

POUNDS OF PREVENTION

- A Disaster Risk Reduction Story -

“Pounds of Prevention” is a series of short articles that illustrate how disaster risk reduction works and why it is important. Take a behind-the-scenes look at aid work in action, long before the disaster occurs. How is that possible? Read on!

FOCUS: BANGLADESH

Bangladesh has a long history with destructive cyclones. In 1970, a powerful cyclone killed nearly 300,000 people, and the Great Cyclone of 1991 killed 139,000 people. Shortly thereafter, however, the Government of Bangladesh and its citizens, with support from USAID, began to make enormous strides towards reducing the risk cyclones pose to lives and livelihoods.

Over the past 15 years, USAID has invested financial resources and technical expertise to help develop hazard forecasting capabilities and early warning systems, support the country’s official Cyclone Preparedness Program, strengthen community preparedness and mobilization levels, and train medical and search-and-rescue first responders through the regional Program for the Enhancement of Emergency Response (PEER).

As Cyclone Mahasen threatened the country in May 2013, Bangladesh demonstrated its increased ability to monitor and track storms, forecast their effects, warn at-risk communities, and prepare for emergency operations. The Bangladesh Meteorological Department provided timely warnings of Mahasen’s approach to populations living in coastal areas. The messages were not only distributed through text messages and media but also by alert flags and community volunteers. As a result, more than 1.2 million people safely evacuated ahead of the storm. Tens of thousands of evacuees took refuge in storm shelters, built upon strengthened and raised foundations, more than 1,500 of which were built by USAID and its partners.



A volunteer with Bangladesh’s Cyclone Preparedness Program alerts a community in Chittagong District about Cyclone Mahasen’s imminent arrival. Photo by Robert Friedman, USAID.

In addition, the government activated its Standing Orders on Disaster—or national emergency management procedures—ahead of Mahasen to coordinate activities and preparations with disaster management committees working at the local level. These disaster committees and volunteers trained through the Cyclone Preparedness Program relayed disaster alerts and evacuation instructions to coastal residents and coordinated with relief agencies. The relief agencies, in turn, pre-positioned water purification units, food, and other emergency relief supplies, including items provided by USAID, close to areas likely to be hard hit.

Ultimately, Mahasen lost strength upon making landfall northwest of Chittagong city on May 16, and the storm’s effects were not as intense as expected. Nonetheless, the government proved itself capable of assessing damage and assisting residents in affected areas in Bhola, Barguna, and Patuakhali districts without international assistance.

While the cyclone did not warrant mobilizing many of the country’s first responders, their expertise was put to use in April 2013 following the tragic collapse of Rana Plaza, outside the national capital of Dhaka. The collapse of the eight-story commercial building was the worst accident in the garment industry’s history, with a death toll of more than 1,100 people. Despite difficulties related to advanced search-and-rescue capacity and multi-agency coordination, Bangladeshi first responders, many PEER-trained, rescued approximately 2,500 injured people.

Bangladesh will likely face strong cyclones and other disasters in the future. By demonstrating a continuous commitment to improving its preparedness posture, including the formation of a well-trained cadre of emergency responders, the country and its people have truly invested in preventing loss of life and reducing disaster risk.