



Many women lost their husbands in the landslide and face the burden of caring for their children alone
18 May 2014 – People living in Abe Barak village in Badakhshan, north-east Afghanistan, faced destruction and devastation in their community when a landslide buried around 300 homes in up to 50 metres of mud, leaving many villagers with nothing.

Accounting for the exact scale of loss is difficult, as according to villagers, people from neighbouring areas were celebrating a wedding when the landslide engulfed the village. People who rushed to help the victims of the first landslide were caught in a second landslide. However, it is estimated that 255 lost their lives in the disaster, while more than 4900 people are affected.

WHO, in coordination with nongovernmental organizations and other international organizations, is providing critical assistance to villagers to help them rebuild their lives. WHO has provided emergency medical kits, essential medicines, diarrhoea kits, and tents to provide health services at the site of the emergency.

Access to safe drinking water is critical and water contamination is a current concern. “There were already poor water and sanitation facilities and now there is a high risk of water and foodborne diseases,” says Dr Vickneswaran Sabaratnam, WHO’s Consultant Epidemiologist who recently visited Abe Barak. Villagers have been provided with water purification sachets and the rehabilitation of wells and repairing the damaged water system is underway.

An emergency health camp has also been set up by the Ministry of Public Health, WHO and their partners. The camp will provide essential health care services to affected people, and includes a reception area, an outpatient services department, a vaccination area, a small laboratory, a nutritional care service and maternal and child health areas as well as a mental health unit.

Mental health services

Post-traumatic mental health problems are a key concern in the area as many families have lost their loved ones as well as property and all means of income. The social fabric of the community has been largely shattered. Villagers are receiving mental health first aid from counselling teams and the Ministry of Public Health is currently conducting additional training for field teams on post-disaster mental health needs assessment.



A child in Abe Barak plays with a kite made out of a plastic bag. During a visit to Abe Barak, a WHO field team discovered dozens of children who have not spoken to anyone since the landslide destroyed the village. “Some of them are still in a state of shock, so the mental health first aid teams are working to help them express themselves using art therapy and behavioural techniques such as drawing, playing and interacting with them,” says Sabaratnam.

Gender-sensitive relief

Gender issues are central to emergency response activities and humanitarian partners recognize that relief can only be effective when the differing needs of women and men are understood and addressed. Women have been provided with dignity kits and gender-sensitive latrines have been constructed.

Up to 10 May, there were 34 female-headed households identified in the area as many women lost their husbands in the landslide. Facing the immense devastation brought about by the disaster and the burden of taking care of remaining family members also increases the risk of mental health issues for women. As sole caretakers for their families, women are facing difficulties in gaining access to food and essential supplies as many of them are scared to go out and leave their tents.

“There is an urgent need to provide special housing and livelihood support for female-headed households,” says Sabaratnam. “A gender-sensitive approach to the emergency response is critical here to ensure that aid is effective. Women will stay in the community, raise their children and help build an even stronger community and a better future.”

Saturday 17th of May 2025 09:59:12 PM