

Communicating under duress

Whenever a hazard turns into a disaster of any kind, journalists and relief workers are among the first to arrive on the scene. But they have very different agendas. Journalists have to access and verify real time information, conform to communication ethics and get their story ahead of the competition. In the information age, disaster managers have to balance their own humanitarian priorities with the need to manage information flows and maintain good relations with the media. Five authors offer their perspective on how this might be attempted.





Capturing Nature's Fury

As disaster survivors sift through what is left of their homes, family photo albums are among the most cherished possessions they seek to recover. Every major disaster produces its own iconic images which determine how the collective memory of the world would remember the incident. Why are snapshots of frozen moments so powerfully evocative to individuals, communities and the world?

Shahidul Alam

It was many years ago that I met that woman in Shondeep. It was after the cyclone in Bangladesh in 1991. Our helicopter had landed in the damaged airstrip of Patenga airport in Chittagong. There had been no fire, so why were the leaves all charred? What had happened on that fateful night of 29 April?

My questions to the 'experts' resulted in the standard response. The NGO workers told me of the bags of wheat they'd given out. The engineers talked of the torque of the wind. The government officers spoke of the funds they had allocated.

Then the woman spoke. In a quiet but controlled voice she recounted, 'The land became the sea and the sea became a wave'.

It took those words, for me the photographer, to see what had happened that night.

Many experts and players

The Tsunami had come and gone. While I had felt the pain of the Tsunami victims and their survivors, the predominant media coverage of western tourists and western 'experts' had angered me. As an aid worker and later a photographer after the Tsunami in Sri Lanka, I could relate to the resilience of the victims, but the aid efforts had changed.

There were many more 'experts' in the fray and I could see how the media and other major players determined how things panned out. I had arrived after the event. In Trincomalee, the placid water of the ancient tanks gave no sense of the horror on Boxing Day. I then went to Telwatta, on the southern coast, where the train *Samudra Devi* ('Goddess of the Sea') had been devoured by the wave. Where the land had become the sea.

Shanika, the little girl I'd tried to photograph in the remains of her home, was terrified of the sea. She had lost her twin sister, her two other sisters and her mother to the waters. Priantha, her father, had taken his family to the train for safety, and had watched in horror as the sea moved in.

Shanika knew the sea was not to be trusted. She had been with her aunt, and had only heard what had happened. Had she seen the waves? Had she felt the fury? I never found out, but we made friends. The digital camera made it easy to share pictures and we photographed each other and approached the sea together. And she was telling me to be careful. We spoke different languages, but I wanted to know what she felt about the sea. That night after dusk, I went back to the edge of the water, and in that muted light, I tried to see the things Shanika had feared. Where the sea had become a giant wave.



3 December 2005: Ballakot city used to be a popular tourist destination, but has been converted to rubble. "This used to be a city but has now become a graveyard" said Amjad, the driver for CONCERN. Pakistan Shahidul Alam/Drik/Majority World

Shattered lives

Yet, exactly a year earlier on 26 December 2003, and almost to the hour, nature had also reminded us of her presence. The historic city of Bam, in Iran, had been all but reduced to rubble. The clay bricks, the domed rooftops, and the fact that people were at home sleeping, all led to the huge loss of life. With no light and no electricity, the few that were living could do little to retrieve the dying.

Iran is no stranger to earthquakes. Another curious cycle of roughly ten years separates the devastating quakes that have rocked this land. I wasn't there, but my photographer friends had decided that we would not be allowed to forget this calamity. Over a period of months, they documented the misery, the valour, the strength and the fighting spirit of those who survived and remained but refused to give in. The witnesses of our time have ensured that we on the sidelines also bear witness. We later exhibited our work together. Trying to pass on nature's message.

8 October 2005. Breaking out from the cyclic order of the previous disasters, the quake in Kashmir took on a different form. News filtered through slowly. As the death figures rose, I remembered how as

children we had gone out singing songs, and collecting blankets, whenever a disaster struck. I wanted to go out to Pakistan, but it was different this time. One needed visas, letters of invitation and official permission. The right time to be there, and capture the unfolding story, came and went. I decided to wait.

But as the media predictably moved on, and the people outside affected areas gradually forgot the disaster, the pain gnawed inside of me. As the winter drew near, I worried about what might be happening. My friends in CONCERN, an NGO I had worked for before, were already out there and I decided to join them. Arriving in Islamabad in the early hours of one morning in December 2006, I soon headed off to Muzaffarabad.

This time the waves were different. Entire mountainsides had flowed like liquid, crushing all in their path. Trucks were still clearing winding pathways, blocked by massive landslides.

I was nervous as I went through the long tunnel that was the gateway to Azad Kashmir. Tents dotted either side of the roads, but even amidst the rubble and despair, life was going on. Children were playing with whatever they could find. A teacher was teaching

her class with a blackboard under the open sky. Moving their tables on to the road, a restaurant was serving customers.

A solitary telephone, on a rickety table, open to the wind and other elements, was the most popular amenity. People desperately sought news of their loved ones.

It was Amjad, the driver, who brought it home as we approached Ballakot. He simply said, "This was a city. Now it's a graveyard."

The winter was already setting in when we met a family in a remote mountain near Neelam. Fatema's husband had been crushed by their falling roof. Her mother in law had been hurled below, survived the fall, but died of a heart attack when she heard of her son's death. They had not come across the army, government officials or NGOs, but as in Muzaffarabad, they were just getting on with their lives. Their top priority was to rebuild their homes before the snow closed in.

The response by ordinary people was overwhelming. Winter came and went. Many survived the bitter chill, but months later, and nearly a year on, much of the talked-about reconstruction had not happened. The pledges seemed to have been forgotten.

Return to Kashmir

I decided to return. I had worked hurriedly the first time, and felt there were many personal stories that needed to be recorded. Nearly a year after the Kashmir quake, I went back.

On the first occasion, I slept in a tent in the garden of the CONCERN office. This time I stayed indoor. The office couch became my bed. But nearly a year on, tents were still where most people lived. The after tremors still shook the homes, and even those who had moved back to their houses lived in fear. They would move out to tents at night. They didn't trust themselves enough to wake up in time and move out in case there was another quake during the night.

As we went through the ravaged land, we found people who had suffered many times over. Shabbir and Razia had taken shelter in a tent after their house was destroyed. Their temporary home was washed away by a flash flood, one of the many after effects of the earthquake. They lost everything that they salvaged after the quake, and some Rs. 17,000 (US\$ 282 approx.) that remained of the compensation from government. And they now had a new-born baby to look after.



Shahidul Alam/Dirlik/Majority World

Sri Lankan survivors of the tsunami look at a photo album salvaged from the rubble.



Shahidul Alam/Drift/Majority World

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We came across tender love stories, as that of Muhammed Saleem Khan, who despite his own injuries, pushed his unconscious wife Rubina on a home-made stretcher for two days to the Abbas Hospital in Muzaffarabad. Muhammed looked after the children and doted on Rubina, but she was sad. The children had become close to the father and she herself, paralysed from the waist down and unable to look after them, felt the children were moving away from her.

Safdar Hussain was buried under stones for four days and thought he would die. Having lost his wife and children to the earthquake, he wept for his mother. Unable to hold the pain, his mind had taken shelter elsewhere.

But Fazila Bibi had a different story to tell. “Before the earthquake we were happy, healthy people,” she said, “the sort of people who gave alms to beggars. Now we have nothing, and we must do with nothing, but we are stronger people.”

Fazila and her family, confined to a tent in Jalalabad Park in Muzaffarabad, waited for things to get better. Waited with quiet strength.

Cluster bombs, warheads, bombs that dig deep before exploding, compete with burning oil wells, toxic spills and nuclear dumping, to shake our fragile earth. Rampant consumer cultures arrogantly shun treaties

to curb our destructive habits. In a globalised world where material and human world resources are fodder for exploitation by giant nations and multinational companies, nature in its fury reminds us that our lives are entwined.

In the ruins of Telawata, where the fateful train disaster had taken place, I came across a family that had gathered in the wreckage of their home. I wanted to ask them their stories, find out what they had seen, but stopped when I saw them pick up the family album. They sat amidst the rubble and laughed as they turned page after page.

Frozen memories

I had seen it before. As people rummaged through the ruins of their homes, the first thing they searched for was photographs. Years earlier at a disaster closer to home, I had photographed a group of children amidst the floods of 1988. The children insisted on being photographed. As I pressed the shutter, I realised that the boy in the middle was blind. He would never see the photograph he was proudly posing for. Why was it so important for the blind boy to be photographed?

Though my entry into photography had been through a happy accident, my choice of becoming a photographer had been a very conscious one. Having felt the power of the image I recognised its ability to move people. The immediacy of an iconic image, its ability to engage with the viewer, its intimacy, the universality of its language, means it is at once a language of the masses, but also the key that can open doors.

For both the gatekeepers and the public, the image has a visceral quality that is both raw and delicate. It can move people to laughter and to tears and can touch people at many levels. The iconic image lingers, long after the moment has gone. We are the witnesses of our times and the historians of our ages. We are the collective memories of our communities.

For that blind boy in Bangladesh and for the many who face human suffering but may otherwise be forgotten, the photograph prevents them from being reduced to numbers. It brings back humanity in our lives.