



Tremors in the Himalayas

Poverty-stricken Nepal faces an uphill climb after two terrible earthquakes, but its politicians and neighbors see only their own opportunities

by Animesh Roul and Akanshya Shah



TWO SUCCESSIVE earthquakes, first on April 25 of this year and then on May 12, visited death and devastation on the tiny Himalayan nation of Nepal. The tragedy took the lives of more than 8,000 people and left thousands more wounded and more than a million homeless and displaced. These earthquakes and their hundreds of aftershocks, which continued into June, damaged more than a million homes as well as the morale of a country known for its brave and resilient Gurkha people.

The earthquakes have added unprecedented misery to communities already suffering from years of political instability and economic downturn. The international community, especially Nepal's neighbors, India and China, have stepped forward with immense aid efforts. Nestled between the two great Asian powers, Nepal may benefit from their political rivalry in its reconstruction efforts.

The nation is nonetheless in dire need. The government and civil administration face a humongous task of infrastructure rebuilding, with needs including providing temporary structures for the quake-hit pop-

ulation, repairing damaged government buildings, and restoring destroyed historical monuments and world heritage sites like Bhaktapur and Patan.

In all probability, the volume of destruction is much greater than the official estimates. The country witnessed a number of its iconic UNESCO World Heritage sites and popular tourist attractions reduced to piles of rubble. Among the well-known Kathmandu landmarks destroyed by the quake was the 200-foot Dharahara Tower. Built in 1832, the landmark was cut

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down to a 30-foot pile of bricks. And many more historic Hindu and Buddhist holy sites were destroyed.

The most urgent task is twofold. First, the government has to send food and supplies to the remote villages—a process which will be hugely hindered by the upcoming monsoon season. Second, there are many villages that are no longer inhabitable, and the people now residing in camps must be evacuated and

resettled in secure temporary shelters that can resist the monsoons.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the U.N., the 7.8 magnitude earthquake, the country's biggest in 80 years, has left some 3.5 million people in need of food assistance—especially as the agriculture sector in the western and central regions were hit hardest. FAO also states that some \$8 million is urgently needed to help disaster-struck Nepalese farmers recover lost agricultural inputs and resume preparations in time for the imminent rice-sowing season. In addition, Nepal has suffered a loss of over \$420 million in the tourism sector. With trekking and Everest routes closed due to avalanches, a government report has estimated a loss of around \$10 million in the mountaineering sector, and the damages to cultural and historic sites have caused a loss of \$70 million.

The Aid Competition

In the aftermath of these devastating earthquakes, several humanitarian aid groups and search-and-rescue teams from India, China, and the U.S. have extended their support and expressed their willingness to assist Nepal in its reconstruction efforts. Neighboring South

Asian countries, including the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, have also reached out with what assistance they could offer.

More than 70 international rescue teams assisted the government in the initial operations. India's team arrived within several hours of the disaster on April 25. They ferried in aid workers and relief supplies, includ-

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ing medicines, meals, blankets, and tents, and rushed in experts to assist in search and rescue operations. The magnanimity of international support and humanitarian assistance was huge. There were suspicions, however, that relief efforts were not entirely altruistic.

Nepal shares an open border with India, and the latter considers it a buffer state against China. As with other smaller South Asian countries, however, China has emerged as an important player in Nepal's economic development. This has often led to clandestine clashes in Nepal between the two giants, with com-



Students practice earthquake drill, Matatirtha, Nepal



Dharahara, before and after the earthquake

petition in vital sectors like hydropower, tourism, and infrastructure development. Although India traditionally has closer ties with Nepal and accords the country special status, China's contribution to Nepal's overall economic development has significantly risen.

Soon after the disaster, on May 1, China announced that it would triple its \$3 million in aid to Nepal while dispatching a 215-member military rescue team comprising People's Liberation Army members to the country. Chinese President Xi Jinping was quick to express concerns and condolences to his Nepalese counterpart Ram Baran Yadav, promising that China "is willing to offer all necessary disaster assistance".

Neighboring India, which also suffered from the earthquakes in its Northeast region, quickly moved its resources to engage in rescue and relief operations in the affected areas of Nepal. India's National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) was at the forefront of the rescue operation, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi rallied his nation to his neighbor's cause with the words "Nepal's pain is our pain."

A full-fledged Indian Army humanitarian effort

was launched to mitigate the disaster in Nepal. Entitled "Operation Maitri", it was targeted at sustained rescue and relief operations. India sent nearly 200 tons of supplies, including drinking water, food, and medicine. Along with hundreds of NDRF personnel, reconnaissance and earth-moving equipment, makeshift tents, blankets, and makeshift hospitals reached Nepal by air or road within the first crucial 48 hours of the disaster. Operation Maitri turned out to be the largest relief and rescue mission undertaken by India outside its own borders.

Speculation was rife, however, about whether India's efforts were disaster relief or disaster diplomacy, purely altruistic or an effort to outdo China and impress Nepal in its most difficult hour. Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar insisted India's assistance had no ulterior motives, but that since India has the capability to help, it was doing so. Speaking to CNN, Jaishankar stated that India's aid had nothing to do with China but was a "gut reaction" to the tragedy.

Unfortunately the humanitarian efforts did not go smoothly. There were complaints of inadequate

provisions, lack of basic hospital care, and scarce medical supplies. The Indian government drew flack when custom officials delayed clearance for relief goods even though the Nepalese government had waived customs duties for relief materials to facilitate access. India's response, however, created headlines that put the Chinese army "on the defensive". A news story in Nepal's *Annapurna Post* highlighted Chinese reservations in the face of the overwhelming presence of Indian military personnel in Nepal.

Reconstruction Hurdles

The Nepalese government is faced with a humongous task, needing to rebuild around 10,000 schools and health posts. A minimum of another 500,000 private houses are to be built, for which subsidies and loans have been announced. According to the World Bank, Nepal's recovery needs amount to over a third of its economy. The Post-Disaster Assessment Need (PDNA) report prices the damage at \$5.15 billion, losses at \$1.9 billion, and recovery needs at \$6.6 billion. On the basis of the assessment, the Nepalese government has called for international help.

At the June 25 donors' conference in Kathmandu, titled 'Towards Resilient Nepal', the E.U., U.S., Japan, India, China, and monetary organizations

like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank announced reconstruction packages to bail Nepal out of its current crisis. The reconstruction efforts are based on the findings of the PDNA report, which highlights Nepal's need for both financial and technical aid. Nepal is requesting international support for its robust reconstruction plan, estimated to cost \$6.6 billion over a five-year period, according to the PDNA report. Over 36 countries and 24 donor agencies were invited to the conference.

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Observers are unanimous on one thing: the international or regional donors must ensure the funds are used for rebuilding Nepal's socio-economic backbone, not helping the political or bureaucratic elites of the country who could exploit the situation in their favor. Clamor for an independent body directly under the President or a former Chief Justice in order to ensure effective use of reconstruction resources is increasing in Nepal.

Nepal's government is not known for its effi-



House after the earthquake

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ciency. The country's democracy has suffered ever since its foundation due to political wrangling. Nepal's first Constituent Assembly (C.A.), elected in 2008, was tasked with writing a new and inclusive constitution. However, after years of inter- and intra-party feuds and extensions, the C.A. was dissolved in 2012 due to lack of agreement over the division of states within Nepal.

This resulted in the election of a second C.A. in November 2013. The recent earthquake prompted the political leaders to sign an historic agreement a week later that would divide the country into eight federal states. This agreement maintained that the boundaries would be decided in the future by a federal commission and that the names of the states would be chosen by a two-thirds majority vote in the new state assemblies. The Supreme Court of Nepal, however, found the agreement incomplete and directed the C.A. to decide on the names and demarcation of the federal states.

In the midst of tragedy, the political landscape of Nepal is once again in disarray. The country's ruling party, the National Congress, came under intense criticism from the people for its delay in responding to the disaster with rescue and relief efforts. The hope that the 16-point agreement had generated in the country, which could have ended years of political deadlock, has once again left the people in despair. The political uncertainty and years of instability have been further aggravated by the intense loss of life and infrastructure caused by the disaster.

The Nepalese government is facing an uphill climb. Even if India and China just want to boost their image in the region, Nepal could use their help. There is thus tremendous regional and international goodwill at its side, but the management and implementations of post-earthquake action plans remain a challenge for Kathmandu. In addition to efficient allocation of funds, the country needs to ensure it follows a lasting and sustainable development strategy. The 16-point agreement among the top four political parties of Nepal brought much respite to the people, but the nation's constitution drafting process must move ahead alongside post-disaster reconstruction efforts in order bring confidence and inspiration to a recovering nation. ■

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The Facts

Two successive earthquakes struck Nepal in less than 20 days, killing thousands of people and leaving millions homeless: on April 25, a 7.8-magnitude earthquake with its epicenter in the Lamjung district, east of the capital Kathmandu; on May 12, a 7.3-magnitude earthquake centered around the border of Dolakha and Sindhupalchowk districts. The Department of Internal Affairs has confirmed at least 8,583 deaths.

The Democratic Republic of Nepal is a landlocked country located in South Asia, with a population of approximately 27 million. Its capital, Kathmandu, which was hit hardest by the earthquakes, is the country's most populous city. Although the actual damage caused in the valley has yet to be ascertained, rapid urbanization and unplanned development in the capital during the last decade have directly contributed to the massive scale of damage.

The earthquakes affected almost 39 districts, and ten districts suffered over one hundred deaths. According to official estimates, 22,310 individuals were injured, 2,656 government buildings were fully damaged, another 3,622 were partially damaged, and 512,054 private houses were destroyed.

Speaking with Ram Sharan Mahat, Nepal's Finance Minister

"The scale of the damage was massive and the country's preparedness and responsiveness was almost nil," Mahat told THE GLOBAL INTELLIGENCE. The country is facing a \$7-8 billion dollar collective loss in its overall economy, which includes losses in infrastructure, tourism, agriculture, real estate, and more, he said. "It is a massive task of infrastructure rebuilding in Nepal." Although he claimed that at an aggregate level the government handled the situation well, reports emerged from remote parts of Nepal as recently as June that there still is a shortage of food and lack of access to clean drinking water.

Speaking with Dr. Govinda Raj Pokhrel, Vice-Chairman of the National Planning Commission of Nepal

"Once the PDNA is ready, we will go for full mobilization in terms of rebuilding," said Pokhrel. "All private and donor assistance can move ahead in collaboration and coordination with government agencies. We will develop certain mechanisms to prevent overlap in reconstruction work."

These earthquakes hit nearly 20 percent of the population, he said, and they have stifled Nepal's efforts to fight poverty. The World Bank estimated that an additional 3 percent of the population has been pushed into poverty as a direct result of the disaster.