

Julley Friends of HEALTH Inc and Ladakh,

For those of you searching for news of the Health Inc friends and projects you support, I know it has been frustrating. Getting news out remains a challenge, with the towers down in many villages and the entire government radio, television and satellite system washed away.

All former and current Health Inc employees and interns are alive and safe. We have lost 'extended family' with some members losing parents, siblings and project participants. But honestly, with 1 in 150 dead here, everyone has lost someone they love.

I was in Hanu Gongma when the floods started. So I, like most Ladakhis, was cut off from news, especially what happened in Leh. Three successive nights of monsoon rains resulted in destruction of almost all bridges; 9 of the 12 bridges on the main highway, and most of the bridges in the Domkhar, Skurbuchang, Achinathang and Hanu side valleys. (In addition, walking bridges across the Indus are gone and there is a tremendous amount of damage in Turtuk-Bogdon, Markha and Wanla areas). Much of the Batalik road is gone or under water, 100s of houses in our Domkhar-Hanu area destroyed, most irrigation canals devastated, fields and crops lost and other infrastructure – from mobile towers to wheat mills – ruined. The schools at Hanu Gongma, Domkhar Gongma and Tongros were all hit and will need rebuilding. Access to water is difficult and most people sleep outside as the damaged houses are unsafe.

I just got back to Leh today after 8 days of waiting out floods and slides in Hanu Gongma and walking for 2 days to get to where vehicular traffic is possible. The army has done a miraculous job clearing roads and erecting emergency bridges. In less than a week they had 6 of the 9 main road bridges up, and within 9 days they reopened the road to Srinagar. Since Friday (our Independence Day), they have been dropping relief supplies in villages cut off from help.

As I walked out, there was no road for half of the 14 kilometres from Gongma to Thang. I couldn't even see where the road used to be much of the time. The next 26 kilometres to Skurbuchan did not leave me hopeful. In some places, there is 4 metres of cement-like mud covering the road every 100 metres. In dozens of places, flood gullies have washed a 12m wide, 12m deep gouge in the road, and in others the road remains under water or is covered with two metres of driftwood for stretches of 100 metres or more. The Indus has carved a new channel in several places (in the Sham canyon, you know what a feat that is), and all the side valleys are totally changed. The trees and fields are gone, replaced by boulders, gravel and more cement-mud. Once in awhile, you see the top of a walnut tree sticking out where you know there used to be a one-house hamlet.

In our area, Hanu and Skurbuchan were very badly hit; Achinathang and Domkhar less so (Less so I guess means less than 6 houses totally destroyed and less than 20 damaged per village). All 4 valley systems have lost their connecting roads and 80% of their bridges. The Tar and Changral bridges across the Indus are out. Basgo, Nyimu, Nurla, Phyang, Phey, Sabu and Leh (at the new bus stand area) were badly hit and the depression below Sabu in Choglamsar, past ITBF devastated. There are 185 confirmed dead and 600 confirmed missing and presumed dead, and several hundred road workers missing. 300+ are in hospital (which was also hit and evacuated to the GH).

At the same time, the 8 days I was stranded in Gongma, while the rains continued, damaged increased and fear grew, I was heartened to see what people did for themselves. Groups immediately started helping move the disabled and infirmed to safety (we all slept in communal tents). Those who had salvageable home, had *paspun* members immediately helping them dig the mud out and wash and ferry goods to dry places. Trees were felled so rivers could be bridged again. And when that was not possible, a cable was thrown/floated across and a milk tin 'bucket bridge' created for messages, salt and the ever-present packet of biscuits to be sent across. The

men started digging out the canals. When the emergency phone came, everyone networked to find out about loved ones in Leh and other villages. No-one sat around waiting to be saved.

When I walked out, I was joined by a Biama-pa for 5 hours of the journey. His 2 daughters are missing and presumed dead in Choglamsar. I am helpless – all we can do is walk together; I give him plasters for his feet and he gives me a hand over the dangerous places. At the Army check post at Hanu Yokma, there is nothing left save 3 latrines. *Nothing*. It is all under 4-8 metres of mud and boulders. The sergeant there is digging and stops to describe where I should ‘find the path’. “I would offer you tea”, he says. “But the stove is gone. The pots are gone. I lost my boots.” (He has on Chinese tennis runners). So we share some water and I am grateful to learn that none of his 35 men were killed, even though the mud hit at midnight (The Army lost 33 in Turtuk). I arrive in Skurbuchan just as the funeral of the mother of a friend is starting. Looking at the slides that hit there, it is hard to imagine that only 3 died. The family is ‘shamed’ that they have to have the funeral outside under a tent; not one stick of the house remains. The whole village is right there: there is no shame.

Shoveling out 30 cm of mud while chatting with a man in our mental health programme, he says “This is only mud. I now have my son back. Together we can handle the mud.” In moments when I felt helpless, and said so, the rough translation from *Brogscat* back to me was “But you’re here, nobody else is ever here; don’t you understand what that means?”

I hope that what Health Inc has given people is that belief that ‘together we can handle the mud’. For years, we were ‘just there beside them’ as they learnt how to network and solve problems for themselves. The resilience that comes from their culture and the empowerment and dignity brought through projects and work that are not based on charity *are* serving them well. What Health Inc supporters and all of us here know is that helping people believe in themselves cannot be washed away in the mud or water.

The government is rightfully covering immediate flood relief and will be supporting infrastructure reconstruction; and doing a good job of it. However, there are gaps. If you want to contribute to the kind of community building that Health Inc has always stood for:

- We are expanding our mental health programme to help families across the district deal with the traumas they are facing. We’ll also make sure our ongoing programme to provide medicines to the disabled, mentally ill and severe arthritis patients is not interrupted.
- We’ll help villages rebuild community centres in the Sham-Domkhar-Hanu area (with matching grants from the government).
- With friends and Health Inc members in the departments that are rebuilding canals, fields, toilets, greenhouses and foot bridges, we’ll ensure the remote villagers’ voices are heard.
- Our Future Leaders will be documenting villagers’ stories – as an important historical document, but also to let people have their own voice.
- Most important, we won’t let our 5 ongoing projects get derailed. Our partners tell us that we are an important part of them building something that endures, even in tragedy.

To make a difference TODAY, visit www.LadakhRelief.org and donate what you can.

Cynthia Hunt
Health Inc & Ladakh Relief