

Bangladesh 2013



Bihari Relief Fund

We invited Hashmat Ashraf to speak at Grand Island Rotary. He is a noted cardiac surgeon and chairman of the Kaleida Vascular Institute cardiac surgery program. The new building cost 300 million. Thereafter Hashmat appeared at the Himalayan HealthCare fundraisers we held in Buffalo. I was surprised that he took interest in what we do. Little did I know that he had plans for me.



Hashmat is Bihari. His ancestors were prominent in the Bihar province in Northeast India. In 1947, after Mohatma Gandhi brought the English to their knees with his revolution of the heart, the British split India and Pakistan. As described in a book by Singh, Train To Pakistan, there was a genocide as Hindus fled to the south and Muslims went north. I would say that they are barbaric except for the sins of the colonialists and our own civil war history. I will say that humans are the same wherever you go and that their actions are shaped by experience. West Pakistan and East Pakistan were one nation until the East felt neglected and cheated in 1971. At that time they fought a war for independence with enormous loss of life and finally became the new nation of Bangladesh. Be aware that East and West were widely separated geographically.



The West spoke Urdu and the East Bengali. There was however a Bihari ethnic group that had fled to the East in 1947 and spoke Urdu. This portion of the population did not participate in the struggle for independence, just as there were British sympathizers during our own revolutionary war who were later not welcome and ultimately sought shelter by going north. After the war for independence in 1971 the population of Urdu speaking people who had migrated from India in 1947 was estimated to be 400,000. One half of this group was killed in the second largest genocide during the 20th century. The United Nations placed the remaining 200,000 in refugee camps throughout the country. Indira Gandhi and Prime Minister Bhutto promised that these refugees who were not even considered citizens of the new nation would be moved to Pakistan in the west. But how does any nation move 200,000 people. In fact the refugees waited until now and they remain in the camps. As they have waited they have gone from being well educated and hated for their prosperity and ethnic differences to illiterate and stuck in the camps with no economic opportunity. In 1971 my friend Hasmat had just completed his medical degree in Dhaka, being first in his class. His younger brother Azmat was in college in West Pakistan. The rest of the family was

living in Dhaka. Hasmat somehow survived. Nasmat, the even younger brother was saved by a family friend from being beaten to death and then smuggled to India. Hasmat later found him through persistence. The rest of the family was killed.

Hasmat was given a chance to study surgery in England. He was able to bring his two remaining younger brothers to England where they struggled together to make a new life. Younger brother Azmat tells me that big brother Hasmat was devoted and helped his siblings make something of themselves. I cannot recreate the emotional struggle that these brothers experienced. It can only be told by survivors of genocide.

Azmat became a bank president living in Canada. Later he came to reside in Bahrain, buying failing banks for restructure and resale. In 1997 he lived in Dhaka for six months. He began visiting the camps in hope of just finding a familiar face. He knew that many relatives were left behind.

Azmat loaned some money to a man hoping to fix motorcycles, but the man disappeared. Still Azmat persisted.

Azmat pictured below with students and their mothers.



Now meet Ahmed Ilias, a Bihari survivor who was successful in creating a new life for himself but remained committed to his refugee community.



Ahmed Ilias and Peter Nichols

After the genocide Mr. Ilias (at left) worked with Peter Nichols, an English Social worker with the NGO HEED (Health, Education and Economic Development). HEED pulled out in 1981. Al Falah was formed in 1981 by the camp survivors themselves to carry on the work of bettering the lives of the Bihari people.

This non profit, registered in Bangladesh, involves itself with education of the Bihari refugees caught in the camps. The goal is self sufficiency through education. Three hundred older students on scholarship have taught 3,000 pre school students. Al Falah ran a clinic in the Geneva camp on and off for several years. Presently they are closed for lack of funding. They specifically need funds for immunization and birth control activity. A year of funding will cost less than \$5,000. In 2007 the constitution of Bangladesh ruled that the camp people are in fact citizens. This has been a major victory. Still people are caught in the camps due to a lack of education. The camps need not necessarily close. They need transformation to something of better quality.

Last year Hashmat approached me about getting involved in a new non profit to be called the Bihari Relief Fund. We had several meetings. At present the Al Falah group is funded by Target International and by Azmat. We would like to use the good name of Rotary International and the matching grant process to advance the work of Al Falah. We feel that a critical mass of educated young people can be reached that will change the lives of the Bihari survivors.

I left Bangkok after ordering three very fine suits from Mr. Singh at Majestic Taylors. On the return I picked them up and stayed at Mr. Singh's Hotel Majestic. I would call him a successful business man. He treated me like a king. Too bad clothes don't really make the man. The illusion however is wonderful.

I have to admit something very personal. I have always been against racism since seeing a documentary at Charles Street School in the fifth grade. In fact I really have enjoyed the friendship of people of different ethnic groups throughout my life. But sometimes I have a

reaction in my gut when I see people who are different. This is a reaction of fear and I know it is wrong. As I stepped off the plane in Bangladesh I felt like the only one who was different. That must be how so many feel who are minorities among us here at home.

I was efficiently guided through the visa process by Azmat's contact. Azmat waited for me outside. It felt like Kathmandu so I was now relaxed and almost at home.



Bangladesh has 160,000 people. Dhaka has 15,000 million. The population density of Dhaka is by far the highest in the world. The few outdoor plants in the city are covered with dust. The traffic is terrible. Political strikes make travel dangerous unless one knows how and when to move. If the sea level rises by one meter ten percent of the population will be displaced.

Photo from the internet borrowed without permission:



We spent the first day talking with student teachers.





We then went to the Dhaka Uttara Rotary meeting. This is Peter Nichols.



To my surprise we were the noted guests and were given time to present our program. Every nation has its history of good and bad. Every person has the same. The people in the room were all very supportive and interested in helping the Bihari cause. The feeling in the room was buoyant and in fact loving. I was really taken by these caring and committed Rotarians.

On our second day we visited three more refugee camps.



We handed out report cards to lots of little kids while their parents looked on. These are beautiful children, just like Juliet, my granddaughter. I wondered if one of them will one day make a major contribution for the benefit of mankind. Slowly my heart opened as I realized how profound the accomplishments of Al Falah have been.



In the evening we had dinner with Rotarians from another club and with leaders of Al Falah. Again the atmosphere was the same. Peter Nicholas of HEED had come to join us at Azmat's invitation. He told me that he had not been in the presence of such a group of wonderful leaders

during his life of public service. Mr Ilias is a noted poet. The circle included some of the great Urdu poets of Bangladesh.



One gentleman told me a story of his time in a taxi while in New York City. The driver was Bengali. They discussed the reason for coming to America. My acquaintance said he was looking for tolerance. The driver said that is not enough. He wants respect.

The report is not complete without picturing Hasan Mohammad. This young man has grown up with Al Falah and has been the leader of the youth organization. He is now married and has one child. He fought for the Supreme Court Decision giving the Bihari group citizenship in 2007. He is a law student at this time.



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DHAKA

The miracle of birth could be Denver or Dhaka,
Christian or Hindu,
Healthy or flawed,
Wealthy or declawed.

Our species rises with an open slate,
Our basic DNA seeking to communicate.
Between start and finish
Do we grow or diminish,
Adore or deplore?

Our hearts be not still;
Let us reach for free will.

Dance, sing, fly in your dreams.
Every breath a vibration;
Every heartbeat an incantation.

Live without fear.
Work with passion.
Love across all boundaries,
Neuro-plasticity
Simplicity
One step at a time,
Make bliss your design.

David N. Johnson, MD
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