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Louise Svendsen during a mental health training session at a school in Bagh.

Quake survivors need mental health support

By Ashfaq Ahmed

Besides food, medicine and shelter, earthquake survivors in Pakistan need psychological help to return to normal life, said a mental health specialist.

Louise Svendsen, who worked as a volunteer for Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in the quake area in Pakistan, said mental health support for the survivors is essential to helping them cope with the tragedy and lead normal lives.

Svendsen spent two months in Bagh - one of the worst affected areas in Pakistan-administered Kashmir - providing mental health support to people and training psychologists and social workers in the extreme cold weather.

She talked to *Gulf News* during her brief stay in Dubai after completing her mission.

Main problem

"The main problem of the people is the fear of new earthquakes and this has been badly affecting them and hampering their efforts to go back to normal life," she said.

The MSF volunteer also educated people about earthquakes to ease their mental stress.

"Social workers and psychologists must talk to people to ease their stress. Even two months after the quake, some people told me that it was the first time

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that someone has listened to their story. Everyone in that area has lost someone and doesn't have time to listen or console others," she said.

Unemployment

Svendsen said one of the major issues is unemployment. "They need to get jobs again to get back on track and support their families. They need money to build their houses and buy the necessities of life."

"Unless they work, they won't get money and if they don't get money, it will be difficult for them to start a normal life."

"It is very difficult to sit in a tent and just pass time doing nothing. It is mentally killing. Some of them have already found work and opened tea stalls and small grocery shops, but a majority of them are still jobless."

Sleeping problems

"Their children need access to schools and health facilities, but they need money to do so."

"They have sleeping problems, concentration issues and mental tension. These are very normal body reactions in an abnormal situation."

"We talked to them about how they used to cope with difficulties so that we could encourage them to do the same things again."

"I was pleasantly surprised by the people whom I met to provide consultation. They are so hospitable that wherever I went with my team, they greeted us well, offered us tea, biscuits, fruit and even meal despite the fact they still survive on aid. It was difficult to say 'no' to these people if they offer you something as a host," said Svendsen, who had also served with MSF in Indonesia after the tsunami.

She has been working with MSF in Denmark as volunteer since 1998.

Kind-hearted approach

"Serving people in distress and helping them gain mental health is a mission of my life," she said. The gentle smile on her face speaks volumes of her kind-hearted approach towards people in need.

"During her two-month stay in Bagh, Svendsen went to various places along with MSF medical teams despite the heavy snowfall."

"We also went to schools, talked to

children and helped them in recreational activities. We taught teachers how to understand the reactions of children and how to help them ease their stress by conducting relaxation exercises."

"We had experts going on home visits in order to talk to people, discuss their problems and give them psychological support."

Memories

"We were really shocked because everybody had a story to tell about the loss of their loved ones. We talked to them and we realised that they really didn't know what they should do."

"We talked to them about values, culture, memories and ask them to carry on with memories and try to restart, and don't wait for something to happen."

"By talking to them, we take away their pain and agony as they felt relieved after relating their stories. One of Svendsen's main tasks in Bagh was to train a team comprising psychologists, social workers and community workers to help them carry out mental health programmes in their communities."

"We taught them how to recognise symptoms of stress, how to understand and analyse them and how to discuss issues to help people feel at ease."

MSF has spent about 22 million euros (Dh99 million) as of the end of December on its mission in the earthquake areas of Bagh, Muzzafarabad and Mansehra.

It is on its way to building a container hospital in Bagh, which will later be handed over to the government.

Mobile clinics

It has so far distributed 11,900 tents, 139,000 blankets and 14,445 construction kits, plastic and iron sheets for shelters.

It is also running mobile medical clinics in addition to medical services at government hospitals.

It also gave hygiene kits to families. A hygiene kit includes soap, water bottle, hygiene pads, tent and blankets for a family.

The MSF also provides heaters because tents are not enough protection from the extreme cold.

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