

# News from the ant – September 2012

## Response in a Violent Situation

It has been a trying 2 months for us – both as individuals and as an organization. Violence between Bodos and Bengali Muslims spread from neighbouring Kokrajhar District to our district of Chirang on 22<sup>nd</sup> July. Life has not been the same for us since then. Never having dealt with situations of direct violence before, we were initially at a loss of how to deal with the situation. More than the actual killings and burning of villages, the fear of being attacked saw hundreds and thousands fleeing their homes and taking shelter in makeshift relief camps. We found it impossible to move as most of our field staff and their families were also in relief camps. Then, since 90% of our staff belong to the Bodo tribe – one of the groups in the conflict – their movements were (and still largely are) highly restricted to certain areas where they are in dominance. It has been a huge challenge reaching relief materials to the camps as few are willing to risk going in a curfew area – though in reality we have had no occasion when we were stopped and checked when we moved around on our bikes in the height of curfew and violence. Never before have we seen terror in so many and so deep.

Two months down the line, things are much improved. While the police and army and a tighter administration have managed to control the physical violence, getting a handle on the economic and social violence is another ball game. The poison of fear and hatred has spread so deep in both the communities that someone needs to start working on that, but how, we are still at a loss.

There are still over 35,000 people from approximately 7000 families living in various relief camps in our district. Of these some 2007 houses have been destroyed but most are unable to go back out of fear and lack of security. Trust and confidence in the other has completely broken. While politicians from all sides indulge in their posturing games, the worst sufferers have been the poor, the women and the children. The situation has forced us into fast track learning. We are still trying to gauge how best to deal with the conflict and the communal polarization that has arisen from this. Never having done any serious relief work before, we wonder how much and how long this will go on.

While we are trying to meet the requirements of people here in Chirang, the larger part of the IDPs are in other districts like Kokrajhar and Dhubri and hence there are expectations that we will intervene in those districts too. But our own security position is delicate as our campus and office is located in a Bodo dominated but the overwhelming majority of the IDPs are Bengali Muslims. Then, with a majority of our experienced staff being Bodo, it is difficult for them to reach out to Bengali Muslim camps. Hence, we are trying to figure how best to reach out to meet expectations and make a difference in bringing some relief to people and helping them cope with a bad situation.

### **Our response in the Ethnic Violence in Chirang & Kokrajhar**

After the initial days of shock and immobilization, we got into some action.

#### **1. Emergency Rations and small items to fill the gap in the camps :**

It took 5 days for the government to get into action and start providing the first relief rations. We tried to fill in the gap in a couple of camps in the initial days and then even later. We supplemented the government's supply of rice, dal and salt with some edible oil, spices, potatoes, soyabean, channa etc. In addition, we put some money into the hands of our field staff in various areas and let them purchase things that the relief camps urgently needed – like candles, matches, chillies etc. Needing to respond in other areas / districts where we do not have a field presence, instead of **the ant** going and carrying out relief ourselves, we have been working through partner NGOs. We have given 2 organizations grants of Rs.1 lakh each to reach out with relief materials to some camps in Kokrajhar and Dhubri.

## **2. Non Food Items**

We mobilized some funds and taking stock of the needs of families whose houses had got burnt, we listed down essential non-food items which we distributed. Till date we have distributed 1000 plastic tarpaulin sheets for tent as for ground sheet and 400 sets of cooking utensils. We have given over 11,000 washing and bathing soap.

With support from Mercy Corps (USA), we have just started distributing non-food items – including 4 blankets, a plastic sheet, a set of kitchen utensils and mosquito nets to every single household still in the relief camps in Chirang. We hope to cover some 7200 households staying across 35 big and small camps in 2 weeks.

## **3. Food Support to poor families**

Poor families who survive on daily wage labour but did not need to live in relief camps also suffered greatly. They could not work and so were starving. The government gave only rations to those families living in camps. So, we stepped in to support such families. Across our various work clusters, we supported over 600 such families with emergency rations whenever there was no work. Our field staff identified the poorest families and we could help them till the situation normalized enough for them to work and earn.

## **4. Scholarship Support to Students**

School going children have lost their books and uniforms when their houses were burnt. We have just started supporting them with scholarship amount of Rs.2000-Rs.3000 for them to buy books and uniforms so that they can go to school. With the help of the District Administration we helped some enroll in schools near their relief camps. Some were helped with cycles to attend schools from the camps itself.

## **5. Psycho Social Relief**

We have started games and activities with children in some of the camps. We distributed materials for sports and games so that children can be kept busy and also have a way to vent out their energy and frustrations. In a limited number of camps, our staff has been going for conducting activities with children. We are trying to start some activities with women in the camps. We are supporting a local partner NGO in starting schools in 5 camps in Bilasipara in Dhubri District. 2 teachers have been hired in each camp and classes have started for children over there.

## **6. Return to their Homes**

We have been working closely with the District Administration in trying to get security for those villages who are ready to move back to their original areas. Our close contact with the field gives

us enough information which we are able to pass on to the administration and connect them with each other.

### **Future Action**

#### **1. Rehabilitation**

Along with the community we will have to see a role in rehabilitation of the victims from both communities whose houses have got destroyed.

#### **2. Rebuilding Livelihoods**

Many who have been displaced have lost their livelihoods and we will need to start helping them address the issue of rebuilding their livelihoods and their assets again.

#### **3. Peace Building**

In the long term, the ant will have to carve a role for itself in peace building efforts between the two communities. We are poised at a very critical place where we will need to reach out to both the groups and get them to start talking to each other. We will have to explore and create spaces for interaction between the various groups. For that we will need much support and also building up of our own capacities in peace building.

### **The ant's other Projects**

All our project related work was completely disrupted by the violence. But with peace returning, our regular work is slowly getting back on track. Staff are now able to move around a bit more and resuming their work. Our women's federations have started meeting again and talking of taking the process of monitoring of group building and social action ahead. The children and youth mobilization have started again and through football and sports and cultural activities, we are working to keep their energies positively channelized. Our agricultural team has started meeting farmers in their homes though we lost the peak agricultural season for giving inputs. But our work with the Bengali Muslim community has got derailed totally as a number of our Bodo staff used to reach out to them too and now are unable to. We may need to think of some ways of building up more human resource to reach out to them.

One good news is that our NGO training work luckily did not get too disrupted. When we realized that it was difficult for NGOs to come to Chirang for training to our centre because of the unrest, we moved the trainings out. Our senior NGO partners in various parts of Assam all chipped in to support and shared all their resources to keep the work afloat. We are proud of their ownership over the programme.

The next few months will be critical for **the ant** as it will determine the direction we move in and hopefully this trial by fire will make out come out stronger.