Gift of the Givers 'does the work others won't do'

Members of Africa's largest disaster relief group are experts when it comes to massive relief missions

SUE SEGAR

T'S nine o'clock on a wintry Tuesday in June and Billy Joel's Piano Man is playing loudly as I jump into the Gift of the Givers' four-by-four, driven by Badrealam "Badr" Kazi, the relief organisation's government and corporate relations manager. I'm joining him on a mission to deliver emergency supplies from Cape Town to drought-stricken Sutherland in the Karoo.

Following us will be two huge trucks loaded with water tanks, food and blankets for the farmers and farmworkers of the Northern Cape town better known for its astronomical observatory sited in this remote location because of its clear, dark night skies.

It is Ramadan, and although Kazi is fasting, he offers me water and points to a big bag of figs and dates, my padkos for the trip. We stop briefly to see that all is on track at the NGO's storage facility in Maitland where the trucks are being loaded. Gift of the Givers stores literally fields of packs of bottled water, water tanks and other emergency supplies here. Formerly the Maitland abattoir, this site is now owned by the Department of Public Works.

Gift of the Givers — also known as Waqful Waqifin Foundation — issued a news update in June warning that Sutherland was in serious trouble. "Man, animal and the environment are in tremendous difficulty," said the organisation's founder, director and chairperson Dr Imtiaz Sooliman. "The area is experiencing its worst drought in 100 years. All 200 boreholes that served the region have dried out. As the water table has decreased substantially, the total sheep count has dropped to 25%, [either] from urgent sell-off or death of the animals. Grazing is non-existent, pregnant sheep will lose their new babies and more deaths will follow unless there is an urgent intervention with fodder. In the last year, 11 farmers have lost everything, another 56 are about to suffer the same fate. The knock-on effect is the loss of jobs of virtually the entire farm labourer population and the resultant economic effect on their families. The local schools are also in crisis.

"Gift of the Givers is intervening urgently to try to save Sutherland. Generavailable the first 500 bales of fodder. Our trucks will start distributing these in the next 48 hours. Our hydrology team, led by Dr Gideon Groenewald, will be on site soon to drill deeper boreholes. Food parcels, blankets, warm clothing, hygiene packs, special supplements for fodder and school items are all urgent requirements ... Saving Sutherland is going to be a mammoth task."

Sooliman founded Gift of the Givers in 1992 after a Turkish Sufi master instructed him to set up a humanitarian organisation. Since then it has grown to become Africa's largest disaster relief group which has helped people in distress around the world, including in Haiti, Bosnia, Somalia and Pakistan, and it has set up hospitals in Yemen, Syria and Gaza. The group helped after flooding in Zimbabwe, the outbreak of xenophobia in South Africa, the efforts to rescue Stephen McGown when he was held hostage in Mali, and it has negotiated in other hostage situations, including that of South Africans Pierre and Yolande Korkie in Yemen.

Gift of the Givers has delivered five truckloads of fodder from farmers in Fouriesburg and Cradock. The food and blankets that are on their way will help farmers and farm workers alike.

Kazi says: "We were rolling out the Free State drought programme last year when we were contacted by farmers who said Sutherland has no water and no feed. We started with soft humanitarian

aid — fodder, water, clothing and food." For months now the community and other small Karoo towns have relied on aid from Gift of the Givers. The area, traditionally part of the lucrative thirdgeneration Karoo lamb and mohair region, has not had good rains since 2013, and boreholes have dried up, making it increasingly difficult to keep the sheep in the region alive.

It's not just Gift of the Givers that have stepped in to help. Heart-warming stories abound of farmers from around South Africa, co-ordinated by Somerset West resident Elizabeth Visagie, who have sent truckloads of donated fodder and other goods. When the going gets tough for South African farmers, it appears, their fellow farmers send feed and

other assistance across vast distances. Visagie's story alone is intriguing. After voluntarily sourcing fodder for farmer victims of the 2017 Knysna fire, she was approached by Gift of the Givers to help with drought logistics in the Eastern Cape. Ever since, she has been a full-time official volunteer for the organisation. It

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ous farmers in Free State have made Gift of the Givers has delivered truckloads of fodder for livestock from farmers in Sutherland, which is experiencing its worst drought in 100 years.

alarm that Sutherland needed urgent assistance drilling for water. For nearly nine months she has been involved in drought and humanitarian aid there and, with Givers, has arranged nearly 40 truckloads and two trainloads of fodder to the beleaguered town.

As we drive along the N1, our Gift of the Givers-branded vehicle elicits many supportive hoots from fellow road users. Kazi points to a site in De Doorns where the Givers recently drilled a borehole to provide water for 20 000 people in the

"They were running dry so the Western Cape government asked us to help — then someone stole the pipes! I drove back there, stormed straight to the community leaders and demanded we find out who took them. If you show you're weak, you're dead. I am not a Mother Theresa," says Kazi.

Along the lonely road, a farmer turning out of his gate waves down Kazi. "Please stop for coffee on your way back," he says. "Things are very bad in Sutherland. Thank you for what you do."

Sooliman might be the better-known face of the Givers, but it's quite clear that the no-nonsense Kazi, although more of a behind-the-scenes manager, is an old hand when it comes to organising assistance for the full range of disaster situations. Between directing trucks, making payments telephonically and fielding a continual stream of phone calls, Kazi tells me what his job entails and what drew him to Gift of the Givers.

In essence, he liaises with governments and corporations when there is a disaster, to enable Gift of the Givers to do its work. "Because of all our experience, we are able to give a very accurate assessment of the situation on the ground and we know how to roll out accordingly ... We can then liaise with the different departments, like Social Development, Health, etc.

"We know that some of South Africa's municipalities are underresourced, so we help. With corporates, they need people to manage their contributions and put them to good use. For foreign rescue missions, we deal with the Department of International Relations and Co-operation. Our relations with government are excellent. There's a lot of appreciation for what we do. We do the work

that others don't want to do." For the mission to Sutherland, Gift of the Givers has also dispatched a hydrology team, led by Groenewald, to dig deeper boreholes. The drilling team arrived



Two hundred new boreholes will be drilled in Sutherland over 1,4 million hectares by Gift of the Givers, costing R15 million. PHOTO: GIFT OF THE GIVERS

BADREALAM "BADR" KAZI Gift of the Givers' government and corporate relations manager

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tion, 40 000 litres of diesel had been delivered — fuel required to establish 200 new boreholes.

Kazi tells me that a large portion of the money donated to Gift of the Givers

"see it as a priority to contribute to chari- — "the most rewarding decision of my was in fact Visagie who sounded the in advance of us with two rigs. In addi- is given by South African Muslims who been a volunteer for more than a decade humanitarian crisis in Israel, we tion or another complex operation was

ties and though they will help a hospital life. Some people think because we are in Syria, they will not fund a war there". Muslim, we support Isis or are part of Kazi, who, like Sooliman, is a Sufi, joined the Illuminati. You name it," he jokes. Gift of the Givers full-time after having "I just tell people that if there were a

issues should be exempt from politics. What attracted me to Gift in the first place was that it is all-embracing. You're South African and you need to help. Our immediate aim is to help South Africans. We first help our own and then others." The Givers' volunteer base comprises

wouldn't hesitate to go and help. Human

medics, fire-fighters, dentists and other volunteers who drop everything in an emergency. "Dr Sooliman and Dr Achmat Bhab, who is based at North West University and heads up emergency response, put together the teams. We then of people who might not normally con-

"During the Haiti earthquake, our doctors were known as the Dream Team. The UK and U.S. doctors were in awe of them. Whenever a difficult amputaneeded, they would say, 'send it to the Dream Team'. Our team are also always there simply to hug the victims of a disaster. Time after time they show these qualities, in Haiti, Yemen and Knysna ..."

Driving along the gravel road to Sutherland, the tell-tale signs of the drought are evident.

"For these farmers", says Kazi, "it is very humiliating to receive aid. They do not like to accept aid on a platter. There's a lot of Afrikaans pride there. But, when we come, you can see the gratitude on their faces."

The Gift of the Givers' hydrologist, Groenewald, is himself a legend. He is also a geologist and a palaeontologist with 35 years' experience. Sooliman has described Groenewald's water-finding ability as uncanny. The two met in 2016 when Gift of the Givers responded to the Free State drought.

"It was an instant spiritual connection between the heart and the soul. He understood my spirituality. I understood his. Ever since, it has been a magnificent relationship of mutual respect and professional competency."

At a padstal near Sutherland, we bump into the Givers' driller, Andre Cilliers, who has come from Bethlehem. Nicknamed Smurfy, he leaps out of his vehicle with the good news that the team has already struck water at 54 metres on Willie de Lange's farm Verlatenkloof, on the road to Klein Roggeveld.

"I gather that there is more-or-less 10 000 litres an hour and it's drinkable. It was at 2 pm yesterday," says Smurfy. "There were tears in the farmer's eyes. have seen true gratitude."

Hester Obermeyer, liaison officer for the town's drought committee, says that among the population of 2500, there are 141 farming families and 293 farmworker families affected by the drought.

"We are at 30% of sheep capacity. We had 400 000 sheep in the area, we are now down to 130 000. Some died, others had to be sold. The veld was just unsustainable. Farmers are battling to pay their accounts. This drought has had a big knock-on effect on business in Sutherland." Obermeyer and her team will co-ordinate the offloading and allocation of fodder and other goods to farmers and farmworkers in the next few days.

As the cold evening settles in and Kazi prepares to drive back to Cape Town, he says goodbye to the Sutherland locals gathered at the storage point at the local sports club. The women line up to hug Kazi. He shakes hands with the farmhands and other appreciative locals.

On Tuesday — the same day we are in Sutherland — Groenewald's team and a drilling company owned by Martyn Landmann drills for water on Hennie Visagie's farm, Jakkalsfontein; on Wednesday, it is on Andrias Muller's farm, Gunsfontein, as well as Annes Paulsen's at Vinkekuil. The following day's water is drilled at Kraairiver, then on Saturday it's Klipdrif's turn.

The whole process is expected to cost the Givers in the order of R15 million. The total project area is 1,4 million hectares, involving the drilling of at least 200 successful boreholes.

If a borehole is not successful we will not leave the farmer dry, so we will keep trying until God shows us the spot where he will provide for the farmer, they say.

The project is in its 10th day and they have had a 95% success rate in the boreholes drilled. The water will be tested for sustainability and quality. The Givers assist with applications for the licensing of water use as well as water treatment and distribution of water where farmers are not able to do so. The six-year-long drought is expected to last another three-and-a-half years.

"It is therefore not possible to say what the final project will include. All I can say is that in my 40 years in the Karoo, I do not know of any disaster intervention of this magnitude ever attempted in the history of South African farming. I lift my hat to Dr Sooliman and his unbelievable trust in our almighty God to convince us that this intervention will be achieving its goal with distinction. He would never embark on such a mission without meditation and exceptional planning for the unexpected. Greetings. Oom Gideon."

I am shown a message from a local farmer to Sooliman. It reads: "Dear Dr Sooliman, I hereby want to thank you and your organisation Gift of the Givers from the bottom of my heart for your work on a roster system. We have Afri- very much-needed help for the commucans, Muslims and Jewish doctors and nity of Sutherland and more specifically paramedics, fire, search and rescue for me personally. The borehole produteams. We make up a rainbow nation of ces a very good flow of water and will helpers. It is a real bonding experience be used for my house water, for the workers' houses, my wife's guest house, for sheep water and vegetable garden for the workers. You gave us hope in a hopeless situation. Thank you very much and may God bless you and your organisation. Andreas Muller, Gunsfontein."

— Noseweek.