

Bihar floods devastate thousands of leprosy patients

Severe rain has caused extreme flooding throughout Bihar in India, killing hundreds and devastating the lives of thousands of the most vulnerable people. The number is increasing daily.

Approximately 2000 people with leprosy or lymphatic filariasis (LF) are in danger across four districts, with many losing access to essential medicines, specialised footwear and the necessary support systems.

Only 11% of Bihar's population live in urban areas and the majority of those Lepra help reside in remote and isolated areas.

Bihar has long been considered a Bimaru state, an old Hindi saying referring to India's sickest, most ailing states. Over 10% of India's entire population holds 77% of the total national wealth and for Bimaru states, like Bihar, the extreme weather has widened pre-existing disparities between rich and poor.

Chief Executive of Lepra India, Ashim Chowla, has said that the flooding presents an exceptional challenge in Lepra's efforts to help those already facing crisis due to their leprosy diagnoses.

He says, "There are large disparities across India between the rich and the poor. Bihar gets no attention during times of natural disaster compared to the larger cities around India.

"These are predictable problems and yet, the governance in Bihar is in shambles. The response system for people with lymphatic filariasis and leprosy is non-existent. Nobody has been working on disaster resilience in Bihar."

The healthcare system in Bihar, already struggling due to overcrowding, underfunding and a lack of resources, has buckled following the weather emergency. There are fears that those affected by diseases like leprosy or LF will not be able to seek treatment.

Ashim Chowla says, "The situation in Bihar is abysmal. Even one person losing their life is a tragedy and hundreds have already died in Bihar since the flooding began."

Lepra's primary concern centres on our many patients and staff that are working in Bihar during this turbulent time.

A person affected by leprosy or LF receives two pairs of custom made sandals each year to facilitate their mobility. These sandals are prepared by our specialist shoe technicians after careful examination by a physiotherapist and are tailor-made according to exact measurements and disability.

Working together with a physiotherapist, the shoe technician will take someone's measurements and design a customised pair of sandals. These sandals are tailored to meet an affected person's individual needs in terms of support and comfort.

Our shoe technicians work hard to create sandals that are stylish and that look like any other sandal, decreasing discrimination associated with traditional leprosy footwear.

Our partnership with Pavers shoes has allowed us to construct these special shoes and access those in need through a Mobile Foot Care unit, but the weather has destroyed a significant amount of our specialised shoes and rendered our vans useless.

Those affected by leprosy are among the most vulnerable members of society and often, the shoes are the only thing enabling them to live independently.

Raw sewerage and dirty water have flooded people's homes and villages, decimating their livelihoods and exposing leprosy patients to severe infections like cholera and filariasis.

Lepra are asking the public to help those affected by donating through our website: www.lepra.org.uk/donate. Just £6 can provide a person with a brand new pair of specialised footwear.

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Notes for Editors

About Lepra and leprosy

Lepra is a UK-based international specialist charity that has been working to beat leprosy since 1924. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II became Patron of Lepra in 1952, shortly after the death of her father King George VI, who had been Lepra's Patron since the charity was founded in 1924.

Leprosy affects over 7 million of the most vulnerable people in the world, causing life-changing disabilities and attracting terrible prejudice and discrimination. **But there is a cure.**

Lepra works to beat leprosy in India, Bangladesh and Mozambique by finding, diagnosing and treating people affected by the disease. By raising awareness, pushing for early detection and supporting people living with disabilities caused by leprosy, Lepra works towards a day when this disease no longer destroys lives.

Last year, the charity reached 301,000 people through diagnosis, treatment and care. It reached a further 1.7 million people through health education and events to raise awareness of leprosy and other neglected diseases.

Find out more about Lepra on its website and social media channels:

Website: www.lepra.org.uk

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/LepraUK>

Facebook: <https://https://www.facebook.com/LEPRAUK/>

You Tube: <https://www.youtube.com/user/LEPRAHinA>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/LepraUK/>

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/lepra/>