



John Ayrton, from the Interserve England & Wales office, reflects on his recent visit to Nepal.

My flight to Nepal was quiet because a month earlier, on 1 February, the King of Nepal had taken special measures, dissolving parliament. The cut in communications (including a news blackout) combined with uncertain advice from Western embassies had knocked the bottom out of what was left of this year's tourist season. The king's action was in response to the Maoist insurrection which has been simmering away for almost a decade. During this time eleven thousand Nepalis have lost their lives.

A Maoist-sponsored transport strike soon followed, until 1 March. In a transport strike, travelling by road is simply not possible in areas not protected by the government; anyone doing so faces the displeasure of and penalties imposed by whoever is in control of the area. In practice, it means that no travel is possible between the major cities except by air.

What is the effect of such a strike upon Interserve Partners? For those in cities like Pokhara and Kathmandu, life goes on pretty much as usual, apart from the inconvenience of having to stockpile commodities that become scarce due to supply problems. But for those in more rural areas it is more difficult. Partners involved in community projects cannot get to them; the number of patients coming to Tansen Hospital decreases by half, and after the novelty wears off, that isn't good! But for ordinary people in Nepal it is much worse. How can you sell your stuff in the nearby town if you cannot get there; how do you get treatment if you're sick?

Fear and intimidation are part of the scene: neither side is particularly bothered about keeping to the Geneva Convention. One Partner woke to witness the authorities dealing with a suspected Maoist in the street below – being shot as he hid in a pit. There had been three murders in Butwal the week before I visited, and there was a prevailing sense of fear and uncertainty. Curfews come and go, soldiers appear at nights on the streets, even in the tourist area of Pokhara. 'This place runs on rumours,' said one Partner. So Nepal is hardly stable just at the moment.

#### The church in Nepal

But there is one stable factor, or so it seems. The continuing presence and growth of the Nepali church is one of the most exciting realities to be seen in Nepal. One Partner told me that the church had doubled in the last five years (which of course means that half are under five years old in the faith). The thirty churches in Pokhara held a peace march and rally at Christmas (pictured). Over a thousand people marching through the streets made a big impression. I asked my friend, Grishma, a Nepali pastor, what the reaction had been. The most common response, he said, was, 'We didn't know there were so many Christians in Pokhara.' You see light in the darkest places: we met someone who told us how he and his wife found faith after surviving a Maoist attack. 'Save me, Jesus,' the man had cried as his attackers left him to bleed to death. His prayer was answered.

And there's something new. The church has always been committed to evangelism and discipleship, but I think has tended to see meeting the needs of the whole person as something that perhaps the foreign agencies could get on with. This is changing: the Nepali church has a growing desire not just to proclaim the good news, but also to demonstrate the kingdom in works of service to those in need, and to be salt and light at a troubled time. Nepali Christians are forming agencies to do just that, and the results are impressive. As the leader of one of these groups put it, 'we face real challenges just now, but we prefer to see them as opportunities'. He went on to talk of the need for Interserve Partners to continue serving alongside their Nepali brothers and sisters, sharing Christ across cultures.

Like its people, Nepal's crisis is quiet – the news blackout and special measures have seen to that. But all the time there is another hidden and secret process going on, as the yeast of the kingdom of God does its own quiet work.

#### Prayer pointer

- ♦ Continue to pray about the political situation in Nepal.
- ♦ Pray for the Nepal church meeting the needs of the whole person, and for our Partners' place in that.