

# Homes for quake survivors in the bag



Nepalese building rice bag houses in a village near Pokhara. PHOTO: COURTESY OF KEE YI JAN, OPERATION HOPE FOUNDATION

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Local NGO to build houses in Nepal by piling up stuffed rice bags held together with barbed wire

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Three months after a 7.8-magnitude earthquake hit Nepal, many of its houses, especially those in villages, are still in disrepair.

Local non-governmental organisation Operation Hope Foundation hopes to help by building houses in a village in the Dhading district starting this month.

It is looking to build more than 350 "rice bag" houses, which are put together by filling rice bags with rocks and soil before they are placed on top of one another and held together with barbed wire.

The house is then covered with a roof made of zinc or straw, for example, and its walls plastered. These rice bag houses, which have been tested by the NGO on a smaller scale in Thailand and Nepal previously, are known to be able to withstand floods and quakes.

The NGO's founder, Mr Robert Kee, 67, told The Straits Times that this latest project is a "major undertaking" as it will require 300,000 rice bags and 75 tonnes of barbed wire to be bought in bulk and transported to the village. Still, it is much easier to transport such materials to inaccessible areas in the mountains than moving those used in typical building construction.

"Transporting construction materials like bricks and large amounts of cement is near impossible or would be prohibitively expensive," said Mr Kee. "Then there is the question of labour, as modern construction needs skilled masons and others."

## ROOF OVER THEIR HEADS

**Many charities focus on providing food and not many look into rebuilding houses, but when they are gone, these people still need a home to live in.**

MR KEE YI JAN



## BUILDING HOMES

**300k**

rice bags filled with rock and soil

**+ 75**

tonnes of barbed wire

**= 357**

rice bag houses to be built in a village in the Dhading district by Operation Hope Foundation

Founded in 2001, Operation Hope Foundation has children's homes in Cambodia, Thailand and the Nepalese capital Kathmandu. It is in the midst of building a new orphanage in Pokhara, Nepal.

The NGO has raised \$220,000 for the Nepal earthquake victims and this will be used for the rice bag houses, added Mr Kee, who is also the managing director of an electronics company.

Mr Kee's 31-year-old son, Mr Kee Yi Jan, will be part of the team heading to Dhading tomorrow.

When asked about the extent of the damage in the village in Dhading, the younger Mr Kee said many of its houses are being held together by wooden planks with zinc sheets as roof, all pieced together by the villagers.

"I don't think they are stable at all," he said. "Many charities focus on providing food and not many look into rebuilding houses, but when they are gone, these people still need a home to live in."

The project also aims to teach the locals how to build the houses so they can pass on the skills to even more villagers.

It is hoped that with help from the locals, all 357 houses - each about half the size of a two-room flat and costing \$550 to \$700 to build - will be completed by November. Building the houses within that timeframe is a "race against time" as winter starts in December, Mr Kee added.

One of the Nepalese trained by the Singapore NGO is Mr Dam Bahadur Tamang-Uttam, a social worker and pastor from a village in Gorkha district.

While some villagers have built bamboo and small wood houses after their homes were destroyed, "big numbers of people are still living on the roadside", he said.

So far, more than 50 people have been trained and there are plans to train even more in the near future. "The rice bag house is good. It is easy to learn this method and it is quite safe from earthquakes," said the 33-year-old.

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