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The Sisters of the Destitute team, headed by Sr. Aneesha Arackal (right), organizes play therapy for children affected by the landslides in the Wayanad district of the southwestern Indian state of Kerala. (Courtesy of Aneesha Arackal)



by Thomas Scaria

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Meppadi, India — September 2, 2024

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Jijosh Siva struggled to speak, as a Catholic nun encouraged him to express his emotions as part of his trauma counseling.

"I have lost my parents and brother in the landslide, and I have nothing to hope for in life," the 26-year-old resident of a relief camp in the disaster-hit Wayanad said after several minutes of silence, with tears flowing down his cheeks.

Siva is among some 500 people sheltered in two relief camps managed by the Sisters of Charity of Saint Bartolomea Capitanio and Vincenza Gerosa, also known as the Sisters of Maria Bambina, and the Latin Calicut Diocese at Meppadi, a hill station in the Wayanad district of the southwestern Indian state of Kerala.

Pope Francis was among those who mourned the July 30 landslides that swept away several villages and a town in Wayanad, killing more than 400 people and affecting thousands. Several hundreds have gone missing.

Around 2,500 people were housed in 16 camps in and around Meppadi and Kalpetta, two major towns in the district.

Siva, a driver attached to a resort, said he got up at midnight after hearing a roaring sound. "By the time I realized what was happening, my house with all of us was washed away. Only, I survived somehow," he told GSR Aug. 7.

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Maria Bambina Sr. Sherly Joseph, a trained counselor who helped Siva, serves the relief camps at St. Joseph's Higher Secondary School, closer to the landslide locations, some 50 miles northeast of Kozhikode (formerly Calicut).

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited her camp in August and interacted with the residents. "This disaster is not normal. The dreams of thousands of families have been shattered. I have seen the situation on the spot," Modi said.

Sherly Joseph says most residents in her camp suffer from severe trauma as they have lost their family members and relatives in the early morning landslides following heavy rains. Catholic nuns from several congregations are among those helping the victims recover from the tragedy.

Sr. Binu Ann, Sherly Joseph's local superior in charge of the camp, told GSR they had readied their school for relief even before the government machinery swung into action.

Youth from the local parish, who joined the rescue operations as volunteers, brought rescued people to the school in the early morning of July 31.



The Sisters of Maria Bambina stand in front of St. Joseph's School in Meppadi. The school is the site of a relief camp for the landslide victims of Wayanad, Kerala, southwestern India. From left are Sr. Kuruna Alex, Sr. Sherly Joseph, Sr. Joicy Joseph, Sr. Luxy James and Sr. Binu Ann, superior. (Thomas Scaria)

Ann deputized her five nuns, including Sherly Joseph, to serve the camp in Meppadi.

The Maria Bambina nuns have converted one school building into an administrative block and center to collect relief materials and provide counseling and therapy. They have also set up a temporary dispensary with doctors, psychologists, nurses and volunteers.

Two other buildings accommodated nearly 500 victims. Catholic youth and nuns helped manage the centers and prepare and serve food. They have also offered entertainment and various therapies to the residents.

Missionary Sisters of Mary Immaculate Sr. Princy Mathai, an Ayurvedic doctor and psychiatrist serving the St. Joseph camp, says most residents require professional counseling and psychiatric care.

"Most of them have experienced depressive panic episodes, trauma, excessive stress, and anxiety disorders, which may require long-term intervention," she told GSR.

The Kerala government has engaged school counselors, psychologists and mental health professionals to help those in the camps.



Maria Bambina Sr. Luxy James briefs a medical team at St. Joseph's camp in Meppadi, a town in the Wayanad district of Kerala, southwestern India. (Thomas Scaria)

Bishop Varghese Chakkalakal of Calicut and Bishop Jose Porunnedom of Mananthavady in Wayanad visited the camps on July 31 and asked all church schools in Meppadi to function as relief camps. "Subsequently, the district administration also recognized our school as a primary care and relief center for the victims," Ann said.

People with external injuries were treated at Dr. Moopen's Medical College in Meppadi and the Government Hospital in Kalpetta, 6 miles northwest of Meppadi. Catholic nuns also served these institutions.

Ranga Swami, a survivor at the De Paul School camp in Kalpetta, told GSR that the Catholic nuns' presence has given them great relief.

"We could relate to the sisters better because we see them as our sisters or mothers," said the Hindu, who works in a tea plantation in Chooralmala, a severely affected village.

Swami said the government officers wanted to restrict the nun's presence in the camps as several residents poured out their emotions and cried when the sisters visited them. The officers misinterpreted it as causing further distress to the victims through their counseling.



Maria Bambina Sr. Sherly Joseph prays at the mass grave of St. Sebastian Church, Chooralmala, one of the villages in Wayanad, Kerala. (Thomas Scaria)

However, such concern was baseless, said Sr. Linet Sebastian, a member of the Ursuline Sisters Daughters of Mary Immaculate, and a psychologist who led a three-member professional team to the camps in Meppadi and Kalpetta.

"The people have undergone the biggest trauma in their lives, and how do you expect them not to cry?" asked the 55-year-old nun who serves as the nursing

superintendent of Nirmala Hospital, Marikunnu, Kozhikode.

Sebastian told GSR that a counselor allows the victims to express their emotions, such as crying. "People who have experienced trauma require such emotional outbursts as part of the therapy," she asserted. She said she suspected a political agenda behind the official resistance to the nuns' counseling.

She and two other nuns from her congregation listened to victims and organized play therapy and interactive sessions with the children, besides helping in the two hospitals.

Maria Bambina Sr. Joicy Joseph, principal of St. Joseph's School, said most residents in their camp were Hindus and Muslims. "But they are more comfortable with us and trust us," she told GSR.

Her school has given counseling and emotional support to its students who survived the calamity.



Maria Bambina Sr. Joicy Joseph, principal of the St. Joseph's Higher Secondary School, poses for a photo with two Jesus Youth volunteers, Jacob Sebastian (left) and

Twinkle John (right). They were serving the residents of relief camps set up in the school at Meppadi, a town in the Wayanad district of the southwestern Indian state of Kerala. (Thomas Scaria)

She quoted available data to say that the landslides have killed at least 53 children and destroyed two schools. "Over 500-odd children are currently staying in relief camps. Some have lost their parents or siblings," Joicy Joseph said.

Sr. Aneesha Arackal said her congregation, the Sisters of the Destitute, sent 18 medical and mental health professionals to Wayanad from their headquarters in Kochi, some 170 miles south. They stayed in Wayanad Aug 1-8 to serve the camps and hospitals.

"We have come at the right time when the people really needed emotional support, especially the children in the camps," Arackal told GSR Aug. 8.

She said several people had difficulty sleeping. "We stood by their side at night until they were able to sleep," she added.

She said their team left Wayanad "with a lot of satisfaction and fulfillment as we could do whatever possible to help them." The team would return if the district administration or the church leadership requested its services.

At the review of the relief camps at Kalpetta and Meppadi, the district administration officers applauded schools such as St. Joseph's in Meppadi and De Paul Public School in Kalpetta.



Residents of the De Paul relief camp, a church-based camp at Kalpetta, a town in the Wayanad district of Kerala, a southwestern Indian state, eat breakfast on Aug. 7. (Thomas Scaria)

Sr. Jose Chakiath, a Sister of Charity of St. Vincent De Paul who served in the De Paul School relief camp, said the nuns' service would be required more when everyone leaves after rescue and relief works.

"Now, everyone is competing to show their presence and services, especially political parties and their youth wings. After all this stops, we need to step in," said the superior of the congregation's convent in Kalpetta.

She says the church and the nuns will offer the victims emotional and spiritual support, education and counseling, accompanying them in their journey.

Fr. Jibin Vattukulam, the pastor of St. Sebastian Church in Chooralmala that lost nine members in the landslide, told GSR that the church's response to the tragedy was "almost spontaneous," with priests, nuns and the laypeople working together as a

family.



St. Sebastian Church in Chooralmala lost nine members of its 35 families in a landslide that devastated the Wayanad district of the southwestern Indian state of Kerala. The parish functions as a coordinating unit of the government rescue operators. (Thomas Scaria)

Fr. Sebastian Karakatt, pastor of the Sacred Heart Church in Kalpetta, observed that the Wayanad landslides have had emotional responses from all walks of life. "Once this initial momentum subsides, the church must play its role more convincingly," added the priest, whose church is a collection center.

The parish priest of the St. Vincent De Paul Forane Church and De Paul School in Kalpetta, Fr. Mathew Periyapuram, who facilitates a relief camp in the church campus, observed that several nuns worked in the camps in the first week but most

have gone back because of the government restriction.

He told GSR that nuns who served the camp in his church have given exemplary services. "No doubt the sisters could easily empathize with the people and win their confidence, but some watch church intervention with suspicion," he said.

Meanwhile, the Kerala Catholic Bishops' Council, Caritas India and several Catholic organizations have pledged to build homes for the landslide victims and educate their children.

Siva said he overcame his trauma only after the sisters counseled him many times.

"I was afraid of sound and sunlight after the tragedy. But now, I can manage my stress and even serve as a volunteer in the camp," he said, expressing gratitude for the nuns' "loving care and support."

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  A drone view shows destroyed homes in the southern state of Kerala, India, Aug. 1, following multiple landslides in the hills in Wayanad district. (OSV News/Reuters/Francis Mascarenhas)

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Rescue operators, including police and military personnel, rest after lunch inside St. Sebastian Church, Chooralmala, Wayanad, Kerala, southwestern India. (Thomas Scaria)

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Maria Bambina Sr. Luxy James, right, in charge of the St. Joseph's School relief camp, briefs counselor Sr. Sherly Joseph on the current status of the camp residents. (Thomas Scaria)

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A team of 18 Sisters of the Destitute, comprising doctors, nurses and psychologists, served the relief camps in Wayanad, a district in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala. (Courtesy of Aneesha Arackal)

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Fr. Mathew Periyapuram, parish priest of the St. Vincent De Paul Forane Church, Kalpetta, Wayanad, Kerala, manages a relief camp at the church school and coordinates the services of the church teams. (Thomas Scaria)

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Sr. Linet Sebastian (right), of the Ursuline Sisters Daughters of Mary Immaculate, conducts relaxation therapy for children affected by the landslides in Wayanad, Kerala, southwestern India. (Courtesy of Linet Sebastian)

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A relief material collection center at Sacred Heart Church, Kalpetta, Wayanad, Kerala, distributed needed materials to various relief camps. (Thomas Scaria)

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A tea plantation in Chooralmala, close to landslide-affected areas of Wayanad, Kerala, southwestern India (Thomas Scaria)