The numbers are staggering: 600,000 homes destroyed, 20,000 schools in ruins, government buildings reduced to rubble, dozens of bazar towns that look like they were carpet bombed. And that was before Tuesday’s 7.3 aftershock which finished off the houses that were left standing. No one has even bothered to revise the figure. The work ahead to provide emergency and long-term shelter for 4 million people is going to be overwhelming.

Future reconstruction of devastated Kathmandu Valley towns, urban centres and district headquarters will need a different focus: how to brace non-engineered masonry buildings. The fact that so many of the reinforced concrete houses are standing and traditional clay-mortar brick houses crumbled after the earthquakes has bolstered public perception that concrete is good. But given shortcuts used in reinforced concrete construction, this may only give us a false sense of security. Most rural rebuilding will have to be (and should be) household-led. Proposed housing types should be specific to each community and use existing local materials and skills. Unless families have a sense of ownership the new construction will not be maintained and looked after.

**BRICK BY BRICK**

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he numbers are staggering: 600,000 homes destroyed, 20,000 schools in ruins, government buildings reduced to rubble, dozens of bazaar towns that look like they are carpet bombed. And that was before Tuesday’s 7.3 aftershock which finished off the houses that were left. No one has even bothered to revise the figures. As logistical hurdles and bureaucratic delays overcome to get more emergency shelter, medicine and food to the affected areas, attention has started turning to the enormous task of rehabilitation and reconstruction. As we report in this edition of Nepal Times, there is the urgent need for short-term emergency shelter so families can tide over the approaching monsoon and winter. Then there is the longer-term need for massive reconstruction which could be financed by remittances, government grants, subsidies and soft loans – all with the intention of creating jobs at home to stem the expected exodus of even more Nepalis going abroad to work (See Om Astha Rai’s report on page 16).

Short-term shelter requires coordination between government and agencies like UN-HABITAT as well as smaller relief groups in order to quickly cover the sheer geographical scale of the affected area. It is important that these temporary shelters not become permanent homes, and that people are given the financial means and technical assistance necessary to rebuild in the longer-term.

Future reconstruction of the devastated Kathmandu Valley to urban centres and district headquarters will need a different kind of focus: how to brace ‘non-engineered’ unreinforced masonry buildings. There is no strict code for these kinds of houses, but there are ‘rules of thumb’ that need to be followed and monitored. As Sonia Awale reports (page 14-15) the fact that so many of the reinforced concrete homes and traditional clay-mortar brick houses crumbled after the earthquakes has bolstered public perception that concrete is good. That would be fine, except that reinforced concrete construction demand that rules about preparing and using cement are strictly followed.

So, like everything else in Nepal, it comes down to implementation. The 1993 building code needs to be updated and enforced, masses must be trained in reinforcing brick and their work monitored, safer and cheaper designs need propagation. There many alternative housing solutions (some of which we have listed on page 19) but the trouble with alternatives is that they are difficult to scale-up to a national level and be accepted by the mainstream. The lesson from Haiti is not to have grandiose and expensive government housing projects. Efforts by individual families to rebuild on their own should not be derailed, and government must not be bypassed. However, the state must be put on notice that it can’t hatch reconstruction assistance like it messed up the distribution of compensation for conflict victims in which many genuine families never got help.

Most rural rebuilding will have to be (and should be) household-led under benign but vigilant state regulation. The role of local government in the districts should be to provide financial support, enforce technical standards, monitor reconstruction without actually building homes. Proposed housing types should be specific to each community and use existing local materials and skills. A lot of this is already starting to happen, and much of the reconstruction will by default use local materials. However, many will opt for reinforced concrete which needs training and oversight. Unless locals have a sense of ownership (of both private houses and civic buildings like schools) the new construction will not be maintained and looked after.

HOMELESS IN NEPAL

The challenge now is to provide both short-term shelter and long-term housing, mainly in rural areas but also in ravaged urban centres.

MARSHALL PLAN

I hope the remaining natural forests will not be destroyed or degraded during the reconstruction process ("Needed: A Marshall Plan", Editorial, #757). Reconstruction must be planned prudently with environmental sustainability and efficiency in mind, and without adversely impacting the ecology. This is an opportunity to make a change from the word ‘go’, and I hope politicians, government officials, planners, citizens, and the donor community will behave rationally and with foresight.

— Annapurna

Fire Bham Dev Gautam. The man has no experience in disaster management, people died due to his ineptness.

— Gopal

This editorial is spot on, but can be summarised in one sentence: ‘Incompetence is a general state and non-specific.’ Why assume that a government incompetent at education, health care and constitution writing would suddenly display competence in disaster management?

— Socrates

We should take this earthquake as an opportunity to think ahead and find new ways to face challenges surrounding us.

— Ketan Dulal

Disaster is an understatement. Has the current government got the mandate to govern Nepal? I think with this situation they are way over their heads. How much bigger wake up call does Nepal public need?

— Sanyek Shrestha

This is exactly right. Incompetence is a general state of being, and those in politics in Nepal are completely and utterly incompetent. Not fit for purpose whether that purpose relates to disaster management, healthcare, power supply, job creation, education, infrastructure, the economy. They operate a completely ‘extractive system’ and until they are completely removed and replaced Nepal will remain one of the poorest and least developed countries. The tragedy of this is that the country is full of resilient, hard working, caring people but who seem content to be led over the dfficulte line. What a disaster.

— Brian Metters

Thanks for this well-articulated masterpiece of an editorial, and an inspiring note to the youth to return and participate in rebuilding their nation. By then, the smile being squating on the high seats will remove themselves and go on a pilgrimage.

— Kesang

Our governments did not work for the good of all in the past. It does not at present. And I see no chances of it working for all in future. They should put one of those red dangerous building tags on Baluwarat and Singha Darbar – they should be condemned. We don’t need a plan like a Marshall Plan, we need implementation of the plans we have.

— Narendra Tamang

Excellent editorial. However, in Nepal right now I don’t see a leader who can handle a Marshall Plan type of work.

— Notra Thapa

SINDHUPOCALYPSE’S SORROW

Lack of efficient access to aid, combined with little public transparency or information can make things spiral out of control (‘Sindhupacchok’s sorrow’, Bhumiki Rai, #757). These local communities do matter.

— Kristine Hildebrandt

Most of the time, our leaders are busy enjoying asaka, drinking whiskey, jet-setting around the world and robbing us blind. Then, they were hiding in their rat holes when the people needed them the most.

— Chitra Bahadur KC

I the sorry state of the Nepali government exposed.

— Ante Gurung

Thanks again for your moving reportage of villagers’ suffering (‘Life after deaths’, Om Astha Rai, #757). Hope the Nepal government does not have deaf ears.

— Francesco Coles

DISASTER LESSONS

While I applaud Virat Thomas’ views and visions in the article relating to disasters in Nepal (‘Learning from disasters’, Virat Thomas, #757), I would emphasise foremost the importance to ensuring good governance in the country, which is unfortunately severely lacking. When governance system is largely in the grip of corrupt cronies, no means and measures whatsoever of mitigating disasters could be effective. After all, bad governance itself is a disaster.

Dr Ek Raj Ojha

You can have the best response teams, best disaster planning, etc., but when a national leader (Ram Sharan Mahat in this instance) says that NepQuake15 was an ‘unimaginable event’ you know the level of mendacity which has pervaded our society.

— Suresh

A new Nepal has to be born for young open-minded and good motivated leaders to rule (‘Earning back the people’s trust’, Tsoring Dolker Gurung, #757).

— Tashi Lama

A good name lost can never be retrieved.

— Gauri Nath Rimal

Even as we yearn for them to lead us and rebuild our country, we can be sure that these thugs will once again loot the people of aid money and relief goods. I will never forgive them. They do not deserve our trust.

— Barai Khukuri

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A city of three million densely packed into a Valley that used to be a former lake was always a recipe for disaster. The earthquakes were no surprise, what was surprising was the relatively low casualty rate.

One of the nightmare scenarios for Kathmandu was that transportation and communication would be hit and the capital would be cut off. That did not happen. Roads and the only international airport suffered minimum damage, electricity and phones were restored surprisingly swiftly. However, the most encouraging sign was the sight of Nepal’s young population rallying to deliver emergency aid – filling a gaping gap left by the government. Despite strong aftershocks still shaking the Valley and adjoining districts, young Nepalis were volunteering to collect relief and transporting it to where they were needed the most, sometimes at their own risk. Image what the demographic dividend Nepal would reap if we could channel that pent-up energy and commit it to nation-building.

At a time when a large swathe of country’s urban population is living in foreign lands, the spontaneous self-mobilisation of urban youth exceed the pressure on state agencies. The government and the bureaucracy do not have a kilo of flax for being late and disgraced with response. However, the scale of the disaster was such that it would have challenged even well-governed states. Nepal’s security forces deserve a lot of praise for putting their lives on the line to save lives. The country has been fortunate to receive immediate help from governments around the world, which have sent in their disaster relief teams to aid search and rescue operations in the remote districts.

But the last three weeks have proven that Nepal needs to strengthen its capacity for disaster preparedness and response. After Tuesday’s 7.3 magnitude aftershock triggered fresh landslides and destruction in Cotabato, Sindhupalchok, Rasuwa we have had a good opportunity to take a hard look at humanity’s vulnerability to nature and to take lessons from it

AFTERSHOCK

While I truly appreciate the selfless work done by our soldiers since the 25 April quake, a few questions have been bothering me (A state in aftershock, #757 by Victor Rana). Perhaps the Earth still has a lot to teach us.

However, the scale of the disaster was such that it would have challenged even well-governed states. Nepal’s security forces deserve a lot of praise for putting their lives on the line to save lives. The country has been fortunate to receive immediate help from governments around the world, which have sent in their disaster relief teams to aid search and rescue operations in the remote districts.

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The four-fold path
Could a stronger and more picturesque country emerge?

Nearly three weeks after the 25 April earthquake and the massive aftershock on 12 May, Nepal is entering the second phase of its recovery and reconstruction.

The government has established a National Reconstruction Fund to which it has allocated $200 million, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has pledged another $300 million and Japan has proposed to convene a donor group meeting. Despite this generous support from the outside world, the country’s recovery will take many years.

KUNDA DIXIT
CHENGDU – The epicentre of the 7.9 magnitude earthquake was 80km to the north-west, and everything swayed in the capital. Some older buildings crumbled. The tremors were felt 1,000km away in neighbouring countries. The airport was closed for a day, and then became the staging area for a massive relief operation. Highways were blocked by landslides, delaying emergency rescue and relief to the mountain communities in a remote part of the province. The earthquake hit scattered communities in a remote part of the country exactly seven years ago, severely damaged. Strong aftershocks, some above 6 magnitude, kept hitting the area for weeks afterwards.

Sound familiar? That isn’t a description of the 25 April Nepal Earthquake, but the one that struck China’s Sichuan Province exactly seven years ago this week at 1:03 AM on 12 May 2008. The earthquake hit scattered communities in a remote part of China that was largely untouched by the country’s economic boom, and killed about 300,000 people, injuring nearly 400,000.

An estimated 7 million people were left homeless. The most tragic part of the Sichuan earthquake was that it struck during school hours, killing 5,500 children.

Even though some 25,000 classrooms were destroyed in Sichuan on 25 April, a similar catastrophe was averted here only because the earthquake struck on a Saturday. Still, about 1 million school-going children will be affected and may be attending classes in Temporary Learning Centres from next month.

China’s emergency response was led by Premier Wen Jiabao himself, and was internationally praised for its prompt deployment. More than 3,000 people were rescued from the rubble in the immediate aftermath, and 100 helicopters were used in search, rescue and relief. Many who took part in the Sichuan relief work were part of the China International Rescue Team that was dispatched to Kathmandu on 28 April.

“We learnt many lessons from the earthquake, and some of them will be relevant for Nepal as it tries to deal with the aftermath of its disaster,” said Dai Yonghong of Sichuan University’s Institute of South Asian Studies. “The top agenda now should be economic transformation to build a beautiful Nepal in the future again.”

Indeed, China’s central government and Sichuan Province turned the crisis into an opportunity to invest $150 billion for reconstruction, rehabilitation and relocation of some towns like Wenchuan and Beichuan. An investigation into collapsed schools showed that contractors cut corners and did not follow building codes.

A unique aspect of the reconstruction was that Chinese cities on the eastern seaboard were encouraged to ‘adopt’ individual towns in Sichuan affected by the earthquake and invest in their reconstruction.

For example, Guangzhou adopted Wenchuan. “We unleashed the power of the whole country to help the reconstruction,” said Zhihui Song.

Of Sichuan University.

At a India-China-Nepal trilateral cooperation conference hosted by the China West Normal University this weekend in Nanchong, the discussions were dominated by how Nepal’s neighbours could help in Nepal’s reconstruction.

Participants felt that India’s advantage was its proximity, and China would help with its experience from Sichuan in rebuilding homes with construction equipment and financial assistance.

Rupak Sapkota, who is doing a PhD at Beijing’s Renmin University, said China should “think big” in Nepal’s hour of need. “Post-earthquake reconstruction of Nepal could be the first big project that the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank could be involved with in the region,” he said.

Could this disaster lead to improved governance?

If the country’s governance were to improve and appropriate policies adopted, a stronger and more picturesque Nepal could emerge from the crisis. This is a tall order given the poor track-record of the government in delivery of services, mismanagement, and coordination, but there is no harm in hoping.

Policy actions are required immediately on four fronts:

1. Since the government lacks credibility, there must be monitoring systems to oversee the newly-established National Reconstruction Fund. Watchdog bodies and community-based organisations should be in place to ensure transparency and accountability in the use of resources.

2. Nepal has been in political transition since 2006 and the end of the conflict. Local government elections have not been held since 1999. Instead, civil servants run the system from the capital. Corruption is pervasive at all levels. The Prime Minister’s speech to the nation a few days after the quake disappointed many, and several top political leaders were conspicuous by their absence in the early days of the crisis.

3. The most tragic part of the Sichuan earthquake was that it struck during school hours, killing 5,500 children. In school after school in Wenchuan and Beichuan, teachers and students were crushed or trapped under shoddily-built school buildings. At least 1,700 were killed in just one school in Mianyang. The loss of children was so serious in a country with a strict one-child policy that the government made an exception to allow the affected parents to have more children.

4. Nepal should strive to become a land link between China and India, and it was centuries before by improving connectivity both within the country as well as cross-border. Such a strategy would result in a more balanced development of the country. Nepal’s founding member status in the China-initiated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIBB) and its support of China’s Silk Road Economic Belt policy are steps in the right direction.

Nepal experiences a major earthquake every 100 years or so. The government had legislated a new building code in 1996 but the code was poorly implemented because of poverty and poor governance. An important lesson for other countries prone to natural disasters from Nepal’s experience is that there is no option but to be prepared. It is not good enough just to have laws and codes, they should be enforced.

Praduman B. Rana is associate professor and coordinator of the International Political Economy Program in the Centre for Multilateralism Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Lessons from Sichuan

If the country’s governance were to improve and appropriate policies adopted, a stronger and more picturesque Nepal could emerge from the crisis. This is a tall order given the poor track-record of the government in delivery of services, mismanagement, and coordination, but
Bibeksheel Nepali shows how it is done

A party of youthful citizens shows what it means to be committed to the country above self

through on its election promise of reducing the cost of utilities in the aftermath of the 25 April earthquake where the response was tardy, uncoordinated and inexcusably managed.

Nepalis are all concerned about the lack of accountability, transparency and responsibility on the part of the state. Already politically alert and aware about governance, the Nepali people are now so fed up that they have started looking for alternatives.

Can this angst against the state result in the ascendancy of a new political group or Bibeksheel Nepali in Nepal much like India's AAP?

The group that comes closest to pulling it off may be the Bibeksheel Nepali party which like its Indian counterpart started out as an anti protest movement. Led by young, educated professionals, the group first took to streets to campaign against national shutdowns foisted on the people by the mainstream parties. It took up the cause of exploited migrant workers, violence against women, corruption in public offices and advocate for citizenship through mothers, drafting of a new constitution through the very popular 'Occupy Baluwatar' movement, 'Nepal Unites', and 'Nepal is Open' campaigns.

These drives gained wide support via social media and became a meeting point for like-minded youth who though politically conscious weren’t involved in the system.

In 2013, the group registered itself as a party and four of its members (pic. above) including party chair Ujjwal Thapa filed

who stepped in to transport relief material for Bibeksheel Nepali in his SUV tells me: “I have seen how committed they are. It's not just for social media. There are volunteers who don’t sleep at night and spent hours packaging supplies because they have to be delivered in the morning.” Another decided this was the group to recommend to fellow nepalis in need. “They are completely transparent about their finances,” she explained.

Visit the party office at Maharajgunj any day and you will meet hundreds of young volunteers, all doing their bit to help fellow nepalis in need.

We started our relief work from the third day of the 25 April earthquake. We are now planning to move towards rehabilitation work.” said Jeevan Shrestha who has been coordinating the party’s relief efforts.

Bibeksheel Nepali shows how it is done
Back to school

SAHINA SHRESTHA

The earthquake on 25 April had already damaged the four walls of the Bana Higher Secondary School in Bhaktapur, and then the 12 May aftershock brought down one of the classrooms. While the upper floors look fine, the ground floor has cracks and the floor of the auditorium was raised half an inch. Since the school has earthquake resilient buildings, the beams and pillars are still intact, but Principal Ambika Nyaichya says the school’s labs are now too unsafe to use. She is unsure how to restart classes for the 1,000 students enrolled here. The government had said schools would restart on Friday, but have been put off by two more weeks after the after shock on Tuesday. Even so, there will be many schools in Sindhupalchok, Gorkha, Nuwakot that will not be able to open because 90 per cent of them have been completely destroyed. Eighty per cent of schools have been razed in Bhadgaon, and in Kathmandu Valley many schools are serving as temporary shelters. The government estimates that 24,000 classrooms were destroyed, and if the 25 April quake had struck on any other day besides Saturday, a lot of students would have lost their lives.

"It will take time to rebuild and repair the buildings, but more than that it will take time to get the fear out of children’s mind and get them back to school,” says Nyaichya. “My niece’s school has already reopened but she refuses to go back out of fear and parents are also unsure whether their children will be safe.”

UNICEF Nepal estimates that almost a million children will not be able to return to school immediately, but says going back to class and meeting friends again is important for children to overcome their fears.

"Going back to school will help children cope better,” says Tomoo Hozumi, Nepal Country Representative of UNICEF. “It also helps them recover from stress which when left unattended can lead to trauma in children.”

Since most of the learning materials at home and school are gone, UNICEF and its local partners are working to replenish those and restart classes as soon as possible in Temporary Learning Centres and child-friendly spaces in 14 districts, most affected by the quake.

"In these safe spaces children have an opportunity to come and be children. They can play and interact with their friends and peers. These spaces also give us an opportunity to provide key messages to children as well as caregivers,” says Marilyn Hoar, UNICEF’s Education Chief.

Child friendly spaces set up in Kathmandu and Lalitpur offer children a chance to be involved in colouring, playing games, singing songs and engaging in activities where they can have fun together. After the government announces date for reopening schools, these spaces will transition into learning centres where classes will come together with their teachers.

"It also allows caregivers to have a place where they know their children are safe and looked after, and that they can do good with other needs including food and in some cases finding missing family members,” says Hoar.

For other members of education cluster working in affected districts to set up temporary learning spaces, UNICEF provided tarpaulins, school kits (for school going kids), early child development kits for children aged 3-4 and recreation kits. Each kit comes with WASH facilities, and people involved in child protection work closely with children and caregivers providing them with psychosocial counseling.

UNICEF is also assisting the Department of Education on the structural assessment of school buildings to see if they are safe. Hozumi insists that when the schools are rebuilt, they need to be earthquake resistant and located in safe places.

"We need to build resilience and preparedness right from the beginning of relief, reconstruction and rehabilitation activities,” he says. "Contingency plans at schools can save the lives of many students and disaster risk preparedness needs to be a priority.”

Learning inside camps

The 25 April earthquake has damaged over 24,000 classrooms and UNICEF Nepal estimates almost a million children won’t be able to return to schools immediately.

With schools set to reopen only beginning of June, local initiatives like the Kathmandu Nepal (KIC Nepal), a non-profit organisation, which provides necessary supplies to students of public schools, have set up temporary learning camps.

Last Monday the organisation started an activity camp at Kanya Mandir School where 66 children, between the ages of seven and 14, participated on the first day.

Renuka Acharya, coordinator of the camp says all activities are based on fun learning. “Children will still be taught mathematics but in a ludic way,” she explains.

Pipra Regia, 18, an undergraduate student is one of the 19 volunteers running different workshops at the camp. “I support this project that teaches school children how to read,” she tells Nepali Times.

The project is called Resuming Schools, Resuming Lives as it indirectly also helps parents rebuild their lives. “Adults who have to take care of these children cannot look for new jobs or look after the repairment needed in their houses,” says Acharya.

Another purpose of the camp is to help children with trauma, as Umanga Pandey, chairperson of KIC Nepal explains. “Students can decide what activity they want to do,” he says. “We don’t want to traumatise them more by forcing them to do something they don’t.”

KIC Nepal’s camp is open to all students in the district. The group had initially planned to run the camp for only one month but will now continue for as long as possible and has plans to open similar centres outside Kathmandu.

“We understand that the hard-hit regions have other priorities now, but in time they will need education,” says Acharya. Stéphane Huët,
The weather gods thankfully took pity on people sleeping out in the open again this week after Tuesday’s aftershock, and the thunderstorms kept away. But we may not be so lucky going into the weekend when a low pressure system spawned by a huge trough in the southern subcontinent will also affect Central Nepal, bringing afternoon and night storms and rain. These are characteristics of pre-monsoon showers, when the prevailing wind is still from the west and there is moisture infusion from the Arabian Sea. The monsoon is still at least a month away, and that will give time for the government to provide shelter to earthquake survivors.

KATHMANDU

I t was Saturday and Kali Bahadur Pahari (pic, right) was at his home in Badikhel when a 7.8 magnitude earthquake shook Central Nepal. The first floor of his two-storey house was badly damaged. Luckily, his family escaped unhurt.

A long time employee of Everest Pashmina Knitting and Weaving Industry in Jharuwabasi, Pahari came back to work a few days after the earthquake. Like him, there were other employees eager to get back to work even though the back wall of the building where the sewing stations were located had collapsed and the main office and warehouse were damaged.

Fifty employees worked together to clean up the mess and get the factory up and running. An engineer was called who assessed the buildings and supervised the reconstruction of the back wall. Three weeks after the earthquake half of the 300 employees are back at work, producing handcrafted pashmina products.

Reopening the factory so soon wasn’t an easy decision for Santosh Gurung, owner of the small family-owned business in the south-west corner of the Valley. One-third of the workers had damaged homes and a seamstress lost her life. But seeing that his employees were eager to be back at work, he decided to go ahead with the production.

“Opening the factory was important not only for employees who depend on us for livelihood but also because we owe it to our customers to deliver the products on time,” says Gurung. “It is also the best way to begin the recovery process.”

Products made at Everest Pashmina are exclusively exported to countries like Spain and Luxembourg. “It will still take a few weeks to go into full production but at least we have started work for now,” says Gurung, who is currently busy rectifying the buildings. “Come end of the year the buildings will have been rectified to withstand earthquakes up to 9 magnitude,” he adds.

He is also collecting funds to help employees whose homes have been damaged to rebuild. “My customers have extended their help and for that I am forever grateful,” he says.

Robin Boustead, a customer of Everest Pashmina for nearly two years has launched a campaign in Indiegogo, a crowdfunding and fundraising website, to collect relief funds for earthquake victims in Nepal. His brand Mirror in the Sky caters to large multinational companies to small boutiques and will be donating 10 per cent of all sales to disaster relief programs in Nepal.

Boustead believes that combining emergency aid with long-term business partnership is the best combination of immediate assistance and helping people to rebuild their lives.

“We had planned to launch our Indiegogo campaign for our Signature Designs, but then the earthquake happened and really it became an opportunity to provide relief funds and highlight the need for business partners to stick by Nepal,” says Boustead. “The situation will deteriorate further if the overseas communities desert Nepal and we want to make a very vocal point about loyalty and support.”

Sahina Shrestha

SAHINA SHRESTHA

Encouraged by employees, factory owner decides to open workshop few days after the earthquake.

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Sahina Shrestha
A midst the ruins of what used to be their homes, Kathmandu residents sifted through the rubble to salvage belongings and raw materials to reconstruct new ones. Neighbours helped neighbours, even the youngest members of families lent a helping hand. Sometimes complete strangers stopped by for support.

Children helped their parents and siblings to clear sites of what used to be their homes. And in the midst of it all, people who lost everything had time to pause and smile and offer visitors tea.

The earthquake may have devastated Central Nepal, spreading death and destruction, but it also brought out the resilient and self-reliant spirit of the Nepali people to restore their homes, their heritage, the culture and identity of Nepal. The international goodwill and support was overwhelming, Nepal has lots of friends.

PHOTOGRAPHS by JAN MØLLER HANSEN

nepalitimes.com
READY TO FACE ADVERSITY (clockwise from top, left):

Father and son arrive in Bhaktapur, fleeing earthquake damage in their district to the east.

A woman in Bhaktapur smiles amidst the ruins of her house.

Two young women at the town square in Bungamati, which was severely damaged by the first earthquake on 25 April.

Children help parents remove debris and rubble from what used to be their home in Bungamati.

Mother and daughter clean up the rubble of their home in Bungamati.

Husband and wife with their baby at a shelter in Bungamati. Their home was completely destroyed.

This boy has been living in a temple courtyard in Bungamati under a plastic sheet with his family after their home was destroyed.
The Swiss have always had a great affinity for Langtang, ever since a yak cheese factory was established there in 1955, which is still running. I first trekked to Langtang via Sundarijal and Gosainkunda in 1975 when I came to Nepal to work for Swiss Development Cooperation. Langtang Village with its stone houses, carved wooden windows and shingle roofs was bucolic, the villagers had all taken their yaks to high pasture since it was summer. In Kyangjin, the cheesemaker proudly gave me a slice of hard yak cheese to taste, cut from a disc that would be carried over Ganja La to Kathmandu. That night we set up our tents on a flat meadow, the mountains glowed in starlight.

When I went back there in 2013, there were 40 new lodges in Kyangjin and many more in Langtang Village. There were more than 300 trekkers in Langtang that autumn, and the locals were busy, and the cheesemaker was happy to announce that there was shortage of cheese. I appreciated Langtang not just for the scenery and the warm hospitality of the people but also for the enormous biodiversity of the pristine Langtang National Park that goes from sub-tropical to bamboo groves, the birch and rhododendron trees alive with red pandas, and then the coniferous forests, the alpine meadows and the Arctic desert of the mountains.

Few visitors go to the other side of Langtang River from Kyanjin to enjoy several small lakes with crystal blue water reflecting the fluted ridges of Gang Chhongpo in the distance. I still cannot believe that the village is gone, but Langtang is still there and so is the indomitable spirit of the people of this incredible holy valley who will rebuild their lives and heritage.

Fritz Berger
I had never seen an avalanche like this

After

Details of the full horror of the avalanche in Langtang started trickling out a few days after the 25 April earthquake, a specialized team of Spanish mountain rescuers with sniffer dogs and forensic experts arrived in Kathmandu, and immediately took helicopters into this iconic valley 400m north of the capital.

What they saw on 2 May was a scene of utter devastation, an entire village of about 100 people had been buried under 100m of boulders, mud and ice. A huge chunk of the Langtang Lirung Glacier had broken off at 6,900m, building up through the moraine and tumbling over a cliff to the settlement below.

Shock waves preceding the avalanche of thousands of tons of ice and rock flooded the valley, straight down it had blown away dozens of houses with people in them. Such was the force of the blast that it lifted a forest on the right side of the valley.

“This was a multidimensional crisis, we had to deal search and rescue, forensic identification, evacuate the wounded and the survivors and get them on flights out of Kathmandu,” explained Spain’s ambassador to India and Nepal, Gustavo de Frutos, who was in Kathmandu for the past two weeks to direct the operation. “We are grateful to the Nepali Army, the Indians and the Chinese. We are so saddened that it wasn’t possible to find all the remains.”

This week, the Nepal Army evacuated remaining families from Kyangin, which is threatened by more landslides and avalanches following aftershocks. Settlements along the narrow gorge of the Langtang River near Ghoda Tabela and Lama Hotel, which were hit by avalanches and mudslides, have been completely destroyed.

The team made 12 sorties from Kathmandu in dawn-to-dusk search and rescue, but it was obvious that the village with everyone in it had been wiped off the map. The mission turned into retrieval and identification of the bodies of some of the hundred of villagers and trekkers. Some 50 tourists are still missing, and the Spanish team could find only two of the bodies of the eight Spanish trekker in Langtang.

Many of the photographs taken by the Spanish team are too gruesome to be shown, and there is a video of the dogs barking through the buried roof of what used to be a trekking lodge. Some of the victims had been blown right across to the opposite mountain side, the shock waves having torn the flesh away leaving only skeletal remains.

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Hi all, It has almost been 3 weeks since the big earthquake and the strong aftershock last Tuesday, we are slowly starting to get back into our usual routines, while there are still plenty of people who are concerned with how they will shelter themselves during the upcoming monsoon season because they have lost their homes. In such tragedies, we have philanthropists and helpful individuals out there, spending hours of their days calling, coordinating and delivering relief aid to those in need, hours out of the capital.

Altruism is an admirable quality in humans when we work to help others, it is something people do to benefit others without expecting anything in return. However, it is rare for individuals or groups to help without seeking any validation for what they have done. There is definitely more of ‘look at how I am helping’ than ‘look at how s/he is helping’. It is hard to find those who will help without seeking any credit and that is just how it works. Helping others is a very noble thing, though at times some get so busy promoting themselves that they forget the main purpose of the help. “I just donated Rs 100,000 to a cause” status update or posting pictures of self holding the edge of a sack of rice while giving it away is probably not the most modest way to go. But right now, some help is better than no help.

Please send me more questions to: askanjanaanything@nepalitimes.com or @AnjyRajy

Hello Anjana, I respect individuals who are going out of their way to help the earthquake victims and their families. But it annoys me to see so many of them posting regularly on social media about the help they are providing to the survivors – as if it was a competition. I feel they are more concerned with showing off what they are doing than actually helping others. I hate this cheesy atmosphere. Some say I’m cynical or insensitive, others say I’m in complete denial. But I feel I’m just trying to move ahead. What is wrong with me?

— FT

Anjana is a certified mental health rehabilitation technician and has four years of experience in adult mental health in Maine, USA.

TO THE RESCUE: A Nepal Army personnel carries an injured man for treatment at Bir Hospital on Tuesday.
Searching for a heart of gold

Dambar Krishna Shrestha

Ten days after the earthquake, my colleagues and I headed to rows of ruins, searching for any sign of life. We went there as journalists and relief workers, carrying supplies bought with funds collected from friends and families. At our car drove into Gorkha village of Nukwadi in the middle-of-the-night on 6 May. We ask an elderly woman (see pic). “I have collected from friends and families. Carrying supplies bought with funds there as both journalists and relief workers, received any relief at that time. We went to a purse.” She later accepted the money, refused to accept saying, “Why do you have tried to give her money, the woman initially returned the biscuits. ‘Please give these to others,’ she said and two packs of biscuits, I told her: ‘Eat these two packets of biscuits, I told her: ‘Eat these. Handing her a packet of instant noodles and our hunger subsided after seeing her. She doesn’t need it,” she said, her face at the window of the car. Although our initial plan was to eat first, and then begin distributing the supplies we had brought, our hunger subsided after seeing her. handing her a packet of instant noodles and our hunger subsided after seeing her. Although our initial plan was to eat first, and then begin distributing the supplies we had brought, our hunger subsided after seeing her.

When our driver Sam Kuncha Tamang tried to give her money, the woman initially refused to accept saying, “Why do you have to give me money when I don’t even have a purse?” She later accepted the money, tucking the notes inside her patcha. Her photojournalist Gunwala Bista tried to hug her but the woman threw her hands away saying, “What have you done, girl? Do you know that I am an untouchable Dalit?”

“Aama, what is your name? How old are you?” I asked.

“I don’t remember my name. I was four during the 1934 earthquake,” she replied. My eyes welled up, Dwmak was also teary-eyed. Sitting behind us, stood up comedian Manoj Gajuri looked somber. Never had I seen the man who is always making others laugh so serious.

The great earthquake has brought Nepal together. A lot of individual Nepalis not affiliated to any charity or the government have come forward to help with rescue and relief. Thousands of Nepalis living abroad have returned home with supplies, while those who are still outside continue to donate generously. Amidst the sense of shared humanity in the aftermath of the earthquake there are, however, some who are so greedy that they treat the tragedy as an opportunity to profit. They are usually the ones who are already well off.

In Kathmandu we saw people with luxurious apartments and bungalows fight with homeless people over tents. A woman tried to store owner in Nukwadi had no shame telling us to leave our supply of mosquito nets with her reasoning there were no mosquito nets higher up the mountains in Nukwati. Relief materials collected by a group of young entrepreneurs from Pashupati meant for distribution to remote villages in Nukwadi was seized by those who didn’t need it. In Sindhupalchok lodging relief supplies by young musclemen is common. There are also people who claim they haven’t received any help and continue to take packages meant for those in need.

In Gorkha too there were people who had already received tents, and food demanding they be given as much as another village who had received nothing so far. People who were bedecked in gold necklaces and rings were giving relief workers a lot of things they needed. I kept searching for the elderly woman in the crowd. But I didn’t find her. We set aside food supplies, and a blanket for her and left them with a local youth, Damodar Ghimire. We didn’t have to give her a tent because we heard she lived with whoever gave her a place to sleep for the night.

When the angry crowd started getting unruly, we took the remaining supplies back to the car. As our car drove back to Kathmandu, I kept thinking of the grandmother with a fear of gold who despite being in need herself thought of others first.

Relief superstar

Annapurna Post, 12 May

Under the initiative of Nepali actor Rajesh Hamal, relief materials worth Rs 1.6 billion was brought to Nepal on two chartered FedEx Express aircrafts, first of which landed on Saturday and the second on Monday.

The relief materials which contained large volumes of IV solutions, medicines, surgical supplies and other medical essentials was sent by American non-profit medical organisation, Direct Relief.

The medical supplies will be handed to Nepal NGO Possible that has been working to provide free quality healthcare to people in far-west Nepal.

Tears of joy

Sudesh Shrestha in Nawak, 11 May

Actress Sushma Subedi was present at Tribhuvan International Airport on Monday evening to receive the aid from chairman and CEO of Direct Relief, Thomas Tighe.

“FedEx has waived Rs 75 million, the fare of both the aircrafts as their commitment to helping the earthquake victims of Nepal,” informed SP Kalumnae of Possible.

Sonit Awal’s rescue on the front page of Nepali Times

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“They say the earthquake that struck Nepal on 25 April was 7.8 magnitude, but what Ramila Awal felt on that fatal afternoon cannot be measured on any scale.

Ramila had gone to a nearby shop before the NAWAPO, leaving her two children, 10-year-old Sonia and four-month-old Sonit, at home. Sonia was watching a Hindi serial on the tv and baby Sonit was asleep. Suddenly the home started swaying violently and cracks started to appear on the walls. Sonia ran outside, but realised that her brother was still inside. She returned, picked up her brother and started running outside. But the house had started to rumble by then, and she could not move her trapped feet. She held her brother tightly against her chest.

A wooden cupboard fell over Sonia and she lost hold of her brother, and she does not remember what happened after that. Ramila rushed back to see her house coming down, her feet trembled and she wanted to cry but no sound came out.

Ramila’s neighbours started digging through the debris to rescue the children. Half an hour later, they found a little leg covered with dust. As they dug deeper, they found Sonia who was alive but unconscious. Sonit was still missing, and although the neighbours dug furiously they couldn’t find him, and assumed the worst. They say the earthquake that struck Nepal on 25 April was 7.8 magnitude, but what Ramila Awal felt on that fatal afternoon cannot be measured on any scale.

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Amidst all these pain and worry, she smiled, consoles herself and says: “I don’t care what the earthquake damaged. That smile, consoles herself and says: “I don’t care what the earthquake damaged. That smile, consoles herself and says: “I don’t care what the earthquake damaged.

Two weeks later, moments after a 7.1 magnitude aftershock rattled Kathmandu yet again, I reached Bhaktapur. Everyone looked scared about the new shaking, but Ramila Awal was unflustered. She had come through worse than a mere aftershock. She was breathing. Sonit who was struggling in his mother’s lap.

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It was 9PM, and the survivors were preparing to sleep-out in the open. Just then, they heard a baby crying under the rain. Ramila knew that it was her baby. Nepali Army personnel arrived and started digging. Ramila’s newfound hope slowly ebbed as the soldiers couldn’t find her baby. She could not sleep all night, every second was like a year.

Before dawn the next morning, neighbors started digging again and the soldiers returned. They could now hear the baby’s cry. It was 10 AM when Dipak Rai of the Nepal Army pulled Sonit out of the rubble. He was covered in dirt and was not able to open his eyes, but he was alive and surprisingly unharmed.

Rai cleaned Sonit’s eyes, and dusted his clothes. Sonit was perhaps hungry and started sucking his own fingers when Ramila took him in her arms and held him tightly. Suddenly, Ramila could cry again, but these were tears of joy. She could cry again, but these were tears of joy. She could cry again, but these were tears of joy.

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Annapurna Post, 12 May
MUD VS CEMENT: Mira Maharjan points at her parent’s reinforced concrete structure in Patan that withstood the earthquake (right) and a brick and clay-mortar house in danger of collapsing (left).

SONIA AWALE

In a narrow alleyway deep in the heart of Patan adjacent to the ruins of a clay-mortar house, a four-storey concrete block stands tall, unscathed except for some minor cracks. In street after street of the ancient towns in the Valley, centuries-old temples and ancestral homes have been reduced to rubble right next to buildings made of concrete.

On another narrow lane near Mangal Bazar there is now a pile of bricks where there used to be a house with its first two floors made of bricks and clay. The owner had added three concrete floors on top of it. A family of seven lived there, and four of them were killed when the entire structure collapsed during the earthquake on 25 April. On either side of this house, two five-storey buildings made of reinforced concrete are still standing.

“We learnt during this earthquake that cement houses are stronger,” said 41-year-old mother of two, Mira Maharjan, who is afraid that her own brick-and-mud house may not withstand another quake. “But my parents live in a cement house, so I am not worried.” Maharjan works in Patan Museum and was lucky to survive the collapse of the east wing of Sundari Chok.

Because so many of Kathmandu’s concrete-built structures survived, it has confirmed public perception that these are structurally safer than traditional clay-mortar brick buildings. However, engineers specialising in seismic-resistant housing say Nepalis may have been lulled into a false sense of security with this renewed trust in concrete.

They say the way monads for reinforced concrete beams and slabs are prepared and the use of substandard raw materials may make these houses less safe in future quakes. Reinforced concrete in itself isn’t bad, but it needs knowhow and training for the buildings to be durable.

“The only reason reinforced concrete structures survived this time was that the intensity and duration of the earthquake was not as big as predicted,” said Padma Sundar Joshi of the United Nations Human Settlements Program (HABITAT).

“If the intensity was a notch higher and if the shaking had gone on for 10 seconds longer, reinforced concrete structures would have also come down.”

The 7.3 magnitude aftershock on Tuesday brought down concrete buildings already weakened by the main quake three weeks ago, and forced people back to shelters in open spaces. Maharjan had already gone back to her house, but returned to her shelter at the royal garden of Patan Durbar.

“I was taking pictures of the damage of my brick house when another one hit us,” said Maharjan. “I don’t know when I’ll go back to my own house.”

The problem lies with traditional masons who lack the training and knowledge to ready concrete moulds, and often do not know how to prepare joints for iron rods, they do not follow time limits on mixing cement, and design houses with unsafe cantilevers and unnecessary decorations. Joshi warned: “If we don’t change the way we work with cement in Nepal, building more reinforced concrete houses will lead to disaster.”

Bijaya Karmacharya is a Nepali engineer currently working for post-disaster housing in Bumla, and likes building homes to visiting a doctor. “If you need an operation, you go to a qualified surgeon. But if you want to make a house, why don’t you go to a qualified engineer?” After all, both professions are essentially about saving lives.”

Kathmandu already has a strict urban building code prepared in 1993 containing specific guidelines for the design, construction and mandatory rule of thumb (MRT) for buildings up to three floors. This code now needs to be revised and enforced.

Bijay Krishna Upadhyaya of the National Society for Earthquake Technology – Nepal (NSET) advised the Pakistan government after the 2005 earthquake, and said disasters offer an opportunity to reform housing criteria and enforce safety guidelines.

In Pakistan, reinforced concrete buildings collapsed even though it was an earthquake of much lower intensity because required procedures for concrete were not followed. The same could happen here next time,” he said.

RURAL RECONSTRUCTION

Seismologists have been surprised by the scale of the destruction in the mountain districts north of Kathmandu because they had expected much more devastation in the Valley. Now, they worry that many families will build reinforced concrete houses in district headquarters or in villages where engineering norms are even less strictly followed than in the city.

Upadhyay said: “If new reinforced concrete houses are not properly made, you don’t even need a 7 magnitude earthquake to bring them down.”

The big challenge for rehabilitation in rural Nepal now will be to make sure that people have emergency shelters for the coming rainy season, and that build safe permanent houses for the future (see box). “We shouldn’t just be promoting emergency shelters for the monsoon, they should also be warm enough for the coming winter,” Joshi said.

At HABITAT and NSET, experts believe that the next phase after emergency tent and tarpaulin is for the mass distribution of corrugated sheets which can be used for roofing of improvised houses made from salvaged bricks which can be recycled for building permanent homes later. Nepal currently produces 80,000 tin sheets every day, and this production capacity is enough to meet demand.

The Nepal Engineering Association (NEA) has deployed 3,000 engineers to go house-to-house for a rapid assessment of buildings to categorise them as liveable, repairable and ones that need to be demolished. After the earthquake and aftershocks, many families haven’t gone back to their homes even though they are safe or can be retrofitted.

Upadhyay reckons that one-third of the 600,000 houses that were either destroyed or damaged in the earthquake can be repaired, and this would be cheaper than rebuilding them.

"A CONCRETE FUTURE"
Cheap, light, quick

Two weeks after the 7.8 magnitude earthquake rattled central Nepal, attention is now turning to reconstruction of the estimated 600,000 houses that have been either damaged or destroyed. The government and relief agencies are struggling to provide emergency shelters suitable for both the approaching monsoon and winter, while trying to decide how best to ensure cheap, easy-to-make and safe permanent homes for the 8 million people in Central Nepal who are affected.

The scale of the need is overwhelming, and many survivors who have tents are now demanding tin roofing. Others have already started to rebuild destroyed homes with salvaged material, while some are using local bamboo and thatch to make temporary housing. City-based groups also offer a range of options for cheap, easy-to-build homes that can be mass produced.

Bamboo
Bamboo is perceived as a poor man’s building material, and is looked down upon. However, it is plentiful, strong and can be turned into light, cheap and attractive homes. There are many options available depending on the size of the family and can be constructed in three months, and can last at least 25 years. While a concrete building can cost Rs 3.5 million and nine months to build, a bamboo home with basic amenities will cost only Rs 500,000 and can be put up in three months after builders are trained.

Adobe
Mud has got a bad reputation after this earthquake because so many clay-mortar brick buildings could not withstand the shaking. Even though it will be difficult to convince people to go for mud, adobe housing can be butressed, made earthquake resistant and can be quite attractive. Mud construction is also light, and has better insulation properties. It just needs to be protected from rain and moisture.

Resilient Homes
Resilient homes is promoted by Himalayan Climate Initiative (HCI) with steel frames as an option for rebuilding homes and schools. These low cost, quick to construct modular prototypes can convert into permanent structures later. They are replicable and expandable meaning the owners can improve it when they can afford the time and money. The budget is comparable to current market prices for houses with the same floor area.

Earthbag
This method evolved from military bunker construction techniques is inexpensive and quick to put up. Earthbag schools in eastern Nepal withstood the 25 April earthquake, and temporary shelters made of earthbags have been used extensively in Pakistan after the Kashmir Earthquake of 2005. Plastic bags are filled with sand, stone dust, gravel and moulded into modular shape for stacking into walls. The roof can be made of bamboo, thatch or corrugated tin at the site itself.

Prefab
Prefab was the easiest and fastest to build, there were several Nepali companies offering this method of construction even before the earthquake struck along the seismic resistant properties of their homes in their websites. Pre-built wall panels can be transported and quickly assembled at the site with corrugated sheets for roofing. It doesn’t require water, bricks, cement, iron rods, sand or stone to construct. A typical two-room, one-bathroom home costs Rs 600,000.

Transitional hut
Everything Organic Nursery located in Kavre has come up with a design for transitional homes for families of five to six that could be used for a year or more until a permanent house can be built. They are expandable and the design is based on the traditional thatch hut (chhapri) and uses bamboo or wooden pole frame and corrugated metal roof. The walls are made of bamboo strips and are plastered with a clay/fresh cow dung plaster.

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Nepalis may have been lulled into a false sense of security about the strength of reinforced concrete structures.
When he went to work in Malaysia four months ago, Ram Hari Katwal had everything most Nepali men dream of: a house, a wife and two little children.

Today, he has lost almost everything. His wife Hima and one-year-old son Bikram are dead, his house is gone. But his five-year-old Biraj survived.

“I could not see my wife and son before they were cremated,” said Katwal with a distant look. “I wanted to return home immediately but it took me two weeks to get permission from my company.”

Katwal, 26, is now with his son in a temporary shelter made of timber and tin he salvaged from the ruins of his house in Melamchi of Sindhupalchok. He has decided not to return to Malaysia. It was only last year that Katwal built a house with a bank loan, and he went to Malaysia to pay it off.

“I have not paid off my loan yet,” he says. “And now, I have to take more loans out to rebuild my house, the government is never going to give us enough.”

One silver lining about the fact that more than two million Nepalis like Katwal are working abroad means that their families can use the money they send home to rebuild damaged houses. Many Nepali young men also survived because they were not here when the earthquake struck.

In village after village, women, children and the elderly are left to fend for themselves. This week at Kathmandu airport, every flight from the gulf and Malaysia was full of migrant workers returning home.

Migration expert Ganesh Gurung says remittance money will make reconstruction easier. “Nepali migrant workers send home nearly Rs 1.5 billion every day and this is the only reason houses damaged by the earthquake will be rebuilt soon,” he says. “Government compensation amount is too little to rebuild.”

Gurung says the earthquake will change the pattern of use of remittances, and lead to a surge in the number of migrant workers.

At present nearly 80 per cent of remittance income is used for household necessities. “Now, a large portion will go for reconstruction of houses,” says Gurung.

Although Sindhupalchok is the district with the highest number of women migrant workers, none of the 14 affected districts are on the list of top districts in terms of migration. But this may now change.

FACES OF LOSS: Krishna Silwal (top) paid his own way home from Qatar, but has to rebuild his house in Dhdhing before he goes back in a month. Biraj Katwal (below) now lives with his father who returned from Malaysia after his mother and brother were killed in the collapse of their home in Melamchi.

PHOTOGRAPHS by JAN MØLLER HANSEN PAGE 8-9