

Labour Relief Campaign: Paying off

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Immediately after the earthquake, it was decided in a meeting of Labour Relief Campaign (LRC) to target an area devastated by earthquake. There was over 22000 kilometers that was badly affected by the earthquake on 8th October 2005.

Paniola district Rawalakot in Kashmir was chosen to concentrate our relief and rehabilitation work. The main reason was our local contacts in the area. An area comprising 38 villages, scattered over 200 kilometers of mountainous area with 62000 registered votes was not an easy task. With over 300 casualties, thousands wounded and over 80 percent houses demolished, it was difficult to cover the area with immediate relief and some rehabilitation.

Now after 45 days of the earthquake, there are signs that our relief and rehabilitation work is paying off. I visited the area with two representatives of Action Aid Pakistan on 22nd of November, my second one of the area since the earthquake. A day long visit gave us some sign of hope. A hope that we saw among the affected people that life must go on and we must rebuild what we have lost. 100 houses are being built in the area with the active participation of the local community. Many have been helped to build some sort of shelter homes to fight the zero temperature. Many tents have been erected provided by LRC and other organizations. Community is there to help each other in every aspect.

We saw happy face of Nazeeran Bibi, a widow, who told us near the site of her unbder construction home that my home will be completed in three days. *"I will have a roof once again"*. She told us with pride. Her house was grounded and a total loss of every household item she was able to have. Nazeran is at present living in a tent provided by LRC.

Who will have the first fifty houses to be built by LRC was a difficult question. It was solved by the local committees by pointing out the neediest and those who had casualties. Women were given the top priority.

Nazar Mohammed, a local teacher and a member of the committee showed us his house which was not totally demolished but they were not able to live there. *"I have not awarded myself a home in this phase because there are more who deserve the priority"* he told us. While his mother, elderly women, asked us when her turn would be and when we will have the home build. We told her it is the decision of the committee, *"Ask your son"*. *"But he is a comrade and is very principled person"*. She replied.

Nazar Mohammed told us that he got a loan from the government to build his house and house was completed only two months before the earthquake. *"I have spent Rupees two hundred thousand (\$3500) to build the house, it is now a*

total loss. But the government is still sending us notices to pay the loan".

We advised him not to pay the loan and that LPP will launch a campaign on the issue. It will demand that all the debts of the earthquake area must be abolished.

It is a working class area where most of the men have gone for jobs in different parts of Pakistan. There is neither industry nor an agriculture friendly area. Most of population depends on the remittances of their family members. Some goats, cows, chickens and buffalos were bringing some small income. There were some fruit trees but was not sufficient to make a proper living. The area has no large land holding. It was not a tourist area like some other parts of Kashmir and North West Frontier Province. It was an ordinary mountainous area.

It was first truck load of relief items like cloths, blankets, tents, medicine and food that reached here from Labour Relief Campaign. Then there were other 10 trucks afterwards that were distributed by newly formed local relief committees.

A team of volunteers from LRC started work in this area a day after the earthquake. Headed by Nisar Shah, chairperson of Labour Party Pakistan, it was able to convince the community to form committees at village level to help in distribution the relief items and to organize the rehabilitation.

On 18th October 2005, A Citizen Relief Committee was formed in Lahore and subsequently, CRC was also formed in Kashmir. LRC became part of it to expand the work in this area. CRC Kashmir not only helped in the immediate relief work but also played a political role by exposing the militarization of relief work and opposed the intervention of the NATO forces in Kashmir. It issued regular press releases to the national media and tried to break the myth that it is only the religious fundamentalists that are active in relief work.

A three days mobile medical camp by LRC with the help of Women Workers Help Line treated over 400 women and children; it was the first medical help that came here directly in the community. Another one with 6 doctors and three nurses is been planned for November 27th for three days by the same organization.

Thanks to all the donations that were collected locally and raised internationally by the progressive and labour organizations that helped LRC and CRC to bring some hope to the area.

The result is that there is no religious fundamentalist organization in this area that can claim that they the one who did this and that. There is no military government help that has reached here. It is our efforts that have brought some life back to the area.

On the way to Panilola, we gave a lift to Saeed who guided us to the town. Saeed is public employee in Islamabad and was not here at the time of earthquake. But he is here to help his village community. I asked him if he knew Nisar Shah, *"Yes, from Labour Party and he is building houses in the*

area. He has not visited our village but he is coming here, I heard". So was the case with two more persons we were able to speak on the way. They all knew the work we are doing.

Nisar Shah told us that the words are spreading very fast in Kashmir about our work. I receive every day delegations from far off places who wanted us to help them build their houses. These are the first house to be completed at the time when many relief organizations are still distributing tents. We are far ahead in our approach of rehabilitation. Winter is approaching and no one will be able survive in the tents.

Nisar Shah told us that we were the first ones who distributed the iron sheets only after 15 days of the earthquake. These sheets helped many to build some sort of reliable temporary shelter place. Now, we are the first one to build proper houses with concrete blocks and iron sheets. They are able to resist the earthquake. Our houses are built with the help of Action Aid Pakistan who have been helped by DIFFED, the British international aid agency.

"We have been approached by Shirkat Ghah, leading women NGO of Pakistan, who will help us to build another fifty houses in the area. We are trying to build very low cost homes. So, more shelter homes for more people", Nisar Shah told us.

I led many hundreds of my community people to protest the wrong distribution of government help by the military authorities on 20th November. They invited us to negotiate and we were able convince them to provide help without any discrimination to any one. It was earlier distributed to only very few who were close to military by some how.

We saw some life coming to the area. In the afternoon, we saw children were coming out of schools in their uniforms. Shops were normally open. Fruits and vegetables were available and super stores were full of every day items. Pakoraas and Samosas were on sale so was some locally made sweets and Mathai. We did not see people on the main roads waiting for some immediate relief that was the case a month before in most of the roads.

We did not see buffalos, cows and goats. We heard that they were mainly eaten up during the immediate period after the earthquake or they died as the houses collapsed. We saw people working in some sort of construction work. They are not trying to repair the old ones but building new places near the demolished houses.

All is done without any help from the military government. *"The government is busy still in the main cities and has forgotten local village areas like this"* Arslan told us. Arslan is a volunteer of LRC and is based here since 11th October.

For more information:

www.lef.org.pk

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