

NEWS

Issue #38

April 2008

for friends of asha

Asha is a community health and development society dedicated to improving the lives of slum dwellers in Delhi

INDIA'S FINANCE MINISTER TAKES ACTION FOR ASHA!

One of India's most powerful politicians, Mr P Chidambaram, took drastic action after accepting Dr Kiran Martin's invitation to visit Asha in January. Mr Chidambaram has been India's Finance Minister since 2004, and has been widely credited for India's overwhelming economic growth. Fortunately for Asha, the Minister has shown that he is aware that India's poorest will be the slowest to benefit from the country's growth, and in his recent budget he took steps to address that issue.

Initially, Mr Chidambaram visited Asha to see all the improvements that have resulted from the collaboration between Asha and the slum community of Ekta Vihar. The narrow, bustling lanes of the area were clearly a dramatic departure from the Minister's usual surroundings, and he was keen to speak to the residents and find out how well they cope with living in such an environment.

Dr Martin introduced him to the women's group, and the members explained how life was for them years ago. They told Mr Chidambaram how they stayed in their slum huts most of the time and covered their faces, squinting through their veils, when they did venture outside.

Mr Chidambaram was obviously impressed as the conversation turned to finance and the women told him about their occupations, the money they earned, and the fact that they were very much in control of their finances; sometimes to the point of not letting their husbands know the full extent of their earnings!

The conversation took on a more serious note when Mr Chidambaram asked if the women had received any help from local banks. Not a single woman was able to raise her hand, and several of them explained that they had approached banks for loans but had been refused. Shocked, the Finance Minister asked them what kind of loans could help, and was overwhelmed with responses.

The women told him how small loans from banks could enable them to expand or start up businesses, pay for their children to enter higher education, or could enable them to get transport and then extend their options for employment. Several of the women's husbands drive auto-rickshaws for a living, but often end up giving more than half their daily earnings in rental costs for the rickshaws; a loan to buy a rickshaw of their own could transform their earning potential.

The Finance Minister was clearly impressed to see the resilience of the community under difficult living conditions, and also the



Finance Minister Mr P Chidambaram with Dr Kiran Martin, Asha staff and the people of Ekta Vihar

ambition of the children, who show no signs of feeling restricted by their backgrounds. The full impact of the visit on Mr Chidambaram soon became clear, as within a week of his visit, he had taken action. He called the manager of every bank in the district surrounding Ekta Vihar and the Asha headquarters, and quizzed them about any loans that they had granted to people from local poor communities. None of them were able to give details of such loans, and so Mr Chidambaram asked them to visit Asha and meet with the Director to develop a scheme that would benefit the slum dwellers.

Shortly afterwards, a large group of managers from local banks visited Ekta Vihar with Dr Martin and met an eager crowd who were delighted at the prospect of being able to open bank accounts and take out loans. A proposal is being drafted, and one of the members of the newly-formed bankers committee has already accompanied Dr Martin to Savda Ghevra. The people of the Thokar No. 8 slum were relocated to Savda Ghevra after their homes were demolished. They are still in the process of building permanent homes, starting businesses, and settling into the area, and these loans can make a huge difference to their lives. You can check our website at www.asha-india.org for updates on the loan scheme as progress is made.

A family's hope for better opportunities



Shahid and Ghazala have lived in Ekta Vihar for 18 years. Following Asha's housing project, they now live in a comfortable brick home instead of the shack they once had. Their children are immunised and all but the youngest attend school. A loan could still make a big difference to their lives.

Have you ever been turned down for a loan before?

There are lots of times when loans could have helped us, but we never even applied. We were worried about all the paperwork, and were sure we would be rejected as we live in a slum.

How do you feel about the prospect of applying for a loan now?

Since Mr Chidambaram visited, and the bankers, we realise that the application process will not be complicated, and that we can get help with applying if we need it. We will apply for a loan so that I (Shahid) can buy the vehicle that I drive for work. Every week I give over half of my earnings in vehicle rental, so I would be much better off if I owned it.

How do you see your situation improving with a higher income?

Things would be better in so many ways. We could buy a gas stove, and even a fridge. We would have more money to spend on the children, as there are more expenses for them as they get older, and we'll also be able to start sending our youngest child to school with all the books and the uniform that he needs.

Visit the Asha website at: www.asha-india.org

Kiran's letter

Dear friends,

I am excited that the visit of India's Finance Minister, P. Chidambaram, to Asha on January 12th, 2008, has opened up many doors of opportunity for our urban poor.

Although India's growth story is being talked about all over the world, I would like to remind us all that India's Under Five Mortality Rate, according to UNICEF 2008, is 76 for every 1000 children born, and is ranked at 49th from the bottom out of 189 countries. This rate is a much more sensitive indicator of our country's development, and more telling evidence of our priorities and values, than the GDP of 8.5%. This Under Five Mortality Rate (U5MR) measures the outcome of the development process rather than the input. It is a reflection of the nutritional status of mothers, the availability of maternal and child health services, income and food availability in the family, the availability of safe drinking water, basic sanitation and housing, and the overall safety and security of the environment. It is much more difficult for a wealthy minority to affect the U5MR of our nation than it is to affect the GDP, and it therefore presents a much more accurate picture of the health status of our children and our society as a whole.

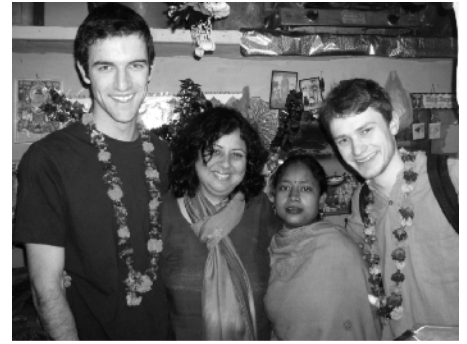
I am happy to report that through a host of different interventions over the years, the U5MR in Asha slums stands at 43.2/1000 live births, which is nearly half the national average. Asha's children are not only surviving, but have far fewer illnesses, and are able to develop thinking, language, emotional and social skills. They do better at school and have a far greater chance of becoming creative and productive members of society.

The ever widening divide between the rich and the poor of our country must be addressed urgently. I am sad to note that special interests and the naked quest for power continue to control the public discourse and political decision-making in our country. Politics is being shaped by visions that defend wealth and power, that exalt private interests over the common good, and has become a shallow spectator sport.

We must be people with a compelling and credible vision whose commitments, skills, creativity and moral authority will change the wind, recast the discussion and transform the debate in favour of those who are marginalised, those who are faceless and voiceless. Let us offer our best energy and gifts to see that our poor become possessors of a dignity, their inherent worthiness, where they are empowered to live full and meaningful lives.

My belief is that the truth of a society is best known from its bottom. Let us lead by example, carrying a vision that will inspire many to a whole new set of priorities. The bigotries, the injustices and the indignities experienced by the poor will then not have the last word.

I am deeply grateful to all of you for your friendship, for being people of faith and conscience and for becoming partners with me to work towards a new order where we all see the poor through the eyes of God.



Dr Kiran Martin with volunteers Jon Bell and Graham Richardson, and Mamta, a CHV from Jeevan Nagar

Dr. Kiran Martin
Director & Founder

News in Brief

SLUM CENTRE REFURBISHMENTS CONTINUE

More Asha centres have now been renovated and beautified, thanks to the hard work of several UK teams. Dan Pooley and his team from Southampton revitalised Jeevan Nagar, Dick & Julie Hogben's team from Yeovil transformed Kusumpur Pahadi, and two teams led by Libby and Jez Ethington from St Stephen's church in Twickenham changed the Dr Ambedkar Basti and Kanak Durga centres beyond recognition. Our heartfelt thanks to everyone involved.

NEW EMPLOYEE NEEDED FOR ASHA'S DELHI TEAM – Could it be you?

We're currently looking for someone who can commit for at least a year and join our Promotions team at the Asha headquarters in RK Puram, S Delhi. A part/ full local salary can be paid depending on circumstances. The position will involve all tasks related to raising funds and raising awareness of Asha's work. The successful person will be corresponding with supporters and dealing with requests for information, updating the Asha website with articles, photos and videos, writing for the newsletter and appeals, and applying for grants and other funding. Experience in fundraising, marketing or PR is desirable but not essential. For more information, contact Alex Arnold at alex@asha-india.org.

THANKS FOR SUPPORT LAST WINTER

Your generous donations bought countless blankets and warm clothes for the most needy elderly and children in many slum areas last winter, and the children's Christmas parties were as successful as ever. Our grateful thanks to all of you who contributed money and made a difference to slum residents in some of the harshest months of the year.

VOLUNTEERS AND VISITORS

Jon Bell, Graham Richardson, Orlagh McGlade, Ellie Ashton, Sue Harper and Tom and Linda Speir have been continuing the good work of our English Literacy programme in a number of slums. Simon Fairnington, an English examiner from the UK, visited and gave the teachers some advice and support. Éamon ó Cuív, Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Government of Ireland, visited Ekta Vihar with Pat Bourne, Deputy Chief of Mission at the Irish Embassy in Delhi.

VISITORS HELP ASHA STAFF TO ENHANCE SKILLS

Recently Asha has been fortunate to have the help of many professionals who have provided training for our staff members. Grace McNair, from the USA, put her expertise in birth support to good use in a number of slums, providing useful training for the women. Dr Dick Hogben and Dr Tim Deegan held an osteoporosis camp, and briefed doctors on the appropriate screening and treatment of the illness. Dr Louise Dolan, a rheumatologist, took sessions for Asha doctors on arthritis, back pain and conditions of the joints, and treated a number of patients. Mark Baines and his colleague Marc Helliwell from Marcom in Bath visited and gave us indispensable advice on our website and other areas.

HELP FOR THOSE WITH ALCOHOL PROBLEMS IN SLUMS

Representatives from Alcoholics Anonymous are now visiting the slum areas of Mayapuri and Zakhira after Asha supporter Jez Ethington noticed the need for their services. After volunteering in Zakhira last year, Jez spoke with several men who were battling alcohol addiction. He contacted the Delhi branch of AA, who are now providing advice and support for a number of people in those areas.

Progress continues at Coolie Camp

Asha's newest project area already shows the hallmarks of an Asha slum. The houses are painted, lanes freshly swept and the drains between them flow freely. It is hard to believe that the area has such a severe water shortage. The women of the newly-formed Mahila Mandal are full of enthusiasm and clearly ready to rise to the challenge of improving their community with Asha's help. They have already been introduced to certain MLAs (Members of Legislative Assembly) and have visited them many times to try and resolve the water problem. The area has a locked-up toilet block that could easily be made functional if only they had access to water.

Water tankers are now visiting daily, an improvement on the previous situation, and thanks to the women's efforts, the sanitation department now collects rubbish on a regular basis. Progress is also being made in the area of health, with the Asha mobile clinic visiting twice a week, and many women coming forward to receive antenatal care.

Three women were proud to raise their hands and say that they have volunteered to be Community Health Volunteers (CHVs). They have learnt about their responsibilities, been taught First Aid, and are aware of the need for correct care of pregnant women, newborns and malnourished children. They have only been taking classes for a few weeks, but have already made sure that they know the health status of all the families in their area. One statistic gives them a head start: there are no TB patients in Coolie Camp. The committed trainee CHVs will be able to identify any possible sufferers as they arise, and refer them for tests immediately.



The women of the newly-formed Mahila Mandal at Coolie Camp

A sizeable group of children have volunteered to join a Bal Mandal, and already show such enthusiasm that we have very high hopes for their contribution to the community. Keep an eye on our website for updates!

Slum children experience a different world



At the kind invitation of Wendy Butler, the wife of Creon Butler, British Deputy High Commissioner, 25 children from 5 different slum areas visited the Butlers' residence in Delhi. The children were extremely keen to learn more about life in another country, and bombarded Mrs Butler with questions about the status of children in the UK.

Mrs Butler answered all their enquiries about the difference between private and government-run schools, the usual age of marriage and whether or not married couples live independently of their parents. The children had put a lot of thought into their questions, and wanted to know who looks after the UK's elderly, the kind of social problems that are found in the country, child labour and voting practices. The session was enlightening and hugely enjoyable for all the children, and gave them a highly-valued change of environment.

We are extremely grateful to Mrs Butler for taking the time to organise the visit and spend time with the children – it was an unforgettable experience for every one of them.

Urban poverty outstrips rural situation

In our last newsletter, we wrote about the upgraded equipment that we have been able to install in the Asha Polyclinic. This time, we need to explain why the facilities are needed so badly.

Healthcare for the urban poor is desperately inadequate, and new figures show that even those in rural areas are better-served. Rural communities have a structured healthcare system with sub-centres, primary healthcare centres, local district hospitals and so on, but there is no such equivalent in India's cities.

Asha staff and volunteers often struggle to get fair treatment for the slum dwellers that they accompany to hospitals. Often the overworked and underpaid staff attempt to turn them away, and violence against would-be patients is not uncommon.

Hospitals are overcrowded, and staff rarely take even the most basic precautions against the spread of disease. Grace McNair, an Asha volunteer, has spent a lot of time working in a government hospital and was horrified by the conditions. She told us of blood encrusted blankets, seeing hypodermic needles being stuck into mattresses before they were inserted into patients' veins, and how the skin at injection sites is rarely cleaned before needles are used.

An article in the Times of India comments on the draft of strategies for urban health, stating, "unlike in the case with (sic) rural health, no conscious efforts and substantial investments have been made so far by either the central or state governments insofar as the issue of urban health is concerned. To say it differently, urban health lags rural health by several decades". (Times of India, 14th Jan 2008)

The statistics back this up. According to the Urban Health Resource Centre, there is an average of one urban primary health facility for about 150,000 urban population, with only 2-4 health workers. 74.3% of women living in poor urban areas give birth at home, whereas 54.1% of rural women do the same. The percentage of malnourished children is 56.8% amongst the urban poor, compared with 49.6% in rural poor communities. Around 60% of urban poor children are still not fully immunised by the time they are one year old.

Unless healthcare facilities for the poor are improved dramatically, the situation will only get worse. People continue to leave their villages in search of work and will still end up living in inadequate housing and exposed to all the pollution, overcrowding and poor sanitation of those areas.

Asha is maintaining efforts to influence the Government's drafting and follow-up on healthcare proposals for the urban poor, but in the meantime the healthcare that we provide remains as vital as ever.



Friends of Asha

If you want to contribute to the lives of poor slum dwellers in Delhi, then we suggest that you become a Friend of Asha. As a Friend of Asha we welcome you to join the Asha family that exists to help the downtrodden and oppressed live a life of dignity and hope. Friends of Asha make a huge contribution to our activities through donations, fundraising events, volunteering and raising awareness of our work.

IMPORTANT NOTE FOR CURRENT SUPPORTERS IN GREAT BRITAIN

Please be aware that as of January 2008, all general bookkeeping and Gift Aid claims are managed by Peter Martin of Palm Services. If you receive communications from Peter in respect of any donation you have made to Friends of Asha (GB), please be assured that he is acting on our behalf and with our knowledge. All donations can continue to be sent to Phil Leighton at the address below – thank you.

Phil & Heather Lyon from the Isle of Skye, Scotland, sent people an email update instead of Christmas cards this year, and donated the money they would have spent to Asha - a great idea.

Second year students at Berlin Metropolitan School were learning about housing, and sold paper bricks to people between their usual classes. Each €1 brick was made into a "house" on a wall, with the name of the donor on each one. It was a tremendous effort by some of Asha's most junior fundraisers, and we look forward to hearing of any future ideas they have!

There are all sorts of things you could do to raise funds for Asha. If you organise something interesting, please send us details and photos, and you may be in this space next time!

SUPPORTERS FROM ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD CAN DONATE DIRECTLY TO US IN INDIA

Asha is registered to receive donations from overseas which means that we do not need to pay tax on any of your gifts. Sterling donations are acceptable, as are those in any other currency. If you'd like to make a valued contribution to our work, please fill in your details below, write a cheque made payable to "ASHA SOCIETY" and post it to us at this address:

The Administrator, Asha Society, Ekta Vihar, RK Puram Sector 6, New Delhi - 110022, INDIA.

Posting named cheques to India is a perfectly safe and secure method of making your donation. Please be assured that you will not incur any bank charges when donating directly to Asha in India.

Yes, I want to become a 'Friend of Asha'

- My contribution of _____ is enclosed.
- I would like to become a Hope Giver and contribute _____ every month. My first contribution is enclosed. Please send me a standing order form.
- I want to contribute particularly towards _____
- Please keep me informed about **Asha's** activities. My email is _____

Full name & title _____ Organisation (if any) _____

Address _____

City _____ Postcode _____

County _____

Only if you wish to Gift Aid your donation:

Please make your cheque payable to "Friends of Asha, GB" and mail to: Phil Leighton, Coordinator, Friends of Asha, (GB), Woodlands, 34 Knoll Road, Sidcup, Kent DA14 4QU, UK. Email: leighton@clara.net Charity Registration No. 1085071

ASHA CURRENCY CONVERTER

- **£10** will provide 10 children with Vitamin A supplements to prevent blindness
- **£20** will provide a child with full medical care and vaccinations for the first year of its life
- **£50** will provide basic health education to 150 people
- **£180** will equip a Community Health Volunteer for one year, including all medical supplies

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IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO MAKE A VALUED CONTRIBUTION TO ASHA'S WORK:

Please complete the form below, make a cheque payable to "Friends of Asha, Ireland" and send both to:

Christine Burnett, Coordinator, Friends of Asha (Ireland), 7 Demesne Avenue, Holywood, County Down, Northern Ireland, BT18 9ND, UK. Email: christine.burnett@gmail.com
Charity Registration No. XR 37459

Yes, I want to become a 'Friend of Asha'

- My contribution of _____ is enclosed.
- I would like to become a Hope Giver and contribute _____ every month. My first contribution is enclosed. Please send me a standing order form.
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American Society for Health for All (ASHA)

If you want to contribute to the lives of poor slum dwellers in Delhi, then we suggest that you support the American Society for Health for All (ASHA). As part of ASHA (USA), we welcome you to join the Asha family that exists to help the downtrodden and oppressed live a life of dignity and hope. Supporters of Asha make a huge contribution to our activities through donations and fundraising events, volunteering and raising awareness of our work.

A group of dedicated Asha supporters in Yuba City, California, held a phenomenally successful fundraiser for Asha at the end of last year. As reported in the India Post, "December 9 marked Dr Kiran Martin's first visit to Yuba City and she was overwhelmed by the hospitality and support for her great cause by the Punjabi residents of Yuba City. She shared a compelling PowerPoint presentation about her organization's efforts to uplift the life of children and their families (regardless of their religious affiliation) that are living in inhumane conditions in the slums. Her powerful and touching words lead to an outpouring of unprecedented support from approximately 300 people in attendance which included people from all walks of life in Yuba City.

Honored guests in the audience included Congressman Wally Herger, Mayor Rory Ramirez, Councilmen Kashmir Singh Gill and Tejinder Singh Maan, Supervisor Jim Whitaker and Sheriff Jim Denny. The Yuba City Committee for ASHA who organized and hosted the event include: Mr and Mrs Sundeep Singh Dale, Ginger Kaur Purewal, Mr and Mrs Sushil Kumar Satija, Kam Singh Takhar and Mr and Mrs Sarbjit Singh Thiara."

There are all sorts of things you could do to raise funds for Asha. If you organize something interesting, please send us details and photos, and you may be in this space next time!

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO MAKE A VALUED CONTRIBUTION TO ASHA'S WORK

Please fill in the form below, make a check payable to "American Society for Health for All" and mail both to:

Louanne Hempton, American Society for Health for All (ASHA), 96 Sweetwater Ave #6, Bedford, MA01730, USA. Email: lhempton@hotmail.com. EIN #01557632.

ASHA (USA) is a 501 (C) 3 registered charity.

Yes, I want to become part of ASHA (USA)

- My contribution of _____ is enclosed.
- I would like to become a Hope Giver and contribute _____ every month. My first contribution is enclosed. Please send me a standing order form.
- I want to contribute particularly towards _____
- Please keep me informed about **Asha's** activities. My email is _____

Full name & title _____ Organization (if any) _____

Address _____

City _____ Zip code _____

State _____

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- **\$40** will provide a child with full medical care and vaccinations for the first year of its life
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- **\$350** will equip a Community Health Volunteer for one year, including all medical supplies

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