



SUCCESS STORY

Citizens Respond To “A People War” – Never Again



USAID/NEPAL

A bombed-out hospital in Chautara, Sindhupalchok District, the site of a major battle between Maoists and Nepalese security forces, makes an evocative backdrop for an exhibition of war photography from “A People War.”

In August 2006, the U.S. Agency for International Development’s Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) began a program in Nepal to bolster the current peace process, strengthen governance mechanisms, and support positive, nonviolent community engagement in the country’s political, social, and economic future. The objectives of the program are to:

1. Increase access to information and diversify public debate on issues critical to political transition, and
2. Increase the effectiveness of key political transition institutions.

April 2008 – Between 1996 and 2006, the conflict in Nepal brutalized the country and claimed the lives of nearly 15,000 people, many of them innocent civilians. In the post-conflict period, there has been a need for messaging that reminds people of the brutal consequences of war and the suffering incurred during the conflict so that efforts for truth and reconciliation are continued and a return to violence is avoided.

To address this need, local nongovernmental organization nepa~laya exhibited photographs from the book “A People War” at 31 locations around the country. The book is a collection of 172 photographs that capture the conflict and serve as a collective memory of this dark decade in Nepal’s history. More than 300,000 people visited the exhibitions, many at sites where major battles between the Maoists and security forces took place. In addition, the organization has donated 7,000 copies of the book to schools and libraries throughout the country.

Testimonial books were available at each site so visitors could share their experiences, and the overwhelming reaction from the exhibitions’ visitors was “Never Again.” A sixth grade student from Gorkha confessed that prior to seeing the exhibit she felt that she and her village were the only ones who suffered because of the war; afterward, however, she said she realized that the whole country suffered from the conflict. Similarly, a female police officer from Syangja District confided, “I realized that I had almost forgotten the tragic incidents of the past. Being a policewoman myself, I was directly involved in so many clashes. I hope the exhibition and photographs will remain as evidence for those who knew too little about the 11 years of conflict. I also hope that it strengthens their desire for peace and never to return to the conflict again.”

Workshops featuring one of Nepal’s most respected journalists, Kunda Dixit, who wrote the preface and captions for the book, were held at the exhibitions to explore the role of media in conflict settings. More than 900 local journalists attended these exchanges. In addition, a documentary, “Frames of War,” was filmed during the second phase of the project. The film tells the stories of people affected by the conflict.

USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives worked with nepa~laya to support the exhibition tour, distribute copies of the book, and develop the documentary.