

Soldier Deploys to Pakistan for Earthquake Relief Mission

By First Lieutenant Clare Martinez

Outside the City of Muzaffarabad, Pakistan, a Soldier from the 22d Signal Brigade was asleep inside his vehicle, awaiting daylight so that he could help construct tents to house Soldiers from a unit he deployed to support. Staff Sergeant Syed M. Ahmed traveled to Pakistan, a country in ruins from a natural disaster, to assist the 212th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (MASH) for 30 days during Operation Earthquake Relief.

Staff Sergeant Ahmed deployed to help bridge the language barrier that hampered communications between the Pakistani people and relief personnel. It was his ability to speak Urdu and communicate in Punjabi that provided the greatest assistance. Ahmed speaks five languages, including Hindi, Punjabi, and Pakistani “mountain language,” but he sometimes found it difficult to communicate because many of the Pakistani people were old and, oftentimes, illiterate. Medical terms were especially difficult to translate. When patients visited doctors, Ahmed had to explain what was going to be treated and what the associated risks were. And there are just some English medical terms that do not translate to Urdu.

On day two of Staff Sergeant Ahmed’s deployment, Soldiers built an emergency room and an intensive care unit, off-loaded trucks, and cleaned the new area. Much of the area was filled with litter, so everyone worked together to set up operations, stopping only to consume meals, ready-to-eat (MREs). Additionally, there was no fresh water. “We were under water ration for the first two days. We could [only] consume three bottles a day, even though we were working very hard and sweating,” said Ahmed. The MASH team worked 24-hour days and required vigilant translator support with the local populace. “When we first got there [Pakistan], we didn’t have cranes. We didn’t have heavy forklifts. We didn’t have the equipment to download what we needed [to make the hospital ready]. It was the translator’s job to go get the cranes and forklifts and even the fuel we needed from [the] Pakistanis in order to provide medical support,” said Ahmed. The MASH unit was up and running within 48 hours of arriving in theater.

Seven days later, although still sleeping on cots, Soldiers in the 212th MASH began to see a dramatic

improvement in their quality of life. Water restrictions were lifted and, thanks to the creative carpentry efforts of US Navy Construction Force Seabees, wooden foot stands (for shaving), showers, latrines, and laundry facilities were constructed. Thirty-five days later, Soldiers were still eating food from a bag, but they were grateful for their MREs and their new accommodations.

The Soldier translators in Pakistan coordinated with many local officials, such as colonels, generals, and police inspectors general. According to Staff Sergeant Ahmed, the Pakistani police inspectors general are similar to police chiefs of small towns in the United States. Also, Soldiers often traveled to schools and other off-site locations on preventive-medicine missions. “If we found cases of meningitis, [the] translators had to find out which village they were from. We went with the medics to that village and gave medicine to that person’s family and whoever



A young Pakistani boy receives an inoculation at the 212th MASH.

that person came in touch with within the last few weeks,” said Ahmed.

Inside the city of Muzaffarabad, among the rubble and debris of earthquake ruins, a woman was found in a stream. She had leeches on her body and wore filthy clothing. No one knew what village she was from, and no one claimed her. “We don’t know what happened,” Staff Sergeant Ahmed said. “She was in shock. We had to release her once she was treated, but release her to where? This is where the translators come in. We had to coordinate with the Pakistani Army. They had a civilian agency like the Red Cross. We couldn’t just let her go; she could have fallen from the mountain.”

And it was that mountain that kept Staff Sergeant Ahmed and the 212th MASH from reaching Muzaffarabad on their first night. It was too dark and dangerous to drive along the mountainside. The advance party had already made it to the city, but the main body where Ahmed was, stayed outside the town. “While we were there [Muzaffarabad], two buses filled with people fell from the mountains that were above us. It seemed routine,”

Ahmed said. A jeep also fell from the mountain while he was there. In Muzaffarabad, many of the roads are gone and the streets are washed away. “It’s very interesting. All the roads are above you. What looks like stars could be headlights,” said Ahmed.

Despite the absence of roads, people walked from villages 40 to 100 kilometers away for medical treatment. According to Ahmed, some walked for two or three days to reach the MASH unit.

“What do you do with the people who plead with you to let them stay once they have already received medical treatment? Words just cannot show the emotion of people who are pleading. As a translator, how do you say [that] this guy doesn’t have housing? He has no where to go. Words just can’t convey the emotion,” Ahmed said sadly. 🙄🙄

First Lieutenant Martinez is a public affairs officer with the 22d Signal Brigade rear detachment. She has written several articles on Soldiers who have deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.