

Kathmandu, Nepal Tragedy Dispatch; Days 7-12

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Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Environment](#)

For my first blog from Nepal, [see here which you can link/share](#), FB etc. (I'm not using FB here, neither photographing)

Our night skies are still battered by the sounds never heard over Nepal before—they are the monster cargo planes departing after disgorging millions of tones and tones of relief aid. This should be a welcome disturbance. But given our tenseness, it is one more sign of the crisis enveloping us. Tremors too continue. Some stop us in our tracks midday; others awaken us from sleep, setting off sustained bursts of barking feral dogs. Tremors immediately following the quake were really upsetting—menacing—and remain never less than threatening. Gradually, against instinct, we accept advice from scientists saying these waves of the earth will continue to decline and are not, as first supposed, a resumption of the great upheaval of 13 days ago.

As I move through the city, I note signs of progress, if not hope. Not far from my residence, at the corner of Dallu Bridge, there was a sleek, orange crane probing earth, lifting parts of homes in search of victims for 3 days. It's gone now. Every time I pass there, I note people paused on the bridge to stare onto the scar—a quarter acre crater of rubble, twisted iron, concrete slabs. What most startles me is the clash of terror and calm:—a regular line of buildings, attached rows of shops and residences, then suddenly, inserted among them, either yawning space vomiting its gnarled mass of brick and rubble, or a building suspended at 60 degrees, with innards of people's private lives spilling out of cleft kitchens and bedrooms. Like a mutilated corpse suspended among a cluster of office workers continuing their routine.

To me that's more unsettling than a field of crushed houses. Maybe because it speaks to the utter irrationality and randomness of the quake's fury. The bizarre and threatening imposes itself into the normal. Tornadoes have the same effect, I imagine.

Talking about normal, life's far, far from routine. A fraction of customary activity pulses through Kathmandu city. After endless complaints and apprehension, we appreciate those trucks, small and large, heaped with sacks of food, stacks of tarpaulin and cases of water loading at depots across the city, then setting out on their missions. Nirvaya, a musician and student of English, tells me he's about to depart with friends for nearby Godavari to assist victims there. Dr. Mingmar and his Belgian counterpart have departed by road with a field hospital; they will deal with hill slides and impassible roads as they proceed behind bulldozers, then set up medical centers in villages awaiting help. Kathmandu residents emerging intact from their daze and disorientation realize that fellow citizens in those places, most within 100 miles radius of the capital, are today's priority; they may feel heartened that they in turn can offer succor to others.

Foreign rescuers are fewer, although I suppose overseas media are plentiful. Nepal's journalists are doing a terrific job in TV and print. I heard that NYTimes declared "Nepal is flattened". If so, it's untrue, and irresponsible. Why exaggerate? It's bad enough. Here, most talk is of government ineptness—officials demand that everything be channeled through the government while its ministries are largely incapable of coordinating supplies or setting priorities. (More about government and governance later.) Meanwhile, some basic facts (I'm still a social scientist) starting with population statistics:

Kathmandu has as many as 5 million (possibly 6) inhabitants, not the 2.5M reported by foreign press (probably taken from official sources, since true figures would expose the scandal that is Nepal's administration). Over the past 15-20 years the city has exploded with rural migrants; they've settled here, living on remittances from mainly sons and brothers (making up the 3+ million who work as unskilled laborers in Malaysia, Qatar, Saudi, etc.) (Source: Pitambar Sharma, "Some Aspects of Nepal's Social Demography, Census 2011 Update", 2014) These people left fields fallow to live as consumers, increasing Nepal's dependence on imported food and everything else (from India and China). They live in poor conditions, but their presence increases property values and enhances the income of the original owners and retailers. Sound familiar? Kathmandu city is also home to hundreds of 1000s of Indian migrants, not really legal, but who nevertheless become an integral part of the economy.

As the capital's population has quadrupled in the last 25 years, no new infrastructure has been built by the govt. We still live on a water-elect-waste disposal-road system build for a million or less. (Foreigners, including parasitic iNGOs, have their own fully supplied compounds. "Tamel", the tourist business district serving the lower-strata foreign backpackers is a cluster of 1000s of curio, art and cloth shops, trekking suppliers, 2-star lodges, restaurants, etc. Those hundreds of cozy hotels drill private wells (illegal) to provide showers and western modern toilet facilities for oblivious clients.)

Foreign press may accept the 2.5 M figure since those internal migrants and Indians aren't here at present. Many are Nepalese who, as noted, returned to their villages to care for families and inspect lands/houses. We're told that almost all the Indian workers departed on busses and by planes provided by the Indian government. I don't know if this exodus was encouraged by Nepali officials, ie: if it was a plan. But the result is, in the short term, favorable. During normal times the city is filthy, strewn with waste, choked by dirty air, clogged by traffic, etc. Electricity is normally cut half a day; (called "load shedding", it switches from neighborhood to neighborhood for hours at a time in waves across the city with its schedule published in the dailies, and guess what—there's a phone app for it!) Today's depopulation greatly reduces stress on electric and water; so there's less likelihood of disease (from accumulating garbage), less chance food shortages and resulting high prices, hoarding, and panic.

Municipal water supply is totally, totally inadequate anytime. One needs a Kathmandu guide book to identify and manage the categories of water—drinkable, teeth-gargling, bathing, cooking, dishwashing, clothes laundering, toilet flushing- and anticipate the weekly hour when municipal tap (non-drinkable?) arrives. That's 60 minutes- a week: Wednesday at 5 am in our street. This isn't an earthquake condition! It's normal during the 8 non-monsoon months. (Foreign visitors including NGO-types never face this.)

Nepal has ~28M people. That means one in five resides in the capital—a heavy load for a city with shoddy infrastructure. Then an earthquake hits!

Today, by their absence, we're feeling the critical place of these city migrants in our routine. Because young men who drive taxis left for their villages immediately after the quake, taxis are few. It's difficult to get a haircut, I'm told, since it's Indian migrants who do the barbering, and they've left. Indians are the scrap dealers, gatherings and sorting waste paper and plastics for recycling; so we expect to see a resulting accumulation of waste in the streets in coming weeks. Indian migrants are also the main vegetables and fruit vendors who sell door to door and at residential corners.

(Remember the night-watchmen who turned me away from Mandep and Northfield hotels? That was likely because most service staff, village boys, had left for home villages.)

How many NGOs (international and local) do you think Nepal hosts? 34,000 is the estimate given me by Professor Rai. (Small wonder the government doesn't function.) With this quake, NGOs may increase — offering still more imported experts a handsome living, easy access to mountain trekking on their ample free time, and envy and admiration from folks back home. (Some of you have heard me rant about this scandal.)

There you are—basics to help evaluate international press reports. Meanwhile you can have a useful political sketch from my anthropology colleague David Gellner (<http://theconversation.com/could-nepals-messy-politics-hamper-relief-efforts-40903>)

I'm still listening and reading in search of a voice— is it called leadership?— that might emerge at a historical moment like this one. Where is our Nepali poet, our sports hero, our film star, celebrated author, lama or priest or shaman, our mountaineer, our professor or millionaire investor, whose words will echo off majestic peaks and roll through villages, down terraced valleys to offer these 28 million souls the vision, the strength, the unity and motivation they need? A decade ago, in an essentially bloodless coup, these people rid the nation of an incompetent despot king, and with a death toll of hardly more than 14,000 over 6 years, carried out a successful rural-based socialist rebellion to overturn a one-party royal dictatorship and launch democracy (without US interference—in fact the Americans and British supported the ruler). And, don't forget: Nepal produces capable, honorable dependable young women and men who earn respect wherever they work across the globe.
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