

Flood in Bolivia

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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Heavy rainfalls wreak havoc in the country. A large piece of land is covered with water just like an ocean. It is the first time that the local French hospital is visited by a group of Buddhist medical professionals. It is also their first encounter with Tzu Chi and its emergency medical team-TIMA.

Disaster Relief in Bolivia

The first Tzu Chi disaster relief undertaking occurred in Bolivia, in May of 2007, followed by a free clinic in August of the same year. The governor of Santa Cruz, Ruben Costas Aguilera sent his wife, Ms. Sonia Vincenti to attend the TIMA conference in Taiwan to thank Master Cheng Yen for the relief effort.

In November of the same year, nonstop rains over three consecutive months caused widespread flooding throughout Bolivia, and its government declared a state of emergency. In February of 2008, Tzu Chi mobilized its volunteers and staged a coordinated disaster relief effort that involved TIMA from the USA, Argentina, and Paraguay. Materials and medical supplies were delivered by TIMA and Tzu Chi volunteers for the victims and their families.

Before the disaster relief, the US team from Washington D.C. Practiced conversational Spanish. Volunteers immunized themselves with vaccines for the most common infectious diseases. Even upon their return to the US, they continued the vaccination program in order to prevent any incidence of infectious diseases.

After the flooding receded, influenza and skin diseases were frequently seen among victims. Included in the materials distributed to victims, were the most popular medicines and a description of how they should be used. The Bolivia Tzu Chi district office Cui-juan Ke was the primary organizer for the medicines program. Volunteer, Cui-juan Ke, provided her restaurant as a staging area for the assembling and packaging of the materials for emergency relief. "There is nothing more important than helping the victims," she said.

At the same time, TIMA's doctors were busy, staging their operations at the French hospital in preparation for the free clinic.

Teaching by Live Action

"When stitching the membranes, let's not run into the intestines, even if you have to use your bare hands to stop it from happening..." The Tzu Chi medical team was led the way during a hernia operation inside the French hospital. Dr. Fuming Chen is from Cleveland, USA. He had many years of experience in this operation and he did it in the most efficient and effective manner to keep reoccurrence rate to a minimum.

When Dr. Fan-sheng Yao, an anesthesiologist from New York, USA, realized that the local medical team relied on full anesthesia during operation, he volunteered himself in teaching the benefits of using local anesthesia. He even donated some of his books to the hospital.

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Nurse Tsu-lien Li shared her own experience in accounting for the operation tools and supplies before and after an operation. From bandage to stitches, and from knives to other small equipment, there was no chance for error, or accidentally leaving any items inside the patient.



Because of the difficulty of staffing, the maximum number of operations in the French hospital was limited to eight. The Tzu Chi medical team had broken that record in its first day of operations. Some local doctors asked about the possibility for a Tzu Chi doctor stationed over there to improve their medical knowledge.

During the three-day health fair, Tzu Chi doctors were besieged with questions by the local team of doctors. Even the operating room was full of visitors and onlookers, just like the learning atmosphere back at the teaching hospital, in the university. The pronunciation of the last names of medical team members appeared to be a bit of challenge for the locals. In order to reduce confusion and embarrassing moments, local medics referred to “Dr. Tzu Chi” (a generalization for all the Tzu Chi doctors with last names that look similar but pronounced very differently) as the only official name on the white board outside the operating room.

“For the months following the flooding, I was so tired and was about to collapse. When Tzu Chi doctors came, I wasn’t lonely and had found my energy,” said Dr. Fernando Lacoa Mendoza. Dr. Mendoza was thankful for the assistance of all the Tzu Chi volunteers. It was their first time ever having a group of Tzu Chi Buddhists as visitors, and learning about

TIMA as well as Tzu Chi.

When Dentist Dr. Richard Chang learned about the local, free, private program organized by a group of local dentists, he donated the “Tzu Chi 5” mobile dental equipment to them so that they could make use of the latest technology for their health fair.

As a result of these cross cultural visits, the seed of love is embedded here in the country, and is just waiting for the sunshine and proper watering.