

KOSI FLOODS 2008 – AN OVERVIEW BY SSVK

The Incidence

A human tragedy of unparalleled dimensions unleashed itself on millions residing in the 7 North Bihar Districts of Supaul, Araria, Madhepura, Saharsa, Purnia, Khagaria and Katihar due to a breach in the in the eastern Kosi embankment upstream of the Indian border at Kushaha in neighbouring Nepal on the 18th of August, 2008. Following the breach, River Kosi, often referred to as the “sorrow of Bihar”, picked up a channel it had abandoned over 200 years ago, drowning towns and numerous villages coming in the way of its newly acquired course, affecting more than 3 million people. Still worse this altered course now cuts through an area which ever since the construction of the eastern Kosi Embankment almost 5 decades ago had lived in the relative comfort of being flood protected. Unlike floods, this is not calm water but an angry torrent, making relief work very difficult.

The Impact

With the river virulently flowing through its new found course, lakhs of people were caught unawares. Apart from loss of land, crops, homes, human and livestock lives and massive damage to infrastructure; close to a million found themselves marooned .

According to a release of the Disaster Management Department of Government of Bihar dated 06/11/08, the following is the current status of the impact of floods in the 5 worst affected districts:

	Supaul	Madhepura	Araria	Saharsa	Purnea	Total
Affected Details						
No. of blocks affected	5	11	4	6	9	35
Name of affected blocks	Basantpur Pratapganj Raghopur Chhatapur Triveniganj	Shankarpur, Puraini, Kumarkhand, Chausa, Singheshwar, Alamnagar, Murliganj, Madhepura, Bihariganj, Gwalpara, Udaikikishunganj	Narpatganj Bhargama Forbesganj Raniganj (W)	Saurbazar, Nauhata, Patharghat, Sonbarsa, Simri Bakhtiarapur, Banmi Itari	Banmankhi, Dhamdaha, K. Nagar, Vaisee, Barhara Kothi, Amaur, Bhawanipur, Baisa, Rupauli	
No. of panchayats Affected	65	140	71	59	77	412
No. of Villages Affected	173	370	141	169	140	993
Population Affected	696816	1419856	626062	448796	164000	3355530
No. of Families Affected	186661	374798	140895	130000	41645	873999
Livestock Affected	132500	303640	80000	161000	35000	712140
Area affected in lakh hectares	0.51	1.59	0.45	0.38	0.47	3.4
No. of Houses damaged (Pucca, Kuchha and Jhopadi)	130207	168410	8439	26124	7562	340742
No. of persons evacuated	370000	335110	107937	115945	65000	993992
No. of Human Death	15	222	2	35	1	275
No. of Livestock Death	97	1348	0	22	0	1467

Source: Disaster Management Department, Govt. Of Bihar
website: <http://disastermgmt.bih.nic.in/>

In government statistics death figures are grossly under reported. Reports from field workers of Action Aid and other organisations participating in the Citizen's Initiative on Flood in Bihar,

place death estimates at 2,000. Media reports estimate still higher figures. Government figures are much lower because they only include those whose bodies which have been recovered.

Response of the Government

Caught unawares by the magnitude of the tragedy, it took the government almost 10 days to come forth with a structured response to the daunting task of evacuating more than a million marooned, a task which lingered late into the 2nd week of September 2008. Having got its act together, it next set about addressing the issue of running relief operations for the evacuated and the displaced by setting up relief camps and health and veterinary centres.

It certainly goes to the credit of the Government of Bihar that it is not fighting shy of the enormity of the task that it is confronted with now. Ministers of the Bihar Cabinet have been specifically designated to the worst affected districts to oversee the rescue and relief operations. Special District Magistrates have been posted to the affected districts for smooth coordination of relief and rescue operations and a host of relief interventions have been initiated. Nevertheless, the enormity of the task places it beyond the resources the state government has at its command.

Even at its peak the relief operations fell far short of the demand with the government run relief camps accounting for less than 10% of the affected population and the rest living in unorganised clusters on embankments, by road sides or on elevated open grounds on their own. Worse, the state government has neither the manpower nor the resources to meet this unprecedented situation. Instances of food riots breaking out at relief camps and relief materials being looted in transit are reported in the media. Supplies, inadequate to the demand, are impacting most severely on the already socially excluded victims particularly the dalits who are being deprived of their relief entitlements by the dominant castes as well as by an apathetic lower bureaucracy. Cramped and unhygienic conditions on limited dry ground are resulting in outbreak of diseases. The threat of outbreak of malaria and kalazaar¹ looms large. With the crisis still far from over the government has already begun rolling back its relief camps substituting them with gratuitous relief (GR) in grain and cash doles. The following table is illustrative of it:

	Total as on 7/10/2008 in the 5 worst affected districts	Total as on 21/10/2008 in the 5 worst affected districts	Total as on 06/11/2008 in the 5 worst affected districts
No. of Relief Camps Operational	257	122	27
Persons in Relief Camps	344368	191463	22225
No. of Hand pumps installed	2056	2155	2155
No. of temporary toilets built	3506	3750	3750
No. of health centres functioning	206	160	42
No. of veterinary centres functioning	93	95	55
No. of food packets distributed	239851	239929	248929
GR Distributed in quintal	301804	544565.5	681714.3
Cash dole distributed (in lakh)	8783	16030.32	17564.48
No. of kits distributed from C.M. Relief Fund	73084	129484	183030
No. of polythene sheets distributed	132659	133602	158359

Source: Disaster Management Department, Govt. Of Bihar
website: <http://disastermgmt.bih.nic.in/>

¹ **Visceral leishmaniasis** (VL), also known as **kala-azar** and **black fever**, is the most severe form of **leishmaniasis**. Leishmaniasis is a **disease** caused by **parasites** of the **Leishmania** genus. It is the second-largest parasitic killer in the world (after **malaria**), responsible for an estimated 500 000 deaths each year worldwide. The parasite migrates to the internal organs such as **liver**, **spleen** (hence '**visceral**') and **bone marrow** and if left untreated will almost always result in the death of the host. Signs and symptoms include **fever**, **weight loss**, **anemia** and substantial swelling of the liver and spleen.

Source of information: Wikipedia.

While the extent to which GR and cash doles have been made available by the government is praiseworthy, its relevance in the context of the present crisis raises questions. With their habitations lost to or yet to/just beginning to recover from the submergence, their livelihoods and assets lost and with lakhs still living perched on narrow embankments with barely some cover to pass off for a makeshift shelter, the relief camps needed to be run for longer for the flood victims. Even if government assertions of plugging the breach and restoring the river to its pre-breach channel are to be believed, it still entails a minimum wait time of 6 to 7 months for them. Till then the relief operations should have been carried on with the relief camps gradually transforming from make shift shelters to semi-permanent camps with more structured provision of basic services like health, education and water and sanitation. Only with this transition having been made distribution of support in grains and cash doles would have made more sense for many. Additionally the transition would also entail provision of kitchen kits, bed rolls, blankets and mosquito nets. The education needs of the children would also have to be addressed. Employment opportunities would also have to be created to gainfully engage the camp inhabitants. While the government has made initiatives in the direction of transforming relief camps into transit shelters with basic amenities till the time the more complex issues of rehabilitation and reconstruction are addressed, they are cutting down on the number of camps thus leaving large numbers to fend for themselves.

International Relief Organisations

Realising its limitations, both physical and financial, in dealing with a calamity of this magnitude, the state has gone in appeal to other actors, including those from the civil society. Some of the players who have taken up cudgels are UNICEF, OXFAM, CASA, ACTED, IFRC and ICRC, ActionAid, CARE, Christian Aid, GOAL, WHO, MSF, Spain, Concern Worldwide, Plan International, MSF, Netherlands, EHA, EFICOR, Caritas India, World Vision, Save the Children and Aid Matrix India but the actual relief operations either actually have to roll out (with agencies still appraising or having gone in appeal with funds still to be raised) or are very few and far between.

Corporate Sector Response

Corporate Sector Response has been very encouraging though their contributions are largely being put into the Chief Minister's Relief Fund. Contributions in kind being made to the government are being delivered to the victims through the Indian Red Cross.

Civil Society Response

Civil Society response, which initially appeared feeble because of being overwhelmed by the enormity of the evacuation exercise requiring specialised personnel, has significantly picked up with charitable organisations from all over the country chipping in with cash, kind and volunteers to firm up the local civil society initiatives.

While in the early stages of relief operations, there were a range of civil society actors to extend coverage to those being left out of the government relief operations, there have been hardly any proponents from within the civil society to push for a transition to semi-permanent camps to accord a modicum of human dignity to the flood victims till the time the still distant goals of resettlement, reconstruction and rehabilitation are realized. Most persist with their relief efforts at the make shift settlements that have sprouted wherein flood victims continue to languish in subhuman conditions and exposed to the elements of weather and unhygienic living conditions. A shift to semi-permanent transit camps would have also allowed initiatives in the direction of livelihood restoration which hardly seems to be feasible under the present precarious circumstances that most are living in.

Response of SSVK in the current crisis

SSVK till date has been running 4 relief camps in Murliganj block of Madhepura district and 8 relief camps in Kumarkhand Block of the same district. Through the four camps in Murliganj Block being supported by N.M. Budhrani Trust, 1'632 families are being covered. At all these camps community kitchens serving 2 cooked meals a day are being run. 8 handpumps have been installed and SSVK's trained cadre of health workers are addressing the health needs of the affected families. All families have already been provided with shelters and. All these families would also be provided with two blankets and a durrie each. Biscuits and milk with sugar are being provided to the children. SSVK is running 4 NFE centres in 4 relief camps of Beldaur Canal, Madhepura. Gas lamps have been provided for to keep the camps lighted during night, though the numbers currently provided are not enough. These camps would be operational for 2 months till the first week of November 2008. All India Disaster Management Institute has also chipped in its support through sponsoring the nutrition component at one camp for one week. UNICEF has also extended its support by providing for Halozene tablets, bleaching powder ,ORS packets and Polythine sheets. Dignity kits comprising clothes and sanitary napkins would be shortly provided to all the 1632 families through the auspices of UNICEF.

The eight camps in Kumarkhand Block are being run with support from United Way of Mumbai and would be run for a month till the third week of November2008. 4000 families spread over eight camps are being covered under this component. Apart from the nutrition support being restricted to one cooked meal a day through community kitchens,the rest of the components remain the same as that coming from N.M. Budhrani Trust minus blankets and durries.

UNICEF is going to run a one day training camp for 40 health volunteers at the campsites run by SSVK for N.M. Budhrani Trust in Murliganj Block and for United Way of Mumbai in Kumarkhand Block. The support provided for the relief camps in Murliganj Block would be continued and extended further to the eight relief camps that have come up in Kumarkhand Block with United Way's support.

Swiss Red Cross has also pledged its support for 1'000 families for 14 days in Patarghat Block of Saharsa District. The proposed intervention would be operationalised through organising the targeted 1000 families into 2 relief camps of 500 families each. Though the needs are manifold, the intervention has been prioritised and confined to addressing the food, drinking water, shelter and health related needs of the people in light of the limited resources available for the moment.

The intervention provides for two meals a day, one in the form of dry ration support of flat rice and jaggery to account for break fast and the other in the form of cooked food comprising rice, pulse and a vegetable to account for at least one wholesome meal through setting up of community kitchens. Community kitchens are being preferred over dry ration support as the latter leaves the beneficiaries with the difficult, if not impossible, choice of arranging for fuel. Moreover, by engaging the victims in various tasks associated with running the community kitchens will maintain a modicum of community conviviality which would also help the victims in overcoming their enormous grief.

At each camp provision has been made for five hand pumps each and five water storage containers to address the drinking water needs. Additionally each family is being provided with a plastic jerry can of 10 litre capacity to take care of drinking water storage and ensuring water security at the household level.

All the 1000 families are to be provided with a polythene sheet to account for their shelter related needs.

At each camp provision has been made for 4 gas lamps to keep the site illuminated during night thus ensuring greater safety of the residents. Additionally 4 torches are being provided per camp for running errands after dark.

The intervention also provides for medical relief and assistance. Having run a community health programme in the past, SSVK has a trained cadre of community health workers adept in symptomatically diagnosing the commonly occurring health problems during floods and prescribing non prescription drugs for the same. They will be addressing the health needs of the affected families. One health worker from the organisation would be in charge of the two camps to be run .

Other like Tech Mahindra Hyderabad, Prayas Gaziya, Goonj Delhi and many individuals have also extended support in kind like Utensils, Clothes, Buckets etc. SSVK is covering a total of around 7000 families with a population of around 40,000.

SSVK has also been part of the Dalit Watch initiative which has come out with a 39 pages report on the systematic exclusion of Dalits from the relief initiatives of the government.

SSVK has dedicated a space on its web site that consistently updates media reporting on floods, has articles, reports and documents on floods and provides important links to sites of consequence. Kindly visit us at www.ssvk.org

Future Directions:

Evacuation and immediate relief assistance are just the tip of the efforts that would eventually have to be taken up. Apart from shift to transit shelters, Experts suggest that it is just the beginning of the problem, for one, the changed course of the river has swallowed large swathes of land which are hardly going to resurface even after the water recedes. Two, these inundated areas are technically in the river bed, thereby completely uprooting those living in these areas—not to talk about the loss of agriculture land, houses, livestock, ponds, wells and above all their dreams.

The state government has sought an assistance package of almost Rs 9,000 crores from the central government for rehabilitative initiatives over and above the Rs 1010 crores initially sanctioned by the Prime Minister towards relief. Mr. S.C. Jha, member of PM's task force on Bihar is however of the opinion that rehabilitative interventions would require somewhere between twenty five to thirty thousand crores.

Thus a daunting task awaits in terms of reconstruction of houses and rehabilitation of livelihoods of those affected by the Kosi Floods. Apart from restoration of public infrastructure like roads, railways, bridges and government buildings, there is the mammoth task of reconstruction and repair of fully and partially damaged houses in the flood affected villages and making them into habitable settlements by rebuilding community infrastructure like roads, library, and drinking water and sanitation facilities. Keeping in mind the scale at which a demand for construction workers would be required, there would be a need to train local people in masonry, plumbing, and other construction related skills. This would also generate employment for the communities during the reconstruction phase. There would also be a need to build local management capacities to facilitate better management and utilisation of the community structures created through the project.

Restoring houses without providing for livelihoods would make people migrate for livelihoods. The floods have left the victims homeless, destitute and without any source of income or livelihood. The only way then to ensure their stay and repair the fragile rural economy is to

simultaneously, along with rebuilding of houses, provide them with income generation opportunities right at the village level. Hence, along with reconstruction of the damaged houses it becomes imperative to lay an equal emphasis on an integrated and sustainable revival of livelihoods in order to turn the tragedy into a livelihood opportunity. For the restoration of livelihoods, the thrust would have to be both on the farm and non farm sector. For the farm sector the key intervention areas would be:

- Agricultural input support for those whose land has been spared from being devoured by the river to be able to undertake rabi cultivation
- Promotion of short duration crops on fields where crops have been entirely lost
- Reclamation of sand cast and waterlogged fields
- Promotion of pisciculture and makhana cultivation
- Restoration of livestock

For the non farm sector emphasis would have to be laid on :

- Livelihood diversification through promotion of non-farm employment opportunities
- Income enhancement through promotion of new skills particularly in the construction sector and up gradation of existing skills, organisation of beneficiaries into self help groups and provision of working capital support to them through creation of a revolving fund and promotion of secure and competitive market linkages
- Securing the entitlements of the landless and the marginalised in the employment generation oriented programmes of the government like NREGA and PMGSY and enhanced allocation under various schemes of the government.

Another key intervention would be to reduce the vulnerabilities of rural communities to disasters and stresses through building community level capacities in disaster preparedness and mitigation.

However, a detailed intervention design for reconstruction and livelihood restoration would have to await the finalisation of the reconstruction and resettlement policy which is in an advanced stage of being drafted by the Government of Bihar and for which parleys are on with the Government of Tamilnadu and Government of Gujarat who have had preceding experience of handling disasters of a similar magnitude in the event of Tsunami and Earthquake respectively. This document becomes extremely vital in terms of setting the following agenda:

- Models of public private partnership that the state government opts for
- Compensation packages on offer from the government
- Resettlement of those who have lost their land to the Kosi
- Construction parameters for the dislocated including plot size, built up area and technical parameters for rendering the houses hazard proof
- Parameters for in situ reconstruction
- Government's stance on livelihood restoration and the contingent macro policy it evolves for the same (e.g. cluster approach, enhanced allocations within existing schemes, agricultural subsidies, relaxation of norms under SGSY) all of which would have implications for fine tuning our intervention.
- Specific roles for specific stakeholders

It is only when these aspects are in place that a detailed intervention design can be prepared which would not only exclude duplication of efforts but also optimise resource deployment. Till then what remains of prime concern is making life more humane and dignified by pushing for setting up of semi-permanent transit shelters.