

UNICEF HUMANITARIAN ACTION REPORT 2009

NEPAL

UNICEF HELPS MAINTAIN SANITATION AND HYGIENE AT RELIEF CAMPS

Six-year-old Lalita Kumari Sah finally returns with a jar full of water to the makeshift camp where her family resides. Her house was inundated when Saptakoshi River burst its banks flooding great swathes of the Nepali and Indian countryside.

Lalita had tagged along with her neighbours and walked for two hours to fetch the water. "My daughter had to walk through knee-deep, dirty water to reach the water pump," says her father. "We did not have any drinkable water sources or latrines here."

Hundreds of families pitched tarpaulins as tents on the remaining embankment of the river after the flood entered their homes. Drinking-water facilities in this settlement were minimal, so people had to either use the contaminated floodwater or walk as far as Lalita to get drinking water. The situation was worsened by open defecation around the settlement area due to the absence of toilets.

This kind of day-to-day problem was typical, not just for those living at makeshift camps on the embankments but also for those dwelling at government-managed relief camps. "More than 5,000 people are settled here and we hardly had 10 toilets to begin with," says Javed Alam, Vice-President of the Camp Management Committee at Jamia Islamia Madrassa. "Moreover, many of the people were used to defecating in the open. Hygiene and the danger of waterborne diseases were becoming a real concern."

Javed is assisted by a team of female community health volunteers who have been raising awareness of the hygiene dangers and on how to use the camp toilets, but it was a more difficult job before UNICEF's hygiene campaign was launched. "I literally had to shout at people to use toilets and not to go around the school area," says one camp volunteer. "Things only started to improve after we began implementing UNICEF's hygiene and sanitation campaign."

UNICEF has mobilized 80 hygiene volunteers and helpers in 27 temporary shelters to spread hygiene messages. They simply use hand-held loudspeakers to disseminate the messages to each family, as almost no one has access to other media, such as radios, televisions or newspapers.

To further secure the environment, UNICEF has financed the construction of 400 temporary latrines, 120 tube wells equipped with handpumps, 100 garbage pits and over 200 bathing spaces for women and adolescent girls. UNICEF has also distributed 312,000 water-purifying Aquatabs and 250,000 sachets of PUR to sterilize water, as well as 8,000 family hygiene kits and over 14,000 water buckets.

With these UNICEF interventions, coupled with the relief provided by the Government and other humanitarian agencies, life has become a little less harsh and a lot safer for the people living in the shelters. Safe water is now available nearby and clean toilets and private spaces for women and girls are at hand.

Now that six-year-old Lalita no longer has to walk for hours to fetch drinking water, her parents can think about the quality of her life rather than worry about her health and safety.

"Next she needs to go to school," says her father. UNICEF's education in emergency team, in partnership with the Government and Save the Children Alliance, is addressing the provision of schooling for flood-affected children.