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Dear Friends



Chaos as fuel shortages grip the country

Malcolm writes: Once again Nepal is in grave crisis. Indeed Unicef has said that the current situation 'threatens the future of the country itself.' This time the cause is not a recent earthquake. Rather it is a blockade on the border with India that has been strangling daily life throughout Nepal for two months now.

Nepal is a land-locked country. It has borders with two countries only: India and China. But the vast majority of imports come from India, as the borders with China pass through the Himalayas which are often blocked by landslides in the monsoon, or snow in winter.

The current blockade on the Indian border is crippling Nepal. There is a critical shortage of petrol, diesel, and aviation fuel, and the small amount that is occasionally available is rationed. So queues at every Kathmandu petrol station easily stretch for a mile or so, and people wait in them for several days and nights at a time. Gas cylinders for cooking ran out some weeks ago. The government is now officially selling firewood on the streets of Kathmandu so that people can cook. Medicines are in desperately short supply. Many hospitals are warning that they will run out of emergency medicines in a week or less.

For many Nepalis life now is gruelling. Schools and colleges are shut as there is no transport. Factories are idle as they cannot get the raw materials they need. Restaurants are closed as there is no cooking gas. Taxis are stationary as they cannot get petrol. Hotels are empty as tourism has shrunk to a trickle. The national economy has been damaged far more by the two-month blockade than by the two



The struggle to get a seat during fuel shortages



On foot the most reliable means of transport

earthquakes in April and May. In short, ordinary Nepali life is being throttled.

What is the cause of this blockade? The apparent answer is that the people in the Terai (the flat strip along the southern flank of Nepal which borders on India) are blocking the borders to protest against the new Constitution which was promulgated on 20 September. They argue the new provinces created in the Constitution exclude them from proper representation. But everyone in Nepal believes that the blockade is also being unofficially supported by India. Why would India do that? The chief explanation given is that the people in the

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Terai are ethnically more Indian than Nepali, so India sees their interests as being crucial to continuing Indian influence over Nepal. Whatever the full truth, the end result is stale-mate. In the Terai itself tragically there have been almost 50 violent deaths. As we write the news is that four more protestors have been shot dead in fresh clashes with police. Ambulances and lorries carrying medicines have been torched by those enforcing the blockade.



Old water bottles filled with black market petrol

There are two further aspects to all this which make the situation even more depressing. One is that because of the lack of fuel the survivors of the two earthquakes are receiving only a fraction of the supplies they need just at a time when the harsh mountain winter is setting in. The area that UMN is working in – Dhading – is relatively close to Kathmandu, but those working in more distant areas simply do not have the fuel to get there. Meanwhile the National Reconstruction Authority should be ingathering and disbursing the \$4.1bn, (£ 2.7bn) funds pledged by foreign governments and donor agencies on 25 June. However, a full seven months after the earthquake, this body

still has not been even set up. The reason for this? One is that the various political parties are squabbling between themselves as to who should be its Director.

The other intensely dispiriting aspect of the current crisis is that there are some people who are actually benefiting from the whole situation. One such group is those who run the black-market. When small supplies of petrol and diesel do get through, half is allocated to the 'emergency services,' and the remainder then to the general public. It is widely reported that government officials, the army and the police are then privately selling off their half at vastly inflated prices. Another group which is benefiting are some opposition politicians. They see the crisis as a chance to unseat the current Prime Minister (who was only appointed in September). So they are refusing to support any talks which are aimed at ending the crisis. For us – and for many ordinary Nepalis we have spoken to – it is utterly immoral and unjust that some people are



Ploughing as has been done for centuries

making financial or political gain at a time when there is such terrible hardship and suffering in the country as a whole.



Teamwork to separate out the grain

What can you who read this letter do about any of this? One is to raise awareness of the current crisis. We have the impression that it has received very little coverage in the Western media. The other is to pray that the current deadlock would be resolved soon. And until it is, pray that corruption and greed may be replaced by honesty and integrity, and that those who are most at risk may be given priority for what limited resources there are.

Cati writes: Alongside our regular visits to the staff in Tansen hospital, we also manage to go to UMN's more remote, smaller hospital in Okhaldhunga. Usually this has entailed a journey of fifteen hours, with an upheaval part way when we have to unload the entire contents of the jeep, have them carried by local Nepali people across a swinging footbridge, and re-loaded into another jeep waiting on the other side of the river.

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Last week we visited Okhaldhunga for what will be our final time before our work in Nepal comes to an end. (UMN is eking out our existing stocks of fuel for necessary journeys). This year the journey was markedly improved. The reason was twofold: a recently completed and more direct road, built by the Japanese; and a permanent bridge across the wide river enabling us to travel all the way in a single vehicle. Instead of fifteen hours, we were there after just eight hours!



Cooking at UMN for up to 200, during chronic gas shortages

Okhaldhunga serves a widespread population, many of whom saw their homes destroyed by the earthquakes this year. As a result they are still living under tarpaulin or temporary tin shelters as the temperatures at night steadily become colder with each passing week. During a ward round I found myself present for the admission of a woman, seriously injured when she fell during the night outside her shelter. All sensation had been lost in her arms and legs as neighbours and family carried her to the hospital. She lay terrified by the sudden total dependence on those around her. X-Rays revealed some distortion in the alignment of her vertebrae in the neck and, under very basic conditions a brace was screwed to her skull, weighted with 7kg in a bag at the head of her bed. Hopes are for the traction provided by this device to re-align the vertebrae and hopefully restore mobility. Tragically the same had befallen a man earlier in the week and ended with no improvement. He was taken home and died en-route. How suddenly our lives can be shattered, and how often we have seen this happening to people around us this year.

As Malcolm has explained, Nepal is crippled by another crisis at the moment, caused by prolonged border blockades and severe shortages of fuel, cooking gas, medicines and basic food products, with soaring prices. Three weeks ago UMN's staff from all the outlying areas of Nepal came into Kathmandu for a week of discussions and training. A team of people were hired to set up an outdoor kitchen and in order to feed up to 200 people each day they were cooking on five huge bonfires outside our office; gas no longer being available.

Here in Kathmandu and during our journey to Okhaldhunga we continue to see numerous buses with crowds of passengers up on the roof to compensate for limited transport to where they want to go. We stopped for lunch at a roadside café, patronised by many travellers on account of its excellent 'Dal Bhat.' There too I found myself invited to come and see the dark kitchen in which endless amounts of food were necessarily being cooked on wood fires filling the room with thick smoke. 'We have no gas. Life is so hard now,' were the plaintive words of our host. One of our fellow passengers found a shop selling black-market petrol at three times the official price, which had been decanted into old drinking-water bottles. He bought five litres to take home.



Roadside cafe moves outdoors to cook on firewood

However, despite the harsh conditions under which people are struggling at the moment, as we travelled I was profoundly mesmerised by the wonderful scenes of people out in the fields, harvesting their fields of rice. So much activity as families worked together, cutting, drying, threshing and winnowing the grain to replenish their stores of this staple food for the months ahead. Somehow it spoke strongly of the fact that whatever hardships and fears people may be reduced to as a result of political battles and international feuds, our Creator has nevertheless continued to provide Nepal with rain in season. The people are as resourceful as ever, restoring

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some sort of daily rhythm in their lives, by working in step with nature and ensuring that they can grow at least some of what they need to survive.

In the midst of poverty, homelessness and little sign of immediate improvement, there is a spirit of determination and resilience that leaves us humbled and conscious of our own blessings in life.

Soon we will lead what has become our annual Advent mini-Retreat: first in Kathmandu, and then in Tansen when we go there in early December. When life for so many around the world seems so bleak, may this Advent be God's season of true hope.

With love and prayers,

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