

Nepal Update

by Liesel Briggs

Imagine getting up every day in the dark and not knowing if you'll have five hours or 15 hours of power that day. Quickly you rush to put on the rice pot, boil tea, and do anything that requires electricity, such as email!

That's what it's like in Nepal now. When I was there in October and November the power cuts were less, but still, inevitably I'd be in the middle of an email, or dinner or walking home and boom. Instant Dark. Of course, I had my handy little flashlight, but that doesn't help a lot when you're biking or writing an email or printing out some information, or trying to make tea! At present, there are up to 11 hours a day of power cuts. It's been up to 20 hours of no power. Water reservoirs for hydro electric generation are low. Nepal has the capacity to generate more power however due to 10 years of civil war, instability in the government and other problems, they are using less than 3% of their capacity. Therefore, winter, a time of cold, damp, dull weather, when people need more power, is a time of more power shutdowns. Of course, most people have candles, batteries, and gas cookers. Still this is more than just an inconvenience, and not just for the locals.

Tourists don't want to stay if they have to fumble with candles, endure cold rooms and colder showers during the cold months, and not stay connected with family and friends. It may be an adventure for a day or two, but not much longer. Business owners such as Jupiter Sharma of the Lumbini Village

Lodge told me recently that tourists are leaving as quickly as possible – and this is the tourist season.

So, it's a tough time for business operators. Meanwhile, the patient, ever courteous and helpful Nepalis do everything to make one's stay enduring, while themselves often not having battery backup, rarely a diesel generator and not expecting more than a cold shower.

The Linh Son Children's Home is in the same situation. They have flashlights, and candles. Everyone goes to sleep early and gets up when it gets light – around 6 am. Studying, washing laundry and cooking is done during the daylight hours. Their wood-burning stove can always make tea and a meal! The hand water pump works just as well. Homework gets done outside, but lights out has a whole new meaning when it's 15 hours of lights out.

The road "bandhs" are a challenge. When they are declared no motorized vehicles are permitted to travel. So, teachers and students cannot get to their schools, unless they bike or walk or take an ox cart. Businesses, travelers, students, pilgrims, everyone is stuck. This is all a part of the on-going ethnic conflict in the Terai. The Terai is the part of Nepal that is the flat, arable ground between the Himalayas and the Indian border. In 2006 a peace agreement was signed following the 10 years of civil war. The unrest caused by non-inclusion of ethnic peoples in the governing process so these groups began targeting both the state and the Maoists. And the Maoists never stepped back from the issue, but only fueled it with tire burning and other unrest. In 2007 three of the groups joined to form the United

Democratic Madheshi Front. Their goal has been a separate Madheshi province. A Madheshi is defined as non tribal caste Hindu of Indian origin. However, there are other groups living in the terai. The eastern region is more Madheshi, while the West more Tharu. In a new move, just this week, the Tharus and the Madheshis have met to say they do not want a divided Terai. I hope there is a peaceful resolution to this. There has been too much unrest.

And where does this leave Linh Son Children's Home, the school or anyone else? Some people are leaving Nepal. Some people are keeping their heads down, tilling their fields and hoping they can continue on with their life. Many hope this new move will be the start of peace. Children are caught in the middle. Education has been often threatened. The older orphans at Linh Son Children's Home are more pragmatic and are looking to higher education. One young lad is now in Kathmandu attending college. He and some of the other children if they indeed do move on – whether to college or back to their villages, will still need financial support, in the form of individual sponsorship. Presently, I am talking with the people at the children's home. There is a lot of uncertainty to the future, not just due to political tension, but because the children are growing up and there is a general feeling from the founder of the organization that he may not continue with the orphanage, but only the school. Personally, I feel he is an excellent fundraiser. School's out in April. That will be a time for decision-making.