

26th October 2013

Cyclonic Storm, torrential rains and Floods in Odisha

My dear Fathers, Brothers, Sisters and Lay Faithful,

We are all aware of the tragedy that has struck Odisha as a result of Cyclone-Phailin. We are also aware that the persistent rains and floods which engulfed the coastal areas of our state especially in Balasore and Mayurbhanj. These inclement weather conditions have caused enormous disaster to our people and serious threat to the basic infrastructures and live stock.

A crisis situation of great magnitude:

Large parts of our coastal areas are vulnerable to flooding due to the rivers which often rise to alarming heights. Scores of villages are in high risk. Cyclone Phailin lasted only for 24 hours but the predicament of our people this time was due to the flooding of the main rivers like Budhabalanga, Baitharani, Jalaka, Subarnarekha and their tributaries which has done immense damage by flooding the plains.

News accounts reveal the loss of the lives of a few children and adults. Houses were under two meters of water and most mud houses of the poor collapsed while others developed cracks. More than one million people were displaced when over flowing rivers submerged homes. In Balasore alone, in 184 GPs, 930 villages where more than 7 lakh people have been affected, with 1,00,000 people rescued. The problems faced by flood victims are manifold, with reports of water born diseases, snake bites and shortage of food, clothing and medicine. Large tracts of land are still covered with mud and filth. This hampers the movement of the relief vehicles and the volunteers to some of the remote villages. The most affected are still stranded.

Cited properties losses during this cyclone include lose of the standing crops and wastage of large tracts of cultivable land, infrastructural destruction like damage of schools, communication and electricity net works and roads.

The rivers which are originating from bordering states like Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand flows through the low lying areas of Odisha to reach the sea mouth in Bay of Bengal. These rivers swelled due to the torrential rains in their catchment areas. Thus the flooding in these districts refuses to be quelled. Recurring low pressure in the Bay of Bengal caused heavy rains from October 22-26 which put

the relief measures out of gear. Crop loss has taken place in around 6, 25,408 hectars. Till now 3, 33,070 dwelling houses have been reportedly damaged.

Government approach deserve praise:

Early warnings and evacuation measures of the government has helped to avert major human causality. Our government has matured in detecting a possible threat using forecasting models and warning. National and local media also played a decisive role in alerting the people about the dangers and precautionary measures. These early warnings have helped. The government apparatus, crisis managers, decision makers and local bodies deserve our appreciation.

It is the time to consider our vulnerability and resilience. The public, experts and authorities deal with the concept of risk and safety. While the public does not expect that the risk will be reduced to zero, they do expect that some response will be forthcoming. Despite the fact that time and equipment will be limited, the public and government will be better off when adequate measures are taken to prepare for a potential disaster. Sustainable spatial planning and disaster and crisis management in our country still need fine tuning.

Please pray for the suffering people:

In the aftermath of these unfortunate events, we are called to pray for the victims, the first responders and for the affected places. Prayer is helpful. I invite you to pray. As Christians, we are called to respond. Let us begin by offering prayers for the victims and families. What we need is God's mercy. God loves us and wants the best for us. But he also knows that it is entirely in our best interests to live recognizing that the world is his and that we depend entirely on his mercy.

Our response:

As usual Catholic Church has responded as the one among the first to alleviate the suffering of the people. We are working in close collaboration with the government administration. We have already provided direct support to the suffering people in the following manner:-

- We organized free community kitchens in various pockets of the districts for two weeks.
- Dry ration kits consisting of rice, potato, jagary, biscuits and puffed rice was distributed for severely isolated households.
- Temporary Shelter Kits for totally destroyed houses containing Tarpoline, Rope, Sleeping mats for families. Hygiene items (Wash kit) with Plastic Buckets with lid, Bathing & laundry soaps, Steel Glass with handle for most deserving families in Baliapal, Basta and Jaleswar Blocks of Balasore District.

- Water treatment materials like 60 nos of Aqua Tablets to purify 1200 litres of drinking water, Markin Cloths for water filtering, Bed sheets, blankets, plastic mats and Kitchen utensils and Tarpaulins for most deserving families in Bangriposi and Bodasahi Blocks of Mayurbhanj.
- Conducted medical camps with teams of doctors and nurses from Jyoti Hospital in scores of places in these districts from 16-28 October.

We have a satisfaction that through our instrumentality, hundreds of people received immediate relief by way of dry and cooked food in a critical juncture soon after the cyclone. Homeless received NFI kits to build temporary shelters. They treat and protect their drinking water for the next three weeks.

Our priests, religious, health personnel, social workers and volunteers deserve appreciation for their selfless service in this juncture. May the good Lord reward you for it. Balasore Social Service Society (BSSS), the social wing of the Diocese is working in close collaboration with Caritas India, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and other consortiums of donor agencies. We are knocking at various doors for assistance as the enormity of our need is huge. We have great concern for the Children who lost their precious time for study and their books, Women flock in the villages who doubly suffer in such calamities, the elderly & handicapped that are left without a roof and warm cloths. We are determined to do our mite to wipe their tears.

Our long term commitments:-

This trial towards the end of the Year of Faith invites us to broaden our perspectives and make our journey with the people of our neighborhood whose *'joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted,' (GS: 1)* we are bound to share.

We are chalking out a long term plan of intervention. Creating livelihood options for the people will be one of our priorities. Risk resilience and sustainability measures like a) Seed support for the coming winter crops, b) support by way of Bio-fertilizers for farm hands, c) promotion of kitchen garden for nutritional support and empowerment of the women, d) Educational support for the school going children, e) Support for community & personal asset repair, f) Construction of medium range community centers for the severely flood prone areas are some of our plans.

We will also like to strengthen the beneficiaries' capacity through trainings on household level water treatment, safe handling of water, and linkage with government services to help people access compensation for damage to houses, free medicine and veterinary services.

By all these, we will be focusing on a long term target of building up the community with expertise, tools and materials so that they may grow as a community leaving aside their difference of class, caste and religious differences.

Collection:

How can we be in solidarity with those who suffer the most? With this natural disaster in mind, I request that our parishes and institutions take up a special collection, a compassionate expression of the entire Diocese for people who are among the most vulnerable in our districts. We already made our appeal for voluntary contributions from our children in all the education institutions in the diocese. This special collection will be in the month of November 2013. The collected amount will be used to meet basic needs and help meet long term recovery efforts. I am grateful for your continued generosity. As Catholics, we lead by example, know that our efforts make a difference.

As we respond to the difficulties of these days let us consider the instruction of Paul: *“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the power of the Lord’s might.” (Ephesians 6:10)*. May our Blessed Mother who assisted the family at Cana intercede for all the families who bear the agony of this natural calamity.

God bless you.

Devotedly yours in Christ,

**Thomas Thiruthalil, C.M.
Bishop of Balasore**
