

Aftershock: Nepal's Forgotten Earthquake Victims

In Nepal, tens of thousands of people still live in shanty settlements, a year after the 7.8 earthquake rocked the country and killed over 9,000 people.

Now, over 8,000 people live under tarps in Kathmandu's largest displacement camp with no access to electricity, running water, education, or a steady food supply. Yet everyday the population of the camp grows.

"Five or ten new numbers are painted every day," says Ragu Kami, a 33-year-old farmer, who's been living in one of the six displacement camps for the last eight months. "A family comes at night, waits in line until the next day. When UNICEF finally meets with them they give them their rations, a tent and after [the family] sets up their tent, UNICEF paints a number on it. See?"

Ragu points to "1,843" spraypainted yellow on the top of his blue tarp.

But that was six months ago, as UNICEF has shuttered most of its offices in Kathmandu and haven't handed out food rations in the past 4 months. Despite the departure, the number of people moving to the camp grows everyday.

"You can tell which families came here after UNICEF [left]. They brought their own tents. The ones that don't have a number."

This is the reality for thousands of Nepali citizens, any of the 750,000 people whose homes were destroyed during the earthquake and now live in dedicated, emergency housing areas, spread throughout the country.

The displacement camps were the first step enacted by the Nepali government under its reconstruction plan, a four-step relief program, aimed at re-housing and job training. But a year later, the residents of the camp say the plan was a fairytale.

"We were told four months—*four*," said 16-year-old Nepali, Rohan Beniya, "We've been here for almost fourteen month! This is [the government's] plan! In the rainy season our floors become a pool. Water rushes in and we must hold our blankets in the air. In the summer it is too hot to even lie down. In the cold season we must all sleep together to stay warm."

Families like the Beniayas have been playing a waiting game since the earthquake struck in April 2015. His two sisters, brother, and mother all live in one of the tents pitched in this camp. The number "2620" is painted on the top of his tarp.

Rather than tend to the victims, the government prioritized ratifying a new constitution, to replace the Interim Constitution created in 2007.

This led to an eight-month stalemate among federal officials to appoint the National Reconstruction Authority, who would've been in charge of utilizing the \$1 billion set aside from the \$4 billion donated overall, for reconstruction.

The constitution disputes riled the Nepali citizens into protests, specifically near Nepal's southern border, where protests turned violent and forced the neighboring country of India to enact a blockade of Nepal's key transport lines.

Supplies of gasoline, cooking oil and medicines became scarce; plans for infrastructure renovation stalled, aid organizations were left without fuel for their supply trucks, and the number of people moving to the camps ballooned.

While the Nepali government scattered to settle the country's political and social unrest, aid organizations ran out of supplies and funds and were forced to abandon the earthquake victims, according to Reuters.

"Do you see any [government] here?" said Beniya, as he stood outside of his tent in over-sized khakis and a once-white polo shirt, "Do you see food, water or medicines? No. Only tents and five public toilets. We are here alone."

This was not the original plan promised by the Nepali government. After the 7.8 quake report, Reuters reported close to \$4.1 billion was donated within a week and millions more poured into the country in the months following.

"All earthquake victims were supposed to receive 200,000 Nepalese Rupees (\$2,450)," said Joshua Pradhan, a student studying international politics at Tribhuvan University in Nepal, "Most of this money can now be found in government officials' bank accounts."

Lokmi Pokharel is a 42-year-old earthquake victim, also living in the displacement camp, showed me the inside of her tent and confirmed Pradhan's claim.

"[The government] told us we would be given money for the things we lost," said Pokharel. "I received nothing. I am still living here. No job. No house. No money. And look at this. At least we can see the stars!"

Pokharel points to a hole in the top of her tent. Two quilts spread on the dirt floor, a bundle of pillows, a tire-sized basket of raw rice, one pot, a single light bulb wired from who-knows-where, and a few, scattered water bottles, all empty.

In Pokharel's eyes, water is the largest concern, "You should see how people act here when it rains."

The National Cooperative Development Board, the government entity in charge of coordinating bottled water deliveries to the relocation camps, have completely vanished. Now the camp's population relies on inconsistent water deliveries made by the Nepali army. The army schedules weekly trips to resupply a public well; however, according to Pokharel, the army hasn't been seen in two months.

"[The] NCDB gave bottled water [up to] a month ago," said Pokharel, "Now they're out of here. We pray the army comes, but that can't be trusted."

Scars caused by the earthquake could still be seen all over the city, as buildings stood missing roofs and walls, large cracks furrowed in almost all roads and Durbar Square, the historic heart of the city, sustained severe damage. The city's oldest palace, Hanuman Dhoka, had collapsed and still had not reached full repair in July 2016.

"It was complete destruction," said Pradhan, reflecting on the day and the weeks to follow the earthquake. "Most of the houses in Nepal are very old and were built by the ancestors of the family and passed down through generations. Those were the first to go. A lot of schools were destroyed, classes were discontinued for months."

The earthquake was the largest in the country's history and exposed the lack of an emergency strategy.

"There were a lot of aftershocks, ranging from 4-7 in magnitude," said Pradhan. "To avoid falling buildings and houses, people of the community moved to the open grounds and paddy fields. Imagine an entire town of people crammed together on a football field. That was Nepal weeks after the earthquake."

To add to the proliferation, controversy surrounds the reported magnitude of the earthquake.

At first the quake was reported by media outlets as reaching 8.1-8.2; however, the reports were quickly denounced by the Nepali government and reaffirmed at 7.8.

According to international law set by the U.N., if the magnitude of an earthquake reaches 8.0 or higher, then all affected victims are entitled to full reimbursement for the destruction of their housing situation and personal items. Moreover external countries, organizations and their resources are allowed a larger role in interceding with aid and reconstruction of the affected country.

If the earthquake is below an 8.0, then the affected country's government decides how and where to use international aid.

"There are still people living out in the streets," said Pradhan. "The [victims] need food, water and mostly a government that will take care and do what they promised they will do. It's been more than a year and a half. The suffering needs to end."