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The Clock That Did Not Stop

It was just before dusk on 11 Oct 2005 as we crossed Kohala Bridge towards Muzaffarabad. The oncoming traffic was surging as people of Muzaffarabad and surrounding areas had started the exodus in the aftermath of 8 Oct 2005 earthquake. The facial expressions of these people said it all- eyes wide open and red with lack of sleep and tears, mouths agape, ruffled hair, frozen and far distant stares. This sight kept getting dimmer as the sun set and the team of KLWT workers opened their fast in the vehicle. Our eyes had definitely shut themselves to the sight but the mind was still registering and understanding of what will we encounter in the city.

The darkness of the night was not enough to hide the extent of destruction, pain and death as we entered Muzaffarabad. The headlights of our vehicle not only lit the path but all the rubble around it as we started to see people under improvised shelters huddled together around small fires. The large figures of the homeless that we had been reading and hearing about had started to take shape. The homeless now had a face which stared at us as we traversed the deserted streets of Muzaffarabad in order to reach Jalalabad, a posh colony, where all high ranking civil servants lived including the Prime Minister of AJ&K.



The barrier to this once ‘No Go’ area for the commoners was now raised permanently as people entered Jalalabad at will. Two policemen, wrapped in chadars, only lifted their heads every now and then to make their presence felt and were probably busy discussing how the world had changed for the whole city and its inhabitants on

the morning of 8 Oct. Our vehicle’s headlights kept exposing the devastation as we headed towards the house of a colleague’s brother- Mr Tahir Yousaf Saraf, our point of contact for our relief operations in the area. We crossed the PM’s house and many other important houses before bright lights and hustle bustle of international media workers greeted us. As we parked we saw Lyse Doucet prepare herself for the next BBC bulletin having the rubble of Chief Justice House in the background. Our colleague, Dr Sajid Yousaf Saraf had lived in that house for 10 years!

Dr Sajid took some time to get orientated to the changed configuration of the streets and the rubble before he headed towards one direction with a small torch. We all waited and looked around to see the cameras of media people taking pictures and their microphones taking sounds of the devastation around the globe. They were undoubtedly doing a great job but certain questions nagged me as I asked myself -was it good enough or for how long will the media focus on the calamity or is it sending the right message so far or is it designed to carry the pains and sufferings to the living

rooms of the world to make them realise and contribute? My thoughts were broken with a loud and a warm ‘Assalam o Alaikum’ from Tahir Saraf- a Geology Professor in University of Muzaffarabad who seemed in control of things out there, a great sign of hope! We shook hands with him and a small crowd suddenly finding us different from the neighbouring media people gathered around and listened to our conversation. Tahir introduced us to some of his friends and the introduction included the name followed by the number of fatal and injured casualties in his family. I stood on the most important avenue of Muzaffarabad listening to him and wondering how the tremors of 8 Oct had also changed the facets of social introduction – the pain and suffering followed the name as status, appointment and influence lost their meanings. Lyse Doucet was now live on air!

The team’s night activities were focussed on liaison, coordination and damage assessment in order to help in formulating the relief response. It was well past the midnight once we turned in for sleep. All members slept after pitching a small tent in the side lawn of Chief Justice House. I slept in the vehicle’s rear seat convincing myself that the uncomfortable seat kept me awake and not the images of what I had seen and heard since my arrival! I knew I was wrong!

Few quick sips of water with some dates and I was done with my Sehr. The finishing of Fajr Prayers marked the beginning of a new day for all as the sunrays revealed an entirely different picture of the whole area. The limited vision through the vehicle’s headlights, last night, could never do justice. As the team members rolled down the tent I took the advantage of exploring some of the houses, which were not in the bright light of cameras. This took me to the back streets of Jalalabad.

Every step revealed utter destruction, homelessness, helplessness, death and loss! Then I saw life – a sign of life! In the midst of a destroyed house a wall clock still ticked away at time and life. It had sustained the ravages of time since 8 Oct 2005. I stood outside the house at 0730 am and wondered what did this mean to all of us!

The clock had not stopped! It had fought with resilience to continue working and give accurate time despite all odds. It meant that life was to go on and we as a nation had to get our efforts together in an organized manner to show mental and physical discipline. It gave a sign of order in a house that was utterly destroyed and in chaos. The cracked walls, the unhinged doors, the uprooted wirings and now the homeless occupants had not deterred the clock from ticking! It had not frozen in despair, agony and pain but moved on with same rhythm and accuracy as before.

I took the photo of ‘The Clock That Did Not Stop’ as my gesture of respect and joined my KLWT team members to start the day of relief operation with renewed energies and objectives!