

## Char people get new meaning of life

Tania Sharmeen  
back from Gaibandha

RAFIQUL Islam, for the first time in his 40 years of drifting life, feels delighted and a little secured to have a house of his own.

Floods and erosions have forced him to move with his family from one place to another and from one shoal to another in Kurigram district and start life anew.

Poverty and hunger had always accompanied him until he, like many other ultra-poor, has been provided with a shelter in Kumar Kamrangir char of Kurigram, where he has been living for the last eight years.

Rafiqul now boasts of a safe house, cattle and a piece of land to cultivate. His family has access to healthcare and his children go to school, and all these have happened for Lifebuoy Friendship Hospital, the country's first floating hospital initiated by a Frenchman.

Lifebuoy Hospital now works in the northern part of Bangladesh, ushering in new hopes for hundreds of homeless and hapless families like Rafiqul in the shoals of the Jamuna.

Tara Mia of Bhatiborali char has the same story to tell. Once a landless and moving from place to place for a home and livelihood, he now owns a piece of small land for growing maize and leads a happy life.

In 1994, Yves Marre, a French humanitarian worker, sailed to Bangladesh in a barge, which he later developed into a floating hospital that started operation in March 2002.

Its works have now spread to seven northern districts between Sirajganj and Pabna and the bene-



A Lifebuoy Friendship Hospital executive distributes relief goods among flood-hit people of a shoal in the River Jamuna.  
— New Age photo

ficiaries are mostly women and children.

Friendship is presently working actively in 75 islands, covering a population of 40,000 people and imparting training on traditional and mechanized sewing techniques to provide the poor and vulnerable women and adolescent girls with a living.

While working for giving the poor basic health services, the charity found that its target people need homes and food first and decided to go beyond its primary objective and started taking initiatives for shelter and livelihood developments in the char areas.

Friendship's activities, spread in the districts of Kurigram, Gaibandha, Jamalpur, Bogra, Sirajganj, Tangail, Pabna and parts of Dhaka, also include protecting

people from floods and rehabilitating the affected by the deluges, a common phenomenon in char areas and on the banks of mighty rivers of the country.

Its emergency relief, reconstruction and income generating programmes are supported by international donor agencies and multinational companies.

The organisation plans to build 1300 houses and install around 500 sanitary latrines and sink some 500 tube wells in next six months with supports from the French government.

Around 900 houses will also be raised on plinths to keep them safe from monsoon flooding and supports will be available in this purpose from the British Department for International Development under its Chars Livelihood Project.

These houses are to be built in a part by part technique so that they can be shifted to safer place during floods and brought back intact after waters recede.

Nearly a hundred chars will be brought under this programme within the next one year, the charity officials said adding that the poor farmers will be provided with cash and material supports for agricultural production.

Boats will be there to carry farm, poultry, dairy and fishery produces to market places and entrepreneurs will be given management and skill development training under the project.

Friendship's 100 satellite clinics are now working in the flood effected areas.

Ten schools set up in 10 chars are educating 960 children, who

had little or no chance of going to school. Teachers of these schools are inhabitants of the chars and chosen from best students who teach Bangla, English and Mathematics.

Students also receive livelihood training on tailoring, mechanical and electrical works, livestock, poultry and fish farming.

The organisation has taken up another initiative of giving the chars an oval or triangular shape to ward off the direct shocks from the rough river and protect those from the force of water. Ponds for fish farming have also been dug on some of the shoals.

Mobile phone service, a modern amenity, has also been made available for char people.

Director of the charity organisation, Dr Runa Khan said they trained up the people on how to protect themselves from natural disasters and diseases. 'We monitor their conditions regularly. Patients have register books for follow-ups,' she said.

The floating hospital has been well-equipped for X-ray, pathological tests and surgeries. There are eye and dental treatment chambers. Even a seaplane has been kept standby for taking emergency patients to Dhaka.

Encouraged by the activities of Lifebuoy Friendship Hospital, the Emirates airlines also took up a floating hospital venture in the char areas.

The Emirates Friendship Hospital will provide health services in 50 selected chars and remote areas in Kurigram district, covering a population of 120,000 people and bringing a new ray of hope to the people battling with poverty and hunger.