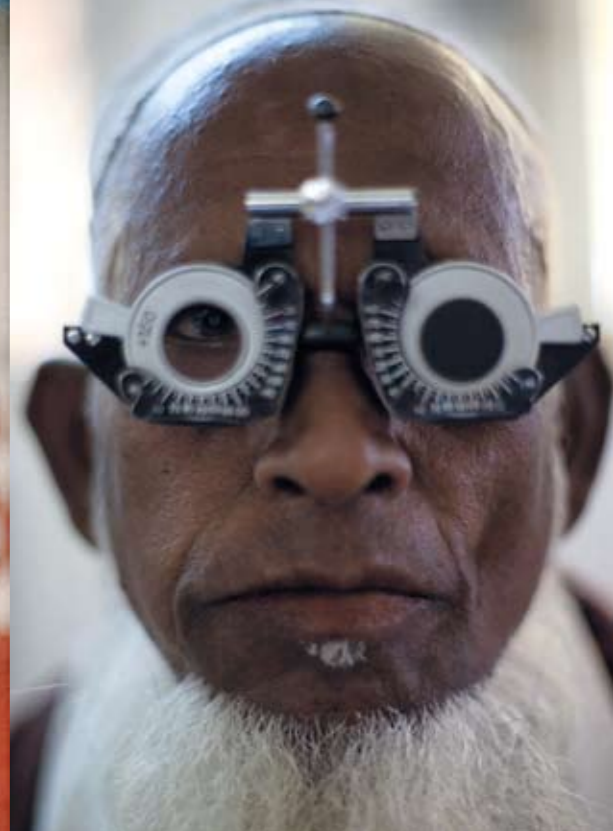




This elderly man's last step off the gangplank could be his first to a better life after treatment on the Lifebuoy Friendship. He is just one of the many – like the man getting his eyes examined (right) – whose lives have been and will be changed by these humanitarian efforts.



SEEKERS

IN A REMOTE CORNER OF BANGLADESH, SICK VILLAGERS GET THEIR CHANCE FOR MEDICAL TREATMENT – ON AN OLD CONVERTED OIL BARGE.

BY MICHAEL BUCKLEY PHOTOS ADRIAN THOMAS

On the narrow ramp that leads into the hospital, cataract patients totter in line as they grip a bamboo handrail, post-operative patients wearing dark sunglasses queue for check-ups with a nurse and an elderly woman is piggybacked up the ramp by a relative. Emotions run high: confusion, apprehension, nervousness.

Inside the operating theatre, a French team of doctor, anaesthetist and two nurses is busy coping with the line-up of patients. Dr Philippe Dubayle, an ophthalmologist, tells me they perform 35 procedures a day. But this is no ordinary hospital – it is a floating hospital on the Upper Jamuna River in a remote corner of northwest Bangladesh. This is one of the poorest parts of the nation, where many people have never seen a medical institution. Today, they will be given their sight back at the Lifebuoy Friendship Hospital. To many, it is almost a miracle.

Older Bangladeshis are at high risk for cataracts due to intense sun, and particularly due to bright sunlight reflected off the water, says Dubayle. “The cataract condition can be remedied by a 20-minute operation, but it must be done by a skilled ophthalmologist to

THE HEALING VESSEL



Savage storms demolish permanent structures like hospitals that are built in the Bangladeshi *chars*. This floating hospital offers a godsend to the local people, who sometimes wait even through cyclones to see a doctor.



avoid complications,” he adds. Some patients have waited about two to three years for this operation.

More than 300,000 patients have been treated at Lifebuoy Friendship Hospital since it started operating in December 2001. Funding by the Unilever Corporation has enabled the facility to get up and running, and it has been so successful that a second floating hospital, funded by Emirates Airlines Foundation, is now operating on the central reaches of the Jamuna River south of Lifebuoy Friendship.

MARINER MEDICS

But how did this unconventional hospital get started? Ayeleen Ajanee Saleh, assistant director at Friendship - a value-based organisation that runs the floating hospitals - explains.

“In Bangladesh, the largest river - Jamuna - has carved out hundreds of islands of sand and silt, called *chars*. Over five million people live on them,” she says, “poor people who have nowhere else to go.” Because of flooding and recent climate change factors, these islands regularly shift, crack and break up, so it’s not unusual for these people to have to move 40 times or more during their lifetime, Saleh adds.

Which means minimal permanent infrastructure, and little or no medical outreach for the forgotten squatters - just a handful of NGOs coping as best they can. Fortunately, an adventurous Frenchman, Yves Marre, had an extraordinary vision he was sure could help. In 1993, he came up with the zany idea of sailing a disused oil barge to a needy country to establish a floating hospital. In many monsoon-ravaged

THERE IS LITTLE OR NO MEDICAL OUTREACH FOR THE FORGOTTEN SQUATTERS

places, a floating hospital makes more sense than a land-based one.

“I needed a region with lots of rivers,” he says. He considered places such as the Congo and the Amazon basin, “but I finally settled on Bangladesh”. He set off from Marseilles, sailing via the Suez Canal and the Indian Ocean. One of his biggest hazards, he remembers, was dealing with officials who demanded “tariffs” to allow passage of the vessel.

“At one point, in India, I was negotiating my way out of a payment when I

INSET PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

noticed a sign that read, ‘A Golden Ship is better than a Silver Ship, but nothing is as good as Friendship’. So I pointed to the Friendship logo on the side of my barge and said, ‘Ah, I didn’t know you were expecting me!’,” he laughs.

More than three months later, he reached his destination. He handed the barge over to a Dhaka-based medical organisation and thought his job was done. But the barge languished in dock: substantial funding was required and none was forthcoming. So Marre concentrated his efforts - together with his

new wife, Runa Khan - on a small boat-touring venture.

Then came the breakthrough: a client on one of Marre’s boat tours happened to be Jeff Fraser, then-president of global giant Unilever. He was very impressed by the floating hospital idea and offered to fund the project for an initial period. In 2001, Lifebuoy Friendship Hospital at last became a reality. Superstructure and operating theatres were built and the ship put in place, with Khan running the whole operation as executive director.



MARRE THE MAN

A sprightly man in his late 50s, Yves Marre hails from Toulouse, France. In his younger days, he was addicted to daredevil aerial feats as a keen hang-glider and paraglider: he once flew a motorised hang-glider across the English Channel. Unfortunately, he landed near the garden of a British customs officer and was arrested. Released after having convinced the British police that he had no ill intentions, he returned to France by boat. Back on home ground, he was again arrested, but freed when the local press took up his case. He also sailed solo across the Atlantic, and satisfied his wanderlust and financial needs as an Air France flight attendant.

This is Dubayle’s second tour of duty at the hospital. “I feel the need of the people here,” he says, “because there are so many who are blind with cataracts. A humanitarian mission is not something to take lightly. You must put everything into it.” Indeed, the patients regard the Western doctors, in particular the eye surgeons, as miracle workers for their ability to restore sight to the blind.

The hospital relies on people such as Dubayle, who is among the 65 Western doctors who have volunteered there since it started. Working through a range of NGOs from Europe, teams of doctors and nurses fly in from Dhaka on seaplanes operated by Mission Aviation Fellowship for a one-week stay. “I am very happy to work here,” says Dubayle. “The Friendship charity sets everything up so I can get on with my job efficiently.”

To the sick and disabled living in this corner of Bangladesh, treatment on Lifebuoy Friendship is a chance to improve their health – and their lot in life – even if it means having to be carried to the recovery room after surgery (opposite, bottom).



Eight-year-old Alamgir is half-way to realising his dream of running with his friends as he waits for the doctors to work their magic on his right club foot.



It's not just eye care that Friendship brings. Volunteer teams work in 15 specialist fields, including paediatrics, dentistry, orthopaedics, post-operative care and plastic-reconstructive surgery. In addition, the Western surgeons help train their local Bangladeshi counterparts to develop their skills.

When disaster strikes, lack of medical knowledge can compound the problems; for example, drinking floodwater can lead to outbreaks of diseases such as diarrhoea. So Friendship has established more than 200 satellite clinics, 100 of them in the range of Lifebuoy Friendship Hospital. At these clinics, an extended programme for immunisation, nutrition, mother-child care and family planning are explained.

FLOATING SOLUTIONS

Marre envisages floating solutions to Bangladesh's other pressing problems. "We have started with the floating hospital, but we have many other projects - floating ambulances, floating homes, floating schools and floating gardens. Everything in Bangladesh will have to

**"EVERYTHING
IN BANGLADESH
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FLOAT SOONER
OR LATER"**

float sooner or later," he asserts. He has been working with top French naval designers to produce fast motorised catamarans that can serve as emergency vessels to handle disaster management and flood relief. Marre outlines plans for building a vessel that would enable rapid deployment of small containers loaded with medical and disaster-relief supplies. Despite the country's daunting problems - the major one being a severe shortage of healthcare facilities and professionals - he remains upbeat.

"At our research shipyard, we are mixing it up - using traditional knowledge from Bangladesh and combining it with Western technology to try and address the challenges," he says.

He illustrates this approach by showing a prototype for a fishing vessel made from layers of jute (a traditional fibre) and high-tech fibreglass. His hope is to use local, greener materials to strengthen and renew the Bangladeshi fleet. One boat of 40 percent jute fibre and 60 percent glass has already crossed the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean, among other places, on a trial voyage.

Starting out as a small single-barge operation, Friendship has grown to make a huge difference to the lives of the people living in northwest Bangladesh. "Friendship has an integrated approach to development, to provide a holistic way of improving the quality of life of ultra-poor and disaster-prone communities," Saleh says.

There may still be a queue at Lifebuoy Friendship Hospital, but its continued presence means there is definitely light at the end of the tunnel. ■

"A HUMANITARIAN MISSION IS NOT SOMETHING TO TAKE LIGHTLY"

