

Oxfam ups the response to Bihar floods



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Senior Rashtriya Janta Dal (RJD) leader and Union Minister of State for Water Resources Jaiprakash Narayan Yadav accused the Bihar government of massive flood in the state by being "totally negligent" in taking preventive measures.

According to a media briefing on 3 September 2008, Yadav alleged that Bihar State Water Resources Department, till August 17, kept on giving reports from the flood control cell that all the embankments under its jurisdiction were safe. However, when a breach in the east Kosi embankment at Kusaha in Nepal occurred on August 18, Yadav said, the Bihar Government came up with a report that erosions were taking place at the Kosi dam in Upper Nepal on Bahothan embankment for the past several days.

"This is how the government played with its own report to steer clear of its responsibility. This is not a hearsay disclosure but facts based on documents," Yadav said showing the copies of the Bihar Government reports to the reporters.

Regardless of who-so-ever may get the blame, the severity with which one of the worst floods in Bihar has devastated the lives of millions of people, will not diminish. Enormous rehabilitation and relief work, needs to be done. Many civil society organizations are rushing in to contribute towards the relief and rehabilitation work. One of them is Oxfam India. Oxfam has been working in India since the 1952 famine in Bihar and also undertakes long-term development work.

Oxfam India issued an appeal on Monday (1 September 2008) for funds to support its rescue and relief work in flood-hit Bihar. The money will be spent on delivering emergency shelter, food, hygiene items, clean drinking water and safe sanitation.

Oxfam and its local partner organisations have been rescuing people and responding to the crisis since August 18, when waters rushed into six eastern districts of Bihar from a 3 Km breach in River Kosi on the Nepal-India border. The worsening floods, with more rains predicted by the meteorological department, have already affected over 30 lakh people in 16 north-eastern districts of Bihar. The Prime Minister has declared the floods a national catastrophe.

Oxfam is using its motorboats to rescue stranded men, women and children from Supaul, the worst affected district. Contingency stocks of tarpaulin shelter sheets, water purification kits, buckets and Oral Rehydration Sachets (ORS), kept in readiness in flood prone districts, have also been moved to provide preliminary support to the affected. Staffers from Oxfam and two local organisations, Bihar Sewa Samiti and Abhigyan Disha, as well as trained volunteers, are working round the clock in Supaul.

"Oxfam is preparing to reach out, to being with atleast 20,000 families in Basantpur and Pratapganj, two of the worst affected blocks of Supaul," said Nisha Agrawal, CEO, Oxfam India. "We are scaling up our response on temporary shelter, food, water and sanitation. Women and children are particularly facing the brunt in cramped camps or are exposed to heat and the rains under the open sky. Pregnant and lactating mothers are not getting safe water and are forced to defecate in floodwaters. The need for hygiene and sanitation is imminent to prevent the spread of any water-borne epidemic."

Oxfam rapid assessment team toured the worst affected areas in the first few days and has recommended shelter, food and public health as the key needs. Oxfam is also coordinating from the start with other aid agencies and the government through the state-level Inter-Agency Coordination Group to ensure there is no duplication in response and

that relief reaches all the needy people.

The public can donate to Oxfam by calling in on +91 11 46538000 or by sending a check in the name of Oxfam Trust, addressed to Oxfam India, Plot Number 1, 2nd Floor(above Sujan Mohinder Hospital), New Friends Colony, New Delhi - 110065 (www.oxfam.org).

A donation of Rs 2000 would give a shelter kit for a family; Rs 850 would give a hygiene kit for 5 families; and Rs 1000 would give a safe latrine to 2 families.

The hope that efforts of organizations like Oxfam will help the most affected communities, lives on.

- Amit Dwivedi

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