



A girl jumps down a footpath beneath a small shrine in one of the lanes of Makaiapur. JESSE PESTA/
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Isolated Nepal Villagers Wait and Worry After Quake

**Famed Gorkha village becomes a distribution point
For aid to some of the hardest hit areas**

By JESSE PESTA

GORKHA, Nepal—On a mountain ridge just outside town recently, Rajmaya Kandel climbed a tree with her husband to gather berries to eat.

“All the houses are collapsed, what else can we do?” said Ms. Kandel, 40 years old, from near the top of the spindly tree. The couple lost their home in the devastating magnitude-7.8 earthquake that struck Nepal a week ago.

High in the mountains, the tiny town of Gorkha boasts a nation-defining history. The king who nearly 300 years ago shaped modern Nepal hailed from here. His historic palace and temples still attract pilgrims.

Today, the quake gives Gorkha a new role of national importance: Central distribution point for aid to some of Nepal’s hardest hit areas.

Vehicles lumber in carrying tents and medicines, baby clothing and water-purification kits. Then the aid flows right back out—by truck, tractor, and occasionally by donkey, into the Himalayas where villages lie flattened and inaccessible.

The rescue activity takes many forms. Sitting in the Gorkha Welfare Scheme office, Hon. Lt. Tirtha Thapa coordinated aid last week for the many retired British soldiers who live in remote villages here.

For generations, the British have come here to recruit soldiers, who are known as Gurkhas and are renowned for their fighting skill. Some 500 British military pensioners live in the hills, Hon. Lt. Thapa said.

Nepal is known in the world for two things, “Mount Everest, and that it is the country of the Gurkhas,” he said, sitting

beneath a framed, black-and-white portrait of a young Prince Charles and Lady Diana.

Late last week, Hon. Lt. Thapa dispatched four reconnaissance teams to hike into inaccessible areas to offer help. Thursday afternoon, his phone rang. It was a team reporting in. They had failed to reach their target destination. A landslide in progress blocked the way.

Hon. Lt. Thapa, told the team to redirect westward. Then he picked up a pointer and turned to a map. The team is “somewhere here,” he said, pointing to an area near China.

Outside the Gurkha Welfare Scheme office, Rambahadur Shrestha, 66 years old, waited to see Hon. Lt. Thapa because his house in the nearby village of Makaipur is badly damaged. Hon. Lt. Thapa gave him 2,000 Nepalese rupees, about \$20, toward buying a tent.

At first glance Mr. Shrestha’s village, Makaipur, looks sound. Most of the colorful, stone homes remain standing amid terraced fields where corn and millet are grown.

A closer look, though reveals crumbled or collapsed walls in almost every building. Of his own 25-year-old home, Mr. Shrestha said, “Any moment it could fall down.”

A half-dozen villagers sat on a stone wall behind Mr. Shrestha’s house, talking about the crisis. They share the surname Shrestha but aren’t immediately related.

They hope the government will help them rebuild their homes. Loans won’t work, they agree: Interest rates range from 15% to over 20%, they said, depending on whether you go to a bank or a loan shark. “We couldn’t pay it back,” Rambahadur Shrestha says.

They also agree they’re luckier than many. Only one person died in Makaipur. “The government is trying to identify the neediest first, so it hasn’t reached us,” said Deunarayan Shrestha.

Still, that’s a generous thought. His family is living in a tent. The village school is a pile of rocks.

Back in Gorkha, as dusk fell Thursday a police sub-inspector walked up the street, having spent the day evaluating homes



The village school has largely collapsed. This room, still partly standing, held a language class—the word on the chalkboard is “Nepali.” JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



A resident of Makaipur sits in front of her home, which is uninhabitable. Although it looks undamaged, the wall directly behind her has crumbled inward, leaving the roof unsupported. JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



Just outside Gorkha, a husband and wife climb a tree to collect wild berries to eat after the quake. The mountainside here is so steep, passers-by stood eye to eye with the couple even though they were at least 10 feet high up in the tree. JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

for damage. “I checked 50 homes today,” he said. “Only 12 are habitable.”

His test of habitability was rudimentary. Houses that people are willing to enter are listed as “slightly damaged,” said the officer, Narishor Aryal. “Those that no one will enter, those are ‘completely damaged.’”

Friday morning, above Gorkha at the historic palace of the king Prithvi Narayan, a man walked down the stone steps, carrying a headless goat. The animal had been sacrificed moments earlier as part of a ritual that takes place here most days.

A priest followed, chatting with a worshiper, Mina Thapa, about something that troubles them both. The palace survived the quake, but it destroyed an important temple here, and damaged two others—one to Kali, the Hindu goddess of strength, and one to Gorakhnath, a religious figure from whose name the word Gurkha derives.

The temple damage “is an immense loss,” Ms. Thapa said.

She had traveled an hour to attend the sacrifice, she said, as a vow “to alleviate the pains and sorrows in my family.” The earthquake toppled her home.



Villagers who have lost their homes in the earthquake and are low on food collect berries like these along a dirt road near Gorkha. PHOTO: JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

There were premonitions of the quake here, says Ganesh Prasad Bhattarai, the government official in charge of the palace grounds. Five days earlier, the carved-stone peak of one of the temples fell, he said.

Yet it remained unbroken. “It was as if someone had picked it up and placed it on the ground,” said Mr. Bhattarai, 50. “It was an indication that something bad was going to happen.”

Mr. Bhattarai opened a storage room to show the fallen object. The electricity didn’t work, so he held a cellphone to light the relic.

He places some blame for the disaster on human behavior. “We went against nature,” he said.

His friend Vihnu Prasad Khama, sitting nearby, agreed. “People are being selfish, money-minded. We are dishonest. That’s why nature is angry.”

A horse nibbled on the lawn. Mr. Bhattarai’s 20-year-old son, Umesh, joked: “Maybe we shouldn’t live in Nepal.”

Everyone laughed.

Umesh Bhattarai represents a changing Nepal. In a few weeks he’ll be taking an English-language exam in hopes of going to Australia for college to study nursing. Would the father consider following the son to Australia? “Maybe, we’ll see,” the elder Mr. Bhattarai said.

The royal palace, decorated with wood carvings and erotic poses, still stands. But its walls are cracked and askew.

Mr. Bhattarai fears that the properties will need to be disassembled and rebuilt. “That could take at least 10 years,” he says, walking the grounds.

Bricks, tiles and wood lie scattered. Mr. Bhattarai pauses at a pile of rocks—a temple destroyed by the earthquake. No hint of a structure remains. “Rebuilding this will be very difficult,” he says.

And then, Mr. Bhattarai expresses urgency. Aftershocks remain a problem. “We shouldn’t stay here,” he says. “Even a small jolt could bury us.”