



## Article

# HUMANITARIAN AID IN THE HIMALAYAS

Ladakh, the land of high passes, is a scenic region in the Indian Himalayas that lies on an average altitude of 3,500 metres above sea level. The Italian Cristina Martinelli has extensively travelled Ladakh together with her Ladakhi husband Tashi. She recalls: «When I first came to Ladakh in the mid 1990-ies, the region could only be reached by the infrequent flights per week. Road connectivity was limited. Phone communication to my family was only possible using one of the few public phones in Leh. There was no cyber café at that time.»

Nevertheless, it was a great time, in which Cristina and Tashi visited many villages or did trekkings in remote areas – during summer as well as in winter. «The local population at that time was especially welcoming, content, and it was such a beautiful experience to share time with them in their spartan, yet comfortable mud brick houses. But, in the mid 1990-ies, they lacked quite a few things, basic medicines for instance, or good clothing and shoes for the winter. And here I had the idea of our first humanitarian activities.»

Back in Europe, she told about her experiences to family, friends, and colleagues. She began to collect basic medicines, warm clothing, shoes, toys, children books in english, and other necessities. Many people followed her initiative, donated, and helped with the packing. Back in Ladakh, Cristina and Tashi used at that time the public buses, trucks, or army vehicles to transport the goods. Often they had to walk to the villages to bring the commodities to the needy inhabitants. «We involved the *goba*, the respective village head man, and distributed the items among the needy people. These first humanitarian actions gave us a lot of satisfaction, and it was heart-warming to see the happy faces of the villagers.»

In 2000, they achieved a long cherished dream, and their travel agency was established. «While our business picked up, so did our humanitarian activities. With the active help of friends, visitors and travel groups from all over the world, we suddenly were able to collect more things as well as to reach more people. Together with volunteers we planted tree samplings, cleaned camping sites, or distributed solar lamps to needy families. We also started an ambitious project in which volunteers were helping to construct a community building in Phyang, the village where we live.»



One of the early donation activities. Volunteers helping local artisans constructing a community building.

In 2006, a significant natural calamity occurred in Phyang. Due to heavy rain falls in the upper part of the valley, the village stream swell immensely and flooded more than twenty houses. «Our next humanitarian effort occurred», remembers Tashi. «All local foot bridges over the stream were washed away, and so was the main bridge on the National Highway 1. This caused immense hardship to the entire traffic between the capital Leh and lower Ladakh. The nearest, the only accommodation was our home which during the summer season serves as a guesthouse. So, by that evening, we were full with both, travellers and affected villagers. With the limited stock of food and blankets, we did our best to provide shelter to everybody. People were sleeping in the rooms, the corridor, our dining room and kitchen. We were helping each other the best way possible.»

Some days later and with the support of two travel groups from Australia and the U.S., the couple raised money to buy relief materials (showels, buckets, ropes, tarpaulins, sanitary items and toys) which were donated to the affected families in Phyang.



Flood relief materials for the affected families in Phyang.

Over the years, the young couple expands the home. By 2010, the compound comprises also a big organic garden, several vegetable and corn fields, a dining hall, a small restaurant, two lush green camping terraces, and an orchard with broadleaves and fruit trees. Cristina and Tashi remember: «Thanks to the help of our uncle Angdu and a Nepali youth who both looked after the fields and our animals, we were self-sufficient. And beginning summer 2010, we got the wonderful news that Cristina was expecting.»



The old house with organic vegetable garden, dining hall, and camping place.

However, their happiness did not last for long. «Shortly after midnight on August 6, 2010, we hurriedly had to wake up our guests, among them two minor children. Together we fled amidst torrential rain, most of us wearing only pajamas. We were continuously stumbling or sinking hip-high into the moving mud, helping to carry the two kids, and keeping the group together.



With great difficulties and what seemed after a very long time, we finally managed to reach our neighbour's house on a hilltop, and spent the night there.»

Early the next morning, Tashi and Cristina returned to their home together with the guests. «It was devastating to see the immense destruction. Over ten years of work had been washed away within few minutes. Much more painful, however, was the loss of our uncle Angdu who died in the flash flood. All our animals perished, too.»



One of the rooms filled up with rubble (left photo), helpers cleaning the corridor (right).

Tashi and Cristina separated from their visitors the same day because the guests, understandably, decided to return home. The relief works started the very same day, too, and took several weeks. Many things happened with the active help of family members, friends, and later volunteer groups. The house needed additional beams to support the building from collapsing. Their uncle's body was found, and cremated. Cristina's family and friends were informed by text messages that they were doing fine only after four days. All the confirmed bookings had to be canceled. Their belongings needed to be sorted out, and cleaned or repaired. And so many other things.

«It was an extremely tough situation.» they remember. «We were so overwhelmed with strong emotions, and countless things needed to be done.» And Cristina adds: «Before settling to Ladakh permanently, I was working with the Red Cross. In the special training for disaster deployments after natural calamities, I got to know how to set up an independent logistics office, and I was trained how to help the needy people. Suddenly we were victims ourselves. How to cope with that situation? There is no training for this.»

After a few days, representatives of the local government and national non-government organisations surveyed the situation in the village. «We came to know that the local government made an assessment about all the affected people in our village and we managed to get a copy of the document. But the list was not accurate. So, we had to address the situation again. It was a big challenge, but finally the list was ready. Close friends in the UK, Switzerland, and other countries raised funds for the affected population in Phyang. They were amazing.»

In September 2010, Tashi and Cristina started the construction of their new home on a higher, safer ground. They moved from their temporary shelter, an army tent, into three less affected rooms of their destroyed house. Two months later, Cristina left for Europe to see her family and to discuss the money distribution which took place in December. In this event, over sixty families in the village received a monetary contribution for construction works, to buy seeds, tools or other necessities.

The first highlight of the year was in February 2011, when their son was born. In August 2011, exactly one year after the flash floods, the young family moved into the new house whilst still under construction. They welcomed the first guests in 2012, and continuously worked at the house and surroundings. The 2015 season has been the most successful year for their tourist

business so far.

«We are thankful that we can continue with our work in the tourist business. At the same time, together with friends from Australia, we are discussing how to continue our ambitious community building project here in Phyang. Since the landslides, it was unfortunately put on hold.» Tashi and Cristina are optimistic that they will accomplish what they set out to achieve.

**End of the article.**



The HIDDEN NORTH guesthouse in Phyang with dining hall and organic vegetable garden.