

Nothing Left but Rubble

Written by Qiu Ru-lian

Tuesday, 25 August 2009 00:00



Typhoon Morakot hit Taiwan in early August, causing widespread damage in the southern part of the island. Torrential rains triggered floods and mudslides, swamping several mountain villages in Kaohsiung County. It was the worst typhoon to hit Taiwan in over 50 years. More than 600 people lost their lives or were reported missing, and nearly 25,000 people were evacuated.

The once beautiful mountain villages are now sobering scenes of devastation. Roads have been cut, homes destroyed, and bridges demolished. Whole communities have been wiped out, buried under dozens of feet of mud. Survivors are left to struggle with unimaginable grief at the loss of loved ones and the stress of picking up the pieces of their lives after losing everything.

After the catastrophe, relief helicopters were dispatched to ferry survivors to safety. The air rescue operation lasted more than two weeks. Tzu Chi volunteers also mobilized immediately after the disaster to bring care and warmth to survivors in order to help soothe their pain and help them find strength to stand up again.

Relief helicopters flew back and forth over the playground of Cishan Junior High School, Kaohsiung County, ferrying survivors of Typhoon Morakot down from the mountains to safety. Every time a helicopter landed, the anxious, worried people waiting on the ground grew excited and hopeful again. They strained to catch glimpses of the evacuees as the helicopters emptied, hoping to see family members delivered safe and sound. Those who saw loved ones getting off the helicopters burst into tears. Those who didn't walked away in disappointment, hoping that their beloved would be on the next relief helicopter.

In the aboriginal villages in the mountains of Kaohsiung County, summer is usually the busiest season for tourism. But the allure of the area isn't limited to tourists. The natives enjoy good harvests of peaches, mangoes, and taros that fill the air with tantalizing and delicious aromas. Villagers working elsewhere in Taiwan often send their kids back to the mountains to spend the summertime with their grandparents.

Situated on the east bank of the Nanzixian River, Xiaolin was a beautiful village surrounded by hills on one side and water on the other. The hamlet of 1,300 residents, mostly Pingpu aboriginals, resembled a veritable utopia tucked far away from the hustle and bustle of this world.

This year, Father's Day (August 8 in Taiwan) happened to fall on a weekend, and many villagers working out of town returned to celebrate the holiday. None of them would have expected what was awaiting them.

Typhoon Morakot hit on August 7-8, bringing torrential rains and unprecedented devastation. The heavy downpours washed away roads and destroyed bridges, cutting off the only routes into or out of Xiaolin. The mountainsides surrounding the village quickly became saturated

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beyond their limits. The waterlogged soil finally gave way in the early morning hours on August 9. Huge landslides swept through the village, wiping out everything in their path. In an instant, 163 households were buried.

Xiaolin was cut off from the outside world for two entire days. Trapped in the mountains, the villagers who were lucky enough to have survived the landslides could only rely on themselves to find a way to survive.

It was not until two days later that the devastation was discovered and relief helicopters were dispatched. They found and evacuated over 40 residents to a temporary shelter in a nearby town.



Moments of horror and heartbreak

Those who arrived at the temporary shelter safe and sound were still overwhelmed with fear and worry. Many of their family members were still stranded in the mountains. The final count from the village listed more than 500 villagers missing. To calm the survivors' minds, Tzu Chi volunteers from Kaohsiung hurried to the temporary shelter to see what they could do to help.

When the devastation of Xiaolin made the news, out-of-town relatives rushed to the temporary shelter, hoping to find out whether their family members were safe and well.

"I talked on the phone with my grandchildren on August 7," said Mrs. Lin, one of the relatives at the shelter. "They said it was raining so heavily that water was pouring into the house. The adults were all busy scooping out the water. The kids were so scared. Later, I couldn't reach them anymore when I tried to call them again." Mrs. Lin burst into tears in a volunteer's embrace. With 12 of her family members missing, she was filled with anxiety and worry.

A survivor took a volunteer's hand in his and said, "I have a family of five. I'm the only one that got out." Tears filled his eyes; he was heartbroken. He said that on the day the tragedy hit, he got up early to go to his farm to inspect the crops. No sooner had he stepped out of his house than a landslide swept down and wiped out his home. He lost his entire family. "It happened so quickly that I didn't even have time to go back to warn them. They were sound asleep when it hit."

Before they were brought to safety, many of the victims spent time in the open air, exposed to the elements. Their clothes had been repeatedly soaked by rain. Unable to stay dry, many developed skin diseases. Some caught colds and were running fevers. A mother had had to mix powdered milk for her baby with rainwater; the baby subsequently contracted diarrhea.

Many of the victims escaped with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Tzu Chi volunteer Yang Ming-xun (楊明勳) immediately contacted the foundation's relief coordination center, and emergency cash was given out to survivors so that they could buy clean clothes and obtain

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medical care for sick family members.



Disaster relief

Xiaolin wasn't the only village impacted by the disaster. Many other aboriginal settlements in the area were also severely damaged. Thousands of residents were stranded without running water, electricity, or food. Army helicopters, using Cishan Junior High School as a base for relief operations, ferried stranded typhoon survivors to safety and air-dropped supplies to those still trapped in the mountains.

As of August 24, more than 6,200 people had been evacuated by rescue helicopters and more than 20 temporary shelters had been set up in local churches and temples.

Tzu Chi volunteers were on hand to provide aid and care in the shelters. They also went to Cishan Junior High School to accompany people waiting for their family members. The Tzu Chi International Medical Association also set up medical stations to provide treatment for survivors. External injuries, skin diseases, and gastrointestinal disorders were among the common complaints. They served a total of 6,731 patient visits from August 10 to 24. The medical services were scheduled to continue until the end of August.

Post-disaster psychological trauma

Huang Xue-hui (黃雪惠) was one of the many Tzu Chi volunteers who served at a temporary shelter. She said that so many supplies from kind-hearted people poured in that typhoon victims didn't have to worry about going hungry. Medical volunteers also helped the injured receive the proper treatment they required.

While it was relatively straightforward for volunteers to treat external injuries, it was far more difficult to ease the survivors' worry and grief. Some survivors displayed signs of post-traumatic stress syndrome. Many who had been rescued were terrified and afraid of being left alone or in the dark. Children often burst out crying in the middle of the night. Traumatized, many sought out the help of Tzu Chi volunteers, who listened with compassion as survivors poured out their hearts.

Li Li-lian (李麗蓮) had panic written all over her face as she recalled the moment when landslides hit her home: "Muddy water and rocks smashed into the house. My daughter-in-law grabbed my grandson and we ran for our lives. It was really great luck that we escaped in time. Even now, my grandson still wakes at night crying. My daughter-in-law walks away whenever she hears people discussing the disaster."

"My hometown used to be a very beautiful place," said Li, "but now there is nothing there." Another villager added, "I miss my hometown, but I don't dare go back there again."

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