

One year on: Sichuan quake - Stories of survival

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Eighty seconds was all it took for the full force of the Sichuan quake to shake the foundation of buildings and the assumption that we'll live to see another day.

Close to 90,000 people, including some 5,300 students, died or are missing since the 8.0-magnitude earthquake occurred on this day last year.

After visiting some quake-hit areas in the south-western Chinese province of Sichuan, *Mok Fei Fei* files this report on the reconstruction efforts.

A reenactment of the massive earthquake in a touching performance put up solely by disabled residents of Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province.

Held in commemoration of the first anniversary of the tragedy, the concert included victims of the quake.

One of them is 15-year-old Tang Xue Mei, a student from Mu Yu Secondary School in Qing Chuan county, who lost her left leg.

"Last year on May 12th, I was in school taking a nap when the quake rocked the place. We didn't know it was an earthquake, but we started running away. I ran along the corridor till there was nowhere left to go. The walls collapsed on me. My leg was trapped under the rubble for a day and a night. It had to be amputated when I received medical treatment on the 15th of May."

28-year-old native of Long Men Shan town Gao An Tao had his left arm amputated after being rescued from the quake.

A former driver, he used to make 2,000 Chinese renminbi, or some S\$430 a month before the disaster.

Now, as a helper in an internet café, he earns just a few hundred renminbi, or about a hundred Sing dollars per month.

Mr Gao managed to be dragged out from the wreckage, but as roads were destroyed, the delayed medical treatment cost him his arm and his livelihood.

"Sometimes I forget that I lost an arm. I would try to do things with my left arm unconsciously before I realize that it is gone. May 12th is quite a burden, we wonder if the same thing will happen again this year. Our town has been badly damaged. I think 90 percent of all buildings collapsed. Life's really hard, it's not easy to find a job. If I can, I'd like to drive again, but I asked the traffic authorities and that's not allowed."

Sichuan, like many of its disabled residents, has been crippled by the quake.

Deep wounds from the quake are etched on the cracked walls of affected buildings still left standing.

Those not strong enough lie helplessly in a pile of ruins along the streets, as the rubble continue

to bear silent testament to the devastation.

Slowly, but surely, life is resuming.

Collapsed schools, homes and offices are being rebuilt through a unique government-mandated twinning principle.

Quake-hit zones in Sichuan have been paired up with more prosperous cities in other parts of China.

For example, Shanghai was designated to help Sichuan's Dujiangyan city, as a resident of the quake-hit place, Mr Fu explains.

"This is the arrangement made by the central government, asking them to give the aid. This is a communist country, unlike capitalist nations where states are more or less independent of one another. All our schools, hospitals and public facilities are reconstructed by Shanghai. Our students can study in Shanghai too and they help us provide jobs."

With the help of Shanghai, Dujiangyan was not only able to provide temporary homes for all affected residents, it has even finished building permanent high-rise apartments to house the farming communities that have lost all their belongings in the quake.

Others, like urban residents, have also been promised their permanent homes, with the pledge to reconstruct more than 1 million houses in Sichuan by the end of the year.

A beneficiary of the state aid is 64-year-old farmer Chen Min Kang.

He was among a group of 6 family members which was up in the mountains cutting bamboo when the earthquake took place.

Chaos ensued and the once-familiar solid land gave way, forcing him to crawl his way through the debris.

He was the only one in the group to make it out alive.

Within weeks of the calamity, Mr Chen was re-settled in a shelter at Ji Guan Shan, where he lives in makeshift container boxes and has a fresh start.

"I go back to the mountains every few days for work now. My farming produce is up there. I'm still a bit afraid though. "

Not everyone is able to move on with life.

Alleged corruption by local officials who embezzled reconstruction funds have plagued the rebuilding proceedings.

Questions also arise over the crumbling of so-called tofu school buildings and the unethical behaviour of some teachers.

In Dujiangyan alone, 8 schools reportedly collapsed, killing hundreds of children, including 35-year-old Du Jia Fu's 11-year-old son, Du Cheng Wei.

Having abided by the one-child policy rule, Mr Du recounts with grief the death of his only son as told to him by one of the children who was saved.

" When the quake occurred, he teacher closed the classroom door and ran to the first floor to save his own child first. The boys in class saw cracks on the wall widening and tried to prevent the wall from falling, asking others to fetch the teacher. They were all found dead, buried under

the wall. The teachers did not come for the children, they ran down."

To help people like Mr Du, who was born disabled, Singapore's TOUCH Community Services International provided counseling skills in Chengdu as part of its post-quake rebuilding efforts.

The aim of the sessions is to help the disabled counsel others crippled in the quake and is more pertinent in view of the first anniversary of the disaster, says head trainer at TOUCH, Arthur Ling.

" This time around, we added in a suicide prevention component. We don't expect there'll be a lot of suicide cases, but we feel they need to know it to watch for symptoms. It's the first anniversary, thinking back, you never know what will happen in terms of how you feel inside, especially victims."

Having identified the disabled persons group in Sichuan that would find it more challenging to be employed, Executive Director at TOUCH, Eugene Seow, says it will continue in this area.

" We want to in future to help them in their life skills, capacity building for some of the people who have been disabled through the process of this earthquake. We're planning to support them by helping to resource a commercial car workshop in order for them to be trained, skilled and handle a new industry."

Another non-governmental organisation from Singapore, Mercy Relief, helped to rebuild 3 schools, 1 home for the aged and one health clinic in Sichuan's Ziyang prefecture

It's Head for International Development, Chia Hui Yong, says Mercy will be looking at eradicating poverty in future.

"Poverty is also one of the main reasons that people are so vulnerable to disasters. If we can work with them during peace time, we help to strengthen their capacity so people become less vulnerable and they're better able to defend themselves in times of disasters. That to us is a more comprehensive approach instead of being purely reactive."

Both Mr Seow and Mr Chia also advise those who wish to help in Sichuan's rehabilitation to work with Singapore NGOs that have already touched base there.

This is to avoid duplication and ensure good organization in maximizing the aid rendered.

Looking at the grateful faces of the Sichuan people whose lives have been moved by the Singapore NGOs, it's clear that rebuilding efforts by this little red dot are not just a drop in the ocean.

One year on from the mammoth quake, the sentiment of Sichuan and its people can probably be summed up by this:

Down, but not out.

Disabled, but not unable.