

Nepalese family braves earthquake-ravaged terrain to bring help home

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Cousins brings supplies more than 100 miles to Muchhok, a remote village in the Himalayan foothills

May 5, 2015 5:00AM ET

by Tom Zeller Jr.

MUCHHOK, Nepal – After the heaving and lurching had stopped, after the wall of his home had disintegrated and the cries had begun to rise up from the rubble all around him, Thakur Prasad Badu says he ran toward the school.

He had been outside gathering corn when last Saturday's earthquake struck just before noon and leveled this remote community – one of hundreds of similar wood-and-stone villages that cling to the hair-raising slopes and carved mud terraces stretching out in all directions from Nepal's Kathmandu Valley. And he knew that a handful of teachers from surrounding wards had gathered for a meeting at the school, a U-shaped compound of one-story brick buildings where he had also worked as an instructor for decades.

“I saw that there was no school,” Badu recalled. “Only stones.”

Most of the teachers escaped. Four did not, and in the chaotic 24 hours that followed, torrential rains and a succession of powerful aftershocks punctuated a historic temblor that left at least two-dozen people here dead and the village looking like a war zone.

By the middle of last week, aid and supplies were only slowly – and by many accounts, haphazardly – penetrating the more densely populated areas in and around Nepal’s capital city of Kathmandu, where most of the more than 7,200 casualties occurred. A full six days after the earthquake, Badu’s ward, like myriad other smaller but hard-hit and hard-to-reach communities dotting the quake zone, had yet to see a single government representative, military personnel, or relief volunteer.

Whatever help has come has been delivered, often at great physical effort, by a diaspora of family and community members bearing supplies from the outside. It is a microcosm of the very survival system that drives much of the Nepalese economy. Burdened among other things by underdevelopment, a recent civil war, and a frequently venal bureaucracy characterized by corruption and political paralysis, a full quarter of Nepal’s GDP is cash transfers sent into the country by family members who sought better work prospects abroad – among the highest rates of remittance in the world, according to data from the World Bank.

With thousands of people still missing across the vast quake zone, and with communities large and small still languishing amid a lack of adequate shelter and other basic necessities, criticism of relief efforts in Nepal has begun in earnest. For its part, the government has admitted to struggling in its response to the crisis, but the head of the United Nation’s humanitarian and relief operations suggested on Friday that critics were underestimating the scope of the disaster. “The scale and devastation wreaked by the earthquake and the aftershocks,” UN emergency relief coordinator Valerie Amos told news agency Agence France-Presse, “would have challenged any government.”

Whether or not that’s true, the first substantial supply of aid would only arrive in Muchhok with the help of Badu’s son, Lokendra Badu, and other family members. They traveled more

than 100 miles from their homes in Kathmandu to the heart of Gorkha district and the rugged, 5,000-foot inclines of the Himalayan foothills – first by pick-up truck and then, when the perilous mountain road became too rutted and boulder-strewn for passage, by foot.

“Luckily I will be happy to meet family because they survived,” Lokendra said during a brief stop on the journey out to Muchhok, “but I feel for the people who lost their relatives, their friends, and lost houses, cattle, goats, buffaloes, everything.

“I’m bringing a lot of clothes, foods – and tomorrow my brother will bring medicine.”

The delivery was enthusiastically welcomed, but it was not nearly enough.

“I want to speak with you about the terrible came here,” the elder Badu, 60, said in imperfect English late last week, after the goods his son had brought in had been divvied up and another long night without electricity or even four walls began. His face was lit by a newly arrived lantern, and even amid all the wreckage, and seated beneath the orange plastic canopy – held aloft with tree limbs and bamboo – that now serves as the family’s shelter, Badu insisted on a personal sartorial elegance, donning a colorful dhaka topi and a formal sleeveless waistcoat.

“Every person here,” he said, gesturing out over the rubble that once was his village: “Very big heart.”

The United Nations puts the number of people in Nepal in need of humanitarian assistance at roughly 8.1 million, including more than 3 million in need of food assistance and nearly 15,000 struggling with injuries and unmet medical needs. Last week, the organization and cooperating humanitarian and relief groups launched an emergency appeal for a total of \$415 million in funds to help support the Nepalese government in

responding to the growing crisis, which destroyed an estimated 161,000 homes and damaged another 144,000, according to U.N. data.

With the onset of the monsoon season just weeks away, a rapid scale-up in relief efforts is required, the agency said, principally to provide adequate shelter to the most affected areas – a swath of territory that now officially stretches more than 200 miles from the Lamjung and Gorkha districts in the west to Ramechhap in the east, and from the Rasuwa and Sindulpalchowk districts along Nepal's northern border with China to Mawkwanpur district 50 miles south of the capital.

Lokendra Badu in Muchhok, Gorkha District.

Lokendra Badu in Muchhok, Gorkha District. Ivan Castaneira

The U.N. Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) team said Friday that its personnel had established a humanitarian supply distribution hub west of Kathmandu to service some of the hardest hit areas – including Gorkha, home district to Badu's village.

In UNDAC's May 1 report, the organization said there was a dire need for shelter, particularly tents and blankets, in Gorkha, and that some remote villages can only be accessed by helicopter. Forecasts of heavy rain in the coming days "will place additional strain on the people who have already lost family members and friends, as well as much of their belongings."

The U.N. also noted rising but unsubstantiated reports of looting of relief goods, and even inequitable distribution of relief within communities themselves – almost certainly based on social caste.

Any one of these challenges would make relief efforts following a natural disaster complicated. But the road to recovery in remote, rural districts like Gorkha – let alone the congested and poorly planned sprawl of the Kathmandu

Valley – is made more difficult by a long list of demographic, institutional and infrastructural barriers.

More than 40 percent of Nepal's population, and nearly half of all women, lack basic literacy. Nepal ranks in the bottom third of countries for life expectancy, 197th in per capita income, and 75 percent of the population depends on agricultural work. A quarter of Nepal's 28 million people subsist on less than \$1.25 per day.

A brutal, 10-year civil war that ended in 2006 and cost 13,000 lives did little to advance the country, and even after democratic elections and the abolition of the nation's monarchy two years later, relentless partisan bickering and a political system with a reputation for graft has stymied the adoption of a much-anticipated and sorely needed constitution. The country currently ranks 126th out of 175 countries on Transparency International's corruption perception index. In March, a British parliamentary committee recommended eliminating \$130 million in budgeted aid for Nepal unless "endemic" government corruption was addressed.

On the ground in Gorkha, these realities are amplified and compounded by other challenges. Only two hospitals, for example, serve more than a quarter million residents dispersed over the district's nearly 1,400 square miles. Roads are a deeply furrowed mix of stone, dirt and, depending on the season, mud – passable even in the best of times only by vehicles built for off-road conditions, or far more commonly for a population that cannot afford jeeps and trucks, on foot.

A rudimentary road connecting Muchhok to the river valley below was built 10 years ago, but it remains only occasionally passable during certain times of year. When the road is blocked or washed out, the simplest purchasable provisions – food, household items – require a rugged, four-hour roundtrip trek down the mountain and back.

In the aftermath of the recent earthquake, a partial collapse of the road halted vehicle access a few miles shy of Ramche ward and Badu's home. Further up the stretch, boulders the size of small cars, dislodged by the quake, added additional barriers.

Shree Prasad Poudyal (front) and Indra Prasad Poudyal and their family stand in front of his house that was destroyed by the earthquake.

Shree Prasad Poudyal (front), Indra Prasad Poudyal and their family in front of their leveled home. Ivan Castaneira

This sort of isolation can come with high social costs. Roughly a third of Gorkha's nearly 250,000 residents aged 5 years and older are unable to read or write, according to data published last year by Nepal's National Planning Commission Secretariat. Nearly half of the roughly 3,500 people aged 5 and above in Muchhok village are functionally illiterate – most of them women, who make up the largest share of these communities as men are more likely to leave for work in distant cities or, in many cases, other countries.

Meanwhile, the region's housing stock – while remarkably sturdy and well-maintained in the face of annual cycles of rain, mud, and even routine, low-magnitude tremors felt across the country – were predictably vulnerable to collapse, particularly for a region well-known to be at risk of a major earthquake. Virtually all of the nearly 1,000 homes in Muchhok village, from the floors and foundations to the walls, are – or were – made of mud-bonded bricks or stones, simple wood planks, or bamboo, according to government data. The most common materials for roofs: thatched straw, corrugated metal, or loosely arranged slate tile.

No official tally of Muchhok's earthquake damages has yet been made, but the devastation in the Ramche ward appeared to be very nearly complete. No structure surveyed escaped damage entirely. Virtually every home was uninhabitable.

Lokendra Badu, 30, sat hunched over a laptop Wednesday morning on the floor of his home, a one-room mobile office trailer purchased at auction and now perched on cinder blocks near Maharajgunj, a congested middle-class neighborhood on Kathmandu's north side. Sleeping mats and clothing were strewn about the floors alongside a low bed and a single desk, giving the place the feel of a college dorm.

He had been running his own Web design and computer services firm, which he calls Green Hub, out of an adjacent trailer, but the roof of that unit was now buckled and sagging inward – freighted with the rubble of a neighboring brick wall that had collapsed amid the earthquake's convulsions.

Now he works from his sleeping room and earlier last week, the place was buzzing with activity. As Lokendra obsessively managed and tracked progress at a crowdfunding page he'd created on behalf of the earthquake victims in Gorkha, a steady stream of visitors – mostly extended relatives – came in and out of the trailer to discuss a planned excursion to the district where many of them were born.

Being male and the son of a teacher, Lokendra was among the lucky residents of Muchhok to have been nudged out of the village at a young age. "My father wanted me to come here to Kathmandu, to live with my uncle," Lokendra recalled. "He said it was important to learn English and to go to a good school."

A cheerful man with boyish features and a seemingly bottomless store of energy, Lokendra studied information technology in Singapore. There, he acquired a sort of entrepreneurial fervor that, when combined with his wry sense of humor, proved well-suited to disaster response.

"This is some of our village pictures, and these are like, the – worst pictures I have ever seen," Lokendra said, scanning the images he's received from community members in Gorkha, and which are now posted at IndieGogo.com. "This is my friend's

house – it got broke. And this was my school where I used to study in my childhood. Now it's just this – nothing there. Crazy.”

He has garnished the page with statistics gleaned from some early post-earthquake estimates for the Gorkha district: Some 200 people dead, more than 1,000, injured, around 30,000 left homeless.

The most recent official estimates put the number of dead in Gorkha at 410.

“No food, no clothes, no medicine, no people to help,” Lokendra said. “And no government – not much government effort there. That's why I started this project.”

Himlal Podel and Tilkumari Podel stand in front of the rubble that was their home.

Over the course of the preceding days, a substantial cache of supplies had accumulated at his uncle's home, dropped off by Kathmandu residents with connections to Muchhok and nearby villages. The provisions included dozens of desperately needed plastic tarps that would serve as shelter for many months to come; clothing to replace what now lay beneath layers of rock and mud; mats, blankets, and candles for the long nights villagers will spend sleeping without walls, and without electricity, in the chilly shadow of the Himalayas; and sacks of rice and other food staples.

After the materials were loaded into the back of a pickup truck, covered with a piece of green carpeting and tied down with rope and twine, Lokendra attached a printed sign to the load: “Earthquake Rescue, Muchhok, Gorka.”

Knowing the roads would be rough, washed out and often perilously narrow as they skirt sheer, 1,000-foot rises through the mountains, the Badu family hired a driver for the excursion. By mid-day Wednesday, Lokendra, along with his

cousins Sujan Bhattarai, a 20-year-old student, and Ishowni Prasad Amgai, 35, a civil engineer in Kathmandu – both Muchhok natives – were inching their way through the thick smog and persistent congestion leading westward out of the Kathmandu Valley.

Along the way Ishowni's and Lokendra's minds crackled with ideas for improving the lot of the villages. They traded thoughts on the construction of modest, earthquake-proof housing that poor residents could afford, and they hatched plans – vague but impassioned – for getting such an effort off the ground. And the group stopped at various points along the way, first to wait for daylight before tackling the notoriously difficult and unpaved road ahead, and later to gather a few more supplies – some rice, more medicine – from residents on the approach to Muchhok.

When a washout of the road prevented the truck from pushing on further, the team unloaded the supplies and set off for the final leg on foot. After an hour-long upward slog, Lokendra met his father, who was seated on the ground providing an account of the village's casualties to a Nepali radio reporter. A group of residents gathered around the pair, while the twisted profile of the now flattened school loomed 50 yards up the road.

“It's very terrible. Very surprising,” Ishowni said as he surveyed the tangle of beams and bricks and corrugated metal where he'd spent much of his formative years. “I had studied here from grades 1 to 10. Now it's gone.”

So, it turns out, was nearly everything else.

A group of older teenage boys and younger men were dispatched down the mountain to load the dozen or so heavy sacks and boxes onto their shoulders and carry them up, while Lokendra pressed toward his home in the Ramche area of Muchhok. The house was uninhabitable, with the west-facing wall blown out

and the structure itself made dangerously unstable.

“There used to be a lot of people living in this house,” Lokendra said as he surveyed the damage. “It was a very happy house, as you can see. Now it’s all broke up. It’s sad to see this.”

That the house was standing at all might be considered a small miracle.

Puni Devkota stands in front of her home.

Puni Devkota stands in front of her home. Ivan Castaneira

Just a few hundred feet down the mosaic of mud walls and paths that form the steep terraces of rice and corn in Ramche, Puni Maya, 72, a widow, stood in front of her buckled and leaning house. The south-facing wall had collapsed inward, inundating the living space with stones and debris, and the platform where she now slept stood exposed in the open air nearby. She asked plaintively for a tarp and some food.

Nearby, 38-year-old Mitralal Devkota, a former teacher and farmer, shuffled amid his own ruins, picking up bricks and moving timbers in what appeared to be a dazed and half-hearted effort to re-establish order. A makeshift collection of wooden planks and a tumble of blankets revealed where his family had slept the night before, also without a roof.

Sansari Nepali, 40, sat on a nearby bluff, stoically watching Lokendra as he surveyed the shambles where her family had, only days before, celebrated her daughter Aiti’s completion of the 10th grade – a proud achievement and often the terminal point of education for many Nepalese.

Aiti was crushed to death in the earthquake.

Similar scenes and stories mingled with an air of desperation and discord when the supplies began to drift into the village. Lokendra laid a large tarp onto the wet ground and dumped out bags and boxes of clothing, after which a dozen or so

villagers eagerly plucked through the offerings. One woman snatched up a pair of bright blue corduroy pants and held them up against her son, who was about five years old. He looked up and beamed.

Lokendra tried to keep control of the store of other supplies, but soon enough – and after some heated discussion over who should get what – everything had been spirited away and absorbed into the menagerie of lean-tos, livestock stables and other impromptu shelters that now typify life in Ramche.

“I feel really sad, man,” Lokendra said. “This is terrible.”

Rumors of looming helicopter deliveries and follow-up aid convoys continued to percolate throughout the community into the night, though none proved correct. On Thursday evening, before a meal of chicken and rice, the elder Badu laid out a long list of still pressing needs – both material and psychological. “We need a school for the children,” he said. “We need medicines and some sort of clinic. They need hope, tents, more food supplies.” He added that the community remains traumatized – “Earthquake-phobia,” Badu called it – and that the mere sound of a buffalo bumping the side of its stable was enough to send villagers running. “It’s coming! It’s coming!” remains a common cry in the night, Badu said.

With Lokendra translating for his father, Badu added that he doesn’t really blame the government for failing to help his village so far. “They don’t have brains, and they’re dirty politicians, so they can’t help a village like ours,” he said. “All things go with God.”

When asked if he expected any assistance beyond what God might offer, he gestured to Lokendra. “Only personal,” he said.

This story was supported in part by The International Reporting Project.