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Link Letter No 22

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Dear Friends,

Once again it has been too long since we last wrote and we are sorry. Like many we get caught up in all the busyness of everyday activities. We were just reflecting as it has been a year since we returned home to the UK, unsure of what we would do next although confident that it was right to return to Bangladesh. One year on, we are still feeling we are in the right place and enjoying being living and working in Bangladesh.

However, it has also been a very sad place to be recently. This whole last week there has been rain, it has been unseasonably cool. In a sense I sometimes wonder if its God weeping for the hundreds who have lost their lives here this month, the hundreds taking to the street in rampages of anger, violence and frustration. As I write, it was only a couple of weeks ago Bangladesh faced its worst ever building collapse with a death toll of over 1100 people and the search continuing. There was already political unrest with opposition parties calling national strikes in order to bring the government down and now anger against the government has grown. Recently the Islamist parties staged a rally in the old part of the city which resulted in at least 17 dead and over 60 injured. Many friends and colleagues are disheartened by the current situation and yet change seems so impossible. The issues surrounding the recent disaster seem huge. This week when I visited the Church of Bangladesh, I learnt of Kohinoor a woman from the same village as the Bishop. She had been in the Rana Plaza, along with her husband, his sister and her husband. The four of them survived, although Kohinoor lost both her legs and her brother-in-law was in need of major skin grafts to his arms. As promised, the government is covering all the treatment costs so the immediate needs are not there. But she, like hundreds of others, asks about her future. How will she earn money? Living here in the midst of it all, we feel powerless and question again and again how do we respond?

But as I stop and reflect I realise that its just taking a step at a time and doing what we can, small though it may seem. In Rebecca and Reuben's school, the children were keen to respond and so pleased to have the opportunity. They are thinking of ways to collect money, cake sales, crazy hair days etc. to raise money for those affected by the Savar tragedy. Their money will be donated to a fantastic hospital very close to where the tragedy took place - CRP, the Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed. This is just 1 km from where the building collapsed and since then they have been heavily involved in the immediate relief work.. " *Their work is now focussed on three main areas:*

- *Visiting local hospitals/clinics to identify those disabled with spinal injuries and amputations and who are likely to need long term care at CRP.*
- *Reception and treatment of victims at CRP*
- *Delivering CRP's services such as therapy and medical to local hospitals/clinics"*

If you do want to find out more about their fantastic work then you can read more about it on the www.valerietaylortrust.org

Sadly the tragedy which has unfolded in Savar highlights one of the huge issues in Bangladesh. Thousands come to Dhaka seeking work and often find themselves in poorly paid, high risk jobs. One of the things we have really appreciated about the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) is that since it began its work in Bangladesh in 1971, one of the focuses has been on creating jobs for poor, vulnerable, rural women in their own locality. These women usually have no opportunities to provide for themselves and many are often the head of their households.



Some of you may have seen the lovely cards made here in Bangladesh, many of these cards are made through paper-making businesses which were started through an MCC initiative. In 1996, a papermaking centre was opened which makes environmentally friendly paper using

local materials such as pineapple leaves, cotton waste and water hyacinth. MCC sets up centres such as this, providing training for the women as well as awareness raising on issues such as HIV. The MCC job creation programme supports these centres with the design and then the marketing until a point when the centre becomes a self sufficient business at which point it becomes independent. However, it is not just left. The centres come under a local umbrella organisation, Prokritee, set up by MCC which continues to provide support in design and marketing.

Another example is Sacred Mark, a hand-made soap making initiative that was set up by MCC to provide women in a red-light district in the north of the country an alternative source of income. Many of the women working here are graduates of Probitra, an MCC job training program for vulnerable women who have



MCC Bangladesh Women cutting soap (MCC photo: Silas Crews)

been working on the streets. Probitra is a word that can be interpreted as "holiness, sanctity, the fresh cleanliness of a newborn." In this training programme about 20 women a year are invited to attend a training programme after making a commitment to leave work on the street. In exchange they are given a daily stipend and are given life skills training for example, training in literacy, numeracy, tailoring, block printing and the opportunity to break links with their past habits. Once they have completed the year the women are helped to find different employment.

MCC has provided support in the design, the production and marketing for this soap making initiative and is hoping to make it independent soon, possibly linked with Prokritee. It is encouraging to see women being given the help they need to become self-sufficient and able to support themselves and their families. The work of MCC is not just providing hand-outs but rather trying to enable them to help themselves, its giving them respect, giving back their self-worth and dignity and in the process creating beautiful products

One key aspect of David's work was to join the management team of MCC Bangladesh and spearhead the work on disaster preparedness. At Christmas, a colleague left and David was asked also to be head of finance and administration. However, disaster preparedness remains a priority. Recently there were cyclone warnings - cyclone 'Mahasen' was expected to hit the Chittagong coast. The planning and preparation was thorough, people evacuated from their homes, the army deployed in the vulnerable areas and NGOs waiting to respond. Our office, like many, prayed and prepared, and was relieved to hear that the cyclone had weakened. Although there has been some destruction of homes, there were very few fatalities and overall damage was less than was feared and resources were in place to provide immediate relief.

The one thing that has always struck us is the resilience of the Bangladeshi people. Such an amazing example of this was Reshma, the woman who was freed from the building collapse in Savar after 17 days of being trapped. Finding Reshma alive after 406 hours bought jubilation all over Bangladesh. In the midst of the darkness, there is hope. As I reflect on the magnitude of the recent disaster here and pray for those mourning, I'm reminded that God knows each by name. *"He heals the broken-hearted and bandages their wounds. He counts the stars and calls them all by name."* (Psalms 147:3-4)

Please pray

- Please pray for Bangladesh, for the hundreds mourning loved ones, for those who are angry and in despair, for those who are powerless and vulnerable; for those who have power that they would use it wisely, for there to be justice following this tragedy and for people to know real peace from the Prince of peace.
- Please pray for discernment for MCC as it seeks to serve the people of Bangladesh in the empowering people to prepare for disasters.

Strike at the root

written by Rabindranath Tagore

*This is my prayer to You, O God - strike,
strike at the root of poverty in my heart.
Give me strength to bear lightly
my joys and sorrows.*

*Give me the strength to make my love
fruitful in service.*

*Give me the strength never to disown the poor
or bend my knees before insolent might.
Give me the strength to raise my mind
high above daily trifles.*

*Give me the strength to surrender my strength
to Your will with love*

- Please pray particularly for Probitra, the MCC training programme, this month. A new intake has just started on their year's training programme. The women who come here, bring lots of hurt and pain with them. Please pray for the staff who work with them and for the women themselves.
- We are so pleased that the Board of Grace International School has appointed a new Head Teacher. Please pray for him and his wife as they prepare to come to Bangladesh. Sadly there are still a few more teaching vacancies that need to be filled. Please pray that these vacancies can soon be filled (see www.graceinternationalschool.org for anyone who is interested).
- This summer we will be travelling to the USA for orientation and training. Please pray for us as we prepare for this. We are pleased that we will be going via the UK and will be able to spend a few days with family both on our way there and on our way back.

Join us in thanking God for....

- Relationships, both new and continued, that we have with many Bangladeshi friends and colleagues.
- The many people and churches who continue to support us in prayer (you are one of them!)
- A good break away in Nepal over Easter
- Sarah has continued with language study and was encouraged recently when she passed some exams in conversation and reading.
- Good preparation for, and relatively little impact from, cyclone Mahasen

With love from the five of us.....

David, Sarah, Rebecca, Reuben & Matthew

and our names in Bangla script...

ডেভিড , সারা, রেবেকা, রুবেন, ম্যাথিউ



A note from Rebecca, Reuben & Matthew.....

Rebecca is delighted with the new school pets - two rabbits by the names of Caramel and Oreo. On her birthday she got a 'rabbit token' so she got to spend her lunch time in the cage with them.

Reuben continues to be as energetic as ever and now is very keen on football. He even played in the international schools tournament recently which he was excited about, as he was one of the youngest and definitely the smallest.

Matthew is one of the few people to enjoy hartals. He's not had a full week of school since February! Instead he enjoys playing with his best friend and walking the neighbourhood. Now the office is so close, he regularly comes to visit and have 'cha' with the staff during the tea break.