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Logistics Brief

Pakistan: USAID-Donated Boat Ambulances Help Save Lives in Gilgit-Baltistan

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Federal Minister of State for Health, Mrs. Saira Afzal Tarar, receives a boat ambulance model from Mr. Jonathan Ross, Director of the USAID Health Office in Pakistan, during a ceremony held on October 10, 2013 in Karachi. Federal Minister for Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit-Baltistan, Ch. Muhammad Barjees Tahir, was also present on the occasion.

"It is a great initiative that was very much necessary. Now at least patients in a serious situation will reach a medical facility on time."

—Syed Mehdi Shah, Chief Minister for Gilgit-Baltistan

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In January 2010, Lake Attabad was formed in a catastrophic landslide that inundated the Karakoram highway, cutting off road access to approximately 20,000 people and displacing 6,000 local residents in the Hunza-Nagar district of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) in northern Pakistan. The massive landslide left the population without timely access to appropriate medical facilities, which led to an increase in the mother and child morbidity and mortality rate.

To address the plight of the affected population, including pregnant women, USAID/Pakistan assigned the USAID | DELIVER PROJECT the essential task of developing a viable logistical solution to provide safe transport and timely evacuation of individuals during medical emergencies, as well as transporting essential medicines to the communities.

To help the residents at Lake Attabad, the project recommended acquiring two high-speed boat ambulances to reduce delays in antenatal, natal, and postnatal medical care for women, and for emergency evacuation for the community in general. After assessing various options for procuring the boats, they were manufactured locally with imported engines.

In April 2014, eight staff members from the Health and Population Welfare Department of the Government of GB came to Karachi for training on how to operate and maintain the boat ambulances. They learned about the technical aspects of boat ambulances and received practical training at the Marina Boat Club.

Transporting the boats to Lake Attabad presented its own challenges. Lake Attabad is located in one of the most inaccessible areas of GB, where the only connecting road is the Karakoram highway—the highest altitude paved-road in the world. This unassuming road is among the world's most difficult trade routes and allows very little room for error. The size and the height of the

boats, vis-a-vis the narrow road, posed an extreme logistical challenge during transportation. Safe-keeping of the boats was another major concern because of security-sensitive spots along the route; therefore, the Pakistan army and police escorted the vehicles 390 kilometers from Abbottabad to Gilgit.

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Boat ambulances are transported to Lake Attabad with security support from the police and Pakistan's army.

Upon arrival at Lake Attabad, the honorable chief minister of GB, Syed Mehdi Shah, inaugurated the ambulance boats in a ceremony held on June 2, 2014. He applauded USAID for assisting the residents of Hunza-Nagar by donating the ambulance boats. Shah also expressed his gratitude to the U.S. Government for its role in improving health care across Pakistan and pledged to continually work toward strengthening ties between the two countries.

Since the inauguration, hundreds of families have benefited from the new service. Women can now get proper antenatal, natal and postnatal medical care, and people in the community have access to timely evacuation during emergencies. Feedback from the local GB administration indicates that the ambulance boat service has reduced evacuation delays and contributed to decreased maternal and child morbidity and mortality rates. Up until October 2014, 43 patients have been transported on the boat ambulances and have benefitted from faster medical treatment.

The ambulance boats and their impact on maternal and neonatal health have contributed to the objectives of USAID's Maternal and Child Health (MCH) program, and demonstrated the effectiveness of the USAID | DELIVER PROJECT. USAID's MCH program works through a public-private partnership in collaboration with the Government of Pakistan. The program helps to improve maternal and child health outcomes in Pakistan by strengthening health systems and increasing service delivery; specific goals include averting 4,000 maternal deaths, reducing infant mortality by 13 percent, and increasing the use of skilled birth attendants by 38 percent.

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