

OPINION

Office of Andrew Broad MP
Member for Mallee

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THE WORST OF HUMANITY, AND THE BEST – A TRIP TO BANGLADESH

Whenever I try and prioritise what I should focus on, as the Federal Member for Mallee, I am mindful of what the values and priorities are for the people I represent.

Ensuring regionally based Australians are recognised for their contributions to our nation and our economy, and ensuring the services and infrastructure they deserve is provided for them.

It is also ensuring that our humanity and decency is extended to others.

It is for this reason as Co-Chair of the Parliamentary UNICEF Group that I was able to visit and observe the work of UNICEF in the refugee camp on the border of Myanmar and Bangladesh.

UNICEF is the United Nations organisation focused on the welfare of children. Of the 1.2 million people affected, 720,000 are children.

Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel said, “when adults wage war, children perish”. And it was children I saw; grubby faces, bare feet, hungry, without toys yet smiles... children flying kites made out of plastic shopping bags above the squaller, open sewers and smells.

I heard of stories of husbands killed, wives raped, of houses and people burnt alive. I saw the drawings of young children reflecting the trauma that young eyes should never witness, and I heard the challenge that faces aid agencies as soon 40000 babies will be born, decedents of now dead fathers or products of rape, and perhaps those babies yet soon to become victims of mothers who may seek to abandon them.

I also witnessed Australian aid in action; food, shelter, water, medicine.

One hundred people to a toilet, ensuring water is safe to drink and children are immunised for disease that can quickly affect so many people in such conditions.

The courage of Australian aid workers, whose Aussie get things done attitude is changing the lives of traumatised people. One aid worker from Perth telling me “I can cry watching a movie, and I could cry every day here, but that’s not going to help these people, I have a job to do and I’m going to do it”.

The next challenge is the approaching monsoon season, shifting 80,000 people in 60 days so they are not killed by mudslides, ensuring adequate drainage so that disease doesn’t thrive with extra water mixed with excrement. Then the future, so that the people can safely return to Myanmar or integrate into Bangladesh society creating hope, for people need hope to survive.

I saw no waste in Australia's aid expenditure, but the needs are massive and the humanitarian response is still underfunded. I saw the result of the worst of humanity contrasted with the best of humanity, and I felt proud to be an Australian, that our prosperity mixed with our values, can be a positive contribution to our world.

Values that I am sure are held by the people of the Wimmera and Mallee.

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