

Undying Hunger in the Hinterland

By Marty Logan

KATHMANDU, Aug 10 (IPS) - Here on the narrow trails carved into the steep, emerald hills that plunge into the winding Karnali River hundreds of metres below, villagers have one thing on their minds: emergency rice.

Ninety percent of locals met by a group of visitors is either walking briskly to the airfield in Kolti to collect the 40-kg bags of rice or trudging home with the white sacks strapped to their backs. They move in small groups: men wearing narrow trousers, long-sleeved shirts and vests and patterned Nepali topis on their heads; women with bright handkerchiefs tied in their hair and circular rings in their noses; all sporting cheap canvas running shoes or plastic sandals.

Richard Ragan wishes he could drum up such interest in the rice in Kathmandu. Country director of the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) in Nepal, Ragan has been soliciting donations to finance an emergency operation (EMOP) in 10 districts in the country's northwest for months -- but has raised only 17 percent of his 5.4 million dollar budget.

"We've certainly been vocal about the crisis, but this area has food shortages regularly so we have to work harder to overcome scepticism that this year is different," said Ragan in an interview in Nepal's capital.

Birjit Katal has no doubts. "I've never seen drought like this in 50 years," says the porter sitting on a rock to smoke his hookah at the foot of the Pilichaur suspension bridge a few hours walk from Kolti, where the narrow, swollen Karnali laps at its banks like an ocean.

Asked what they need most right now, besides the rice, Katal and his porter colleagues respond immediately: irrigation and seeds.

In development terms, Bajura and surrounding districts are "food deficit areas": places where locals do not grow enough crops in the best of times to feed themselves. To make ends meet they work for daily wages, borrow from wealthy villagers or migrate to neighbouring India to toil as manual labourers for five or six months.

The WFP has long provided rice to villagers here in exchange for work such as road-building or if they send their children to school regularly. This year, for the first time, the agency decided that after the driest winter on record had withered most of the wheat crop, the "food gap" between harvests had grown so dangerously wide that it would provide locals with emergency rations.

WFP identified 70 needy village development committees (VDCs) in the 10 districts, where households would receive 80 kg of rice -- half before starting a "food for work" project and half when finished -- and 7 kg of fortified flour. Then it began looking for cash to buy and transport the grain. With no early pledges, it borrowed 543 metric tonnes of rice from the Nepal Food Corporation and 500,000 dollars from an internal account.

Now it cannot even pay back those loans, let alone begin phases two and three of the EMOP: shipping food to six districts even more remote than Bajura (mostly by helicopter).

Only the United States and Australia have pledged to EMOP, and Ragan is warning that without more money he will have to prematurely end the operation without having helped the districts where the need is arguably the greatest.

Not that there is excess here in Bajura, the second poorest of Nepal's 75 districts according to CARE-USA. A day's walk from Kolti, in Sapata VDC, a visitor opens the food cupboard in Maghi Dhami's house to find only a few utensils at the bottom. Across the dim windowless room, a few of Dhami's 10 children lean against the only other visible furniture -- another empty cupboard. "Some days the children eat wild vegetables, some days they sleep without food," their mother says.

That visit over, the walk resumes, up and down along a trail flanked by tall, thin cactus plants. Across the river boys are shouting and manoeuvring buffalo to plough tiny plots of land. After a few hours locals at another village line up to bless guests by marking their foreheads with vermilion "tikas". One man approaches a visitor: "Do you have any medicine for my child's stomach?" he asks.

The nearest health post is a three-hour walk away but the nurse is on leave for training and the doctor attends only when convenient, explains a local development worker.

The villages' men, women and children assemble on a large ledge overlooking the winding Karnali far below. "Long-term development is needed here," says one man, to applause from his neighbours. "The irrigation canal is too far away; one should be made closer," he adds.

A woman with a deeply wrinkled face and wild hair explains that they have been eating lots of wild vegetables but that if it does not rain, they also dry up. "Many children have died," she adds.

From 2,000 m, the valley below can be deceiving. Green plots may signal freshly transplanted rice, irrigated land, or on closer inspection, contain stunted maize or millet that will produce little. Observing children is also a puzzle: many have discoloured hair, yellow-orange instead of the usual black, and at least one has a distended stomach; both symptoms could signal minor, or major, health problems.

Evidence here is anecdotal but in the neighbouring districts of Mugu and Humla, children are dying of malnutrition, says Mireille Seneclauze of the aid group Action Contre la Faim (Action Against Hunger). "We've lost some (children) already they couldn't be treated on time. If they could have there's a good chance they would have lived," Seneclauze told IPS in an interview in Kathmandu.

In February and March the group assessed 10 VDCs in Humla and Mugu, concluding that acute malnutrition rates "were more alarming than expected". In June, it returned to begin treatment -- and found 25 percent more children needing help. It planned to treat 560 children and women six months pregnant or more, but logistics problems have resulted in the group working with only 200 children to date and no pregnant women. An unconfirmed number of children have died.

"What these people really need are development projects but, my god, where do you start?" says an official at one donor agency interested in funding the EMOP. "We are planning to get more serious about this region. But one problem is that for the cost of helping one person here, you can help two people somewhere else in Nepal."

