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Pictures of the India earthquake
PICTURES COURTESY PAULA SLIER



At the cutting edge:

SABC News tells it like it is



SABC Feature

Reliving Bhuj and the tragedy of India

By Paula Slier

It's half past twelve at night. I'm trying to gather some semblance of warmth in my sleeping bag in almost sub-zero temperatures when the phone rings. "Hello," I whisper, not wanting to wake up the thirty people around me who are just managing to nod off to sleep.

It's the nine o'clock news (literally!) and they're crossing to me in five seconds for a live question-and-answer session. I leap out of my sleeping bag, run across the field, trip over a brick, tear my socks and crouch on the floor with a torch balancing against my one shoulder. Papers are strewn across the grass, there's smoke everywhere and there I am, trying to be composed and telling it like it is.

You can't predict news.

So I guess it really wasn't a surprise when twenty hours earlier I was sent to cover a press conference on the South African search and rescue team leaving to assist with finding survivors in India after its recent massive earthquake. And now here I was in what had been an outside restaurant before the quake, desperate for the toilet but not quite sure which pile of rubble would hide me from the otherwise exclusively male group — and starving.

PLEASE TURN OVER



SABC News Reporter Paula Slier interviewing a local resident of Bhuj, after the massive earthquake that left at least 30 000 dead in the Gujarat province.

SABC Feature



The South African Search and Rescue team looking for survivors among the rubble in Bhuj, India.

When you have to go shopping at midnight for two weeks' food, you don't have too many options. And take it from me, BP's One Stop Shop doesn't exactly provide a nourishing diet. So I was armed with biltong, bully beef and Smash for my trip to India!

Around 30 000 people are estimated to have died in the 26 January earthquake while the country was celebrating its Independence Day. The International Red Cross and Red Crescent society estimates that there are hundreds of thousands of survivors who are still desperate for food, water and shelter — people who will be living from hand to mouth for at least the next four months.

People keep asking me "How was India?" and I'm still not quite sure how to answer. Sad? Depressing? Unreal?

It was all of that... and more. It was also an amazing opportunity to be part of an international news story.

Bhuj was the worst hit city and Richard Somlota, the SABC cameraman who accompanied me, and I used it as our base. Before we left I'd seen pictures of the devastation and had read of the horror. I thought I was hardened to the suffering. But in the 10 days I spent in India, I learnt that nothing can quite prepare one for destruction on such a scale.

I'LL NEVER FORGET a sad, very old man, who wobbled up to the South African search and rescue team, supported by his walking stick, and asked in the most basic English if they could use one of their sniff dogs to help him locate the body of his dead mother. He'd been searching for a week and couldn't rest until he'd dug her up and buried her.

The main challenge to me as a journalist was the extent of the destruction

Gujarat is an extremely large province and even 10 days after the quake, there were areas that had not yet received any kind of outside assistance.

The earthquake happened in the morning and most of the people who met us were men. There were very few women and children around because they had been at home when the disaster struck and had died under the collapsed buildings.

THE FIRST BODY The South African team uncovered was of five-year-old Jayshree. She'd been caught in the rubble that fell on top of her while she was playing at home. In fact, everywhere one looked there was nothing but rubble.

Jayshree's body touched my heart because here was an innocent child caught in a devastation incomprehensible to most. No sooner had her body been recovered than her father was called from the field and she was immediately cremated.

As with all stories in foreign countries where there's been massive destruction, there was no running water, no electricity and we were warned against eating local food.

Distances were also extremely far and with the local population speaking very little English (and my Gujarati in an equally poor state) it was often a struggle to explain to taxi drivers where we wanted to go.

Richard and I had taken along a laptop editor on which we edited our TV stories every afternoon before feeding them through to South Africa via the Reuters satellite line. It was always a rush as we had to feed at 18:00 South African time and we were given exactly twenty minutes in which to do this.

One day we had an hour to go, we were busy editing on the floor of a local police station that was the only place with electricity, when the power failed. Eventually — with half an hour to go — we flagged down a local taxi and in broken English and almost non-existent Gujarati (Richard wasn't much better at the local language than I) managed to convince the driver to let us wire our cables to his engine. When this didn't work — with the clock ticking mercilessly — we managed to get power from the generator the SA team had flown in with them.

With three minutes to spare we finally made it to the Reuters feeding point and got the material through. To this day I do not know where Reuters was located. They were literally in an open field that had no name. And so, despite the fact that every day I landed up there, it was always a mission of frantic gesturing and loud clucking sounds before I got there.

Making contact with the news office back home was also problematic as the 'phone lines were often down, and it was difficult to get cell 'phone reception.

I remember doing a live question-and-answer session with John Perlmans for SABC's morning show with planes taking off around me, hunching under a bus seat and trying to read my notes.

It was when I was in the middle of one of my answers and I heard him saying "Well, we seem to have lost our reporter Paula Slier" that I realised that some interviews are just not meant to happen!

PLEASE TURN OVER



Paula Slier and Richard Somlota, SABC news cameraman, reporting from Chobari village, where over 2 500 people died in the earthquake.

SABC Feature

Living in a park was also an experience. We'd work on average about 18 hours a day, we had no toilet, no shower and only cold food to look forward to. I must commend the South African rescue team for eventually coming up with a long-drop system and a shower that utilised an upside down water canister filled with hot water from a fire. It was still comforting to have a hot bath when I got home.

Believe me, after the first four days without a bath, anything that allowed one to experience the thrill of clean water on your back, was a blessing! We were fortunate that the South African rescue team allowed us to set up camp with them. They had brought along 1 400 litres of bottled water and two full crates of food — enough for 40 people for ten days.

Because of the stressful conditions — lack of sleep, poor living conditions, an unbalanced diet and physical stress — many in the team

developed oral ulcers, fever blisters, inadequate wound healing and a few even contracted traveller's diarrhoea.

I won't forget Bhuj in a hurry. The first time I saw it, it was from a bus window. People were carting their surviving belongings on huge wheelbarrows. Not one street was unaffected by the earthquake. There was a corner house with one whole side of the wall torn away. A wedding picture still hung from the standing wall. Children's books lay on the floor. And — the most surreal of all — the clock that rested against a shelf had stopped. 20:00. Time has not moved on since then. One minute 15 seconds was all it took.

AS A JOURNALIST, one cannot get emotionally involved in stories. And yet I believe you have to — in fact as a human being you cannot ignore the pain and heartbreak that surrounds you. One person sleeping on the street because he'd lost his home gave me the

number of his niece in England and asked me to call her. He told me that although the family was fine, her mother had died in the earthquake.

"If you as a journalist tell her about her mom, then she'll know it's true," he said.

India taught me that even in the midst of horror, there are always heart-warming scenes and beautiful moments, like the newborn child delivered by the Red Cross a few days after the earthquake.

There were even funny moments. Everywhere I go people would ask where I am from. When this happens and I reply "South Africa" there is an excited wail of "Mandela, Mandela". But in India the answer, even in the refugee camps, was "Aaah, South Africa. Hansie Cronjé. Hansie Cronjé".

There was also another moment of relief when after an entire day of finding bodies and sharing the pain

of relatives who'd held out hope until the last moment, there was one home that had remained standing amid the entire buildings that had collapsed around it. I noticed against the one wall a line of nails with teacups hanging from them. "Now how do you explain that," I asked one of the rescue guys. "Strong nails," was his reply!

I wish I'd visited Bhuj before the earthquake. I kept wanting to compare what I was seeing with what had existed before. Nothing will ever be the same in that city. Heartbroken people who've lost their families, their homes and their livelihoods are now living on the streets, surviving from one moment to the next.

In my recollections, I have an enduring picture of myself walking down a dusty road and a young woman my age with a baby in her arms and toothless smile approaching me. She clasps my hand and says: "Thank you for telling the world."



Chobari village — or what was left of it...