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Mine-risk Education in Nepal, 2009

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A boy looks at an NCBL brochure during a mine-risk education class conducted by NCBL in Bardiya district, Nepal.
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Mine-risk Education in Nepal, 2009

Despite the signing of a 2006 peace agreement by the Nepalese government and the Maoists, Nepal's mine clearance remains a work in progress due to the after-effects of its decade-long Maoist conflict and the emergence of small, armed groups. Ban Landmines Campaign Nepal (NCBL) is at the forefront of the country's mine-risk-education efforts. This article examines NCBL's MRE program objectives, expectations, methods, and achievements, as well as the many challenges it faces.

by Purna Shova Chitrakar [Ban Landmines Campaign Nepal]

The Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and the government of Nepal signed a comprehensive peace agreement on 21 November 2006. The tireless efforts of NCBL enabled both parties to agree to incorporate important points on landmines and improvised explosive devices into the CPA. The provi-

sion directs the parties to map landmines and other explosive devices within 30 days of the signing of the agreement and destroy such mines and devices within 60 days. Despite this commitment, only 17 out of 53 minefields, and 99 out of more than 285 improvised-explosive-device fields were cleared by mid-2009.

No progress has been made on collecting the data and destroying the mines and IEDs planted by the Maoists. The mines and IEDs from the conflict continue to injure, maim and kill the civilian population. Furthermore, the Maoist breakaway factions and the emerging armed groups in the Terai (the stretch of foothills at the base of the Himalayas) exacerbated the situation with their use of explosives, resulting in 182 incidents within 28 districts in 2008. That year, media reports and information available to NCBL indicated 330 civilians were injured in Nepal, which included 240 men, 46 women and 44 children. Eighteen people died from their injuries. From January to June 2009, there were 96 civilian victims: 46 men, 25 women and 25 children. Among them, 11 died.¹

When the CPA was signed, elections for the Nepalese Constituent Assembly were held. A functioning interim government formed, and the top leader of the Communist Party of Nepal became the prime minister. However, the government has yet to encourage development and provide stability within the country. The decade-long armed conflict encouraged various groups, divided by caste, race and language, to continue fighting. Small, armed groups have emerged in the Terai and hills of Nepal, fueling violence and further destabilizing the region.

NCBL MRE Program

Despite the challenging political situation, from January to March 2009, NCBL conducted mine-risk education in 10 districts in the hills and Terai with the objective of protecting people's lives and property from mines and other explosives. NCBL also ran emergency MRE in two additional districts, including Bardiya and Rautahat, which suffered losses from explosions of mines and other explosive remnants of war. The districts were selected based on the number of explosions and casualties within each district. Ten facilitators were selected to run the MRE program, and the International Committee of the Red Cross, NCBL, Nepal Army and UNICEF implemented the introductory training. In addition, NCBL published a brochure and distributed 100,000 copies of MRE literature during the introductory program. NCBL started providing MRE in 2003 and has conducted education programs in 39 districts.

Objectives of the MRE program included the following:

- Conduct and encourage community MRE while raising awareness about the risks of mines

- Conduct MRE in schools and motivate pupils to share their knowledge with their families and communities
- Encourage security forces, local government and relevant authorities to conduct MRE around security posts and high-risk areas to protect civilians
- Publish and distribute MRE materials

NCBL expected the following from the MRE program in 2009:

- Civilians from 10 districts would participate in MRE
- Fifty thousand civilians (including schoolchildren and teachers) from 12 districts would receive MRE
- NCBL's published materials would reach 50,000 local people
- The government and security forces would be encouraged to conduct MRE

NCBL had planned to run MRE in 10 districts, but it added the Rautahat and Bardiya districts, as they had substantial mine-contamination threats for the residents. Altogether, 32,831 people, including teachers, students, farmers, security personnel, journalists and intellectuals, participated in and benefited from the program.

NCBL applied various learning techniques to civilians within these districts. Methods of mine-risk education included:

- Lectures
- Group discussions
- Door-to-door visits
- Media mobilization: local, regional, and national print and broadcast media
- Discussions about MRE pictures
- Question-and-answer sessions
- MRE charts
- Speeches by teachers

Program Achievements

NCBL's MRE program accomplished several objectives, grouped into six categories of achievement, explained below.

Success in numbers. An overwhelming 32,911 students and teachers in 160 schools and 40 communities in 12 districts benefited from the MRE program, namely Banke, Bardia, Dang, Doti, Jajarkot, Panchthar, Parsa, Ramechhap, Rautahat, Saptari, Siraha and Sunsari. The program taught MRE participants to recognize and not tamper with suspicious objects, avoid suspected hazardous areas and inform the authorities about possible minefields.

Cooperation. The MRE program was a joint effort between the Nepal Army, International Committee of the Red Cross, and UNICEF, social workers, journalists,



Students participate in an NCBL MRE class in Bardiya district, Nepal.

human-rights activists, students, teachers, members of school-management committees and rural women from different districts.

Political pressure. The MRE program put pressure on the government to remove mines and to sign the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention.

Keeping at-risk youths safe. The Maoists engaged children and youths in war and in the making of explosives. Even after the guns fell silent, the children and youths maintained an interest in the risks associated with mines and other explosive devices.

Expanded influence. The MRE program strengthened the anti-mine campaign and expanded the network of NCBL.

Community involvement. The program received suggestions from the local community, teachers and students on conducting and improving MRE. Additional achievements included:

- Conducted MRE in two additional districts.
- Distributed more than 100,000 copies of previously printed publications.

- Expanded NCBL's impact and outreach in additional districts.
- Established the ability to organize an efficient response to landmine/ERW incidents affecting the Madhesi people. In this case, NCBL organized a rally of 150 women, eliciting a positive reaction from the local community.

Monitoring and Evaluation Meeting

A monitoring and evaluation meeting was organized to assess the work carried out by the facilitators in the different districts. They discussed the following agenda items during the meeting:

- Objectives, methodologies and achievements
- Experiences from the different districts
- Further difficulties in carrying out MRE

Suggestions. Various suggestions were received during the evaluation. NCBL believes these suggestions will be helpful in planning and implementing future MRE:

- Organize district-level seminars. Such seminars would support the mobilization of the district-level government agencies, political parties and the media.

- Include MRE within the school curriculum. Notices posted on school premises and in public places could make people more aware of the program's availability. Interactive programs, such as street dramas, quiz contests and essay competitions, would bring greater attention to MRE programs.
- Accelerate the campaign for declaring schools "zones of peace."
- Ensure MRE is incorporated into military and police training.
- Distribute MRE materials to a wider population. Additionally, these materials should be published in the various languages represented by the districts and should more accurately depict and represent the local population.
- Increase government funding to MRE programs.
- Incorporate information about common consumer goods used to make explosive devices into the MRE programs.
- Promote MRE in children's magazines. Additional information could be effective in reaching small children.
- Promote MRE on radio and TV stations.
- Arrange for the facilitators to meet with the cadres of the emerging armed groups such as the Janatantrik Terai Mukti Morcha (Terai People's Liberation Front)–Goit and Jwala Singh factions, Madhesi Mukti Tigers, Madhesi Virus Killer, Terai Jana Kranti Parishad and others.
- Create and hang wall calendars. Calendars, with their many pages, dates, events and holidays, would be effective as

they can be hung on the walls of school buildings where students can see the educational message year round.

Difficulties

Ban Landmines Campaign Nepal faces numerous challenges in carrying out its MRE programs. For instance, an incident occurred while NCBL was on its way to Pakari in the Saptari district to conduct MRE. The Tigers questioned NCBL, suspecting them of propagating fear among the population. NCBL was able to carry through with MRE, but an armed sentry watched over the sessions at all times. Conflict erupted in the Terai districts, further exacerbating the situation as armed groups continually kept an eye on MRE program facilitators, inspecting the resource materials for possible propaganda against the armed groups.

Strikes, highway blockades and arson continue to create obstacles for NCBL facilitators. Furthermore, limited resources remain a problem.

Conclusion

NCBL constantly faces obstacles to its MRE programs in Nepal. Mines continue to injure, maim, and kill men, women and children in the rural areas. The emergence of various armed groups in the Terai has further necessitated conducting MRE, and it has become essential for the government to sign the AP Mine Ban Convention and to ensure assistance is provided to mine victims. Furthermore, engagement in MRE and various peace-building processes has become imperative in order to restore lasting peace in Nepal. †

See Endnotes, Page 78



Purna Shova Chitrakar began her social activism within the teacher's movement in 1980. She worked with a women's organization for more than 15 years, fighting for women's rights, and established the Women Development Society in 1991. Chitrakar also founded NCBL in 1995 and became a member of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines' general assembly in 1998 and an Advisory Board member in 2004. She has been a *Landmine Monitor* researcher since 1999 and has worked on the issue of cluster munitions since 2003. Chitrakar was a member of the Nepalese government's Central Child Welfare Board and a member of Nepal's National Mine Action Steering Committee. She has visited more than 40 countries, is the author of two published books, and is a writer and columnist in a weekly Nepalese newspaper.

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