

2005 Pakistan Earthquake

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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A major earthquake shook Pakistan on Saturday, October 8, 2005, at 8:50 a.m. The epicenter of this magnitude 7.6 quake was about 65 miles north-northeast of Islamabad, the country's capital. At least 86,000 people were killed, more than 69,000 were injured, and extensive damage resulted in northern Pakistan. The heaviest damage occurred in the Muzaffarabad area of Kashmir.

Some students had no sooner arrived at their schools than they were buried alive under collapsed buildings. Some survivors tried to seek help only to find that the roads to the outside world had been blocked by landslides. They were isolated by the high mountains of that area.

Three million people lost their homes. With winter looming, the survivors had to face the even more daunting challenge of surviving in the bitterly cold mountains without the protection of their homes. "I may be lucky to have survived the tremor, but I know I'll die of starvation or the freezing weather," lamented one helpless villager.

On October 19, the first Tzu Chi relief team arrived at Islamabad en route to Muzaffarabad. The 15 delegates, from Turkey, Jordan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Taiwan, brought with them medicine and relief supplies. Their main mission was to seek out the wounded and offer free medical care, distribute blankets and tents, and help prepare the grounds for pitching tents for survivors.



On October 21, the team arrived at Muzaffarabad and set up camp on the NGO campground adjacent to the UN earthquake relief headquarters compound. Tzu Chi was one of only seven organizations granted permission to camp there. The team attended the daily joint briefings of the relief groups to coordinate their efforts and avoid duplicated distributions.

"A tent used to cost 900 rupees [US\$15]. Now it costs 10,000 rupees [US\$156], if you are lucky enough to even get one," complained 40-year old Kadir. "The needs are so great and the goods so scarce. We often wait in long lines for distributed goods. It is not uncommon for distributors to call it a day when the line is still long." Kadir's predicament is representative of those experienced by other survivors there.



At the suggestion of Dr. Raja Arif Khan, secretary-general to the president of Pakistan-controlled but autonomous Kashmir, the Tzu Chi team focused its relief actions on the

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Jhelum River Valley because it was already reachable by outside vehicles and, more importantly, because the villages there were in urgent need of help.

There are close to a thousand villages and towns scattered throughout the mountains and valleys in Kashmir, far too many for the Tzu Chi team to cover. So Hsieh Ching-kui, the leader of the team, set the basic principle for Tzu Chi's engagement: "We go wherever our eyes and feet will take us."

Before the relief distribution, following the standard procedure for the Tzu Chi Foundation, the Tzu Chi team and local officials compiled a list of people who were most in need of relief goods. On the distribution date, Pakistani military officers called and verified the identities of those on the list. Once verified, each villager received a coupon. The coupon holder simply walked over to the adjacent distribution tent to receive the goods. Since each coupon holder was certain to receive relief supplies, the Tzu Chi distributions were able to minimize much of the commotion and jostling for position frequently seen at many other relief distribution sites.



After the distribution, Tzu Chi volunteers went to visit the tent of Muhammad Iqbal, whose grocery store had been leveled by the quake. He had salvaged some wood and metal sheets from the rubble of his downed store and was rebuilding it across the street when the volunteers arrived. Leaning against his half-finished store, Muhammad said, "Now with six blankets from Tzu Chi, we will be able to live through the winter. And in three days, I am reopening my store." His tenacity in the face of hardships echoes what a middle school teacher said earlier: "We are strong!"

The two things that the survivors needed the most were medical care and tents.

Dr. Qiu Zong-lang told his patients, "Take these pills with food twice a day." He modified the dosage so that patients could take the medicine in the morning and evening to comply with the requirements of Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting.



The Tzu Chi mobile clinics had a unique feature: Much time was spent on educating patients about hygiene and self care. Many patients had been previously treated by other clinics. However, they did not know how to properly care for their wounds, thus causing further infections or inflammation. Therefore, the Tzu Chi team gave them medicine and explained to them the proper ways to change the dressings for their wounds. Volunteers urged them to return to the clinic if they could not change the dressings themselves.

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