

Helicopter Tragedy Blow to Nature Conservation

by Suman Pradhan

KATHMANDU, Sep 26 (IPS) - The decimation of the cream of Nepal's conservationists in a tragic helicopter accident on the weekend has plunged this Himalayan nation into gloom. Newspapers and TV channels have been reporting the grisly details of the crash and the efforts to retrieve the bodies of the 24 people who perished.

But lurking in everyone's minds right now is: how is the conservation sector in this biodiversity-rich country going to recover from this colossal tragedy?

"Almost half of Nepal's conservation expertise has been wiped out in this incident," says Narayan Wagle, editor of the influential Kantipur newspaper. "People are just too stunned to think beyond right now."

The crash occurred on Saturday in a remote area of Taplejung district, about 450 km east of Kathmandu and in the foothills of the mighty Kanchenjunga mountain range. The remains were found Monday after three days of intensive search in rough terrain and bad weather.

The Russian-built Mi-17 copter, which was chartered by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), was ferrying noted conservationists from both Nepal and abroad, including national luminaries such as Harka Gurung, Chandra Gurung, Tirthaman Maskey, Mingba Norbu Sherpa and Bigyan Acharya. It also included Nepal's state minister for forests and conservation Gopal Rai, his wife, and senior officials from his ministry.

Others onboard were British WWF conservation director, Jill Bowling, coordinator of WWF in Britain, Jennifer Headley, WWF United States programme officer, Matthew Preece, Finnish Embassy Charge d' Affaires in Kathmandu Pauli Mustonnen, USAID's deputy director in Kathmandu, Margaret Alexander, and two Russian crew members.

There were altogether 20 passengers and four crew, returning after handing over to local indigenous communities, the management of the remote Kanchenjunga conservation area, bordering India and China and known for its extreme rare wildlife.

"Nepal's conservation hopes now rest on a younger generation of conservationists who learned from the seniors," says Wagle. "They will have to carry on the work of those who died."

Despite many troubles in this impoverished country, including civil war, conservation has been a success story. Nepali conservationists pioneered community forestry, integrated and sustainable development of mountainous regions, managed wildlife parks and reserves, and nurtured endangered wildlife back to healthy numbers. The handover of the Kanchenjunga area to the local communities was just another feather in this illustrious cap of successes.

"It was the first time that a conservation area had been handed over to the local communities to manage," says WWF Nepal's Sunil Mani Dahal. "The people on board the copter had all attended the handover ceremony and were returning to an airport to catch a flight to Kathmandu."

The accident comes in the middle of Nepal's biggest Hindu festival --the ten-day Dasain celebrations which are already underway. But the mood is dampened now.

Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala issued a statement on Monday offering his condolences to the bereaved families. Top Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal (aka Prachanda) did the same, but referring to the deceased, added, "these were just the sort of experts this nation needs."

Indeed, Harka Gurung, who perished, is known as Nepal's foremost geologist, anthropologist and conservationist -- all rolled into one. A former minister, he has a number of widely acclaimed books to

his credit, including Pokhara Valley: A Geographical Survey, Vignettes of Nepal and Annapurna to Dhaulagiri: A Decade of Mountaineering in Nepal Himalayas -- 1950-1960.

Gurung also headed a development think tank in Malaysia, and had done considerable work in recent years exploring the socio-economic problems of Nepal's various indigenous groups. His work had added to the debate over 'exclusion' felt by many communities in Nepal and which had provided the fuel to the violent Maoist insurgency.

Another illustrious member on the flight was Chandra Gurung, WWF Nepal representative since 1999. He was the brains that pioneered sustainable mountain development by creating and managing the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP). In recent years, he has been working on implementing the Terai Arc Landscape, an ambitious conservation project in the southern plains of Nepal.

Tirtha Man Maskey, a former director general of Nepal's department of wildlife and conservation, was a noted ghariyal (a species of alligator) expert who designed ghariyal protection and breeding programmes.

Mingma Norbu Sherpa, a senior WWF official in Washington DC, hailed from the Everest region and was a product of Sir Edmund Hillary's famous Hillary Khumjung School. He began his career as a park warden, but was later involved in implementing the ACAP project and other nature preserve programmes across Nepal.

"It is a national tragedy," said information minister Dilendra Prasad Badu. "We have lost several capable people. It is an irreplaceable loss."

The WWF says the loss of lives in the accident is the single biggest in its entire 45-year history. "The helicopter has been found, and it appears that there are no survivors," said WWF international director general James Leape, in a message posted on the WWF website. "We send our condolences to the families of all those who were involved in this tragic accident. Our thoughts are with the families, and we are doing everything we can to support them."