Aid Worker

God bless you Julian, so that was her way of saying hello.

How did you manage to medically take care of so many refugees, the numbers must have been staggering?
We took a decision right at the beginning that we shouldn't be calling lots of expatriate people, doctors and nurses and other volunteers or paid people from Europe. Because we had all the local connections we needed and we could mobilise medical students and Indian doctors which is what I did. The other foreign agencies did not like our decision, because they were doing a lot of publicity at Heathrow with white faces going places to save people. But we said no, it's far more cost effective to do it from and in India.

Were there enough consenting pro bono doctors in India to take care of up to 10 million refugees?
Well there probably weren't that many but then somehow we found out that a medical student in one of the colleges was actually the daughter of a well-known Ghandian leader, Narayan Desai. So we went to visit her to see whether we could organise anything through the college. She managed to get the college authorities to agree that the students could go out on rotation and if they did a months' voluntary service in any of the camps that we (OXFAM) were involved with than it would be regarded as part of their social and preventive medicine section of their MBBS. After it was rubberstamped by Calcutta University the other medical colleges in Calcutta also offered their personnel. Then it got publicity that it was a sort of Indian operation, and Bombay medical colleges started sending batches over.. And of course that experience was unique for them and moulded their lives for the future. Other medical students even came from places as far off as Gujrat, Punjab and Orissa.

There must have been some terrible sights in those refugee camps. Is there any one in particular that stands out?
The most dramatic experience I had early on was when I visited some camps in Jalpaiguri in the northern part of western Bengal. There were not enough able-bodied men in the camp to dig graves for the cholera victims at that time. So the camp director had asked for army people to come and help. But before they arrived whoever was able to dig was digging, so I spent a day digging graves and we had to dig mass graves because there were hundreds dying all the time. It was an experience I will never forget.

What was the morale like among the refugees?
The refugees were coming over with what could only be called 'frozen faces; because they were still in shock. Many of them had left behind burning villages, many of them had lost members of their family to the Pakistan army and even to friends turned collaborators. Older people just through the physical effort of trekking out of the country even died of heart attacks. There was tremendous suffering and a lot of shock. I suppose in many cases what forced the adults out of shock was the fact that they had to carry on looking after their young children.

Could you explain your role in preparing the document `A Testimony of 60` and the reaction to it after it was published?
Oxfam published this document in record time. A lot of these statements were collected by me in Calcutta and then sent by telex. It had a good reaction with government leaders from Western Europe and the Commonwealth. The publication date was 21st of October and it was only 10 days later that (Senator Ted) Kennedy got it included in the Senate records. And to get it included without any vote against it was quite remarkable considering the government that was in power then (Nixon).

How long have you been in Bangladesh?
I came to Bangladesh first after the cyclone of 1970, the second time I came was about 10 days after Sheikh Mujib returned. I drove by land from Calcutta to Dhaka, I think it took us more than 24 hours and that was largely because of ferry problems. But the volume of people returning during those days was amazing, the singing, shouting and joy was quite extraordinary. I remember as if it was yesterday driving into Dhaka about midnight past the old airport and there was no one, no vehicle, nobody in sight! Then suddenly we were surrounded by the army, we didn't realise that there was still curfew in the city.
Since then I've been in Bangladesh almost every year since independence, but not working full time. I was in India from '67 to '83 but I visited often. Then I was working for a Canadian organisation in Bangladesh from '85 to '92. I came back again in '98 with the International Red Cross. In the 2000 I left the Red Cross and joined the European Union commission of land project Adarasha gram. Then six years later I finally moved immediately into the Chars livelihood program with DFID. In a way I have never really left Bangladesh. ■