Episode 2

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30 October 2023 – I was resting at home, as I do on weekends, when I felt the powerful earthquake that struck Afghanistan's Herat province a little after 11:00 on 7 October 2023. It was so unusually strong that everyone in my family instantly jumped up and rushed outside.

I immediately called the regional hospital in Herat city, the largest in the whole western region, where most of the injured would usually be taken for treatment in an emergency. The hospital authorities told me that a few injured people had already been admitted.

I quickly checked if we had enough medicine in our WHO stock and told the stockkeeper to supply the regional hospital. Then I rushed there without even getting out of my home clothes, leaving my family out on the street for safety. As a health professional and humanitarian, I had to choose between family and patients. I chose the latter as they needed me more at that moment.

At the hospital, I started to receive formal and informal reports that Zindajan district, about 45 km away, had been completely destroyed. By the end of that first day on which the earthquake struck, more than 500 wounded had arrived at the regional hospital, and over 120 dead bodies had been brought there. The hospital gardens were turned into makeshift wards.

In the evening, many individuals and organizations were at the hospital to distribute food and blankets to the patients and their caregivers. It was very good to see this – we were all in this together. There was sympathy and support from everyone. I was at the hospital with doctors and colleagues until midnight to make sure all the patients were taken care of.

The next day, I was in the field. People from near and far were rushing towards the earthquake-affected areas with hoes and pickaxes to rescue those stuck under rubble or pull out the dead bodies. I couldn’t believe my eyes seeing entire villages reduced to dust. I lost my strength and could no longer stand. I needed to sit every few minutes to regain some force. The damage was beyond imagination.

As Incident Manager for WHO, however, my responsibility compelled me to do everything possible to support others. I took some colleagues home with me for us all to find strength in company. We helped boost each other’s morale and psychological condition. Every one of my colleagues was there for those in need.

From the first moment following the earthquake, I understood that my people needed me. I had

to be there with them, even if it meant leaving my family – who also needed my support – to stay at the hospital or in the field until late each night. My country and my people have seen a lot of miseries. As a humanitarian, it is my prime responsibility to do as much as I can for them.

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