

Pakistan: Solidarity saves quake victims lives

Friday 10 March 2006, by [WALDRON Linda](#) (Date first published: 7 March 2006).

Five months after the October 8 earthquake struck north-west Pakistan, a much-anticipated tragedy has been largely avoided. Through the work of NGO, political and trade union activists in Pakistan and other countries, some successes in relief and construction have been achieved in the worst hit regions of Pakistani-administered Kashmir and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP).

One of the most significant factors in averting disaster was the work of 2465 volunteer Cuban health professionals. They set up 33 medical camps in Kashmir and the NWFP and have cared for at least 80,000 people.

The Cuban medical team comprised one of the largest foreign missions deployed in the disaster-stricken area. The Cubans volunteered 500 doctors within hours of the October 8 quake. The offer from Havana, according to reports from Islamabad, created some nervousness in Pakistani political circles and Pakistan initially agreed to accept only 200. The number was raised to 500 several weeks later, as the true scale of the crisis became known.

As 50% of the Cuban medical teams are female, access to health care for Pakistani women has been greatly facilitated.

"The Cuban doctors are incredible", the December 14 Granma reported Dr Italo Subbaro from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore as saying. "I was up the mountain and found a woman with a fractured femur. I called [Cuban doctor] Juan Carlos and he told me to bring her in. They operated on her and now I go to see her and find her looking at the river and the mountain with a smile. The family is happy. Thank God that the Cuban doctors are here, doing miracles in this part of the world."

Relief and construction work has largely been organised by solidarity groups and NGOs. One such solidarity organisation is the Labour Relief Camp for Earthquake Victims (LRCEV), which is a coalition of progressive organisations that includes the Labour Education Foundation, the Women Workers Help Line, the Pakistan National Trade Union Federation and the socialist Labour Party of Pakistan.

The LRCEV, which was established the day after the earthquake struck, has played a political role in highlighting disaster management issues and the inadequate state response. It was also the first organisation to argue that tents would be of minimal use in the harsh winter conditions and that the Pakistani government needed to engage in widespread construction programs if people's lives were to be saved.

The LRCEV also campaigned against price hikes and profiteering which hampered the reconstruction and rehabilitation process.

The coalition conducted detailed surveys of the affected villages, establishing average family incomes and number of dependents to determine which families were most in need. The surveys

revealed that because of the lack of industry in the mountainous regions affected by the quake, the primary wage earners in most families worked elsewhere in Pakistan or in Persian Gulf states. Even these relatively fortunate workers have been struggling as wages in the Gulf states have sharply decreased, with most of the demand being for skilled and educated technical staff.

In four months, the LRCEV has sent 23 truckloads of food, tents, medicines and household goods to 60,000 people in Paniola, Kashmir and Rawalakot and the NWFP, and has constructed 100 houses.

The LRCEV established 19 local committees in affected areas so that goods could be managed and distributed by the local communities themselves. Clear criteria were established for the first homes to go to the most needy members of the community with widows and orphans given first priority.

Unlike some other relief efforts, the involvement of the local communities in distributing the goods has ensured that more inaccessible villages were properly serviced.

Phase 2 of the construction project is underway as the number of needy families remains large. The housing designs have been adapted to be more safe, durable and weather resistant, with a focus on using local materials.

The LRCEV relief and reconstruction project has been made possible through the fundraising efforts of its activists and the generous solidarity of ordinary working people within Pakistan and abroad. The LRCEV campaign has so far raised \$US110,300 within Pakistan and received \$41,919 in donations from abroad.

Australia's Action in Solidarity with Asia and the Pacific (ASAP) has raised \$US2180 to assist with the LRCEV relief and reconstruction project. Major contributors to the ASAP appeal include Sue Bolton, Tony Dewberry and Helen Rosenberg, Ray Fulcher, Craig Johnston, Allen Myers and Helen Jarvis, Tamara Pearson, Linda Tan and Arlene Chattakar-Aitkins in memory of Veronica McCaffery, and unionists at the Deakin University construction site.

[To make a donation in Australia, email Linda Waldron at "indali51 hotmail.com".]

P.S.

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