

## THE RAIN AND PAIN OF WAYANAD LANDSLIDE 2024.

The tragedy of Wayanad landslide occurred due to heavy monsoon rains, coupled with a cloud burst in the middle of the night over 30<sup>th</sup> July triggered the devastating landslides in Wayanad, Kerala, south of India. The tragedy resulted in the loss of over 415 lives, with over 200 still reported missing.

We friars have our presence within the 20 kilometer radius of this tragedy. Some who survived the nightmare had only the cloths that they wore to claim as their own, that too wet and torn as they ran, swam, to safety in the din and dark of that cold and wet rainy night. They had to seek shelter by climbing and crawling to safety from the river of mud and rocks to the hills, and into the woods at night beside wild elephants, holding on to dear life with fear in their hearts and tears in their eyes. Many of our neighbors including migrant workers have also lost their near and dear ones. The landslides reduced homes, resorts, shops, schools, places of worship, offices and practically everything on its sliding path to rubble and ruin. The relentless rain and the flash flood that followed devastated many roads bridges, and such other vital infrastructure in the region. Rain and the fear and pain of rain and its gloom alone now remain.

The district of Wayanad is one of the most backward or underdeveloped districts in Kerala. It has many hills and valleys and so panoramic with its teagardens and thick forest cover. This district has no train or flight service – the closest railway station or airport for this area is about 100 kilometers away from here. We friars stay in a rather remote village of Meppadi Panchayat. The tragedy occurred on the other side of the same mountain range. Here we are surrounded by people marginalized in more ways than one. Here we have tribal hamlets, tea garden workers, settlers and families belonging to various cultures, works and religion and the wild animals and all of them together make up for our neighborhood. Our friary named Prakruthi Mithra- meaning friend of Nature, involves in encouraging and promoting ‘a friendly interaction’ with nature and its creatures in order to respect, protect, preserve, restore and sustain Mother Earth and all created things and beings.

On that fateful night the unrelenting, torrential rains recklessly broke open the boundaries of the gently flowing Chaliyar river to a ravaging torrent and beautiful streams and creeks from Chooralmala hill bore the brunt of the crushing cruelty that the landslides brought along. The mountains and valleys echoed and reechoed the loud and painful screams and cries of streams and creeks that ripped the hushing silence of the night. The People of Wayanad who longed for relief from the scorching summer were eagerly waiting for the monsoon that brings rain and comfort, water and newness of life to arrive but to their disappointment and despair the landslide caused by excess rains brought not comfort but instead destruction and death. The landslide made the comfort/ life giving rain the most feared life threatening mountain monster of the monsoon season.

Those who looked to the rain for comfort are now looking for relief from rain...Many who fearlessly fought their way to the top and putting their lifetime efforts to build on their well-being and remain on top of this hill station are inconsolable. Daughters given in marriage from there to our village and parents who gave their daughter from here in marriage to there are all sorrowful for they have not even found the mortal remains of their dear ones even after fifteen days of the unfolding tragedy. The mutilated body parts found here and there is beyond human recognition. To be alive and not able to conduct the last rites of a family member is a burden that makes the hearts of those alive so heavy and their will to live on so weary. They refuse to be consoled. So the extent of pain and trauma this tragedy has caused is beyond measure. Our challenge is to be there by their side in solidarity.

#### Relief Efforts; Picking up the broken pieces from the fiasco faced is easily said than done.

We friars had begun our relief work days before the landslide occurred as the nonstop rains were causing havoc to the homes of the poor and they were unable to sleep in their own homes as the roofs were leaking. Due to the wind and rains trees were falling and the electricity supply to our area was erratic, since wild elephants and tigers roam around the area at night and to avoid any further casualties caused by live wire the repair and maintenance work would be done only during the day and as a result the poor were left without any light at home in those dark and rainy days. To make matters worse the wild elephants took the advantage to roam freely into residential areas as it was dark all over. For the people it was all dark and cold but couldn't sleep at night because of the fear of the elephants and the house and even the mat that they sleep on was all wet.

When I went into their house to assess the situation of the leaking roof I realized that inside it is dark even during the day and what provides little visibility inside is the torn tarpaulin, broken tiles or other roofing materials, thanks to the monkeys who tare open the roof to see if there is anything in the house that they can plunder. So we came with an idea of providing the tarpaulin sheets to cover the leaking roof and emergency light bulbs that burn about four hours without electricity. So they could burn these bulbs for want of light in the house during the day while there is electricity and when the power is cut at night the bulb will continue to burn. It was with great gratification and contentment we watched them smile a smile of happiness and joy when such everyday essentials were provided.

While being in their huts we also noticed that due to the rains everyone was sitting at home in places where the roof does not leaking and at other places empty vessels were kept to collect the water falling into the house. Hearing the sound of water falling into those empty aluminum vessels, and looking at those weary faces, the little children crying I could sense the emptiness there and the mother of the house broke the silence to say that 'children are crying because the schools are closed' – I was curious to know more and then the mother continued ... 'if they had gone to school they would have got the midday meal, here I have nothing to give them to eat as we have no work for many days due to the rain'. There again the rain is the villain. The sound of rain drops following onto those empty vessels reminded me of the hunger pangs from empty stomachs.

The schools in Wayanad district had to be kept closed due heavy monsoon rains and all the rivulets and brooks around were overflowing above the danger mark. Another reason for keeping the schools closed for students were to provide space for families evacuated from the hill sides fearing the potential and possibility of yet another landslide.

#### Making smiles possible.

When I visited those put up in camps people gathered around me as I was in my familiar brown Franciscan habit, one old lady known to me began to cry and lament, 'so many years I lived here so much rains had come in the past but never had I to leave my home and come away to stay in a camp like this.' I told her with a smile that when you were a child you did not have the opportunity to go to school so this is a special arrangement to make up for it ... all those who gathered around me had a good laugh and the old lady's sorrow and tears vanished into a smile, she looked around the class room and with sparkling joy in her eyes said that as a child she longed to go to school but to take care of the young sibling she had to stay back home, just imagine the school has become my second home now. Another old lady said, father you are right, I had completed class one, and pointing to the board she said see now I am in class two. The gloomy camp became a luminous class room with children of all ages talking and laughing about their childhood stories.

People in our area were sent back home after a week in the camp, but they had nothing at home to eat. So we set out to procure essential food items into kits so that their homes which are now leak proof with Tarpaulin sheet, and lit up with emergency bulb will have something to eat and need not go to sleep with empty stomachs. Thanks to the Franciscan mission, Waterford, and the Provincial team of Friars Xavier Durairaj, Saji Mathew and the defnitors as well as friars Rajsekar Gopu, Joseph Prasanna and John Sekar who are at the service of the brotherhood as project secretary, bursar and secretary of the Province respectively. Some of our good friends and benefactors also contributed a handsome amount locally so that we may not suffer compassion fatigue and could reach out to the deserving with physical/material help accompanied by spiritual and emotional support.

As part of our relief work we tried not only to address their basic needs, but also helped them to regain their confidence and sense of purpose and joy in life. Our regular visits to these homes and camps for relief work thus included Providing physical comfort and emotional, spiritual support, Though the landslide was a brutal blow to all our people, we have been able to sustain their resilience more than anything else. And we are convinced that those living on the margins in Wayanad who have been so badly affected by the rain, the wind, the landslides and the flash floods coupled with the wild Elephant, monkey menace etc, need all the physical, spiritual and emotional comfort we can offer them in order to reduce their anxiety of the future, fear of the fury of nature and the pain of rain and uncertain climate change. Yes much more need to be done to help them to cope with the trauma and grief.

Once our hearts are open to acknowledge their pain and trauma we will be able to find ways and means to offer them the comfort that we can extend. Reaching out to the Poor and suffering around us offering tarpaulin sheets for leaking roofs and emergency bulbs for lighting up their homes; offering protection from darkness and fear, rain and pain and putting the lost smiles back on their faces...

The happiness and joy evident and vivid on the faces of migrants who work in tea gardens living in dilapidated workers quarters built nearly 70 years ago has reason to smile in spite of the nonstop rain no work and no pay situation. Since I can speak their language they feel so happy to see us friars and eagerly await my visit. They are not used to such rains, and the tragedy that has unfolded has put a lot of fear anxiety into them. They say that they feel lost and isolated, but when I talk to them they feel good. These who are on the margins and on the periphery living in fear, hunger and isolation ...need all the comfort that we can offer.

I cannot end this narrative, this reflection without mentioning a word about how much I was touched and transformed by the letters of our Minister General Br. Massimo Fusarelli, ofm who have been reminding us and inspiring us with each passing **world day of the poor** by inviting us constantly to reach out to the excluded on the periphery - Chundel is such a community – and extending a timely help like this gesture of caring and sharing is to make a home in the heart of the rural and suffering poor. «We are called to discover Christ in the poor, to lend them our voice in their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to understand them and to welcome the mysterious wisdom that God wants to communicate to us through them» *Evangelii gaudium*, 198. Mending broken hearts, homes and families is actually building lives. To be willing to stand by the least and the lost and that is what the order is calling us for and the source of inspiration and encouragement is our Minister General Br. Massimo Fusarelli himself.

In his letter to the brothers for the 7<sup>th</sup> World day of the poor observed on 19 November 2023, quoting the message of Pope Francis. He said “The poor become a film clip that can affect us for a moment, yet when we encounter them in flesh and blood ..., we are annoyed and look the other way. Haste, by now the daily companion of our lives, prevents us from stopping to help and care for others” ‘For this reason, on the occasion of this Day of the Poor, our minister General Br. Massimo Fusarelli, ofm asked us to verify our knowledge of the environment and the people amongst whom we live. And he asked us to **make a gesture of service and sharing with disadvantaged people** and situations as a brotherhood. **It may be challenging, but it is possible** he observes and says let us dare more, to see the poverty of Jesus and taste the joy of the Gospel so as to rekindle the passion and joy of our vocation and to illuminate the lack of hope that often threatens us. The hope we can offer our people to face when in reality all that remains is rain and the fear and pain of rain and its gloom is about the reality of lighting candles in the wind. When a sudden wind blows out almost all the candles we had lit there remains one or two candles still burning from which we can relight all the other blown out candles and that’s the hope that we can offer them.

Babu Jose Pampalny ofm

From Prakruthi Mithra. A petal of peace for the poor and deserving. A Franciscan [ofm] initiative. Meppadi Panchayat, Chundel, Wayanad, Kerala.