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Iran

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Photo by Birgitta Sjoblom

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As Long As Anemones Exist

Azar Mahloujian (Writer and Librarian)

It is nearly impossible to write about Iran without reporting on the huge catastrophe that occurred there at the end of last year. On December 26 at half past five in the morning, as the people of Bam, a city in southeast Iran, lay sound asleep, the earth shook. It was for only 12 seconds, but long enough to destroy 80% of the city, kill 41,000 people, and injure thousands more.

Soon after the earthquake, Websites started popping up to ask for help for Bam. A list of hospitals where the injured had been taken was available on the Internet. Thousands of Webloggers posted the latest news, photos and lists of items needed.

The most active Website in gathering assistance has been that of the Coordination Committee of Women's NGOs (nongovernmental organizations). They give highest priority to the needs of women and children -- the most vulnerable victims of the earthquake, often unable to find food and meet their other basic needs. These women's NGOs sent a team to the region to evaluate the situation and to focus awareness on the lack of facilities for women. For instance, sanitary napkins, which men seldom think about or remember, were sent by women's organizations. They also encouraged people to visit children in hospitals and deliver toys and books. Women are

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focusing on women's needs. It's reminiscent of the organization Women to Women in the former Yugoslavia.

Lack of confidence in the authorities to assist the survivors of the earthquake prompted large groups of people to organize help by themselves. They were afraid that humanitarian aid would be stolen by corrupt officials or that anarchy would prevent help from reaching victims of the earthquake. Many NGOs instituted aid efforts, among them the Aid Council of Young NGOs, which mobilized the youth of Tehran to help the survivors reconstruct their lives.

The writers union, university students, popular football players, singers and musicians all raised money. A fundraiser by Iranian film stars, filmmakers and writers at a theater in Tehran attracted a large crowd. This cinema screened Iranian films around the clock to raise money for Bam. The original manuscript of a poem written by Simin Behbahani, today's "diva of Persian poetry," sold for 1,400,000 toman (US\$1,770).

Iran's Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi was asked to open a bank account in her own name and to supervise it. The money from this account will be spent according to the collective decision of the women's organizations for reconstruction of the city of Bam, with priority given to protection and support for women. The account number has been announced on various Websites, and people from inside and outside Iran are sending donations.

In the past, earthquakes have had political implications in Iran. In 1978, a year before the revolution, an earthquake centered near Tabas in east-central Iran leveled many towns and villages. The mullahs said it was due to the increased corruption during the Shah's reign. Now people are asking whose corruption caused this latest quake. They also wonder if the God of the American nation is different from the God of the

Islamic Republic. Why in America, a country full of sin according to Iranian hard-liners, did a California earthquake of equal magnitude cause only two dead that same week? When the Japanese can construct houses that withstand earthquakes, they wonder why the same is not true for Iran. An Iranian newspaper asked why those with black gold (oil) under their feet should live with mud over their heads. How can the authorities permit such housing?

These questions are difficult for the Iranian government to answer. People's frustration is high. Rumors have spread about the kidnapping of women and children in Bam and of a large number of suicides among the survivors. Yet even when so many people have died and nearly the entire ancient city of Bam -- with 2,000 years of history -- has been destroyed, the great solidarity among people warms our hearts. The need for blood for hospitals was satisfied after only one day, and from all across the country people made generous donations -- even the money they'd saved for their wedding ceremonies -- for those in Bam.

And groups from 40 countries were at work, among them an 80-strong U.S. team that set up a field hospital in Bam. To see that the Americans have come to Iran, not as a military force, but as a helping hand in solidarity with thousands of innocent Iranian people, provides hope.

We must live as long as anemones exist, says the Iranian poet Sohrab Sepehri.

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