

PARTNER PLAN

Malcolm & Cati Ramsay - Nepal May 2012

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

Dear Friends,

As I write this Cati and I should have been sitting on the bus from Kathmandu to Tansen. Setting off at 6am, this would have taken us on a ten hour journey westwards, on switch-back roads and with dramatic descents and rises, to visit the staff in the UMN hospital in Tansen. Instead, because of a wild-cat strike that has halted all movement in Kathmandu and across wide parts of Nepal, we, like countless others, are marooned where we are. Maybe the strike will be lifted tomorrow. Or perhaps the next day? Who knows?!



This small snapshot from our own lives is a tiny illustration of the much wider and far more serious situation that Nepal currently faces. We are fast approaching the key date of 27 May. This is the deadline by which the new Nepali Constitution has to be written. This Constitution is the latest milestone in some of the tumultuous political changes that have surged over Nepal in the last decade.

For those who like this kind of information here are some of the key background dates and events leading up to Nepal's current political situation. (For more details for some of this see the BBC 'Nepal profile' at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12511455>)

- * For most of its modern history Nepal has been ruled by monarchs or a ruling family in relative isolation.
- * In 1991 democratic politics were introduced after popular protests, but the king retained far-reaching power as a constitutional Hindu monarch.
- * From 1996 Maoist rebels waged a decade-long campaign against the monarchy, leaving more than 12,000 people dead and 100,000 people displaced, according to UN figures.
- * In 2006 a peace deal was finally agreed. A key part of the peace process was that a new Constitution should be drawn up by May 2011.
- * In elections in April 2008 the Maoists emerged as the largest parliamentary party. The monarchy was abolished a month later, ending 240 years of royal rule, and Nepal was also declared to be a secular republic.
- * In May 2009 the Maoist-led coalition government disintegrated. Since then until now there has been a complicated succession of coalition governments with no one party being able to form an absolute majority.
- * The May 2011 deadline for the new Constitution was not in fact met, but the current deadline of 27 May this year is final and cannot be extended.

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The culmination of all of this is that in the next fortnight Nepal's politicians have to decide political issues that are immensely contentious, and profoundly far-reaching. Probably the single biggest issue is the number of federal states Nepal will have, and where the boundaries will fall. These are hard questions as the country is remarkably diverse. There are more than 100 languages spoken in Nepal. There are numerous different ethnic groups and castes, - the numbers given vary according to how people are classified. Geographically Nepal's terrain and its economy and agriculture go from one extreme to the other: from the swelteringly hot flat plains bordering India. right up to Mount Everest itself. Many people identify with their region as much as their language, ethnic group, or caste.

Given this mix there are a huge number of irreconcilable points of view over what the new Constitution should specify. Inevitably the overwhelming temptation for the politicians is to haggle and to horse-trade. The temptation for the people is to fight one's own corner, and to improve one's own position. Most of the time people express their views by wildcat strikes. Currently one-fourth of the country's territory in the Far West has been paralysed in this way for almost a fortnight. (Our current strike affecting Kathmandu is only an irritant in comparison).

But ominously there have also been cases of murderous violence. For example, on 30 April in the southern town of Janakpur, a bomb killed four people at a rally where protesters were demanding a separate state. Many people are deeply worried that once the Constitution is passed those who are disappointed by its terms may respond by similar tactics that take the country backwards and downwards, not forwards and upwards. Please pray for Nepal, that the country's leaders would show vision and statesmanship, and that its people would allow national unity and long-term stability to take precedence over regional or ethnic self-interest.



Cardboard recycling in Kathamndu

Cati writes: Alongside all the political tensions that are evident at the moment here, we have been struck by the extraordinary resourcefulness of the Nepali people in their daily lives.

As soon as the sun rises each morning we are invariably woken by the now familiar calling of a man cycling round the neighbourhood in search of any paper or cardboard. He will obtain some financial, albeit meagre, return for this at the end of the day, and then begin the process again tomorrow. Others do a similar job collecting rubbish or anything they can possibly 'recycle'.

Along the route we take to UMN headquarters each morning, women have established impromptu teashops on the roadside by means of a miniature paraffin stove and a motley collection of stools. Here for a few strategic hours in the day, they serve sweet milky tea and boiled eggs for a few rupees.

Everywhere street vendors set up even the tiniest of stalls in the hope of selling a modest assortment of produce ranging from cigarettes to chewing gum; flower petals to offer to

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Hindu Deities; various fried beans and chickpeas that serve as cheap snacks, served in small pokes of old newspaper; a dozen small oranges neatly laid out on a piece of cloth; fresh cucumber, papaya or watermelon chopped and served on a plastic plate; and freshly-cooked corn-cobs off a wood-fire on the street-corner. With quiet dignity they may sit all day on the pavement, sometimes with an umbrella for shade or shelter, and wait patiently for any potential customer. Many of these people are living in extreme conditions of poverty, yet remarkably few will resort to begging. Their determination and resilience is humbling.



An elderly Nepali's staff carefully arranged for another day on the pavement.

This attitude was brought into sharp focus for us both when Malcolm had to go into hospital last month for surgery on a painful inguinal hernia that had developed within a week of arriving here. Anyone admitted to hospital here has to be accompanied by a relative or friend who can look after them throughout their stay, so I too lived in the ward with Malcolm for those three days. Although extremely grateful for the surgery (and gradual healing since then), the conditions in the hospital, the interminable 'queues' that preceded any attention by medical staff, the heat and noise and lack of cleanliness in the communal bathrooms were cumulatively demoralising and dispiriting. Yet these are conditions which the Nepali people accept with extraordinary stoicism as part of life. Once again we are confronted with the challenge to reconsider our own assumptions and expectations.



Life goes on for a child playing with a rescued bicycle tyre on the day her "home" was destroyed.

One particular experience this week illustrated for me the power of human resilience in the face of daily struggles. Many so-called illegal settlements alongside the Bagmati River in Kathmandu were destroyed by bulldozers early on Tuesday morning, accompanied by swarms of riot police to deal with any protesters. I was standing on the bridge looking out at the scene of devastation below and noticed a small child. She had discovered an old bicycle tyre amidst the remains of what had presumably been her home and was trying with unrelenting persistence to push it along the dirt track with a stick...threading her way through the many passers-by and showing every sign that as far as she was concerned life just goes on. I

returned the next morning and saw her again, now having mastered the art of pushing along her tyre and smiling!

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Once the current strike is over, we plan to spend a week of orientation and getting to know UMN staff in Tansen, followed immediately by two weeks living in Kaskikot village. There full immersion in village life and the Nepali language should help immeasurably in our willingness and ability to attempt conversations with the people in whose country we are guests. We'll tell you about it in our next letter!

With love and prayers,

Cati and Malcolm

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Mother & daughter weaving a rush mat in the morning sunshine.

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