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Tiger Bags Raise the Morale of Conflict Survivors in Nepal



From victim to artist: Pooja hopes to sell tiger bags

Basgadi, Bardiya District, Nepal: When Pooja Shahi met with The Advocacy Project (AP) in this small town a year ago, she had just completed a piece of embroidery that depicted in grim detail the arrest and disappearance of her father in 2001. She was understandably somber.

When Ms Shahi met with AP again last week, her mood was lighter. Not only had she married, but Ms Shahi had taken a step towards turning her needlework into a source of income by designing a tiger bag that will now be offered for sale.

Together with 24 other women who lost relatives during the war, Ms Shahi has launched a cooperative to produce tiger bags for tourists at the Bardiya national park, which is famous for its tigers. The cooperative sold its first two bags recently and received a commission from [Wild Trak Adventure](#), which takes tourists into the Bardiya park on safari in search of tigers.

Ms Shahi's father is one of 1,475 Nepalis who disappeared during the conflict that ravaged Nepal between 1996 and 2006. Their fate continues to unsettle Nepali society, although in some respects Nepal is well on the way to recovery. The Maoist rebels who triggered the conflict have

embraced democracy and look set to rejoin the government when elections take place next month. The government has also awarded \$10,000 to each family, and established two commissions to investigate the disappearances and promote reconciliation.



Kanchan,19, is known for her skills as an artist and sense of humor. Her bag was made by Christine Bradford in Washington DC.

However, these achievements have not satisfied the families. One reason is that the two commissions have been weakened by internal feuding and ignored by the international community [on the grounds that the commission law offers an amnesty to perpetrators](#).

Such legal disputes seem irrelevant to family members like Ms Shahi, who live far from Kathmandu in the regions worst affected by the conflict. In a strange twist, Ms Shahi's husband and brother in law are both in the same army which kidnapped her father, but she shrugs this off as "fate." She still wants to know what happened to her father and has formed a deep affection for the other members of the Bardiya cooperative. She credits her husband with being supportive.

AP first invested in the Bardiya cooperative in 2016, at the request of the [National Network of Families of the Disappeared Nepal \(NEFAD\)](#), an AP partner organization that advocates for the families. [Peace Fellow Megan Keeling](#) worked with Sarita Thapa, the leader of the Bardiya family members, and organized embroidery training which enabled the women to commemorate their missing relatives. The artists also produced tiger squares for a quilt that was assembled by friends of AP in the US and returned to Nepal.



Peace Fellows Vicky and Kirsten, seen here with a Tiger quilt, commissioned sample Tiger bags.

This summer, the artists decided to turn their needlework into a source of income. Peace Fellows [Vicky Mogeni](#) and [Kirsten Yanisch](#) helped them to form their cooperative and open a bank account. Using [money from Global Giving](#), AP commissioned a tiger square from each member. The squares were then attached to bags by tailors in Kathmandu and by Christine Bradford, an AP friend in the US. The process was led by Ms Thapa, helped by Prabal Thapa from NEFAD.

Last week marked the first time that the artists had seen their finished bags. They were impressed, although Ms Shahi agreed that her tiger might seem a little too cute. "I just liked it!" she says.

As discerning consumers, Ms Shahi and her friends understand that their bags must compete on the open market and that production costs in Kathmandu are too high. They have agreed to purchase a sewing machine for Ms Thapa and produce a line of bags in traditional Nepali colors here in Bardiya. Each artist will make her own tiger design.



John Sparshatt from [Wild Trak Adventure](#) has agreed to promote Tiger bags with his safari clients. He is seen here with Sarita Thapa, who heads the Bardiya cooperative.

AP will deploy a Peace Fellow next summer, produce an online catalog of the bags, and support the cooperative while funds last. AP may also sell tiger bags in the US, where several skilled quilters have offered to help.

The cooperative members hope to sell their bags for at least \$20, which could make a big difference to members like Kanchan Chaudhary, 19, a talented artist with an impish sense of humor who lost her brother in the conflict. Instead of studying at college, where she would seem to belong, Ms Chaudhary helps her widowed mother and sister to grow vegetables, which bring in \$40 a month. "(Selling) two bags a month would help a lot!" she says.

No-one knows if the cooperative will succeed as a business, but the friendships and skills developed during the last two years leave no doubt that building peace

must start with those who were directly affected by the war. Reflecting on what she has achieved, Sarita Thapa observed: "I never thought our bags would be this good, or that we would come this far."

* [Click here to invest in the Bardiya cooperative](#) and thank you! All donations are shared equally between AP's three partners in Nepal, including the Bardiya group.

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