

# We are a target for all rebel groups

## Politicians do not have guts to translate their words into action

**B**huwani Prasad Ghimire, 53, is president of the Village Development Committees' Secretaries Welfare Protection Centre. Four years ago, he moved to Lalitpur when Jwala Singh and Jay Krishna Goit started threatening the secretaries in Kapilvastu. So far, 22 VDC secretaries have been killed. Eighteen of them were murdered by Maoist rebels during the insurgency. Four fell prey to different armed groups operating in the tarai.

Ghimire says that there is no working environment in 11 districts of the tarai. VDC offices have been relocated to the district headquarters. VDC secretaries have been threatened and kidnapped for ransom. Ghimire, who spoke with **Puran P. Bista and Kosh Raj Koirala of The Kathmandu Post**, claims that VDC secretaries have become targets of armed groups operating in the tarai, some parts of eastern hills and far western Nepal.

Excerpts:

**Q: In the absence of elected local leaders, how have the VDCs been functioning?**

**Bhuwani Prasad Ghimire:** Since June 2002, there have been no people's representatives at the local level. In reality, the VDC is an organization directly accountable to the people. It is an agency that enforces development projects effectively. In the absence of the people's representatives, we have become the main target of various armed groups. They think that we represent the government at the local level. And we are government employees. So we are working as per our convenience.

We are a target for all rebel groups. Earlier, the Maoists used to attack us; now Maoist splinter groups -- Janatantrik Tarai Mukti Morcha, Tarai Cobra, Akhil Tarai Mukti Morcha -- are targeting us. They abduct us for ransom, and kill us if we do not pay the money. They threaten us and extort money. Two VDC secretaries are suffering from mental disorder; they developed psychological problems after they paid the ransom. Both of them are from humble backgrounds. They have nothing left after making the payoff.

We have demanded that the government either provide security or make alternative arrangements. But the political leaders in power just deliver speeches. They do not have the guts to translate their words into action. Some leaders say that the law and order situation will be improved in October; some say they will enforce law and order only in December. But there is no working environment especially in the 11 districts in the tarai. VDC secretaries have either relocated their offices or are gradually quitting their jobs for the sake of safety.

Now the Maoist-led government has allocated a budget worth between Rs. 1.5 million and 3 million to the VDCs. How the funds will be spent in the absence of elected local bodies is the question.

**Q: How many VDCs have been relocated to escape attack?**

**Ghimire:** In all the districts of the tarai, incidents of abduction,

extortion and intimidation are rising. In eastern Nepal, Limbus detain VDC secretaries, demand money and even threaten to kill them if the budget allocated to the VDCs is not spent as per their order. We cannot run away nor can we stay



in such a situation. Other districts where the lives of VDC secretaries are at risk are Dadelhdura, Rukum and Bajura. There, a secretary has to walk for days to reach the VDC from the district headquarters.

In remote VDCs, secretaries are responsible for projects at the local level; they walk for days carrying cash with them which is dangerous. The money could be for old-age allowance, local development work or some other purpose. Even if somebody robs us at gunpoint, the secretary is always blamed. The government does not understand the gravity of the risk.

It should realize that incidents of robbery have increased since the Maoist People's War. A VDC secretary is not responsible for disbursing old-age allowances or carrying out development work. He is there to monitor or facilitate local development projects. When I say that I have been robbed, I would instantly be suspected. It is fine for VDCs located near the district headquarters. If there were elected VDC chairmen, they would be responsible for carrying cash, paying old-age allowances and executing development projects.

**Q: The government claims that it has deployed adequate security to maintain law and order in the tarai. How are VDC secretaries still being attacked?**

**Ghimire:** In Siraha, incidents of extortion and abduction are very common. Everyday, new criminal groups are being formed. You cannot live in your house if you are a VDC secretary. If you pay money to a group today, another group will come to your door the next day and ask for money. On the third day, you will be abducted for ransom. They believe that extortion, kidnapping and collecting donations is their profession. Our assessment is that the police administration is

working hand in glove with some criminal gangs. We have even passed a resolution claiming that the police force in Siraha is in cahoots with armed groups.

**Q: How can you say that criminal gangs are working**

Shah Dev Bhatt. What I stress is that the police should know that we are unarmed civil servants. We cannot fight back with armed groups. Our choice is to listen to the gun-toting gangs or leave the job.

**Q: The government was mulling over the appointment of officials, including the chairman, of local bodies. Why has it not done so?**

**Ghimire:** During the time of the coalition government led by the seven-party alliance, former minister Rajendra Pandey had decided that officials of local bodies would be appointed. It was reported that local leaders belonging to the seven-party alliance would assume the responsibility of executing projects at the local level. But nothing has happened since then. Who should be chairman of the VDC? The UML demanded that 60 percent of the VDCs be headed by its local leaders.

Some political leaders insist that we should work on the basis of understanding. The clash among leaders of different political parties over chairmanship of the VDC is intense. Every party wants that the chairmanship be headed by its activist. Seven leaders of seven parties sat down to sort out their differences. They did not come to an agreement. Sometimes, we manage to bring them together, but they criticize us once the work is over. These leaders have even threatened us not to spend the budget allocation.

In the tarai, we could not spend the first budget allotment. This money was meant for the local people, but the government did not release it due to differences among the local leaders. We have demanded that the government either legitimize our way of working or appoint new VDC chairmen so that it becomes easier to function at the local level. The then minister Dev Prasad Gurung had assured us that he would do the needful, but he resigned doing nothing. The UML is playing a dirty game. It wants 60 percent of the VDCs to be headed by local UML leaders.

**Q: How have the VDC secretaries of the 11 districts in the tarai been discharging their duties?**

**Ghimire:** The offices of the VDCs have been relocated to the district headquarters. They cannot live in the VDCs and work. Again, they cannot find a room to rent in the district headquarters because homeowners fear their house will be attacked if they let them to VDC secretaries. Some VDC offices have been destroyed by local armed groups. Many VDC offices are housed at the office of the district development committee (DDC) which has provided space and protection.

Now this problem has spread to Kapilvastu district. So far, around 22 VDC offices have been relocated to the district headquarters in Kapilvastu due to threats from Goit and Jwala Singh. Unless the government takes this problem seriously, I do not think that we can enforce the budget allocated to the VDCs effectively. People do not bother when a contractor builds a bridge costing millions of rupees, but they see us as corrupt secretaries when we spend Rs. 1 million on development work.

# Animal tears

LUCIA DE VRIES

**A**n animal shelter manager one morning found a plastic bag hanging from the gate of the shelter. When she looked inside she saw two puppies. They had been left by someone in the evening to be kept safe. Good intention, but wrong method: the puppies had died from suffocation.

World Animal Week has been recently celebrated in Nepal for the seventh time. Stories such as these make me wonder if since 2001 any progress has been



made. Instead of throwing puppies into the river, they are now carried to shelters in plastic bags. Tortured dogs can be put to sleep at vet clinics. But is that real progress?

In many ways the situation has become worse. This monsoon we noticed that even more dogs

and cats were being killed. The long-skin diseases and malnutrition in Lalitpur and Bhaktapur districts. In this expanding urban environment, with people, dogs, cars and motorbikes competing for right of way, dogs no longer have a safe place to live.

Outside Kathmandu District, no animal birth control is implemented, and stray dogs continue to multiply. It's estimated that 75% of puppies do not survive. If they do, theirs is an unwanted and usually unhealthy life.

Pet dogs suffer too. Vets nowadays treat expensive breeds whose well-off owners do not provide elementary care. They are malnourished, chronically ill, untrained. We need to remind ourselves that this is the animal specie that is called 'Man's best friend' and is believed to guide us across the river of death.

Farm animals have become a sadder lot in the past decade as well. The 2002 Meat Act introduced humane transportation and slaughterhouse but made no impact. The increased demand for meat has made things far worse for chicken, goats, pigs, buffaloes and even cows.

An increasing number of 'momo buffaloes' are transported from the tarai to the capital or India. During the journey, the animals are tethered from their extremely sensitive noses and tails, and do not receive any basic care, like water, rest, or treatment when injured. Many trucks do not have a ramp so buffaloes are simply thrown out of the vehicle. Broken legs are no issue for the meat merchants.

The killing of buffaloes is gruesome. Using hammers and knives, butchers 'cut' the buffalo

out in the open. Anyone who has seen this knows that buffaloes don't die easily, even if they want to. Many Kathmanduites have seen the crying buffaloes on the highways or at impromptu slaughter locations but continue to demand buff products.

It seems that no one cares for this strong and magnificent animal. With markets opening up and (illegal) meat export within Asia increasing, Nepal's farm animals are bound to suffer even more. Through smuggling to India and Bangladesh, the cow (holy or not) is no exception.

A decade ago we thought the government would no longer fund animal sacrifice by 2008. We were convinced that the public beheading of innocent animals would no longer be shown live on TV. We never expected Nepal to breed monkeys for biomedical research in the US. Or that brick kilns would be using donkeys as porters until they dropped dead. Or that poaching networks would still be setting up smuggling routes for endangered-animal parts. How naive we were.

But there are some recent developments that has given us hope. Seven organizations involved in education, stray animal rescue and/or Animal Birth Control are now organized into one network. Jointly, they carry out education for change and conduct a survey into levels of awareness. With these results it will be easier for authorities and NGOs to design interventions to monitor

change. The long-awaited Animal Welfare Act is ready to be presented to the Cabinet. This law will give us the legal tools to address animal cruelty in the country.

In addition, the Kathmandu Animal Treatment Centre (KAT) initiated a project in which female dogs are systematically vaccinated and sterilized. Thanks to KAT and the Kathmandu Municipality, 6,000 dogs have received this 'royal treatment' and countless sick and injured dogs have been rehabilitated. Organisations such as Kirtipur Animal Rescue, SPCA Nepal and Street Dogs Nepal have set up rehab centres and teach local communities how to take better care of canines. Roots and Shoots aims at establishing the country's first wildlife rehab centre.

In Lalitpur district, a community-based rescue project is being set up by Animal Nepal using volunteers to provide preventive health care and to rescue needy stray animals. An increasing number of families are interested in adopting a stray dog. With better campaigns, Nepal's clever and strong local mixed-breeds will be rediscovered as great pets.

Children seem increasingly aware of animal rights. They watch Animal Planet, love their pets, and take good care of them.

Our eyes are set on the young. And on Nepal's wonderful animals. In the decade to come may they receive the care and recognition they deserve.

*De Vries is a journalist and animal rights campaigner active with Animal Nepal and the Animal Welfare Network Nepal*

## Children welfare

This refers to Simrika Sharma's insightful article "Investing for children welfare" (Oct. 5, Sunday Expression Page 5). By highlighting the problems facing the street children, and child labour in the Nepali context, Simrika Sharma has raised a very pertinent issue of how children are deprived of access to "fundamental rights" such as education, health, and social security. Many experts working on street children have also expressed the similar views and pointed out that factors like poverty, broken family, conflict, and socio-economic problems have forced many children to live in the streets. Despite financial assistance pouring in for children's welfare, the authorities concerned have utterly failed to provide the deprived children with basic needs.

In the present context, an assurance is a must from the government side. Education, easy access to food and shelter, health services etc., as the writer points out, must be in

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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the priority list of the concerned ministry.

Therefore, it is imperative that the government enact laws that relate to "child rights" in the new constitution. Let Sharma's article act as a wake-up call for the present Maoist-led government.

**Sanjay Shrestha**  
Kathmandu

This refers to Simrika Sharma's article "Investing for children welfare" (Oct. 5). I appreciate Ms. Sharma for her in-depth analysis regarding the situation of child rights in the country.

I agree that poverty, conflict, and society force children to be engaged in labour work in the market. We hear that various organisations working for children's welfare receive foreign assistance yearly. Despite this,

what is worrying is that the problem has deepened even more. Sadly, the government seems to have turned a deaf ear as to how the street children can be brought to the country's socio-economic mainstream.



To guarantee children's fundamental rights on all fronts, as the writer argues, the government must work as a facilitator and monitor the child-related organisations' plans and functionings. Besides, the government should take corrective actions immediately on financial matters.

I encourage the writer to continue writing more such incisive articles about child rights.

**Auras Bhandari**  
Kathmandu

## Refugee resettlement

This refers to Post B. Basnet's news story "Druk refugees rush to resettle in West" (Oct. 3). This contains misleading and fake infor-

mation, which I believe, dismantles Bhutanese refugees' long appreciated sincerity all over the world. Is there any formal proof, as the writer claims, that former US ambassador James F. Moriarty's car was "stoned" by the Bhutanese refugee? Immediately after the incident, the US ambassador spoke to the press in Biratnagar stating that the Maoists' were involved in the incident.

I do not know how the Nepal government investigated this issue. I hope the media will correct this and do justice with the frustrated Bhutanese refugees.

I am one of the resettled Bhutanese refugees in Atlanta. I am happy to know that Hari Kafle, a Bhutanese refugee, realized that the resettlement is the only option for the Bhutanese refugee.

I agree that some of the refugees tried to foil this resettlement by threatening and intimidating the people opting for the resettlement.

**Khem Regmi**  
U.S.A.