

Report-III

Voices of IDPs and Returnees of Sunsari*

Every year Nepal undergoes various types of natural disasters which not only causes human casualty and loss of property but also a large number of people are displaced. The Koshi floods that occurred on 18 August 2008 had a destructive impact on the local population. The disaster occurred as the Koshi River breached its Spur No.12.10 and 12.80 at Paschim Kushaha VDC. The flood entered the settlements damaging the national highway, power transmission lines, communication cables, health posts, schools, village roads and private and public buildings. In total, 42,765 people from 7563 families of Shreepur, Haripur and Paschim Kushaha VDCs of Sunsari district were affected.¹ The government agencies and national and international non-governmental organizations worked in tandem to provide some support to the flood affected victims. Despite the Government efforts, UN bodies and national and international organizations, there are still many areas where the IDPs need further support to bring back their lives and livelihood into normalcy.

Nepal Institute of Peace (NIP) conducted a Rapid Assessment of Koshi flood affected IDPs in October 2009 in Sunsari district. Its objective was to identify the needs and aspirations of the IDPs and returnees, their access to humanitarian assistance and basic services as well as government effort regarding the relief, rehabilitation and resettlement of IDPs. Taking into account the resource limitations, the study was limited to a size of 14 respondents who were randomly selected from the three major flood affected Village Development Communities – Paschim Kushaha, Shreepur and Haripur. Thus the findings of the study cannot be considered representative of the entire Koshi flood victim population. The major ethnic/caste groups in the affected population are Muslim, Tharu, Bahun, Kshetry, Yadav, Koiri, Mushahar, Teli, Dhanuk, Haluwai and Uraon.

* Refugee Watch, 36, December 2010

Table I: Overview of the Respondents

No. of IDPs	Caste/Ethnicity	Age	Gender	Occupation	VDC
2	Brahmin	30 & 40	M & F	Farmer & Housewife (couple)	Sripur-4
6	Yadav, Koiri (OBC)	20-80	M	landlord, Farmer, Business, Student	Sripur-4,5,9 Paschim Kushaha - 4
2	Muslim	20 & 25	M & F	Unemployed & House wife	Sripur Jabdi - 8
1	Urao (Indigenous Community)	48	M	Carpenter	Paschim Kushaha - 4
3	Musahar (Dalit)	30 - 57	M	Farmer	Haripur - 1

The survey questions covered the following concerns:

1. Loss of human and property
2. Services provided during and after disaster by government and organizations
3. Resumption of basic services
4. Access to the relief package
5. Discrimination in distributing support
6. Return package and comprehensive package

The perception of the respondents was not positive towards the support they received from the government and other organizations. Many respondents were not satisfied with the unfair and discriminatory distribution of ration cards, which was dominated by the political approaches. They also claimed that the quality of food was not edible. They also expressed their dissatisfaction relating health services. Despite the provision of free health services, there were no medicines with the health department staff to provide to the sick people. The respondents claimed that except reopening of some of the health posts, the government authorities ignored the health problems of the IDPs and returnees during and after disaster.

Majority of the respondents said they are quite satisfied with the camp management for the shelter and the items like utensils and winter clothing provided by organizations. They were also satisfied with the schools but pointed out the necessity of reconstruction of schools in the nearby villages. The respondents said that despite having good security provision within the camps, there were some cases of theft within the camps.

The respondents claimed that there was provision of one tube-well for every five households. However, the people who enjoyed political connection were able to install tube wells in their courtyard. They also complained government's unwillingness to support for toilet and tube well construction. The problem of drinking water and sanitation is still many villages. Most of the respondents were unaware of the rights of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) as well as the national IDPs policies. They also did not have enough knowledge about the supporting mechanism available for IDPs. The IDPs received *Cash-For-Food*, and *Return Package* of Rs 50,000.00. *Cash-for-Food* was provided on the basis of NRs 1,000 per person to households with less than five members whereas families with more than five members received a lump sum of NPR 5075.00². Most of the respondents were not satisfied with return package provided by the government as it was very little amount as compared to their losses. From *Comprehensive Compensation Package*, Natural Disaster Relief Committee (NDRC), Sunsari has distributed around Rs 300 million to flood victims till date. The committee is still continuing the distribution to cover the loss of land and crops³ but the respondents had serious doubt about the fairness of the distribution.

Situation Analysis

Almost all the cultivated land in three VDCs namely Shreepur, Paschim Kushaha and Haripur was damaged by flood. Large parts of cultivated land are covered by thick layer of sand. Majority of people of these VDCs who had returned from camps are living in uncertainty. Those families who owned hectares of land are landless. A total of 8,200 Bighas of land was damaged by flood.⁴

Farming and livestock have been the major sources of income of majority of people in this area. Except physical materials and land, they have lost large number of livestock in the disaster. According to Regional Veterinary Service Directorate, Biratnagar, some 7,000 livestock were killed and 78,000 others affected in the aftermath of the disaster in Sunsari and Saptari district.⁵ As most of the agricultural land is covered by sand and arable land is also suffering from the lack of irrigation facilities, they are unable to grow any crops. As farming is their traditional occupation, they are not able to switch to other profession due to the lack of skill in other field. Thus they seek an alternative source for income or livelihood support from government. They are facing numerous problems for running their household expenditures.

Since disasters cannot be eliminated or controlled, one of the key efforts is to reduce vulnerability and mitigate the impact through proper disaster management system. Various reports reveal that lack of flood management monitoring and awareness about the risk of flood are the major

cause of Koshi flood disaster. Thus it requires strict technical as well as social monitoring mechanism to generate early warning system. At the same time regular repair of spurs is also necessary to avoid devastating impact.

Case Study

Sunsari is one of the conflict affected districts, where large numbers of armed groups are operating. These armed groups are threatening, intimidating, abducting and killing people for collecting ransom and let them leave the region, especially the people from Hill origin. Due to an attack by Madheshi Mukti Tigers (MMT) cadres, an armed outfit, on 23 September 2007, 58 households of hill origin from of Haripur VDC– 2 of Sunsari district were displaced to different villages⁶. Many of them are living in dire conditions in the various villages. During the visit of Haripur, the NIP researcher found a displaced family living in Haripur.

Goma Devi Dahal, a 40 years old housewife, is living in Haripur VDC with her husband and four children. As they have no land and none of the family members are educated, they are living and harvesting in government land in Haripur. Goma said that a large number of hill origin families were living in harmony with Madheshi people for time immemorial. Even during the Maoist insurgency, they did not face any threats. They were living peacefully and happily before an armed group Madhesh Mukti Tiger (MMT) started threatening them to leave the place. She recalls “At the beginning, we didn’t take it seriously as we poor people did not have land and not enough money to move to another place. But, when the cadres of MMT started coming at night and repeatedly intimidated, assaulting families, vandalizing houses and looting livestock and crops, we had no choice but to leave the place”. As the MMT cadres attacked on 23 September, Goma Devi and her family fled to Bhardah VDC of Sunsari District. However, they couldn’t stay there for long because of the lack of employment for survival and returned again to Haripur after five months (unlike other families who moved to hill people dominated villages) without any support from government or other organizations. Since they were not aware of the government support mechanisms, neither they inquired with the District Administrative Office (DAO) or Office of District Development Committee nor these offices made enquiry regarding this incident.

According to NRC, it provided shelter and other non-food items to the displaced families (MMT victims) living in Bange and Bharaul VDCs but they have not received any support or relief assistance from the government. The displaced families living in Madhuban and Chatara VDCs are in a very crucial situation. The government must initiate the process of identification and resettlements of the families displaced by armed groups and provide proper security to those who are willing to return. The government should

also support the families who want to settle elsewhere. Apart from this, long term livelihood support is necessary for them to manage their living.

Group Discussion

Musahars who belong to Dalit community, are popularly known as *Sada*. They are mostly landless or marginal people in the Terai. Along with many other castes and communities, a large numbers of Musahars were also displaced in Koshi flood disaster in 2008.. A total of 50 Mushahars households from Sripur VDC ward No. 4 were displaced and are currently living in government land at the side of the embankment of Koshi River at Haripur. Even before displacement, they were living in the government land with a hope that one day government will allocate the land to them. The disaster which swept away their houses and fertile land, made their life very difficult.

The displaced Musahar are still suffering from inadequate resources, lack of shelter, food scarcity, unemployment and diseases. Some of them have lost their body organs such as hands and legs during the disaster. The children are not getting access to schools and many families have lost their identification documents such as citizenship certificates as a result of the loss of household properties. As they have no land, they are unable to claim for Compensation Package which is provided for land and crops by government. For the last nine months, neither the government nor any other organizations have supported them except tube-well installation for drinking water. It was found that In the displaced families are struggling for their livelihood in the absence of employment and livelihood support programs. The children and pregnant women are living under severe malnutrition.

Most of the Musahar IDPs said that both the government and civil society neglected them because of their lower caste identity, illiteracy, and inaccessibility in political approaches. They claim that they have faced discrimination in support due to lack of political approach. Despite not having knowledge about housing rights, they are repeatedly demanding from the government about the need of land and compensation package.

Conclusion

The IDPs, living far from their original home, are dependent on the support of the government and other organizations but they are still struggling to resettle when they return to their original places. Thousands of people who were displaced because of Koshi flood in 2008 are yet to resettle and restart their normal life. Although most of them have returned to their original places but are facing difficulties for survival because of lack of employment and livelihood opportunities.

The displaced and returnees are highly dissatisfied on services provided by government as they claimed discriminatory practices based on caste/ethnicity/religion and political approach in relief distribution. They expressed their doubt in fair distribution of compensation package which the government has been providing since few months for loss of land and crops.

The IDPs argue that the government should focus on creating employment, livelihood opportunities mainly through agriculture, animal husbandry and small enterprises that help build sustainable livelihood in the villages. At the same time, improvement in housing, drinking water, sanitation and community health should be the priority of the government.

People displaced by armed conflict are also living in dire situation. They have also lost their land and assets and are unable to return at their original place due to threat by armed groups. The IDPs, either conflict-induced or natural disaster-induced have right to live their normal life wherever they like. The government should provide protection. The emerging trend of displacement in Terai needs to be addressed by the Government. They should focus on collecting information about the situation of these new IDPs from Terai. If the current problem is not addressed on time, its impact may bring series of other problems in the future.

Notes

¹ OCHA, *Koshi Flood Emergency Response Lessons Learnt Workshop*, Inaruma, Sunsari, 23 March 2009,

<http://www.un.org.np/reports/OCHA/2009/2009-04-01-Koshi-Flood-IL-Workshop.pdf>; Accessed on 23 April 2009

² OCHA, *Koshi Flood Response Update*, 6 May 2009

http://www.un.org.np/floods/daily_updates/Sunsari/2009-05-11-Koshi-Flood-Response-6-may.pdf; Accessed on 10 June 2009

³ The Himalayan Times, *Koshi flood victims get Rs 300m aid*, 2009-11-15

<http://www.thehimalayantimes.com/fullNews.php?headline=Koshi+flood+victims+get+Rs+300m+aid&NewsID=47399>; Accessed on 10 December 2009

⁴ UNESCO, *Rapid Hazard and Risk Assessment: Post-Flood Return Analysis*, p. 46, 1st June 2009; Accessed on 2 March 2010

<http://www.un.org.np/reports/UNESCO/2009/2009-06-01-UNCESC-Rapid-Hazard-and-Risk-Assessment.pdf>; Accessed on 1 March 2010

⁵ ekantipur.com, *Deaths, displacement up as deluge hits life*, 1st Sept 2009

<http://www.ekantipur.com/kolnews.php?&nid=159039>; Accessed on 1 March 2010

⁶ NRC, *Distant from Durable Solutions: Conflict induced Internal Displacement in Nepal*, Nepal IDP working Group, P. 19, 15, June 2009

<http://www.nrc.no/arch/img/9409470.pdf>; Accessed on 1 March 2010