



8 Questions For

Interview Series



Ratindra Khatri during his service in Haiti

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Learning From Haiti

1) Can you describe your experience in Haiti when the earthquake struck?

Well, I was deployed to Haiti 1 and a half months before the catastrophic earthquake in January 2010. I was deployed in the UN Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) as a Chief Military Personnel Officer of Force Headquarters and National Contingent Commander of Nepalese UN Peacekeeping troops in Haiti. But my role in Haiti changed drastically when the earthquake struck at 16:53 local time. When the earthquake did strike, I was in my vehicle on my way to an anniversary event for a battalion serving in Port-au-Prince. Many of the Nepalese serving in Haiti were quite lucky because they attended this event which was held in a flat open area.

I felt my vehicle jump and thought a tire went out but then I saw the flagpole shaking violently from side to side and I knew then it was an earthquake. It lasted for 35 seconds but it felt like an eternity. The shaking was so violent it was impossible to move or run during those 35 seconds. Immediately following the earthquake, I looked over Port-au-Prince and I could only see dust rising and I knew then we had suffered something devastating.

The earthquake came to us as a surprise because we did not perceive that there was an earthquake risk in Haiti. We had contingency plans for other disasters like hurricanes, floods and landslides but not for earthquakes. The initial days after the earthquake were an absolute nightmare. The sights were unbelievable. Everywhere I looked, there was debris and dead bodies; it was truly a nightmare. It was also a very chaotic period because we did not have a plan in place to respond.

But that night, we regrouped, established a temporary headquarters and started our own rescue operations.

2) You were in Haiti with the UN Peacekeeping Force. How did your role change after the earthquake? What was your role in Haiti post-earthquake?

Our initial mandate in Haiti was to create a secure environment for political stabilisation. But right after the earthquake, we began focussing on providing immediate humanitarian relief. We did this before receiving a new mandate from New York because we simply could not

wait; we had to help as many people as possible. We were sending out patrols to different areas but they were coming back with casualties and injured people. So we converted the tent that was set up for the anniversary into a treatment centre but we did not have enough medical supplies to treat everyone. We worked throughout the night trying to help people and clear routes to headquarters so we could organise a response.

Initially, we could not even communicate with New York to advise of the situation or receive orders. But in the next morning we established communications through VTC and we were able to share information gathered with New York.

Within 72 hours, we were able to establish a leadership structure and within 1 week we were given a mandate for humanitarian response.

While we were focused on our humanitarian mandate immediately after the earthquake, that did not replace our original mandate of political stabilisation. We were tasked with both mandates and because of that, Haiti was able to hold Presidential elections that same year.

3) What did you find most difficult in those days following the earthquake?

The initial response was very difficult because Haiti did not have any national level contingency plan that could be followed; we had to rely on international guidelines. Without a plan, it is very difficult to operate in that kind of environment. There was also no equipped search and rescue capacity in Haiti, just like Nepal, which made response very difficult. Before dawn following the earthquake, we

had to move to force headquarters; but the route was completely blocked with collapsed buildings, damaged roads and fallen trees and electrical wires. While moving to force headquarters, we came across many people who were trapped in the rubble. Those trapped were crying for help but we were unable to help them due to a lack of equipment to remove the collapse structures; there was a sense of helplessness in this dilemma.

Command and control was another difficulty as we lost many high ranking officials which created a gap in leadership and decision making. Another difficulty was dealing with the influx on humanitarian actors; especially as many humanitarian actors did not have the capacity or self-sufficiency to operate in that environment creating an extra burden for response. And finally, accessing those impacted was very difficult because all the roads were impassable due to collapsed structures.

4) Given your role in Haiti and your ability to observe both the national and international response what would your key recommendations be to the Government and International system in Nepal?

There are many similarities between Haiti and Nepal in terms of the risk and the vulnerability to earthquakes. We need to do something immediately to avoid the devastation that Haiti suffered. The work done in Nepal over the last few years has been positive so I do believe Nepal is more prepared than Haiti for an earthquake, but we have so much more to do.

For the government, I would advise that we need to have a national authority whose primary respon-

“We (Nepal) need to do something immediately to avoid the devastation that Haiti suffered”

sibility is disaster risk management. Currently, we do have the Ministry of Home Affairs as the lead for disaster risk management but they have many other roles to perform as well. We need a separate organisation that can plan, implement and monitor risk reduction efforts. Also, disaster risk management needs to be a priority across all sectors and all levels of government; if it is not a priority we cannot make progress.

We also need to strengthen the emergency management system in Nepal. For this, I would recommend we adopt the Standardised Emergency Management System (SEMS), which is a nationwide guideline for all disasters that can strengthen communication and response by providing a common language and system for emergency response. Work in this area has been making progress under Flagship 2 of the NRRC, but we need greater commitment from the government and international and national partners.

I would also recommend that the government implement a nation-wide sensitization campaign to raise awareness about earthquake risk. This is essential for risk reduction and preparedness. People need to know and understand the risk before they can take the necessary action to reduce risk and prepare for disaster. The NRRC Communications Group does provide a platform for coordinating awareness raising but, again, we need commitment from the government and international and national partners.

The international community has played a very important role to make disaster risk reduction an agenda in Nepal. Now, we need to identify and address the gaps in our current implementation efforts. We also need the international community to strengthen and focus their advocacy in Nepal for disaster risk reduction.

5) Now you work in DRR. Why do you think DRR is important for Nepal?

All of Nepal lies on a highly active seismic zone. We know there is a great risk for earthquakes. We know it will happen, maybe today or tomorrow, maybe this generation or future generations will suffer from a great earthquake. We know this so we must prepare for it; there is no other option. In addition, we also suffer from a variety of disaster such as floods, landslides, and fires. It is in our interest to reduce our risk and prepare for these disasters.

But while we know the risk in the DRR community, awareness of communities is very low. People in Nepal continue to do things that are exposing us to greater risk. We need to raise awareness of this issue and make DRR a priority at the national and local levels.

6) Based on your experience, what do you think are the most important things to be done in Nepal to reduce vulnerability to an earthquake?

We need to start with having the proper policies in place. In Nepal, this means we must pass the Disaster Management Act. If we have a comprehensive policy environment for DRR, we can consolidate our efforts and resources to make an immediate and significant impact.

There must also be strict enforcement and compliance of building codes. In Haiti, there were no building codes in place and, as a result, 80 percent of buildings partially or completely damaged. We have building codes in Nepal but they are not implemented properly; we are making the same mistakes made in Haiti. Including building codes, we need to have a well managed urbanisation plan to sustain our fast urban growth and ensure we are not creating new risk. Having seismically resistant structures includes our cultural sites, such as the Durbar Squares in Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur. These sites are part of our cultural identity and we need to protect them from collapse.

We also need to seismically strengthen health facilities and critical infrastructure because these areas are key for responding effectively after a disaster. In Haiti, people went through great difficulty to carry the injured to hospitals only to find those facilities had collapsed. Many people lost their lives because there were no health facilities operational immediately after the disaster. We need to make sure health facilities in Nepal remain intact and operate after an earthquake, this would save many lives.

While the government has done a great job in securing 83 open spaces for response, these sites are mainly outside of the ring road of the Kathmandu Valley. My experience in Haiti suggests that people will not leave their homes immediately after a disaster because they want to be near their belongings. We need to have a plan in place to address this. This includes identifying how we can establish free and open spaces within the community.

Finally, we need to strengthen all access routes to Kathmandu Valley. This includes roads, bridges and the international airport. These structures need to remain intact so we can bring in critical supplies and reach those affected immediately.

7) You are suggesting that so many different things need to be done to prepare for the earthquake. What are your suggestions for how we can do this in time?

I think the most important thing we can do to complete this work in time is to prioritise risk reduction and crisis management immediately. The only way we can do this in time is if government, business and households make this a priority. This means we need to advocate and raise awareness of disaster risk so people can understand the gravity of the situation and their role in reducing the risk. We also need to have concrete plans and coordination place so we can avoid duplication and focus our

collective efforts on making an immediate impact. This would include the need to mainstream disaster risk management into all development plans to ensure that all those working in Nepal are taking disaster risk into consideration in the implementation of activities.

In order to do these things, we need to have a high level authority with strong linkages to the local level that is dedicated to disaster risk management in Nepal.

8) If a person or household was only to do one thing today to prepare, what should it be?

They need to have a household emergency plan. Having an emergency plan is not only for preparedness but also risk reduction. To have a plan, one must first understand the risk. From there, they can take the steps to plan how to reduce that risk and prepare for it. In an emergency plan, you should have the following:

- In your home, know the vulnerable areas and the safe locations
- Have a safe meeting point with family members
- Know how to communicate with family members
- Have an emergency kit prepared and ready to use after a disaster
- Understand what to expect after the disaster and how you will respond

Having a plan and being prepared is critical for all households. Following some simple steps can help households survive from an earthquake.

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