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The cover story

Flood relief by Shanaz Ramzi

In this gloom and doom scenario where it seems that all news is bad news, it is heartening to come across even the smallest ray of hope, such as an initiative taken by a group of volunteers in Khairpur in 2010. The houses that were constructed for the flood victims last year proved to be so durable that this time round when the floods hit their area these structures stood fast and the residents were able to resume their normal activities within a couple of days. This was a first for them in many years, for the people in the area have always had to evacuate their village in the past during floods. What's more, the houses were not only durable, they are also quick to construct and economical.

limited to their homes (read tents) where they seemed to have no activity other than household chores and looking after numerous children.

When the representatives of the Heritage Foundation witnessed the squalor and the lack of awareness in the community regarding hygiene and cleanliness, they decided to take these issues up as equally important aspects that needed to be worked upon along with the construction of the

units. It was decided that workshops for artisans and communities (particularly women) would be carried out periodically, so as to teach the local population this 'green' method of construction that is earthquake and flood-resistant. The workshops would also serve to make the participants aware of many issues relating to hygiene and education.

A list of beneficiary families was prepared with the assistance of the District Government and a local civil society organisation. The first 25 units, along with a training workshop, were undertaken with the support of Architecture for Humanity and Shah Abdul Latif University which provided free and subsidised accommodation to out-of-town participants including artisans, volunteer students and Heritage Foundation teams. Funds were drawn from the pool already available to Heritage Foundation for Flood Response for the remaining units along with other service facilities including a Green Women's Centre, a health centre and a school. The Swiss Pakistan Society also came forward to help support the additional construction in Darya Khan Sheikh and later identified a neighbouring village, Uthero.

A wind catcher, to take advantage of the prevailing wind, was incorporated in the original design, the model of which was based on the studies carried out by architect Yasmeen Lari. Another innovation that proved to be time-saving as well as instrumental in boosting local economy was woven, local reed matting which was produced to size as prefabricated panels for roofs and walls in a nearby village. Woven reed is a sturdy, long lasting component which adds to the durability of the construction. As the team contin-

tional cost. They were able to generate the fifty per cent cost of the second boat within two months and a second boat has now been provided to the village.

The Women's Centre was constructed on stilts as were the school and health centre with a floating walkway that are nearing completion. Thanks to their elevated construction, these two communal areas remained high and dry when floods inundated the surrounding houses this time round, and families were able to find refuge in them till



Women and children taking refuge at the women's centre during the floods, 2011

Known as the Green KaravanGhar (GKG) initiative, this project was initially launched by Heritage Foundation in Swat after the floods hit that area last year. GKGs are low carbon footprint, low-cost (cost per unit is under Rs65,000) nucleus houses, consisting of one room (to accommodate at least five persons), a veranda, kitchenette, W.C. and bath. They are constructed using primarily environment-friendly building techniques with sustainable, locally available materials such as bamboo, mud, lime and stone.

After seeing their success in Swat, Architecture for Humanity supported the programme in a small remote village along the river bank in Sindh prone to flooding every year, known as Darya Khan Shaikh, in the district of Khairpur. The community here was living in tents that had been provided as immediate relief from the 2010 floods — no NGO or government agency had intervened till then to construct houses for the flood victims — with several families sharing a single tent. Tube wells were being used as communal washing up spaces as there were no proper washrooms or toilets. A make-shift school was functioning from inside a mosque with just a handful of students. The women of the community were



Women's centre on stilts provides the community refuge during floods



These sturdy and cheap houses are still standing after the 2011 floods

ued to build more units, the entire village became engaged in this income-generating activity.

The Women's Centre is now being maintained by the women of the area themselves, who have formed a committee for its maintenance. A fish drying process has gained momentum with the women, which is not only improving the daily diet of the families but is also creating an added income activity for the village. The committee asked for a boat so that they could catch more fish to dehydrate as well as easily visit the areas on the other side of the river. A boat was handed over to them with the promise that if they were to raise fifty per cent of the cost of the next boat, the Heritage Foundation would supplement the addi-

the water receded.

Thus, the positive impact of the project has been multifaceted. Aside from the provision of secure housing to the affected communities, mobilisation of the community, and training in building skills which has boosted their confidence, the positive impacts also include an increase in the contentment level of these traumatised communities, their growing awareness of hygiene, and appreciation of the support offered them.

Though there are many problems still to be solved, for the people in these two villages of Khairpur at least, life has undoubtedly changed for the better after the devastating floods. ■