

# DERA RESPONSE - INDIA SUPERCYCLONE

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# DISASTERCOM

DERA Newsletter

37 Years of Service

December, 1999



## DERA Responds to India's Supercyclone

Following widespread devastation and heavy loss of life from a supercyclone that hit Orissa state, India, our partnership organization NIAR-India requested technical and manpower assistance from DERA to provide emergency management and support to the state government. At the request of the Chief Minister (Governor) of Orissa, NIAR had established portable amateur radio stations throughout the areas worst hit, as well in key ministry offices in the state capital, Bhubaneswer. NIAR requested DERA to provide portable computers, satellite communications equipment and technical expertise to assist with planning, recovery and restoration. Our Executive Director, Jay Wilson departed immediately with a disaster support kit and joined with the NIAR team already in place in Orissa. Jay sent the following interim report from India.

Thanksgiving Morning, 1999  
Hyderabad (A.P. State) India

Having just returned from India's horribly devastated East Coast, I've spent much of this morning sitting in weary silence at the National Communications Control Center in Hyderabad trying to clear my mind and focus on the job ahead. Communications teams are also just now returning from their deployment mission into the heart of that area. As exhausted crews haul their equipment inside, I sense far more in their silence than just fatigue. All of us tend to stare blankly, silently and numbly, alone at last with the chaos of our thoughts and the endless gallery of hellish images that have been burned into our memories.

Those of us now gathering in this control center are, without exception, seasoned veterans of many past disaster missions--some with decades of experience. Most have dealt many times with mass casualty incidents and were prepared for the anxiety and depression that often sets in as a mission ends. But today it's different. This mission has shaken each of us to the core and our lives have been changed forever. We have returned from Orissa, but something from deep within each of us was irrevocably left behind in that sad place. No amount of ex-



School Administrator Niranjan Biswal and Jay Wilson survey damage at the Tandikul Elementary School. Similar damage occurred to other essential facilities throughout the area.

perience or training could have prepared any of us for the magnitude of prolonged suffering we have just witnessed.

As I finish my own work here, I am persuaded that far too little is being done internationally to help developing nations prepare for disasters and mitigate the risks of natural hazards. Even though the UN-designated International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction is just now concluding, the need to continue working for the implementation of comprehensive preparedness and effective response systems worldwide is more desperately needed than ever before. Greater population is at risk in 2000 than in 1990, yet there is more competition for limited funding. We simply are not doing all we should be doing to break the cycle of disasters.

Emergency managers throughout the world need to use every means at their disposal to raise awareness of this issue, both on the part of policy makers and the public.

For those who have not been following the situation in Orissa, let me briefly outline the background of what has become India's worst natural disaster in over a century. Orissa is a large state with a population of about 60 million people on India's East Coast. The Bay of Bengal provided this region with a panorama of incredible beauty, a bounty of plentiful fish, and a climate ideally suited for vegetable farms, coconut groves, fruit plantations and extensive rice cultivation. The rich farmland brought prosperity to

(Continued on page 4)

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Membership in this Nonprofit Association is open to all who share our commitment to effective disaster preparedness and response.  
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## DERA International

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## Director's Comments

Dear Members:

Many members worked hard on DERA projects throughout 1999 while several others supported our activities with generous financial contributions. Please join me in thanking the following members for their particularly noteworthy contributions:

Jerry Cassidy, NØMYY  
Carmen Chaves  
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Lars Warkentien

Our collective thanks to each of the above members for all they have done to make our programs successful.

Also, I'd like to extend sincere condolences on behalf of our membership to David Crews and Al Manteuffel who have recently lost close family members.

This edition of the newsletter features an article Jay Wilson sent us from India. DERA's response to the cyclone in India is continuing. You cannot imagine the extent of this tragedy unless you hear about it from an eye witness. I want to recognize a few of our members who have been providing assistance to the effort:

John Crawford helped with last-minute policy issues and met with Jay in Washington, DC immediately prior to the deployment to draft guidelines for the mission.

Dennis O'Quinn, K4CXX, continues to work on many technical matters, particularly the restoration of communications to isolated villages and long-term recovery projects.

Kevin Wilson and Brian Larkens covered the DERA office in Colorado while Jay was away. Kevin provided a centralized message switchboard service for agencies needing to send text or data to DERA's portable Iridium unit in India.

David Crews expanded the international aid files on *Emergency Management Gold* and specifically tailored them to the needs of this mission.

Steve Keene functioned as logistics support manager, and he prepared a follow-on mission package in Milwaukee. He was ready to deploy as Jay's backup or replacement if needed.

Kathryn Dunlevy-Wilson was our public information officer responsible for handling inquiries from the press, relief organizations and government agencies.

Matthew Narajka arranged for overnight air shipment of Motorola communications equipment.

Jeanne and Cecil Culpepper and David Dunlevy helped considerably with logistics in the Washington, DC area.

The DERA Disaster Support Center was activated in Asheville, NC, so that the DERA office in Colorado could continue to manage activities not associated with the disaster. A large amount of email, telephone messages and other agency contacts were made through the center.

Finally, I want to thank all DERA members who volunteered to help and who provided suggestions and encouragement. This mission was a success because of teamwork, commitment and willingness to help.

Much remains to be done, however, and our job is not over. Perhaps the most urgent action needed is for us as individuals to make generous financial contributions to the organizations currently laboring in Orissa—CARE, OXFAM, World Vision, International Red Cross, Action Aid, Habitat for Humanity, NIAR and others. DERA administers a Disaster Emergency Fund that is able to rapidly provide support to these and other agencies.

As Jay mentions in his report, our help is still needed to ease suffering in Orissa and elsewhere. We welcome contributions of any size at any time. All funds we receive for this purpose go directly to relief activities—we keep nothing for salaries or overhead. I ask you to join me in contributing a generous amount today either to your favorite relief agency directly or to joint relief activities through DERA. Even the smallest donation makes a difference in disaster relief.

Best wishes for the new year. I thank each of you for your contributions of time, support, finances and faith. The world is a better place each day because YOU cared.

Robert R. Dockery, WD4CNZ  
Chair, Board of Directors

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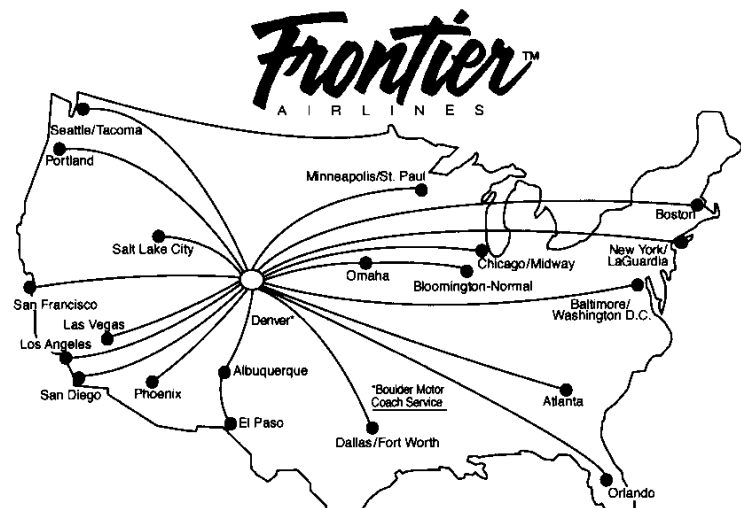
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the people of the region, who were hard working, warm and gentle. The modern capital of Bhubaneswar sits over 50 miles inland and is home to the state government and numerous major corporations. Orissa has long been a popular tourist destination because of its ancient architecture, ornate temples and dramatic scenery.

During the last week of October 1999, while almost everyone in India eagerly prepared for Diwali--the Festival of Lights--a powerful supercyclone was forming in the Bay of Bengal. As the storm intensified and moved westward, it threatened virtually the entire eastern seacoast, causing widespread warnings to be issued by central and state governments.

India's eastern coast regularly endures cyclones, so residents generally heeded warnings and prepared as best as they could, some taking shelter in schools and others huddling together in interior rooms of their homes. Many took to the roads, attempting to evacuate inland.

Beginning at 3 a.m. on the morning of October 29, 1999, everyone's life began rapidly unraveling across a 15,000 square mile area in Orissa. Over the next few hours, at least 10,000 people would die (50,000 are still missing and may never be accounted for), and nearly a million would lose homes, possessions, and everything else needed for a normal life--cattle, farm implements, fishing fleets, school buildings, medical clinics, village markets, city shopping centers, factories, and post offices. Both the power grid and the modern telecommunications network were utterly destroyed. Virtually all public services, business and commerce stopped for twenty million people.

With sustained winds officially gauged above 160 miles per hour and a tidal surge well over 30 feet high, the population and buildings in more than 35 towns disappeared without a trace, the landscape permanently changed.

On the seacoast was what had been the picturesque and prosperous fishing village of Paradip. Words cannot describe the devastation in that town from sustained tornado-force winds and a monolithic tidal surge. Yet even worse destruction is still being discovered elsewhere as rescue crews reach areas that have been isolated for nearly a month. Some villages can't be found. They and their people are now buried without a trace far beneath a new landscape of sand, silt and mud. Only with a GPS unit and good map from before the storm is it possible for rescue teams to know for certain that they have found the top of what was, until recently, a busy and prosperous town.

Saltwater contamination devastated coconut and fruit plantations, rice fields, farms and villages for more than 30-50 miles inland. Death came swiftly to people in coastal villages. Further inland, indescribable suffering and lingering death awaited survivors in village after village as contaminated water supplies, lack of medical care, shortage of food and inadequate shelter silently took their toll.

Meanwhile, in the northeastern part of the state, deadly walls of water and mud cas-

caded down mountains as three days of continuous, torrential rains swelled rivers to record levels, washing away farms, villages and roads alike. Over a 4,000 square mile area, survivors clung to debris floating toward the sea. Indian Army and Navy rescue helicopters could save only a fraction of those who initially survived, while countless others quietly lost their struggle for life and were swept away.

Nearly a month later, after a grueling ordeal of heroic rescue of the living and grim



*Suri, Wilson and Chief Minister Gamang*

recovery of the dead, hundreds of square miles of marshland and rice fields are still littered with countless human bodies and the rotting carcasses of millions of cows, dogs, goats and wild animals. The death rate among the animal population near the seacoast was nearly 100%; humans fared only slightly better. The remains of that carnage are now contaminating water supplies, fouling the air, and creating the worst imaginable public health crisis. In general, the corpses are still largely intact, slowly decomposing in place because few if any vultures or scavengers survived the storm's fury. Due to the flooding, much of the region will not be reachable by ground for weeks or months.

I was in the town of Ersama near the coastline this week. Just east of town, I did not even see flies, mosquitoes, ants or birds. I saw nothing green in any direction. No tree was standing and not one blade of grass was alive for mile after mile. People did not survive the storm there. If not for gut-wrenching sights and smells, this place could be mistaken for the surface of an uninhabited planet. However, roadside ditches are still lined with bodies. Every pile of debris is a tangle of human body parts, animal carcasses and the material remains of homes, shops, offices and vehicles.

Not far away from there was the saddest scene I've ever witnessed: I encountered several groups of small, apparently orphaned children who were attempting to cremate the remains of their elders. Without kerosene or diesel fuel, their feeble, withering fires of wet grass and straw created a permeating stench words can never describe and the grotesque sight that emerged as the flames died out is something that will haunt me for the rest of my life. When they could not rekindle the fires, the children would cry bitterly in grief, fear and confusion. They desperately needed someone to take from them their awful burden of duty to the dead. They needed someone who could give them comfort and peace at least for a little while. Yet I

found myself too numb from fatigue, misery, and mental stress to be of any comfort or support to them. As outsiders, no one on our damage assessment team spoke the local dialect well enough to be understood and our few attempts to approach the children terrified them horribly. Perhaps, we guiltily reassured one another, someone else will come to help them. We simply found that we did not have the ability to help, either as a team or as individuals. It took all the strength, courage and mental discipline I could muster just to refocus on the tasks at hand. In doing that, I simply blocked out the cries of despair and anguish of the very people I had come intending to help. That is one part of this experience I will remember with deep regret for the rest of my days.

But even in the face of such indescribable suffering, there were agents of mercy who appeared when hope was all but lost, rekindling my faith in the goodness of the human spirit and the willingness of one human being to help another even at the cost of extreme personal sacrifice. I encountered CARE, OXFAM, World Vision, Red Cross and Action Aid Medical Team volunteers who had chopped their way through many miles of fallen trees to bring food and medical care to people who were at the very brink of death.

I saw Rotary Club members working waist deep in muck and filth trying to clear wells. I talked with men and women who had traveled a thousand miles on their own to work as relief volunteers. I saw missionaries, monks, priests and nuns from every religious persuasion working side-by-side tending to the injured and sick. And I saw first hand teams of NIAR amateur radio operators who, financed out of their own pockets, voluntarily threw their lot in with storm victims, literally living off the land for weeks, surviving only on a dry biscuit or two a day and water from wherever it could be found. Despite all the unspeakable horrors of this tragedy, I also saw an inspiring and wonderful demonstration of courage, endurance, and selfless dedication on the part of countless volunteers who are still serving throughout the devastated region.

Conversely, I am outraged beyond words at leaders—including some from my own country—who issued carefully worded proclamations of support, but who then provided little or no meaningful assistance to the disaster response and recovery effort. Worse yet are those who chose to withhold aid on ideological grounds. By those decisions, thousands of innocent victims were condemned to prolonged suffering and probable death, and it will be beyond the ability of overworked volunteers and underfunded relief agencies to alleviate most of that suffering. Disasters can be cruel events, but I find no excuse for those who set the stage for a "disaster after the disaster" when it is within their means to help.

Throughout my stay here, I've had the very great privilege of working with exceptionally professional and dedicated officials from the State of Orissa and with many national, state and local civil service project directors. I was especially honored that Chief Minister Giridhar Gamang, Governor of the State of Orissa, asked the DERA/NIAR project team for a de-

tailed damage assessment report and our prioritized recommendations for state-level recovery planning. Mr. S. Suri (NIAR Vice-Chairman) and I presented the report to the Chief Minister and spent several hours with him and his senior staff discussing strategies for programs involving public health, hazard mitigation, emergency communications, housing and utilities restoration.

Suri's and my recommendations to the Chief Minister included a proposal that he promptly institute a comprehensive emergency management program built around the functions of hazard assessment, community planning, preparedness, mitigation, and response and recovery operations. We also suggested that the massive rebuilding effort just beginning include provisions to create disaster resistant communities, following in principle Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) guidelines. Key features of our recommendations for long-term recovery included:

- (1) Deployment of an effective early warning system throughout coastal and flood-prone areas;
- (2) Reestablishment of communities, where possible, on safe ground after careful risk studies and hazard mitigation efforts;
- (3) Construction of cyclone shelters in coastal towns;
- (4) Creation of a state-wide Amateur Radio Emergency Service based on the NIAR (India) model, and placement of ham radio stations in schools, cyclone shelters, Collectors' Offices, and state government ministries;
- (5) Establishment of a State Government Emergency Operations Center equipped with redundant communications (including ham radio), advanced Information Technology resources such as GIS mapping, and efficient work space for all key ministries;
- (6) Recognition that the worst of the disaster may be yet to come, as even the small amount of outside assistance now being received dries up. There is serious risk of a long-term agricultural disaster and famine in the area. Contingency plans for mass care and feeding must now be developed in order to provide relief agencies with adequate time to mobilize the needed effort.

It remains doubtful, however, that the State of Orissa will receive enough financial aid and other outside assistance to implement an effective recovery effort.

Overall, however, I believe there are some larger lessons to be learned from this tragedy. Developing nations often do not have the resources to set up a program of comprehensive emergency management. There are always competing priorities and pressing agenda. However, when tragedy strikes, everything available is usually thrown into the response. Resources are taken from critical development and community support projects to meet the emergency, setting the stage for the next disaster.

**A better course would be for sponsoring nations to issue more foreign aid grants for disaster planning, hazard mitigation and response team development before disasters strike.**

Not only will improved preparedness be more cost effective in the long run than *ad hoc* response to recurrent emergencies, it will also be

far more effective in preventing loss of life, property damage, and human suffering. Until governments begin to regularly implement cooperative worldwide disaster planning, prevention and mitigation, we, the professionals and volunteers in the disaster response field, should take it as our personal mission to educate business and governmental leaders and other decision-makers on the human cost of these missed opportunities.

As a specific case in point, we should be vocal and persistent in deploring the lack of adequate financial aid to alleviate the current suffering in Orissa, as well as the lack of restoration and mitigation assistance.

Please remember also that many of the relief organizations I've seen at work in the field here are running desperately short of funds to continue their mission. Many are also meeting heavy commitments elsewhere in the world. I urgently ask everyone associated with DERA to donate generously to these vital efforts.

In closing, I would like to share one final thought. In the time I've been here, I've seen volunteers and paid professionals laboring together under the worst imaginable circumstances without any regard for personal differences, race, religion or creed. I've witnessed incredible courage and commitment on the part of local officials, international relief agency workers, NIAR disaster teams, and individual volunteers from throughout India. I stand in awe of their consistent professionalism, unshakable determination and unflinching optimism even in the face of overwhelming challenges. I salute them, not just for what they have accomplished as a group, but what they have individually endured so that others might live.

Jay Wilson

*Editor's Note: In addition to portable computers and radio equipment, DERA provided a Motorola Iridium satellite telephone which was used extensively by relief agencies and state officials for emergency calls out of the disaster area, and to receive Internet Email. Bob Dockery activated the DERA Disaster Support Center in Asheville, North Carolina to provide liaison with U.S. government agencies, Habitat for Humanity, and the Jimmy Carter Foundation in response to requests for assistance with temporary housing for 2.5 million people in Orissa. In mid-December, Chief Minister Gamang re-*

*signed from his office because of difficulties with the recovery effort. NIAR is continuing emergency support to many isolated communities and is helping plan for restoration of infrastructure systems. The deployment phase of DERA's mission has now ended, but our organization will continue to support NIAR disaster response efforts by providing financial and technical assistance as needed.*

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*The team in Hyderabad after returning from Ersama*

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