

Technology Comes to Aid of Victims of Massive Kashmir Floods

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A telemedicine program and Google's People Finder application are two initiatives in a mass U.S. effort to aid the thousands of victims injured and left homeless by the recent devastating Kashmir floods.

More than 200 people died as water levels late Sept. 9 evening reached over 25 feet in parts of the state, including the capital city of Srinagar; thousands of others are still homeless as flood waters begin to recede.

"This was a flood of colossal magnitude. Everything is gone. Billions of dollars will not make a dent in getting people's lives back to order," Vijay Sazawal, president of the Indo American Kashmiri Forum, told **India-West**.

"When people went to sleep Saturday night, there was two feet of water on the ground. Sometime around 2 a.m., water started to rapidly rise. People were running to the second floor of their homes as the water was rising," said Sazawal, detailing the horrific event as described to him by a friend who lives in Srinagar.

Most buildings in Kashmir have only two stories, he explained, adding that mud is most commonly used as insulation.

The Kashmiri Overseas Association, in partnership with GrandOpinion – an Ocala, Florida-based company that offers medical consultations via phone or Skype – has launched a telemedicine initiative, in an attempt to mitigate an epidemic of water-borne diseases transmitted through unsafe drinking water and inadequate hygiene.

Physicians across the world will enter their information to the GrandOpinion database. Kashmir residents calling in to a flood helpline number will be matched with a physician who will provide a free medical consultation via phone or Skype.

Ashish Dhar, who founded GrandOpinion a year ago, told **India-West** the initiative has already attracted a panel of more than 100 doctors willing to provide their services to Kashmiri flood victims.



Kashmiri residents

Indian army soldiers seen helping Kashmiri residents during flood rescue operations on the outskirts of Srinagar on Sept.

6. Volunteers from the Indian Red Cross Society are also assisting in the rescue operations, and a telemedicine program launched by an Indian American group is helping to provide medical care to the injured. (AFP/Getty Images)

Consultees will describe their symptoms to a physician, who will advise his/her patient on how to manage the symptom, as well as general advice on purifying water and proper hygiene and sanitation techniques.

Dhar said he anticipates an initial technology gap; the state is experiencing little to no cell phone connectivity and no Internet connection. But hundreds of calls are still coming in daily through the help lines and Dhar anticipates thousands more as phone services are restored.

The GrandOpinion/KOA initiative aims to fill a medical gap as hospitals recover from flood damage and get back to providing services. Dhar, an Indian American whose family left Kashmir in 1992, noted that the Valley is still submerged under eight feet of water. “If this had happened anywhere else in the country, the death toll would have been much higher,” he stated.

Jeevan Zutshi, founding member of the Kashmiri Overseas Association, told **India-West** the telemedicine initiative was setting an example of the core values of the Kashmiri Pandit community. About 400,000 Kashmiri Pandits were believed to have been forcibly exiled from the Kashmir Valley in the early 1990s, and relocated to refugee camps in Jammu.

Sazawal told **India-West**: “All Kashmiris have become refugees today; perhaps they can now understand the plight of Kashmiri Pandits who left their homes and all their belongings with just the clothes on their backs.”

The floods have also served to equalize the rich and the poor of the community, said Sazawal, noting that all classes of people are standing in line for food and shelter.

The Google Foundation’s Person Finder application has launched a new portal for finding missing residents of Kashmir. On the site – google.org/personfinder/global – people can post information about missing relatives and friends. Others who have seen or spoken to the missing person can then post information as to his whereabouts. More than 17,000 queries had been posted as of Sept. 16.

The Houston, Texas-based SEWA International has connected with its partner on the ground in India, SEWA Bharti, whose volunteers were one of the first responders to the Kashmir disaster. The team initially had trouble accessing the ravaged areas, but followed the Indian Army, Kavita Tewary, project coordinator for the Houston chapter of SEWA International, told **India-West**. “We were the first civilians to reach on the ground,” she said. “We have our eyes and ears there, so we have a very real picture of what is going on.”

SEWA Bharti has been involved in many relief efforts in India, most notably the Uttarakhand floods last summer, which left 5,700 people dead.

Tewary said the organization is focused on immediate relief efforts now, but will be in for the long run, rebuilding schools and health care centers decimated by the floods. “The infrastructure is completely wiped out,” noted Tewary.

Using the ALS Foundation's popular ice bucket challenge model, SEWA International has launched a similar initiative. A person can donate to the organization, then challenge three friends to do the same over social media. The Houston chapter has already raised \$200,000 in about seven days, according to Tewary, who added there is complete transparency as to how the money is being used.

In Baltimore, Maryland, 10-year-old Myiesha Tanveer Padder has collected more than \$3,000 in two days to help the flood victims, through the Web site gofundme.com. Her father, physician Tanveer Padder, told **India-West** his daughter was moved by news reports of the flood victims and wanted to donate all her toys. Padder's family hails from Kashmir, and he still has a number of friends there.

More than 20,000 homes were destroyed by the floods, and many residents will remain homeless in the oncoming chilly winter, said Padder. The Indian government has been a roadblock in getting necessary food and medical supplies to the region, added Padder, hazarding a guess that the duty costs on a supply of antibiotics would be as expensive as the medicines themselves. However, physicians from abroad are working with pharmaceutical companies in India to get medical supplies to the state, he said.

The Indian National Overseas Congress is collecting in-kind donations of clothing and canned goods at several drop-off points throughout the U.S. INOC USA is connecting with relief organizations in Kashmir, who will distribute the contributions.

George Abraham, chairman of INOC USA, told **India-West**: "We are committed to doing whatever we can to help alleviate this tremendous tragedy."

PTI reports that the American Embassy in New Delhi announced Sept. 16 it would donate \$250,000 to three NGOs in India involved in relief efforts in Kashmir. The organizations include: Save the Children India, Care India, and Plan India.