

PARTNER PLAN

Malcolm & Cati Ramsay - Nepal July 2012

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

Dear Friends,

Malcolm writes: When we last wrote in May the people of Nepal were waiting both anxiously and eagerly for the new Constitution to be promulgated on 27 May. After five years of waiting, and several extensions of the deadline, most people felt that for better or worse the new Constitution would take the country on. This would be the next critical landmark in the tumultuous political changes that have taken place in Nepal over the last 20 years or so.



In the event, what actually happened on 27 May was probably the worst of all possible scenarios. The political parties had bickered between themselves and amongst themselves so much that they could not reach any consensus whatsoever. The deadline came and went with no new Constitution. So the Prime Minister dissolved the Parliament (called here the 'Constituent Assembly'), and announced new elections for 22 November.



One of many bandha roadblocks en route to Tansen

The reaction to this has been varied, but almost wholly negative. The people are dumbfounded that five years of discussion have produced nothing at all. They denounce the politicians as self-serving, and interested in nothing more than lining their own pockets, and in promoting the interests of their own ethnic groups. The politicians have blamed their leaders, blamed each other, and then split their own parties in two. The international community, (including the UK), has tut-tutted, and 'expressed concern.' Foreign investors, (on whom major schemes like hydro-electric development depends), have decided that Nepal is too unstable politically to be worth

investing in.

A recent editorial in the weekly English-language 'Nepali Times' sums up the current situation in these words. "Today, the constitution-writing process is derailed, we have no national parliament, the country is being ruled by a government that has outlived its mandate, it is led by a lame duck prime minister and a ceremonial president. If anyone were out to sabotage governance in this country, they couldn't have done a better job." The implications of this "sabotage of governance" for ordinary people are tragic. In Kathmandu there are numerous and obvious problems. The immediately visible ones include: grave and worsening power shortages; a serious lack of water (let alone drinking water); major problems with pollution and traffic; a crumbling infrastructure; and

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a complete lack of earthquake preparedness. All of these problems are crying out for firm and visionary leadership for the common good. Instead there is a complete and utter power vacuum.

Cati writes: It's just over two months now since we were able to travel to the UMN mission hospital in Tansen and get to know all the staff who work there. The somewhat alarming bus journey there took an interminable 12+ hours due to all the political protests going on along so many parts of the route. People had blockaded the roads with huge boulders or tree branches so that anyone who tried to ignore these was liable to be mobbed or attacked while trying to move obstacles. Thanks to "TANSEN MISSION HOSPITAL" being written along the side of the hospital bus we were sometimes waved through, but in other areas we were held up for long, tense periods while the driver tried to persuade the leaders of each roadblock to let us through with weekly hospital supplies needing to be delivered.

Once safely in Tansen we had an extremely valuable time, meeting individually with all the different members of staff and getting to know the sort of stresses they live under. About twenty UMN staff work in the hospital in various capacities, while their children are taught in the small compound school by a dedicated Australian teacher. Living, working, socialising and sharing so many different aspects of life with one another in an otherwise isolated situation has resulted in a very close-knit community whose warmth and friendly welcome was keenly felt by us both.

However living in such close proximity with one another inevitably brings with it peculiar stresses that might not be so evident in Kathmandu. A number of our initial meetings led on to further pastoral conversations, the development of friendships and an invitation to return every two months throughout our time here in Nepal.



Tansen hospital compound in hot sunshine!

Sadly, that week saw the country becoming increasingly volatile though as more and more groups organised 'bandhas' or strikes to make their particular point before the deadline for the Constitution. These strikes have devastating effects on people's lives because all businesses and shops etc. are forced to close under threat of violence. Public transport is brought to a complete halt and several patients being brought to Tansen while we were there died as a result of not being able to get to hospital in time.



Stirring the dung and water before it's ready to supply methane gas to the kitchen

Our proposed village stay in Kaskikot had to be cancelled for fear of being stranded in a remote area with no means of getting back. Instead, after prolonged discussions we arranged to walk down into the valley in the early mornings and spend the day living with a Nepali family on their rural smallholding. Throughout the day we were involved in their daily life and had to communicate always in Nepali...falteringly but hopefully with noticeable improvement as each day went by! The presence of a large extended family alongside neighbours and friends looking to buy produce from their land meant there were always a variety of levels of conversation, and we were certainly made to feel welcome.

I was taught Nepali cooking in the kitchen every day, often by candlelight when mains power was off. And there was also the busyness of looking after buffalos, goats, chickens and cultivated

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terraces. Almost all the food they eat is grown on their land and methane gas from the animal manure is used for cooking. So the experience was inspirational!

The real highlight for me was undoubtedly when they had to prepare the paddy fields for this year's rice planting. With two oxen yoked to a wooden plough that must essentially be unchanged since biblical times, the men trudged up and down preparing the paddy fields while I was involved in trying to bank up the sides of each plot to ensure that any water remains within its boundaries once the monsoon began. (Malcolm decided to take on the role of photographer that day!) Ankle deep in mud and splattered by more each time the oxen careered past was an experience I'll never forget; somehow in perfect harmony with nature and unbelievably satisfying, though obviously for the family this was just part of the daily burden of working on the land.

Walking for an hour back up the hill to Tansen at the end of the long days, combined with stifling heat and the challenge of having had to speak/listen in Nepali for eight hours left us both physically and mentally exhausted! But the experience will remain with us for a long time to come!

On top of this, our enforced extended stay on the hospital compound meant we got to know the staff much better and we look forward to spending a lot more time with them during the next four years!



Oxen trundle past and back to our own task!

Malcolm writes: Our other news, much more briefly, is that we finish our full-time language study at the end of this week, (although we will carry on each having four hours of class every week thereafter). We will take a week's holiday in Pokhara – Nepal's chief tourist resort – then officially start our role here giving Pastoral Care and Support on 30 July. We look forward to reaching that stage! By then it will be almost a year since leaving Pitlochry, with 10 continuous months of preparation and orientation in that interim!

We enjoyed a Skype interview we had a few weeks ago with a Missions Day Conference that was being held in Pitlochry. It was a good chance for us to answer people's questions about life here, and bring them up to date in a very immediate way. The sound quality was fine, although the video quality was very poor, and we apparently ended up as blurred shapes! We hope the Pitlochry folk found it as valuable as we did!



The kitchen sink in the village home

Unfortunately we have had some dispiriting news about our flat in Edinburgh, which is our bolt-hole for us when we are back, and the only place we can call 'home' for Megan and Angus. Our excellent neighbour has spotted a serious outbreak of dry rot on the common stair, and in our flat which is the top flat. It is being urgently investigated as we write, and we are very blessed in having Angus, Cati's cousin Francis, who is a Chartered Surveyor in East Lothian, and our neighbour Jamie, who are all wonderfully willing to deal with matters on-site in our absence.

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Still, at times like this, we feel especially keenly that we are 5,000 miles away from worrying matters we would like to attend to personally! Email is wonderful, but it is a poor second-best for hands-on involvement in an issue. But maybe in all of this there is an incidental lesson for us in our new roles here in Nepal? How important it is that we try to express God's love and care to people in a way that is personal, face to face, involved, and - in short – incarnational!

With love and prayers,

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