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Red Cross Offers Psychosocial Support to Earthquake Victims

Red Cross team provides necessities along with comfort and emotional support to quake survivors

Bonnie Gillespie, Special to RedCross.org

Wednesday, June 07, 2006 — YOGYAKARTA, Indonesia – Ibu Raja was crying when American Red Cross worker Sujata Bordoloi approached her. Raja's village in Klaten, Indonesia, was leveled by the May 27 earthquake that killed her beloved daughter and many of her neighbors.

Just three days after the devastating earthquake, Bordoloi, Manager of the Psychosocial Support Program for the Tsunami Recovery Program in Aceh province, traveled with six other trained specialists from the American Red Cross and the Indonesian Red Cross Society to Yogyakarta.

Having already reached tens of thousands of tsunami survivors through culturally-relevant activities in Aceh, the psychosocial support team was deployed to areas hardest-hit by the quake to offer psychological first aid and other community-based interventions to help ease the suffering of those affected by this recent disaster.

Psychological First Aid

"Psychological first aid is actually a simple process," explained Bordoloi. "It's five steps that our teams use to interact with people affected by a disaster. The first is to meet the immediate needs of a person, whether that's water, food or comfort."

When Bordoloi met Ibu Raja, who was grieving over the loss of her daughter, she immediately comforted Raja and offered her emotional support.

"Raja cried for a while and was withdrawn, but eventually she began talking openly and shared about what she had been through and what she was feeling," said Bordoloi. "Listening is the next step in psychological first aid – to be open to what they're saying, and then to accept a person's feelings without judgment."

Raja and Bordoloi spoke for more than an hour, then Raja asked Bordoloi to go with her to see the collapsed home where her daughter had died. This helped Bordoloi identify Raja's deeper needs – the

third step in psychological first aid. Raja, of her own initiative, wanted to face the place and source of the loss she was feeling.

“Through our conversation, Raja herself was coming to a decision and moving forward in her own way, and seeing that happen in a person is the ultimate goal of psychological first aid,” said Bordoloi. “Once she began talking about what had happened, then facing that loss emotionally and physically, she was able to talk about her own future and talk about what her options were.”

“The most amazing part, though, was that by the end, Raja was offering me food and something to drink,” Bordoloi said. “I was there to help her, but once she had processed her experience, she wanted to take care of me. The change was remarkable and touching.”

Community-Based Activities

In the first days after the psychosocial team arrived in Yogyakarta, Bordoloi and her colleagues conducted rapid assessments in 15 villages and 10 schools, enabling them to offer psychological first aid and give residents the opportunity to express what types of activities would be most beneficial to their community.

“Even though the earthquake had destroyed almost everything in the villages we visited, we found that most people were staying in their communities,” said Bordoloi. “There was a sense of cohesiveness and resilience among villagers, and that even though structures were gone, the communities still remained intact.”

A disaster of this magnitude, Bordoloi went on to explain, can often take away a person’s “sense of place” – the cultural elements and daily routines, such as adults going to work, children to school or families to pray at the mosque.



American Red Cross worker Sujata Bordoloi, Manager of the Psychosocial Support Program for the Tsunami Recovery Program in Aceh province who traveled to Yogyakarta shortly after the earthquake struck, walks with a new little friend through a hard-hit village in Klaten district.
(Photo Credit: Bonnie Gillespie/American Red Cross)

“Children are especially affected by these types of changes,” said Amin Khoja, an American Red Cross Psychosocial Support Field Officer. “Parents told us stories about children seeing their school building collapsed and starting to cry.”

By facilitating activities that the community members request, many psychosocial interventions help to restore a “sense of place” for disaster survivors. In the village of Birin in Klaten, parents and teachers asked the Red Cross psychosocial support team to set up an informal school to help children regain some semblance of a normal life and routine.

“The village leader offered us space in his front yard, so we set up tarps to have shade and brought out school supplies and games just for the kids,” said Khoja. “As you can imagine, word spread pretty quickly and children from all over the community literally came running.”



Amin Khoja, with the American Red Cross Psychosocial Support team, admires a drawing by a young girl in the village of Birin, Indonesia, during an informal schooling activity. Such activities provide a means for children to express themselves and help cope with the trauma of a disaster the magnitude of the earthquake that struck the area on May 27, 2006.

(Photo Credit: Bonnie Gillespie/American Red Cross)

Two young girls darted through the rubble of their home to the lone cupboard that was left standing. Flinging open its doors, they emerged moments later triumphantly waving their backpacks, thrilled to go back to school. A mother carried her son, who was on crutches due to an injured leg, on her back through the debris-lined path to the informal school site, where he was reunited with his classmates and friends.

In all, more than 50 children participated in the creative and expressive activities during the first day of informal schooling in Birin. Despite the evidence of disaster all around them and the limitations of bandages and crutches for many, the children laughed, sang songs, drew pictures and played games for hours – helping them to reconnect with other kids for the first time since the earthquake.

“Our school is broken,” said one little boy. “So this is really fun. This makes it better.”

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