

Strong earthquake hits Yushu, on the Tibetan Plateau

TRAS was truly saddened to hear of the devastating earthquake which hit the town of Yushu on Wednesday, April 14. 97% of the population is Tibetan. 85%, if not more, of the mud and wood houses have collapsed, as has the majority of the infrastructure in the town. Official reports say over 2,000 have died; tens of thousands are injured and homeless. Just before 8am on a weekday morning means children were at school – it's hard to imagine the horror. To add to the heartbreak, some of the children who survived are now orphans, because their parents had not yet left home, and died. Elderly people, who go daily to pray at a huge mani stone structure outside Yushu had left that morning on the 7am bus. By the time they returned, their houses, their families were gone. Earthquakes are a common feature of life on the Tibetan Plateau, but they usually happen in the thinly populated nomadic areas, with little or no damage or loss of life. This one unfortunately hit the town of Yushu (or Jyekundo or Jieqo in Tibetan), the county seat of Yushu, so the effects have been horrendous. Our hearts go out to the people of Yushu.

We have spoken to one of our supporters, Didi-la, who comes from a town close to Yushu and has family members in Yushu. Didi-la was able finally to talk to a cousin in Xining (880 km from Yushu) to learn the fate of the family. She heard of miraculous escapes and harrowing stories of beloved relatives trapped or dead in the rubble. She is comforted to have been able to help raise funds by appearing on the Chinese TV station in Vancouver and to be interviewed on their radio station to talk about Yushu and what it must be like trying to survive in the harsh winter climate at 4,000m. She says the Tibetans and Chinese are working together to get supplies to Yushu and are fundraising like mad. Chinese businessmen and cities are being incredibly generous. The monks have been a tower of strength and compassion.

The Chinese Government has acted swiftly, sending in thousands of helpers and supplies. 4 large plane loads of supplies arrived within hours. Didi-la says her family is overwhelmed by the speed of the official Chinese response. However, after the immediate rescue efforts, much will need to be done to reconstruct a life for the shocked survivors. Yushu was a vibrant, beautiful, very Tibetan town. Let us hope they can reconstruct it the way they want it to be.

To donate: As TRAS has no local connection through which to send donations, we have joined a local coalition of NGOs, Buddhist Dharma groups and concerned citizens to establish a fundraising appeal for humanitarian relief and reconstruction work. A website is being prepared that will include a list of reputable organizations that have long worked in the region and provide tax receipts to Canadian donors. If you would like to donate, we encourage you to watch out for it. It should be up and running soon. The address is: www.rebuildyushu.org.

Fundraiser for earthquake relief: Tsengdok Monastery is planning a day of Tibetan cultural events on July 11, Van Dusen Gardens Floral Hall, 10am-midnight. Info: <http://tsengdokrinpoche.com>

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TRAS Takes on New Projects

They haven't suffered from horrific earthquakes, tsunamis or hurricanes, so they aren't front page news. They do suffer from other weather-related crises – failed monsoons some years, floods in other years, with resulting mudslides, loss of topsoil, crops and harvests. But this is all ho-hum stuff to the western media. Nor are they all refugees, although in Nepal they have been caught in the ugly crossfire of a decade-long civil unrest.

So it takes personal contact and some sleuthing to learn about pockets of dire poverty hidden away in valleys and on remote mountains in the Himalaya. And it takes dedicated local people to try to reverse the injustice of years of neglect. The people TRAS is helping through several new projects have been dealt a raw deal when it comes to arable land, education, health care, jobs.



Winter in Humla, Nepal

Some of their little communities are far removed from roads, services and the attention of their governments. So even though they should be receiving some of these services by right of citizenship, they are not.

The TRAS board of directors is really happy to start helping some of these hard working local people who want to bring about change for the better in their communities. With your help, we hope to achieve lasting results. It will take time – change does not come swiftly, and education takes years to bear fruit – but we believe it is worth persevering. Over the past few months we have received much information and encouraging descriptions of the local efforts, and TRAS has agreed to take on 3 new projects for which we are accepting donations. You will find them on the following pages.

Departures and Arrivals

In the past two months TRAS has said 'goodbye' to two directors, the Office Manager and the newsletter layout volunteer. **Rob Asbeek-Brusse's** term as Treasurer finished after five years of guiding our financial situation. **Megha Shakya**, who has been very helpful with contacts in Nepal, has resigned from the Board for a happy reason: his wife, Armila, has taken on the job of Office Manager. Luckily, Megha has agreed to act as our consultant on Nepal for the Projects Committee. **Samaya Ryane**, who has looked after the layout of the newsletter for several years, is taking a break while she travels. We thank all three of them most heartily for the hours of work they have put into TRAS.

Lise Kosmack, who joined TRAS as Office Manager last July, had to return to Ontario, and we are sorry to lose her. In the short time she was with us, Lise contributed much to the Society and to the smooth running of the office, streamlining many processes for TRAS. We will miss her expertise and friendly presence, and wish her well in her next steps.

At the same time, we are delighted to welcome our new Treasurer, **Kevin Yuen**, who has been persuaded to explain why he was happy to join TRAS. "Formerly a clinical laboratory scientist working in Hawaii and Denver, I am now a chartered accountant working in a public firm as an auditor. In my spare time, I facilitate training for up-and-coming chartered accountants, play volleyball, and collect movies I may never watch.

My reason for being interested in helping TRAS was that the position of treasurer allowed me not only to match my work expertise to the organization's needs, but also to be able to do some good in aiding others in a different part of the world. We may never meet, but we are all one human race trying to make it in this world, and everyone deserves a solid footing to start."



And we welcome **Armila Shakya** as our new Office Manager. Armila is the first staff person who actually knows firsthand where all our projects are, and how to pronounce all the unusual names! She has a wealth of experience working in the NGO and international development management field in Kathmandu, and she has moved into the TRAS position with great ease and a real interest in the work. Armila is originally from the Philippines; she met Megha at a UN trade convention (who knew a boring trade convention could have such bi-lateral results!), lived in Nepal for many years, and now resides in Canada with Megha and their 13-year-old son.

READI Nepal

The District of Humla is in the far northwestern corner of Nepal, and is by far the poorest of the 75 Districts. To reach it, you drive or fly to Nepalgunj, then take a flight to the tiny airstrip near Simikot, the capital. Many days the plane doesn't leave, so you kip down in the little airport along with all the locals and their goods, waiting for the next break in the weather. Or, if you can't afford to fly, you get to Nepalgunj and walk on a trail for 20 days! There is no road. It is truly isolated. The villages are tiny, perched on terraced hillsides. The huts (one can hardly call them houses) are made of rough stones, topped with corrugated iron or wooden roofs. No windows – plenty of wind whistles through the cracks (see the photo on Page 1). Others in drier areas are made of mud.



All are poor. The land is not blessed with agricultural bounty, although there are local crops which do well. Sadly, the government has seen fit to encourage the purchase of subsidised white rice. It is flown in, adding to the cost, while the nutritional value is far less than that of the locally grown barley. There is no industry. Simikot, the capital, must be the tiniest capital in the world – a few government buildings, a small hospital, a couple of schools and basic housing. That's it. The poorest children receive no education. The lower castes are still 'untouchables' here. Many families continue to suffer from the conflict.

READI Nepal is ready to change this picture. It is a small local NGO, made up of determined, dedicated local people. They are fighting "untouchability and illiteracy, all forms of caste-based, economy-based discrimination and poverty". It is a fairly new NGO, and this will be a pilot project. It may take time to show any positive results, but TRAS has decided that they have to start somewhere, and a good place to start is with this project. 20 young children, half of them girls, from the poorest backgrounds and a mixture of castes, have been selected from 5 villages to attend school in Simikot.

A house has been rented to house the children. Two young cooks have been sent for training in nutritious cooking, specifically using local food products. This will become a showcase for the value of using local produce. There is a private school in Simikot with a fairly good reputation, which has agreed to educate the children. To



augment this schooling, READI Nepal has arranged to send two of the teachers to Kathmandu for a teacher training course run by the Rato Bangala School. This is an excellent private school, which has decided to spread its expertise through outreach to poorer parts of Nepal. It runs concentrated courses in modern teaching methods and then supports and mentors the teachers once they return home. The Humla Department of Education is delighted with this approach and has guaranteed to make time and space available for a series of workshops to be conducted by these two teachers so that what they learn is spread further. Meanwhile, the parents of the 20 children will be taught various income generating activities. READI Nepal has identified outside groups who are willing to help with this, and the Village Development Committees are champing at the bit for it all to start.



Health and sanitation lectures will be yet another component of the project. TRAS has agreed to pay for the first year of schooling and accommodation (\$9,721) and the training for the cooks and teachers (\$1,900) as a start. READI Nepal has high expectations of breaking down caste barriers, of bringing literacy to the people, along with income generation and better health. A huge goal, but judging by results gained by equally dedicated people TRAS has worked with in similar situations over the years, much CAN be achieved. **The children have started school for the first time in their lives – wouldn't you love to be a fly on the wall!**

SHARE Vocational Training Project

Long-time TRAS members will be familiar with SHARE, an NGO near Manali in the foothills of the Himalaya in India. Ren Madan is the hardworking, farsighted President of SHARE, and, working closely with him, TRAS has supplied the materials for the villagers in 30 hillside villages to build over 1,000 latrine toilets. The project took time to get off the ground – local distrust was rampant – but Ren says by 2012 every single village home will have a toilet, and no longer do people expect to be given the materials! TRAS has provided funding for a health project, too – every child has been vaccinated, and now every new mother walks with her baby into Manali to get the vaccinations at the hospital. Three hundred families were expected to buy into a family health plan, which gives them a monthly visit and support from a health worker.

Well over 750 households pay the small monthly premium now. Disease and child mortality have plummeted. SHARE has tried hard to educate the villagers about the value of garbage collection and recycling and continues its education on climate change. Several years ago, Ren asked TRAS to support a computer training project. The timing was not good for TRAS, and we did not help. But he went ahead anyway, training two women as teachers. Many classes later, the young people who took the course have low-end jobs, and the project is not only self-supporting: it gives funds to other SHARE projects! But without further training, they stay in the low-level jobs. Now Ren is ready to move to the next stage. Manali is a popular tourist area, with skiing in winter and hiking in summer through the beautiful valley of the Beas River.



It is the beginning of treks into the mountains and into the Spiti Valley and eventually to Ladakh. But the village people have never benefitted from all this. The little village schools just do not provide a good enough education. Businesses in Manali hire better educated

help from other cities in India – help which costs more than local help, and is only temporary. Ren plans to change this dynamic by training young people in computer skills, English (still the lingua franca of India and of most foreign tourists), general knowledge and basic hospitality. He plans to arrange practicums with local businesses and also to give career counselling at the high schools in Manali. Again, this is a pilot project, but one we feel is worth supporting. Knowing Ren's successes in the past, we are sure this will grow into a thriving training school. Already, with the low-end jobs the computer students have obtained, the village girls are keener to work than to get married at a young age. They have their babies later, when their bodies are more mature, and they have smaller families. They will insist on their daughters going to school. It has taken nearly 20 years, but societal change can come from such small beginnings as a latrine or a handloom for weaving. Better health and incomes for the women have been turning points in these villages. Now it is time to support the next step. 13 school leavers and young women have started a basic computer course, and English lessons start mid-April.



Ren plans to take in 30 students a year for three years. Sensibly, he expects each student to pay a portion of the fees, and he fundraises locally for money or in-kind help. TRAS has been asked for 1/3 of the cost of the project (\$13,934 over 3 years).

TRAS members may be interested in 'The Sari Soldiers', a film about the recent conflict in Nepal from a woman's point of view. It will be screened as part of the 2010 DOXA Documentary Film Festival, on Friday May 14 at 6:30 pm, at Pacific Cinémathèque in downtown Vancouver. www.doxafestival.ca

Sikkim School Hostel Construction

by Marion Tipple

Perched on a high mountain ridge in the shadow of Kanchenjunga at 12,000ft lies Zuluk. 3000ft higher is the small village of Gnathang. Known as the abode of the Cloud Warriors, this area, on the border of Sikkim (India) and Chinese controlled Tibet, is off limits to all except with a special permit. The natural splendour of the location belies the abject poverty of the inhabitants, refugees from Tibet and Nepal who eke out a living as road workers, chopping stones off boulders to make gravel, melting tar over roadside fires and creating roads where there are none.



Their houses consist of sheets of corrugated iron, roofs held on by stones and walls lined with newspaper for warmth. In winter a wood burning stove provides a little additional heat. Winters are harsh with heavy snowfall and summers are wet and foggy.

Into one of these shacks Lama Paljor was born, one of four children. As a young child he was sent to Kalimpong to become a monk and received a basic education.

The other children grew up at the roadside, inhaling the acrid tar fumes as they played and worked and later worked alongside their parents. Mostly illiterate, the present adult villagers are keen to have their children educated to break out of this cycle of poverty. Education to Grade 4 is available in the village schools. After this they have to attend the government school, 15km down the mountain side in Phademchen. With no public transport and too far to walk, the only way education can be continued is for their parents to rent rooms near the school, which they cannot afford to do.

Recognising their need, Lama Paljor raised funds to build a hostel where the children could stay while attending school. The hostel was designed with three floors but only two could be built with the funding available.



Lama Paljor

Large, bare concrete rooms are lined with iron bunk bedsteads on which the children sleep, eat, study and socialise. Bathrooms and a kitchen are attached. In winter, a stove is dragged into the centre of the room for heat. Looked after by a housemother and father, 50 children, boys on one floor, girls on the other, now call this home. The hostel was filled with laughter and song when I visited last November.



The hostel, ready for its third storey



Getting ready for school

I arrived as they finished breakfast, a substantial meal cooked by their house father. They greeted me warmly, proudly showing me their schoolbooks and reading me their stories. As they readied for school, I watched them transform into schoolchildren: dressed neatly in uniforms, hair combed and braided and then with bulging school bags excitedly heading down the road to school.

Partnering with TCEF (Tibet Children's Education Foundation, a US non-profit) TRAS is raising funds to allow Lama Paljor to complete the hostel. Completion of the third floor will allow these youngsters to have a table to eat at, a chair to sit in, a place to study and space to play. A little comfort to ease their harsh existence. (The TRAS 50% share of the funding will be \$9,063.)

We are thrilled that our wish to update the TRAS website may soon be a reality. Thanks to the great kindness of Malcolm Ellis and his company, Magnum Creative of Vancouver, the TRAS website will take on a more modern, vibrant look. Several volunteers will be involved cutting and pasting all the information once the design is ready. This is slow work, and may not be finished before the fall – but do keep checking!

Sponsorship Report

The youth and children in this issue are all from the Munsel-Ling School in Rangrik, in the remote Spiti Valley, in northern India. Like the children in two of our three new projects, these young people would lead a life of backbreaking labour in stony fields and live in poverty, if it were not for this school taking them in. Their region is rich in magnificent scenery and the age-old traditions of their culture and their Buddhist religion. Now we can give them an education so that they can make the most of their lives. If you would like to sponsor a child or a student, please contact the TRAS office at tras@portal.ca or phone Armila at 604-224-5133

Dorje. One of 7 children from a poor family in Rangrik Village, Dorje received all his education and graduated from Munsel-Ling School. Currently he is studying in Dharamsala College in his second year of a BA.Hons, majoring in English with an ambition to be a teacher. Unfortunately, his previous sponsor could only help him for one year and he desperately needs help to continue. English teachers are urgently needed in Spiti as in order to be successful the children need to be fluent in English. Please consider helping him. Cost \$680/yr.

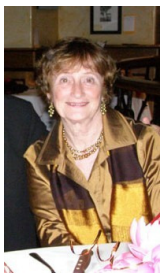
Sonam. Sonam is an excellent student who is currently in Class 10 at Munsel-Ling School. In order to achieve her potential and be competitive in attaining a university place it has been recommended that she study at a good school in Chandrigath or Delhi. Her family are subsistence farmers and therefore cannot afford to send her. Your help would be much appreciated. Cost \$680/yr.

Chhering. 6 year old Chhering is attending Kindergarten at Munsel-Ling. His parents do not have regular jobs and have little money to pay for his schooling. Please consider helping him. Cost \$400/yr.

Tenzin. Also 6 years old, Tenzin comes from a poor family of labourers. Due to the severe climate they are only able to work for 6 months of the year. They struggle to make ends meet and have no money to educate their children; your help would go a long way. Cost \$400/yr.

Volunteer Corner

Where would TRAS be without its volunteers! This time we thank Kathy and Beck for their super contributions!



Kathy Gibler. "The first time I was lucky enough to visit Tibet was in 1996. I only stayed for a few days. As I was leaving, I knew that Tibet hadn't finished with me. In 2004, I was finally able to return. While preparing for the trip, I ran into TRAS and ended up visiting Lhasa Yuthok School while in Lhasa. Lhasa was greatly changed, but old Tibet could still be glimpsed in rural areas, so I gravitated there. After my trekking partner and I came home we created a multimedia presentation about our trip and showed it to whatever group would have us then collected donations afterwards. The money went to Lhasa Yuthok for repairs, books, a globe and a bookcase they painted bright pink. I have helped with other TRAS projects since then, and now I'm coordinating the beautiful TRAS handicrafts. We're always looking for opportunities to sell the items, so if you have ideas, please let us know. Everything sold helps TRAS and supports the great TRAS partners who make the goods. I've been immensely impressed by the work that TRAS has done through the years. It makes me proud to be associated with it. Working with TRAS is one way I can connect to the people and places that have been woven into my heart."

Beck Lamb. Beck has been enthusiastically helping TRAS with handicraft sales for a while and now has cheerfully taken on the job of doing the layout for this newsletter!

"Originally hailing from Australia, I've now been wandering the globe since 1999, visiting a total of 86 countries. Having discovered Buddhism in Mongolia in 2001, I travelled to Nepal and Tibet in 2004 to learn more and, upon falling in love with the Tibetan and Nepali people and culture, returned a further 4 times -- including fulfilling my dream to trek to Everest Base Camp from both the northern and southern faces of the world's highest peak. My passion for Nepal and Tibet and the continuance of their culture and safety of their people, together with my love for volunteering in a variety of sectors, saw me first join TRAS in 2004/05 and return again in 2009 when I emigrated from Australia to Canada."



Reports From The Field

Several reports received by TRAS recently tell of good news and successes. One, sadly, does not.

Buddha Academy Infirmary: TRAS member Maureen Minden visited it recently and was very impressed, both with the general health of the children, the attention to detail such as the school-wide vaccination program, and the care children receive when they are sick.

Severe cases are taken to hospital, but Buddha Academy copes well with everyday problems, and one does not see the epidemics of diarrhoea, worms and lice that have been so prevalent at Munsel-Ling School in the Spiti Valley. A TRAS couple pays over 50% of the annual running costs of the infirmary; the rest is paid by donors from other countries. Dorje said that if he had one desire, it would be for a little more money to stock necessities in the infirmary.



The three students now working in Lebanon

Buddha Academy Vocational Training: Where else would \$10,000 a year train 84 students in tailoring or industrial education (that works out at \$119.00 per student)? Things have changed over the years, with the Academy's scholastic record improving hugely, so much so that a fulltime vocational training is taken up by only a few students. Dorje is therefore also able to offer the fulltime course to young people from outside the Academy. He says "They come from far away villages and their parents are labourers in the city. They have been in a village school for a few years, but all are dropouts, and finding it very difficult to manage life in the city. We give them full tuition, a free lunch and some pocket money (around \$1.25 a month).

Altogether 12 girls have benefitted from this 6-month training in the past year." The rest of the trainees – 35 girls in the tailoring class and 37 boys in industrial education – are taking these subjects as part of the regular curriculum, and Dorje has been granted permission to use these courses for credit in the School Leaving Certificate. Several of the students have written letters; many comment that these are useful skills in everyday life, several say they will make a career in fashion design or engineering (and in fact they are: 4 young men are currently studying to be engineers or civil overseers, and three young women who did the 2 year fulltime tailoring course have gone to Lebanon and landed very good jobs in a tailoring house and are sending money home to their families). And several comment that if you don't like studying, it's nice to have a skill to learn instead!

Central Tibetan Administration Nurses' Training, Dharamsala: 5 girls finish their training this year, and are doing well. One unfortunately contracted TB and has to rest for a year before continuing with her studies. TRAS directors voted in April to take on five new students for a three-year training.

Little Flowers Crèche, Dharamsala: This little creche for the toddlers of the Tibetan government workers is running well. It has a very active Parents' Group, which looks after it. Mrs. Phuntsok, the Secretary, wrote that during this past year they have: painted all the windows and doors; bought new curtains; installed wooden shelves and a shoe rack to tidy the place up; bought a few new charts for the classroom walls, and purchased 10 cups and 12 spoons! They were not able to whitewash the walls because they ran out of money.

SHARE Environmental Project: The last phase of this project to teach environmental stewardship to the community has centred around climate change, which is affecting the Manali area. They have run an

awareness campaign on the local problems, namely poor apple crops because of warmer winters with some extremes, less water in the streams because of less snow, fewer tourists because of uncertain weather conditions, appearance of mosquitoes. At the end of February they were holding a seminar by scientists on climate change, organic farming instead of increasing use of chemical pesticides, fertilizers, etc, and on helping to make their State carbon neutral. They were running competitions (painting, speeches and quizzes) for schools on ecology and climate change. They were holding a marathon for a greener valley, and were trying to get many partners involved.

The one sad piece of news is that the **Lhasa Yuthok Kindergarten** has closed. TRAS supported this wonderful school since it began in 1996. While we are saddened to see it close, we are grateful that the principal ran it so well for 13 years, enabling hundreds of impoverished Lhasa youngsters to get a good grounding in basic education.

TRAS

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and education for
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Heartfelt Thanks!

We were saddened last year by the passing of a long-time friend of TRAS, Dr. Michael Futrell. Dr. Futrell had been a staunch supporter of TRAS from the very beginning, joining the first Board of the new society founded when George and Inge Woodcock returned from their life-changing trip to India in 1962. For 47 years Dr. Futrell supported many projects, and unfailingly appeared at every annual meeting and as many talks as possible. He always asked questions – and expected good answers! Helpful to the end, Dr. Futrell has left a bequest to TRAS, for which we are most grateful.

TRAS Lecture Series Zeros In On Tibetan Education

TRAS members have been fortunate to hear two experts talk about the state of Tibetan education in India and Nepal recently. Mati Bernabei, of the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University, who is writing her PhD thesis on Tibetan education, spoke in January about the history, the problems and the future of education for the Tibetan refugees in India and Nepal. Mati led a group of student teachers from SFU to India last fall to work alongside Tibetan teachers in three schools near Dharamsala. The experience was overwhelmingly positive on both sides – Mati says her students had a hard time leaving the delightful, enthusiastic Tibetan children, and they are hoping to be able to do some fundraising to alleviate some of the concerns expressed, for instance, by the principal of Chauntra School, like nutrition.

On April 14, Mati introduced to TRAS members Karma Chungdak, the director of the Sambhota Schools, who is visiting SFU from India. He gave a most interesting talk,



explaining the various types of schools for Tibetan refugees and stressing the vital importance of teaching the Tibetan

language and culture to the refugee children, for they will be the main repository of this knowledge for the future. There are 75 Tibetan schools in India, Nepal and Bhutan. 28 are run by the Central Tibetan Schools Administration (CTSA). These schools are run jointly with the Indian Ministries of Education, and adhere to their standard curricula. For many years now, these schools in India have been able to teach all subjects in Tibetan for the first 5 years. The rest of the Tibetan schools are 'autonomous', and of these, 15 are Sambhota Schools. They are able to use their own curriculum, but the children still sit the final exams set by the host country. The value of having autonomous schools is that they can concentrate on including Tibetan language and culture throughout the curriculum. A few years ago, the Tibetan Department of Education brought together a team of educators, including Karma-la, to create an educational policy, which is now being taken up by the Sambhota Schools, and is being considered by the other autonomous schools. There are many facets of the policy which can be introduced as extra-curricular activities in those schools which are jointly run by the Tibetan and Indian governments. The policy is based on human values and four aims of education: *Freedom*: referring to freedom of mind, thought and creativity; *Altruism*: 'others before self' and cooperative learning; *Upholding heritage*: there are only 120,000 Tibetans outside their own homeland and every one of them has a role to play to uphold Tibetan heritage; and *Innovation*: courage to introduce new principles and systems. TRAS members who heard his clear, logical approach to the education of the whole child were all convinced this policy would enhance every school system in the world. We are most grateful to Mati and to Karma Chungdak for their enlightening talks.