

SOUTH BRUNSWICK: Local man aids Pakistani flood victims

Working with relief efforts in southern part of the country

By Davy James, Staff Writer

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Members of the Islamic Society of Central Jersey collect supplies for victims.

Amid the devastation and the desperation of the nearly 20 million people affected by flooding in Pakistan, scores of aid workers are tirelessly distributing food and medicine to people that have been cut off from help.

Among them is Monmouth Junction resident Faris Kasim, 28, who works for Save the Children, an international humanitarian organization helping to bring food and medical supplies to areas of the country that are facing the worst of conditions.

"Thousands of kilometers have been flooded. About the size of the entire country of England has been devastated by the flooding," Mr. Kasim said via phone from southern Pakistan. "About 20 million people have been affected in some way. Infrastructure has been destroyed in many places and you have families and children living in tents because their homes were washed away."

Mr. Kasim, who graduated from South Brunswick High School in 2000, began working for Save the Children about a year ago and has been helping the displaced in Pakistan since heavy monsoons began causing flooding in late July.

He said that, in the northern mountainous part of the country, many people were forced to abandon their homes after being cut off from aid. In the southern part of the country, thousands of kilometers of farmland were washed away along with livestock.

"We've been doing food distribution in the mountains for the most far-off communities who don't have access to buy food," he said. "They grew their own food and are too poor to buy food. Their farms have been destroyed by the flooding."

Because the flooding has had such a dramatic impact on such a large area, millions of people have been displaced from their homes, which has forced an untold number of residents to live in large tent villages among other displaced Pakistanis.

"People have no access to nutrition and the health-care system was very poor as is," Mr. Kasim said. "People have no access to hospitals because the flood water has cut them off. Disease is spreading especially in women and children, with diarrhea and skin disease. A simple cold can turn fatal to them."

Working with the United Nations, the Pakistan government and military, Mr. Kasim said aid groups like his are doing as much as they can to bring food and medicine to those without access, but the task remains daunting due to the sheer scale of the damage.

"There's such a high number of people who have been affected that it's impossible to help everyone," Mr. Kasim said. "We're still finding areas where people haven't eaten proper food in 20 days. There's a sense of desperation and people are migrating toward open areas to these tent villages so they're more connected to the rest of the country."

Those who left their home seeking aid have sought shelter wherever they can find it, some having been given tents and others finding refuge under trees. Living quarters are tight for those who have been given shelter, with one tent distributed per family. Then there are those who didn't want to leave their homes.

"There's just so much water, a huge ocean of flood water, and in the middle of it all you find what used to be a village with people still living on this small island," Mr. Kasim said. "Their houses were destroyed but they don't want to leave because it's their home. They have to walk through 4 to 5 feet of flood water for miles just to get food and drinkable water."

Mr. Kasim said aid is dropped by helicopter or brought by boat, but with so many kilometers devastated, even aid workers have to put themselves at risk to reach those in desperate need of supplies. This includes traversing mountain trails where no roads exist and the constant danger of a landslide is always in the back of everyone's mind.

"To reach those who are most vulnerable we have to be on the ground," he said. "We hiked for 12 miles to reach some mountain communities or we walk through waist-high water. It's quite dangerous especially if it starts raining because monsoon season still isn't over and that can cause a landslide."

Mr. Kasim said some of his colleagues have suffered injuries from falls and others have gotten skin diseases as they are constantly faced with unspeakable conditions.

"I saw two scared children chased out of their home by stray dogs chasing them," Mr. Kasim said. "They ran into their neighbor's home. A few minutes later that entire house was just washed away by flood waters. That kind of traumatic sight is happening everywhere in Pakistan. Entire villages have been destroyed, farmland has been destroyed, thousands of people have died, children die from diarrhea."

Also at issue for the huge communities of people living in tents is going to the bathroom, as they are forced to use natural communal bathrooms.

"It's a natural bathroom where the waste is absorbed in the ground," Mr. Kasim said. "The problem is that this is only a temporary arrangement. If prolonged waste keeps going underground then it will contaminate their water source."

Some families get by through water rations distributed by aid workers, while others are forced to walk for miles just to reach tap water, Mr. Kasim said.

Certain parts of the country are also reliant on the planting of crops to get through the hard winter, which will be difficult to impossible if floodwaters don't recede and infrastructure can't be repaired.

Also looming in the minds of aid workers is the rapidly approaching winter season, which is only months away, and the affect it will have on those living in tent villages.

"In some cases of severe weather the temperature can go down to negative 20 degrees," Mr. Kasim said. "People can't survive the winter living in tents. They won't live too long in the cold temperatures. We have to get them in some sort of housing within the next two to three months."

Mr. Kasim said government estimates place the timeframe for some sense of normalcy being returned to the country at about one year, depending on how quickly flood waters recede and whether infrastructure can be repaired.

But Mr. Kasim said some people will never be able to return to a somewhat normal way of life because everything they own has been destroyed, their agriculture buried under floodwater and their families simply washed away.

"The scale of this disaster is so wide that it's a daunting challenge to rehabilitate the villages that have been destroyed," Mr. Kasim said. "People have lost their entire families, their entire communities. Any kind of aid is most needed because everywhere you look it's a desperate situation."

The Islamic Society of Central Jersey is conducting weekly donations of supplies to be sent to relief organizations on the ground in Pakistan. Last week the ISCJ collected over 500 boxes of supplies for distribution, but given the tremendous scale of the devastation more aid is urgently needed.

The ISCJ will conduct another collection Saturday from 10 a.m. until 2:30 p.m. The South Brunswick Public Library and South Brunswick Family YMCA have also offered their help as drop off locations for the ISCJ.

A list of suggested items for donation can be found on the ISCJ web site at www.iscj.org. Mr. Kasim said of particular need are water purification tablets, which within minutes can turn dirty water into drinkable water.

"We live in a globalized world and the smallest incident half a world away can affect the entire world," Mr. Kasim said. "Everything is interconnected and the smallest bit of aid donated in New Jersey can have a huge impact in Pakistan. As citizens who are connected, it is our duty to help each other out, this time especially."

The ISCJ is located at 4145 Route 1 South and Route 522.