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By Ken Camp

Managing Editor

From hurricanes in Latin America to famines in Africa and Asia, Texas Baptist Men volunteers have been some of the first responders among faith-based disaster relief providers over the last three decades. But the Texas Baptists who recently returned from Iran were glad an Alabama group had paved the way for them.

A 15-member Texas Baptist Men team, along with three Baptist volunteers from Georgia, worked Jan. 12-20 at a refugee camp on the outskirts of Bam.

The crew cooked meals and provided medical care for displaced residents of the earthquake-ravaged city. A massive quake the morning after Christmas left three-fourths of the ancient city in ruins.

The volunteers served under the auspices of a non-governmental agency recognized in Iran.

They followed an Alabama Baptist disaster relief team. Since "Ala" sounded

like the Iranian word for God, "ba" like "with" and "ma" like "us," the group became identified locally as "God with us disaster relief."

Fortunately for the Texans who came behind them, the Alabama group lived up to their lofty name and earned a solid reputation in the region. When the Texas Baptists arrived in Iran, they initially received a cold greeting from a stern governmental worker, according to team leader John LaNoue of Lindale. But when he told the official they were related to the "Ala-ba-ma" group, "it was an open door," LaNoue said.

The Texas Baptists worked in a 341-tent refugee camp that housed more than 1,700 people.

"There was not one empty tent in the camp," LaNoue recalled. "There may have been three tents with one person in them, but there were some with as many as 14 in them."

The Texas Baptist Men cooked more than 3,000 meals and 5,000 cups of hot tea each day for the camp, plus an additional 1,000 meals daily for another camp that was being established nearby. The volunteers worked 14-hour days, cooking rice, lentils and occasional helpings of lamb in massive four-foot-wide pots.

"Our men ate what the people in the camp ate, but they never sat down to eat until all the people had been served. It was a powerful statement to those people," LaNoue said.

Through interpreters, LaNoue learned that many of the people in the camp were asking: "Why have these old men come to help us? We see them working when we get up in the morning and working when we go to bed at night."

While the crew included one 36-year-old volunteer and a 41-year-old doctor, the average age was 63. The oldest volunteer was 78.

"I called them the 'over the hill gang,' but they're on the side of the hill that knows how to do the work," said LaNoue, who is just a few months shy of 70.

One image that indelibly branded itself on LaNoue's memory was an old Iranian man in Bam climbing to the top of the rubble where his house once stood, removing one brick at a time. He repeated that process for hours each day.

"One brick was all he could carry at one time. He was trying to find his family, who were entombed there."

While the residents of the refugee camp publicly expressed a growing love and appreciation for the American volunteers, the Texas Baptists remained under close scrutiny by governmental officials. Some crewmembers were interviewed up to three times a day by authorities who wanted to know why they had come to Iran.

"We told them we had not come because of politics, but because our hearts were broken by the tragedy of the people. We told them God loved the Iranian people so much, he had instructed us to come help them," LaNoue said.

When asked, the Texas Baptists identified themselves as Protestant Christians, but they were careful not to be perceived as proselytizing. "We're Christians. Nobody talked about it much, but everybody knew it," LaNoue said.

Looking back on the experience, he added, "My prayer for the people of Iran is that they will have the opportunity to recognize the truth, that God will bless them with the knowledge of himself ... that their physical needs will be met in such a way that they will come to recognize the Giver of good gifts."

Texas Baptists can contribute financially to the disaster relief project by designating checks "Iranian relief" and sending them to Texas Baptist Men, 333 N. Washington, Dallas 75246-1798.

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