

PARTNER PLAN

Malcolm & Cati Ramsay - Nepal February 2016

c/o United Mission to Nepal
PO Box 126
Kathmandu
Nepal

Dear Friends

Malcolm writes: On a personal note 2016 has begun very differently for us from what we expected: we have just come back from Bangkok where I went for knee surgery.



Slow and steady!

Back in May last year I wrenched my knee playing tennis. For more than three months I did intensive exercises prescribed by a very good physiotherapist here in Kathmandu, but the problem if anything got worse rather than better. Life here can be very stressful, and we have found that daily vigorous exercise is an essential way of trying to cope with some of those pressures. But my injury meant that I was completely unable to exercise as I had before. I could not play tennis, or run, and my swimming and cycling were severely curtailed. An MRI revealed that I had a torn meniscus, and eventually the Church of Scotland insurers sent me off to Thailand for surgery.

I was very glad that the insurers made this decision. In the whole of Asia Bangkok is highly regarded for medical treatment. Many insurers send their patients there, and it is also a centre for 'medical tourism.' So, as anticipated, we were extremely impressed with the standard of the surgery, the hospital care, and the follow-up physiotherapy. More than that, we were very grateful for it. What a contrast (I am very sad to say) with the kind of medical treatment that is available in Nepal. The same is true of travelling: at Bangkok I was lifted into the plane in my wheelchair on a luggage hoist. But at Kathmandu I had to descend the precipitous 20 or so steps down the mobile staircase to the runway on my crutches!

However the surgery was much more extensive than I had anticipated, with the result that I am not allowed to weight-bear for five weeks from the operation. So I am working from home, where I can do computer work, and we are carrying on with our pastoral work as much as we can by inviting people to our house for coffee and cake or meals. Cati of course is looking after me wonderfully well! However she is being kept exceptionally busy. Currently she has to do all our usual joint tasks on her own. In addition she is going in to the UMN offices every day for a few hours so that at least one of us can carry on with that crucial part of any pastoral work which is simply to make oneself available.



Endless skyscrapers on the Bangkok skyline from hospital window

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Cati writes: Back here in Nepal the border blockade with India continues to be enforced – with devastating effects. You may remember this arose out of a conflict over the new Constitution that was promulgated at the end of September. The leaders of the ethnic Madhesi people living on the Terai – the flat southern strip of Nepal next to the border with India – argue they have been disadvantaged by it, and announced the blockade to force a change to the Constitution.



Petrol queues trailing out of sight

The blockade has now lasted more than 130 days, and Nepal is being throttled of supplies of fuel, cooking and heating gas, and medicines. The only thing that is flourishing is the black market. For example LPG

(Liquid Petroleum Gas) which is used for cooking and heating is completely unavailable from the official government suppliers. It can still be found on the black market – at a hike of 630%. The staple food here is rice: its price has doubled. The cost of essential commodities such as lentils and flour has risen sharply. Last month UNICEF warned that more than three million children under the age of five are at risk of death or disease during the winter months due to the severe wide-ranging shortages. A recent international news item on the situation here has the very acute headline: ‘Running on Empty.’



Cooking firewood for sale in Kathmandu's streets

The Madhesis themselves – whose leaders are supposedly acting in their interests – are suffering terribly as well. In the Terai over 50 people have been killed in skirmishes and violent protests. Innumerable businesses have collapsed. Schools and colleges have been closed for months, and students will have lost at least a year of academic progress.

Just this week in a Nepali newspaper I was reading the comments of various individuals in the Terai who are feeling quite literally trapped by the blockade at the main Raxaul-Birganj border crossing. A street trader says he hasn't sold anything for months. A driver says, ‘Ordinary people like us are made to suffer every time there is a strike. I sometimes feel like defying the strike and chasing away the protesters, but I can't risk my family's well-being.’ And a trader is quoted as saying ‘This is the third time the Madhesi people have risen up against Kathmandu. But what did ordinary Madhesis like me get? Nothing. I wonder if we made a mistake getting rid of the monarchy. Instead of one king, we now have many kings fighting each other.’



Cooking large-scale over bonfires due to gas shortages

Last month Parliament passed an amendment to the Constitution granting better representation and adjusting electoral constituencies to reflect the population. But Madhesi leaders walked out during the vote, saying it still doesn't satisfy their demands. They seem to shift the goalposts every time there are negotiations to attempt to resolve the crisis.

Here in Kathmandu the planned ‘load-shedding’ (the euphemism for power cuts) has now been raised to 91 hours per week. Each day of the week has a different schedule, but as most of the power that is supplied comes in the middle of the night it effectively means each day we have only three hours of electricity between about 6am and 10pm.

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Consequently the city-wide demand for electricity - when it is supplied - is intense and the system cannot cope. Last week our local transformer blew and we were without any electricity at all for two days, with no idea as to when it would return. It feels as if the country is limping along from day to day, and the shortages and alarming price-rises are so familiar now that the abnormal has become the normal.



Trying to resolve electricity problems!

Of course we ourselves are living in conditions of milk and honey compared with the average poor Nepali, but the winter cold and lack of heating gas are making it difficult especially for Malcolm with his current lack of mobility. With all the layers of clothing he now wears he looks like a Michelin man. Without full movement in one leg his feet become icy. When we get our three hours of electricity our priority is to fill the line of Thermoses in the kitchen – and then the vital hot water bottle to wrap around his feet. A wonderfully effective remedy to be recommended!

Last weekend we were determined to get Malcolm out of the cold house and arranged for a taxi to take us to church. I was so focussed on helping Malcolm slowly climb down all the steps from

our flat, descend a steep slope, and manoeuvre himself into the taxi, that it wasn't until we got to the church that I realised to my horror that I was still wearing my slippers!

Cati continues: Relief work for post-earthquake survivors has inevitably slowed to a trickle. There are still hundreds of thousands waiting to be housed. The Nepali bureaucracy has thrown so many obstacles in the way of reconstructing people's homes, and the monsoon followed by the bitter cold of winter appears to have made no difference to any sense of urgency. Just last month we heard that some international donors who had promised funds following the earthquake are now threatening to withdraw their pledges as a result of the government doing nothing



Vital priorities when power returns

so far. Apparently a recent announcement from the government Reconstruction Authority was that they will begin distributing money on the anniversary of the earthquake. But why wait until the end of April? Why not do it *now*?!

Malcolm writes: A friend has shared with us a remark from the French Catholic priest Abbé Pierre that seems particularly apt for life in Nepal at this time. Abbé Pierre said that we need to look at the world through both eyes: one to see the beauty and give thanks; and the other to see the suffering and commit ourselves to fighting against it.

In Nepal, as in every country, there is much to give thanks for, but also much to fight against. We personally are able to cushion ourselves to some extent against the harshness of life here now in the on-going blockade. But the vast majority of Nepalis do not have a fraction of what we have. Because of their leaders' calamitous incompetence, even criminal neglect, those who should be helping them are failing to do so.



Little to do in the day?

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As we approach the end of our time in Nepal please pray that we would keep both eyes open, and that we would get the balance right between profound gratitude for so much that is good, and vociferous protest against so much that is wrong.

With love and prayers,

Malcolm & Cati

PLEASE NOTE: IMPORTANT PS re MALCOLM'S NEW WORK EMAIL ADDRESSES

Along with all other Church of Scotland ministers and mission partners Malcolm has recently been issued with an official Church of Scotland email address which he is now required to use for all work purposes. So if your emails to Malcolm count as 'work' rather than 'personal' please switch to the new email address for Malcolm below – and expect to receive emails from him at that address also. Thank you!

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Cleaning the inside of the well water tank on our roof!