

**“EVEREST TREMBLED: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE NEPAL
EARTHQUAKE RESPONSE”
TESTIMONY BEFORE THE HOUSE FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ASIA AND THE PACIFIC
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Introduction

Chairman Salmon, Ranking Member Sherman and Members of the Subcommittee: Thank you for this important and timely hearing on Nepal in the aftermath of the terrible earthquake that struck on April 25th.

The outpouring of concern from the U.S. Congress in the days and weeks following the earthquake and the surge in contributions to relief organizations are a testament to the generosity of the American people. It is a true indicator of the common values that unite us during these difficult times.

Mr. Chairman, the 7.8 magnitude earthquake that hit Nepal took over 8,600 lives and injured over 16,800 people, destroyed or damaged over 760,000 homes – directly impacting over 3.8 million people – as well as many schools and government buildings.

Last week, I traveled to Nepal and witnessed first-hand the devastating losses suffered by the Nepalese people. But I also bore witness to the triumph of the human spirit and the resilience of the affected communities as relief workers from around the world joined hands with Nepalese organizations to provide humanitarian relief. I saw grit and determination in the faces of those who had lost their homes and their family members, but had not lost their hope.

The Nepalese military, ably led by the Army Chief of Staff General Rana, worked hand in hand with our own Marines and civilian responders, alongside military and civilian teams from across the region and around the world, to coordinate search and rescue efforts and bring relief to remote and difficult to reach areas. I was there when the heart-breaking news of the American UH-1 helicopter crash, with no survivors, reached our team in Kathmandu. We salute those brave military

professionals – Americans and Nepalese – who perished in their nations’ service while helping those in need. I also want to take a moment to express our gratitude for the strong support of Indian and Nepalese forces during the search for our missing helicopter. These soldiers worked tirelessly alongside our Marines to fly sorties and deploy infantry to comb through the vast and difficult terrain.

The U.S. civilian responders, led by USAID’s Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance through their Disaster Assistance Response Team, including urban search and rescue teams from Los Angeles and Fairfax Counties, have worked tirelessly to save lives and bring aid to affected populations. All of these people are heroes that embody the best of American values.

Mr. Chairman, Nepal is a nation of tremendous strength and bravery. This is a nation that emerged from a ten-year civil war with a renewed commitment to democracy and development, holding successful elections and reducing the rate of extreme poverty from over half the population down to a quarter in just seven years.

However, the earthquake that hit Nepal on April 25th, its aftershocks, and the follow-on impacts, threaten to unwind the incredible progress that the country has made in recent years. The earthquake struck amid delicate constitutional negotiations, and many Nepalis have suddenly found themselves without access to shelter, clean water, or medicine. The monsoon rains begin next month and last until August, threatening more landslides and destruction.

Mr. Chairman, while in Nepal I had a chance to visit Sankhu, a historic town on the outskirts of Kathmandu with centuries-old architecture. What I saw was a scene of utter destruction, with more than half of the buildings completely destroyed and others damaged beyond repair. Other remote villages, hit by landslides, had all but disappeared, swallowed by the mountains around them.

Many villages suffering similar fates can be found throughout the most-affected districts. The needs are incredible, but we are helping to meet them. The United States Government has already committed nearly \$47 million in assistance. My colleagues will go into more detail on where that assistance has gone and what it has accomplished, which will really make you proud of our people out there and the great work that they are doing. I also want to underscore how important our pre-disaster investments in Nepal were. While these were relatively small dollar figures, their impact was tremendous: they saved lives – American, Nepali, and others – both during the earthquake and after.

Consular achievements

Our embassy staff, under the leadership of Ambassador Peter Bodde, has performed above and beyond duty's call in recent weeks and I would like to take this moment to publicly commend them for their incredible and life-saving work.

Despite the trauma of surviving a massive earthquake and witnessing the horrific aftermath, they selflessly continued to serve their own country and help the people of Nepal. Our staff ran 24/7 operations to account for and help U.S. citizens and assist with disaster response. After the earthquake, the Embassy contracted private helicopters to search for U.S. citizens stranded in remote locations. Thanks to their efforts, 17 U.S. citizens and 38 third-country nationals were rescued. Sadly, four U.S. citizens were killed immediately by avalanches on or near Mt. Everest.

The Embassy has been open for emergency services for U.S. citizens since April 25th, and over 800 U.S. citizens and third-country nationals sheltered at the Embassy and its annex after the earthquake. Immediately after the earthquake, our staff began canvassing hospitals and hotels to locate U.S. citizens and provide support as needed, and worked closely with the Nepali Army to rescue missing citizens. Our staff also worked with other missions to get information on U.S. citizens in possible distress and to help evacuate U.S. citizens as needed.

Our Embassy was able to respond so quickly and thoroughly because of far-sighted investments in disaster preparedness. In the past five years – and in response to the terrible Haiti earthquake of 2010 – the Department of State, with strong support from Congress, has made substantial investments to upgrade Embassy housing to meet high-seismic standards. We have conducted regular drills on earthquake preparedness, including a drill on April 24th, just hours before the actual earthquake.

These investments in preparedness made the difference between life and death. I have to give credit to our previous Ambassador, Scott DeLisi, who was also instrumental in these preparations. And we are proud to report that none of our Embassy staff – American or Nepalese – were killed or seriously injured in the earthquake or any of the aftershocks. Mr. Chairman, I want to again thank Congress for the strong support in this investment on disaster preparedness, which saved lives and meant we could respond more effectively to U.S. citizens in need.

We will look to the Nepal earthquake for lessons learned and best practices we can deploy in other seismic-prone embassies.

Regional Cooperation

This tragedy has given rise to a remarkable regional response in South Asia. India, which also lost lives in the earthquake, has demonstrated its ability to lead, deploying search and rescue teams, medical teams, and engineering teams, in addition to hundreds of tons of relief material, some of it airlifted on U.S.-supplied aircraft.

India has also been extremely helpful in assisting the relief efforts of others, especially the United States. They have granted our aircraft overflight clearances faster than ever before, allowed us to use their airfields, and eased visa restrictions for our people going in and out of Nepal, including a surge of American Citizens Services personnel from India.

Bangladesh, where some also died in the earthquake, has contributed two Army Medical Teams as well as rice, money, tents, medicine, blankets, and water.

Sri Lanka used a U.S.-made C-130 aircraft to deliver its own search and rescue teams, food, medicine, and helped repair an orphanage.

Pakistan has sent two C-130s carrying a medical team, a field hospital, tents, blankets, and more.

And one of the first countries to deliver assistance was Bhutan, whose Prime Minister joined a special flight that delivered medical and search and rescue teams, along with a pledge of \$1 million.

Some of these South Asian countries were devastated by the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami and now, barely a decade later, they are delivering assistance to their neighbors, often with unique platforms that U.S. companies helped build. That is a strong demonstration of how effective our investments in regional capacity can be, and the potential of further increasing those capacities and bringing them together under a regional framework.

I should also take a moment to recognize China's extensive relief efforts, which included deploying over 950 military staff, 10 plane loads of tents, and emergency road repairs. We have had good coordination with China throughout and we're

very grateful for their efforts, and offer our condolences to the families of those killed in China by the earthquake.

Next steps

Mr. Chairman, the most urgent tasks in the coming weeks will be to get the millions of Nepalis who lost their homes and were directly impacted by the earthquake into emergency shelter before the onset of monsoon season. Our USAID team is also working to help farmers plant their crops before the monsoon, so that Nepal does not fall into long-term food insecurity. This will provide livelihood for the affected population and reduce dependency on food aid.

Now is also a critical time to focus on planning and coordination for the recovery and reconstruction phase, which will start after the monsoon ends. We are working closely with the Government of Nepal and others in the international community to coordinate a Post Disaster Damage and Needs Assessment, or PDNA. USAID will participate in the needs assessment along with the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, United Nations, European Union, and Japan.

We are also encouraging Nepal's neighbors to join in the multilateral needs assessment process so that donor countries all have a common framework from which to work. Needs assessment will not be available for several more weeks, and one thing is clear: Nepal's recovery and reconstruction will cost billions and take years to complete. We expect a strong response from Nepal's neighbors, but the United States also has an important role to play.

I should add that another way we can help Nepal's recovery is through granting Temporary Protected Status, or TPS, to Nepali nationals who are currently in the United States. This temporary benefit would allow them to continue to work here and send back much-needed remittances, which their families and friends can use to purchase food, medicine, building materials, and other necessities. U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services estimates that 10,000-25,000 Nepali nationals in the United States could benefit from TPS. The Government of Nepal has requested TPS, and Secretary Kerry has sent his recommendation to the Department of Homeland Security, which is now considering a determination.

Political Reconciliation and Inclusive Recovery

The earthquake struck amid Nepal's delicate transition from a decade of conflict towards political reconciliation and constitutional democracy. That process is now more complicated and made more fragile.

Nepal faces massive challenges and its people – and leaders – must face them as one. Nepal must finish its constitution and hold long-delayed local elections to build the foundation for a stable, inclusive, and accountable government that will be critical to an effective reconstruction process. We raised these concerns with the Prime Minister, with members of political parties, and with civil society. Accountable leaders will ensure that earthquake relief is delivered to the people who need it, without disadvantage for caste, gender, legal status, or ethnicity. Doing so will lay a critical foundation for stability and renewal – one that values equality and the full participation of society. The U.S. commitment to equitable access to assistance will reinforce this approach.

Our assistance is needs-based and guided by the principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence. And we seek to ensure that our assistance is reaching vulnerable communities, and that those communities are protected. For example, USAID is running a five-year project on improving the health and nutrition of pregnant women, new mothers, and infants. The project pays special attention to groups that have historically suffered discrimination through the caste system, and uses Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping to ensure that project services are delivered to those populations. After the earthquake, USAID was able to use that project's platform to provide aid equitably in six of the 14 most-affected districts.

Since the earthquake, we've also worked to make sure that local authorities and police are alert to gender-based violence and trafficking threats in displaced-person camps. Police were able to use U.S-supplied equipment and training to identify and arrest three rape suspects. We're now working closely with Nepal's government, civil society, and the international community, to ensure that vulnerable populations, including women and girls, members of the Dalit caste, persons with disabilities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) persons, are protected in the aftermath of the earthquake, and are included equally in recovery and reconstruction efforts. India has been especially proactive in increasing vigilance against trafficking-in-persons in the aftermath of the earthquake.

I should also mention that we are monitoring the impact of the earthquake on the large Tibetan, Bhutanese, and other refugee communities in Nepal, as part of our enduring commitment to those populations. We send our condolences to the families of the approximately 20 Tibetans that died in the earthquake, and we are working with Nepal's government and international donors to ensure that these communities receive the relief supplies they need.

Let me pause to note a virtuous circle: the U.S. Government has accepted more than 80,000 Bhutanese refugees who had previously been housed in camps in Nepal. I was heartened to learn that this community, many of them now U.S. citizens, took up a special collection to help Nepal as a sign of thanks for Nepal's hospitality during their own time of need. We will keep the Tibetan and Bhutanese refugee communities and other vulnerable populations in mind as we plan for a longer rebuilding effort.

And as the world looks to helping Nepal rebuild, a top priority should be restoring the damage to its world-famous cultural heritage. The devastation is deeper than the toll in bricks, mortar, and the economic costs of lost tourism: these sites represent the idea of Nepal as a wellspring for Asian religion and culture. The development and expansion of Buddhism and Hinduism over many centuries inspired a unique artistic and architectural heritage in Nepal that represented impressive achievements in not just artwork and buildings, but also in developing a tolerant and inclusive society that was a melting pot for diverse faiths and cultures. The earthquake completely destroyed some of the grand monuments to this important legacy, and strong and sustained international efforts will be required to restore them.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, as you have heard today, our investments go a long way when disaster strikes – they save lives, including American lives. And when these investments succeed it means that we have to spend much less afterwards – health and development impacts are smaller, and the countries are able to recover quicker. This is truly a case where an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. So we need to expand and accelerate our investments in helping Nepal, and the region's other countries, to prepare for natural calamities.

We, and, more importantly, the people of Nepal, appreciate the strong messages of support and commitment from Congress and from the American people – they mean a lot in times of tragedy. Now, we must turn our attention to recovery and

reconstruction. We are committed to helping construct more resilient housing, addressing the impact on health and education, expanding support for vulnerable communities, and strengthening disaster preparedness and response capabilities in Nepal's government and civil society.

Mr. Chairman, this will be a long-term effort that will require long-term attention, and I look forward to working closely with Congress to help rebuild a stronger and more resilient Nepal. Thank you and I look forward to your questions.