COVID-19 has brought daily lives to a standstill, with nations across the world racing to contain the rapid spread of the virus. The Asia-Pacific region is one of the first epicentres of COVID-19, owing to its many densely populated cities that created an increased risk of transmission and community outbreaks. Governments in the region quickly responded to the pandemic by passing travel restrictions, lockdown orders, and curfew regulations. Public sectors services and front-line facilities, such as hospitals and emergency services became strained with implementing necessary protective measures and subsequent influx of COVID-19 patients. While these much-needed interventions saving lives, they also have had cascading effects, with many small businesses closing and food crops going unharvested due to a shortage of seasonal workers. Though most governments have been providing stimulus packages to many sectors, a lot of vulnerable communities are still struggling to access the aid needed to recover from the impacts of COVID-19.
Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation Asia-Pacific Response

Upon hearing of the COVID-19 situation and possibility of new outbreaks in nearby countries, Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation (BTCF) established its COVID-19 Relief Coordination Center on 26 January 2020. BTCF chapters across the Asia-Pacific region utilized local resources to monitor the situation and plan for relief efforts. Regular communication lines between its local chapters, regional offices, and international headquarters were strengthened to share critical COVID-19 updates and provide resources.

As the global pandemic grew, access to personal protective equipment (PPE) became increasingly limited. BTCF quickly recognized the high priority PPE needs for both frontline workers such as healthcare workers, police officers, faith and community workers, due to their high frequency contact with at risk individuals, and vulnerable communities, due to their inability to access critical PPEs and adhere to social distancing protocols. BTCF quickly utilized international networks to provide PPE supplies. As of July 1st, a total of 20,253,337 PPE items have been supplied globally.

BTCF chapters also reached out to at-risk communities including low-income individuals, elderly, disabled persons, refugees, and undocumented persons, to ensure they were supported during this critical juncture. Government services and partner organizations were also contacted to coordinate efforts and provide support. This resulted in BTCF partnerships to providing food packages, PPEs, emotional and spiritual care, setting up shelters, and more. Simultaneously, local initiatives, such as making cloth masks and cooking plant-based meals for frontline workers, were shared amongst Tzu Chi chapters. These local initiatives were adapted and implemented by local volunteers to meet local needs.

As businesses resumed services and lockdowns lifted, communities are dealing with grief, future uncertainties, and struggling financially and emotionally. In this summary, BTCF has provided some highlights of its relief in the Asia-Pacific region.
Highlight Region: Malaysia

The first cases of COVID-19 in Malaysia were reported on 25 January 2020 and in March, there was a rapid increase in confirmed COVID-19 infections, both from the local transmission and imported cases. By 16 March, there were reported cases in all 13 states and 3 federal territories, resulting in a Movement Control Order (MCO) and a subsequent Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO).

As of 5 June, for the COVID-19 response, BTCF Malaysia has provided financial support to 13,133 households with 39,139 people receiving RM 4,132,362 (USD $964,154). Volunteers have also been providing PPE supplies and relief aid to 2,179 institutions and 28,703 households.

BTCF, in partnership with UNHCR, has been supporting refugees together since 2007. The pandemic has taken its toll on the mental well-being of refugees due to limited or no access to information and support. BTCF increased the number of hotlines to accept assistance requests and has received over 15,000 calls since 14 April. BTCF plans to provide continuous financial support for the refugees as a part of its recovery program.

As of 6 June, BTCF has provided aid to:

- 6,952 households
- 19,629 people
- Relief aid totalling RM 2,524,352 (USD $588,976)

Malaysia has a large population of documented and undocumented migrant labor workers from nearby countries including Indonesia, Nepal, Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar. Because of the pandemic, many migrant workers were unable to return home and access critical institutional support.

Having engaged with these communities in the past, BTCF was able to build upon the relationship, assisting individuals who needed livelihood support, including food and necessities, at this critical juncture:

- 2,013 households
- 4,081 people
- Relief aid totalling RM 547,056 (USD $127,638)
Sabah is a Malaysian state located at the northern point of Borneo with a large population of “stateless” natives residing in fishing villages and rural areas. For generations, these communities do not have birth certificates or documentation due to various reasons. The children have no or limited access to education and medical treatment, often leading to generations of poverty and illiteracy. The areas are known as “black areas”, areas rife with crime and illegal settlements. Dharma Master Cheng Yen, the founder of BTCF, urges “We have to go into these places, areas that people do not go or have forgotten. We need to bring light to places of darkness.”

BTCF has been working with these communities since the turn of the century, one such area being Titingan Town, originally Kampung Titingan, from 2003 by providing relief aid after natural disasters, awarding scholarships, and opening a learning center for local children. In the COVID-19 pandemic, BTCF quickly implemented a relief aid program, providing support for Titingan Town, even reaching nearby villages across the areas of Sandakan, Keningau, and Tawau through land and water transport.

Highlight Region: New Zealand

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in New Zealand was reported on 28 February. Following a rapid increase in cases, the highest-level alert was introduced by the NZ government, putting the country into an unprecedented nationwide lockdown.

BTCF New Zealand established the COVID-19 Emergency Financial Aid Programme and partnered with COVID-19 impacted local schools. In total, BTCF COVID-19 Emergency Financial Aid Programme received 127 applications with 70 successful applicants who benefited from the fund.

**EMERGENCY FINANCIAL AID**

- Eligibility criteria include:
  - Non-citizens or Non-permanent residents
  - Valid Working Visa or Working Holiday Visa
  - Loss of employment due to COVID-19 pandemic
- 70 recipients received financial aid with a total of NZD$35,400

**WORKING WITH LOCAL SCHOOLS**

- 25 at-risk families received food parcels
- Foods include 15 items: milk, bread, jam, corn flakes, biscuits, fruits and vegetables, and canned foods

In these challenging times, where there is so much need and such few resources, the importance of collaborative efforts and partnerships cannot be understated. BTCF, working together with a local school, provided 25 at-risk families with food packages. Because of BTCF’s long-term collaborations with local
schools through various projects including the Tzu Chi Scholarship Program, local schools were able to immediately seek support from Tzu Chi. BTCF has also worked closely with local supermarkets, a partnership that has been operating for over a decade, to distribute food packages to vulnerable and at-risk communities.

BTCF believes that through direct action, we create opportunities to share and spread compassion and love, to inspire and empower individuals through selfless giving. Together, a stronger and more resilient community can be built.

For more information, please contact: info@tzuchi.org.nz

COVID-19 Response Stories: PPE Supplies to the Front-line Workers

During the first phase of COVID-19 response, BTCF has provided PPE supplies to frontline workers to prevent the spread of the virus. Special care was also given to the less obvious frontline workers such as hospice workers, sanitary workers, cemetery workers, faith leaders, and more.

JAPAN

Saitama Kyodo Hospital and Warabi City Hospital are two of the regional hospitals selected to receive COVID-19 patients to decrease the risk of community transmission, located in the Saitama prefecture. At the end of May, BTCF Japan, through the local chapter, donated 6,000 disposable masks to Saitama Kyodo Hospital and 4,500 disposable masks and 300 face shields to Warabi City Hospital. Representatives from both hospitals expressed their gratitude and appealed to the public to support local hospitals and communities.

Throughout the month of June, many hospitals nearby local chapters will also receive PPE supplies to decrease risk of transmission.
AUSTRALIA

Known as the gateway to the Pacific, Australia had its first confirmed case of COVID-19 on 25 January. Currently, there are 7,436 confirmed cases and 102 deaths. As rest homes are high risk communities, BTCF Australia branch in Sydney supported three rest homes: Lewishem Aged Care Nursing Home, St Mary Villa Residential Aged Care, and Elderly Australian Chinese Homes with 2,000 disposable face masks, supporting 245 elderly.

BTCF has also initiated a financial aid assistance programme to support individuals who are unable to receive government support during this pandemic.

COVID-19 Response Stories: Relief Aid in Vulnerable Communities

BTCF as a faith-based humanitarian aid organization, has deep experience working with the local communities. During COVID-19, BTCF closely liaised with partners and local authorities to identify possible individuals and families in need of assistance. Observing social distancing and government regulations, distributions and home visits were conducted, and emotional and spiritual care, alongside with financial assistance was given.

CAMBODIA

Working with welfare authorities, BTCF Cambodia conducted distributions in the slum areas in Phnom Penh. In these areas, most residents earn an income by selling recyclables or doing labor work. BTCF conducted three distributions, supporting families, local authorities, a local temple, and sanitary workers, helping them through these challenging times. BTCF Cambodia was also in discussion with welfare authorities regarding partnerships before the outbreak and will continue these discussions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aid Recipients</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Aid Provided</th>
<th>Rice Provided</th>
<th>Food Parcel include:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low income Families</td>
<td>870 families</td>
<td>Rice and Food parcel</td>
<td>34,800 kgs (40 kgs/family)</td>
<td>Vegetable Oil 2L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local authorities</td>
<td>100 individuals</td>
<td>Rice</td>
<td>4,000 kgs (40kgs/person)</td>
<td>Soy Sauce 1L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local temple</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Rice</td>
<td>2,000 kgs (50x 40 kgs)</td>
<td>Salt 1 kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanitary workers</td>
<td>500 individuals</td>
<td>Rice</td>
<td>20,000 kgs (40kgs/person)</td>
<td>Sugar 1 kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total Rice Provided 60,800 kgs</td>
<td>Bread 1 loaf</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In total, BTCF Australia branch has donated:

- 115,932 pcs Disposable Masks
- 180 pcs N95 Masks
- 5,750 pcs Face Shields
- 1,800 pcs Gloves
- 10,950 pcs Isolation Gowns
- 1,773 pcs Cloth Masks
VIETNAM

During these challenging times, it is critical to understand that people are affected differently by the pandemic and with vulnerable and marginalized communities, such as low-income families, sight-impaired and disabled communities, being disproportionately impacted.

In total, 7 distributions have been held, with 2,200 families receiving relief aid: 1,000 sight-impaired individuals, 1,000 disabled individuals, and 200 low-income families. During the distributions, BTCF volunteers carefully lined up chairs for the residents to be able to sit down and observe social distancing protocols.

COVID-19 Relief: Response to Recovery

This pandemic has affected the lives of all communities, with many people who are and will continue to struggle for much longer. It is important for all organizations to think beyond the immediate needs of vulnerable communities and to develop the long-term support needed to build the resilience of these communities.

COVID-19 has also brought up much discussion on the sustainability of disaster relief models and the environmental impacts that have led to this pandemic. Dharma Master Cheng Yen, the founder of BTCF, urges all “Through COVID-19, we need to reconsider our relationship between people and our environment. As we care for those around us, how can we do this while minimizing our impact on our environment? We need to be mindful of our actions in daily life such as observing a plant-based diet to respect lives and minimizing waste.”

BTCF will continue to work with partners to support vulnerable communities through these challenging times and beyond. Heading out of lockdown, many BTCF chapters have initiated recovery programs to provide more individualized assistance in the coming months.

CONTACTS

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