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Through a volunteer's hand

As I stepped out of my hot shower, upon my return from Jabar, a mountainous rural area about 20 kms north of Bagh, I thought of Sabeel, the driver who had lost a sister and three nephews in the earthquake. I put my warm clothes on and sat on the dinning table to savour some hot chapattis with chicken curry, saag gosht (spinach and meat) followed by hot Halwa and piping hot tea brewed to perfection. I thought of Sabeel again.

Sabeel had just made a new extension to his already modest home. Now he has a canvas tent, measuring 4m x 4m. He's one of the lucky ones.

It was eighteen hours ago... at 3 am, when accompanied by my fellow volunteers, we left Islamabad with two trucks of tents, blankets and food stuff to be delivered and handed to Captain Jamil of the 21 Sind Regiment, stationed at Bheer Pani. It was a clear still night with the full moon gracefully lighting up the valleys and mountains. But I wasn't here to enjoy nature's beauty and grace, I was going to witness nature's humiliating, violent wrath. My colleague, Omar, maneuvered our jeep up the mountains and in to Kashmir with the skill of an expert driver. I was supposed to get some sleep on the way, but I couldn't.



“When you reach Bagh, go to the Brigade head quarter and ask for Maj Qaiser of 71 AJK and ask him to give you two sepoy (soldiers) to accompany the trucks to Bheer Pani”, were the instructions given to me the night before by Jawad, who had accompanied the team that had taken the first supplies three days ago. As we approached Bagh, the destruction started to become

more visible. Throngs of people were either waiting on the sides of the roads for some relief or in queues at relief camps.

At the Brigade head quarter, I got off my jeep and negotiated my way through a mass of people trying to convince the MP at the entrance to let them in. Internal refugees, bitter, twisted and torn, each with his own story and each one thinking he had prior right to aid. A painful irony in itself, that man can think he has more right to food and shelter than the brother next to him. And here I was from a life so different from this before me, overflowing with the excesses and greeds of the high-class material world. And in my mind re-echoing the words of Jawad...so distant, rational and formal...I had to find Major Qaiser...

“You need to talk to that soldier who will ask Col Khalid for your request”, said the 6ft tall MP pointing towards a soldier wearing a surgical mask. “Where is Maj Qaiser”, I enquired. “Their unit moved out last night, I don’t know where he is” was the curt reply. Col Khalid was a medium sized man with glasses, standing with his hands back, giving orders and scrupulously overlooking the huge helicopter pad where a massive relief operation was in progress.

There were troops running around and as a chopper landed blowing dust everywhere, it reminded me of a scene from a Vietnam war movie yet this was for real... “The convoy with troops for Bheer Pani left half an hour ago” Col. Khalid shouted over the sounds of the chopper engines and revolving blades. “It will take a couple of hours before I can arrange two sepoys to accompany your trucks,” he added. “We’ll go on our own, if it’s ok with you?” I asked. “Just enter your truck nos and contents over there”, he said pointing towards a young soldier sitting in front of a desk, that was covered by pristinely ironed white cotton, busy making entries in his register. Tayyab was the name badge on his chest. Tayyab efficiently entered our details in his well-used register, then stood up and with a big smile shook me by my hand and said loudly, “Thank you very much sir”. Such extreme courtesy, in this hour of madness, I thought to my self. “Get me an axe, we need to chop those trees down” were the last orders I heard Col. Khalid give as I made my way to Bheer Pani.

The stench of decomposing bodies amongst the rubble in the once bustling Bagh bazaar was not enough to prepare me for what was to come. As we meandered out of Bagh, further north in to rural areas toward Bheer Pani, it hit us. Upon every turn, there was a broken house and with it many broken families. Just sitting amongst the rubble. Some had improvised shelters, some by now had tents and others were trying to make something of the rubble. There were women, there were children, and there were old age people. No one spoke in the jeep. It was shock and horror. We know how, but we don’t know why.

And to think, this was just one very minute affected area, which was accessible by road. Helpless villagers with no grand indoor stadiums or county halls where they could take refuge and shelter. How many must have perished? How many injured? How many still under hard concrete rubble still crying for freedom? There were no ambulances here where the injured could be transported to medical care. They were bringing them on Charpais (beds), on foot, from God knows how far to already full capacity medical camps. What about those injured who had lost loved ones and there was no one to carry him/her to a medical camp? This could happen to me tomorrow.

At Bheer Pani, Capt Jameel was happy to receive our trucks. He thanked me and ordered his men to off load our trucks immediately, which they did. My colleagues talked to some locals waiting for some relief aid. They were all in high spirits. We set out to Jabar on foot, a short 15-minute walk and managed to meet Sabeel and GulFaraz, our effected colleagues, near their shattered homes. In the clean, crisp mountain air, surrounded by the soothing sound of the stream, I asked them what they intended to do now. “I don’t know,” said Sabeel with a confused look on his face. They told us how the coming of

winter and snow would prevent them from re-building anything for the next five months. I didn't speak much. I didn't know what to say to them.

But amid all the suffering, I saw life going on. Returning to some normality. Women were washing clothes at the stream, just like they and their earlier generations had done before. Kids were playing amongst the rocks on the stream, probably reveling in and loving the fact that they don't have to go to school for the foreseeable future. Waving at us, they tried to catch our attention as they joked and giggled amongst them selves. Maybe they will be known as the earthquake kids in the future I thought. I smiled at the state of the human heart-just when it had thought it had endured it's full capacity of pain it was big enough to still find space for love and hope and laughter once again...

In Bagh, there were lines of shattered shops, but amongst them would be one standing, and it would be open for business. Oblivious to 'structural damage' and 'this building is declared unsafe', grocery shops, fruit and veg, even a butcher, trading as usual. I guess the human soul is a survivor. It can take in and endure a lot more than we think.

As we headed back home, I thought, well is this it? What next? Are we going to go back to our lavish dinner parties, silly weddings, Sunday brunches, evenings at the club, games of tennis and squash...? Would it be fashionable to help these people two, four months down the line?

So readers...if you think you've done enough, think again.