



# How to save those who survive the next mega-earthquake in Nepal

Search and Rescue in Nepal

Emergency response capacity is critical in Nepal as the mountainous country is a hotspot for natural disasters including floods, landslides, droughts, and epidemics. Moreover, the Eurasian and Indian plates beneath Nepal are creating enormous pressure as they push the Himalayan range into the sky. This pressure will continue to build until it eventually releases through a large-scale earthquake.

Rapid and complex urban growth, high-density settlement patterns and unregulated construction of new buildings further add to the threat, leading to extreme vulnerability. GeoHazards International ranks Nepal's capital, Kathmandu, as the most at-risk city in the world to earthquake. All of this means that Nepal and its capital, Kathmandu, have the potential to be instantaneously devastated, undermining the economic and infrastructure gains of several decades and leaving significant numbers of the more than 2.5 million people that call Kathmandu home buried under rubble.

Addressing the dire threat facing its population, the Government of Nepal, with technical advice of a joint team of international experts from the People's Republic of China and the United States of America, recently developed a plan of action to strengthen Nepal's search and rescue capacity in its effort to mitigate, prepare and respond to disasters.

In February 2011, the Government of Nepal launched the Nepal Risk Reduction Consortium (NRRC). Under the NRRC, which comprises of Government, develop-

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ment, international financial institutions (IFIs) and humanitarian partners, five flagship areas have been selected for action. Flagship 2 of the NRRC, coordinated by the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Red Cross, focuses on strengthening emergency preparedness for response.

One of Flagship 2's intended outcomes is to build the capacity of first responders. Ensuring first response capacity from the community to the national level is critical to saving lives following a major earthquake. This is even more the case in Nepal, where the only international airport will very probably be damaged following an earthquake, leaving the landlocked and geographically rugged country and its capitol in Kathmandu Valley isolated from immediate international

With only one international airport and limited access routes, Kathmandu will be isolated from the world following a mega earthquake. Ensuring Nepal has the capacity to search for and rescue those who survive is critical.



response.

According to Pradip Koirala, Under Secretary of the Disaster Management Unit in the Ministry of Home Affairs, “First responder capacity development is a priority of the Government. It is vital that Nepal develops its own search and rescue capacity building from existing strengths, with the help of our partners, so that we can all be better prepared.” As part of its commitment to strengthening overall disaster preparedness and the disaster response system in Nepal, the Government has formulated a National Strategic Action Plan on Search and Rescue Capacity; but much work remains to be done to make this plan a reality.

To support the Government of Nepal in developing a clear road map for first response, technical experts from the People’s Republic of China and the United States of America visited from the 10th to the 18th of March 2014, supported by the NRRC and the Ministry of Home Affairs. During the visit, the experts took part in consultations with key stakeholders to determine a way forward. After the consultations, Professor Dr. Qu Guosheng of China’s National Earthquake Response Support Service and Deputy General Team Leader of the China International Search and Rescue Team<sup>1</sup> voiced enthusiasm stating, “There is a clear desire to develop Nepal search and rescue capacity. Working together we have formulated a solid plan of action for developing that capacity which both Nepal and its international partners can support.”

The mission found that personnel from the Nepal Army, Nepal Police and Armed Police Force are not only extremely motivated to take on the responsibility of responding in a major disaster, but also that some have received training in the fundamentals of search and rescue. Capitalizing on this motivation and training the different security forces are developing dedicated search and rescue units. Ultimately, these dedicated units will train and work together as a cohesive search and rescue response across the country.

Additionally, a number of community volunteers have also participated in search and rescue awareness training - a critical aspect of any effort as 50% of the lives saved after a disaster event are due to community based first responders and spontaneous acts. Despite this encouraging information, capacity is currently scattered across the country with limited coordination, inadequate equipment and no national standards.

<sup>1</sup> Professor Dr. Qu is also the Vice President of The International Emergency Management Society and the former Chief Engineer of China’s National Earthquake Response Support Service and has authored numerous publications related to structural geology, seismic risk assessment, and earthquake disaster emergency responses.

Based on these findings, a consensus emerged that a harmonized approach across Government and with the donor community will be needed in order to build a capacity designed specifically for the context of Nepal.

This harmonized approach will require:

- The establishment of Nepal specific standards for search and rescue which government partners will be required to comply with
- Sustained and significant investment in “first responders” at the community level in coordination with NRRC Flagship 4: Integrated Community Based Disaster Risk Reduction
- A national disaster response training facility which leads the development, delivery and maintenance of a national training plan
- A coordinated approach from the donor community on equipment and training in order to build a sustainable national capacity, avoid duplication and ensure interoperability
- A long-term commitment, including significant resources to first develop and then sustain equipment, training and preparedness

At the conclusion of the mission, all stakeholders agreed that building a solid foundation for development of emergency response systems encompassing search and rescue capacity is a project that must go forward. United Nations Resident Coordinator, Jamie McGoldrick, summed up the dedication needed by all to achieve success noting, “This work will require a long-term mindset and major commitments from disaster response elements, donors, and the government of Nepal.”

Ultimately, a solid foundation of emergency response must be built from the ground up – incorporating day-to-day emergency responders such as the fire brigades and ambulance services, which are severely under resourced in Nepal. It was agreed that community first responders and the security forces will have to work together as the foundation is established, building a unified system that will be able to search for and rescue Nepali people in the future.

With this in mind, the Government of Nepal and its partners will now take steps to implement the agreed plan of action through the creation of a Search and Rescue Secretariat while preparing to conduct a donor conference to be held in the fourth quarter of 2014.

For more information, visit [www.flagship2.nrrc.org.np](http://www.flagship2.nrrc.org.np)

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