

The China Post

Wall St. largess benefited the poor

Monday, October 13, 2008

By Emily Wax, The Washington Post

NEW DELHI, India -- With freshly cut keys to their new brick-and-cement homes, families in an impoverished settlement on the outskirts of India's capital honored a surprising hero this week: Richard S. Fuld Jr., head of the now-defunct Wall Street giant Lehman Brothers.

Before the 158-year-old investment firm went bust, it sponsored construction of low-cost housing with Habitat for Humanity in the destitute Bhalaswa neighborhood. Although the US\$50,000 contribution was a pittance for a multibillion-dollar Wall Street firm, it was enough to help build 100 single-room houses for about 500 people, mostly children, who were living in shanties of tarpaulins and old clothes.

The largess of Wall Street has fed hungry children in Haiti, funded trauma centers in Sudan's war-torn Darfur region and paid for rescue boats for flood-prone Bangladesh.

U.S. corporations, foundations, charity organizations and individuals together gave more aid to the developing world than the U.S. government did in 2006, according to the Hudson Institute's Index of Global Philanthropy: Private donations totaled US\$34.8 billion, compared with the government's US\$23.5 billion. But with the U.S. economic meltdown, and its worldwide ripple effects, aid experts doubt those numbers can be sustained on either the private or the government side.

Many leaders in the humanitarian field have started lobbying to keep funds. The United Nations has announced efforts to ensure aid is spent more efficiently during lean economic times.

U.S. corporations helped pay for rescue efforts during the recent flooding in Bihar, an impoverished state in eastern India.

Donations from Target, Coca-Cola, and the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation helped fund efforts to reunite tens of thousands of parents with their children who went missing during the floods. Clothing and hygiene kits were also distributed, and temporary schools were put up for those in camps, said Thomas Chandy, head of Save the Children in India.

In Bhalaswa, the houses were unveiled on the day Fuld, the former Lehman Brothers chief executive, was questioned by a House committee about his failure to rein in risky investments while raking in millions of dollars in bonuses for himself.

"It's one tiny housing story Lehman got right: in Delhi's backyard," read a front-page headline in the Indian Express newspaper.

Many Bhalaswa residents are migrant workers from poor states. They came to New Delhi in search of economic opportunity and were evicted from one of the oldest slums in the city, a vast encampment alongside the polluted Yamuna River. In Bhalaswa, they initially found a congested maze of shantytowns surrounded by a landfill, picked over by cattle, pigs and crows. There was no access to clean latrines or electricity. Some slept under mosquito nets on the ground.

"The struggle to get a roof over my head has been a long and hard one," said a smiling Bindu Gupta, 38, who has six children. She cracked a coconut on her new doorstep in an Indian tradition to mark an auspicious beginning. "Now my life has greatly improved," Gupta said. "I have cleaner food and water in my home. I'm so proud I will call over my friends for tea and meals. I can't believe that I have my own toilet."

The families were asked to contribute US\$170 for the construction of their homes, and many saved all year and pooled funds.

Kamlesh Saha, a 35-year-old mother of three, said that during the monsoon season her old makeshift shelter was submerged in floodwaters.

"Now, when I see my new house, I feel great joy and pride," said Saha, adding that she didn't know who Fuld or the Lehman Brothers were, but thanking them anyway.

Copyright © 2008 The China Post.

Available online at <http://www.chinapost.com.tw/life/discover/2008/10/13/178461/Wall-St..htm>