

Society & Social Problems

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# Thar — a valley of natural disaster

By Anwer Kamal

ISLAMKOT: Chief Executive of DDAT Krishan Sharma has said the recent January 26 earthquake and its aftershocks has left psychological effects on the people, who still seem to be in trauma.

Sharma, a former human rights activist, took a group of journalists to a hamlet, Toba Rai Singh in Mithi Taluka, through a 30-kilometre long trail, where 20 families were residing in 20 huts before the earthquake. The muddy huts collapsed in the first jolt of the earthquake, which also caused a several feet deep crater over a five kilometre area.

People said the government came to know about the disaster after one month. "I lost several goats in the earthquake," said a resident, Megho, adding that he could never forget the terror caused by the earthquake, when cracks appeared in the earth and water sprang out. "I and my family members could not sleep the whole night due to fear," he said. Muhammad Pirsan said the water, which sprang out of the ground, was not potable and showed wide

craters. The government shifted the people to a place, a few kilometres away from the hamlet. They live there praying for rains but are equally fearful of the after-effects of the rains as to where they will take shelter. Rahema, a 50-year-old blind woman, is unable to take her diet properly since the earthquake had hit the area. She says she still feels the tremors.

There are many small villages and hamlets, located 30 to 40 kilometres deep along the trail, which are called no-water zones. The residents of these hamlets suffered badly from recent tremor and the delay in relief works.

Krishan Sharma said the DDAT initiated Earthquake Relief Programme (ERP) with the assistance of CWSP with an amount of Rs 1.3 million. The DDAT is also concentrating on wheat cultivation in four villages of Mithi Taluka, including Vengar, Jhul, Chhoho and Tooh. The organisation has achieved encouraging results.

According to a survey conducted by DDAT, the total arable land in Tharparkar district is about 4.7 million hectares out of which 1.7 million hectares are not culti-

vated and are left for animals grazing. About 3 million hectares are cultivated by sowing crops like cluster beans, millet, lentils, sesame, melons and castor seeds. The agriculture mostly depends on rainfall. However, cultivation through water drawn from wells is also in vogue in southern parts of Tharparkar around Karunjhar hills of Nangarparkar. In this area cash crops such as chillies, onion, garlic, brinjal and wheat are grown. The rainy season in Thar normally stays from June to September and the rainfall varies between 200 to 300 mm. The rainfall is not uniform all over the Tharparkar district. The rainwater is stored in covered tanks and the wells are recharged by the rainfall. Due to high temperature of up to 45 degrees Centigrade the evaporation is five times higher than the rainfall. These factors also affect ponds and cause low recharge to the ground water aquifer. Sharma said to overcome these problems, a detailed survey of the area is needed. The DDAT chief said besides these problems, there are health and education problems, adding that little government

healthcare facilities are reaching the people in remote areas. "There are high infant and maternal mortality rates due to lack of awareness about safe deliveries, nutritional care of mothers and children and preventive care. Also the problem is due to long hours of work and insufficient food availability to the poor families. Most people in Tharparkar are ready to opt for family planning measures but they say they are afraid of lack of facilities in case of complications," he added. The figures provided by DDAT revealed that population growth rate in Tharparkar district is 3.08 per cent, there are 2,363 villages, 42 union councils, 173 Dehs and over 4,600,000 animals. There is a single district hospital, two Taluka hospitals, two rural health centres, 28 basic health units, 17 dispensaries, 28 district council dispensaries, three Shifa Khanas, 21 EPI centres, eight TB centres, five dental service centres, one veterinary centre and one centre of family planning services. There are 2,414 boys primary schools, 30 high schools, 22 middle schools, 94 primary schools, 12 girls middle schools and four

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girls high schools. There are 69,000 boys and 9,000 girls enrolled at primary level. The literacy rate is 28.33 per cent among male and 6.91 per cent among females.

Inappropriate use of natural resources, seasonal migration, climatic changes, depletion of natural resources — tree, grass, water, land grabbing, illiteracy, poor health facilities, lack of communication — road, telephone, transport, and lack of political will for development by the government are among the general problems of the people.

The steps immediately needed to resolve Tharis' problems include, development of infrastructure — road, electricity, improvement in communication network, transport and telephone. Other things required are small scale industries, non-rain dependent programme, increase in employment for Tharis in government and private sector jobs, alternative agriculture cropping, fodder development, promotion of quality animal breeding, development of water resources and management system, development of skills and capacities of Thari people, improvement

of health and education, awareness on environment, health, education and positive social change, increase in assets of the people, land and livestock, skills, and commitment and will of the government for Thar development and strengthening of NGOs, community-based organisations (CBOs) and village organisations.

The dawn of 21st century, Internet and 'global village' seem mere rhetoric when one goes deep in the desert. The vast area of Thar is still without electricity, water and other basic amenities.

Apart from what around 100 NGOs are doing in Tharparkar district, Visham Das Advocate, whose father Mukhi Nihal Chand remained the chairman of Union Council Islamkot for 25 years, was not satisfied with the working of NGOs. He accuses many NGOs of money laundering and fanning corruption. He said he had documentary proofs of several rackets detected by him.

Working with a sound network in Tharparkar, Sharma was optimistic that the condition of Thari people will reverse one day with long-term planning. *(Concluded)*

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MITHI: Amid long spell of drought, the earthquake losses and slow pace of relief operation, over a million people are leading a miserable life in Tharparkar.

When it rains in Thar, the golden expanse of the desert, its sand dunes and mountain crests turn green — the view never seen in recent past. The tracts of green bushes have long withered away due to no rainfall for the last three years and even this year, according to Meteorological Department forecast, the rains are expected not before June in the desert, spread over 19,389 square kilometres. Around 35 per cent population of the drought-affected areas has migrated to other places. The drought, tuberculosis and snakebite cases are among the major causes for the people to flee to barrage areas. But there, too, acute water shortage is adding to their woes.

Chhor, a small town of Taluka Mithi, comprises 200 houses. Here two to three people

of every family had left their houses in search of food.

Thari people are not concerned with the new system of local government, as their top-most priority is water, food and medicines. A vast majority of the people do not even know what the government intended to do for them through the local government system. The drought-stricken areas of Tharparkar district, were belatedly declared declared calamity-hit areas only two weeks ago mainly because of poor and improper arrangements by the federal as well as the provincial governments.

The serious conditions due to persisting drought aggravated by the tremor of January 26, and the federal government donated only 200 tents. The people remember that Islamabad sent an aeroplane carrying blankets and others items to India. These sorts of indifference towards their plight alienate the people.

Deputy Commissioner Tharparkar Asadullah Dharejo says besides 200 tents, the federal government had approved a

long-term plan of providing loans to the people. He said the House Building Finance Corporation (HBFC) would be made active to release Rs 50,000 loan to one person, while the Sindh government would pay the interest.

The provincial government, after declaring the affected parts of Tharparkar district as calamity-hit areas, has also prepared a drought relief programme, which provides for exemption of land, agricultural and other taxes and setting up of 22 relief centres for over 200,000 affected families.

About 100 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are operating in Thar to reduce the level of poverty with the assistance of donor agencies like the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (Unicef) and the World Bank, but the problems never resolve.

Raising cattle is among the few businesses the Thari people do. However, the absence of water has almost completely destroyed the livestock business. During a visit by a group of jour-

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nalists to the largest animal market of Mithi, located near District Headquarters Hospital, it came to the fore that the people were selling their animals on no-profit basis.

Pabuhar, a resident of Mithi, was selling his cow for just Rs 6,000. He told the journalists that he could get Rs 25,000 for the same cow had he been able to sell it on the market of Hyderabad or Karachi but he had no money for the transportation.

Sambo, another resident of Mithi, was selling his goat for Rs 750. He said due to diseases the prices of animals have gone down. Furthermore, they do not have much buyers. "I may get Rs 3,000 for the goat if it is sold in Sukkur or Hyderabad," he added.

The Animal Husbandry Department of the Sindh government is treating the affected animals but many people complain that it lacks facilities.

Tuberculosis (TB) is another enemy of the Thari people. Last year, 3,000 cases of TB were reported. The deputy commissioner, Tharparkar said the TB,

mainly caused by poor diet, would persist there as long as poverty exists in Thar.

The snakebite cases are also among the major problems of the people. The people are really scared of vipers and cobras.

According to the deputy commissioner last year some 1,600 cases of snakebite were reported officially and the mortality rate stuck to just one person!

The District Development Association Thar (DDAT) — an NGO funded by Church World Service Pakistan (CWSP) — has become active in Tharparkar district to help the people. The initiators of the DDAT have decided to work in the area, which is remote and out of reach of other NGOs or government services. The DDAT is providing Tharis huts, besides it has installed two tube-wells at Vat and Chha of Mithi Taluka.

Chief Executive DDAT, Krishan Sharma told The News that the DDAT had planned to provide 500 huts to the people in Tharparkar district.

**(TO BE CONTINUED)**