

DPR KOREA

Rebuilding lives in flood-devastated counties

Kim Nam Suk, 33, joined the UNICEF Office in Pyongyang at the end of July. Mother of an eight-year-old daughter, she was eager to learn about UNICEF's activities on behalf of children and women all over the world.

The devastating floods that hit DPR Korea in August brought her face to face with the tragedy that affected almost the entire country leaving 450 people dead and over 170,000 homeless.

Nam Suk travelled with UNICEF's Representative in DPR Korea Gopalan Balagopal, colleagues and representatives of other humanitarian agencies to some of the hardest-hit communities. She was taken aback to see the devastation on her first visit to Singye County. The school was left with only one wall standing and all the desks and benches had been washed out. The health centre serving over 126,000 people was also damaged. One wing of the maternity ward was crushed. "This is the biggest flood that anyone has seen in their lives," said an 84-year-old man living by the riverside.

Two days later Nam Suk travelled to Pongsan County, which had received nearly 400 mm of rain during the second week of August. Standing on an embankment looking at *Wonjong-Ri*, a part of the Pongsan County, she was speechless. The entire settlement of over one hundred houses was completely demolished. People were taking shelter under plastic wraps on the embankment and the surrounding hillsides. "What moved me most was the courage and spirit among people who were doing all they could to rebuild their homes, like the two ladies we spoke to," said Nam Suk. "They were thankful to the doctors from the Ri Hospital who had come to look after the health of their children. They even offered us potatoes they had prepared for their lunch. In the midst of the devastation, that really touched our hearts," Nam Suk added.

Pongsan County's pumping station, which provides water to the entire county and the nearby town of Sari won, was submerged, knocking out three of the four pumping machines. Until the system is restored, the only sources for clean water are a few deep wells and a reservoir 9 km away. "The number of children with diarrhoea has gone up nearly sevenfold, from an average of 50 to 60 cases at this time of the year to 452 today," observed the County Hospital's doctor.

"Everyone could watch the direct connection between clean water and the incidence of diarrhoea and other diseases during this trip," said Nam Suk after her visit to a third flood-affected area, Tongchon County. "We were happy to see that families knew about oral rehydration salts. It was an exciting new experience for me to help UNICEF's Nutrition Officer Sawsan Rawas explain to the people how to prepare them."

Jigok-Ri is up in the mountains, accessible after a long drive through winding tracks on the hill. It was totally inundated when the embankments of the nearby dam gave way under the enormous pressure of rising waters. Luckily the population was warned in good time to get out, but one hundred houses were washed away, among them the only medical facility, the Ri Clinic.

UNICEF responded to the flooding with pre-positioned supplies of 'emergency health kits' and 'family water kits' – containing a range of medicines, water purification tablets, buckets, collapsible jerrycans and soap. In addition, emergency obstetric care kits and 'doctor bags' with essential equipment were also rushed, in cooperation with UNFPA.

UNICEF is working with the Ministry of City Management to provide water purification tablets to meet immediate needs and to repair the water pumping machines as soon as possible. The agency is also supporting the Ministry of Education to rehabilitate the damaged classrooms so that the children can resume their studies. Until communities are able to build new structures and UNICEF brings in new furniture and supplies, students will be using 'school-in-a-box' kits, announced UNICEF's Education Officer Cristina Brugiolo as she met the teacher and students of a school that was totally washed away.

"I am happy that, in this difficult time, I am with UNICEF, who is providing assistance to the children of my country," said Nam Suk on her way back to Pyongyang. "I realize how privileged I am to be able to take part in this effort. The children need us now."