Source: *The Business Times,* p24
Date: 16 June 2016



A Nepali man praying for the dead at Kathmandu's landmark Dharahara Tower on April 24, to mark the first year since the quake which killed 9,000 of his countrymen. PHOTO: AFP

One year of aid, but little progress in Nepal

Pressure is needed from the international community to impress on the Nepali government to stop its in-fighting and commit to rebuilding the country. BY ASIT K BISWAS AND KRIS HARTLEY

THE first anniversary of the April 2015 Nepal earthquake has drawn considerable reflection, and, as predicted, most has been discouraging. There has been little progress in physical rebuilding, and none in improving a governance system that failed citizens before and after the disaster. A year later, more than a million people lack access to clean drinking water, infectious disease is breaking out in the crowded shelters, and stress-related mental illness is on the rise.

What is the reason behind Nepal's lack of progress, and what should be done?

Despite a year-long tide of recovery aid from the international community, the landlocked, mountainous country recently celebrated its New Year under the crushing spectre of strife and deprivation, with residents enduring harsh winter conditions and imminently, the sweltering heat, torrential rains and landslides.

The Nepalese, however, have faced recovery with courage and practicality, often rebuilding homes on their own using a creative assortment of materials including bamboo and salvaged wood; with much of Nepal's male workforce having emigrated, the recovery burden is falling to women and children, who have exhibited admirable resilience and ingenuity.

Nevertheless, the efforts of heroic individuals are not enough to overcome the massive challenges of recovering from an earthquake. A recent CBC report offered a stinging indictment of the management effort: of US$4.4 billion pledged internationally, US$2.8 billion has been received and of that, "very little" has been spent. The underlying problem is no mystery: a stale blancmange of lazy governance, weak political will and poor accountability. If such a historic disaster failed to drive progress in fundamental areas, one must doubt whether there will ever be hope for Nepal.

Aid appears to have been applied primarily, if prudently, to sustaining citizens' basic livelihoods, already fragile even before the earthquake. Absent adequate government resources, significant amounts of on-the-ground assistance have come from non-government organisations (NGOs), development agencies and charitable religious organisations such as Caritas and the Mennonite Central Committee Canada. The Red Cross provided shelter for 130,000 families in the months following the earthquake, and plans to assist half a million more residents by 2017. Exactly how much is being applied to substantive rebuilding is uncertain, but construction grants of 200,000 rupees (roughly S$2,522) were pledged by the government to each needy family.

Bureaucratic bumbling – in particular the delayed and highly politicised establishment of Nepal's National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) – has impeded aid distribution. *The Indian Express* reported that less than 5 per cent of homes have been rebuilt, and US$2,000 fails to cover the projected US$7,500 cost of rebuilding a house.

One NRA official acknowledged last year what many already knew – that the government's response has been slow. Another official quoted in *Khmer Times* said: "They (homeless residents) will not be able to rebuild their houses before the monsoon, even if we begin distributing housing grants now."

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, weak design and enforcement of building codes received copious attention from analysts and commentators; these failures had created a built environment vulnerable to disaster.

With a year now passed, it is prudent to examine deeper governance failures in preparedness and recovery. Sluggish mobilisation should be of no shock to those knowledgeable about Nepalese politics; weak political will and poor accountability are rife. These pathologies compromise Nepal's competitiveness and living standards across numerous measures, and have eroded disaster resilience.

AID GROUPS' DILEMMA

Under such circumstances, aid organisations are in a difficult position. On one hand, withholding support to make an ideological point does little to change minds in government, where entrenched interests drive policy, regardless of citizens' needs. Without aid, the Nepalese people pay for a lesson that leaders would not care to learn anyway.

On the other hand, uninterrupted aid can perpetuate corruption and abuse that repels donors, particularly when non-government channels for aid delivery are underdeveloped. Indeed, many academic studies have found a connection between aid dependence and bad governance.

In Nepal, persistent ethnic-based violence on the Indian border and related travel restrictions, along with the extended process of ratifying a constitution, are already major distractions for a government with limited capacity.

Further, tourism – a driving force of Nepal's economy – is declining; 900 heritage buildings were damaged or destroyed by the earthquake. Tourist arrivals fell 90 per cent immediately following the disaster, and by 32 per cent overall last year.

An optimistic official expects tourism to return to 2014 levels by next year. Nevertheless, the Nepalese government projects economic growth to be an anaemic 0.77 per cent this year, the lowest in 14 years.

Beyond the conditions people can improve are those they cannot. It is unlikely that the 2015 earthquake will be Nepal's last. A British geophysicist said in a recent *International Business Times* report that the region above the Himalayan thrust (which includes Nepal) will have "very much worse events in their – probably not too distant – future".

What can be done to prepare for these calamitous eventualities? Inadequate disaster preparedness is no isolated case of incompetence, nor is it the only factor exacerbating recovery efforts. It is one in a litany of governance failures: air transport hazards, dilapidated infrastructure, electricity interruptions, poor education, declining public health, increasing crime and a widening wealth gap.

While genuine self-reflection and moral reckoning by Nepal's leaders would be a good prompt for reform, sudden enlightenment is unlikely. Therefore, the international community – politicians, aid organisations, scholars and thought leaders – must apply consistent pressure on the country's government to shun political in-fighting and genuinely commit to comprehensive development.

Resilience is not about one piece of infrastructure or one sweeping policy reform; as in nature, resilience is a product of deeply interconnected systems that function purposefully and reliably. Progress on the above litany of challenges would enhance Nepal's resilience to natural disasters. It is also the humanitarian thing to do.

From daily inconveniences to near-complete reliance on external aid for disaster recovery, the people of Nepal are tragically underserved by their government. Arguably, the country does not have much further to fall before it earns the "failed state" label. The 2015 earthquake was supposed to be a wake-up call, but while the rest of the world hears the ring, Nepal's leaders remain asleep.

Asit K Biswas is Distinguished Visiting Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. Kris Hartley is a doctoral candidate at the LKY School.

Source: The Business Times © Singapore Press Holdings Ltd. Permission required for reproduction.