WWF-India’s Relief Work in Ladakh
August & September 2010
Acknowledgements

WWF-India wishes to thank the immediate and positive support from Elder Pharmaceuticals, Mankind Pharma, Primum Hospital and Canara HSBC Oriental Bank of Commerce Life Insurance for providing relief supplies. We also wish to thank CASA, Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), the J&K State Government, Insaniyat and Save the Children for their support and cooperation in coming forward to meet the challenges for urgent relief and subsequent rehabilitation. A special thanks and acknowledgement to Jet Airways and Kingfisher Airlines for continued support during this operation for airlifting the relief supplies free of cost on priority. The Indian Army and ITBP at Leh are acknowledged for their support to WWF-India in meeting many requirements to achieve this humanitarian effort in phase I of the operation. We also wish to thank the Ministry of Defence and Indian Airforce for their support. Our special thanks and appreciation for the support of the Government of J&K, including the Deputy Commissioner of Ladakh and his offices, the Forest Department, the Relief Commissioner and the Resident Commissioner of the Government of J&K.
A song sung by the students of Sadbhavna school, Leh in a programme with WWF-India on the 16th of September 2010 conveys the message on Leh. The same can be heard at the following link: www.wwfindia.org/multimedia
24-year old Shilpa (a survivor) – “It happened so fast that we didn’t get a moment to think about the enormity of it.” While she and her husband clung to a wall for safety, they could hear cries of people trapped in the mud and slime trying to wade out to safer places. Their house and store of their business products worth lakhs of rupees were washed away.

24-year old Anonish (Greek tourist) – “There was total chaos and destruction in the town with people wailing over either death or disappearance of their loved ones. These people offered me great hospitality when I landed here. I will not return to my country till rescue operations get completed.”

26-year old Nisa Khatoon (local resident on Friday night) – “We are spending the night on top of the mountains around Leh. The whole of Leh is here. As we look down upon Leh, it is enveloped in darkness. All BSNL lines got cut and only my cell phone is working because it’s a private service, but my battery will die out soon. So far we are ok, but we still fear more rain.”
Ladakh – a land known for its stark beauty, hospitable and warm people, is today passing through one of its worse crisis. The night of August 6th, 2010 will be etched in the memory of its people for a long time to come as deadly flash floods hit the town of Leh in Ladakh and its surrounding areas in the early hours of this fateful day. The full impact of loss of life, property and infrastructure is still being assessed. These floods, caused by a cloudburst have claimed approximately 500 lives. The extent of the damage was so high that, even a month after the tragedy, very few dead bodies could be recovered. Even today, devastation is writ large in this town as one sees buildings, vehicles and important landmarks buried under huge debris.

Leh, in Ladakh (about 425 km east of Srinagar) is situated at an altitude of 11,500 ft (3,524 m) above mean sea level, spread over 45,110 sq. km. It is a high altitude cold desert, which normally receives very scant rainfall, usually only in the months of July, August and November. Although 5 villages in a 4-5 km radius of old Leh were damaged in the flash floods, it was Leh town that bore the brunt of the mudslides and in particular Choglamsar, a low-lying, small, dry mountain town, 14 km from Leh was the worst affected area by the flood's fury, with nearly all homes washed away or turned to mud. These floods also severely impacted about 40 villages in other parts of Ladakh. In most of these villages, the agricultural land has been completely damaged.
WWF-India has been working in Ladakh area for the past fifteen years, focusing on conserving the High Altitude Wetlands which have been identified as critical regions. WWF-India works on six priority wetlands in Ladakh, namely- Tsomoriri, Tsokar, Pangong Tso, Hanle, Chushul in Leh district and Rungdum in Kargil district. It has also been working very closely with the civil authorities, Indian Army and local communities in Ladakh to achieve its conservation goals. Our efforts are towards policy-formulation for better management practices, recording climate witness accounts, reducing the impacts of tourism and other anthropogenic activities and furthering demonstration of community-based wetlands management practices.

The district administration at Leh was quick to establish a disaster management mechanism to ensure expeditious delivery of the required assistance in this relief operation and to take care of long term rehabilitation. In line with this effort, the authorities reached out to NGOs working in the region. WWF-India's five member team (Led by Pankaj Chandan, Nisa Khatoon, Dawa Tsering, Tsewang Rigzin and Phuntsog Tashi -the team from WWF-India is already working at Leh). The team has been working in Ladakh on various conservation initiatives. They are thus well versed with communities, area, and topography of the region and hence were adept in providing necessary logistical and operational support in this task.

The Ladakh administration tasked WWF-India for rehabilitation of a hamlet south of Choglamsar-one of the most affected areas). Situated about 10 kilometers from Leh town, this village has a population of 85 families (350 individuals). This area was identified as one of the worst affected areas.
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Bravely accepting this challenge, WWF-India team at Leh, in consultation with the Senior Management Team at Secretariat, New Delhi immediately launched a massive relief operation in the area. A proper strategy was chalked out and the action was started on the same within 3-4 hours. By the evening of 9th August, two field bases in two tents were established. One base was established at Tashi Gatsal and the other base was established at Phunchok Geypheyling. WWF team members were stationed there on 24 hours basis so that they could give immediate feedback about various urgent requirements of the affected people. In the first phase of rehabilitation, emergency relief supplies were sent as per the feedback from our team. The immediate requirements were identified as solar charged lanterns, tents, blankets, water filters, medicines, sanitation kits (comprising of soap, shampoo, basic medicines, sanitary napkins, chlorine tablets, Anti Septic Cream, Scissors, Bandages, Cotton, Anti Allergic and Anti malaria pills, Water sterilization tablets, and oral dehydration salts to help reduce the risk of illness and enable families to maintain basic hygiene), kitchen sets, dry and wet rations, chocolates, jaggery, packets of ready to eat food, dry fruits and instant noodle packets. In order to avoid the spread of communicable diseases, surgical masks were immediately rushed to the affected people in the 1st consignment of relief material sent from WWF India Sectt. These masks were also given to all those who were assisting in digging the dead bodies from the debris.

Sufficient supplies of urgently required medicines were provided to the local medical unit of Indian Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) and the Indian Army, and the doctors there have been providing these medicines to the affected people. Digging tools had also been provided to the local people and to the volunteers who have been assisting in the rescue and relief operations. Besides working in Choglamsar, WWF team has also assisted in some other affected villages like Stakmo, Meeru, Upper Sumdo and Lower Sumdo. Food materials were also supplied to various families at Sumdo. While the relief work at Leh was on, the team members got the news that village Sumdo, about 170 KM from Leh had also been affected due to these floods and the local villagers there were in desperate need of food supplies. Reaching out to these affected families was a tough task as many bridges all along the road, connecting this village with Leh had got washed away due to floods. WWF-India team made a daring attempt and reached this village with essential food supplies loaded in two vehicles and distributed the same.

At village Stakmo, the urgently required water supply had been restored to some of the agricultural fields, where standing crops were drying up because of the massive damage to the local canals. During these relief operations, WWF-India team worked very closely with the Indian Army and distributed solar lamps to some of the relief camps being run by them.

WWF-India approached many corporates and institutions which have associated with the organization in the past. The help was immediate. Organizations like the Indian Army at Leh and Church’s Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA) also came forward to join hands as an emergency relief agency and worked together with involvement of our team for damage assessment and in distribution of the relief material. Canara HSBC Oriental Bank of Commerce Life Insurance also contributed to relief items which were airlifted to Leh and distributed to the victims. Gp Capt (Retd) Naresh Kapila, Director HR, WWF-India coordinated with WWF team at Leh and other agencies, as well as liaised with various airlines such as Jet Airways and Kingfisher Airlines. They immediately volunteered to provide free of cost transportation for airlifting relief supplies. Thanks to Gp Capt Kapila’s unstinting efforts we were also able to tie up with Ministry of Defence for airlifting future larger requirements such as Solar powered water pumps, RO plants and Generator sets.
Meanwhile Lt Col (Retd) Sanjeev Singh Rana, Director Operations-WWF India was deputed to Ladakh to assess the damage with our team, supervise the distribution of relief supplies and to build the morale of the team. He also took this opportunity to meet senior Army officials apprising them on the work done by the team and how WWF-India could be of assistance to the Defence Forces in reaching out to the affected. His feedback to the Secretariat at Delhi office was also useful in assessing the situation and led to the organization garnering more support for further supplies. WWFs network also rallied behind us and provided emergency funds to help people of Ladakh at this crucial time. WWF-India would like to thank all those who came forward to assist in relief operations in Ladakh and in providing the relief material in this hour of need.

WWF-India provided approximately 650 solar lamps (through funds provided by WWF-Netherlands) to the affected families. These solar lamps also proved beneficial for charging mobiles. Solar lamps were provided initially to relief camps at Choglamsar, Tashi Gatsal, Phunchok Geypheyling. Assessment visit to villages resulted in distribution of solar lamps in the villages of Gya Meeru, Stakmo, Phunchok Geypheyling and many more as requests kept pouring in. At various worst affected locations in Choglamsar water tanks were provided to ensure safe drinking water to the affected people. Water hoses /pipes were also airlifted from Delhi to Leh to transport water from the tanks to the camp locations. These tanks are being regularly filled with the help of Indian Army and local PHE department. WWF- India is also exploring to provide Reverse Osmosis (RO) water filter plants so as to prevent spread of water-borne diseases. A detailed family wise damage assessment for each family in Choglamsar has been carried out for affected families for further provision of support. This assessment is important for the long term rehabilitation of the affected people.
RELIEF ACTIVITIES AT LADAKH

The work done by WWF-India in the aftermath of the Leh natural disaster while having provided urgent and immediate relief support in the first phase has also provided us an opportunity to revisit our work and strategy for future plans for carrying out environment impact survey for the affected areas of this ecologically sensitive Himalayan region as a long term measure.
Presently, we have not been able to ascertain the long term damage caused by this natural disaster to the very fragile ecosystem. As things limp back to normalcy our conservation work will have to be rebuilt. WWF-India plans to work towards rehabilitating this critical landscape and to build capacity towards understanding natural disasters and combating them. A Herculean task, but nevertheless one that would have long term benefits for this beleaguered region and for the country at large, as Ladakh region is a part of the Himalayan landscape that plays an important role in the hydrological regime of mighty rivers like the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Indus. These wetlands also act as a buffer between glacial melt waters and outflows to smaller rivers and streams. Ladakh is home to some of the endangered species such as Snow leopard and Black-necked crane.

A special mention has to be made of the WWF-India team at Ladakh which has tirelessly worked (day and night) towards alleviating the misery of their Ladakhi friends. Also a special mention of WWF-India’s teams that coordinated the movement of supplies and logistics between Delhi and Leh - this includes the HR Division, Operations, Finance, Freshwater program and High altitude programs. All this would not have been possible, if the leadership at WWF was not proactive. The leadership was instrumental in providing guidance and directions and ensuring that the relief supplies and related work happened with speed and precision, and no stone was left unturned towards providing the necessary assistance in the immediate time frame after the tragedy struck Leh.

Plans are afoot in assisting the people of Ladakh on having better disaster management methods which also include providing guidelines on green development construction. The buildings presently constructed are made of local materials which are unable to bear the brunt of such calamities. WWF-India is looking into ways by which new architectural system can be developed which, while not affecting the environment could stand the test of such disasters. In the anvil are also plans to set up climate adaptation resource centre within existing schools and in partnership with the Indian Army. Proposals will also be provided to the local administration on incorporating climate adaptation strategies in state action plans.

Mr. Ravi Singh, Secretary General & CEO, WWF-India visited Leh and affected regions of Ladakh from 15-17 September, 2010 for a personal assessment of the damage, the work done so far and to decide the future plan of action. A number of meetings were held by him with victims of Phunchok Geypheyling, Tibetan Refugee Community, Tashi Gyatsal (Group 1) at Choglamsar, as well as victims of worst affected families staying in 250 tents at Choglamsar, Gya Meeru, Stakmo village and the students of Sadbhavana Hostel and understood the magnitude of the damage and the need to do further long term infrastructure work for their rehabilitation.
The main 4 areas of work identified to focus are:

- Rehabilitating a school and a village;
- Establishing water points for some affected communities;
- Constructing / facilitating community hall/s at specified points and;
- Doing an environment impact survey and a re-plan for the affected areas.

He also held meetings with the Deputy Commissioner of the Civil Govt, the Army Commander at Leh, the DIG of ITBP, the Special Relief Officer of the J&K Govt, officials of the Forest Department, NGOs and the Ground Water Scientist wherein he discussed the measures that need to be planned in cooperation with the Civil Authorities. These measures are:-

- For the worst affected families staying in 250 tents at Choglamasar, considering the harsh winter about to set in from November, we are exploring the possibility to provide woolen headgear and heating systems besides the solar water pumps, if feasible.
- For families at Gya Meeru, additional Solar Lights are proposed to be provided along with exploring of alternate sources of livelihood as the village has considerably lost its agrarian income resources.
- To help the students of Saddhavana Hostel, it is proposed that sleeping bags, quilts, warm jackets, trousers, mattresses and books could be considered for them to tide over immediate problem.
- At Stakmo village, where one of our Ladakh team member, Mr. Phuntsog Tashi lives, the community has lost most of their agricultural fields. While the local villagers thanked WWF-India for all the support provided to them and especially for restoring water to their standing crops when they were drying, they requested to help to restore their damaged water canals and its source and to enable ploughing of the fields again after clearing the mounds and debris. WWF-India could help those affected in the village along with Tashi’s after carrying out complete damage assessment of the village agriculture land and depending upon funds availability.
- It was decided during the meeting with District Commissioner at Leh to commission an impact study and to address future environmental based settlement planning.
- The discussions with the Forest Department led to decision to see the feasibility to put solar water pumps at Hanle and Chushul.

The Civil Administration, including Special Relief Officer, J&K Govt , the Army and ITBP, thanked WWF-India for providing immediate and timely relief support and assured all possible help to WWF-India team at Leh in future. The communities we met we unequivocal in their appreciation and gratitude; their cheerfulness and grief were both visible; there was despondency around the impending winter and inadequate availability of consumables to take them through. Many blamed themselves for the cloud burst - due to their own bad actions that led to divine intervention in the form of a storm. But there was can-do spirit to see it through and a great willingness to look at alternatives.

The government and NGOs action has considerably limited the impact of the flooding though the damage to their agricultural fields, the loss of family and friends will take a long time to recover.

In the period ahead, we have decided to contribute to the areas of work as identified above and for what is not within our means of purview, to coordinate actions through other NGOs such as Save the Children, CASA, Insaniyat as well as Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and the civil government.
The achievements and impacts of the work done by WWF-India team, as a whole have been outstanding, a tribute which was paid everywhere. Mr. Dawa Tsering one of our team members was personally involved in saving lives of victims trapped in some of the more impacted areas and we will specially honour him.

Mr. Dawa Tsering, Field Assistant at WWF-India's Leh Project Office, who happened to be in one of the worst affected areas at Leh, when the tragedy struck, reached the site at about 1 AM that fateful night and saved the lives of many people trapped in the mud. He, along with others gathered there stayed throughout the night and saved many people, who would have died otherwise, as well as pulled out many dead bodies. Dawa remained busy in this work till 11 AM next day and carried out this operation until the Army and ITBP came for support in the morning. This heroic act of Dawa deserved a special mention and appreciation due to the fact that he was instrumental in saving so many lives and never shared this selfless help provided to anyone till very recently this story was narrated to Mr. Pankaj Chandan, Project Coordinator at WWF-India's Leh Project Office by his local friend.

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Survivors speak:

Ms. Tashi Dorjay, Panchyat Member of Phunchok Geypheyling says, “After floods, WWF-India and LNP were the first and only agencies who came to our hamlet and helped us. We are thankful to WWF-India for providing us the solar lights, water and medicines in this hour of need.”

Ms. Achay Tsering, resident of Choglamsar village, quotes following with tears in her eyes. “I have lost everything including my house. I am now putting up in a tent at Village camp. I am very grateful to WWF-India for helping me by providing solar lamp, water and taking me to the hospital for check up and also helping me in getting the relief materials also from other agencies. Nisa, I will never forget you for rest of my life.”

Mr. Sonam Rinchen, Village Head Tashi Gatsal

After shifting to another camp we are missing the WWF-India Camp office team. They were with us for 24 hours and were always ready to help. By visiting different tents and interacting with us they tried to keep us happy and helped us by providing digging materials, medicine etc. He further adds that they will never forget WWF-India for this great contribution during floods.

Mr. Tsering Dawa, Member of Phunchok Geypheyling

“WWF-India has provided us a wonderful item in the form of solar lights which also charges my mobile. On 12th of August due to heavy rains floods again struck Sabu and Choglamsar. On that day the solar lamps helped us all and I used the same to save many other people as well. I personally thank WWF-India for giving us such an important item especially when we were in desperate need of the same.”
Letter of Appreciation for WWF-India Ladakh Team

OFFICE OF THE SUB-DIVISIONAL MAGISTRATE NUBRA

Mr. Pankaj Chandan
Programme Manager,
WWF-India.

Subject: Providing assistance to the Flood victims of Nubra Valley.

Sir,

1. Let me at the very outset express my heartfelt appreciation and gratitude for you and volunteers of your organization who have always been forthcoming wholeheartedly in assisting the Public and Civil authorities materialistically, morally or otherwise as and when the need arises. It has been observed in the past that your organization has never been found wanting by the poor public of Leh District when it needed its assistance. I am again putting it on record that your organization has always been willingly forthcoming in providing regular assistance to inhabitants of this place always and every time whenever wherever they needed it.

2. In a recent case when a natural calamity struck the remotest and most backward District of J&K namely Leh in the form of Cloud Burst during the month of Aug 2010 causing extensive damage to the men and material, road and other communication system, the wholehearted and timely materialistic support provided by your organization to the poor public who lost everything within shortest span of time speaks volumes about your contribution in mitigating the public grief.

3. The said calamity also had caused extensive damage to the houses of Tyakshi, Turtuk, Bougdang, Waris, Hunder Dhok, Largiab, Ronjku and other adjoining villages of Shyok and Nubra Valley. Out of this 25 families have lost their houses and many shops which had been the only source of livelihood were fully damaged. This devastation has made people homeless and jobless.

4. Since your organization has been very generous in helping the homeless people of Leh in providing them all possible help to come out of this trauma to reaffirm and restore themselves therefore it is hoped that the same kind of gesture will be extended in alleviating the deplorable plight of the homeless people of Nubra valley too.

‘An early action in this matter is highly solicited.’

Yours sincerely

Sub-Divisional Magistrate
Nubra