Hungry for the Gospel in flooded Dhaka

Volunteers turn 'failure' into faithfulness in Bangladesh

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By Dea Davidson

DHAKA, Bangladesh (BP)--Head bowed, Drew Neely* expected ridicule as he approached a crowd of approximately 500 Bangladeshis. After a sixth day of waiting in offices and pleading with official letters, Neely still was unable to receive final permission from authorities to distribute food that had been assembled for the crowd. Yet, rather than accusations and raised fists, the comment that rose from the crowd was “bhaalo” (good). As they pointed their fingers at him, several began to cry, “Good man. Good man.”
“I can say the public isn’t mad at us,” Neely said after the Christian relief effort to Bengali Muslims was prohibited for the final time Aug. 21. Neely had repeatedly requested permission to distribute the food—an approval that would have afforded protection to help ensure the food would go to its intended recipients and not be misused. “The community has had an opportunity to see me pour my life into this project and work extremely hard to show love to them.”

“They understand he’s trying to help them,” said Thad Crisler*, a Southern Baptist relief worker. “To me, that was a recognition of his faithfulness to them to try to make that happen.”

ANOTHER YEAR, ANOTHER FLOOD

Neely and three South Carolina volunteers, along with 50 local volunteers, had tried to put nearly 2,000 22-liter containers of food and medicine into the hands of those affected by monsoon-induced flooding in southern Dhaka, an effort partially funded by the South Carolina Baptist Convention. Approximately 700 Bangladeshis have died over the past month and thousands more suffer from water-borne illnesses such as cholera and dysentery from contaminated floodwaters.

To people in South Asia, mentioning flooding in Bangladesh is like Americans discussing a rash of tornados in the spring—it happens every year. Yet, for these people living sometimes less than 30 feet above sea level, the yearly expectation of more disease, more hunger and more suffering is a recurring tragedy.

REAL SUFFERING BEHIND STATISTICS

Bangladesh is one of the world’s most densely populated countries. Approximately 150 million people—primarily Bengali Muslims—live in an area the size of Iowa.

Tin homes on stilts become self-contained islands as they rise above the floodwaters across southern Dhaka. Their 8-foot-high floors hover only six inches above the flood line, leaving families to scramble for shelter.

• For Rabia, a 60-year-old grandmother, her heavy, wooden bed had to be tied near rafters with green string as floodwaters filled her home. One of her grandchildren, less than a year old, suffers from diarrhea.

• 10-year-old Sharmin slept on the roof of her three-room home for two nights when the flood line was at its highest. The two families (10 people) living in her home have access to only one boat, which makes traveling difficult.

• For hundreds of families forced to abandon their homes, an impromptu community was set up under a bridge spanning one of Dhaka’s main rivers. Sheets define borders for each family group area as children find empty patches of ground to play on next to rescued sheep and goats.

BLESSING BANGLADESHIS

“It ain’t easy being a blessing in Bangladesh,” said South Carolina volunteer Dewey Ogburn.* “I can’t make a difference in every person’s life in Dhaka, but I can make a difference in one person’s life.”

Sitting at the food distribution site that never opened wasn’t wasted time for the volunteers. They talked with the national volunteers about their faith. One man responded, “Keep going. Tell me more.”

“By the world’s standards, I don’t know that you can call what we did this week a success,” Ogburn said. “But when you look at the cross, it wasn’t considered a success by worldly standards either—and yet it changed the world forever.”

*Names changed for security reasons.