

## Earthquake strikes – a church sends volunteers

### A brief case study from Gujarat State, India

#### 1. Introduction

On Friday 26 January 2001, at 08:46 local time, an earthquake that measured 7.9 on the Richter Scale struck Gujarat State, north-west India. The epicentre was a small town called Bhuj. It turned out to be one of the two most deadly earthquakes in the recorded history of India, with almost 20,000 people confirmed dead, and another 166,000 injured. Members of the Bombay Baptist group of Churches (BBC) were gathering at that time in Mumbai, a city 800km away. They felt the tremors and pledged a response to the disaster. During the relief phase over the next three months, in co-ordination with a task force of churches in their city, they sent over 70 volunteers to the earthquake zone, as well as an administrator to assist in the long-term rehabilitation effort. On site they worked through EFICOR (Evangelical Fellowship of India Commission on Relief), a specialist relief agency, which launched its relief operations from the premises of a church at Gandhidham.

#### 2. Aims

The aim of the intervention was to engage members of BBC in an effective and appropriate response that met the practical needs of disaster victims as well as the aspirations of those wanting to help.

#### 3. Steps in the process

##### i. The church's decision to respond

As soon as it became obvious to the church elders that there had been significant loss of life as a result of the earthquake, they selected one of them to accompany an NGO on a visit to the earthquake zone. On his return and hearing his report, it was agreed that the church should get involved. The question was: how?

##### ii. Working with a task force of churches

No network of charismatic evangelical churches had ever met previously to organise a collective response to a national disaster. However, in response to the report, a senior church leader called a meeting of all the evangelical and charismatic churches in Mumbai to decide what they could do together. As a result, 17 representatives from 12 churches and international ministries attended, including BBC. A core group of representatives continued to meet on a weekly basis to monitor progress until the work came to a close at the end of April.

##### iii. Relief phase: sending volunteers

- **Composition.** It was decided that each organisation/church should recruit its own volunteers. Two leaders would be appointed to lead each group of volunteers.
- **Format.** The volunteers left Mumbai on the Monday train for Gandhidham, arriving back in Mumbai on Saturday morning, serving four days in the field. A total of 70 volunteers served in the earthquake zone in five groups.
- **Finance.** The volunteers paid for their own rail ticket and were accommodated at the church in Gandhidham. Food was provided by the relief agency EFICOR. One of the agencies represented in the task force took responsibility for tracking the financial contributions made towards the relief effort and the accounts were closed when the relief phase ended in April.
- **Orientation.** A simple orientation was given before and after the trip that explored, amongst other things, cultural sensitivities and a need to avoid doing proactive evangelism.
- **Volunteers' role.** This entailed stacking, sorting, recording and distributing relief supplies, as well as survey work, when needed.

##### iv. Rehabilitation phase: seconding an administrator

- The relief phase came to an end in April 2001. However, BBC extended its involvement and seconded a member of its church to work as an administrator until December 2002. BBC also funded a school and other community facilities.

## 4. Impact

### Impact on the churches:

- The churches in Mumbai became more aware of human need and a few years later, when floods struck in the state of Maharashtra, they initiated a response of their own. This time, however, they managed the operation themselves and EFICOR provided BBC with technical support.
- The experience of Christians working together with others from different churches was a very positive one and it developed good relationships at a personal and institutional level.
- The experience of members of BBC who served with EFICOR was very positive, leaving everyone with the feeling that they had been of practical service to people in great distress and that they had served their God honourably in the process.
- As well as providing volunteers to the relief effort itself, the Gandhidham church became the logistical centre for a three-month relief response involving hundreds of people from different parts of India. The church's impact raised its credibility in the community as people who cared.

### Impact on the relief agency

- EFICOR was able to distribute materials to people more quickly because of the large number of volunteers. It also meant that, instead of employing extra staff, money could be spent on purchasing more relief items. EFICOR also now has people from a number of churches and institutions throughout the country who have engaged with them in a professional relief response and who could be contacted again if a disaster struck in their area.

## 5. Lessons learnt

### Task force

- The co-ordinating function of a task-force allowed the specialist relief agency, EFICOR, to deal with one body instead of several. It also provided a bigger pool of resources, both human and financial, from which to draw.

### Church

- Volunteers being away between Monday and Saturday fitted in with the priorities of key stakeholders: employers were happy to agree to a week off work, pastors and key church workers would not be absent for long periods of time, and families were well able to manage without a member of the household for that time.
- BBC focused on providing volunteers. By delegating financial responsibility to an agency within the task force and submitting itself to EFICOR in operations, BBC kept well within the limits of its capacity.

### Relief agency

- If a church holds people's spiritual welfare as a high priority, then it is best to link it with indigenous churches where possible. This allows volunteers to freely support the local church in its situation of need.
- As successive teams of volunteers were being orientated by EFICOR, two initiatives were taken to make this task easier. First, an orientation manual was compiled which has been used for the same purpose in other disaster situations. Secondly, teams were organised to overlap by two days so that there could be a handover of work.

## 6. Conclusion

A church working with other Christian agencies in its locality and with a specialised Christian relief organisation can combine skills and resources to set up an effective relief response.

## 7. Potential for replication

The approach outlined in this case study can best be replicated in contexts where:

- a disaster location can be reached, with comparative ease, by the sending church
- short voluntary contributions fit with the requirements of all key stakeholders: the relief agency conducting operations, the releasing churches, the workplace and the families concerned, and the beneficiaries
- there are good premises from which to organise a relief operation, such as the one provided by the church in Gandhidham.
- there is good communication and clear expectations of roles and responsibilities between the sending and receiving agencies
- there is a task force of co-operating agencies fully committed to respond for a limited period of time.

[Click here for a more detailed version of this case study.](#)

Author: Andrew Bulmer, 2008