

Nepal: Earth Tremors Fading, Monsoon Looming

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Kathmandu is gradually repopulating with residents like Anil who left soon after April's earthquake. He explains that he returned to the capital from Chitwan (in south Nepal, bordering India). "I went for 20 days with father (also a taxi driver) and my stepmother; we have no house in the village, so we slept here", he says, gently pounding the steering wheel of his taxi. Small boned and lean like many poor youths, Anil nevertheless sports a silver earring, head shaved on both sides with his silky black forelock flopping forward. Just 18, Anil is a licensed taxi driver, having learned to drive at 15, taught by his father.

Today Anil's family lives in this vehicle and another his father operates (probably as tattered as this one, and also leased). They enter their former lodging only to cook, wash and change clothes, then back to the cars to sleep. Their rented rooms are unsafe to stay in. "Destroyed; like that", says Anil, pointing to a crumpled one-story brick structure we pass on the roadside. (His family is not yet able to think about a permanent alternative.)



Following the first tumultuous shaking of their land, many Nepalese had set out for the worst hit areas to find (and perhaps conduct funerary rites for) loved ones and to inspect ancestral fields and homes. Fearing more convulsions in Kathmandu Valley, Anil along with an estimated million plus residents (representing a large part of the valley's population) sought safety in distant native villages across Nepal and in India.

Nepal's capital—empty of traffic and commerce, absent its Indian vendors and factory workers, its tourists and cleaners and drivers—turned eerily stagnant for a month. Hearty permanent residents eschewed their workplaces and cafes to remain at home with families during anxious days and nights. It was hard for even the most self-assured citizens to not fear another calamitous eruption.

And it happened. The May 12th quake dislodged any sense of calm that had begun to ease fears after the earlier cataclysm. Although less severe, the second upheaval erased confidence in scientific assessments; it further destabilized and imperiled structures already cracked and it exposed dangers hidden within every dwelling—home, hospital or office. That May 12th eruption extended the first's destructive path, collapsing more schools, setting off deadly avalanches in Langtang Valley and damaging monasteries and houses in hitherto untouched parts of Solu-Khumbu further east.

By the end of May, relief efforts which had slowed after the second upheaval gradually resume; house and school inspections become more urgent and determined; pressure increases to clear impassable mountain roads; and demolitions, although sluggish and seemingly random, continue. All this while the government announces yet again that more assistance is on its way, although we see no sign that it's capable of handling the resources it has in hand. At the same time Nepal's United Nations relief coordinator appeals for additional international contributions.

There was no all-clear siren and no message from any source that we are safe. There's no report from recovery teams that all bodies have been retrieved, no cessation of tremors (however slight they've become), no assurance from seismologists or earthquake apps or weather reports that we are out of danger. Although rumors attributed to astrologers continue to circulate that forthcoming Tuesdays and Saturdays are ominous, we pass Tuesday and another Saturday without incident.

With a government announcement that schools should reopen by the first of June (whether or not structures are repaired) principals mobilize their staff and parents ready their children. Schooling would recommence, if only for a few hours a day, with each school deciding how to adjust to new conditions—physical and psychological— and deal with whatever traumas their pupils bring with them. Doubtless, the discussions I hear at Amrit School are repeated in all staff meetings. Teachers share stories of difficulties in their neighborhoods, yet they recognize how even without training they bear the additional burden of counseling their wards. Then, with several classrooms marked by engineers as unusable, they agree on a new routine to start. (They are luckier than others where tent classrooms are being erected beside the rubble of collapsed schools. It will take years for over a thousand damaged government schools to be rebuilt.)

Food supplies, blankets, tarpaulins, and essential household utensils are being mobilized for many thousands awaiting help. Although there are complaints about unfair 'selective distribution', teams of workers—private ad hoc volunteer groups and employees of service agencies—are laboring to ensure aid reaches the helpless and the deprived. For the coming months, several hospitals in Kathmandu Valley and beyond, with their added load of patients and damaged facilities, will, like schools, operate out of specially equipped tents.

A sense of urgency has emerged with the approach of a new menace: the monsoon rains.

“We have only a week or ten days to move supplies from airport storerooms and transport them into the hills. It’s not just the threat of water damaging our provisions; we urgently need to get trucks loaded, on the road and to their destinations”, explains N. Tendup Sherpa of the Himalayan Health and Environmental Services Solukhumbu. HHES (<http://www.hhess.org>) is one of many domestic NGOs forced to redirect its energies, in this case to support World Food Program’s efforts to get aid to outlying villages. “Once the rains arrive, these roads are treacherous; today, with hillsides unsettled by the earthquake, travelling conditions are more precarious.”

And so we have arrived at Asia’s time-honored monsoon rains: the nourishing, cleansing, drenching, unstoppable monsoon that takes shape at the highest points of these Himalayan ranges and moves south across the entire subcontinent. Everyone knows Nepal’s rains are due. There’s no doubt about their appearance, intensity and duration. Farmers need them for newly planted crops; urban dwellers normally welcome their relief from the hot dust and heat that has enveloped the city and polluted the air. These showers help nourish potted plants, ubiquitous in any courtyard and rooftop. Rainwater unclogs the grey, sluggish and stinking Bagmati River and Dhobi Khola meandering through the capital. The monsoon washes away the detritus of months of accumulated human waste and undecipherable rubbish and animal corpses that fill the waterways around Kathmandu and other valley towns. Rains fill dangerously low government reservoirs as well as rooftop tanks and other vessels set by individual families. Shortages and rationing endured for months will ease.

These rains brings wonderful sunsets too, and more flowers, although even during dry months, flowers—roses, sunflowers, mimosa, bougainvillea and many more blooms— seem to manage.

How much will the rains exacerbate the tribulations and suffering of these people this year? No one knows, but the fear is palpable. Without identifying new points of weakness, effective preparations are impossible.

Still in the traumatic grip of the earthquakes, uncertain about the stability of any dwelling, people move cautiously. The shock of the earthquake will not dissipate. An incompetent government of squabbling self-interested parties just worsens an already unstable condition.

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