

Contrasts & Connection

Nine Students Reflect
on Their Worldwide
Internships/2008



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Searching for Peace through the Chaos: Peace and Development in Nepal

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When Kamal Pun was 13 years old, he gazed through the Nepali night at the Maoist soldiers crawling through the alleys of his city. Kamal's home is directly across from the Royal Nepal Army Base in the Dang district headquarter of Gohrai. Five minutes after he first saw the soldiers, he heard an explosion. Kamal's parents instructed him to hide in his room. He hid under his bed, but then curiously snuck upstairs to "see everything." Amidst the bullets and explosions, Kamal heard the wails of his neighbor. Rebel mothers fought with children on their backs. He reflects:

"The women carried a gun in one hand and their baby on their back." Youth his age fought alongside the women. The fighting continued until early morning. He did not sleep. At dawn, Kamal saw the Maoist soldiers carry away their dead and wounded. After the Maoists departed in nearly thirty trucks full of captured Royal Nepal Army weapons, Kamal left his home to find twelve dead bodies strewn about his neighborhood. He could not sleep for days. The soldiers fought over ideologies distant to a thirteen-year-old boy. He was not partial to either side. As he tells his story six years after the attack, a fire burns in his distant eyes.

When I arrive in Nepal in July 2008, it has been twelve years since the People's War of Nepal began and only two years since it has ended. Monarchy ruled Nepal since the unification of the country centuries ago. The Maoists claimed to fight to remove all forms of oppression, and they built a fighting coalition of laborers, women, and alienated minority groups. The conflict began in the most rural regions of the country, areas of the greatest poverty and despair. The Maoists advanced from the destitute rural regions towards district headquarters and eventually towards cities such as Nepalganj and Kathmandu. In 2006 the Maoists negotiated with the Seven Party Alliance and signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). Elections took place in April of 2008. The Maoists won more than twice as many seats as their rival the Nepali Congress, establishing them as a clear voice in the newly revamped government. However, the Maoists did not win enough seats to claim a majority in the Constituent Assembly (CA).

I am acutely aware of the ramifications of violent conflict. The first funeral I ever attended was for Mark Evnin, an American soldier killed in Iraq. In the dark early morning hours prior to the funeral, in accordance with the Jewish tradition, I sat solemnly alone with my mother in front of the casket covered by the American flag. After the funeral, a massive line of cars slowly followed Mark through the streets of Burlington and then South Burlington, Vermont. A few miles from the graveyard, we passed hundreds of students and teachers who lined both sides of Dorset Street, just outside of South Burlington High School. As we drove through the students, the air molecules froze in a shocked silence. Tearful students clung to each other next to their sober teachers.

When I was seventeen, I volunteered in a Liberian refugee camp in Ghana. When guns fired for local Ghanaian rituals, I saw my traumatized Liberian friends regress back into the shock of war. As I walked through the camp, the stench of poverty and need filled my nostrils. I thought of my grandfather, Carl, a holocaust survivor orphaned as a young teenager after the war. I saw the soul of my grandfather in the camps, searching for escape and freedom. He lost more than forty family members. Today he is retired and has more time to himself than ever before. As he looks out his Rochester, New York, window, he sees soldiers taking away his parents. And as he sits alone on the porch, he recalls the faces of his younger sisters killed in the war.

As I look into Kamal's eyes, they grow even more distant as he goes into the depths of his story. I think of how my own eyes drift as I remember the Holocaust, the refugee camp, and the car driving through the suspended disbelief of my classmates and teachers on the day of Mark's funeral. From Iraq to America, Ghana to Europe in the 1940s, violence has touched my life. It is part of my DNA. It is part of my bones. Recognizing that my life has been so deeply affected by violence, I see peace advocacy as a responsibility. It was with this in mind that I traveled to Nepal to learn how to build peace.

Namaste

As soon as I walk out of the Kathmandu Airport, a massive smile above a sign with my name on it greets me. The sign and the smile belong to Ghanshyam, a schoolteacher and one of my hosts. I soon learn that, for the Nepalese, peace is a way of life. "Nepal is a peace country. Peace is our identity," said Kedar Gandhari, a friend and translator. The Nepali word "shanti," or "peace," is a sacred statement of the Nepali language and culture. At the school in which I stayed, meditating youth would exhale the words "om shanty" to conclude their meditations each morning. Nepalese greet each other with "namaste," which means "the God in me sees the God in you." In essence, they celebrate the divinity within each other every time they meet. Despite the fact that peace is part of the Nepali cultural identity, a brutal war engulfed Nepal. The fighting killed 13,000 brothers, mothers, daughters, fathers, neighbors, students, religious leaders, political activists, and those unaffiliated with any political party or ideology. I ask myself, how did such a peaceful country come to experience such a violent tragedy? And what can I learn from this context about peacebuilding?

Kathmandu

As I leave the school in which I live, I exit onto the Kathmandu streets, paved to suit the needs of the nation's capital, but dusted by years of neglect and poor upkeep. A single row of corn grows on both sides of the path. Dogs move about menacingly, slowly lifting their heads to stare at a

passer-by. Next to the roadside stores, just beyond the residential area, a condom stands out, imprinted into the mud. Men sit in front of empty stores, as hens and chickens peck around the rotten and decomposing garbage heaps that lay between the stores and the street. The street buzzes with loud and rapid traffic. As I wait for a taxi, I can make out the image of a poster across the street. A metal hand shakes a hand made of green clay. The poster is an inadvertent monument to the collusion of the virgin environment and modernity.

Taxis painted with the face of Che Guevara, *tuk tuks* made of tin, bicycles rotting from years of use, and large passenger busses all push in unison.

Students with neatly cropped hair stick their heads out of the *tuk tuks*. Motorcycles driven by bandana-clad young men rev their engines as they breathe in the dark fumes escaping from their tail pipes. Vendors next to the barbed-wire fence sell bright colored vegetables soaked in exhaust. The motor vehicles mix with an assembly of vendors and pedestrians to create the mishmash that is the Kathmandu traffic jam just outside of the Nepal Parliament complex.

Usually, I experience these traffic jams from the inside of Nepal's taxis and *tuk tuks*. The *tuk tuks* are tiny tin trucks that you enter from the back. Passengers sit on one of two wooden benches that face each other. They are reliably crammed. And so are the larger buses. Shoving is required to enter and exit. Women and men holding sacks of potatoes and leafy vegetables squeeze among passengers of all ages. If you are over about five and a half feet you have to sit hunched over in your seat so that you do not smack your head against the tin roof. As a five foot, ten-inch American, my ride is marked by an aching back and the interested stares of my travel partners.

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The *tuk tuk* exhaust mixes with emissions from trucks, taxis, and mopeds. When I sit along the road drinking tea, I worry that the particles from the tale-pipe-less trucks will enter my respiratory system as I sip. Cows sit contentedly in the middle of the road as medians that the traffic swerves around on each side. Sometimes the cows will move from the roads to the sidewalks. As a pedestrian I learn to monitor my steps in order to slalom the smeared cow pies.

As I stand at Pashupati corner, I see a woman dressed in a red and yellow traditional Sari with a red dot on her forehead. Before the Hindu woman, atop a sheet, lie vegetables. The leaves of a long lemongrass-like vegetable hang on to the curb. By my feet sits a broken (potentially eaten?) three-inch section of a cucumber, two scattered small tomatoes, and a juice box with a straw. As I stare at the piece of cucumber and lemongrass resting on the cement next to the colorfully dressed woman, I stand in suspension. The dichotomy is striking. The woman of earthy nature – the woman of culture and spirit, the eternal source mixes with modernization – honking horns, cement, dirt, and grime. It grips me to my core.

After my camera is pick-pocketed, I venture to New Road, the center of technology in Kathmandu. New Road attracts throngs of youth, many of whom are clad in their college uniforms. Electronics shops full of digital cameras, computers, and cell phones line the street. Security guards stand on corners as a mass of people cross. Close to Thamel lies King's Way, one of the classiest sections of the city. Trendy shops and expensive restaurants stand out from both sides of the road just down the way from the now vacant King's palace.

I rarely see foreigners in most parts of Kathmandu. But in Thamel, they are everywhere. As I enter the tourist district, street children walk up to me, and hold on to my hand with one of their hands as they outstretch their palms. "Money, money, money, money, money, we hungry, money" they cry. As I drop rupees into their hands, I cross the street. On the other side, I see an older boy of eleven or twelve years dropping glue into the bags of the youth. One of the boys holding a bag looks with his graying eyes into mine. "I'm sorry," he whimpers as he grabs my hand.

One late night a young man approaches me in Thamel. He asks me if I smoke marijuana. I shake my head, and he dejectedly moves back into the shadows, away from the light of the Thamel streets. I join him next to a wall and ask him how much he makes per month. He responds that he brings in an income of 19,000 rupees. I later learn that his revenue is three times the salary of many of the city's teachers. Towards the end of the night, I am stopped before my hotel by a boy with a young but sharp face. "Want a lady?" he asks as he grins mischievously. "How old are you?" I reply. He is a 13-year-old pimp.

Students from across Nepal leave their families for a chance to enter into one of Kathmandu's elite colleges and universities. A student I met at a conference, Danish, invites me into his home. He lives in a ten-by-fifteen-foot apartment along with two other roommates. The three sleep in two small beds. They cook their meals on the floor, right below where they sleep. Danish is from a far-away district. He has come to the city for a new life and a new opportunity. After I leave the thriving center of Kathmandu and head towards the school in which I live, I transfer buses near the Kathmandu airport. Amid the dark night, I approach a group of youth sitting just beyond the airport fence. A young man I befriend tells me that each night he crawls under the airport fence and sleeps in the grass. He is too embarrassed to tell me what he does for work. But he says he makes less than two dollars a day and works shifts of over fourteen hours. Airplanes scream as they approach and depart.

I drive an hour outside Kathmandu city and hike the quiet hills of the valley. Villagers greet me as I walk. They are dressed in old cloth. A young man chops wood as his siblings look onwards. A mother stands next to a boy of only two or three years wearing no pants. Only a few miles away from the city, quiet sets in. Amidst the silence, I look back towards the city from atop the hills. I see a city torn between a rural past and an urban future. Elements of the countryside roam the city streets. Cows meander. Vegetables are strewn about the intersections. But the noise screams of urbanization. The throngs of students cry out for a cosmopolitan way of life. Grime-ridden workers in search of a sustainable pay do not let me forget that for Nepalis, however chaotic, Kathmandu is an opportunity.

Ganesman

Ganesman Pun sits quietly and assuredly on the third floor of the central office of the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M). He is the commander of the Young Communist League, the youth organization of the CPN-M. When I ask him why he joined the Maoist Party, Ganesman responds: "In our society, there is a dispute between the elite and the proletariat. That is why I want ... youth to develop. I want to help them to fight against the [evil of the society]." When Ganesman was fifteen years old, he recognized social discrimination. The injustice inspired him to act. As he speaks he does so factually and proudly. He told me that in 1996 he led an attack on a police station. The attack was part of a countrywide effort that sparked the start of the war. The government forces captured Ganesman and held him in prison. Four years later he escaped and returned to the battlefield as a senior military leader. Ganesman reflects: "In Nepal, people here had a good ideology. People see the progress of the world, but [they do not see progress here]."

That is why people feel depressed, that is why people are going towards violence in Nepal.” Ganesman claimed that inequality and poverty fueled the conflict. To see for myself, I traveled from the paved streets of Kathmandu to the dirt roads of the countryside, where economic development is foreign and distant.

Rural Nepal

As I leave Khatmandu, I am joined by translator Kedar Gandari. We travel to Gorkha, Dang, Rolpa, and Sarlahi. My few days at Kedar’s home illustrate what it is like to live in the countryside of Nepal. On a microbus the size of a large van in the US, we drive over and out of the valley. We exit the microbus after five hours of driving and walk past wooden shack stores. A four-foot-wide suspension bridge overhangs the river of brown and white rapids. We carefully cross the bridge. Kedar points towards the top of a distant 8,000-foot “hill.” “I live there,” he says pointing to Gorkha. As we walk up the hill, we pass men and women harvesting hay with sickles. One woman wearing a rainbow-colored small umbrella hat turns to me in the hot sun. She smiles and joy radiates from the laboring woman. Transportation to Kedar’s house is a large all-wheel-drive truck. The white truck, caked in mud, carries both supplies and as many passengers as can fit. I start the journey on the top of the hot white vehicle’s roof, but midway, my hands and feet grow tired, and I move to the back of the truck. As we climb the 8,000-foot hill, the marvelous lush valleys fascinate me. Near the top, the snowy Himalayan Mountains appear above the clouds in the distance. I am in awe as I stare at the magnificent peaks.

Suddenly the truck jolts and we sink into a caked groove. The wheel has come off. We move to the truck that we have been following. I climb up to the hatch and hold onto the railing. A few minutes into the journey, I notice a smell that makes me cringe. Three feet in front of me a low iron cage is strapped to the top of the truck. It is filled with white chickens. Chickens on the side of the cage wiggle their heads outwards in a futile attempt to escape. One chicken lies motionlessly with its head outside of the cage cocked to its side. White, yellow, and green excrement lies on its head. Another chicken’s butt sits atop the motionless chicken. As the bumps continue and the chicken still lies motionlessly, I wonder whether it is dead or alive. As we go over another bump, my question is answered. The chicken’s head snaps off; the chicken was dead. After the bus ride, we hike towards Kedar’s house. We walk for ten minutes along a path of stones. Kedar’s father greets us. Over an open fire pit, his father roasts an entire chicken, holding it by its leg.

Kedar’s home is made of clay. Kedar’s mother warmly greets us. She sits with one of the six family goats underneath the husks of maize that hang from the ceiling. At 56 years old, she goes to work the field at 5 in the morning during the harvest time. Besides the harvest time, work in the countryside is extremely scarce. The family grows their own maize but they rent the land and must share the limited produce with the owner. Despite the Gandharis’ efforts, they can only grow enough maize for two months’ worth of food.

The Gandharis are part of the Gandharba caste, the only musician caste in Nepal. The Gandharba are an “untouchable” Dalit caste and particularly struggle to find employment. Their numbers have dwindled in recent years. For centuries the Nepalese have lived under the ancient caste system. And the Dalit face a difficult life. They are not allowed to enter many of the rural temples. When some Dalit have tried to enter, they have been beaten. At some of the rural schools, Dalit children must sit separate from their non-Dalit peers. One Dalit, Anupkamal B.K., had to flee his village after he married a non-Dalit girl. His family followed in order to escape persecution. Dalit discrimination in the countryside is particularly harsh.

For centuries the Nepalese have lived under the ancient caste system.

Kedar’s home sits atop a hill of majestic wonder. Within a couple hundred yards of Kedar’s home stands the castle ruins of the Gorkha King who united the nation of Nepal nearly two and a half centuries ago. Valleys of great depth plunge from the royal hills. Beyond the valleys, more hills rise with miraculous height in front of the Himalayan peaks that loom majestically afar. When Kedar’s 56-year-old mother goes to the field at 5 a.m., her deeply wrinkled face is highlighted by the rising sun. Sickle in hand, she smiles beautifully and proudly. She is at peace with her life. But many in the village are not. Two of the youths joined the People’s Liberation Army, the revolutionary Army of the CPN-M. The people of Gorkha and those in many other rural districts refer to their homes as “backward,” a term so politically incorrect that it is jarring for my American ears to hear. It is understandable how despite the beauty of their lives atop the Gorkha hill, the youth joined the Army. They want to survive. And many desperately want change.

Rolpa is even less developed than Gorkha. Its dirt roads and difficult access belie the poverty of the area – poverty that served as fertile ground for the birth of the Maoist insurgency. A ride in one of the few buses that dares to enter

the district is like riding a mechanical bull along the edges of steep mountains. It is excruciatingly bumpy and even the local policeman described the ride as difficult. In route to Rolpa I get out of the bus. As I stand in the cornfield, I notice an electricity pole with a small hole in it a few feet from the base. On the back side of the pole is a circle of jagged metal that is torn outward. It is a bullet hole. After I get back on the bus, we ride along the zigzag road from the tops of large hills to the valley of Libang. Libang, the headquarters of Rolpa, is wedged among looming hills on all sides. We stay in the headquarters' "best hotel." It costs four dollars a night, a low price even in Nepal for a "best hotel." The Internet cafes that are so abundant in Kathmandu cannot be found along the mud roads of Rolpa. The lack of access to communication leaves me longing for Kathmandu – a city whose dirt and density would never have spoken to me as an economic center or a developed city before I left for Nepal. But now I see that to which it stands in contrast.

The last destination of our trip is Sarlahi. Sarlahi is located in the Terai, which is the strip that stretches across the Nepali-Indian border, just under the hill section of Nepal. The sun is much more intense in the Terai and the heat is as well. The land is flat, its vast stretches sliced by thin streams of water. The roads mirror the streams, haphazardly cutting across the land, doing little to interrupt the cracked ground. Thatched roofs rest atop the small houses we pass. I count five children openly excrete along the side of the road.

As we travel back from Sarlahi to Kathmandu, a young man walks by wearing slick-backed hair and a stylish jacket. His dress is a sharp contrast to the tattered clothes of the inhabitants of rural Nepal. Cement houses line smooth cement roads, free of the persistent bumps of the countryside. Large cigarette advertisements cover the tops of doorways and stores. Our bus enters a marketplace. There are taxis, but no rickshaw drivers. Purple onions, tomatoes, and plastic bags bob in the muddy water below the bustling marketplace. The noise of the city rocks me. After two weeks in rural Nepal, I see the development of Kathmandu from a new perspective.

Contrasts

In both Rolpa and Sarlahi, great poverty swept the region. And violent actors were able to mobilize despair. Maoism is a part of life in Rolpa. Bold blue writing that proclaims "Drinking is injurious to health" stands out from the center of the hotel bar. On each side of the writing, liquor is placed behind glass. The large writing is clearly visible to the anti-alcohol communist leaders, communist cadre, and community members that see the bar each day as they walk

to work. The Maoist Rolpa District deputy secretary described the Maoist party as "the guardians of Rolpa." The party won every Constituent Assembly seat in the district during the April 2008 election. In Rolpa, even schoolchildren dress in red.

The people of the Terai are the "Madhesi" and they vigorously push for change. When I meet with the Sarlahi leaders of the Madhesi People's Rights Forum, nearly fifty people crowd the small space used for the interview. Two adult leaders of the Sarlahi organization sit across from me as the crowd gathers around us. They claim that their civil rights have not been granted, and they cite the lack of development in Sarlahi. A charismatic and powerful young student leader sits to the right. The leadership and attendees are angry, and they want change. They interrupt each other to tell me of their plight. The Madhesi struggle with the government of Nepal has waged for many years, their struggle turning violent at times. One man's angered wide eyes stick out from the crowd of men. He seems off kilter, ready to pop at any moment. As he speaks, his eyes grow wider and scarier. As the leaders and Madhesi attendees at the meeting count off human rights violations, their anger boils. While the efforts of the Madhesi have been generally peaceful, and they stress that their movement is a nonviolent one, I can understand, given the anger in the room, how the movement could turn violent. The scene is a window into tensions prior to the outbreak of armed conflict. If violent political entrepreneurs gain leadership, if the political context worsens, then it is understandable how the anger of the attendees could possibly be transformed into violence.

Rolpa and Sarlahi face great poverty and underdevelopment. Rolpa was fertile ground for the creation of the Maoist insurgency. And Sarlahi is fertile ground for future revolt as well. Conflict management expert Lisa Schirch writes:

Preventing Terrorism requires an understanding of the places where extremism thrives. Extremists are a tiny minority in any society, but they are more likely to find a sympathetic audience when the majority shares some of their anger, resentment and fatalism. They exploit frustration and indignity, no matter what the cause—be it chronic poverty, political oppression, or systematic exclusion from the benefits, privileges and respect that other societies enjoy.¹

According to the 2008 Chronic Poverty Report, Nepal is a Chronically Deprived Country.² Poverty hampers all of Nepal. But the extreme poverty is concentrated in rural regions and among certain castes. The disparity between the lifestyles of people in most districts of Nepal and the people of Rolpa

is great. Similarly the standard of living in the Terai is less than that of the hill regions. During the civil war, the Maoists mobilized those angered by the lack of development. And due to the economic condition of people in the Sarlahi, it is understandable how they could be mobilized to act violently in the future if their grievances are not sufficiently addressed. The lack of peace in Nepal can be attributed to two predominant factors: concentrated chronic poverty and the decision to seek change through violence.

The mantra of the Nepalese today is that “peace-building and development must go hand in hand.” To achieve a sustainable peace in Nepal, it is necessary for all people, independent of caste or gender, to secure economic resources. And people must be inspired and supported to choose peace. Whether it is peacebuilders at International Alert, organizers at the Asia Foundation, or members of the Dalit Welfare Association, humanitarians in Nepal understand the dual need for peacebuilding and development. When I asked Preeti Thapa, a program officer at the Asia Foundation, about the interconnection between peace-building and development, she noted: “People now realize because of the conflict in Nepal that you need to join peacebuilding and development together.”

As Preeti speaks, she comes alive with a loving, compassionate energy. Although she is a mother she retains a youthful energy and presence. It is clear she is in tune with the needs of the villages throughout Nepal and understands the resources needed to transform the various conflicts that the Nepalese face. Preeti states that the grassroots of Nepal are challenged by the need for both peacebuilding training and development support:

They can learn this [peacebuilding] training, they can learn this skill of conflict resolution, but they cannot “eat peace.” That is what they say: We cannot “eat peace.” ... Only [peacebuilding] training will not help them because their needs are there, and they are unmet. If you know how to deal with your problem, and you try to be nice ... you [still] do not have anything to eat. That is not a way of life. That does not solve the other part of the problem.

Preeti illustrates her point through a story of a woman whose husband was killed in front of her children. The traumatized woman did not know how to deal with her own pain. Her traumatized children did not attend school.

She got support from the government, and the Red Cross gave her [a] shop. But that did not help her ... She did not know how to deal with her own trauma.

She did not know how to deal with the trauma of her children, because they saw the Maoists kill their own father ... And with this training, she said that she met people like her, other victims of conflict. And they shared their feelings, and she realized, “Oh, I am not the only one who has gone through this problem,” ... and she realized that to be a widow is not a curse, and that it is OK to cry, it is OK to feel like that, it’s normal and that there is such things called trauma ... and healing. And then she knew how to address her own conflict with other people and build relationships. She knew how to go ask for help. And after this training she went to school, and asks the teacher to take the children to school, and then they got [a] scholarship ... So this type of training helped to build relationships and to help [victims] deal with their own problems, and to slowly help them in reconciliation and breaking the cycle of the enemy.

Preeti emphasizes the need for development activities. But she notes that “[Victims] won’t know how to address their own traumas. When they go back home, they are still dealing with this cycle of violence, this cycle of conflict. And from the inner side they won’t have peace.” In the “interdependent” and “inter-linked” Nepali community, Preeti makes the case that “we need each other to survive in a community.” Development supports the body, helping it function, to have its basic needs met, while peacebuilding supports the spirit. Together development and peacebuilding provide hope to build sustainable ways of life throughout a new Nepal.

In a training on “Building a Sustainable Peace,” trainers emphasize the need for both civil society and government to play a role in building peace. Civil society includes Nepali and international non-governmental organizations. Examples of civil society peacebuilding efforts include the training Preeti references, the efforts of the Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC), and the Children’s Peace Home. During the People’s War, INSEC mediators in Rolpa would visit Maoists if the Maoists abducted residents and work with them to seek the release of the abductees. And if the government detained anyone, INSEC mediators would work to ensure the protection of the detainees’ rights. Since the cessation of fighting, INSEC organizers have worked with local government to assist communities to heal and reintegrate displaced persons. The Children’s Peace Home of Dang hosts youth orphaned by the conflict. The children sleep, eat, pray, and dance together among the rice paddies that stretch far into the horizon. In Dang, I stay at the home and witness the children’s joy. In the morning, we walk for ten minutes amid the rising sun, and then sing while riding on the top of a school bus.

The Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction

The government of Nepal formed the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction (MOPR) in order to build peace after the People's War. Although it was only created last year, this ministry is one of the most powerful sections of Nepal's government. From interviews, as well as discussions with citizens, peacebuilders, government officials, and political party leaders, it is very clear that the vast majority of Nepalese believe that the MOPR should exist. However, many Nepalese are also deeply disappointed with its performance.

The Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction lies in the Singha Darbur government complex. On the back of a moped driven by Manish Thapa, I arrive at Singha Darbur after rounding the parliament and driving along a road lined with less-politicized ministries, local businesses and restaurants. Manish is the executive director of the Asian Study Center for Political & Conflict Transformation (ASPECT), where I am an intern. My assignment is to study and report on the efforts of the MOPR, with Manish supervising me. A dynamic young man in his mid-twenties, Manish is a peace studies professor. He is well known in the Nepal peacebuilding community and in larger Nepal political circles. Manish led the civil society campaign to establish the MOPR in 2007.

As we get close to the ministry, I grow excited. I currently serve as the executive director of the Student Peace Alliance, the national youth movement to establish a U.S. Department of Peace. Since 2005 I have organized youth throughout the United States to ensure that peace has a strong voice in our federal cabinet. Soon I would step into the halls of a government agency in Nepal like the one I have advocated for in my own country. A massive rectangle surrounded by a brick wall topped with barbed wire, Singha Darbur is the home to many of the government ministries and parliamentary offices. Graying buildings of four or five stories rise above the brick wall. Manish points to the closest building just beyond the wall: "That's the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction."

At the east entrance of Singha Darbur, police guards in blue and black stand armed outside the gate. Soldiers wearing green and black stand at attention inside the gate. Along the wall, a line of people extends from a guard station. The line of predominantly men all wear pants despite the great humidity. The palace of an ancient Nepali king sits beyond the east entrance. Ritzy cafes and trendy shops are interspersed throughout the palace grounds. Between the old palace grounds and the entrance, a handful of vendors line the streets. They sell sliced fruit on paper plates to the snacking government employees. A large black bull stands along the sidewalk. A section of the brick wall sags inwardly. I wonder if the sagging section of the brick wall is from an attack, poor construction, or old age.

We wait on our moped for someone from the ministry to greet us and guide us through security. A man of about five feet approaches us quietly. He looks tired and worn. But he smiles as he shakes our hands. As our escort from the MOPR brings us to a building, I am confused. "Law Commission" is written on the side of an overhang at the building's entrance. Underneath the overhang, new or relatively new SUVs and sedans are parked. Small Nepali flags extend upward from some of the cars. On most of the cars the flags are covered. Many of the cars display a blue sticker with a white cut out that looks like both a Nepali flag and a peace dove. The ministry occupies three floors of the law commission building and is made of about 80 staff members. At the front of each office, a white sheet hangs down from the door frame. Next to the door white writing on a wooden sign displays the name and title of each office inhabitant.

Madhu Regmi is a joint secretary at the MOPR. According to Madhu, the Peace Secretariat provided advice and support during the end of the 10-year Nepal armed conflict and the early stages of the peace process between the government of Nepal and the CPN-M. When I ask why the MOPR was formed, Madhu explains that the preceding Peace Secretariat did not have a direct channel to the cabinet. The officer overseeing the Peace Secretariat did not prioritize the issues of importance to the secretariat. So the members of the Peace Secretariat wanted, as Madhu describes, a "political boss." And with the creation of the MOPR, the Minister of Peace received the authority to speak within the cabinet on behalf of peace.

The responsibilities of the MOPR are solely aimed at implementing the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the government of Nepal and the Maoists and overseeing the peace process. The cantonment division of the Ministry oversees the barracking of the Nepal Army and the placement of Maoist forces into interim holding camps. The human-rights section of the ministry oversees the controversial Truth and Reconciliation Commission process. Those working in the section are currently writing the fourth draft of the TRC legislation. Other efforts of the MOPR include peace-promotion initiatives to raise awareness of peace in media throughout the country. A division oversees the Local Peace Committees, committees designed to bring the peace process to the grassroots level of Nepal. And the Relief and Rehabilitation unit administers compensation to war victims and oversees the reconstruction of infrastructure destroyed during the war.

Many in the ministry are proud of the work that they do. When I interview the ministry civil servants, many of them

beam with pride as they discuss their work. However, the ministry faces great challenges. Though the ministry focuses on peace promotion, so much of the country remains unaware of the peace process. Though the Local Peace Committee is supposed to bring the peace process to the local level, many of the districts have not organized local Peace Committees. In the few districts that have organized the local Peace Committees, meetings are typically held at the district headquarters, detached from the villages.

Those within the ministry typically tend to deflect blame onto the uncertain political climate. However, they do admit that they lack capacity, and the fact that few staffers are trained in peacebuilding is a “weakness.” Madhu explains that the civil servant system in Nepal is a “generalist practice.” Civil servants within the ministries typically only stay in one ministry for two to three years and are then transferred to another ministry. Madhu, for instance, previously worked at an anti-corruption agency. When he was promoted to the rank of “joint secretary,” Madhu moved to the Peace Secretariat, the predecessor to the MOPR. Only a handful of the 80 staff members are actually trained in the field of peacebuilding and conflict management in which they are working. Due to an incredibly insufficient budget, the government of Nepal does not currently have the capacity to fully train their staff in peacebuilding. And the international community is hesitant to train the workers because foreign governments and international NGOs believe that the training is not a good investment as within a couple years the trained civil servants will be transferred to another ministry.

In my last visit to the MOPR, an elderly woman dressed in brightly colored traditional robes stops me on the stairway. She begins to rapidly speak in Nepali as she leans on her cane. When I smile and tell her that I do not speak Nepali, she continues speaking to me anyway. Maybe she is crazy, or maybe she is deaf. But standing in her Nepal Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction, I get the sense she is deeply dissatisfied, and she just needed to speak to someone, even if I cannot understand what she is saying.

A Void Left Unfilled

Many of those on the ground, people who continue to struggle day to day, have yet to see the fruits of the civil society and government efforts. After a fourteen-hour overnight bus ride to Dang, we come to a halt in the early morning dawn a mere 15 minutes away from our destination. We get out of the bus and find water running over the road for the next 150 meters. We are told that off

into the dark the water is raging. As I walk over to verify, indeed a fast-paced river covers the top of the road 100 meters from the bus. A man next to me matter-of-factly explains that there are three sections of the road that the water covers.

Although bridges had been planned, the bridges were never built due to the political instability of the armed conflict period and the instability of the current transition process. Vehicles can still cross over the rivers but they must wait until the pace is slow enough that the river will not wipe away the tractors and trucks. We wait a half hour for the water to recede, and then we cross.

Kamal is now nineteen years old and a muscular young man with strong features. He is quietly intense.

His eyes, yellow and black, are tiger-like. During the war, Kamal felt continually afraid. “Even we could not breathe fresh air,” he reflects. As we arrive in Gohrai, the headquarters of Dang, soldiers of the Nepal Army march in front of a massive red gate at the center of the city. The gate honors the Maoist martyrs who died fighting the same army that daily marches past the gate. Kamal leads me around the “affected area” of his city. We walk along the main road and veer into a neighborhood. Blackened mangled trees stretch pleadingly towards the blue sky. Next to the charred trees, iron construction poles extend from brick homes. Through the pain, the city struggles to rebuild.

Lack of development fueled the war, yet two years after the fighting stopped the bridges of Dang are still not built. Many of the destroyed houses in Dang have not been rebuilt. The roads of Rolpa remain unpaved. Despite negotiations with the government of Nepal, the people of Sarlahi remain deeply dissatisfied that their grievances have not yet been met. Many of those injured during the war have not received reparations. Although both government and civil society have sought to develop and reconstruct Nepal, much work remains to be done.

As Kamal speaks, his vulnerability comes through his quiet intensity. He still sees the dead bodies. He feels frustrated that the government does not do more to help. But he does not prescribe policy. I ask Kamal for permission to print his story and name. Quickly he agrees. He wants the world to know.

Though the ministry focuses on peace promotion, so much of the country remains unaware of the peace process.

Conclusion

The conflagration that is the People's War in Nepal raged for many reasons. A lack of economic resources provided the timber, social discrimination the kindling. Despair and anger were the fuel. The Maoists merely lit the match and then maintained the blaze. In 2006, the fire was ostensibly extinguished. However, its embers remain hot. The peace that was left when violence ceased is built on shifting sands, its foundation unstable. If the embers are not sufficiently attended to, then the fire could start up anew. Now the

government of Nepal needs to fully build a sustainable peace.

The country is slowly transitioning to democratic governance and a life free of war, but many in Nepal are growing frustrated with government corruption and impotence.

Two years after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, Nepal still heals and seeks to transform the conflict. A foreign minister of the United Marxist-Leninist party concludes: "A baby is not baptized on the first day." A monarch ruled Nepal for hundreds of years. The country is just starting to experiment with democracy. The country is slowly transitioning to democratic governance and a life free of war, but many in Nepal are growing frustrated with government corruption and impotence.

A comprehensive solution to the conflict is necessary. As the fighting has ended, space must be granted to understand what happened, identify the challenges, and move forward. Development is necessary to rebuild after the war as well as to provide for the grievances that sparked the war. Human rights must be granted for each to be respected and included in community life. But without peacebuilding (mechanisms to resolve conflicts locally and nationally), neither human rights nor development can be sustained.

The Nepal MOPR brought together conflicting parties, inspired members of government to learn about peace and conflict management, and provided central contacts for all those in support of peace both inside and outside of Nepal. Yet the MOPR has struggled with implementation. Despite the capacity of the MOPR to generate policy, the ministry has struggled to effectively advocate for the needs of conflict victims. Furthermore the ministry is hindered by partisanship in leadership. The Nepali Congress-led MOPR provided reparations to those killed or injured

by the Maoists, but not to those killed or injured by the government forces. This sparked great anger among the Maoists, and their complaints to the Nepali Congress led MOPR to change its ways.

Many of the MOPR's challenges are due to timing and implementation. April 2008 elections that sent a Maoist plurality to the Constituent Assembly did not lend to the formation of a Maoist-lead government until the end of my stay in Nepal. Throughout interviews and meetings, people on the street, NGO workers, and government officials repeated the same refrain: "wait and see." Political implementation necessitates political consent. But political consent is difficult to cultivate in times of crisis. And in order to generate political consent, implementation of past agreements is necessary. The game goes round and round. Peace processes take time and patience is mandatory. The MOPR must be evaluated in this light. Additionally, leadership of the MOPR must be held accountable and given the educational and training resources to do the work that must be done. Maoists criticized the Nepali Congress-ruled MOPR for its partisanship. As I left Nepal, leadership of the MOPR shifted to the Maoists. As the Maoists now rule the MOPR, they have a unique opportunity to make change that moves beyond party lines. Future research is needed to study and monitor the MOPR. Research should focus upon the policy shifts instituted after the Maoists took leadership and how the MOPR is able to engage with frustrated parties such as the Madhesi.

After traveling from Nepal, to Bahrain, to London, and then to Boston, I lift my traveler's pack and enter the Boston T. I board the T from the Airport station and head towards Park Street on the blue line. I have traveled for thirty hours and I look like I have traveled for thirty hours. My Jewfro is disheveled. My stubble is becoming beard-like. And I smell. I smell badly. As I enter the T, the lights brightly illuminate the passengers. The passengers sit calmly. They are well dressed, and they wear shoes that look new. If the riders want to stand, they stand. If they want to sit, they sit. I am shocked by how spacious the T is. A blonde boy whines to his mother about the difficulty of the ride. I smile.

According to the 2008-2009 Chronic Poverty Report: "In all, 19 of the 32 countries classed as CDCs have experienced major conflicts since 1970 (a higher proportion than for other categories of country)."³ As I return to my Internet access that is ten times faster than the Internet cafes of Kathmandu, and to grocery stores with shampoo aisles the size of some Kathmandu markets, I question how the affluence of my America impacts the violence of Nepal.

And I see the violence of Nepal in our American way of life. The revolution of the Nepali countryside is the underground revolt of American urbanites. In America the cities that face the greatest poverty and despair also typically face the greatest violence. It is no coincidence that some of America's poorest cities (such as St. Louis, Detroit, and Cleveland) are also some of America's most violent cities. But even in our wealthiest communities, violence is a part of American life. In the wealthiest of American households, the silent oppression of domestic violence shatters the thin windows of suburban progress. The bullets of Columbine and Virginia Tech remind us that the soul of our nation still lives on in despair.

When there is no opportunity, when there is no hope, people want change. And if they grow sufficiently desperate they are willing to accept that change even if it is by violent means. Whether it is desperation over stress at work, alienation at school, or the inability to provide for one's family, this principle holds true no matter if the setting is Nepal or America. Like Nepal, America also needs a comprehensive approach to building peace. To uproot the scourge of violence in our country, we need to address conflict with strategies of development that raise up the economic condition of all Americans. And we need a peacebuilding strategy to inspire those across the economic spectrum to lead lives of peace. After two months searching for peace through the Nepal chaos, I return to America even more committed to making a vision of peace into reality.

Notes

1. "A New Vision for U.S. and Global Global Security" The 3D Security Initiative, 4.
2. 2008 Chronic Poverty Report, 15.
3. Chronic Poverty Report, 88.