

lies come to the hospital, leave alone mere spectators. We are very strict in terms of discipline, rules and order. Our single most achievement has been the trust of the people that we provide services to. Thankfully, we have never faced any serious problems. I feel safer here in the *chars* than in the cities. We have never had looting or theft since everyone knows and supports us. And if minor problems do arise, the local people of the *chars* jump right in to help without even being asked to."

How do these islanders survive the harsh storms and the heavy showers, not to mention floods? "Some of

when two children fell off into the river right in front of her eyes and were pulled away by the strong currents. "We sent out all our boats to look for them," she says. "But I knew it was of no use."

Friendship has yet another floating hospital under construction which is being made locally in Dhaka. "We have a contract with Emirates Airlines Foundation who is financing the second floating hospital," she explains. "If everything goes well, we will have the Catamaran (a boat with two hulls for stability, size and speed) by the middle of 2007." Friendship is also going to have the first river ambulance made. "It is being designed by the famous naval architect in the world today, Marc Van Peteghem," informs Runa. "His multi hull boats have won all the cross-Atlantic boat races in the last 4-5 years."

"Sometimes we need to make harsh decisions, such as asking the doctors to be honest with the poor mothers with children who cannot be cured," she says. "There was a mother who had come in with her child suffering from Cerebral Palsy, a disease that damages the brain. The child becomes an overgrown infant who cannot do anything by himself. Therapy helps but does not cure. I had to request the doctors to tell the mother the truth; otherwise she would eventually go to a quack or probably trust a doctor who would want to take advantage of her situation by giving her hopes of curing the child. When this mother came to know of her child's situation she came up to me asking what she would do with the child. I felt absolutely helpless when the delirious mother suggested killing her own baby as a

probable solution. Being a mother of three, I could feel the torture that she was going through within and spent several nights crying over such a feeling of helplessness that we have to endure sometimes." The child is still alive and comes to the ship for minor ailments.

However, there are also many happy endings the hospital has made possible. As Runa Khan takes her visitors around to meet the patients, she speaks of a 3-year-old child who would not stop smiling, looking surprised with everything he laid his eyes on. "The child was born blind," she explained. "He was operated on a week ago, and ever since he opened his eyes, everyone around came to see his expressions of surprise. He was literally looking at the world, including his parents, for the very first time." The Lifebuoy Friendship floating hospital is more like a precious gift to these islanders. A foreign reporter had once asked one of the waiting patients as to why they always came from far away places to this particular hospital, informs Runa. "Because we get better," was the simple reply.



Educating mothers on general health and pregnancy hazards.

these islanders have boats of their own and move to safety to the mainland," explains Runa. "However, most of them cannot afford such kinds of provisions, so they either move to the highest point of their sunken islands or spend between weeks to months on a high landing that they build inside their huts or on the roofs of their houses." Even then, lots of lives are lost in these torrential rains. Though relief is sent from all over the country to Gaibandha and Kurigram, none of them reach these poor islanders since they simply cannot sail all the way to the mainland to collect them. "Something you have to realise is that you cannot fight the climatic conditions in these areas," she explains. "All you can do is help the survivors with relief and lessen the impact of a drastic situation, but you cannot avoid it. During the last flood in 2004, we had trucks filled with packaged food and medical supplies sent all the way to Gaibandha, Kurigram, Jamalpur and Pabna, which were then loaded onto boats and transported to the *chars*. We would then go to these *chars* ourselves to keep a check on the distribution of the supplies and maintain a database." Runa recalls the day