

Builds Schools, Helps Farmers and Sick in Cyclone-Hit Myanmar

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
Thursday, 06 May 2010 09:10



In the two years since Cyclone Nargis devastated Myanmar, the foundation has worked in many areas to help its people recover – distribution of aid, improved seeds and training for the farmers, surgery for the injured and the building three of schools. It is its contribution to the long-term reconstruction of the country.

The worst natural disaster in the recorded history of Myanmar, Nargis struck the Irawaddy Delta on May 2, 2008, causing at least 138,000 deaths and causing damage estimated at US\$10 billion. It affected the lives of at least 1.5 million people. Since then, the foundation has since then carried out regular distributions, the most recent beginning on Monday, May 3.

Volunteers are giving out 19,636 sacks of rice seeds in 13 villages in the Thanlyin area of Yangon province. One local volunteer said that, in his village, there were four types of seed, with a total of 780 sacks. “This type of seed takes 125 days to grow.” To ensure that each farmer receives the variety he needs, he will communicate with officials from the Department of Agriculture. When the villagers come forward, volunteers check their names and hand out distribution cards, to ensure that all receive the seeds. “Receiving them from Tzu Chi is a great help to our villagers,” said U Sein Maung Sint, head of Kala Wae village. One villager, Daw Yin Shwe, said that he had no seeds: “I am happy to receive them and now I am going to sow them.” For the volunteers, they are like the seeds of love in Myanmar countryside.



The seed distribution is part of a larger effort to raise the farm output of Myanmar, which used to be known as the rice basket of the world: farming is in the blood of the Burmese people. While the flood waters have receded, salinization of the soil remains a problem; it has reduced the yields, which directly affect the livelihood of farmers. The farm aid project will include improved techniques as well as seeds and aims to pull over 2,700 households out of poverty. In the first phase, 26,000 bags of quality seeds will be given out, including those in the distribution which began on May 3.

One of the volunteers is Lin Mingqing from Malaysia. “We wish to improve rice quality and yields. I hope our research can help pull farmers out of poverty. After we have developed a quality strain, Tzu Chi wants to share the know-how with local farmers.” They are testing local strains, as well as varieties from Taiwan, mainland China and Malaysia. Lin points to one from Malaysia: “even without water, it grows the same. Once it sprouts, insects do not eat it. I do not know why. It is strange.” They have conducted tests on strains planted once or twice a year and different ways of planting – the traditional scatter method or transplanting. “We farmers all know that transplanting yields better harvests,” said farmer U Soe Kyi. “But, because the cost is higher, we cannot do it. Now Lin Mingqing is here. Because he saw how poor the farmers are,

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he invited Taiwan farming experts to come and teach us.”



Soe Kyi, 74, has been farming for almost six decades. He used to own 60 acres of land but, after a major illness, had to sell most of it. Now he owns only eight acres; he has offered his land for Lin’s experimental rice program because Lin is helping him pay off his debts. Soe Kyi and his son are working in the program. His field is a sea of green stalks waving in the wind, even though it is a fallow time for the land around it. The temperature hovers around 40 degrees Celsius, but the farm children play regardless. Nearby is a 10-acre plot belonging to Ohn Hlaing. His entire property was swamped by the floods in 2008. “When the waters came, my house disappeared,” he said. “Now it has been rebuilt.”

The farmers are following the example of the volunteers and carefully transplanting their seedlings. They hope that, in November, they will see a bumper harvest and fields of green stalks billowing in the wind.

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