

Patterns of Internal Displacement in Nepal

By

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Introduction

The patterns of internal displacement in Nepal must be read against the backdrop of the profile of IDPs in Nepal. Firstly, people displaced due to conflict, primarily Maoist insurgency. Significant to this IDP population is the fact that the vast majorities are from the Brahmin/Chettri ethnic group, which has long dominated landholding, government service and political power in Nepal (more than 90% of government servants were of Brahmin/Chettri ethnicity prior to 1990, and the percentage increased during the rule of the 'democratically-elected' parties). The displacement of people of Brahmin/Chettri ethnicity is reflected in the ethnicities of the children investigated in this study.

The second and largest group of internally displaced persons are the collateral victims of the armed conflict, primarily poor villagers who have fled their home land due to general insecurity, degradation of the local economy and services, food scarcity, fear of abduction by the Maoists, or fear of harassment and violence by either the Maoists or the government's security forces (including the national police, Armed Police Force and Nepalese Army). This group includes a wide range of rural castes and ethnicities. The internal displacement of villagers has not been chaotic and random, however. These IDPs have generally followed routes already established by rural-to-urban labour migration, settling in destinations and finding employment with the assistance of already-migrated family and community members.

The third groups of IDPs due to the armed conflict are youth, primarily boys and young men above the age of 12. These youth have fled due to fear of abduction and recruitment by Maoist forces or fear of harassment and violence by Maoists or security forces (or both). While many

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of these young men appear to have migrated to India, many have fled to Nepal's major cities, particularly those in the Kathmandu Valley.

Patterns of Displacement

There are two patterns of displacement. In most cases, displaced persons leave villages or small rural towns individually, with their families or in small groups. Some are direct victims of violence or have been threatened by Maoists. Many of these persons are party workers, village authorities, members of higher caste families, rich farmers or otherwise influential persons in the village. Others, including many poor, feel that they can no longer cope with the generally prevailing climate of insecurity. Such families often sell their belongings, if possible, and following classic transportation routes go first to the district headquarters and then move on to urban or semi-urban areas in Terai, where they live with family members or rent their own accommodation. From there, they often go on to the Kathmandu valley or to India. This type of displacement is not very visible. The displaced assimilate in their new environment and are often too afraid or ashamed of being recognized as IDPs.

In some extreme cases, it has been observed that whole villages were displaced within days or even in hours. Such mass displacements occurred in particular where vigilante or self-defense groups emerged in a specific location, threatening or even killing alleged Maoists. This was followed by retaliation from the CPN-M, causing mass displacement. These people fled to the next district headquarters or, in the case of areas in Terai, over the border to India. Areas are affected by such mass displacement in Kapilvastu and Dailekh districts. Village mobs or vigilante groups killed over 20 alleged Maoists in Kapilvastu district from 17 to 23 February 2005. The houses and properties of alleged CPN-M supporters were burnt or looted by the rampaging villagers, provoking the displacement of over 300 families, partly across the border. Some politicians from the capital had encouraged these acts. In the villages of Namuli, Toli and Soleri, in the district of Dailekh, villagers formed local committees to parlay with the CPN-M to stop abducting children and teachers and to desist from the taxations. Reprisals by the CPN-M in November 2004 led over 400 families from the region to flee to the Dailekh district headquarters.¹

It appears that most of the people from the districts of the East, North east and South Central/East of Nepal have moved to Kathmandu while the Western, North and Southern West have moved to Surkhet district headquarters at Birendranagar. Most of the people came directly to the district headquarters. However, even within that area many have moved house several times. Some people have gone to district headquarters and then come to the capital city. A majority of people seem to have moved mainly to urban or pre-urban areas, primarily with the expectation of finding

some kind of succor and a greater abundance of opportunity for finding some kind of work." ²

In the OCHA/ IDP Mission to Nepal's report findings indicate that it was often difficult to determine whether economic or conflict-related factors was responsible for displacement. The report further states that it is also nearly impossible to verify the number and location of IDPs, as they generally move in small groups and merge into a social network of families and friends. The typical pattern of displacement is from poor, conflict-affected rural areas to larger towns or across the border to India. Many of those displaced by Maoist violence appear to be individually targeted landowners, government officials and others who have reserves to live from for a period of time. The poorer IDPs fleeing generalized violence or human rights abuses move to district headquarters or, if they can afford the journey, to India where economic opportunities are slightly better than in Nepal.³

Pattern of Displacement Movement ⁴

1. District Headquarters,
2. City Centers-Terai
3. Capital,
4. India,
5. Third Country for employment (Malaysia and Gulf countries)

The number of IDPs falling in each category is not known.

In a 2004 study by INSEC on IDPs, it has been found that a family prepares to migrate as soon as possible after the Maoists kill any of its members. The tendency of migration after killing of a family member is also seen and they even abandon all their properties in the rural areas. People of this category have mostly migrated to the capital city or the regional headquarters. Members of the political parties and security personnel are found to immediately migrate to bigger and relatively safer places after killing of a family member. Those displaced by the ongoing violence have not migrated towards a certain place and the background of the people being displaced is also not the same. The family members' capacity, economic ability, probability of employment opportunities all have played important roles to determine the destination of the displaced people.⁵

Some people have resided in nearby villages with their relatives to instantly seek refuge from increasing dangers, the others for long term security have sought refuge in district headquarters and the other district headquarters where they have some one of their acquaintance. But there are many people who have directly migrated to the capital city or such other larger towns where they have access.

The data gathered provides a mixed and complex picture. The general pattern appears to be a movement of people from remote hill areas, first to the District centres and then on to larger towns or per-urban areas,

often on the Terai. Many then continue over the border into India. Against this general pattern there were other types of movement, for example some people moved in an east – west or west – east direction.⁶

People consulted during the assessment agreed in considering the migration phenomena much wider than what it traditionally is. While there are reports of entire villages virtually derelict of men between 12 and 60 years of age, the lack of monitoring and the open border with India makes it virtually impossible to gain a clear picture of migration in Nepal. It is possible however, to identify some more recent features of migration pattern. Over the last year entire families have left their villages, migrating to the Terai, urban areas like Kathmandu (this is where the confusion with IDPs happens), and to India. But more interesting, is the recent phenomena of youngsters migrating by themselves inside the country and abroad. Traditionally these migrated with adults from the village. From the little data collected about migration, it would seem that in addition to economic reasons there are protection concerns pushing people and youth to leave their villages. Most wealthy families have managed to migrate to the capital; or have sent their children to boarding schools outside the conflict area. Poor people more often did not migrate and tried to cope *in loco*.⁷

Maoist insurgency has modified traditional patterns of internal and international migration. Nepal has traditional patterns of internal and international migration, mostly for better job opportunities. However, the outbreak of the Maoist insurgency in 1996 and most especially, the deterioration of the security situation after the failure of peace talks at the end of 2001 have modified these patterns and forcibly uprooted certain groups of population from their home land.⁸

Seasonal Migration

Seasonal migration in Nepal from the high land to the low land in winter has a long history in the country. The massive internal migration was facilitated by the building of the east-west and north-south highways, and after malaria was controlled in the south. Lack of work in the mountains and hills during the slack agricultural season in winter, of non-agricultural sources of income and of basic services annually induce a large number of Nepalese workers to move to the Terai and India in search for work. The largest number of migrants to India comes from landless groups, the highly indebted and members of the “low caste” groups and is especially high in the Far Western Region. Wealthier people tend to go to East and South Asian countries where earnings are significantly higher.

Other factors that have contributed to the large numbers of people migrating to India on a seasonal basis are the open border between Nepal and India, high demand for cheap labour in India and a common linguistic and cultural background across the border. Needless to say that the fact that

the Far Western Region is better linked by road to India than other parts of Nepal has also played an important role.

There is no available data on the exact scale of seasonal migration, but some studies conducted in villages in the Western Region have shown that between 60-80 percent of the male population are away from home land during the winter. The official current figure on the number of labour migrants (except those in India) is about 12,000. However, independent estimates show that more than 200,000 people have gone to several countries as foreign workers from Nepal. Other figures indicate that as many as 500,000 Nepalese workers are working abroad.

Concerning the benefits obtained from migrant labour, many argue that remittances form a high proportion of the total household income for the seasonal migrants' households. However, other studies show that in poor households, especially in the Far Western Region, the benefits from migration are low and consist mainly in a reduced number of household members to be fed on the household income at the place of origin. There is also a general observation that migrant households are poorer than non-migrant households, with less access to agricultural production.

For those migrant Nepalese workers who return home land with remittances, the deterioration of the security situation in Nepal places them at the risk of robbery and subject to extortion by the Maoists. In some Asian countries, migrant workers use an informal money transfer system through private agents as it is a cheap and efficient form of money transfer and involves lower transaction costs and a better exchange rate. However, this so-called *Hundi* system is not applicable in India.

The flow of migrants across the border into India has dramatically increased since the escalation of the conflict in 2001, and especially after the imposition of the state of emergency, according to district and municipal authorities in the Mid and Far Western Regions. The majority of migrants are male youths escaping forced recruitment into the Maoist forces and the pressure imposed on them by HMG/N's security forces. As the Nepalese-Indian border is open, there are no available figures as to the extent of the increase in migration.

According to Douglas Coutts of WFP, "the unrest in Nepal has affected the traditional coping mechanisms of communities. Men used to leave to work and come back with cash or food. Much of that traditional migration has been affected". In fact, at the beginning of the monsoon many men return from India to Nepal in order to help in the rice planting. A phenomenon widely observed by district government officials and development workers in Nepalganj –one of the main crossing points to India- is that very few people are returning home land this planting season.

Displacement by Natural Disasters

Apart from conflict-induced displacement, people are also displaced every year in Nepal by various natural disasters, primarily floods and landslides. About 270 people lost their lives and a large number of people were displaced by floods and landslides in 2008. The major displacement occurred as Koshi, the biggest river of the country breached its eastern embankment at Kushaha in the Sunsari district on 18 August. This caused a displacement of 7,306 families (41,340 people) at least eight Village Development Committees (VDDCs) Kushaha, Laukahi, Ghuski, Shreepur, Hariipur, Narsingha, Madhuban and Basantpur.

Similarly, heavy rainfall and severe flash flooding from 19-21 September 2008 in Kailali and Kanchanpur took 40 lives. According to the Nepal Red Cross Society 16,000 houses were badly affected in 38 villages,, with 15,000 people being displaced in Mahendra Nagar municipality alone. The government, through coordinated action with national and International organizations provided immediate support to IDPs.

The support included temporary tents, food, etc. This support is still continuing, but there is a lack of basic facilities and medium to long-term livelihood support. IDPs are seeking shelter, drinking water and health facilities. Nutritious items and supplementary food is also lacking for pregnant women and mothers with babies living in the camp. According to OCHA, 95 percent of displaced persons have returned to their pre flood areas of the origin; most of them are eagerly waiting for government assistance for education, healthcare, food and water.

As reconstruction of the Koshi embankment has not been completed, and monsoon season has just come, people are living once again in highly vulnerable areas. If proper construction is not completed on time it may not only increase the number of IDPs, but several lives may be lost as well.

Conflict-Related Displacement

With the deterioration of the security situation in 2001, in many mid and far western districts the Maoists expanded their intimidation and violence practices targeting landowners, members of the ruling party, VDC chairmen and wealthy people. As a result, most of them decided to migrate to the district headquarters in search of safety. In recent months, remaining government officials and teachers under threat from the Maoists have been forced to migrate from their villages. Field reports indicate that these targeted persons have, in most of the cases, moved to the district headquarters leaving their families behind. Those reports also suggest that the families are not being further threatened at this stage.

The declaration by the Maoists of the “district people’s government” strategy in August 2001 and the beginning of forced recruitment from every family of one young man or woman, prompted the increased exodus of young people to India. In addition, the military pressure from the security forces since the imposition of the state of emergency in November 2001 has further increased the migration of especially males aged 13-28.

IDPs Prefer not to be Recognized as Such to Avoid Stigmatization

Most displaced have either moved to India or settled in the district headquarters, generally unaware of their status or remaining voluntarily unidentified out of fear of retribution by Maoist or security forces. In the east, although the effects of displacement are very visible in the empty villages, the displaced themselves are rather invisible, the majority preferring to keep a low profile to avoid the stigmatization associated to the "IDP" label, often used by Maoists to refer to political criminals. Many health workers and teachers have been transferred to different areas as a result of threats. Large-scale displacement took place in Kapilbastu district as a result of vigilante violence, forcing up to 35,000 to flee across the Indian border.

Monitoring the dynamics of displacement in Nepal has never been a straightforward task. Unlike other contexts where IDPs remain within the internationally recognized borders of the country to seek refuge in established settlements or easy-to-trace host families, in Nepal IDPs have either gone to India through the 1,500 km-long open border or quietly settled in the district headquarters.

The majorities have remained voluntarily unidentified due to fear, insecurity or unawareness of their status. The unclear boundaries between conflict-related displacement and historically seasonal and economic migration from the hill districts to the Terai and to India have further complicated the task of identifying and monitoring IDPs.

The wide range and diversity of the persons displaced has further hampered the ability to trace them and contributed to the relative ‘invisibility’ of the IDPs. Traditionally, landowners, political party workers and the village elites were the first to flee following or fearing harassment by the CPN-Maoist. Forced recruitment of men and youth by the CPN-Maoist combined with the Security Forces’ suspicion of their collaboration with the CPN-Maoist forced many young people and male heads of households to move out. As the conflict evolved, extortions, closure of schools, disruption of local commerce and failure of basic services prompted entire families to abandon their home land in numerous instances.⁹

In spite of the very visible consequences of forced displacement in the villages’ themselves, the magnitude and nature of displacement to district headquarters and other urban areas in the East is not nearly as visible. By

and large displaced persons are assumed to have had an association with the CPN/M or security forces and face suspicions from their host communities, preferring to keep a low profile in their new environments. Admitting to be displaced also involves social stigmatization as the term “IDP” has become generally associated with an unpopular group of people - “the exploiters or betrayers of the people” as labeled by the Maoists in some areas, but also referred to as informers, village bullies, criminals, or corrupt politicians by normal villagers.

In response to threats, the State transferred teachers and health workers from one area to another. The mission met with some teachers living in the district headquarters and commuting to their teaching posts daily by foot due to continued fear of the Maoists. Occasionally, transfer to a remote area was used as a threat to health workers and teachers who did not cooperate and give information about the Maoists’ activities. The mission was told that the State had recently informed displaced teachers that they had to return to their original posts or their contracts would not be renewed. Most displacements in response to forced recruitment have been of individuals. They have not been given ‘IDPs’ status in the district HQs, as they do not meet the Government’s restrictive definition, which does not include threats as a basis for IDP status. However, there is a growing awareness among local NGOs, security forces and even with local government officials that they have fled the consequences of the conflict. Many have left Nepal, fleeing to India and to Gulf states.¹⁸

There are various complex dynamics of conflict-related displacement occurring in Nepal. The first to be displaced have generally been members of the mainstream political parties, the land-owning elites, and other enemies of the so-called ‘People’s War’. Whilst these groups have specific protection concerns, they have usually had the resources to move and the connections to allow them to integrate at their new destinations, both inside and outside Nepal.

Other individuals and families have had to leave their home land as a result of being unable to sustain their livelihoods because of the conflict and because of threats from the warring parties, and in particular by the CPN (Maoist)’s drive to recruit ‘one fulltime member from each family’. These people, especially poor and marginalized people, have often settled in slum areas around district headquarter towns and in the Terai. Many have continued to Kathmandu or India. A recent mission from the UN Inter-agency Internal Displacement Division was told that in some highland villages up to 80% of the population has left. This has resulted in a breakdown of village social structures where only old and vulnerable groups are left behind as most young men and many of their immediate families have fled.

Others have fled in large groups from new intensive fighting. A number of districts have recently witnessed the re-emergence of ‘village

defense committees', or vigilante groups. In Kapilbastu district, in a recent 'civilian uprising' against the CPN (Maoist), a 4,000-strong mob killed or terrorized individuals suspected of aiding CPN (Maoist cadres, and torched an entire village. Recriminatory attacks by the CPN (Maoist) left further casualties. It is estimated that up to 35,000 people fled across the nearby border to India. Many started to return only a month after the attacks. Similar incidents have been recorded elsewhere, notably in Dailekh and Surkhet. On the rare occasions when IDPs have settled in ad-hoc camps they have not received sustained or coordinated aid. Most displaced have integrated into urban centres and there are currently no large permanent camp-like populations existing in Nepal.¹⁰

Majority of Working IDP Children were Accompanied when Traveling to Urban Areas

Study Terre des Homes & Save the Children Asylums of exploitation by showed that the majority of children migrating to urban centers in the past years and who engaged in some form of productive work traveled safely from source to destination thanks to family and village networks. Based on INSEC's data, the study observed that 3/4 of the children came from seriously conflict-affected districts. Half indicated that they had fled Maoist problems, while the other half cited economic motives as the main reason. Half of the girls and three-quarters of the boys had knowledge of the type of work they would be doing.

The study challenged the somewhat dramatic assumption that much of child IDP migration is made up of children separated from their families and travelling unaided in a hostile environment, prey to abusers and traffickers. The majority of children travelled with family or persons from the same village went directly to the destination and were provided support upon arrival. Exploitative labour agents and traffickers were not reported. Although some of the children indeed travelled at risk and definitely needed support and protection, the majority of children and their families did not appear to need 'safe migration' interventions. Family and village networks supported the children well during migration, although the support from these networks weakened after the children arrived at their destination. The problems of children appeared to be most significant at the source and destination rather than during the migration process.

The study used the article 'IDPs in Nepal: Most Affected Districts' from the INSEC Human Rights Yearbook 2004 as the basis for differentiating between districts that were either moderately or seriously affected by the conflict. The study showed that three quarters of the children came from seriously conflict-affected districts. More than one half of the children stated that Maoist conflict, among other reasons, were the cause of their migration. Nearly one half attributed home land economic

problems, among other reasons, as the cause of their migration. The extent to which these economic problems are a direct result of the conflict could not be determined, although other studies indicate severe disruption of rural economies, particularly in seriously conflict-affected areas. A small but notable number of children migrated because they had been abandoned by their families. Whether this abandonment is due to the conflict or other reasons is not clear. However, a significant lack of family care and support is indicated and requires further investigation.

It is clear from the study that the majority of the families of these working children took concrete steps to protect their children from the conflict by arranging their placement in work situations in Nepal's urban areas. In two thirds of the cases, families unilaterally made the decision for their children to migrate. The great majority of children travelled directly from their home land to the urban destination, and the majority were aware of that destination at the time they migrated. Almost all families provided protection to their children en route, sending them to the cities accompanied by family members or persons from the same village. It should be noted, however, that neither village acquaintances nor distant relatives necessarily provide the support and protection to a child that is provided by close family members. Almost all the girls and three fourths of the boys travelled accompanied by someone they knew. As expected, those who travelled alone were primarily older boys. In the cities, relatives and persons from the same village most often placed the child in the work situation. In some cases, such as stone quarry work, entire families migrated together for employment. In other cases, such as carpet factory labour, children entered workplaces with long-existing presence of family members or fellow villagers. Children were not always knowledgeable of the work they would perform at the time of their migration, however. Approximately one half of the girls and three quarters of the boys had no prior knowledge of the work they would engage in.¹¹

Conclusion

The scenario of migration patterns portrays the fragility of the Nepal hill economy. The situation of IDPs is deteriorating and there are limited resources and humanitarian base for IDPs. They do not have access to basic needs such as education, health and sanitation. There is dire need for psychosocial support for them. There is an urgent need to have in place emergency humanitarian assistance with particular reference to women and children. Attention also needs to shift to longer-term impacts and needs of IDPs.

There is lack of government will to resettle the conflict induced IDPs. The need to work with IDPs is being recognized. Lack of their sense of security needs to be addressed seriously before starting any long-term

rehabilitation. Neither the state nor the Maoists have given any indication to address this issue seriously. The civil society, on the other hand, has not been working together to create a single strong voice for demanding recognition of and support to the IDPs. The problem is further exasperated by the topography of the country, extreme poverty and political uncertainty.

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