

Update from Nepal: Relief for the village of Chupar

Uttam Rai and I arrived in Kathmandu on May 10 with four duffel bags full of tarps. We were met at the airport by our “team” on the ground: Budu’s brothers Maila and Dawa, close family friends Karbu and Kalpana, and relatives from the village, Melange and Ajay. These are the folks who, just a few days earlier, went to Siliguri, India in search of tarps for temporary shelters. (By then, tarps were no longer available in Kathmandu.) They were able to purchase two hundred of them, weighing over half a ton! Re-entering Nepal at Kakarbitta, they were harassed by border officials, but they got the tarps through for the long overnight bus ride to Kathmandu. Also, from your donations sent before we arrived in Nepal, they purchased 90 sacks of rice (30 kg each), cooking oil, salt, and daal. They chartered a large 4WD truck and delivered the food along with the tarps to Chupar, an all-day ride over rough roads.



Village of Gul Bhanjyang in rubble

On the way from the airport to our hotel, tent camps were a common site as people in Kathmandu were still sleeping outside during the frequent aftershocks. Even the proprietors of our hotel were sleeping outside while Uttam and I were sleeping off our jet lag on the fourth floor! The visible damage of what little we saw of Kathmandu seemed more moderate than I had expected, but nothing could prepare us for what we would see the next day. Early on May 11, we took a taxi to Banepa at the eastern edge of the Kathmandu Valley, where we met a truck and driver that Maila had arranged to haul another 110 sacks of rice along with cooking oil, salt, daal, instant noodles, and sweet biscuits for the village children.

We piled in, me in the cab with Ajay, and Uttam and Maila on top of the rice in the truck bed. All day, we drove through destruction, one village after another reduced to rubble. Mid afternoon, trying to negotiate a steep uphill curve on a rutted road, the truck broke down – a stripped gear in the rear differential. In a terrace at the edge of the jungle just above the sad truck, we camped under tarps (we had plenty) and dined on instant noodles. Maila had sent for twenty Chupar villagers to walk three hours over the mountain to guard our load that night.

Morning brought a beautiful sunrise over the Himalaya to the northeast and the prospect of a replacement truck. Maila and Dawa had walked three hours down to the town of Gyaltung on the Melamchi Khola (river), a particularly hard hit area in Sindhupalchok district, to arrange for a heavier duty truck. By late morning they arrived, this time with a 6-ton truck. Now with the Chupar villagers, it did not take long to transfer all the food and gear to the new truck and we were off again, headed up the mountain. Soon, we reached Gul Bhanjyang, a former trekkers’ stopover village with teahouses and lodges, the entire town now piles of rubble. From here, Uttam and I decided to walk the final couple of hours to Chupar.

Along the way at 12:50PM, the second major earthquake of May 12 hit, a 7.3 this time. My first sensation was that I was dizzy and staggering and needed to sit down. It took a few seconds to realize that this was an earthquake. Noticing the house-size boulders embedded in the bank directly above us, we sprinted to get past them. At 1:22pm, an aftershock hit. This one was different---it made us feel we were being lifted off the ground. Descending down the trail into Chupar, one of the villagers mentioned that a crack had opened up in the jungle above the village after the April 25 quake. Hearing this, I began to wonder if we were actually going to make it to Chupar. When you can't trust the ground under your feet, you believe that nowhere is safe.



Unloading rice in Chupar on May 12



Villager receiving black daal (lentils)

We walked into Chupar ahead of the truck and when it arrived, it was soon unloaded. We were told that no one from outside—neither government nor aid organizations—had been to the village or the area yet. We were the first, and this was 17 days after the first quake! Villagers gathered and food was distributed to those who had not received any in the previous shipment. A festive atmosphere brought smiles to faces as one household at a time stepped up to receive their food—rice, daal, oil, salt, instant noodles, and biscuits. Maila—well organized--had a list of households and checked them off as each received food. Our first night in the village, Uttam and I slept in a “hoop tent” fashioned from split bamboo hoops covered by a tarp. During the night, I awoke twice to the rumble of boulders falling down landslide gullies across the valley.

We stayed in the village five nights, assessing the extent of destruction of houses and the school. It was agreed by the village that, after the monsoon, a new school is the highest priority. One

day, we built a “helipad” by making a large “X” out of flat stones painted white, in the only flat spot in the village. We also interviewed several villagers about the impact of this earthquake on their lives. Many survived with nothing more than the clothes they were wearing when the quake hit. Stores of rice, millet, and corn were destroyed in most of the homes. Some had attempted to recover as much grain as possible by re-entering their destroyed and dangerous houses. Others had tried to separate the edible grains from the rubble, but this proved unworkable. Each household had erected some type of temporary shelter using bamboo, recovered metal roofing, and the tarps. It was heartbreaking to see these people living as refugees in their own village. All were concerned about the tough times ahead during the monsoon when it rains every day. Winter wheat was being harvested while we were in the village and it appeared to be a good crop. The monsoon is upon them now. Chupar, like most villages in the hills of Nepal, is cut off from travel by any other means but foot, as the roads are now impassable.



Destroyed Chupar school



Boys in the ruins of their Chupar home

On our last day in the village, before starting out on the 5-hour walk to Surung and then on to Kathmandu, the villagers gathered to show their gratitude to all in the U.S. who had cared enough to donate to their relief. Under a friendship banner that Maila had made in Kathmandu, they presented us with Tibetan Buddhist silk scarves or “khatas”, symbols of compassion. Uttam, Maila, and I each received at least a hundred of them! An hour out of the village, we heard the drone of a helicopter coming up the valley from the west. As it approached, it was descending out of view roughly toward our “helipad”. We later learned that the copter had landed on our “X” and distributed medical supplies.



Smiles in the rubble: Uttam with Chupar's oldest woman of 90 years



Winter wheat harvest

What has been accomplished in Chupar so far would not have been possible without the partnership of kindness and generosity from people here at home and the hard working “team” on the ground in Nepal. It is only the beginning of recovery and the fundraising that will make that possible, but it is a good one.