

THE BAM EARTHQUAKE

The Tragedy of a Cultural Treasure 'Depicted in the Faces of People'

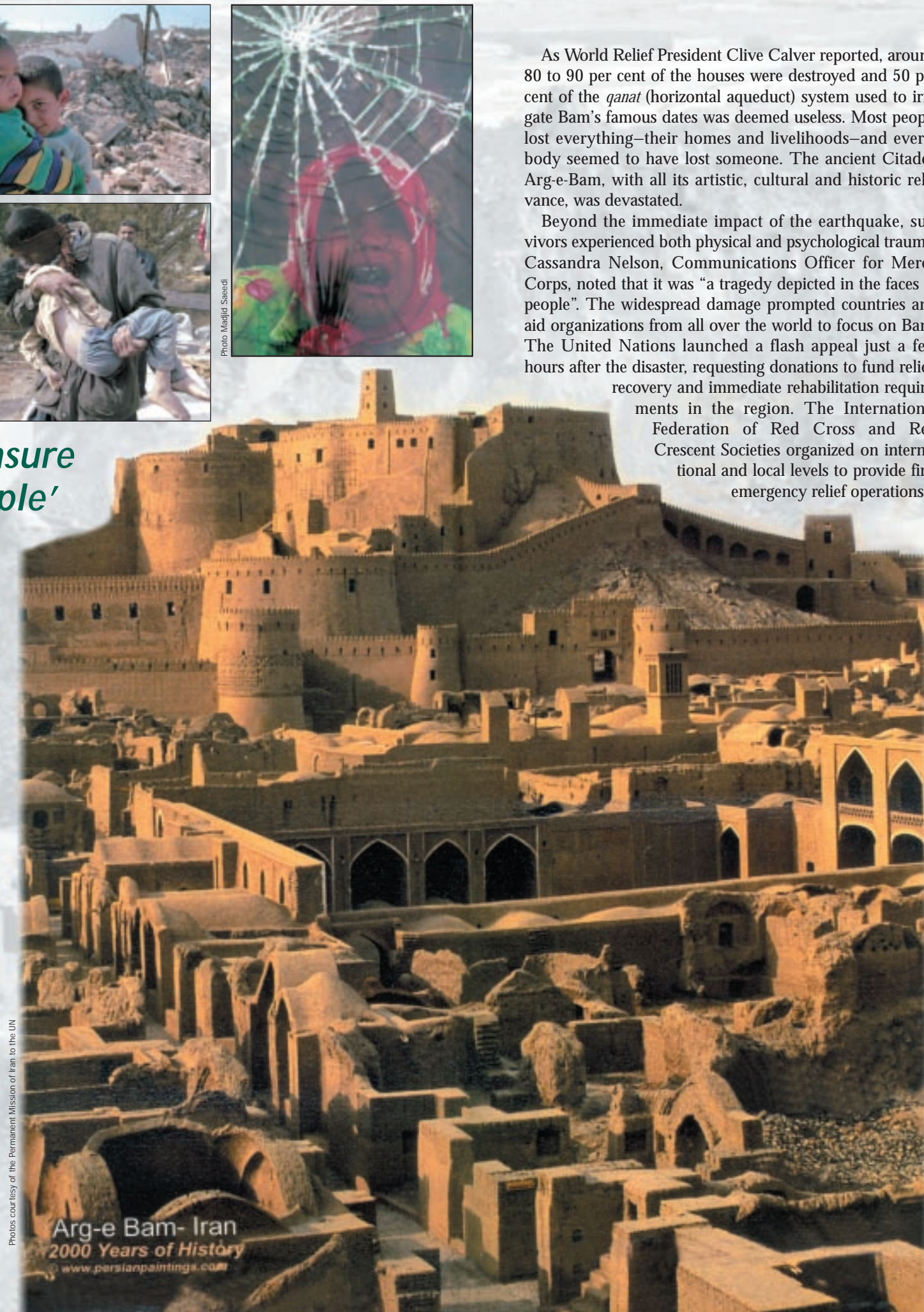
By Giovanni Campi, for the *Chronicle*

At 5:27 a.m. on 26 December 2003, an earthquake measuring 6.6 on the Richter scale struck southeast Iran. At its epicentre was the historic city of Bam, whose historical, social and cultural character and the area's population were dramatically affected. The tremors severely damaged Bam Citadel—or Arg-e Bam—the largest citadel of its kind in the world.

Dating back to 250 BC, Bam has been an important pilgrimage site and trading centre, connecting the Occident and the Orient. Famous for its silk and textiles, it became known as a tourist attraction. The city and the original Citadel were founded during the Sassanid period (224-637 AD). While some of the surviving structures date from before the twelfth century, most of what remains was built during the Islamic Safavid Empire (1501-1722). The spectacularly shaped adobe structure, made of mud, clay, straw and the fibers of palms, came to symbolize Bam's unique cultural and spiritual character.

In July 2004, the United Nations formally recognized Bam's cultural value at the 28th session of the World Heritage Committee of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), declaring the city a "World Heritage site". United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Resident Coordinator Frederick Lyons affirmed the UNESCO decision, stating that "Bam is not an ordinary city; it epitomizes a civilization of which Iranians are justifiably proud".

The early morning earthquake, according to structural engineer Farzad Naeim of the Earthquake Engineering Research Institute, was the worst disaster in Iranian history in terms of human lives lost and structural damage. Visiting the city in January 2004, European Common Foreign and Security Policy Chief Javier Solana noted "the dimension of the tragedy". Overall, some 30,000 persons died during the quake, while another 30,000 were injured.



Arg-e Bam- Iran
2000 Years of History
© www.persianpaintings.com

As World Relief President Clive Calver reported, around 80 to 90 per cent of the houses were destroyed and 50 per cent of the *qanat* (horizontal aqueduct) system used to irrigate Bam's famous dates was deemed useless. Most people lost everything—their homes and livelihoods—and everybody seemed to have lost someone. The ancient Citadel, Arg-e-Bam, with all its artistic, cultural and historic relevance, was devastated.

Beyond the immediate impact of the earthquake, survivors experienced both physical and psychological trauma. Cassandra Nelson, Communications Officer for Mercy Corps, noted that it was "a tragedy depicted in the faces of people". The widespread damage prompted countries and aid organizations from all over the world to focus on Bam. The United Nations launched a flash appeal just a few hours after the disaster, requesting donations to fund relief, recovery and immediate rehabilitation requirements in the region. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies organized on international and local levels to provide first emergency relief operations.

The Red Cross provided 12,400 medical staff in addition to tents, blankets, heaters and food, while the Iranian Red Crescent Society organized and carried out rapid relief and rescue operations with volunteers, workers and youth.

In the weeks following the disaster, UNESCO, the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization and UNDP made considerable efforts to begin rebuilding the city, focusing particularly on preserving and reconstructing the remains of Arg-e-Bam. A joint UNDP/UNESCO mission began 7 February; workers and volunteers from approximately sixty countries assisted with the relief efforts. Mr. Lyons stated that "despite the enormous devastation caused by the earthquake, the response of the Iranian authorities, the Red Crescent Society and the international community was impressive".

Ten months after the initial disaster and reconstruction efforts, much remains to be done. Throughout history, Bam has represented different things to different people: a home for thousands of Iranians; a spiritual, social and economic landmark for the region; and a cultural and artistic treasure for the world. The ancient city's legacy, despite the tragic earthquake, will remain a cultural treasure for humanity. □

