

*For your dew is a dew of light
And on the land of the shades
You will let it fall – Isaiah 26:19*

Dear Friends,

28 January 2006

We drove through the cool darkness alongside the river. The road from Lamjung was mostly straight, but dipped to cross small streams falling from the hills, and we slowed when our headlights caught in pockets of fog or came upon people carrying firewood on their backs. On the mountains to the east, the lights of wakening houses blended into a sea of stars above – it seemed idyllic.

Ahead a horizontal pole suspended across the road came into view. Dhan pulled over and stopped our jeep. We got out and walked past, and then another 50 yards into a village along the right side of the road. A woman crouched in front of a fire in the ditch. Yellow light flickered from the doorways of several houses. A man sat on a bench in front of his shop, smoke swirling up, and I started to holler something to him, but then realized that he was singing his Hindu prayers. We ducked into the next tea house, where a thin teenage girl tended the place, with a TV for company.

“What time does the check-point open, little girl?”

“Six o’clock.”

“It’s already after six.”

“Six fifteen then.”

“Those guys come down from the hill yet?”

“How would I know?”

We took some tea, walked out in front of the shop and looked across to the other side. Inside a perimeter of barbed wire, spotlights shone from poles positioned around a hill. On top was an army post whose sentry boxes stood against the graying sky. There was no sign of movement. We walked further down the road to where a helix of razor wire was wound around another horizontal pole, and watched the silhouettes of ladies carrying water jugs, moving up the road towards us. Behind the shops, a dense forest shrouded in mist, began to emerge from the blackness. If they attacked, this is where the Maoists would come from. The ramshackle village sat between jungle and army barracks. Finally a group of armed soldiers with flashlights came down the hill, and slowly allowed us and the line of cars behind us to pass through. The check-point was open.

I spent the last four days on the road, meeting friends at Tansen and Lamjung Hospitals, laying ground-work for our training network. It has been a good first month in the embryonic Nick Simons Institute, with progress on a variety of fronts. I’ve begun to recruit a management team. We’ve found a nice office, looked at pieces of land for a more permanent site, given input to our lawyer about government registration papers, and interviewed many people (most of them more expert than I) for their advice about this new type of training project. I met Dipen, one of Nick Simons’ Nepali friends from when he worked here in 2002-3. Nick got beside people easily it seems. At the Kathmandu Guesthouse where he stayed, most of the staff became his buddies and everyone knew him. He wound up eating meals with these guys in the kitchen. “This food’s a lot better than in a restaurant,” he told them.

Tansen Hospital is an amazing place: a 160-bed facility seemingly carved out of a rocky hillside, with some of the best medicine available in Nepal. My friends Les and Debbie Dornon worked there for 12 years from 1990, and the more I see of Tansen, the more I realize why they were so proud of their hospital. On mornings out front of the hospital, a large collection of dusty people congregates, huddled in shawls, drinking steaming tea as they wait for the outpatient gates to open. On ward rounds I met a sad-eyed boy who had suffered for 1½ years from fever and huge spleen – probably from a parasitic worm. Our NSI project hopes to incorporate Tansen and other hospitals into a network that will train more health workers for rural Nepal. Some training is already being done, but we hope to help build it up, so that this fine health care can provide a model for more workers from across the country.

Yesterday, I rode from Tansen to Pokhara, where the jeep dropped off two friends before taking me on to Lamjung Hospital – about 7 hours journey. The hilly road north from Tansen is a stress test for motion sickness. This was the day after the political parties had called a country-wide “strike” – which means that no one is supposed to drive anywhere or do any business. We didn’t expect any trouble on the day after a strike, but we did pass many places where trees had been felled to block the road, or haphazard lines of boulders strewn. All of these had been partially cleared by the time we came through.

On this journey I learned a new Nepali word: “chhirnu” means “to slip through”. We came to one place where, in order to block traffic, someone had parked their truck right across the narrow road. There was no shoulder: on the outside a steep hill fell off, while on the inside rose a rocky bank. The truck sat there immobile – an effective blockade of the lonely 60-mile road. Two men were chipping with rod and pick at the adjacent earth. They had increased the opening between the truck and the rocky bank to about 10 feet. We waited a while longer, and when our turn came our jeep was able to pass. On the other side waited a line of about 30 trucks – none of them narrow enough to slip through.

“In Sweden, they’d have gotten so angry there that they’d have pushed that truck right off the hill,” my friend PG said. I’d guess that strikes are a different matter in Sweden. In Nepal a strike closes everything down and is a blow to the powers that be, in this case the King. Fear of retribution is so pervasive that on the day of a strike most people tow the line and just stay home.

Nepal is sitting on a somewhat shaky political tripod: King, democratic parties, and Maoists. King Gyanendra remains “in control”, one year after he seized total authority from the political parties. He has the army and police in hand, and he even plans to hold elections in one week – though a range of powers are arrayed against him. The Maoists ended their ceasefire one month back and are attacking security posts again. The political parties have taken to the streets with rallies and strikes all across the country, aiming to pull down the King. Foreign embassies here regularly decry the loss of civil liberties and democratic norms, which was precipitated by the King’s actions. Frankly, most Nepalis have dropped well below those high ideals and just want some peace and security – by whatever route it comes. Lord only knows the formula to break through this impasse into better times.

I had a productive meeting at Lamjung Hospital, with good questions and some new suggestions. But I was eager to get back home to see Deirdre and our boys. Snacking from the bag of Hershey kisses that my family sent with me, and phoning home for a few words was no substitute for the real thing. Deirdre is finishing up her time of leave-without-pay for child-minding, and she’ll start some mission work this coming summer. We are looking for a nursery school for Zachary, starting from his 4th birthday in May. Benjamin is flying through that most remarkable year of change, heading for this 2nd birthday. He is fully blond, while Zach’s still a redhead.

I asked the driver to leave Lamjung at 5 in the morning, so that we could get home in reasonable time. We lost an hour at that check point, but as the day began to clear we sped along – past the dewy, gray terraces of wheat and mustard, as they caught the morning sun and turned emerald and gold. In record time, we reached the town of Mugling. The jeep dropped me off at the crossroads and headed south back towards Tansen.

I stood a bit beyond the confluence of the two roads, along the straight line of town – 50 shops on each side, mostly small restaurants catering to the heavy traffic. All around the mountains loomed, their heads in clouds. Vendors pushed their carts of tangerines out towards the road, careful not to spill ripe fruit piled to the brim. The fragrance of cooking spices wafted onto the street. Buses, vans, trucks, private cars, and everything in between cruised by, some pulling in, some speeding off with a few shouts and a cackle of laughter. I found a white van called a “Micro”, handed my duffel bag to be stowed up top, and climbed in, heading for home. Thankful for your prayers.

Love,

Mark, Deirdre, Zachary and Benjamin