

USAID/OTI Nepal Quarterly Report

April - June 2009

Program Description

In August 2006, USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) inaugurated a program to help advance Nepal's transition to peace and democracy. The OTI program in Nepal seeks to (1) increase access to information and diversify public debate on issues critical to the political transition and (2) increase local-level engagement and participation in the peace process. The program consists of activities that support wide dissemination of information on Nepal's peace process, promote nonviolence and social harmony in the volatile Terai region, and strengthen the media to play a positive role.

Activities

The OTI program supports efforts to increase public awareness of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and other key peace process documents, the Constituent Assembly (CA) elections, and constitutional issues through local-level dialogues and wide-reaching, popular radio and television programs targeting different groups of Nepali society.

Media strengthening is also an important area of focus for OTI. Throughout Nepal, OTI is supporting professionalization, innovation, and the outreach efforts of local radio stations to increase public access to information about the political transition, particularly in remote and underserved areas. One important activity supports local radio stations in gathering public questions and input through call-in programs and connecting communities with their local government officials, political party officials, civil society members, and CA representatives. These programs, often produced in local languages, provide communities with a peaceful outlet for concerns and opportunities to offer input into the political transition process.

Following the CA election on April 10, 2008, the OTI program shifted focus to address community stabilization activities in the volatile eastern and central Terai districts. In response to a drastic rise of identity-based politics as well as increasing lawlessness, the program began looking at ways to motivate youth to invest time and energy in small-scale community development projects. Communities responded favorably, contributing time and labor and affirming the efforts of participating youths. These youth-managed development projects have reached 540 Village Development Committees (VDCs) and have included activities such as improvements to community libraries and early childhood development centers and rehabilitation of roads and schools. Other activities aim to create space for youth engagement in local community issues and promotion of peace at the local level.

Country Situation

Maoist-Led Government Fails Over Army Dispute – After only eight months, the government led by United Communist Party of Nepal–Maoist (United CPN-Maoist) collapsed with the resignation of Prime Minister Prachanda on May 4, 2009. The fall was the consequence of the Maoist's unilateral decision to sack the Chief of Army Staff (CoAS), a move that was condemned by coalition partners, other political parties, and the President. The debate over the integration of People's Liberation Army (PLA) combatants into the Nepal Army (NA) has remained a contentious issue, and the CoAS had been very vocal against the Maoists' proposal to allow wholesale integration of PLA combatants into the NA. Polarization between the government and the NA reached new heights following the Prime Minister's request for an explanation from the CoAS concerning the NA's decision to recruit new army personnel and extend the tenure of eight army generals.

New Government Forms; Cabinet Not Finalized – With support from 22 of the 25 political parties in the CA, a new coalition government was formed, led by Madhav Kumar Nepal of the Communist Party of Nepal/Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML). The CPN-UML is the third largest party in the CA and its coalition partners include the Nepali Congress (NC), which is the second largest party in the CA, and the Madhesh-based parties. However, a month after the formation of the new government, the cabinet is yet to be finalized. To date, 30 ministers have been sworn in, but internal disputes among coalition partners have stalled the appointment process.

Possible Split in the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum – The largest Madhesh-based party in the CA, the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum (MJF), is on the verge of splintering following the appointment of Bijaya Kumar Gacchedar, a senior party leader, as the Deputy Prime Minister. The MJF faction led by party Chairman Upendra Yadav, CPN (Maoist), claims to have expelled Gacchedar from the party and has also pulled its support from the government. However, Mr. Gacchedar says he has the support of a majority of the party and continues to support the new government.

By-Elections Completed Peacefully – By-elections in five districts for six vacant CA seats were held peacefully, with only minor incidents of violence reported. The district of Biratnagar remained tense during the polling, as cadres from the United CPN-Maoist and the CPN (Maoist) had clashed the day before the election. In addition, the candidate representing the Chure Bhawar Party was assaulted by an unidentified group in Morang, and a candidate in Dhanusha was abducted by members of the Terai Rastriya Mukti Sena, a previously unknown armed group in the Terai. The United CPN Maoist won seats in three constituencies, while the NC, CPN-UML, and MJF each won a seat.

Maoists Lawmakers Obstruct Parliament; Cadres Protest in Streets – Since Prachanda's resignation from the post of Prime Minister in early May, Maoist CA members have been obstructing the Legislative Parliament's sessions, demanding that the President reverse his decision to reinstate the CoAS. The obstructionism follows a winter session that was largely deadlocked. In addition, Maoists cadres have started protest programs in various parts of the country. These protest programs have sometimes turned violent, as the Maoists clashed with police and other political parties. During clashes between Maoists and NC cadres in Bara district in May, more than a dozen people were injured.

Law and Order Remains a Challenge – Security remains a challenge, although the number of incidents reported can vary significantly from month to month and from region to region. In the Terai, May was relatively calm; however, April and June witnessed a significant number of bombings, extortions, and kidnappings by various armed groups.

Kidnappings, extortions, and other criminal activities have also increased around Kathmandu. In May, a little-known Hindu extremist group, the Defense Army, detonated a bomb at a church in Kathmandu, killing three and injuring several others.

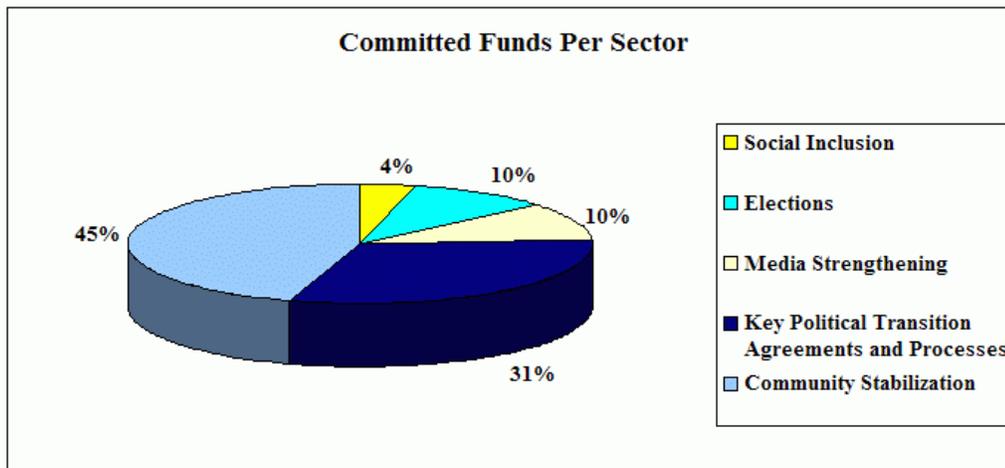
Upcoming events

New Protest Programs Possible – During April, a 2-week strike by the Tharus paralyzed transportation and businesses in some 22 Terai districts. Citing the government's indifference to an agreement made with the group, the Tharus called for an indefinite general strike that was responsible for petroleum shortages and hikes in the price of consumer goods in Kathmandu and other parts of the country. The Tharus called off the strike when the Maoist-led government collapsed. However, with the new government in place, various agitating groups, including the Maoists, have been initiating new protest programs.

Delays in the Constitution-Drafting Process – The formation of a new government, as well as political wrangling over ministerial portfolios, has delayed the constitution-writing process. Ten thematic committees were supposed to present their concept papers and preliminary drafts of the constitution by April 23. (The date was later extended until May 22.) However, as of June 30, only three committees have submitted their drafts for discussion at the CA. This delay may hamper the formulation of the new constitution, which is supposed to be written by May 27, 2010. Further delays are expected and could lead to further erosion of public confidence in the process. Programming may continue to focus on expectations management and other areas related to the constitution-writing process.

Grants Summary

Since August 2006, OTI has funded a total of 298 small-grant and technical assistance activities* totaling \$10,665,576. OTI activities are distributed among five main sectors: Social Inclusion (17 grants for \$375,120), Elections (27 grants for \$1,060,678), Key Political Transition Agreements and Processes (99 grants for \$3,345,851), Community Stabilization (129 grants for \$4,809,507), and Media Strengthening (26 grants for \$1,074,420). The following chart reflects the percentage of funding committed to each sector.



* This figure excludes the four grants implemented by USAID/OTI, totaling \$25,587, prior to the commencement of the Chemonics contract.

Highlights

Community Stabilization – Amid the worsening law and order situation, rising levels of violence, and continual strikes in the Terai and other parts of the country, OTI continues to support a significant number of activities focusing on community stabilization.

- Following the overwhelming success of efforts in the central Terai to promote citizen engagement in local governance through education on Citizen Charters (CC), the program will expand on the CC framework in the eastern Terai and disseminate CC information by mobilizing local youth and women, including Muslim and Dalits, in 21, 25, and 12 VDCs in Mahottari, Saptari, and Dhanusha districts, respectively. These activities will train and mobilize 1,404 local women leaders and 22 Muslim and Dalit youths to raise awareness in their communities and initiate public hearings and advocacy campaigns on issues related to local government services and local social and political issues.
- In an attempt to increase people's access to, and participation in, local decision-making processes and to encourage transparency in government line agencies, 18 local advocacy groups, or Village Development Forums (VDFs), will be formed in 18 VDCs of the Dhanusha district. VDF members will include social and political leaders, representatives from local government and nongovernmental organizations, and women, Dalits, and youths. The activity will educate, organize, and mobilize VDFs to advocate around local governance issues and increase community access to the local development process. The activity will also attempt to educate local civic and political leaders on democratic norms and values, rule of law, local governance, and local development planning processes.
- Nepal has recently been plagued by a growing number of *bandhs* (transportation strikes or road blockages). Bandhs have been called by political parties opposing legislation, ethnic groups seeking constitutional redress, trade unions demanding better pay, and even a community protesting a high incidence of road accidents. OTI is supporting radio stations in the eastern Terai to produce and air 30 live talk shows and 30

public service announcements (PSAs) to point out the disruptive impact these strikes have on communities and increase awareness of the alternatives for peaceful protest. Radio stations in the Jhapa, Morang, and Siraha districts will dedicate a week of live programming to focus on the disruptive influence bands have on various industries and activities, including agriculture, education, small business, transportation, and local development.

- Radio stations in Tharu areas will replicate the programs on the bands. In addition, once the first draft of the Constitution is released, the stations will reorient programming and produce and air 10 live talk shows and 10 PSAs to highlight messaging on the ongoing peace and constitution-writing processes. OTI also provided assistance to 7 radio stations so they can produce and air an additional 87 episodes of live discussion programs that aim to build linkages between CA members and district residents as the new constitution is written.



Nepali students queue to see "Frames of War."

- The national travelling exhibition of the video documentary "Frames of War" visited another 30 locations during the quarter, despite a series of strikes that disrupted transportation. "Frames of War" documents the suffering experienced during Nepal's 11-year insurgency, and reminds and educates Nepalese about the costs of war and motivates them to collaborate on peaceful solutions during the current political transition. The exhibition started on April 10 in the Makawanpur district and ran until June 20, culminating with a final show in Kathmandu. Even though curfews were in place, an average of 1,600 people viewed the show at each stop. The documentary has also been featured at film festivals and exhibits in Amsterdam, Dhaka and, most recently, New Delhi.

Targeting Youth – Youth have always been critical actors in motivating Nepali communities to support the peace process, and educating and mobilizing young people is an effective way to catalyze their positive energy and foster communal harmony and reduce the number of violent incidences at the grassroots level. Youth-focused activities include the following:

- Training and mobilizing youth in Rautahat district and southern Mahottari to increase awareness of the peace process, transition issues, social harmony, nation building, nonviolent forms of protest, and the role and functions of the CA. Activities engage youth from different local sports clubs in promoting peace and nonviolence through sports competitions, sanitation campaigns, and exchange visits. By supporting young people in leadership roles and engaging them in peaceful social activities, OTI hopes to increase positive youth participation in Nepal's transition to peace and increase communal harmony.
- Mobilizing existing youth clubs in VDCs in Sarlahi and Saptari districts to educate residents about good governance, conflict mitigation, leadership roles, the local development process, nonviolent protests, CCs, and the public's role in the constitution-writing process. These activities aim to strengthen the ability of young people to advocate on their communities' behalf at district and national levels.
- Producing a reality-based television show focusing on youth. The show will focus on areas such as public speaking and understanding of Nepali politics and politicians, and will seek to engage young people and raise their awareness of current issues. Audience members and a panel of judges will vote for their favorite contestants, and during the last show, the top three winners will be announced. By highlighting positive role models, OTI hopes to demonstrate the role that young Nepalese can play in the development of their country's leadership.
- Producing and airing 12 radio programs in the local Bajjika language in the Rautahat district. The programs will seek to engage youth on topics such as peace and transition, good governance, and self-employment. The program team will query youth on their concerns and have professional experts address these concerns through radio programming.

Media Strengthening – OTI supports the media in Nepal, which is facing increasing threats and constraints, seeking to help media organizations overcome obstacles to the effective delivery of information. For example—

- Media reports based on stereotypes and generalizations have triggered violence between Madhesi and Pahadi communities. Consequently, agitating groups in the Terai have been targeting media outlets and journalists, accusing them of partiality and unfair representation of Madhesi issues. To help promote understanding, 24 Madhesi and Pahadi female journalists will be sent to adjoining districts to explore local issues. The main objective is to increase coverage of Madhesi and Pahadi issues and give journalists an opportunity to explore the ongoing communal and political issues in neighboring communities. By increasing objective representations of issues, the program aims to bridge differences that separate the communities, promote social harmony, and strengthen the media's ability to play a positive role in the peace process.
- Capitalizing on World Press Freedom Day, OTI supported programming on the importance of a free press, freedom of expression, the role of responsible media, and the state's obligation to protect press freedoms. Spots were aired throughout May and included a TV PSA broadcast on 4 major stations, 3 radio PSAs aired on 60 stations, and a print PSA published in 3 national newspaper dailies. The PSAs aimed to foster greater public understanding of freedom of the press and expression and highlight the value of these freedoms to a strong and open democratic system. The popular radio messages were broadcast for an additional month on 49 FM stations across Nepal.
- During the dry season, prolonged power outages affected every sector of the country, including the media. OTI is supporting a survey to assess how the outages impacted the media. Data will be compiled through questionnaires targeting individual media organizations and focus-group discussions with key OTI partners. The study is expected to help a range of stakeholders understand the extent of the problem so they can identify media outlets in need of assistance and help them stay in operation and continue to provide the public with information on the transition process.

Key Political Transition Agreements and Processes – OTI is supporting four new grants that seek to increase understanding of the constitution-writing process in Nepal.

- Himal Media will produce 12 additional CA supplements that serve as reference materials on constitutional topics. The supplements will be published in *Himal Khabarpatrika*, a fortnightly news magazine. Previous supplements have played a vital role in setting the agenda and steering debates on the constitution. Many journalists use excerpts from the supplement when producing constitution-related reports. The supplements seek to present constitutional issues simply, focusing on solutions rather than political perspectives.



A member of the CA interacts with Bardiya district residents during a live radio program.

- Building on the CA supplement, Himal Media will also raise awareness on constitutional issues through local discussions and debates. At the end of each discussion a consensus "declaration" consisting of a short-list of solution-oriented recommendations will be disseminated through local and national media outlets. This activity will not only make the process more inclusive by articulating neglected voices but also inject new perspectives into the CA supplement.
- The other two grants aim to increase understanding of the constitution writing process in Nepal. The first of these grants will support 26 episodes of a weekly television discussion show that seeks to increase informed debate on constitutional topics throughout the country. The panelists will include national and international constitutional experts, chairpersons and members of CA thematic committees, concerned community groups, and individuals. The second grant will fund 20 radio PSAs that enlist CA members to deliver messages on constitution writing and the peace process. When selecting CA members for the activity, special efforts will be made to ensure that the individuals are well respected and represent different geographic regions with diverse ethnic and religious constituencies. Each PSA will be aired twice a day for 7 days over 40 FM radio stations throughout the country.

Program Appraisal

The national-level context for the OTI program has changed significantly since the last Strategy Review Session, though many of the local and regional-level analyses are still relevant. At a May 2009 program meeting, the team identified potential hot spots and geographic areas where contentiousness could hamper the transition and peace process and discussed possible programmatic interventions. The team questioned whether the national-level context and political wrangling over the formation of the new government would have ripple effects into its current operational space. The team also looked at whether circumstances might create or reinforce ongoing tensions in other parts of the country and lead to situations that might need programmatic focus in the future.

Building on this analysis, the team identified a number of geographic areas, including Khotang, Ilam, Panchthar, and Taplejung districts, assessing them to identify appropriate entry points for engagement, as each has recently experienced a spike in extremist political rhetoric and activity based upon ethnic identity.

The OTI media strategy has consistently supported information dissemination networks that display flexibility in response to the ongoing transition process. The program has supported radio and television shows that address current transitional issues through programming such as television shows and call-in radio shows at the national and local level. Because radio guests are scheduled each week and stations can address rapidly evolving transition issues, these programs continue to gain listenership. Furthermore, the public has proven receptive to using this forum to speak with their CA members and local government representatives. OTI is exploring possibilities of expanding its outreach to conflict prone areas in the hills and the western Terai through new FM radio programming networks.

Next Steps

OTI priorities for the next quarter include the following:

- Conduct an expanded program meeting in early July and a Strategy Review Session in August;
- Maintain activity development that is responsive to political and conflict issues in the Terai;
- Look for new partners in new geographic areas with an eye on identifying an initial phase of grants that can be implemented quickly;
- Evaluate new geographic areas to determine whether FM radio could serve as an initial entry point for activity or have other strategic uses; (Areas to explore include Khotang, Ilam, Panchthar, Taplejung, and along the Tharu belt.)
- Place emphasis on turnaround for consultations on the first draft of the Constitution, as the timeline provides approximately one month to collect public opinion and input; (The program should maintain maximum flexibility during the period, as new grants will not necessarily be able to respond in a sufficient manner. Staff should keep the idea of flexibility at the forefront as they evaluate and implement programming.)
- Ensure more systematic tracking of hot spots outside the program's geographic area of operations as well as Maoist expansion and increased activities within the operating areas.