

NEW ANGLE

Nepal Journal of Social Science and Public Policy

Volume 3

Number 1

December 2014

Flood of 1954: The beginning of a developmental state

Sharad Ghimire

Graduate Student of Global Environmental Policy,
School of International Service, American University, Washington, DC, USA

Editors

Hari Dhungana-Coordinator
Fraser Sugden

Copy-editing

Gyanu Maskey

Layout and Design

Manjari Graphics

©Southasia Institute of Advanced Studies

E-mail: sias-info@sias-southasia.org

Website: www.sias-southasia.org

FLOOD OF 1954: THE BEGINNING OF A DEVELOPMENTAL STATE

Sharad Ghimire*

ABSTRACT

Development projects evolve with reference to particular framings of the need and imperatives of a developing country. Once development projects get legitimated in this way, the aid agencies deepen their presence to move in a direction of their choice. This is evident from an examination of the 1954 flood in Nepal which devastated a significant part of the hills and Tarai in the eastern, central and western areas. This paper looks into the disaster caused by that flood; into how the government of Nepal, the civil society and donors responded to it; and into the way the crisis stirred conflict and contestation among political parties within and outside the government. This paper is based primarily on the review of newspaper coverage around the flood, the political processes and the inauguration of development project in Nepal in the 1950s. It shows the extraordinary power of how the crisis caused by flood stirs up political contestation and helps legitimise actions of one or the other actor, including the donors. These insights on the power of a big disaster to command response from a wide range of domestic actors and donors help us question the largely technocratic framing of the ongoing debate around disaster risk reduction.

Key words: 1954 flood; development; disaster risk; Nepali politics

INTRODUCTION

This is a study of a flood in 1954. The event is important as it occurred during a particularly important time in Nepal's history. The incident is also covered in various literature of Nepal's political and development history, e.g. Joshi and Rose (1966, p.118), Shaha (2001, p.310),

Isaacson *et al.* (2001, p.9), Shrestha (1990, p.185), Mihaly (2002, p.80) and so on, but it has remained under elaborated. Similarly, most literature on natural hazards in Nepal have made only a cursory look at the incident, if any. The flood occurred in a political context, which L. S. Baral termed the 'Apprenticeship in Democracy' (Baral, 2012) towards the end

* Graduate Student of Global Environmental Policy, School of International Service, American University, Washington, DC, USA. E-mail: sharad.ghimire@gmail.com.

of the Tribhuvan era (1911-1950) and at the beginning of Mahendra's era (1955-1972) of a more assertive monarchy. Regarding its development context, the period also saw the beginning of foreign aid-led development in Nepal and the event also attracted foreign aid for relief and recovery, particularly from the USA. This later became a basis for the larger development projects in the Tarai. The incident is important in the history of responding to disasters in Nepal as it is the first flood which attained such a high level of institutional response, particularly from the modernising state. This set a precedent for the conceptualisation of and dealing with natural disasters in Nepal. In fact, it led to the first rehabilitation efforts in Nepal (Dixit, 2003, p.173). This article aims to look at some of these aspects of Nepal's history in detail.

Primarily based on newspaper (*Gorakhpatra*)¹ coverage of the event and other secondary literature, this paper makes two modest claims. One is related to the Nepali state's approach to the crisis and its implications for future policy making on disasters as well as on domestic politics. The second one is related to implications for foreign-led development. Related to the state's approach involvement, the disaster was so massive that it inevitably required the state's

involvement. However, subsequently it created challenges to the already eroding legitimacy of the incumbent government, ultimately leading to a shift in power. Similarly it laid the foundation of approaching disasters from a top-down process in Nepal. Since the flood occurred at particular time in Nepal's history, there was a massive institutional response from the state for relief, rescue and recovery. Since there was no discussion among decision makers about preparedness and vulnerability of the people and no proposals for establishing any policy mechanism to deal with such incident in the future², that would come only after three decades³, the example shows how disasters in Nepal were dealt with in the early period.

On the second claim, the crisis attracted foreign aid particularly from the USA through the USOM (United States Operation Mission), which was then about to launch substantial development projects around health and rural development. The support to the flood crisis made some basis for donors to carry out the project of their interest in the future. However, these upcoming projects had to be linked with the flood. The USAID-led Rapti project and Resettlement activities became important upcoming development projects. Other development policies, for example the agriculture policy, also emerged in the

¹ *Gorakhpatra* is the oldest national daily newspaper from Kathmandu, Nepal. It is published in Nepali language. It is owned by *Gorkhapatra Sansthan*.

² However, in case of India the same flood (of 1954) led to a policy statement, launch of National Programme of Flood Management (Mohapatra and Singh, 2003, p.138).

³ The Natural Disaster Relief Act 1982.

context of the flood, as was covered in a report of the first agriculture convention of Nepal 2015 (1958) (Dahal, 1997, p.152).

This paper is divided into following sections: first it gives a picture of the flood and the extent of its impact in different parts of the country as covered in *Gorakhapatra* and few other sources. Then it goes in detail about what responses were made, for immediate relief and rescue, from governmental agencies (including ministries, departments, other offices and the newly formed committee as well as the Advisory Assembly), other non-government agencies, and political parties and from countries like India and USA.

At the domestic level, responses were made from different institutions at different levels, with many overlaps among them. The response from the Advisory Assembly (AA) in its daily proceedings as well as through its members is particularly important, especially to understand how the response was debated at the policy making level, which ended up forming a committee, that was not long-lasting, and was replaced by another committee in the next session. However, its speaker and other members were active in making trips to different districts after the first session of AA (August 17) until the next session started (November 17).⁴ Responses from the other government bodies were also very important since they acted to make the state conspicuous through another

committee during the crisis situation. The government's efforts were also extended to the district level. This paper also has a section on responses from monarchy, which was late to respond but ended forming a relief fund through yet another institution.

Towards the end of the paper is a discussion on how the crisis was responded to by the international community, particularly by Nepal's top donors, viz., India and USA. As hinted above, the USA's response was more important since it also created the basis for upcoming and bigger development projects. The USA also formed another institution, a joint disaster relief agency. Therefore, all the main actors of that time, government, the AA, monarchy and donors approached the flood by establishing one after the other institution to manage the relief operation. Therefore, the approach to the 1954 flood was mainly limited to dealing with post-disaster relief through a certain type of high level institutions. It does not mean that there were no local level initiatives, but as the paper reveals, the non-governmental and local level responses were either severely limited or were just outgrowths of central level institutions. However, this part may require further investigation. Based on these findings, the paper argues that the response to 1954 flood in Nepal actually led to the current dominant approach namely what Dixit (2003, p.166) called the hazard-led top-down approach,

⁴ A new committee was formed by sidelining the speaker not only from the committee, but also from the ruling party of PM who chaired the second committee.

totally focused on post-disaster relief distribution.⁵ Next, this paper argues that it also contributed to the justification for the upcoming bigger development projects under foreign aid. Similarly, the response also made it necessary for the government, policy-making bodies and other leaders to become engaged in providing relief. However, the response also ended by posing challenges to the then political arrangement.

THE INCIDENCE OF THE FLOOD AND ITS IMPACT

A flood occurred in Nepal in July 1954. It was caused by heavy rainfall from 24-28 July in the central and eastern part of the country. However, there was also a second round of heavy rainfall in central Nepal, in the valley, East No 1 and 2 and the Central Tarai, exactly one month after the first incidence. The first round of the downpour claimed hundreds of lives and caused extensive damage to infrastructures and crops (Shaha, 2001, p.310). The flood created havoc in the central and eastern hills and Tarai, particularly in and around Kathmandu valley (for example east and west no 1 and 2 districts), Bhimphedi (Chisapanigadhi district at that time) and Birgunj-Rautahat in central Nepal as well as Biratnagar, Dharan, Dhankuta and Jhapa in eastern Nepal. It is very hard to

obtain the extent of the rainfall during that time in all affected areas. However, as measured inside the Kathmandu valley, the rainfall was more than 6 inches (152 mm) per day on average during these 4 days. There were also news reports about the damage caused by the rainfall and the subsequent flood in *Gorakhapatra*. Since no specific report about the impact of the flood could be located (except in a foreign aid document), the following show a picture of the impact based on newspaper coverage.

Inside the Kathmandu valley, the Bagmati river flooded, as did all its tributaries. The flood damaged roads, houses and croplands and claimed few lives. A government team reported on the specific cases of destruction on 1 August when it went for observation trips right after the incident. Regarding the damage by the flood inside the valley, based on a news report of 16 August, the road from Kathmandu to Sankhu deteriorated to such an extent that it was difficult even for walking and impossible for motor transportation. It seems that the flood had affected more adversely the area from Chabahil to Boudda, as well as Gokarna, Sundarijal and Sankhu. These parts of the valley used to supply firewood, grains and other agri-products to the city. The deterioration in transportation affected the supply of these items to the city.

⁵ Dixit (2003, p.166) distinguishes a 'hazard-led approach' to disasters, which focuses on the physical event and considers that disasters are inherent characteristics of natural hazards, from an 'alternative approach' that pays attention to socio-economic structures and political processes beside the natural hazard. The first approach, as in 1954, focused on relief and technological measures to alleviate flood (Dixit 2003, p.168).

Details of the damage outside the valley with specific details were absent in the newspapers except from one from the central hill region: from Thankot to Bhimphedi, Dhursing and Bhainse area. The damage was reported by Bhakta Bahadur Amatya, a government official, who was sent for assessment right after the incident on 31 August. He reported it in his field-based account that was published in a supplementary issue of *Gorakhapatra* on September 3. According to him, there was extensive destruction of lives and properties in the central hill region area. As this area was heavily affected, the contact of the valley with other regions through this area was seriously disturbed. All means of transportation from the valley to the southern plains, particularly the road from the valley to Bhimphedi, then to Amlekhganj, railway from Amlekhganj to Raxaul and the ropeway from the valley to Dhursing⁶, were seriously damaged. There was destruction of a large amount of goods stocked at Dhursing (the ropeway terminus). Destruction also occurred in private and public houses in all areas including in the southern border city of Birgunj, where the rainfall was reportedly the highest in the preceding 32 years.

There were also news reports about damage in the eastern hills, in East no 1 and 2, Sindhupalchowk, Dolakha, Ramechhap, Sindhuli up to Bhojpur, Dhankuta and Ilam. These news reports, however, came very late (only from late August and September to November

1954) and mainly through the various field observation trips of local government officials as well as central level and local level flood relief committees.

Damage in the eastern hills also extended to Ilam, from where a delegation team arrived in Kathmandu on 16 August. The team came to the valley to inform high level officials and ministers about the extent of flood destruction in the region along with other local issues such as establishing a high school in Ilam and problems created by the exchange rate between Nepali rupees and Indian rupees. In the eastern hills, the flood occurred in the Rewati and Tamor rivers in Dhankuta. Besides Dhankuta, rainfall also affected Dharan and Biratnagar. Drinking water facilities were also seriously affected in Dharan and Dhankuta.

Apart from the eastern hills, the western hills were also affected, such as the West No1 and 2, Dhading and Nuwakot and Gorkha. In those areas damages occurred to croplands, roads and bridges. For example, according to news reports that came only in the middle of August from the Trishuli section of Paropakar (a philanthropic organisation), nine people were killed in a landslide that occurred in a village just above Harkapur. The same news reports further informed that 3 people were killed in a village named Katunje Torke in West No 1, where cropland was also washed away. Similarly at least 14 households were displaced from Jhiltung when a landslide damaged

⁶ It is a village near the road head town of Bhimphedi about in Makawanpur district.

their homes. Therefore, besides the central and eastern Tarai, the eastern, central and western hill regions were also affected by the floods and landslides in July-August, 1954. In Gorkha area, rivers such as the Marsyangdi and Chepe, had flooded, causing extensive damage.

The most affected area was the central Tarai, particularly Bara, Parsa, Rautahat, Sarlahi and Mahottari. The flood had hit Rautahat the worst, particularly due to the increased flow in the Bagmati river. Therefore, flood victims of those areas, hardly served by the initial relief packages of government, were aggrieved with the government and protested when one of the leaders went there later (discussed in the next section). Dixit *et al.* (2007, p.145) collected people's memories of the 1954 flood (in what the authors have called an ethno-history of flood) from a village named Brahmapuri in Rautahat, just on the banks of the Bagmati River. Their findings were summarised as:

A major flood resulted in sediment deposition over the lands. Entire paddy crop was lost. Farm land looked like sand banks and could not be farmed for the subsequent 7 years. During this period people faced food shortage. The river also brought tree trunks and deposited them in the fields. Some people collected the timber, sold them and made their living. People built resting places on stilts and lived on it for many days. Cooking was done on machan. Some families stacked one

bed over the others to keep them dry. During the 7-year food shortage period, the richer households bought food from local and regional markets while the poor households migrated to India and neighbouring villages in search of menial jobs. The remittance money they earned helped sustenance.

In the eastern Tarai, floods also occurred in Jhapa, particularly in the Mechi river and other rivers. A news report published on 11 August informed readers that the continuous heavy rain for 36 hours since 24 July had increased the water level in the river and obstructed transportation including boats. News further reported that difficulties were also caused in the villages by the destruction of croplands. According to the news, the rain subsided only by 26-27 July, but again fell heavily on 27 August. Local people said that such heavy rain was the first event in the previous 20 years.

After undertaking an extensive aerial inspection with two Ministers on 14 August, the Speaker of the Advisory Assembly (AA) Mr. Bal Chandra Sharma, who also headed the 15-member relief committee formed by the AA, shared at a meeting about his estimation of the total losses caused by the floods. According to him, the flood had caused losses of Rs. 10-15 million rupees, claimed 300 lives and washed away almost 2,000 domestic animals. He further added that the flood created havoc for almost 200,000 people in the Tarai and damaged huge areas

of roads and lands. According to him, these people were going to face severe problems for at least one year and among them were almost 10,000 people whose land was covered completely by sand, and had become landless. He further added that the flood had washed away almost 200 villages in the eastern Tarai.

Casualties of the flood were not only limited to the remote hills and Tarai, but also occurred inside the capital city. For example, on 15 August, very early in the morning, a house, which was weakened by the heavy shower in the last week of July, near Gyaneshwor in Kathmandu suddenly collapsed at around 2 am. Ten people living inside were squashed. Among them, 2 were killed on the spot whereas another 8 who were seriously injured were brought to the hospital.

Besides these damages and disturbances in transportation, the flood also affected communication systems such as telephone and postal services. Although the telephone line was restored soon, postal services could not run properly due to the obstruction in transportation. Therefore, the government made a decision on 13 August to run postal services through airplanes, as informed by a notice of the Ministry of Communication. Damaged roads were temporarily restored only by 22 November. The Nepal and Indian military jointly restored the road. Therefore, the credit for the restoration of some vital services went to the security forces, and largely not to the incumbent government.

In order to summarise the impact of the flood, it would be useful to look at the following information from a document that was an internal communication cable dated 17 September from the Foreign Operation Administration (FOA) of USA (which was represented by USOM in Nepal, headed by Paul Rose). In fact, the cablegram was sent from Paul Rose at the USOM to Harold Stassen of FOA/Washington in order to request flood relief for Nepal. It eventually led to an agreement, which is discussed later in this paper. As stated in the cable the information was provided by Nepal government to the USOM. The first paragraph of the cable reads:

Nepal has suffered the worst flood damage in the last fifty years. These flood waters arriving in Malaya are same that have caused such devastation to Bihar province in northern India. Despite tremendous problems in securing up-to-date information on the extent of damages suffered because of a woefully inadequate lack of communication facilities within country, the Government of Nepal forwarded the following data to USOM /Nepal dated September 2: 1529 hamlets were submerged in Birgunj, Biratnagar, Kathmandu, Bhairahawa and Nepalganj centers resulting in damaging of an estimated 35,000 homes and consequently 132,700 homeless refugees. More than 2000 miles of roads and byways have been damaged and 56 bridges either

destroyed, washed away or seriously damaged. Crops on 76000 bighas of land (123,006 acres) have been destroyed or are seriously damaged. Land itself has in some instances been rendered temporary unusable. Hospitals at Birgunj, Bhimphedi and Biratnagar have reported their buildings have been so flooded that keeping patients indoor is no longer possible. The GoN estimates that the approximate total loss from floods up to this time is about rupees 1-1.5 crores (10-15 million rupees) and approximate number of deaths is 1000.

RESPONDING TO THE FLOOD

Here, I discuss responses from actors inside the country as well as external donors. Actors inside the country included the government (particularly the ministries and departments and the committee formed by them), the advisory assembly, monarchy, political parties and non-governmental organisations. The outside actors, which were donors, included mainly India and the USA.

Response from the government

Immediately after the heavy rainfall of four days, the government established a committee, *Bishesh Paristhiti Niyantran Samiti* (Special Situation Control Committee or SSCC) in order to provide assistance to the flood victims and to resolve many other emerging problems. The constitution of the committee was also

communicated to the Advisory Assembly (AA) by a minister during its first meeting after the heavy rainfall on 29 July, 1954. The Government assigned a bureaucrat (the Commissioner of *Upatyakanchal*) to lead the committee. Its objectives and mandates were clear from a government notice published in *Gorakhapatra*, on 2 August 1954. The notice says:

The Government had already assigned Director Yagya Bahadur with necessary provisions when it received news about the flood destruction in road, ropeway and railway. The Government is confident about bringing the situation back to the normal by repairing all infrastructures within 5-6 days, as it is about to send a contingent of engineers and soldiers from national army and police force. Also it is expected that the government will succeed in between times by transporting foods and other goods that have already arrived in a sufficient amount in Dhursing.

It should be noted that it is a public offense to spread rumors and hence increase the price of foods and other everyday consuming goods or hoard them in a large amount or promote a black market and take advantage of the emergency situation created by disturbed transportation. The Government has already constituted a SSCC under the chair of Valley Zonal (*Upatyakanchal*) Commissioner in order to punish such wrong-doing and combat the situation. The Government

also urges all gentle people to report their total holding of foods and goods (if you have more than one year's self consumption) to the Department of Civil Supplies within 3 days. If the government finds anybody not obeying the announcement, it is obliged to take legal action against them.

It will be easier for the government to manage necessary facilities and provide assistance if you report about the destruction caused by floods to the lives and properties of your family inside and outside the valley along with your current status within 7 days to the Ministry of Public Works and Communication.

Therefore, the committee aimed to transform itself into part of the conspicuous state machinery during the crisis situation. Its mandate and modes of operation, as shown in its own press release of 1 August 1954 (published on 2 August) by a secretary also reveals how the then government perceived the impact of the crisis, particularly in the capital city, and how it wanted to show its presence during the crisis situation:

In order to take a detailed account of the existing government-stored and business person-stored grains and food items for immediate management in the context of heavy destruction caused by the recent rainfall; to assess the existing stocks of daily necessary items like salt, kerosene, clothes in the market; to provide credits to the

victims and manage other necessary activities, the government has formed the committee under the chairmanship of Commissioner of *Upatyakanchal* along with the DIGP, three area commanders of the Army, the Director of the Department of Civil Supplies, the District Magistrates of Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Lalitpur districts and three members representing trade and business sectors. The committee had its first meeting at the office of Department of Civil Supplies Department, Singhdarbar, Kathmandu, on *Shrawan* 15 (30 July). The meeting took various decisions including one that anybody who has petrol stock of more than 30 gallons should inform the Department of Civil Supplies within three days, otherwise, if informed from other sources the stock would be confiscated. Notice should be directed to the local Magistrates Office regarding the existing stocks of everyday necessary goods (as publicised by the radio previously) including petrol (as decided by this meeting), which would help to provide assistance to the victims. In such an emergency situation, one should not attempt to increase the price of daily using goods, should not support the black market, should not hide goods and should not export anything without permission. One should economise one's own consumption (and suggest others to do the same) of imported goods. By doing so, I request everybody, to serve the country and the victims.

The committee again published the following 'urgent' notice after a couple of days (published on 4 August in *Gorakhapatra* under 'government's notice' section in page 4), aiming to further tighten the control of the hoarding of goods in the valley during the crisis.

In the context of the recent notice in 2011 *Shrawan* 17, Sunday (1 August) from the Ministry of Home Affairs requesting people to inform the government about the existing stocks of goods additional to one year's consumption, by valley residents, this is a new notice to all residents, particularly to business persons, in order to ask them to inform the government about the availability of stocks in their stores of more than one month's regular use. This particularly concerns the following goods and materials: For business persons, they should inform the government about the following details: what amount of stocks of following goods they have, what amount they have sold since last *Magh* (January) and what is the current price. Such information should come in written form, within *Shrawan* 21 (5 August) to the Department of Civil Supplies. If such information is not provided by you and we are informed by other sources, we are obliged to confiscate such additional goods and initiate punishment. This is also to notify you that the Ministry of Home Affairs has been writing to publicise

such messages through the media (radio and papers). The Department of Civil Supplies is also mandated to prepare a detailed account of the existing stocks of necessary goods and present it to the Committee. After having the details of stocks of goods, the Committee will make the necessary decisions. Items: 1. Clothes, 2. Cotton (yarn), 3. Kerosene, 4. Salt (Bekrota), 5. Edible oil, 6. Rice, 7. Pulses, 8. Spices, 9. Nuts, 10. Cigarettes, 11. Matches, 12. Sugar.

Besides the AA's relief committee (which will be discussed later), the government's SSCC was also very active in making the state's presence felt during the crisis. Its fourth meeting, which was held on 15 August, focused on updating and following up about issues related to the transportation and supply of goods, as well as concerns about traders' 'illegitimate' approach towards making a profit out of crisis and following up on restoring transportation inside the valley. The meeting promised to make updates to the public available through *Gorakhapatra*.

The SSCC also made an inspection of various parts of the valley on August 11. The team involved the Chairman of the committee, Commissioner Mr. Mana Shamsher JBR, Member of the committee and Area Commander Brig Gen Padma Bahadur Shah, Kathmandu District Magistrate Mr. Ranga Nath Upreti, Mr. Bhagirath Upadhyaya and other members. They observed affected areas like the

bridge on the way to Bhaktapur, damaged houses in Chabahil, a demolished wall in Gokarna, road and bridge in Sundarijal and other examples. The area commander promised to start rebuilding those areas which required wooden poles once the Ministry of Forest provided those poles.

Another meeting of the committee was held on 16 August and it came up with decisions for further action. The first decision was related to regulation of the import and trade of necessary goods into the valley market. The point, which is important to understand, was on how the market could help on relief work after a crisis even as it made a profit out of it. However, market representatives asked for an easing of the government's restrictions on the market. There were other decisions for further steps to be taken in order to respond the situation properly.

Besides assessing the destruction of floods and proposing and recommending relief activities, the SSCC was also active in inspecting the ongoing reparation activities. When the committee was informed about the flood damage in the Kuriyagaun and Panchayani Ghat near Thapathali on 14 August, it ordered for reparation. Later, on 18 August, the committee expressed its satisfaction after the reparation by binding the banks of the river with wooden poles.

The government also seemed highly concerned about the scarcity of goods

inside the valley. For this, it paid attention to the ropeway line. For example, Ministers made inspections at the ropeway station at Matatirtha⁷ on 17 August and ordered to move left behind goods from the station. Later, in the same day the SSCC also made a decision about this. The SSCC was, however, criticised in popular media. One of decisions of the SSCC was about news in a paper:

A recent issue of a newspaper, '*Sahi Raasta*', in its 4 August issue published a piece under the title 'consumption of 756 gallons of oil', which was unsubstantiated, nothing more than a propaganda, about the issue which never came into the committee's discussion. Therefore, a decision was made to write a reaction letter to the paper.

The committee was also highly concerned about market irregularities during the crisis situation. It possessed influence over the government, particularly on the administration and police as it included officials from these bodies. There was one example of arresting of some businessmen on 20 August for wrongdoing in the market, particularly on the price of ghee. The news reads:

The Special Situation Control Committee expected to see a reduction in the price and scarcity of ghee in the market in days to come. Some businessmen were arrested by police for going beyond the regular

⁷ Matatirtha is a village in Kathmandu District in the Bagmati Zone of central Nepal.

price. The arrest however contributed to the scarcity at the beginning. Later when all traders physically attended the committee, they assured the Committee they would limit the price and regularise the trade of ghee.

The government ordered the regular supply of petrol in the valley to arrive by air though in limited quantity. The government, therefore, sent a notice on 25 August to restrict the price and get petrol in a fixed quota. The SSCC also published a notice in 13 September in *Gorakhpatra* to increase the air service from Kathmandu to Simara until the road was restored. The restriction on petrol was completely lifted on 10 December.

In this way, the SSCC also made the government's presence more visible during the crisis. It was more influential than any single government ministry or department during the crisis. However, its implementation wings were all government bodies including the ministries and departments.

The regularisation of petrol became possible by the restoration of the Bhimphedi-Amlekhganj road, which was made ready for running vehicles on 22 November. The government also worked for medical relief works in other parts of the country. For example, the government decided through a meeting of Flood Relief Coordination Committee on 5 December (that was another joint committee between the Nepal government and USOM) to send four medical teams to the

eastern and western parts of the country to carry out two month-long relief works. Each team would be equipped with a doctor and other supporting staffs along with the required medicines. The first team would go to East No 1, 2 and 3; the second team to Dang, Salyan, Banke and Bardiya; the third to Gulmi, Pyuthan, Baglung, Palpa and Syangja; and the fourth team would go to West No 1, 2 and 3. This information itself shows the extent of the flood impact, which was up to the Karnali river in the west.

The restoration of roads inside the valley, particularly around Kathmandu, was also almost completed by a company from Nepal Army by the end of December. The Samarjang company restored roads in Thankot, Banepa, Kharipati, Sankhu, Godavari, Chapagaun, Budhanilkantha and up to Pharping of Dakshinkali road by 22 December. Therefore, the government responded immediately through the committee, and later on through its departments and ministries.

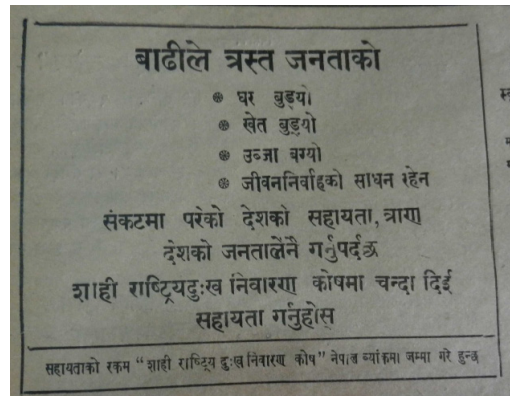
Responses from the King and Royal Family

The King delivered his first condolence message to the flood victims on 24 August, almost one month after the incident. Besides offering sympathy to the affected people, he acknowledged the government's efforts for relief and sought cooperation from the people. He further declared a relief fund (*Gorakhpatra* termed it the 'Royal Relief Fund') to be established to tackle the crisis situation by

providing Rs. 31,000 (Nepali Rupees) from his behalf and sought contributions from all. He announced that the fund which would be called “Royal National Distress Alleviation Fund”⁸ and it would have an account at the Nepal Bank Limited. The King said he regretted not being able to observe the flood affected areas by himself and his sons due to his prolonged illness, but expressed satisfaction with the government’s relief works, particularly works done by ministers, speakers, secretaries, directors and engineers. On the same day, the Crown Prince also expressed his condolences to the flood victims and contributed Rs. 500 to the fund.

This announcement added yet another high level governmental institution to those working for flood relief, particularly for generating funds. After the announcement of the fund, there were contributions from various persons and groups including other members of the royal family who contributed almost Rs. 19000. Contributions were also made by the Prime Minister, Ministers, Speaker, governmental officials (mostly collectively as one day’s salary from a particular office), other elites, social organisations and other individuals. The appeal raised more than 300 thousands until 29 September (as informed in the news). The establishment of the fund and its popularity was highly praised in various editorials in newspapers. The fund also published an advertisement in *Gorakhapatra* for the first time on 13

September and then in many subsequent issues, in order to generate further contributions from people. The advert was published in *Gorakhapatra* as follows:



When the King delivered a message to the nation before leaving for Europe for medical treatment in the first week of October, he specifically mentioned the crisis created by the flood. While acknowledging assistance by the international community, he also emphasised on the importance of self-dependence in order to deal with such a crisis and urged for collective works. He also expressed his satisfaction at cooperation among members of the cabinet and expected the same even for the future. This point was particularly important because there were deep division within the cabinet, which later also became a cause for ending the coalition. However, when the King asked the Cabinet about issues of division, they showed their unity. This unity did not last long and will be discussed later in another section.

⁸ *Shri Paanch Maharajadhirajko Rastriya Dukh Nivaran Kosh*

The Crown Prince, while heading the Regency Council, also made an inspection visit to flood affected areas in the central region from 20 to 22 December. He first went to Simara by plane and then visited affected areas around there by vehicles. Two ministers and the army chief accompanied him. He observed the Amlekhganj-Bhimphedi road and the Dhursing terminus of the Ropeway; took guard of honor from and addressed (with thanks) the Military of India and Nepal for restoring roads. He returned to Kathmandu on 22 December.

Towards the beginning of 1955, the crown prince was much involved in the everyday politics, particularly in the problems created by differences between political parties in power and those out of power. These disputes ultimately led to the dissolution of the government in the first week of March 1955. However, there were significant responses to the flood by the Advisory Assembly (AA) and interesting politics around this, as discussed later. Before moving on to that, this paper will highlight a discussion about the government's response at the local level, particularly at the district level, as covered in *Gorakhapatra*.

Responses at the district level

Relief works from the governmental level were also taking place outside the valley. For example, in towns in Jhapa, particularly in Bhadrapur and Sanischare, government and non-governmental

initiatives were reported. However, in the central region border town of Gaur, the government had a joint meeting with Indian officials on ongoing relief operations. The government's relief packages in that area included grains, cash and repairing drinking water facilities. Although there was huge loss in cropland, Rautahat district remained without immediate support which was announced later on after a detailed assessment by a local governmental officer.

The Minister of Transport, Mr. Bhadrakali Mishra, made an inspection trip of flood affected areas of central Tarai from Birgunj to Saptari in the last week of August. He also formed a local level flood victim relief committee in Rautahat on 27 August and released Rs. 20,000 for immediate distribution. The committee made a plan to divide the district into three regions and start working with the highly affected and densely populated 52 villages at the beginning. The committee aimed to work in coordination with local governmental officers. It also provided a few boats to reach the flood affected regions. It made the Minister spend more days in Rautahat as he extended his trip by four days as informed on August 29. He also happened to meet Nepali Congress leader Ganeshman Singh unexpectedly in Gaur and they talked about the ongoing flood relief activities. Mr. Singh assured the Minister that his party would collaborate with the government for relief operations irrespective of political differences.

The Minister left Rautahat only on 1 September for Malangawa. Similarly, a district level relief committee was also formed in Biratnagar on 19 September when the Minister of Forest and Land Revenue made a tour there. Immediately after the formation of the committee, the government released assistance of Rs. 5000 to the committee. That is one example about how the formation of the local relief committee and relief works occurred initially in Tarai districts.

A relief committee was also formed in Jhangajholi, in East number 2, at the local level without the presence of any ministers. However, the committee asked for more assistance from the government and urged the government to distribute the relief fund not based on districts, but based on the impact of the flood (the need).

Another example of a district level relief initiative was in Jhapa. The local *Badahakim* (district magistrate), along with other officials and local elites held the first meeting. They then had an inspection visit of flood-affected areas around Bhadrapur and later decided to provide food, medicines, shelter and other support. A government officer was also sent to estimate the destruction around the Shanischare area in the northern part. His report estimated that the flood had destroyed almost 2000 bighas of cropland. The report recommended providing credit to 14-15 households whose hundreds

of bighas of land had been submerged. There were also another 16 displaced families in Sanischare, who were provided with food and medicines. This is another example of relief at the local level, where governmental bodies collaborated with local initiatives.

Therefore, based on few examples above, it is clear that there were various initiatives for relief at the district or local level. However, most of them were either created or coordinated by the government (e.g. in Biratnagar, Jhapa and Gaur) or created independently in order to pressure the government for more assistance (in East Number 2). Some politicians from the centre also made extensive trips to various parts of the country in this regard. We will discuss more about their trips in the following section.

Response from the Advisory Assembly

The Advisory Assembly (AA), a parliament-like body in place during the transition period was, arguably, at the peak of its action when the crisis occurred at the end of July. It was the second such *avatar* of the Assembly (among a total of three avatars during the 1951-59 period) and had been established by the King in mid-April 1954. There were two sessions (July-August and November-December) during the crisis time, and both sessions ended in an untimely fashion. Responses made by this body in its both sessions are discussed below.

First session of the Advisory Assembly

The King inaugurated the first session on 28 May. The Assembly appointed its leader (Speaker) Bal Chandra Sharma on 1st June 1954. The Assembly provided a platform for vigorous debates and discussions on policy affairs among its members, who were representing various parties or groups but behaving independently, as the King nominated them individually. Just before the flood incident, on 23 July, the government had presented a statement of expenditure for the financial year 1953-54 and a statement of the estimated expenditure for the first four months of the current year at the Assembly (Joshi and Rose, 1966, p.117). The Prime Minister had to face some problems in the Assembly and the meeting was postponed without ratifying the budget because members demanded some time to study the budget. The session was to take place on 27 July but could not take place as the required quorum could not be achieved due to the ongoing heavy rainfall. After that, the first meeting occurred on 29 July. It then engaged mainly on issues related to the flood crisis. However, some discussions also continued about the expenditure and government's fiscal policy in a few subsequent meetings intermittently. For example, the government passed a bill on internal tax in the AA meeting of 6 August with majority and it became the first bill passed by the AA in the session. In addition to the postponement of discussions about the government's expenditure and

budget, the government faced another blow. The Assembly rejected the Home Minister's bill to provide extensive powers to magistrates and other officials in the first week of August (discussed below). The bill concerned administrative reforms, but was rejected since the Prime Minister's party leaders voted against it. This deepened the division within and between the government and the Assembly. The flood became major issue for the AA during that time (as discussed below) until its adjournment on 17 August on the pretext of the same flood.

On 29 July 1954, for the first time, the flood crisis was made a matter of discussion in the Assembly, which also passed its condolences to the flood victims. In that meeting, a member Mr. Basupasa tabled a resolution saying: 'We express our regrets for the destruction in roads, bridges and other infrastructures by the recent heavy rainfall of about 72 hours and express also sympathy to farmers for the damage to their crops'. Mr Keshav Raj Karki, Mr Sher Bahadur, Mr Padma Bahadur and others also supported the proposal. Mr Hora Prasad Joshi proposed an amendment that "Sympathy to all flood victims inside the country as well as in India" should be added to the message. He further urged the government that since the rain had swept away the shops and stores in Dhursing and a large amount of goods had been damaged at price Rs. 300,000, all goods should be brought inside the valley even if that involved running the rope

way for 24 hours. Mr. Krishna Bahadur Thapa backed the amendment and added that the flood in the Rewati, Tamor rivers in Dhankuta had also damaged bridges and roads, therefore he requested for an immediate response from the government in those areas. The tabled resolution was supported by Minister of Defence Kaiser Shumshere on behalf of government, who said that the government supported the resolution fully. He also informed the session about the formation of a special committee (SSCC, discussed above). He further added that the government had considered the whole territory between Mechi and Mahakali as Nepal (not just inside and around the valley) and it had been assessing the destruction in all affected areas. He assured the Assembly that after getting information from all over the country regarding the destruction, the government would consider providing support to the affected people. The proposal with amendments was later approved by consensus. In this way, the AA first discussed the flood.

The subsequent meeting of the AA on 3 August discussed how to approach the problem of flood destruction from this level, particularly by forming a committee from the AA. Actually, the meeting floated the idea of forming another committee based at the AA in order to address the crisis of the flood in addition to the government's SSCC. On this matter, the news of 6 August reads as:

Discussion was held in the AA meeting of 3 August about support to the areas affected by the recent country-wise rainfall and floods. An eight point proposal presented by Mr. Bedananda Jha said: "A committee should be formed under the chairmanship of the Speaker having members in certain number as recommended by the assembly and the committee should form separate sub-committee with local members in all affected areas. The government should immediately manage the necessary fund in order to support residents of flood-affected areas. The sub-committee members should form an observation team with the Badahakim and other government officials. This team will make a detailed inspection of the affected areas and arrange necessary assistance. All assistance should be carried out only on the recommendation of the sub-committee. Financial support should be provided freely to the helpless people who have no other options left and as a credit to others. The sub-committee should report its activities to the Assembly committee so that the Assembly can discuss this in its next meeting. Government officials should cooperate with the sub-committee as required. Members of the sub-committee should encourage rich people to provide assistance. The government should send necessary directives to its officials at the local level on this matter."

The proposal of Mr. Khadga Man Singh says: "A disaster relief committee should be organised involving government officers, AA members and persons from local communities. It will work to rescue human and animals in affected areas. Arrangements should be made to send immediate assistance." While presenting his proposal, he discussed the huge loss made in and around Birgunj and the difficulties in establishing contact with the center due to obstructions in transportation and communication.

Mr. Kunwar Kallu said that the heavy rainfall had also caused floods in the western part of the country, as in rivers such as the Narayani, Gandaki and Rapti, and they had damaged many houses and infrastructures and resulted in a loss of almost Rs. 5 lakh. He further recommended that the government form a relief/assistance committee immediately and implement activities based on an assistance plan.

Mr. Tripurvar Singh Pradhan proposed that a committee should be formed under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister and involving members of the Assembly representing the affected areas and that the committee would provide assistance with the help of the *Badahakim* and other government officials of affected areas. Mr. Dan Bahadur Shrivastava presented an amendment to the Pradhan's proposal

to have 13 instead of 10 members in the committee.

Mr. Jagat Bahadur Singh asked for assistance to people in the affected areas in the form of grants and revenue relaxation for peasants. He further suggested to gather statistics about the destruction through the revenue office and by forming an assistance committee by involving social workers and government officers. Mr. Krishna Gopal Tandon said that all proposals had same objectives with differences only in their approach. He, therefore, suggested to merge them into a single proposal to table in the Assembly so that there would be a more coherent discussion and decision making would be facilitated. For that, he asked for some time. Then the Assembly passed Mr. Ram Chandra Singh's idea to postpone the meeting until the next day and the Assembly meeting concluded.

In this way, the assembly meeting approached the flood crisis and ended with some level of consensus to form a relief committee. Therefore, on the next day, 4 August, the Assembly continued in its discussion about forming a flood victim assistance and relief committee. At the end of discussions, it was agreed that the committee would consist of 15 members headed by the speaker. News about the session as reported in *Gorakhpatra* of 6 August is as follows:

A joint resolution '15 member Rainfall Victim Assistance (Relief) Committee to be formed' tabled by Mr. Bedananda Jha, Mr. Khadga Man Singh and Mr. Tripurvar Singh had been passed with amendments in today's Advisory Assembly meeting. ... [the] Adopted resolution with amendment had the following content: "In order to provide assistance/support to the victims of recent heavy rain and floods, a 15 member committee would be formed under the chairmanship of the Speaker of AA and members of the committee would be nominated by the Chairman". ...

After approval of the resolution, the Speaker nominated the Prime Minister, Minister of Defence, Minister of Home Affairs and Minister of Legal Affairs in the committee as members. To nominate the remaining 10 members he suggested dividing the country into 5 regions namely the Eastern Hill, Eastern Tarai, Western Hill, Western Tarai and Kathmandu valley so that two members from each regions could be represented in the committee. He further formed a team made up of Mr. Bishnu Bahadur, Bedananda Jha, Kashi Ram Sharma, Krishna Gopal Tandon and Basu Pasa to recommend nominees.

In the next day's meeting of the AA on 5 August, members were informed about the names of all members of the committee by the Speaker. Hence, the

Assembly finalised the formation of the 'Flood-victim Relief Committee'. The information about its final structure was notified after the Assembly approved the release of a total of Rs. 10 lakhs for emergency relief. However, the Assembly did not allow the Home Minister to table a bill, "Special Situation Right Bill 2011". The rejected Home Minister's bill was about delegating extensive powers to magistrates and public officers (Shaha, 2001, p.310) in the crisis. The bill and its rejection was important because it revealed not only the deep divisions inside the cabinet but also great concern from some AA members. Mr Bedananda Jha would continue showing serious concerns about it even in the next session of the AA in November 1954 (this will be discussed in detail later). Another permitted bill, about claiming barren/fallow land was related to the resettlement of landless people (later on this category would also include flood victims). This bill was conceived before the crisis, but was also related to the flood victim resettlement issue. The bill would not be approved by that session but was discussed in the next session of the AA. The news about the proceedings of the AA on 5 August reads:

Today's meeting of AA permitted tabling of a bill "Obtain Fallow/Barren Land 2011" brought by Mr. Narad Mani Thulung, Minister of Forest and Land Revenue. But the AA did not allow the Minister of Home Affairs to table a bill "Special Situation Right Bill

2011". Following this, the Minister of Defence, Mr. Kaiser Shumshere, tabled a proposal to channel a sum of Rs. 10 lakhs for the flood victim assistance as: "It has been difficult for the government to manage the fund for flood victim assistance since there is no any kind of emergency fund or items like that in the recently approved budget by government (approved in 10 *Shrawan*, 2011) for the next three months (until *Kartik*, 2011). Therefore, the AA agreed to set off a total of Rs. 10,00,000 (NC 5,00,000 and IC 5,00,000) in order to manage expenses for the flood victims and for other unseen requirements until coming *Kartik* month of the fiscal year."

Amendment to this resolution were either pulled back or rejected by the assembly. Finally, the resolution as it was tabled was passed with heavy majority. The speaker also announced names of nominated members of the committee as: Speaker Bal Chandra Sharma (Chair), Prime Minister Matrika Prasad Koirala, Minister of Defence Kaiser Shumshere, Minister of Home Affairs Tanka Prasad Acharya, Minister of Transport Bhadra Kali Mishra, Kulchandra Koirala and Dr. Bhudev Rai (from the Eastern hills), Mr. Gulab Narayan Jha and Mr. Beda Nanda Jha (from the Eastern Tarai), Gaya Prasad Sharma and Puskar Nath Upreti (from the Western hills) and Kunwar Kallu Singh and Dan Bahadur Shrivastava (from the Western Tarai).

After forming such an institutional set-up inside the Assembly, the committee chair (Speaker) and other members (which included the PM and ministers too) started to make their air-surveys and field trips for the assessment of the devastation, particularly in the second week of August. The first of such trips was made by the Speaker (Bal Chandra Sharma), the Home Affairs Minister (Tanka Prasad Acharya) and the Minister of Transportation (Bhadrakali Mishra). The Prime Minister was absent from all of these trips and the activities related to flood relief for almost a month since he left for Calcutta for his medical treatment. The trips brought the above three leaders together and later they would form an alliance which ultimately would lead to the dissolution of the government in the following year. These leaders shared their experiences of the trips after returning back to Kathmandu. For example, Bal Chandra Sharma shared his estimation about the extent of damage in the valley and eastern Tarai in the AA on 14 August after his first trip. Similarly, the Minister of Home Affairs ordered army and police forces in Biratnagar to go to the affected areas. The Minister of Transport assured the repair of infrastructures. After such trips, the leaders also shared their idea about how to allocate the relief fund in the regions for various items.

As the AA members were involved in flood relief activities, the Assembly ended its current session abruptly on 17 August.

The termination was declared by then Crown Prince, since King could not make it due to his deteriorating health. The end meeting of the Assembly was witnessed by the Indian and British Ambassadors, other diplomatic representatives, high level government officers and others. The Speaker welcomed the King. The Prime Minister was still absent. The King sent a message through the Prince and regretted that he was unable to join the session. He expressed his satisfaction about the activities of the Assembly as it had built a good foundation for future sessions, according to him. He further added that the next session would be called on to start in suitable time.

It is important to know how its members perceived the Assembly. Towards the termination of the regular session of the Assembly on 15 August, the members were discussing about the experiences obtained so far from the Assembly. They seemed unsatisfied with the effectiveness of the proceedings, particularly the length of time spent in prolonged question and answer sessions and the waste in bringing in so many resolutions and bills but spending a whole month in debates about a single bill (e.g. internal revenue bill), whilst leaving very important bills not discussed, such as a bill related to land reform. According to the Assembly, they tried to make the government listen with many questions and recommendations. However, their grievances were directed toward the government. This indicates

that the Assembly had grievances with the government and its experiences were not encouraging.

Although the assembly was terminated on 17 August in order to facilitate members participation in relief works in their constituencies (Shaha, 2001, p.310), it is important to know what happened to the AA-based "Flood Victim Relief Committee". After the termination of AA session, the committee remained almost completely inactive. The Speaker Bal Chandra Sharma also resigned from the chairmanship of the committee on 21 August. This resignation further deactivated the committee. Although he urged the continuation of the committee, the committee seemed to be basically deactivated after this episode. This indicates how an institution established for relief work at the very top political level with much fanfare ultimately ended without doing any substantial work for relief. Although the committee was not active after the resignation of the chairman, it was not totally dead, since it was only the high level flood relief committee of the state involving the PM and other ministers. For example, it was survived by a disaster relief agreement between USA and Nepal, which was signed in October.

With or without being in the committee, the AA chairman and some of its members were very active in visiting flood-affected areas from August through to November when the next session would begin. One of trips was made by AA chairman Bal

Chandra Sharma. He made extensive visits of almost 20 days to flood affected areas of the central and eastern Tarai in the month of October and returned back to Kathmandu by 26 October. Then he went out again to western hill areas, West No 1 and 2, particularly Trishuli, Arughat and Gorkha, from 6 to 15 November, returning just before the next session of the AA. Although he had already left the committee head position, he became a key person on such trips since he was not only the chair of AA, but also a key leader (General Secretary) of the Prime Minister's *Rastriya Praja Party*.

In the Central Tarai, he visited Bara, Simraungadh, Rautahat, Malangawa and Jaleswor and reached to Siraha. He could not go further east due to suffering an illness. In most of these areas, he had meetings with local officials and local flood relief committees, he also addressed mass gatherings of victims and general people and met party cadres. Since the government in Kathmandu focused on the situation inside the valley and its supply line, particularly the road through Bhimphedi, not much attention had been given to the flood situation in the Tarai, which was even worse. Therefore, the Speaker had to gather complaints and demands and make promises to present them for the executive to do something about them in Kathmandu. Mr. Sharma found Rautahat was the most severely flood-hit district, but it remained without much support. Flood victims blocked Mr

Sharma in Chhatauni village in Sarlahi, while he was going to Malangawa and presented their demands to him for relief. Later, when he promised to raise the issue in Kathmandu, they allowed him to carry on with his tour. Therefore, he made many promises and consolations to the victims. Besides that, he also released the relief fund to the victims by himself or in his presence by the committee or else he recommended that the local flood relief committee do so. Therefore, the trip also likely increased his political capital.

In the western hill area, he also did the same, meeting local officials and cadres, collecting complaints and demands and making promises for their fulfillment. In hilly areas, he also recommended providing arable lands to landless victims, for instance, he said so in a speech in Trishuli Bazar on 10 November. He returned to Kathmandu just before the next session on 15 November, from Gorkha via Pokhara with many complaints and applications from the victims. Then he was engaged in the AA proceedings. He also had to give clarifications regarding his trips to the committee.

Besides the Speaker, other members of the AA were also busy in making trips to various parts of the country. An AA member from another ruling party, the *Praja Parishad*, Mr Ram Hari Sharma, made one such visit. He visited the western hills, particularly Gorkha, just before the Speaker's visit and made a press release on 22 November about his trip. Through

the press release, he reported the damage he had seen particularly of bridges and cropland, which were, according to him, more visible at the national and district level than at the individual level. He also recommended that relief reach the needy people and that relief should focus beyond the immediate material and monetary relief, towards reconstruction and rehabilitation. Similarly, other AA members also visited Eastern 1 and 2 and West 2 up to Syangja. In East No 2, a Praja Parishad Member, Baikuntha Acharya, released Rs. 100,000 through the local flood relief committee. Therefore, the politics during these times was focused on the relief fund and expanding political influence across the country through promises and release of funds.

Though delayed due to his medical treatment, the Prime Minister was also not far behind in carrying out such trips. He stopped in Biratnagar while returning home from Calcutta and made a visit to villages along the Koshi river. He declared that the government would exempt land tax on farmers in Saptari and Biratnagar and for that it would release Rs 25,000 immediately. These relief promises and actions came only on ad-hoc basis and were never communicated through the official government channels. Therefore, in sum, post-disaster relief works had a very limited impact on recovery. This became a big political issue, particularly during the second session of the AA.

The responses made by the government and political parties would be a major

issue in the upcoming AA second session. The government made the first public notice in *Gorakhapatra* on 5 November calling for the second session of AA on 17 November.

Second AA session

The flood would be a major issue in the second session of AA, occurring after the crisis. In addition to direct responses on the flood problem, there were other related issues around policy-making in the AA related to the flood. The first issue of contention was the government's attempt to pass the special situation rights bill to provide more power to local government officials. Although the bill was rejected in its first session, some members of AA, for example Bedananda Jha, were highly concerned by this in the next session and said that the government implemented the bill by changing its name and contents slightly even though it had been rejected. The next issue was related to a new bill, the Citizen's Rights bill which was to define citizen's rights for the first time. This is also important, even for flood relief activities, because it would reveal how the state considered its citizens. Another bill was about obtaining fallow and barren land for the government in order to provide landless people with land. This would now include flood-victims.

The Crown Prince inaugurated the second session of the Advisory Assembly on 17 November. He highlighted the government's activities in his inaugural

speech, which included mention of the flood issue. He said that the worst impact of the rainfall and flood was in the central part of the country, including East and West No 1 and 2, particularly in the central and eastern Tarai and the worst hit was Rautahat. He further stated that the total loss was estimated at more than Rs. 1.5 crore and that the government had already released Rs. 12 lakhs even when it had limited capacity. He further acknowledged the fund generation through the National Flood Relief Fund established by his father as well as support made by the international community for relief and reconstruction (particularly by India, Britain and USA) and the military's hard work in restoring the road from Bhimphedi to Amlekhganj, the major supply line for the valley.

Following the inaugural speech, there was a discussion on the speech in the house. Many members raised issues and proposed amendments. Mr Bedananda Jha raised the issue of the flood-relief activities by the government. On the next day, 24 November, an acknowledgement resolution was passed by the AA and proposed amendments were either rejected or pulled back. However, the Prime Minister responded and raised

concerns before the adoption of the resolution. In his deliberation, PM MP Koirala also touched on the issue of flood relief activities. He accepted the government's weaknesses in dealing with the crisis in terms of effectiveness; however, he urged that all collectively should take responsibility for such weaknesses. He further added that the government had released a sum of Rs. 10 lakhs immediately but that could not be distributed properly. He further emphasised that the government did respond in a timely manner by approving the relief and did not delay in making such a response. It is clear from this deliberation that the government had to be defensive on the matter of responding to the flood.

After completing the inaugural session by adopting the acknowledgement resolution, the government tabled two bills on 26 November. These two bills were related to citizen's rights and claiming barren and fallow land for re-distribution to landless people, which had remained undecided in the previous session.⁹ After realising that the bill related to citizen's rights was vital and technical in nature (defining citizen's rights for the first time based on the Interim Constitution) it was sent to an expert committee of 10

⁹ The bill was also related to the resettlement of the flood victims. For example, while answering a question about the government response to the flood victims gathered in Janakpur, the Home Affairs Minister said that they were provided assistance and would be resettled soon, for which the bill related to achieving the fallow and barren land had been tabled in the Assembly. The bill was approved on 13 December after many rounds of debates. Actually, the issue of resettlement of the flood victims became important during that time. In another example, flood victims in Sindhuli also demanded resettlement when meeting with the Flood Relief sub-committee members.

members of the AA, including the PM, after a brief discussion. Mr Bedananda Jha then proposed a termination of the session on the issue of flood relief. However, he later agreed to discuss this further since the issue was serious and the Speaker was due to speak on it in the next day. Besides the issue of flood relief, Bedananda Jha again brought his concerns about the so called bill about the special situation control, which was rejected in the previous session but later allegedly implemented by government after they made a few cosmetic changes. He argued that there were only two ways to make laws at that time: through the AA and through the ordinance of the supreme ruler (King) in a special situation. He asked how could the government make the law and implement it and how could be there two legislative bodies in a state? He further asked why the government did not start the session with the bill related to budget and expenditure, which was not adopted in the previous session, and instead brought these two bills. The PM answered his concerns about the bill related to special situation control by saying that the government had to

implement it anyway since there was crisis caused by the flood and there was no AA running its session. According to him, the cabinet could promulgate the act with the consent of the King. A similar approach was taken on the budget and expenditure issue. However, Mr Jha did not accept the answer and protested against it by walking out of the AA. Here, the flood crisis situation and the government's way of dealing with it without a necessary legal basis became a great political issue.

The next day's (28 November) AA proceedings also dealt with the response to the flood and drought.¹⁰ Members shared their recommendations in order to deal with these natural disasters from a fresh start. In that session, the PM revealed that the total amount released by the government so far for flood relief was 15 lakhs, which had not been utilised yet.¹¹ Therefore, the PM requested more suggestions and asked the Assembly to think about forming a new committee to start activities more effectively under a concrete plan. He further requested the Assembly to remove the legal obstructions

¹⁰ There was another series of drought and water scarcity incidents in the central Tarai, particularly in Bara, Parsa, Rautahat, Mahottari and Saptari, right after the downpour. The drought was felt particularly in November 1954, when crops were drying up. Therefore, drought was also added in the AA debate along with the flood. Later in December 1954, the government established a commission based at the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Food with four members, headed by Fanindra Raj Hamal, assistant secretary and the team was sent to the field to understand the existing situation and make recommendations for possible relief activities.

¹¹ As informed in the AA meeting on 6 December, the total fund released was Rs. 1,557,150 whereas the total expense was about Rs. 25,000. Amounts are as follows: Dhankuta 2990, Sarlahi 5000, Valley 600, Mahottari 5161, Chisapani 4394, East No 2 1639, officials' trip from Chisapani to Rautahat 4588.

to initiate a fresh approach to the flood problem. All members accepted the proposal and asked the PM to propose the structure of such a committee in the next day's meeting. It brought about yet another institution to deal with the flood crisis, the second from the AA, as the previous one chaired by the Speaker had failed. *Gorakhpatra* also covered the failure of the previous committee in its editorial on 3 December. But the Speaker had to speak about the failure of the Assembly-based first flood relief committee since he was the chair and he had already agreed to do so in the AA meeting on 26 November.

In the AA meeting of 29 November, the Speaker clarified about the activities of the committee, his resignation from the committee and his own involvement in the flood relief works even after the resignation. It seems that he had some problems with the government over dealing with the flood crisis and he was unsatisfied with the works that had been completed so far. However, he valued his own recommendations and asked the government to provide more responsibilities to him with substantial authority. The news about the Speaker's clarification as published in *Gorakhpatra* of 3 December reads as follows:

On the request of Bedananda Jha in the AA meeting on 26 November, the Speaker made a clarification: the flood relief committee submitted a regulation, but the executive had the

responsibility to implement it. Since the scope of the authority of the committee had not been defined, it had to seek the cabinet's agreement for implementation. Then a provision was agreed to send the accepted regulation (to all government agencies) through the telephone and wireless (if not applicable, to send by post as soon as possible) for immediate action. But it was not done. Although there was the formation of local level flood relief committee in some districts, I did not know about them and did not have idea who was/were behind such formations. They also stopped doing their works. After having an order from the committee and based on my own capacity, I visited many affected areas in the Tarai and hills and made recommendations based on my field observations and consultations with local people. But the government ignored all of them. Many of my recommendations were applicable for the entire country.

The Speaker spoke about his resignation: Although the committee was made to handle the relief works, it had already been delayed. Further, it was accused of assuming unnecessary authority. In such a situation I could not bear my responsibilities being in the committee. Since there was no running Assembly session, I submitted my resignation to the supreme ruler (King) who had formed this assembly.

But I was asked by the King to convey any difficulties I would have while working. Therefore, I withdrew my resignation. After that, I used to send the original copies of every activities of the committee to the Regency Council and (Ministry of) State Affairs (*Rajya Vyawastha*). Since the flood problem was almost a country-wide problem and it needed immediate response, I thought that the sluggish working style of ministries would not make any difference. Therefore, I made another request to the King recommending the formation of a separate department to deal with the crisis of this scale as done during the eradication of slavery and great earthquake in the past. The Speaker further added: I have submitted a report that is still in the AA. Every member can have a look at it. My report has also influenced the executive. You can see the increased responsiveness of the PM as clear evidence of this.

The Speaker said: I was given NRs 15,000 and IRs 10,000 by government in order to provide relief by my discretion through the local relief committee. I provided NRs 15,000 in Gorkha and IRs 10,000 in Sarlahi. I have every details of my travel expenses which I will submit to the Accountant General and if not approved, I will pay back. He ended by saying: I have realised that it is not enough to say just 'yes' or 'no' to activities from the allocated money by

sitting here. I have time and I am ready to work, just give me responsibilities.

The statement clearly shows the extent to which the crisis created by the flood had reached deeply inside politics. Deep divisions became visible between the AA and government. For example, in the session of 15 December, many of the AA members showed their anger towards the government for delaying answers to their raised concerns. As a result, many of members left the AA and the meeting closed because of inadequate quorum.

In the meantime, the PM tabled a proposal in the AA meeting of 16 December for the formation of a new committee of 17 members to resolve problems created by the flood and drought. Later, the AA adopted the proposal as it was tabled and rejected all amendments. However, before presenting the proposal in the house, a slight change was made: the name of Bal Chandra Sharma, who was chair of the previous proposal, was removed and the name of another member was put there instead. In fact, Bal Chandra Sharma pulled his name out of the committee by himself when AA members suggested him to do so since putting his name forward would create some legislative difficulties and would become a matter of political contestation. The 17 members of the newly formed committee were: Matrika P. Koirala, Kaiser Shamsher, Bhadra Kali Mishra, Gulab Narayan Jha, Bedananda Jha, Bishwa Nath

Thakur, Kulchandra Koirala, Rameshwar Prasad Aryal, Rajeshwar Devkota, Ramhari Sharma, Punya Prabha Devi, Nistaar Roy Yadav, Hamsha Raj Shrestha, Krishna Bahadur Thapa, Padam Bahadur Singh, Bhudev Rai, Bishwa Nath Thakur and Jagat Bahadur Singh. The content of the adopted proposal was as follows: Although a flood-relief committee had already been formed in the first session of the AA, now the new problem of drought emerged and it was realised that a new committee would be needed to involve new members representing the drought affected areas and to recommend a single plan addressing both disaster issues within a month. The Prime Minister also tried to justify the new committee based on the newly emergent issue of drought. He expected a more effective plan from the committee with concrete relief activities giving attention to available resources. He added that the plan suggested by the committee would be implemented by the executive (ministries and departments).

The proposed amendments to the resolution included reducing the size of the committee, involving governmental officials in the committee to facilitate implementation, adopting modalities to working with sub-committees formed at the local and district level and giving attention to the already released and used funds. Although there was discussion on these amendments, none was approved by the house. Some members also compared the relief works in Nepal with

that in India. Members expressed their criticisms that Nepal had not been able to distribute any significant monetary support to the victims (on the pretext of lacking a suitable legal basis) while the Indian government had distributed thousands of rupees immediately after the incident. Therefore, as shown, most of the politics around the flood relief operation were about the institutions created and financial relief provided.

While writing about the new committee, a *Gorakhapatra* editorial compared the current approach of dealing with the crisis created by the flood and drought with the previous approach of dealing with the crisis created by earthquake of 1934. The editorial labeled the current approach as very sluggish and ineffective, in spite of such a huge contribution made from inside and outside the country, even in a democratic system. It further argued that the ineffectiveness had aided the erosion of popularity of the government, despite its responsiveness. All these indicated that the government was heavily attacked due to its failure to address the flood problem. Therefore, the government had to form a new committee, the only a way to deal with the crisis. The government's difficulties in dealing with the political situation at that time was also reflected in the PM's analysis of the existing situation, presented in his party's general committee meeting held in the last week of December 1954. He accepted the government's inability to succeed in making political consensus.

The same meeting also recommended that the government work on disaster relief under a comprehensive plan, which will be useful even for the future. The meeting also formed a 5-member coordination committee to implement its proposal for a political settlement merging all democratic parties into a single party. That was the PM's major proposal, which differed with another alliance of the ruling party. It will be discussed later.

The second session of the AA discussed a few bills and the budget presented by the Prime Minister on 19 January before its termination on 9 February. The ongoing session of the AA was terminated by the Crown Prince before he left for Switzerland to meet his ailing father. The termination occurred in the context of government's defeat by the rejection of two budget cut motions tabled on 1 February, when the next meeting had been adjourned by a month. Such defeats happened around the time when the political crisis was heightened by reorganisation in ruling parties. During the crisis, the Rastriya Praja Party of the Prime Minister dismissed its dissenting member, Bal Chandra Sharma, who joined the *Praja Parishad*. There was also a merger of another ruling party, the Jana Congress of Bhadra Kali Mishra with the Praja Parishad. Even before this, the Home Minister had already been removed from his portfolio on 10 January, just before the Nepali Congress' *Satyagraha*¹²,

which was later withdrawn. Similarly, the differences between the PM's party with Bal Chandra Sharma had also already surfaced after his poor dealing of the flood crisis and the ineffectiveness of the first flood relief committee of the AA, which was severely criticised. A new committee had already been formed by the Prime Minister which excluded all of his three powerful rivals, Tanka Prasad Acharya, Bhadra Kali Mishra and Bal Chandra Sharma. The political crisis created during that period will be discussed in a later section. Along with a heightened political crisis, the flood issue got little attention during those times. It was instead incorporated in the development projects supported by foreign aid, also discussed later.

In his press release about the termination of the second session of the AA on 9 February, the Crown Prince as a chair of the Regency Council made following statement:

A new legislative situation emerged on 1 February when the meeting of the AA was postponed by one month. But now, the Regency Council, on behalf of His Majesty, based on the interim Constitution of 1951, has terminated the second session of the AA from today, 9 February, Tuesday. The new session would be called on in a favorable time.

¹² Literally it means "insistence on truth," the term was coined and developed by Mahatma Gandhi to denote a form of civic, peaceful resistance.

Later, when the Crown Prince dissolved the cabinet in the first week of March, he also dissolved the Advisory Assembly and hence the time of political experimentation, through which the flood crisis created havoc, ended. It also ended all institutions based at the AA.

Responses from others inside the country

Outside the government, there were few responses from various individuals and institutions to the flood as covered in the *Gorakhapatra*.

The most important was from then opposition leader, Mr. B.P. Koirala of Nepali Congress, which was neither represented in the government nor in the Advisory Assembly. He made an appeal for help for flood victims on 2 August 1954 (published on 4 August in *Gorakhapatra*) and expressed his sorrow for the loss of lives and properties. According to the news, he urged his party cadres to collaborate with governmental and non-governmental efforts for relief and rescue. BP Koirala made another announcement on 26 August from Patna regarding the flood problem. He urged people to collaborate with one of the many relief organisations and initiatives inside the country in such a crisis situation and also to contribute to the relief operation. However, he realised and emphasised the limitation of the government's capacity to deal with such a situation. These were some of his announcements related

to the flood relief works. His particular responses to the government's approach could not be covered in this study. It is, however, clear that he was highly critical of the then political arrangements, and he also must have been critical about the way of dealing with the crisis, accepted as a failure even by ruling parties and individuals. Nepali Congress was focused on a larger political issue, as it was about to launch a *Satyagraha* in early 1955 to demand an election. The *Satyagraha* was withdrawn later on when the Crown Prince, a chief of the Regency Council perceived positively to the demand and assured that he would take necessary action. But it did not happen soon. In an interview in 1955, BP Koirala dismissed the government's claim of distributing cheaper grains in Kathmandu and said clearly he was against ideas such as focusing only on Kathmandu for any relief works (such as selling cheaper rice to combat food scarcity) and running the country through the appointment of so-called 'neutral' people, who did not represent any parties.

There were also responses from outside the political formations. Among very few responses made at the individual and institutional level to the floods, an important one was made by *Paropakar*, a philanthropic organisation. It decided to provide treatment to the flood-victims by bringing them to Kathmandu after it heard about an incident in Dhunibeshi, located 14-15 miles west from Kathmandu. The

incidence was the destruction of lives and properties by the floods and landslide caused by the recent heavy rainfall. Besides that, the organisation also said that it had already sent volunteers to the area from Birgunj to Bhainse and other parts of Tarai in order to provide help to flood victims. It seems that *Paropakar* was active in the western hills near the capital (West no 1). Besides in Dhading, it also provided rescue and relief from its Trishuli section in West No 1, where several people had been killed by landslides. Others were provided with medical treatment and other assistance by the Trishuli section of *Paropakar*.

Responses from the non-governmental sector at the organisational level were few, at least in the capital as stated in *Gorakhapatra*. One such rare initiative was announced by an organisation called *Bal Sakha Dal* (Children's Friend Party) on 18 August at its meeting (news came on 23 August). *Bal Sakha Dal* was a non-governmental organisation working on children's issues. It carried out community level social work and involved children in those works. The meeting was held in Putalisadak at the residence of Dharma Narayan Pradhan. The meeting was participated in by its executive members along with Narendramani Aa Di, Dharma Narayan Pradhan, Sharad Kumar 'Ashant' who was also a secretary general of Nepal Tarun Dal, and representatives of various branches of Bal Sakha Dal. The meeting decided to organise various shows,

football matches and door-to-door fund raising in order to generate a fund for supporting flood victims. As decided in the meeting, the fund would be kept initially in a bank by treasurers of Bal Sakha Dal, and the funds would subsequently be transferred to any governmental or non-governmental relief fund if it decided to do so.

Later Narendramani Aa Di, heading a relief committee formed by some intellectuals in the valley, made a public appeal on 5 September for people to contribute to flood relief works. The committee headed by Mr Aa Di was said to be formed on 29 July, having a contact office at the Chamber of Commerce building on New Road. It is not clear that whether this is same above mentioned initiative of Bal Sakha or not. However, it is clear that there were few initiatives at the people's level. Most of the institutional responses outside the government were focused on raising funds and contributing to the government's relief fund. However, their influence and effectiveness are not explored in this paper.

Domestic politics in the context of the flood crisis

Since its inception, there was deep division within the so-called coalition government, which was formed by the King's *Fagan 7* proclamation of 2010 BS (February 1954). A. Gupta (1964, p.90) called one of the divisions an "oppositional alliance" of newcomers like Tanka Prasad Acharya, BK

Mishra, and DR Regmi within the cabinet against PM MP Koirala. Mr. Tanka Prasad Acharya shared his reluctance to join the cabinet initially but later joined it due to the king's intention, as stated in his biography (Fisher, 1997, p.167). The division was also reflected in the AA as well as in government proceedings. Although there might be some specific issues of difference like on the administrative appointments (Home Secretary) or on the future process for a political settlement with all parties in and outside the government, most of the divisions were more like personality clashes. During the initial phases of flood relief in August, MP Koirala was under medical treatment in Calcutta, therefore other Ministers, such as Tanka Prasad Acharya, BK Mishra and the Speaker BC Sharma, made frequent visits to flood affected areas and helped form local level flood relief committees to channel the government's relief fund. These attempts might have been used for the expansion of political influence of these politicians in different parts of the country; ultimately all of them came under the *Praja Parishad* in February 1955.

However, the PM was also active in relief activities later on, upon his return after the medical treatment. He inspected the rebuilding of the Bhimphedi-Amlekhganj road on 26 September. He was also engaged in getting US disaster assistance and later signed an agreement on it. The US consultant for flood relief assessment also expressed his impression of the Prime Minister who he labeled as a "very

level headed, sincere, honest, patriot who was desperately trying to bring his country out of the chaos that it had been in". Actually, he signed the disaster relief agreement with the USA in Calcutta on 23 October 1954 (the detail is discussed in a later section). However, India was not very positive toward the agreement. It is also clear from Tanka Prasad Acharya's statement "Even MP Koirala had difficulties with Indians. They badly rebuked him for accepting, without prior consultation with India, the U.S. offer of wheat for the flood-stricken people of Nepal" (Fisher, 1997, pp.167-68). India's criticism of the agreement was also reflected in its Calcutta-newspaper coverage of the agreement, which was shared by US Consul in a cablegram to Department of State. Therefore the PM had been facing reactions outside and inside the country, but he remained in power as long as King Tribhuvan was alive.

Based on differences with Tanka Prasad Acharya over the Home Secretary issue, the PM expressed his intention to resign with the King on 28 September (Shaha, 2001, p.313). But later the King temporarily resolved the differences before leaving for treatment in Europe, as also reflected in his address of 2 October to the nation before leaving. The cabinet also made a joint press release saying that they did not have any differences within the cabinet as publicised. Differences again increased later on in late December 1954 and early January 1955, leading to the dismissal of Tanka Prasad Acharya from the cabinet.

The differences between ruling parties, particularly between PM MP Koirala and Home Minister Tanka Prasad Acharya deepened in January 1955. Both of their parties had their general committee or executive committee meeting during that time. At the same time, there was also increasing resentment about the government ineffectiveness in dealing with the flood crisis. Even ruling parties had accepted such ineffectiveness and recommended a new comprehensive approach. For example, the PM's *Rastriya Praja Party* made a decision during its meeting on 29 December about forming a comprehensive national plan to tackle not only the current disaster, but also to prepare better for the future. Similarly, an executive committee meeting of the *Praja Parishad* on 3 January expressed resentment for not utilising the flood relief given by foreign friends. There was feeling of failure in dealing with the disaster not only among all people and opposition parties, but also within the ruling parties. It was in that context that the AA had also come up with another committee. The differences between the major ruling parties were also related as to how to proceed for a political settlement.

The major opposition party, the Nepali Congress, which was launching its *Satyagraha* in early January, posed large political challenges. There were outrages from the ruling party against the *Satyagraha*, as reflected in *Gorakhapatra's* long editorial on 7 January and the PM's

radio address to the country on 8 January. In the meantime, the PM removed Tanka Prasad Acharya from the responsibility of the Ministry of Home Affairs in the wake of the Nepali Congress *Satyagraha* and kept him as Minister without portfolio. After a meeting with the Crown Prince on 10 January, Congress withdrew the *Satyagraha*. Congress later clarified that the main basis for this reversal was a letter sent by the Crown Prince taking positively the demands of the *Satyagraha*, such as having an independent judiciary, holding the election as soon as possible and other demands. Later, on 28 January, the valley committee of the Nepali Congress also thanked the King for being positive towards the 6 point demands of the *Satyagraha* and assuring that he would take necessary step to fulfill them. However, the government was very critical about the announcement of *Satyagraha* as it expressed its position against such attempt through a press release from the Ministry of Home Affairs, published in *Gorakhapatra* 12 January.

After sidelining Tanka Prasad Acharya from the cabinet, a new political crisis emerged in the Prime Minister's party when its leader Bal Chandra Sharma formed an alliance with Tanka Prasad Acharya. To resolve it the PM, as a chair of his *Rastriya Praja Party*, dissolved its existing working committee towards the end of January 1954. He announced his central committee on 4 February in his chairmanship leaving 6 positions vacant.

Right after the reorganisation on the same day in a press conference, the Praja Party made clear that there was no divisions within the party and Bal Chandra Sharma with his 7 allies had already left which made the party free from any 'reactionary' forces. A dissenting group from the Praja Party, the Praja Party struggle committee also rejected, through a press release, the idea of Bal Chandra Sharma as a leader of the group since he had already joined the *Praja Parishad*. This splinter group again merged into its mother party, the Rastriya Praja Party, on 12 February. The central committee of the Praja Party sent its circular to all local committees to dissociate with Bal Chandra Sharma and his allies. Therefore, there was increasing political polarisation.

There was also reorganisation in the *Praja Parishad* during the first week of February, which was also not free of controversy. Reorganisation was based on the 'merger' of Bal Chandra Sharma and his group that splintered from Rastriya Praja Party and Jana Congress of Bhadrakali Mishra with *Praja Parishad* retaining its flag as party's new flag. A dissenter of such reorganisation, Mathura Lal, was obviously given space by *Gorakhpatra* whereby he challenged the legitimacy of such changes in Praja Parishad. Similarly, Mr. Khadga Man Singh, who was previously associated with Bhadrakali Mishra's Jana Congress, also left the newly organised *Praja Parishad* on 13 February showing his differences on the merger and declared that he would

remain disassociated with any political party. Later, Bal Chandra Sharma became the chair of the newly organised *Praja Parishad* and he announced 17 members of working committee including Tanka Prasad Acharya, Bhadrakali Mishra, Ram Hari Sharma, Chuda Prasad Sharma, Rajeshwar Devkota, Chandra Bhushan, Surya Bahadur Bhardwaj, Govindra Prasad Upadhyaya and others. The reorganised *Praja Parishad* would remain a major political force for the future and lead the next government during Mahendra's kingship in the next year.

In such a political context, particularly following the government's defeat to dismiss the amendments in the AA on 1 February, the Crown Prince terminated the second session of the AA on 9 February. It happened just before he was leaving for Switzerland to see his father and to seek more political authority for future political steps. Actually the PM had submitted his resignation to the Regency Council after his defeat in the AA but the council was not empowered to accept it. He however terminated the ongoing session of AA, dissolved two ministers from the cabinet and left for Neuchâtel, Switzerland. Before leaving, he also urged government officials and the bureaucracy on 9 February to continue their tasks and suggested them not to get involved in any political affairs.

The Crown Prince returned back to Nepal from Switzerland with full Royal authority and ordered the dissolution of the Regency Council on 16 February, just before the

National Democratic Day of *Fagun* 7 (18 February). This move shifted political authority completely away from political parties to a more assertive monarchy practiced by Mahendra. The ailing King confirmed his handover of the authority to the Crown Prince in his message on the national day. The Crown Prince revisited his decisions in the last four months made through the Regency Council and expected support for his future steps. Right after democracy day, the Crown Prince sent a message to all political and social organisations and parties through a press release on 21 February. After these developments, the government passed an economic bill from the cabinet and sent it to the Crown Prince for approval. In such a way the government of political parties had lost its legitimacy with the emergence of Mahendra's rule. He finally dissolved the cabinet and ran the country under his direct rule through Royal Advisors until Tanka Prasad Acharya formed his cabinet in the next year (January 1956). All this happened in the context of the flood crisis.

Responses from other countries

India and others

The first international concern about the flood problem came from India, then Nepal's major donor, on 10 August. The Indian Government decided to provide Rs. 25,000 (IC) to the government's flood victim relief fund. Besides that, the Indian government also informed, as notified

by a news story on 11 August, that it was thinking of providing an additional Rs. 25,000 in grants for medical works in the affected areas. The news further stated that the two governments were in discussions for necessary mechanisms in order to supply the medical relief unit to the affected areas using additional grants. As reported, they were also discussing about the required amount for the restoration needed for the damaged section of the Bhimfedi-Amlekhganj road. The Nepal government requested the Indian Ambassador Mr. BK Gokhale to convey its acknowledgement to Indian government for the assistance. The Nepal government also expressed its sympathy for the destruction created in Indian territory by the same flood.

The flood also created havoc in India too, particularly in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Bengal. Indian officials also made inspection air trips of the flood-affected areas of India and Nepal. After one of such trips, Mr. Guljarilal Nanda¹³ said in India on 25 August about the complex situation created by the flood and difficulties to carry out any relief operation in Nepal and India. However, the Indian emphasis had always been on controlling Himalayan rivers, particularly the Koshi river. The same statement was repeated by Mr Nanda again in the context of the 1954 flood when he made public a recent agreement with Nepal to have a barrage on the Koshi river (the agreement was made in April 1954).

¹³ Indian politician and economist. He was the Prime Minister of India for two short periods following the deaths of Jawaharlal Nehru in 1964 and Lal Bahadur Shastri in 1966.

As had been promised initially the Indian government was to send a military medical team to flood affected areas in Nepal, particularly to the Tarai region. Such news came on 28 August. India informed Nepal that it would send two Indian Military Medical teams to Nepal, one would be based in Biratnagar and another in Birgunj, both equipped with medical and nursing officers, other supporting staffs and medicines for flood borne disease. The Biratnagar team also reached up to Koshi Tappu area for the medical assistance as informed in a news story on 12 November. Besides the medical support, an engineering group from the Indian military, which was engaged on building the road in the central hill (Tribhuvan highway), also became involved in the reconstruction of roads and bridges from Bhimphedi to Amlekhganj. India's PM Nehru also said in the Indian parliament on 17 December about providing monetary support for flood relief operations to the Nepal government of almost IRs.1.49 crore.

Besides India, the British Ambassador also contributed financially to the relief work on 22 August but this was only from his personal level. The news about his contribution reads:

The British Ambassador to Nepal Mr. Somer Heise regretted the huge loss in lives and properties by recent cloudbursts and subsequent floods in Nepal and also expressed his deep sympathy to the affected people. The

Ambassador and his wife donated 50 Pounds (previously stated 500 pound which was corrected in the next issue) to the flood victims relief fund.

The British government also announced a relief package of 100,000 Pounds to all flood victims in South Asia including India, Pakistan and Nepal, on 28 August. Although there was not detail about what amount would be given to Nepal and how it would be used, the announcement emphasised that the relief aid would be for the medical support of flood victims in those countries.

At the international non-governmental level, the Red Cross Society based in Geneva also showed an interest in doing flood-victim relief works in Nepal in a message sent to the Nepal government on 25 August. It further asked the government to send details of the levels of destruction in order to plan for the relief operation.

USA

Assistance from the USA for this flood incident is important because it not only provided significant monetary and material support immediately after the incident but it also made this support the basis for future large development projects to be launched in Nepal. Since the year saw the first escalation in foreign aid in Nepal from the USA (from Rs 2,516 thousands in 1953/54 to 9,599 thousands in 1954/55 leading to 10,024 thousands in 1955/56, Stiller and Yadav, 1993, p.71) flood and famine relief became

the third largest category of US support between 1952 and 1962 (Isaacson *et al.*, 2001, p.8). The incident, therefore, was also significant in terms of the history of US-led development assistance.

In order to assess the possibility for assistance to Nepal for the flood disaster, the Foreign Operation Mission of USA appointed Dr. Alexander Langmuir as a special consultant for flood relief from 19 September to October 6. This was in response to the King's broadcast appeal for flood victim relief and after consultation between the USOM representative Paul Rose and the Nepal government (Ministry of Foreign Affairs).¹⁴ Later, based on his visit, the Government of Nepal and USOM made an agreement on 23 October, which included a detailed work plan.

Langmuir arrived in Kathmandu on 22 September and had extensive meetings with USOM officials, ministers and government officials. He had also brought a token number of emergency medicines for Nepal. Later, he handed over these medicines to Nepali officials. The news about this handover was also published in *Gorakhpatra* on 1 October. Based on his visit, as the news informed, there were possibilities of further assistance from the USA for flood victims in the future. Langmuir had indicated problems like the lack of a detailed account of the flood impact in the country, problems in service delivery in various places (particularly in

hospitals in Kathmandu) and issues with the government's capacity. However, he praised USOM/N activities and the capacity of its staffs to carry out development efforts.

Based on such initial assessments, an agreement was made between the Government of Nepal and USOM in Calcutta on 23 October 1954. Nepal's Prime Minister MP Koirala and USOM Director Paul Rose signed the agreement. It was extensively covered by Calcutta-based newspapers. *Gorakhpatra* covered the news on 25 October, quoting the Press Trust of India. However, a summary of the agreement was published only on 17 November in *Gorakhpatra*.



Statesman, Calcutta, October, 24, 1954

As informed by *Gorakhpatra*, the USA would contribute USD 2 million to the joint relief operation in which the Nepal government would also contribute

¹⁴ It was revealed in a letter from Paul Rose (USOM/Nepal) to Stassen (Foreign Operation Mission, Washington DC) dated 17 September.

NRs 2 million. It conceived of providing material support to flood victims, starting air transportation to the valley until the road was restored, rebuilding damaged roads and other infrastructures, providing agricultural inputs to farmers, and providing health services including malaria eradication, sanitation and drinking water facility in the affected areas. In order to carry out all these activities, USOM would bear material, technical and expertise cost whereas the Nepal government would bear the cost of Nepali officials and other conditional provisions. The agreement further established a joint agency named the "Nepal America Disaster Relief Cooperative Service". The agreement would end by 30 June 1955. The agreement had the following 8 points: (1) food and clothing relief to disaster victims, (2) emergency supply line to Kathmandu, (3) road rehabilitation, (4) farm rehabilitation, (5) medical assistance, (6) establishment of joint agency, (7) administration, and (8) entry into force and duration.

The news about the agreement as it was published in the Statesman in Calcutta reads:

A US-Nepalese cooperative relief agreement to alleviate the distress of flood victims in Nepal was signed by Mr. MP Koirala, Prime Minister of Nepal and Mr. Paul W Rose, Director, US Operations Mission in Nepal, at the Nepalese Consulate General in Calcutta on Saturday.

Under the agreement, which comes into effect immediately, the US government will contribute up to a maximum of USD 2 million, the Nepal government supplementing the fund with a rupee for every dollar. The exact amount of contribution will be determined by representatives of both governments after actual requirements have been ascertained. The funds under the agreement, which will also be utilised for restoration of the economy in the areas affected by August-September floods, will have to be spent by June 30 next year.

The US government undertook negotiation for the agreement in response to an appeal broadcast by the King of Nepal for relief to the sufferers. The floods are described as the worst in the last 50 years. More than 1000 persons are reported to have died as a result of the floods, which also caused damage to property worth of several crores of rupees.

Extensive damage

According to reports, large areas of the country have been devastated. Hundred of the villages have been submerged, thousands of homes destroyed or damaged, several miles of vital roadways and scores of bridges swept away, large tracts of cultivable land covered by sand, and hundreds of wells made useless, leaving many villages without drinking water.

The cooperative relief programme will include supply of food, clothing and blankets to about 100,000 sufferers, many of whom have lost their homes and crops, and provision of emergency air transportation between now and early December to maintain supplies of certain essential commodities like kerosene, petrol, salt, sugar and yarn which are in short supply as a result of disruption of normal means of transportation to Kathmandu valley.

Repairs of damaged roads and bridges will also be undertaken. The recent floods have disrupted the normal means of transportation from Nepal's Terai area and from India to the Kathmandu valley. The road leading to the southern end of the Nepal Government cable-way at Dhursing has been badly damaged affecting motor traffic.

To provide relief and assistance to farmers in the devastated areas, the agreement proposed to undertake land reclamation by leveling and deep ploughing to distribute seeds and planting equipment and to provide veterinary supplies and fodder for livestock. Opportunity will also be taken to demonstrate land reclamation by use of mechanised equipment.

As for medical assistance, anti-malaria work is sought to be expanded by spraying insecticides in the selected areas and by distributing drugs to

infected persons. Dispensaries and hospitals are proposed to be stocked with essential medical supplies, new wells will be bored, polluted wells sealed and stagnant water areas drained.

The Programme will be administrated by a US-Nepalese Cooperative Relief Service under the supervision of a committee to be appointed by the Nepalese government and by a representative of the US Operations Mission in Nepal.

There were some queries raised in the second session of the AA on 7 December about the total volume and utilisation status of the flood relief received from other countries. The PM revealed that the total relief received to date was: USD 2 million including medicines and other necessary items from USA; two medical teams working in the Tarai, repairing bridges and embankment along the road from Bhimphedi to Amlekhganj from India. He further revealed that there were promises for relief from Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Among this support, US support came with the formation of an agency.

In this way, the flood received significant international development aid. At that time USOM was in the initial phase of working on vector-borne diseases (focusing mainly on malaria) and rural development works. The project of resettlement and Rapti Valley Development were in the

conception phase. The total funding of USD 2 million provided for flood victim relief could not be used adequately until the end of the agreement. GB Devkota (1960, p.265) said that there was huge corruption in the relief materials given by internationals, particularly by USA. According to him, local officials could not provide relief to needy victims. Either these materials, such as milk powder, grains, clothes, were lost or sold by local officials.

Later, in 1955, there was less discussion about the flood in development policy making. On 30 January, the government unveiled its development projects related to agriculture, irrigation, agriculture extension, health and sanitation, water management and education, particularly areas supported by foreign support, but it did not talk about the flood relief program. However, it made public the total aid received from the US and discussed about the Rapti valley project, which was in very initial stages, assessing soil and climate and starting work on malaria control.

The Nepal government had a meeting with USOM involving experts from both countries to talk about ongoing and future development projects on 1 February. The meeting was held in USOM office in Rabi Bhawan under the chairmanship of Bhim Bahadur Pandey, Secretary of the Ministry of Planning and Development. The meeting discussed the flood relief program along with other development programs such as agriculture, irrigation,

rural development, health, education and the Rapti valley development project. In this way, the flood relief program came under the broader development projects supported by USA and made a way for future interventions. Specific discussion by the Nepal government on the distribution of flood relief occurred through the joint Directorate of the Flood Relief Committee and USOM on 25 February, just before the dissolution of the MP Koirala government. The meeting, held in the presence of MP Koirala and Paul Rose, Director of USOM, discussed the modality for the distribution of the relief. Accordingly, the relief would be distributed through local government officials under the direct supervision of the Directorate. However, the meeting also agreed for major works for recovery such as reconstruction of infrastructure and resettlement of flood victims.

Mihaly (2002, p.80) argued that USOM was determined to open up the Rapti valley for settlement shortly after the flood of 1954, and that flood-relief funds totaling USD 2 million were added to the aid appropriation. He further elaborated that with flood-relief funds, a fifty-two mile road was pushed into the Rapti valley in 1955. It was necessary to initiate the Rapti project, for which the flood relief made a favorable pretext. According to him, in addition to the road building, relief funds were used to construct a sawmill on the periphery of the valley. That eventually became the Timber Corporation of Nepal (Isaacson *et al.*, 2001, p.154). It was an

important project activity but could not last for long.

An assessment of half century's of USAID (Isaacson *et al.*, 2001, p.30) also confirms the story of how the amount provided for flood relief also made a way into carrying out the Rapti Valley project.

Funds for major investment in the Rapti Valley were unavailable until USD 2 million in food aid was appropriated for flood relief in 1955. Because the Rapti area had been flooded, a large portion of the funds was programmed into the Rapti Valley Development Project, beginning with an 87-kilometer road built in 1955. By that time, a concentrated effort led by WHO, and supplemented by USOM, had successfully controlled the Valley's endemic malaria (p.30)... USOM's first road-building effort was the 87-kilometer link between Bharatpur and Hetauda, part of the Rapti Development Program, constructed with flood relief funds (page 72).

In this way, the flood relief operation led to a model development project from the USA in Nepal, namely the Rapti Valley project and resettlement schemes. Therefore, the resettlement project always had the objective of resettling disaster victims, particularly in its pioneer phase (1954-56), which was also reflected in Nepal's first five-year plan.

CONCLUSIONS

The floods of 1954 in Nepal attained an overwhelming response from the state. It is not surprising if we compare the state's response to the flood with the response of the state to the earthquake of 1934. Even during that time, the government established institutions for relief operation and fund generation. During the flood of 1954, the government established a number of institutions at the center. Some differences among political elites were also found in the established institutions and in the distribution of relief fund. Actually these institutions had allowed politicians to make claims on behalf of the people and to establish the fact that they were working for 'the people'. However, the interests of the people became a political matter more evidently during the flood of 1954 than after the earthquake of 1934. Therefore, there was huge politics around the flood response. Similarly, there must have been differences between relief operations during the 1934 earthquake and the 1954 flood. However, a detailed comparative study of these two disasters could not be covered in this paper. Differences between them may also explain some perceptions around the apparently more ineffective response to the disaster during the flood than the earthquake response during the 'autocratic' period.

However, the nature of these two disasters was completely different. Still we

can draw a conclusion that there was also a transition in the common belief toward a natural disaster being an 'act of god' to a disaster being 'a result of a natural process' when we pass from the time of the great earthquake of 1934¹⁵ to the time of the flood of 1954. The 'natural hazard' oriented approach to the flood disasters is still a dominant approach in Nepal (Dixit, 2003, p.163) and it has been advocated that there is a need to go toward the 'alternative approach' which considers disasters as result of not only the natural process, but also and more importantly socio-economic structures and political processes. If we place all these three conceptions of natural disaster (act of god, act of nature and intersection of nature and society) in a hypothetical linear progression, the incidence of 1954 may lie somewhere at the initial stage of the second conception. That may be the reason for the state's substantial response to the disaster, particularly by forming top-down institutions (such as a relief committee) and exerting all energies into the relief operation. We still have top-down administrative mechanisms like the Prime Minister's Relief Fund and the Central Disaster Relief Committee, all having their district and local level branches for addressing disasters (for detail of current structure of disaster response, please see Poudyal Chhetri, 2001, pp.67-68). Such arrangement must have originated since then, a topic which requires further research.

The flood of 1954 was a big disaster event after the state's entrance into the 'modern' developmental era. The extent and expansion of the impact of the flood was so large that the state had to be involved in responding to the crisis. The modernising state was also practicing so called democratic policy making through the AA, which included representatives from different groups and parties and from different parts of the country. This made the issue more vibrant for policy making despite the absence of any prominent civil society groups. Based on the nature of the disaster and type of political arrangement of that time, the heavy involvement of the state was apparent. It was mainly for the post-disaster relief operation. The state experimented with at least five different central level government managed institutions. However, the state had very limited capacity in terms of its administration and resources. To some extent, it became successful in regularising the trade of necessary items in the valley and in restoring the main supply line. Besides that, the state was largely unsuccessful in carrying out substantial relief and recovery operations through these top-down institutions. The failure then largely contributed to the already eroding legitimacy of the incumbent government. The government had been facing opposition not only from parties outside the cabinet but also from inside the ruling alliance. All these factors

¹⁵ Rana (2041 BS: 92-93) lists common beliefs about the earthquake of 1934 which can be regarded as defining the disaster as an 'act of god'.

combined to create favorable conditions for the new monarch to run the country with increased authority through his personal direct rule. Therefore, flood-like disasters on the one hand attracted the state to be engaged in relief operations whereas on the other hand, they created more challenges for the state itself. Here, the involvement of civil society and business was very limited in the relief operation. This may be due to the source of information used in this research. Further research could be carried out on the aftermath of the flood in the field with more in-depth ethnographic study (an ethno-history of the flood).

From the study, I want to draw another conclusion, which is related to foreign aid-led development. The disaster occurred in a particular time of Nepal's developmental

history when the cultivation of foreign-aid-led development had just begun. Donors, mainly USOM, were about to launch concrete development projects related to rural development and health in Nepal. The disaster became a good opportunity to begin and greatly expand such projects. Since the state could not utilise the fund provided by USOM for the relief operation, it was then channeled to projects like the Rapti Valley project and resettlement projects in which the flood victim were made the main beneficiaries. It is not clear whether only the flood victims from the affected areas were served through the initial phases of these new projects. However, it is clear that the 'aapati' (emergency situation)¹⁶ became a justification to launch big development projects in Nepal.

REFERENCES

- Baral, L. S., 2012. *Autocratic monarchy: politics in panchayat Nepal*. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari.
- Dahal, N., 1997. A review of Nepal's first conference on agriculture. *Water Nepal*, 5(2), pp.149-164.
- Devkota, G. B., 1960. *Nepalko rajnitik darpan*. Kathmandu: Dhruba Bahadur Devkota.
- Dixit, A., Upadhyaya, M., Pokhrel, A., Dixit, K. M., Rai, D. R., and Devkota, M., 2007. Flood disaster impact and responses in Nepal. Tarai's marginalised basins. In: M. Moench, A. Dixit, eds. *Working with the winds of change. Towards strategies for responding to the risks associated with climate change and other hazards*, pp.119 -157. Kathmandu:

¹⁶ This term is borrowed from a famous poetic saying about the resettlement project in Rapti Valley, as collected by Shrestha (1990, p.188): *Bhayo bipati, paryo apati, gayo rapti, ani bhayo sabhapati* (Became an outcaste, got into the hot water, moved to Rapti, and became a leader).

ProVention Consortium, Institute for Social and Environmental Transition-International and Institute for Social and Environmental Transition-Nepal.

Dixit, A., 2003. Floods and vulnerability: need to rethink flood management. *Natural Hazards*, 28, pp.155–179.

Fisher, J. F., 1997. *Living Martyrs individuals and revolution in Nepal*, New Delhi: Oxford.

Gupta, A., 1964. *Politics in Nepal: a study of post-Rana political development and party politics*. Bombay: Allied Publishers.

Isaacson, J. M., Skerry, C. A. and Kalavan, K. M., 2001. *Half-a-century of development: the history of U.S. assistance to Nepal 1951-2001*. Kathmandu: United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

Joshi, B. L. and Rose, L.E., 1966. *Democratic innovations in Nepal: a case study of political acculturation*. Berkeley, USA: University of California Press.

Mihaly, E. B., 2002. *Foreign aid and politics in Nepal: a case study*. Kathmandu: Himal Books.

Mohapatra, P. K. and Singh, R. D., 2003. Flood Management in India, *Natural Hazards*, (28), pp.131–143.

Poudyal Chhetri, M. B., 2001. A practitioner's view of disaster management in Nepal: organisation, system, problems and prospects. *Risk Management*, 3(4), pp.63-72.

Rana, B. S. J., 1936. *Nepalko mahabhukampa (the great earthquake of Nepal, 1935)*. Kathmandu: Sahayogi Press.

Shaha, R., 2001. *Modern Nepal: a political history 1769-1955*. New Delhi: Manohar.

Shrestha, N. R., 1990. *Landlessness and migration in Nepal*. Boulder, USA: Westview Press.

Stiller, L. F. and Yadav, R. P., 1993. *Planning for people*. Kathmandu: Human Resource Development Research Center.