



## **RITINJALI'S RELIEF WORK IN LEH**



15 minutes, that's all it took...On the 5<sup>th</sup> of August 2010, at quarter past two in the morning, the skies opened and poured disaster over Leh. The water came rushing down and carried along with it the mountains and resulted in what can be called the greatest catastrophe in the history of Leh-Ladakh. In an area that receives less than 5 mm of rainfall in a year, a decade's quota packed into 15 minutes spelt doom for not just the residents and tourists but also the irreproducible landscape of Leh.

A team from Ritinjali reached Leh early morning on the 10th of August. The airport was a picture of tranquility in stark contrast with the destruction that awaited to greet us as we made our way out of the airport. Crossing the newly constructed and then demolished bus stand, the enormity of the situation began to dawn on us. Rows of three-storeyed buildings had been reduced to rubble and several cars had been flattened and thrown into the buildings, as if it was the new parking lot. Mounds of solidified mud had replaced what must once have been a glorious footpath and the street had become an unmotorable strip of tar, barely accommodating a car at a time. On reaching the hotel, we decided to pay heed to Nature's warning and rested till late in the afternoon. Once reasonably acclimatized to the high altitude, we headed towards the Sonam Norboo Memorial (SNM) Hospital. The SNM hospital was a sight to behold. The old building had been literally buried under the slough and the barely ready new building looked like it had been sprayed with mud all over. We entered the building and made our way to the wards which were jam packed. Patients lay as much in pain as in disbelief as they had still not come to terms with the recent turn of events. Some had lost a loved one and others had lost whole families. To call them the lucky survivors presented a dilemma as their faces told an entirely different story. In their words, they

were cursed – left behind to deal with death of their kith and kin while suffering in pain from their own bodily injuries.



We met with the Chief Medical Officer, Ms. Dolma Tsering, and the health commissioner. Also present was a team of specialist doctors from Delhi's Safdarjung Hospital and Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital. Upon discussing the health situation and the proposed plan of action, the commissioner took his leave and we left for the General Hospital. The General Hospital, an army hospital, was also filled to capacity. Admitted in one of the wards was the miracle baby, Deldan Angmo. She had been tossed around in the water for 6-7 hours and was in a very bad state when they received her at the hospital. She had a head injury, mud in her eyes and abrasions all over the face. We met her 4 days after the tragedy and she seemed to be headed towards almost a complete recovery. In the process, she had been united with her family and her smile said it all.

On the bed next to her was Tsering Dolkar, a 12 year old girl, who had been orphaned. Our hearts sank to see her sitting all alone in the bed with nobody by her side. We also came across a large number of Chattisgarh residents, predominantly from the Bilaspur and Jagirchampa districts who work as labourers in Leh. After meeting with the Commanding officer, Col. Anurag Khanna, we decided to call it a day and went back to the hotel to sleep it off.



On the morning of the 11<sup>th</sup>, we visited Choglamsar, arguably the worst affected area and the photographs would corroborate the fact. Rows and rows of houses have been flattened out or buried under the mud. Large boulders lay strewn all over the new 'ground.' We made our way to the community kitchen where we met some of the local residents who were in-charge. After much discussion, we learnt that they desperately wanted primary medical services in the area and did not want to go to the hospitals, which were almost 5 km away. From Choglamsar we went to the SNM hospital to meet the CMO and presented a request for a health camp at Choglamsar manned by a doctor from Ritinjali. After some deliberation, the CMO gave her consent and the RITINJALI HEALTH CAMP was underway. Co-sponsored by the Health & Family Welfare Department, who provided us with some medicines, a pharmacist and a peon, the health camp was started on the evening of the 12<sup>th</sup> August.



**Ritinjali's Health Camp**

We set up base in the office of a Handicrafts training center at Tashi Gatsal, Choglamsar. The Health camp is just 200 m from the main Leh-Manali road and is easily accessible as the directions are quite clear (photographs). The camp was much appreciated by the local residents and as much by the representatives of various organizations who paid us a visit. We were paid a visit by the following between 12<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> August:

1. AmeriCares
2. The French Embassy
3. Doctors without Borders
4. The National Center for Control of Diseases
5. Save our Children
6. National Disaster Response Force (NDRF)
7. CMO, Leh-Ladhak and the medical superintendent 8, The Ladhak Buddhist Association (LBA)
8. Delegation from his Holiness, the Karamapa's Office, Dharamsala



The camp is averaging about 60 patients a day and is open between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. all 7 days. We are also conducting minor surgical procedures such as suturing, needle extraction etc apart from dispensing medicines and giving tetanus shots. An important service being provided by the camp is follow up for those injured from the mudslides. The camp would continue providing the services till about third week of September giving ample medical cover to the injured as most would have made a complete recovery and any chances of re-infection in those already wounded can also be addressed. All along Choglamsar there is a competent medical facility for its routine health issues.

The health camp received 10 more packets of medicines on 19<sup>th</sup> August including all the necessary antibiotics and antihistamines. The camp is now very well equipped as per Dr. Varun Sreenivasan, who is running the camp. Ms. Spalzes Angmo, the CMO, mentioned that the situation has almost come to normal in terms of the prevalence of disease. The doctors in the camp are primarily dealing with the usual complaints such as fever. Potable water, however, continues to be a problem despite the distribution of chlorine tablets and instructions to use water from the tankers only. The people continue to use water from the hand pump from which the sample was taken and later turned out to be not fit for consumption. The Ritinjali team of doctors has requested the authorities for the hand pumps to be sealed. They are following up on this.

### **Relief Material provided by Ritinjali**



The details of the relief material that we distributed are given below:

1. 50 kilos of rice donated to the community kitchen at Tashi Gatsal on 12<sup>th</sup> August and again on 16<sup>th</sup> August.

2. Blankets sent on the 10<sup>th</sup> August have been distributed.
3. 50 cartons comprising blankets, clothes for kids and adults, biscuits, Maggie noodles and shawls have been distributed in four villages around Leh – Ney, Taroo, Phiyang and Spituk.
4. Medicines procured on the 10<sup>th</sup> August have been made available at the health camp.
5. Medicines donated by AmeriCares are also stored at the health camp.
6. Received 127 more packets of relief material on 19<sup>th</sup> August, which are in the process of being distributed.
7. 10 Cartons of medicines donated by Fortis reached on the 19<sup>th</sup> August at the health camp at Choglamsar.

We would like to specially thank Mrs. Spalzes Angmo for offering us to stay in her hotel, for showing us around and making us feel at home. We are especially grateful to her for helping us in streamlining the distribution process and above all inspiring us with her dedication towards helping those in need.

There is a lot of work to be done and this is just the beginning. And all along there is just one concern – is it going to be enough?! We leave you with some more photographs that highlight the enormity of what has just transpired and underline our nothingness against the omnipotence of Nature.

[http://ritinjali.org/photo\\_gallery/leh.htm](http://ritinjali.org/photo_gallery/leh.htm)