

**Nepal Crying : April 2015 Earthquake
(First Hand Experience of Relief and Rescue by a Young Officer)
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Introduction

The April 2015 Nepal Earthquake killed more than 9000 people and injured more than 23000. It occurred at 11:56 NST on 25 April with a magnitude of 8.1 on the Richter Scale. Its epicentre was east of the district of Lamjung and its hypocentre at a depth of approximately 15 km. It was the worst natural disaster to strike Nepal since the 1934 Nepal-Bihar Earthquake. Hundreds of thousands of people were made homeless with entire villages flattened, across many districts of Nepal. Centuries old buildings were destroyed at UNESCO world heritage sites in Kathmandu Valley, including some at the Kathmandu Durbar Square, the Paltan Durbar Square, the Bhaktapur Durbar Square, the Changu Narayan Temple and the Swayambhunath Stupa.

Rescue and Relief Operations

About 90 per cent of soldiers from the Nepalese Army were sent to the stricken areas in the aftermath of the earthquake under Operation "Sankat Mochan" with volunteers mobilised from the other parts of the country. Operation "Maitri" was a rescue and relief operation in Nepal by the Government of India and Indian Armed Forces in the aftermath of the 2015 Earthquake. It started on 26 Apr 2015 and also involved Nepali Ex-servicemen (ESM) from several Indian Gorkha Regiments for interface, guidance, relief and rescue. The Indian Army initially set up a Task Force Headquarters with Major General JS Sandhu controlling and coordinating operations in Kathmandu and Brigadier J Gamlin in Barpak. In addition, Pension Paying Office (PPO), Pokhara was functioning as Headquarters for relief operations.

206 and 301 Army Aviation Squadrons were inducted and an aviation base was set up with five Army ALH and two MI-17 helicopters at Pokhara Airfield. The Army Helicopters conducted repeated sorties to evacuate people from inaccessible areas and more than 1000 civilians were evacuated to safe areas. Army helicopters in conjunction with IAF delivered approx 900 tons of relief materials. Appreciating the criticality of communication and coordination, a direct hotline was established between Indian and Nepalese Army HQ. Sufficient INMARSATs and HF Radio sets were also sent to ensure intercommunication of the relief teams and detachments operating in Nepal. 10,000 blankets and 1,000 tents were also dispatched to the affected areas.

18 Medical teams each comprising 10 personnel and ambulances from three Field Hospitals; namely, 4004, 4033 and 60 Para Field Hospital, were inducted. They operated in Kathmandu and other remote locations. Medical assistance was given to 4762 injured persons which included 300 surgeries, 216 hospital admissions and 4174 outpatient department cases. A mammoth humanitarian assistance and disaster relief was carried out successfully by the Indian Army and the troops were deinducted completely by 04 Jun 2015.

My Voyage. On 25 Apr, I was on leave in Kolkata. At 1130 hrs suddenly I felt a little dizzy as tremors were shaking my house. I rushed to my parents and immediately evacuated the house; everybody was shouting and it was a complete chaos. The front boundary wall of my house was completely demolished. We all were in a state of shock. Every news channel was broadcasting about the catastrophe in Nepal.

Please refer to Map showing main area of impact. On 26 Apr, I got a call from my Commanding Officer to immediately proceed to Nepal for relief operations. Necessary information was constantly sent on my cell phone. I packed my bags and boarded a flight to New Delhi. A team of one JCO and two Other Ranks also reached New Delhi on 27 April from our Paltan for the same reason. We were getting constant updates about the catastrophe and necessary guidance from 1 GR Secretariat. It took us almost a day to reach Gorakhpur-Sunauli border. There was complete chaos on the border; buses were flooded with passengers to go to Nepal. Thousands of Indian tourists were stranded. We spent a day in Sunauli as there was no transport available to Pokhara. We left for Pokhara on 30 Apr by road. Pokhara was not much affected by the earthquake. The shops were open, normalcy could be seen everywhere. We reported to Pension Paying Office (PPO) Pokhara which was functioning as headquarter for relief operations. We were immediately asked to report to Pokhara Airfield, from where the relief operation was going on. Several ALHs and MI-17 Helicopters were operating from Pokhara Airfield. In conjunction with Nepalese Government and Nepalese Army, tonnes of relief materials were dropped in the worst affected areas. Our team assisted in loading of relief materials in the helicopters.



Map Showing Main Area of Impact

Gorkha. Since maximum damage had occurred in the Gorkha district, we decided to proceed towards Gorkha and its

adjoining areas. We were guided by Lieutenant Colonel SS Moole, OC, PPO Pokhara and his team giving us all the relevant information about the route, transportation and the worst affected areas. We reached Gorkha by the evening of 01 May. Enroute we witnessed the ravage caused by mother nature; villages after villages were damaged, with not a single house standing and people were sleeping in open fields. After reaching Gorkha, we went to the villages of Simalgarhi, Birendranagar, Godhuli and collected information about the damage from our serving soldiers and ESM. The damage in these villages was severe. The majority of people in these villages were ESM from various Gorkha Regiments of the Indian Army. Rifleman Roll Bahadur Rana of 'C' Company who was there on leave, acted as our guide and took us to various other affected areas, despite his own house also being damaged.

Barpak. Next day, we decided to proceed towards the worst hit area by the earthquake i.e. Barpak. Out of 1600 houses, only four houses were standing and more than 2,500 people had lost their lives and hundreds were still missing. The only road connecting Barpak was completely damaged due to several mud slides, the only way to reach Barpak was by air, but due to bad weather and poor visibility, no helicopters were flying. On the way we met Naik Bahadur Gurung and Lance Naik Dhan Raj Gurung of our Paltan who were on leave and proceeding towards their home; their village was approximately 150 km from Gorkha bazar named Manbu. After nine hours of bus journey, we covered 100 km and reached Arughat. Balance of the journey had to be done on foot only. There were approximately 350 houses in Arughat and now only debris was visible. Frequent aftershocks were recurring and people were getting more terrified. We kept on interacting with people and collected information about their losses. Weather was playing a spoilsport and suddenly the bright blue sky was covered with dark clouds and it started raining heavily. We took cover under a damaged house; the rain didn't allow us to move for a good six hours. We were completely drenched and hungry. Despite being in such terrible situation, the villagers gave us food. Next morning, we started our journey to Manbu. Our morale was high and we had to negotiate heights, springs and streams on our way.

Manbu. This was comparatively a large village with a population of approximately 800-900 people. It had been almost a week after the earthquake but no relief had reached there. Naik Hak Bahadur Gurung's and Lance Naik Dhan Raj Gurung's houses were completely damaged. Their families were forced to spend their days in open in a makeshift arrangement. Everything was under the debris. The eyes were moist and the future was dark. We had brought some cartons of noodles and biscuits which we distributed among the villagers but that was like a tiny droplet of water in the ocean. We started collecting our data, the loss was humungous. Relief and rescue helicopters were flying over us but nothing was happening. People were getting impatient and frustrated. With the help of some villagers, we cleared a cornfield to be used as a helipad. I immediately called Lieutenant Colonel SS Moole at PPO Pokhara and informed him about our location and he promised us necessary assistance. Meanwhile we went to the nearby villages to collect information about our veterans. Some locals were doing their bit and distributing food for the entire village which was a commendable effort. Our team also had a Battle Field Nursing Assistant, Naik Hom Bahadur Gurung, he attended to some villagers and provided them necessary medical assistance.

Expect the Unexpected. The next morning i.e. on 03 May, while we were busy in assisting the villagers, we noticed an ALH heading towards our location. It was flying low and the sound of rotors was a welcome treat to our ears. We immediately set fire to some rubber tubes to produce black smoke as a signal to land. The helicopter brought food, blankets, water and plastic sheets. There was a tide of joy amongst the villagers. The helicopter had come from Pokhara and to my utter surprise, Lieutenant Colonel SS Moole was inside the helicopter. We all thanked him from our hearts and proceeded to our next destination. While returning back from Manbu we were loaded with blessings and good wishes from the villagers. On our way back to Gorkha, our team also assisted a team of doctors from Red Cross in establishing a medical camp near Arughat village. During our five day stay in Gorkha, we visited approximately 30 villages and collected information of about 2000 ESMs and serving soldiers.

Kaski and Pokhara. We returned to Pokhara by 07 May and spent the night at Naib Subedar Yam Prasad's house. We made our plan and within the next two days, we went around seeking information about the damage in the affected areas. We covered nine villages; the extent of damage was not so severe as compared to Gorkha but still people were terrified by regular aftershocks. After covering Pokhara, our team proceeded towards Kaski. A team from 5/1 GR was also in that location. We shared our information to increase the speed of our work; up-to-date information was necessary for us. We decided to visit every District Soldier's Board in the affected area so that we could get accurate information about the damage to our soldiers. A small get-together was organised by our Bhut Purvs (Ex-servicemen) at Pokhara to felicitate our team. Honorary Captain Naina Singh Gurung (Retd), Honorary Captain Thakur Bahadur Thapa (Retd) and several other serving and retired ranks of the PVC Paltan were there. It was a great occasion for us to meet our oldies and to share their experiences in such difficult times.

Final Destination. By 09 May, the situation was slowly getting under control. Rescue and relief operations were in full swing. After covering Gorkha, Pokhara and Kaski our next destination was Syangja. Syangja was approximately 40 km from Pokhara and was well connected by road. Next day we met our Paltan's veteran Major Ram Singh Chhetri (Retd). He took us to some of the villages where there was damage and we collected all the necessary information. He also took us to District Soldiers Board in Waling where, several ESM were voluntarily running a medical camp. It was a noble gesture under such grave circumstances. Our journey was approaching its last stage. All the other rescue teams of 1 GR had started de-inducting. Our last stop was Butwal, which was near Gorakhpur border. On 11 May, we reported to District Soldier Board of Butwal and we met several retired and serving personnel of our Battalion. Though in this region, the damage was minimum, but people were reluctant to enter their houses. Convoys of trucks were coming from India, loaded with relief materials.

On 12 May, when we were in a village called Gopalpur of district Butwal collecting information, at 1245 hrs another heavy aftershock was felt. The duration of the tremor was about 6-7 seconds and the magnitude was reported to be 7.2 on the Richter Scale. The epicentre was on the border of Dolakha and Sindhupal Chowk. Minutes later, another 6.3 magnitude earthquake hit Nepal with its epicentre in Ramechhap, East of Kathmandu. The aftershock caused mass panic as many people were still trying to recover from 25 Apr earthquake. For the first few seconds, it was complete silence, after that everybody started to scream which continued even after the earthquake. The tremor caused

fresh landslides and destroyed some buildings which had survived the first quake. We immediately started dialling numbers of all the persons of our Battalion in the affected zone. However, mercifully all of them were safe and sound with no further major damages. Thus, on 13 May, we decided to return to India with an experience of fifteen days which will remain with us for the rest of our lives.

Conclusion

It will take probably years for Nepal to rebuild the Nation and to overcome the loss but no one will ever doubt how these brave Gorkhas ferociously stood against the disaster. Operations “Sankat Mochan” and “Maitri” continue in full swing but slowly and steadily, the land of warriors – ‘Nepal’ will rise again.

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