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Hunger at the Roof of the World Nepal's Food Insecurity and the International Community's Response

Nepal is an impoverished, landlocked country bounded by the Himalayas, that is currently fighting a civil war against Maoist insurgents. This insurgency has adversely affected the food security¹ of Nepal's subsistence farmers. For example, a common tactic of the insurgency is to call mandatory "strikes" during which travel and commerce are effectively shut down by the insurgents through roadblocks and threats of violence. (Maoist Strikes Spell Disaster for Nepal Farmers) The General Secretary of the Nepal Dairy Association, Harihar Tandukar, has stated that Kathmandu, Nepal's capital city, is able to meet only 40% of its milk needs of 140,000 liters (36,984 gallons) daily during blockades and strikes. (Maoist Strikes Spell Disaster for Nepal Farmers.) The farmers who would normally supply this milk lose their income and are less able to ensure nutritional security for their families or for their normal customers. In many provinces, hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of agricultural products go to waste each day due to closed roads and markets. A lack of refrigeration in rural areas means that the crops cannot be stored for sale until after the strike is over. (Dimensions of Need, An Atlas of Food and Agriculture) Farmers are also sometimes effectively drafted by the Maoists for military duty (Douglas) or shot by the forces of either the Nepalese Royal Army or the insurgents. In 2003 alone, 139 agricultural workers were killed by the Maoists, and 153 were killed by Government forces. (Maoist Strikes Spell Disaster for Nepal Farmers) Obviously, these occurrences can cause labor shortages on family farms. Due in large part to the political unrest, overall food production in the country is decreasing. (Bhurtel and Ali) In fact, Nepal has gone from being a food exporter to being a large food importer. (Bhurtel and Ali) The war has had a negative effect on all of the country, but has disproportionately affected farmers. (Maoist Strikes Spell Disaster for Nepal Farmers) The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of the conflict on the food security of Nepal's subsistence farmers and to discuss current and possible future international initiatives to alleviate the problem.

Nepal is a small country, slightly smaller than Arkansas, with an area of 147,181 square kilometers (56,827 square miles). (Chhetry) Nepal has three distinct geographical regions which run through it roughly east to west, parallel to each other. These three regions are the Terai, a low, flat, river plain, the hill region, which is where most of the rural population lives, and the mountain region, which contains Mt. Everest, the world's highest mountain. As one travels north, the regions increase in elevation, and the climate changes from tropical in the Terai to alpine in the mountains. (Nepal: Agricultural Policy and Strategies for Poverty Alleviation and Food Security) The regions are all best suited for different kinds of agriculture, based on their elevation. The Terai has mostly cereal grains, cash crops, and livestock. The hill region has cereal crops, with horticulture in the place of cash crops, and again, livestock. The agriculture of the mountain region is predominantly livestock based. (Nepal: Agricultural Policy and Strategies for Poverty Alleviation and Food Security)

¹ For purposes of this paper, food security is defined as follows: "Food security exists when all people at all times have physical and economical access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active healthy life." (Nepal: Agricultural Policy and Strategies for Poverty Alleviation and Food Security)

Nepal is also one of the world's poorest and least developed nations. The CIA World Fact Book reports that one third of Nepal's population lives below the poverty line. The World Bank states that nearly half of Nepal's population survives on less than one US dollar per day. (Bhurtel and Ali) In the mountain region, poverty is so severe that five out of every six children are stunted. (Bhurtel and Ali) This is an extreme example of the consequences of Nepal's food insecurity. Agriculture provides jobs for over seventy-five percent of Nepal's population, while accounting for less than forty percent of its gross domestic product. (CIA World Fact Book) The Human Development Report 2000, by the United Nation's Development Programme, states that the poorest twenty percent of Nepal's people earns less than eight percent of the income, while the richest twenty percent makes over fifty percent of the nation's income. (Nepal's HDI shows no improvement)

While having officially outlawed the practice, Nepal still follows the Hindu caste system to a significant extent. In this system, there are four primary castes, called *Varnas*. The four *Varnas* are, in order of their rank in society, the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas, and the Shudras. (Reference.com. Caste) The Dalits, or untouchables, while technically not a caste, are still part of the caste system. Caste determines one's position in society and traditionally limited the occupation one could pursue. For example, Brahmins were the priestly caste responsible for the religious affairs of society and teaching. Kshatriyas were the warrior/noble caste whose purpose was to protect and rule the people; only they were allowed to rule. Vaishyas made up the working class, including craftsmen and traders. The Shudras, which were the lowest caste, were historically the equivalent of serfs. (Reference.com. Caste) The Dalits traditionally were shunned by all castes, and they were allowed only jobs that the upper castes would not do, such as occupations involving garbage, sewage, and butchering. (Reference.com. Caste) The Maoist insurgency is comprised mostly of Dalits and the lower castes, but some of the upper castes have been included in their ranks as well. One of the Maoists' original demands was to eliminate the system of Untouchability. Low caste people and Dalits are even today denied many rights and services; this affects their income and makes them more susceptible to poverty and nutritional insecurity. (Reference.com. Caste)

A typical subsistence farmer in Nepal has a family of five or six and lives in a hamlet of about thirty households. Homes are made from mud and straw bricks; there is no running water or sanitation. A family usually owns about half a hectare (1 acre = .4 hectare). Families will grow corn and millet on rain-fed uplands, and wheat and rice on low-lying irrigable land. (Dimensions of Need, An Atlas of Food and Agriculture) The typical farmer can provide for only around sixty percent of his family's food and must sell his labor when not farming to obtain the rest. The average caloric intake of a typical subsistence farmer's family member is around 2,100 calories daily. (Dimensions of Need, An Atlas of Food and Agriculture) Food production in Nepal has dropped over the last couple of years. This is largely due to the insurgency and to farm fragmentation. Farm fragmentation is caused by Nepal's legal system which requires that land be split equally by all of the landowner's sons after his death. (Dimensions of Need, An Atlas of Food and Agriculture) Over the course of several generations, this will turn a good-sized farm into many pieces of land too small and impractical to support a family.

Nepal's Maoist insurgency started armed attacks against Nepal's government in 1996, after the government refused to accommodate a 40 point list of demands issued by the Maoists. (Bhurtel and Ali) Many of the demands were reasonable: regulate the Indian border, check inflation, and protect and honor the orphaned, the elderly, and the disabled. Other demands were not as practical: such as the adoption of a new constitution and the expulsion of large foreign corporations. (40 Point Demand) The Maoists are an extreme faction comprised of various groups. They are led by a former agricultural teacher named Pushpa Kamal Dahal, who has taken

the name Prachanda. Prachanda and top rebel leaders are extreme ideologues. (Douglas) They study the accomplishments and teachings of Mao Zedong, the former Chinese Communist leader. They also study the principles of Marxism and the Prachanda Path, the teachings of their leader. (Douglas) The insurgents have created a new Maoist party, despite being disavowed by the Chinese government as not true Maoists. The Maoist insurgency has gained momentum while the government has floundered. (Douglas)

The Maoists adversely affect farmers in many ways; kidnappings affect farmers when Maoists steal children to raise as soldiers, this reduces the amount of labor a farmer can call upon. The Maoists also tax seeds and prevent travel, which prevents farmers from selling their crops and buying seeds, fertilizer, and other necessities. (Between Two Stones—Nepal’s Decade of Conflict) Farmers can also lose jobs and businesses completely. This happens when Maoists see an area as extremely profitable and simply take it over. This happened in the Rukum District, in western Nepal, where Maoists took control of the local herb industry to control production and sales of the herb *yasha gumba*, an herb sought after for medicinal purposes. (Between Two Stones—Nepal’s Decade of Conflict) The Maoists also take “revolutionary taxes,” which are essentially money extorted from the common people. (Nepal: Truce until Elections)

Nepal’s many problems were further complicated by the shooting of much of the Nepali royal family in the royal palace in Kathmandu by Crown Prince Dipendra, on Friday, June 1st, 2001. (Nepal royal family massacred) Dipendra shot his father, King Birendra, his mother, Queen Aiswarya, his brother and sister, Prince Nirajan and Princess Shruti, and six other people inside the Royal Palace. He then reportedly turned the gun on himself. The prince was said to have been deranged by drink and possibly drugs. Some think the prince went on this rampage as a result of a dispute with the Queen over whom he would marry. (Nepal royal family massacred) Still others think he may have been put up to the assault by Gyanendra, his uncle, the King’s brother. There are many theories as to why the Prince committed this rampage, but the real reason may never be known.

After the palace massacre, King Birendra’s brother, Gyanendra, assumed the crown. King Gyanendra has taken many drastic measures that have not helped to solve the problem of the insurgency. For example, King Gyanendra suspended the prime minister and his council after they disbanded Parliament in 2002. (CIA World Fact Book) He later reinstated the prime minister in 2004, but, dissatisfied by the way the government was handling the insurgency, the king subsequently suspended the government again in February 2005 and declared a state of emergency. The king’s government ended the state of emergency in May 2005, but still retained absolute power until April 2006, when mass protests forced the king to allow parliament to reconvene. (CIA World Fact Book) The reinstated Parliament stripped the king of his powers in June 2006, making the 237 year-old monarchy purely a ceremonial figurehead role. As a result, the king is now subject to Nepali law (he was formerly above the law and immune from prosecution and taxes). Further, the king is no longer the commander in chief of the Royal Nepalese Army and is also no longer able to control the laws of succession to the throne.

As of May 28, 2006, the government and the Maoists have agreed to stop fighting and hold elections for a new government and constitution. (Nepal: Truce until Elections) While the Maoist insurgents no longer insist on a communist dictatorship, so far they have refused to lay down their arms or to stop taking their revolutionary taxes until the elections are over. (Nepal: Truce until Elections) Unless the Maoists get what they want, they will just revert to their old ways and habits of violence and terror.

There have been many examples of international aid to troubled countries. You can see examples of this in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and various African nations. However, there have been surprisingly few international attempts to help Nepal and its people. Ironically, Nepal is the fifth largest supplier of troops to UN peacekeeping missions in 2006, while relatively little has been done by the UN to aid Nepal in its struggle. (Fact Sheet for the International Day of Peace) There have, however, been some international initiatives to help Nepal.

For example, the United States has sent several representatives to Nepal to assess the situation. United States Secretary of State Colin Powell visited the country in January of 2002. (Bhurteel and Ali) Other visiting officials have included US Senator Arlen Specter, who arrived August 12, 2006, for a two day visit. Senator Specter is the chairman of the Senate Committee on the Judiciary. (U.S. Senator Visits Nepal) The commander of the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM), Admiral William J. Fallon, arrived in Kathmandu for a 24-hour visit to Nepal on the first of February 2006. (Senior U.S. Pacific Commander Visits Nepal). These trips and others demonstrate the importance of this conflict and its consequences, and could form the basis for more substantial aid in the future.

Another example of an international effort to address Nepal's problems is the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations' 2003 report, Nepal: Agricultural Policy and Strategies for Poverty Alleviation and Food Security. This report identified seven essential "elements" that Nepal needs to address in order to combat poverty and food insecurity. These are the need to: (a) strengthen the agricultural production base; (b) reinforce participatory institutional arrangements; (c) foster gender-sensitive rural and agricultural development strategies; (d) promote child development, education and school feeding programs; (e) develop infrastructure and employment guarantee schemes; (f) provide social safety nets and welfare support; and (g) promote an investment framework based on market-State synergies. (Nepal: Agricultural Policy and Strategies for Poverty Alleviation and Food Security) Curiously, this document, despite being several hundred pages long and very detailed, fails to mention anything about the Maoist insurgency. I believe it is impossible to address food insecurity in Nepal without first acknowledging and addressing the Maoist insurgency.

The Industrial Security Group (ISG), which brings together concerned embassies, bilateral chambers of commerce, and industry associations, recently met and condemned the Maoists due to the way the Maoists have utilized extortion and threatened workers with violence if they do not join Maoist unions. (ISG Condemns Maoist Activities) These actions have been pushing Nepal's economy towards ruin. (ISG Condemns Maoist Activities)

A final example of an international initiative to help Nepal is the effort of the International Crisis Group (ICG), which is an international non-governmental organization that works through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy towards the prevention and resolution of violent conflict. (Nepal: Dealing with a Human Rights Crisis) The ICG works to prevent conflict world wide. It has offered suggestions to ensure that both sides of Nepal's insurgency respect human rights and to resolve this war peacefully. Among those suggestions are that both sides allow for a United Nations human rights monitoring mission to observe the conflict and for both groups to sign a human rights accord. The ICG also encourages both sides to promote human rights. (Nepal: Dealing with a Human Rights Crisis)

I believe that the international community is limited in what it can do now, as Nepal is preparing for elections. The international community should oversee the election to ensure it is fair. The international community must support the people of Nepal and attempt to end this conflict peacefully. It can do this by providing direct aid to Nepal's impoverished people.

Subsistence farmers in Nepal face many challenges even without the difficulties posed by the Maoists. Many of the farmers' other problems get short attention from the government, however, because it is trying to survive a civil war. The Maoists claim to fight for the people, yet they tax, kill, kidnap, plunder, destroy order, and adversely effect farmers. If the Maoists truly cared they would stop fighting and work towards peace. Also, problems like farm fragmentation go unaddressed because of more pressing issues due to the insurgency. Nepal's subsistence farmers face serious problems that, if not addressed, could lead to disaster for all of Nepal. I believe that it is Nepal's and the international community's duty to end this conflict and to aid Nepal's people. The conflict has prevented farmers from buying seeds, which in turn has prevented the planting of entire crops. This has had drastic effects on the economy. The international community, the Nepali Government, and the Maoists must all work towards a common goal of peace before Nepal can improve its situation. Being sheltered safe here in the Midwest of the United States, I may not know much of war and strife, but I do know that if this conflict does not end quickly, irreparable damage will be done to Nepal and its struggling subsistence farmers. Although I may not be able to do much to help world poverty, I hope that through this paper I can bring issues such as the effect of Nepal's Maoist insurgency on food security to people's attention.

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