

## NEPAL EYES AIR-LIFTING FUEL AS INDIA BORDER STAYS SHUT

**KATHMANDU:** Nepal is considering air-lifting fuel, possibly from Bangladesh, as supply routes from India stay blocked by protesters opposing its new constitution, a short-term solution ahead of a key festival even as the government talks to China for help.

Thousands of trucks are stranded at the border with India, the main supply route into landlocked Nepal, leading to a critical shortage of fuel in the country that only months ago suffered its worst earthquakes in 75 years. "Getting oil and petrol from a country other than India is a very difficult question to answer," Deepak Baral, spokesman for the state-run Nepal Oil Corp, told Reuters.

Other than its lowland border with India, Nepal's other frontiers are mountainous with poor roads. After India, Bangladesh in the closest country with access to the sea. "At the moment India is blocking trucks carrying goods from third countries, so we cannot do this by land. We will work with what stock we have around the Dashain festival. For this we may look into lifting oil and petrol supplies by air from a third country."

Nepal says the blockade is being imposed by India to pressure political parties to address the demands of groups in the southern plains who are unhappy with the constitution

passed last month. More than 40 people have died in protests related to the charter. India denies any role in the blockade. Dashain, the highlight of Nepal's religious calendar, is due to begin in less than two weeks. Many people who live in Nepal's capital hail from districts outside the Kathmandu Valley and return home for the festival.

At Kathmandu's main bus station, operators were only selling tickets for travel on the same day due to the fuel crunch. Traffic in Kathmandu was severely curtailed and public transport was limited, with passengers sitting on the roofs of buses. "It's quite quiet at the minute," said Susan Magar, who works for a bus company ferrying travelers to Dharan in the east. "We can't sell tickets in advance for Dashain because we don't know if we'll have fuel."

Nepal Oil's Baral said the company was looking at ways to ensure people can get home for the festival, but air-lifting in supplies from a third country would only be a short-term solution. He said the Nepali government was talking to China, India's rival in the Himalayas, about fuel supplies. "If we get the nod from the government, then we can start talking to our counterparts, but even then we estimate we can only receive 10-15 percent of our requirements from China." — Reuters



**GENEVA:** International president of Doctors Without Borders, also known by its French name Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) Joanne Liu (left) gestures as she speaks between General Director of MSF Switzerland Bruno Jochum (right) and MSF Lead Counsel Francoise Saulnier (left) during a press conference. — AFP

## MSF DEMANDS PROBE INTO DEADLY KUNDUZ AIR STRIKE

**KABUL:** Medical charity MSF yesterday demanded an international probe into a deadly US air strike on an Afghan hospital, after reports said NATO's top regional commander thought American forces broke their own rules of engagement. Three separate investigations by the US military, NATO and Afghan officials are currently under way into Saturday's catastrophic strike in the northern Afghan city of Kunduz.

But the charity, which condemned the attack as a war crime, stressed the need for an international inquiry, saying the bombing raid that killed 22 people was in contravention of the Geneva Conventions. "We cannot rely on an internal military investigation," Doctors Without Borders (MSF) chief Joanne Liu told reporters in Geneva, insisting that an "international humanitarian fact-finding commission" should probe the bombing.

"This was not just an attack on our hospital, it was an attack on the Geneva Conventions. This cannot be tolerated," Liu said. Saturday's raid sparked international outrage, fuelled by claims that patients had burned to death as they lay in their beds. Liu's remarks come a day after General John Campbell, the top US and NATO commander in Afghanistan, said the "hospital was mistakenly struck" when Afghan officials called for the raid.

But MSF brushed aside that explanation, saying "a mistake is not an answer for us" and

insisting on knowing "the facts, the intention, the criteria" behind the more than hour-long raid. Campbell's admission was the latest in a series of shifting explanations the Americans have offered for the strike, which have ranged from dubbing the bombing "collateral damage" to saying it was carried out to protect US troops.

International aid groups, the United Nations and a growing tide of global revulsion have added to the pressure on Washington to come clean over the strike, which came days after the Taliban overran Kunduz.

### 'Tenuous situation'

The New York Times on Tuesday, citing officials close to Campbell, said US special forces in Kunduz were unable to verify whether the hospital was a legitimate target before the bombs were dropped. "Obviously, the investigation is still under way, but Campbell's thinking now is that the Americans on the ground did not follow the rules of engagement fully," the report quoted one of those officials as saying. But the official stressed that no final conclusions had been reached and a formal inquiry could yield a different conclusion.

Under US rules of engagement, air strikes are called in to eliminate insurgents, protect American troops and assist Afghans who request air support. But the US special forces on the ground most likely did not ensure the

required strike met any of those criteria, Campbell said in private discussions with his colleagues, according to the report.

In testimony to the US Congress on Tuesday, Campbell stressed that while it was the Afghans who called for the strike, ultimately the decision to launch rested with Americans. His remarks provoked no immediate response from Afghan officials, but they have previously claimed that insurgents were using the hospital as a position to target troops and civilians.

A Taliban official told AFP that militants visited the hospital to reassure staff that they would not be harmed but left the facility 12 hours before the bombing. Campbell has urged Washington to consider boosting its post-2016 military presence to repel a Taliban upsurge and stabilise a "tenuous security situation" in the war-ravaged nation.

The White House is reviewing whether to press ahead with plans for the final exit of US troops by late 2016, the end of Barack Obama's presidency, and leave an embassy-based force of about 1,000 in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is at "a decisive point" given the surge in violence, Campbell said, noting the growing presence of Islamic State and Al-Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan. US forces in Afghanistan currently stand at about 9,800. Campbell said Obama has provided him with "flexibility" to slow the drawdown. — AFP



**KATHMANDU:** Nepalese youth gather to 'donate petrol' to the Indian Embassy which requested fuel supplies from Nepal Oil Corporation, at the premises of the Indian Embassy. — AFP

## A DECADE OF SEARCHING MISSING QUAKE VICTIMS

**MUZAFFARABAD:** The morning the Pakistan earthquake struck ten years ago, Nazish Naz had been reluctant to go to school, telling her elder sister the day felt cursed. Less than an hour after the 16-year-old left home, disaster struck.

The 7.6 magnitude quake near the city of Muzaffarabad in the Pakistani administered part of Kashmir killed more than 73,000 people, wounded 128,000 and left around 3.5 million homeless-but a decade on the region has yet to recover.

Naz's family remains unable to accept her death. Other than a lone photograph showing her injured in a hospital which appeared in a newspaper shortly after the disaster, there has been no trace of her: She has simply vanished. Her family are among hundreds of relatives struggling to trace loved ones lost in the earthquake, as all records of whether they survived were destroyed in the chaotic aftermath.

Ten years on and this state of limbo pervades the area. Despite government vows of reconstruction, the promised housing and infrastructure development simply never happened. Instead, derelict construction sites, half-built roads and piles of building material occupy the spaces where thriving towns and cities should exist.

### 'No proof she is dead'

Naz's parents' grief is growing as the ten-year anniversary of the October 8, 2005 tragedy approaches. They have searched for their daughter in hospitals, schools, morgues, train stations, bus stops-and even in brothels-and have found no sign. Still, they refuse to accept she is dead, citing the photograph that appeared in a local newspaper weeks later apparently showing Naz with a head wound in a hospital in Islamabad.

The injury did not appear serious enough to be fatal, they said, and there was no other information. "My daughter was very intelligent. She would have contacted us had she been in her senses, no matter wherever she was," said Abbasi, who works as a driver in a government department. "What we believe is that she might have lost her memory because of the head injury and has been stranded somewhere." "There is no clue about her existence, but there is no proof of her death as well. How can we accept she is dead without her grave existing?" he asks.



**MUZAFFARABAD:** In this photograph taken on September 27, 2015, Pakistani Kashmiri resident Rubila Bibi, who survived the 2005 Kashmir earthquake, teaches children at her home. — AFP

The International Committee of the Red Cross says a total of 576 people were registered as missing after the earthquake but authorities failed to maintain proper records tracking where patients were sent and whether victims lived or died in the wake of the disaster. Nearly 350 were traced later on, but 228 people, including Naz, were never found.

### Broken promises

Shazia Haris, a spokeswoman for the Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority (ERRA), says the government no longer considers them missing. "There were people who died and there were people who were injured in the earthquake. If somebody hasn't returned to his or her home after 10 years... it means they are surely dead and not missing," Haris says.

But Naz's parents refuse to give up. "God willing we will continue our efforts to trace her as long as we are both alive," says Abbasi. "Whether it is a matter of tracing the missing persons or reconstruction, nothing has gone according to the promised plans," says Zahid Amin, chief of the Muzaffarabad City Development Foundation.

In the aftermath of the quake the government promised to help the families of dead and injured, and to build new towns

a safe distance from the fault line. But construction has stalled, with authorities blaming the weather and administrative problems. Accusations of corruption have also dogged redevelopment efforts.

"The majority of the projects have been delayed," says Amin. In some cases people have rebuilt their homes along the quake fault line, despite warnings from experts that another, bigger quake may yet come. "The seismic codes and regulations have been violated for new constructions and the government doesn't care about anything," Amin says.

Even those projects that have been completed have not been handed over to residents due to red tape, he says. ERRA's Haris blames administration issues and the weather. "Locals in most regions have refused to hand over land for development of new cities," she says, adding that due to rain and snow construction can only be carried out for five months a year.

For Naz's family, even if the area can be rebuilt, the tragedy has destroyed their whole world. "I still dream that she is coming back to us," Naz's mother Gulnaz told AFP, sobbing as the rain fell outside her small house on a mountain in the outskirts of Muzaffarabad. "I see her in my dreams wearing her school uniform. Our lives have been changed after her... We always remember her." — AFP

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