

May 12, 2008

China earthquake, Sichuan Province, measured at a magnitude of approximately 8.0

Epicenter was west-northwest of Chengdu, China

September 13-26, 2008

I flew to China with trepidation. I was heading to China to see if there was something our small nonprofit could do to help the earthquake survivors. I had some complications that I still had to work out. I read an article in the newspaper that said the area I wanted to go into had been closed off. I also had to find a Chinese nonprofit to work with and I had no clue who to contact or how to go about finding them. I had arranged an interpreter through the internet and he had offered to come to the airport to meet me. I hoped he would be there. The trip to China took about 30 hours with all the layovers at each airport. The 13 hour flight over the ocean was long and left me with cramps in my legs and neck. I arrived in Chengdu, China, got my luggage through customs and headed out to the front of the airport. There was a young man holding a piece of paper high up above the other heads with my name on it. I was so relieved to see him.

In China, if a nonprofit wants to work in the country they have to work with an approved Chinese nonprofit. How was I going to find one? When we got into the car, my interpreter told me he had found out who to contact at the Chinese nonprofit and made me an appointment for the next morning. I was elated.

As we drove to my hotel, he told me about his experience in the earthquake. He was at his college when the building started shaking. They hurried outside and it took a few moments

before they realized they were having an earthquake. They stood outside in an open grassy area and he says they were afraid. All that night he listened to sirens as emergency vehicles headed to the earthquake area. One lane in the middle of the road was cordoned off so that emergency vehicles could drive to the devastated areas. He described one long line of constantly moving vehicles with sirens blaring as they headed out of town. But he says they still didn't know how bad it was.

The next morning we headed over to the office of the nonprofit, the Disaster Preparedness Center. We had a 2 hour meeting during which time they asked me questions about our work and our connections to any churches. Our nonprofit has no religious or political affiliations. At length, we were approved. We were told we could go to the affected area but we would have to go that day. I went back to my hotel, checked out and we left town.

We drove about 2 hours until we came to a town that was near the relocation camp. We checked into a local hotel and then headed to the relocation camp an hour away. We settled in to talk to the Chinese nonprofit staff about the needs of the people in the camp. Everything takes longer through a translator and it is sometimes difficult to get an understanding of what is being said. I eventually understood that the folks in the camp had been farmers and that their animals had been killed by the landslides and the falling buildings.

We took a tour around the camp, talked with the leader of the village and had some meetings with the people in the camp. What did they want? They wanted homes and work. It struck me that in every disaster I have ever worked, they wanted the same thing. At the 2004 tsunami one of the survivors told me she wanted a "house, not tent, house". The survivors in the Chinese

camp are housed in metal boxes about 10x15 feet, one for each family. It appeared that a concrete pad was laid and the boxes were put on the pads, about 6 side by side in a row. And there were rows and rows of these housing pods, Ready Built, my translator called them. In this relocation camp there were about 20,000 families. The camp has water available and communal toilet facilities. The earthquake on May 12 killed 70,000 people and left 5 million homeless. I was amazed that the government had managed to house nearly 5 million people in 4 months. The school was built first, and then the housing was put into place around the school. I watched the sewer system being dug and then bricked in. The survivors appeared to be willing to work hard and work together to get it done. One of the children I held was orphaned in the earthquake and was being raised by relatives. I was told he was 3 months old when the earthquake occurred.

I was allowed to go into the school in the relocation camp. The school rooms were the same type of Ready Built boxes set in rows that the children live in. I watched the children playing and laughing and running around the bare dirt grounds. There was no playground equipment. There were pictures with stories of successful people hanging on the school buildings. One of the pictures I recognized was Bill Gates. I thought it was ironic that the picture of Bill Gates was hanging prominently on the school building, but the building set aside for their computer lab was empty. I heard singing on the other end of the grounds. I walked to the opposite end of the grounds with the rocks crunching under my shoes. I stood at the back of the classroom and listened to the children singing loudly and enthusiastically. It brought tears to my eyes to listen to the children singing and know what they had been through.

An hour's drive from the relocation camp and we were at one of the epicenters of the earthquake. As many disasters as I have been to, I have never yet gotten used to the first sight of a major disaster. They take your breath away. This one was no different. Here was an entire town that was destroyed and lying in piles of brick. The buildings that were still standing were leaning to one side. The stairways of the buildings were open and showed clearly the power of the moving earth. Pathways through the apartments had been cleared by pushing the bricks aside and the tall piles of brick dwarfed the people digging through them. There was clearly a smell of decomp near a couple of areas where there were piles of brick. The people digging through the mounds of brick were picking out what I assumed were personal items. There were some small areas that had been cleared in the rubble and in these areas people were burning "fake money". My interpreter told me the money is burned for the people who died so that they have money in the afterlife. The mountains behind the town were scarred with large areas of bare dirt where the landslides took out the trees.

The survivors I met in the town wanted to talk about their experience. Survivors at every disaster I have ever worked have wanted to talk about 3 basic things: where they were, what happened, and how they survived. Unfortunately for some, they also need to talk about loved ones who died. The residents explained that they heard sounds coming from the earth before they felt the shaking. It sounded like a deep rumble coming out of the ground. They knew something was very wrong. One of the stories I was told was about a woman who was in the kitchen in the back of the apartment when the ground started to shake. She was thrown out of the back of her apartment when it began to crumble and into the river below. She survived with a broken leg but the rest of her family was killed when the building crumbled.

We drove another 30 minutes through small villages and up the mountain to visit the mass grave. On our way up the mountain, parts of the narrow road were out and there were large cracks in the pavement making it uneven and difficult to navigate. We had to stop and back up at times to go around the areas of the road that would high-center the car. In other places the side of the mountain had slid down onto the road. At the mass grave, I was told that it contained remains that could not be identified or that no one claimed. They were put in a mass grave, covered with lye and dirt, and covered with concrete. A large blue and white striped cloth was put over the concrete. There were areas built to hold sand for sticks of incense, lots of incense. Next to the incense, flowers and fruit were laid out. Some of them were old, dying and rotten; some of them were new and fresh. There are large signs erected around the area showing the design of the monument the government is going to build at the site.

While we were there we saw a wandering dog. I was told that the villagers have been beating the wandering dogs to death. They were afraid that the dogs had been eating the dead and as a result of eating the dead, they would spread disease. They weren't clear exactly what disease it would be, just that the spreading of disease was a fear they had. My stomach turned when they explained that bit of information to me.

Another day we drove to a second epicenter. As we went through the large city at the base of the mountain, there were broken buildings everywhere we looked. There were two more relocation camps in this city. The relocation camps have gates and guards and are laid out in the same way, with rows and rows of box buildings, Ready Builts. My interpreter explained that each area that was destroyed has a large city with resources that is responsible for helping the

damaged area recover. He explained that these relocation camps were in the area of a large city with many financial resources and that these relocation camps were not in need of outside help.

We headed up the mountain and drove over cracked roads and went around mounds of dirt that had slid down the mountain, across the road and down the other side of the ravine. Utility poles and road guardrails were on the ground or bent over the edge of the ravine. The road was rough in places and we carefully drove around the potholes.

The village at this location had been lovely. This was a very old town and the architecture of the buildings immediately identifies it as Chinese. The roofs were collapsed, sides of buildings were missing, stairs were collapsed into piles of rubble, and the very old Buddhist temple was damaged. There were a few residents here, tending to the temple and trying to sell items to tourists who didn't exist. This is a tourist town and there was no way for the residents to generate an income. These survivors are living in tents. They did not have the Ready Built boxes to live in. This is an area high up in the mountains with a beautiful river running through the town. It is obviously going to get very cold here in the winter and I worried about these folks living in the tents. They told us they were waiting for the government plan. There were only a handful of elderly people in this town, and I wondered if they had been forgotten.

Back in the relocation camp the next day, we talked about the need for housing. The Chinese nonprofit, the Disaster Preparedness Center, wants to build housing for the residents. They are especially concerned about the people who did not qualify for the Ready Builts. Those people are living in tents, tarps, and lean-tos that leak rain and will be very cold this winter. The

nonprofit is asking for money to buy steel beams for the houses. They want to build the houses up off the ground, saying they believed these houses would be “earthquake proof”. It was a difficult discussion as I was not clear as to why they believed this would make them “earthquake proof”. They estimate that it will take 4 tons of beams for each family at 5,500 RMB (Chinese Yuan) per ton or about 22,000 RMB per family. We are a small nonprofit and our mission is not housing, but the people were adamant that they want to have homes. I understood that, but talks continued about what other things might be provided to help the survivors.

Some of the survivors in this relocation camp had been farmers before the earthquake. They had animal husbandry skills and wanted to raise animals again, and goats were suggested as a possibility. It would be impossible for us to provide goats for 20,000 families. However, it would be possible for us to provide goats to start a communal herd. Further discussion, and days later, it was agreed that a communal goat herd was an idea that would be helpful. So, our small nonprofit bought them a few goats to start a herd. We are still getting money donated on our website and we continue to add to the herd. The Chinese nonprofit buys the goats locally. It costs about \$150 US dollars to buy 2 goats. It will take a while for the herd to mature, but the fact that they now have a start certainly makes the future more hopeful.

People have asked me if the trip depressed me. Actually, this was one of the most hopeful disaster relief trips I have taken. Most of the survivors are housed and safe. The food in the Sichuan Province was abundant. The survivors want to leave the flat-lands and go back to their mountain homes, and who can blame them? The location of their mountain homes was

gorgeous. The flat-lands are not nearly as beautiful, and certainly not home. I hope that some large nonprofit will help them build the houses they want. But for now, we have touched each other's lives. My life is certainly richer for the experience and I hope that our small contribution of a goat herd will enrich theirs.

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