Press Release
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Helping the forgotten disabled workers in Bangladesh

A British charity worker who lived in Bangladesh for nine years has highlighted the, often insurmountable, obstacles to earning a living in Bangladesh when you're disabled.

Earning enough to feed the family is tough enough in Bangladesh as the coverage of the collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory on the outskirts of Dhaka on 24 April demonstrated to the world.

More than 1,100 people were killed in the worst industrial accident in Bangladesh's history highlighting poor working conditions, low wages and safety standards in the country's garment industry – valued at US$4.3bn in 2012.

But imagine how much tougher earning a meagre living is when you have clawed hands and struggle to walk as a result of leprosy?

James Pender is the newly-appointed Programmes and Advocacy Officer for Asia for The Leprosy Mission having formerly held the position of Development and Natural Resource Management Advisor for the Church of Bangladesh Social Development Programme. James was immersed in mission work in Bangladesh for nine years and has a Bangladeshi wife.

He said: "Leprosy is a disease of poverty and there is widespread poverty across Bangladesh with more than half of the population living on less than US$1 a day.

"Leprosy breeds in squalid conditions and there is a rising number of new cases in Bangladesh. If left untreated, the disease causes nerve damage which leads to disability.

"I've met leprosy-affected people in Bangladesh that have attempted suicide as they have felt so dejected by not only facing the stigma that still surrounds leprosy, but the desperate situation of not being able to work and feed their families."

The Leprosy Mission partners two life-changing livelihoods projects in Bangladesh offering independence to people by enabling them to earn a living.

A total of 910 leprosy-affected households benefited from a European Commission-funded food security project in the Gaibanda district of Bangladesh in 2012, which The Leprosy Mission partnered.
Abdul Kadesh attempted suicide twice before he was helped by the project. He felt leprosy had robbed him of his freedom and he could no longer support his family as a result of his disabled hands.

He was helped to set up a small shop selling household essentials and given his first batch of stock.

“His life has transformed since then and his interaction with non-leprosy affected customers has helped to dispel some of the common misconceptions surrounding the disease in Bangladesh,” said James.

In the Mirpur district of Dhaka, The Leprosy Mission partners the Salvation Army in an urban slum development programme providing unique opportunities for leprosy-affected people to earn a living.

Leprosy-affected Mariam Begum took a loan from the project which she used to set up a small enterprise making and selling Christmas decorations. The mum-of-two has achieved considerable success with the decorations even being exported to Japan.

James said: “The people benefiting from these projects don’t earn a huge amount but enough for them to be independent.

“They are delighted by the freedom of self-employment and, as a result, aren’t subjected to the often substandard conditions of their fellow workers in the garment factories.”

To arrange an interview with James Pender, please contact:

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About The Leprosy Mission England & Wales:

The Leprosy Mission is an international Christian development organisation, transforming the lives of people affected by leprosy. Our goal is to eradicate the causes and consequences of this disease.

We are currently focusing on 11 countries where leprosy remains both a chronic disease and a social challenge. These are: Bangladesh, Ethiopia, India, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Sudan and South Sudan. Issues centre on disease, disability and discrimination. They also include: neglected tropical disease; housing; poverty; social exclusion; micro-loans; education and employment opportunities.
**About leprosy**

- Leprosy is a mildly infectious disease caused by a bacterium called *Mycobacterium leprae* (a relative of the tuberculosis bacterium or ‘TB’ germ). It can stay in the body for up to 20 years without showing symptoms.

- Leprosy causes nerve damage and, if left untreated, can lead to a loss of sensation in the hands and feet. This can lead to disability and the amputation of limbs. Leprosy also damages nerves in the face causing problems with blinking, eventually leading to blindness.

- It is not hereditary and it cannot be caught by touch.

- It is most common in places of poverty where overcrowding and poor nutrition and housing allow people to become more susceptible to leprosy infection.

- The last case of indigenous leprosy in the UK was diagnosed in 1798 and although it can no longer be contracted in this country, around 12 new cases are diagnosed in the UK each year.

- Leprosy is curable with multidrug therapy (MDT), which was developed in the 1980s. Within one day of starting MDT there is no risk of the disease spreading to anyone else. Lack of education, however, means that many people affected by leprosy are still stigmatised, even after they have been cured, especially if the disease has caused disability.

- There are around three million people worldwide disabled as a result of late treatment of leprosy. In 2011 there were 219,075 new cases of leprosy diagnosed. That is approximately one every two minutes. Over half of these were found in India. (Source: World Health Organisation).

- In 2011, five countries where we work reported an increase in the number of new cases detected. These were Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Only Mozambique showed a slight decrease in the number of new cases diagnosed with data from the remaining countries in which we work not available or inconclusive.

- In recent years, trends in new case detection have shown a reduction globally (in Africa, the Americas, South-East Asia and the Western Pacific area) with the exception of the East Mediterranean region. The number of new cases with already established disability, however, remains fairly constant.

**Leprosy is a disease. Those affected deserve dignity not discrimination.**