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Wives of the Disappeared Hold the Key to Transitional Justice in Nepal

NAIKAP VILLAGE NEAR KATHMANDU, NEPAL: Shobha Batta (photo below) has never accepted the loss of her husband Shyam in 2001. One moment he was tending the family shop, the next he was being led away by a group of Maoists cadres, never to reappear. His wife was left to grieve with her two small children.

Adding to the family's woes, the recent earthquake in Nepal tore off the top of the family house. Ms Bhatta received



Undaunted: Shoba Bhatta lost her husband in 2001 and most of her house in 2015

15,000 rupees (\$150) - the standard government handout - but has been unable to apply for a repair loan because the house is registered to her husband, who has not been declared officially dead.

Ms Bhatta still cannot believe that Shyam is gone forever. She remembers sitting in the ruins of her house after the earthquake and expecting him to walk in and take control. She refuses to be called a widow until his disappearance is explained.

Ms Bhatta's situation is typical of the 1,530 families that lost a member to the disappearances during the conflict in Nepal (1996-2006). "We have been largely ignored and marginalized" said Ram Kumar Bhandari, who created the [National Network of Families of the Missing and Disappeared Nepal \(NEFAD\)](#), after

his own father disappeared in 2001. NEFAD represents 1,100 families and is a partner of The Advocacy Project (AP).

At the same time, with help from NEFAD, wives of the disappeared like Ms Bhatta are now in a position of strength - so much so that they could determine the outcome of a controversial government effort at truth and reconciliation. AP and NEFAD are also helping 50 wives with an income-generating grant to produce embroidered squares in memory of their lost husbands. The funds were raised through [AP's appeal for Nepal](#).

The government has established two commissions - one to investigate the disappearances, and the other to promote truth and reconciliation (TRC). The commissions have been boycotted by international human right groups because they allow for amnesty from prosecutions, but the families are more concerned by their lack of action. Five months after being established, the Commission on Enforced Disappearances had still not met with family members. The TRC even returned unspent money to the government.



Critical engagement: Ram Kumar Bhandari, advocate for the disappeared, and Judge Lokendra Mallick, chairman of the commission on disappearances

Early this year, NEFAD's 60 local representatives met in the district of Bardiya and drew up a list of 9 requirements for engaging with the commissions.

With its credibility in question, the five members of the disappearances commission met with Mr Bhandari from NEFAD and a mission from AP in Kathmandu in late July and pledged to take testimony from all 1,530 families.

The Commission chairman, Lokendra Mallick, said that if necessary he will also seek an extension of the commission's term of office beyond 18 months, and an

increase in the budget (\$600,000 a year).

Judge Mallick - a former head of the Appeals Court - also pledged to produce a strong final report and said the commission might refer the names of perpetrators to the Attorney General, even if it means calling for a revision of the amnesty provision. He said the commission will ask for creation of a DNA databank as a possible prelude to exhuming clandestine graves - something that has been resisted by the Nepali military.

The judge said he regretted the international boycott by the international human rights movement but that it is more important to "win the trust" of the families and that he welcomed pressure from NEFAD. "We understand that they are angry and impatient," he said.

Following this meeting, Ms Bhatta and Mr Bhandari were among 12 relatives who met with the commissioners for the first time. Mr Bhandari described it as a "breakthrough" but said that the family members will press the commission to make good on its promise to meet with all

families. Reparations are another key goal. The government has promised each family \$10,000, but only given \$5,000. Widows of those who were killed receive a monthly stipend which is denied to wives of those who disappeared.



Best friends: Mankumari Ranjit's husband was abducted by Maoists, Durga Shrestha's husband by the Army. Participating in a Hateymalo group has allowed the two wives to find common ground.

Meanwhile NEFAD and AP will encourage individual initiatives to remember the disappeared. Hundreds of wives meet each month under a Red Cross program known as Hateymalo ("Join Hands Together"). Several groups have used small grants to make a physical memory to their lost husbands, often in the form of a stone pillar or water tap.

AP and NEFAD are funding a program of advocacy quilting by 50 Hateymalo wives, who will produce embroidered squares bearing the name of their husbands. NEFAD hopes to exhibit the first squares in Kathmandu on August 30, the International Day of the Disappeared.

Shoba Bhatta, who was the first to volunteer for the sewing project, sees the embroidery as another way to remember her husband. "I will write his name and put a flower next to it. This will create a connection and will help me to remember," she said.

* [Click here](#) to donate to AP's appeal on behalf of wives of the disappeared.

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