

## A JESUIT RESPONSE TO FLOODS IN WEST CHAMPARAN, BIHAR

As per the official estimates, the devastating floods in Bihar have already claimed 514 lives and have affected 19 out of 38 districts. West Champaran district bordering Nepal is one of the districts that have been hit badly. With the continuous torrential rains in Nepal and India and water released from the Valmiki Nagar barrage (Indo-Nepal border), the catchment areas of rivers and canals began to overflow. The barrage with a water discharge capacity of 8.5 lakh cusecs, released about 6 lakh cusecs of water, that too without an alarm or warning (TV-News 24) which gives the calamity the nature of being man-made. This year the *Tharuhat* belt from Valmiki Nagar to Mainatad are affected which according to the people of this area is for the first time since 1986. It was tragic that while people were fast asleep on 12 August, water engulfed them, gushing from different routes, with the water level rising to 11 feet. Though the official estimate puts the death toll as nine in Gaunaha block, people have come across more dead bodies. The situation of some villages of Ramnagar, especially the 'Don' area in the Tharu (ST) heartland known as *Tharuhat* is really bad. Suddenly most bridges were destroyed; huge trees uprooted and many huts and ordinary houses were washed away. Many families lost all their belongings, including utensils and cattle. The broken bridges cut off people from the surroundings. This situation continued for almost 4-5 days.



### Jesuit Response

The Jesuits of Ratanpurwa and Gaunaha responded to the crisis at the earliest possible. Both the campuses were in water and both the places had over 60 children in the campuses. The Jesuits in Ratanpurwa sent their tractor to villages to shift some belongings of the people. In Gaunaha, the Jesuit team began to move out to the reachable villages. In both the places transport and communication were not possible because of broken bridges and non-functional towers. The Jesuits began relief operations with a preliminary assessment and with whatever was available in the campuses and began to procure things and distribute them to the needy. Gradually people tried to put things together. People began to put up bamboo bridges to cross over. The Jesuits began surveying the affected villages with the help of their staff some of whom had lost their homes. As of now the water has receded from most of the places. But the people have not been able to come out of the trauma. There are instances where people have found dead bodies in sugar cane fields. On the way to Gaunaha, one can see people lined up in different areas sitting on the roadside, hoping to receive some relief materials. In the entire area, livelihoods are a big concern, as the sugar cane fields are in water and most people have lost their cattle.



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### Identifying the Villages



The Ratanpurwa and Gaunaha team along with the staff initially identified about 20 villages needing immediate attention and with better roads and communications established later, they identified another 10 flood hit villages. Of the 30 villages, 20 were categorized as the most affected and a target of reaching out to 1000 families in Ramnagar and Gaunaha blocks was kept. A village level assessment was done in a rapid manner and a door to door survey format was developed. Information is being gathered for improved interventions. While the general village assessment is ready, the door to door survey is to be done from 10 to 15 Sept., 2017.

### Distribution of Food Provisions & Necessities:

As and when possible Jesuits kept reaching food provisions. In an immediate response, the Jesuits had reached out to 480 families with items that included beaten rice, *jaggery*, sugar, etc. After this, in the second time of distribution in Gaunaha and Ramnagar blocks, kits containing 16 items (including rice, dal, utensils, candles, match boxes, etc.) were distributed to people. In Gaunaha block alone, the Champaran Jesuits have reached out to over 751 families so far. Up to now in Ramnagar block, the first round of distribution is already done in 6 affected villages including the ones in the 'don' area. On 02 September, a team led by Fr. K.C Philip went by tractor and bike and stayed overnight as they were caught up in water and rain. As of now a total of 180 families have been helped out in Ramnagar.



### Collaboration and Networking

First, after studying the ground situation and having done the initial assessment, Fr. Peter Arockiasamy and Siji met the Principal Secretary, Disaster Management, exploring ways to get some support. The next day through the initiative of Fr. George Nedumattam, SJ, a team comprising of Frs. Donald, Siji and George met the District magistrate of West Champaran. The DM was very positive and promised to the extent available, support to the affected people whom we

have identified as vulnerable. We shared with him the data available. The very next day (Frs. Joseph Sebastian, Paul Varicka and Siji) along with the team of Gaunaha met the BDO and followed up the meeting with the DM.

The Coordinating Team made a visit to all the religious groups that are engaged in relief, namely the RNDM sisters at Narkatiaganj, the Canossians at Lauria and the Diocesan Social Service Society at Bettiah. As of now, we are closely collaborating with RNDM and partially with the Canossians in flood relief. Both the sisters' campuses had over 7 ft. water; water entered their convents and the boundary walls were destroyed. A St. Michael Alumnus in Madhopur, a good friend of Gaunaha mission was a true inspiration as he opened his house, resources and began to prepare and serve cooked food for many people in Madhopur village. Many lay people in groups had prepared food, carried them by tractor and served the people in different areas.

### DOCTOR'S FOR YOU and health Camps



Through our past association, we have been in touch with a group called 'DOCTOR'S FOR YOU'. Through them, we have had health camps in the affected areas especially reaching out to the most vulnerable children and mothers by providing basic health care services; WASH (Water Sanitation and Hygiene) interventions. So far with some volunteer doctors from different parts of the country, we have reached out to about 1,000 vulnerable persons, including children, pregnant women, lactating mothers and others in five camps so far. There is still an immediate need of water testing of all existing sources and chlorination to ensure access to safe water, thereby preventing any potential water and sanitation related diseases. On the issue of protection, women and children were found to be in a vulnerable condition. Among the

most vulnerable were pregnant and lactating mothers, the elderly and differently abled persons of the village. Two children in the area are said to have died of diarrhoea. There is an urgent need to arrest many more such incidences. We need to mobilise some resources for procuring more medicines as there is a need for general health interventions.

### Resource Mobilisation and Support:

Fr. Provincial had already written to the Jesuit communities to support the flood response initiatives. As far as institutional financial contributions are concerned, we received support from the Papal Seminary, Pune, St. Xavier's Colleges, Digha and Atmadarshan. As per our information, our schools have already collected materials and money and are ready to dispatch them. Patna Women's College, St. Joseph's School, Bankipore and a few other schools and individuals C/O Fr. Peter Arockiasamy, SJ (Development Office) have also contributed in cash and kind. There has been an overwhelming response from the staff and students of KREA, Bettiah, West Champaran and from other institutions of ours. After an announcement was made by the respective principals in KR campus, students and staff brought items such as rice, dal, match boxes, etc. Some of the smaller kids brought new uniforms that were kept for their use. The students and staff packed various items as per plan and a few representatives took the packets all the way to Ratanpurwa and Gaunaha and were part of distribution. READ and KR together procured the required items including tarpaulins and transported them to the centres for distribution. Children of Ratanpurwa and Gaunaha campuses are also actively involved in collection and distribution.



### Coordination

Frs. Donald (KREA) and Joseph Sebastian (READ) together are coordinating the Flood Response of Champaran with some handholding support from the Development Office. After the initial response, as soon as the road links were established, the Coordinating team along with the representatives from the Development Office visited the three most affected villages of both Ramnagar and Gaunaha and had meetings and interactions with the team of Jesuits, sisters and collaborators in both the places. A phase wise strategic interventions were planned and they are being executed. The first part has been relief and distribution, the second health and the third would be further support through stationary, clothes and uniforms (new), blankets etc. The teams in both Gaunaha and Ratanpurwa have been working very hard despite difficulties. The efforts of the Champaran Jesuits have been inspiring. To me it appears that what has been happening is a true expression of solidarity with the poor especially with all the Jesuits, collaborators, staff and students of Champaran actively involved in reaching out to the most vulnerable and needy.



***With all of us Jesuits, collaborators, and our resources and energies put together, it has been a great opportunity to respond to the needs of the afflicted.***

Siji Noorokariyil, SJ, Development Office, St. Xavier's, Patna

[sijisj@patnajesuitsociety.org](mailto:sijisj@patnajesuitsociety.org), 9006652021