

## **BF NARGIS PROJECT – STEP 2 (26 – 28 Sept 08) Report**

A team of fourteen (11 from Buddhist Fellowship and 3 from Red Cross Singapore) led by President of BF Angie Monksfield, left for Yangon on Friday 26 Sep on a humanitarian mission, the second such trip by BF to help the victims of Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar.

The planning and coordination efforts prior to the mission were conducted by Wang Pei Chong with Chit Chit of Silk Air in Yangon.

The first mission was in July 2008 when the BF team went to the villages in Labutta that involved a 12-hour bus journey and a one-hour boat ride each way. In this second mission, the team selected 3 villages consisting 1,050 households in Kunyangon, another area in the Irrawaddy Delta region that was also severely hit by the Nargis cyclone. The journey took 3 hours on the bus and one hour by boat to the farthest village each way.

The team arrived in Yangon on Friday, 26 September and spent the evening preparing 1,050 packets of 10,000 kyats (S\$11) cash for distribution to the villagers.

In addition, 1,050 bags of rice and peas, bottles of cooking oil, pairs of rubber slippers, packets of candles, sets of Longyi (Burmese traditional dress) and cooking pots had been delivered to the 3 villages ahead of the group's arrival so that distribution can be conducted in an efficient manner. The group also brought with them 4 water filtration systems (weighing 37 kg each) donated by the Red Cross Singapore and 800 pieces of blankets donated by Singapore Airlines & Silk Air.

On Saturday, after breakfast at 5am, the team was ready to board the bus to Kunyangon at 6am. However, the bus needed emergency repair work and the journey could only start at 8am. Unperturbed in the usual BF style, the group made the most of this time by doing a walking tour of Yangon and had the good fortune of encountering monks on the morning alms round.

After a bumpy 3-hour ride on monsoon-eroded roads, the team arrived at the pier of the River Toe in the Irrawaddy Delta to board a boat.

Joined by four local assistants, the group of now 21 people set off in a rather small boat loaded with the 800 blankets and 3 water filtration systems to the 3 villages. The boat reached the first village of Peikone at 1 pm, the second village of Hnar Khaung Chung at 1:45 pm and the third village of Chaung Gyi at 2:15 pm.

### 1<sup>st</sup> Village: PEIKONE – 260 households/900 villagers

(Yap Kheng Guan, Wong Tai Wee, Tan Guat Kheng, Seint & Patrick Lim)

On arrival, the group led by Kheng Guan, was greeted by the village headman and his helpers who had prepared the village hall for the distribution of the donated items.

The distribution took about one and half hour after which the villagers packed into the village room preceded by Homage of the Buddha chanting session led by Kheng Guan. He informed the villagers where the donations were from and their sufferings

were not forgotten by the brothers and sisters of the Buddhist Fellowship in Singapore.

The group then brought the water filtration unit donated by the Red Cross to the village's monastery, Mahathumanarama. Red Cross volunteer, Patrick Lim demonstrated the use of the unit.

The group was then shown around the village or what was left of it by the villagers. They recounted the horror and trauma they went through in May when Nargis slammed the village with super strong winds and engulfed the entire village with 5 feet (1.5 m) of water. According to reports, the winds of Nargis reached a speed of 200 km per hour, the speed of an F1 car.

"We are used to storms and the rough waters of the river but we have never seen anything like Nargis before. We had no warning prior to the cyclone reached our village at about 9 pm and trashed us through the night. In 12 hours, our village was in tatters and our livestock drowned. Over the next few days, we saw many floating bodies of humans and animals" said U Kyaw Them, the village headman as he pointed to the river running by the village. "Among the buildings destroyed was the village's only school building. For now, children in the village have to make do with an old building that is still standing", he added.

BF member Ms Tan Guat Kheng said, " I am glad that I came on this trip. The villagers touched me with their warmth and kindness. Despite having suffered so much, they look happier than many in Singapore who have much more. The villagers laid trunks of fallen coconut trees for us to walk on while they walked alongside us in the wet and muddy ground barefooted. It was really a heart-warming and humbling experience for me. "

#### 2<sup>nd</sup> Village: Hnar Khaung Chaung – 280 families

(Bita Seow, Matthew Rickard, Kwee Poh Gek, Ong Li Li, Lynn & Wilson Boey)

Upon arrival, the group was led to the monastery to meet the Abbot who had been with the village for 8 years. A large beautiful pond full of lotus flowers sat in the middle of this monastery.

The Abbot invited the villagers through loud speakers to assemble in the hall.

Representatives of the families, with smiles on their faces and carrying sacks walked dignifiedly into the hall. The distribution of the items was conducted followed by chanting led by the Abbot and a short address by Bita Seow.

The team members were then given a tour of the village. Then Matthew indulged in a game of sepak takraw with the villagers. After which, he had to take a hose shower and dressed in a sarong while drying out his underpants. This set the children and adults into giggles.

Bita and the rest entertained the children with finger puppetry, hop scotch, five stones and improvised games.

“The village lost 30 people when they cyclone hit. They seemed to have bounced back well and with help from UNICEF, they have a well-run school serving the children in the village. It was great to be part of another successful BF mission. Having been involved in the first mission, I was glad that we were able to spend more time with the villagers this time around and to also get a good understanding of where our funds can be best spent for the long term recovery of the region” said Matthew Rickard

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Village: Chaung Gyi – 485 families

(Angie Monksfield, Wang Pei Chong, Tushita Teng, Catherine Tham, Daniel Ong & Chit Chit)

The third group arrived in the farming village of Chaung Gyi to find the villagers waiting in orderly lines patiently in the Kan Gyi monastery.

The team paid respect and made offerings of donated items to the Sangha. Following the chanting by the Abbot, the team commenced the distribution of items to the 485 villagers gathered at the monastery.

Soon, the clouds darkened and rain began to fall. Sensitive to how the villagers have endured a cyclone and they had waited so patiently, the team did not stop even for a moment despite the rain and some minutes later, some villagers came forward and held umbrellas over us to give us shelter.

This village was the biggest of the 3 villages visited by the mission. The condition of the buildings testified that they had taken the hardest beating by the Nargis cyclone among the 3 villages. A hundred people lost their lives and it was clear that the battered wooden building that housed young novice monks was in need of reconstruction. The main monastery building also required repair work.

The farmers revealed that the village had lost all the livestock and they had to cultivate the land by hand. Beautiful sights of healthy green rice fields reflected the admirable efforts the farmers had put in despite the absence of buffaloes that have in the past helped them with the strenuous ploughing and seeding efforts. It was also a sign of life rejuvenation after the hardships they had to endure!

The 3 groups returned to the pier at 6:30 pm as darkness set in. Everyone arrived back in Yangon at 10:30pm with hungry stomachs but spiritually fulfilled!

“ Even though we all live under the same stars, our lives are so different. Indeed, our kamma determines our birth destination and life experience. This reinforces our determination to help those who are less fortunate.” said Angie Monksfield.

The team is recommending the following for Chaung Gyi village in Step 3:

1. Offer buffaloes to the farmers
2. Offer funds to repair the monastery main building & novices dormitory
3. Offer books and shelves to restore the village library
4. Hire a teacher for the village school to teach the children for 1 year

### **Mission Step 2 Costing**

A total of S\$30,811.02 (26,867,210Kyats) was expended:

<b>No</b>	<b>Item</b>	<b>Costs (Kyats)</b>	<b>Cost (S\$)</b>
1	Rice	2,746,800	3,150.00
2	Cooking Oil	4,836,000	5,545.87
3	Rubber Slipper	1,449,420	1,662.18
4	Cooking Pot	2,887,500	3,311.35
5	Peas	1,209,250	1,386.75
6	Candles	777,800	891.97
7	Longyi	2,152,500	2,468.46
8	Envelopes for Cash	19,540	22.41
9	Plastic Bag (Rice& Peas)	90,200	103.44
10	Transport (Goods)	198,200	227.29
11	Cash (10,000Kyats)	10,500,00	12,041.28
	Total:	<b>26,867,210</b>	<b>30,811.02</b>

Air tickets, accommodation, food and transport were borne by the team members respectively.

### **Mission Step 3**

The next mission is scheduled for 26 – 28 December 2008. We invite members wishing to participate to register with the BF office. Trip budget: \$600.

Collection of clothes and toys for the children, blouses and shirts for the adults will be conducted prior to the mission. Anyone wishing to donate these items can bring them to the BF centre in December 2008.

If you would like to donate cash to assist with the reconstruction efforts, please write a cheque payable to "Buddhist Fellowship Myanmar Nargis Fund". A separate bank account has been established and MCYS has issued Buddhist Fellowship a permit to conduct fund raising for the cyclone victims.