

MAF EARTHQUAKE RELIEF EFFORTS IN NEPAL

Tuesday, 05 May

Today, MAF helped facilitate several flights for a UK medical team to a couple of isolated villages deep in the hard-hit mountains of Northern Nepal. The team was too big for one load, so we split the load into two flights. The bulk of the team and their gear rode on the first flight, meaning there was adequate space on the second flight for Daniel Juzi and me to ride along. Daniel needed to see the flight operations so he could finish the safety audit MAF is conducting of the operator, while I was looking to document, through photos, the critical needs that are out there, and why the helicopter assets we are facilitating are so vital to meeting those needs.

We departed from Kathmandu airport heading northwest towards the rugged, smoke and haze shrouded mountains to the North. The earthquake damage in Kathmandu city itself, and the immediate outlying areas, is obvious, but relatively minor when compared to the more remote locations. Proceeding deeper into rugged foothills of the towering Himalayas, both the damage to the villages and the desperate needs of the people increased exponentially.

Within 10 minutes after departing Kathmandu, we could already see significant portions of small villages which had been turned to rubble on the edges of the steeply plunging mountain sides. Yet, these people actually have much to be thankful for—although a slow and grueling journey, their villages, or what's left of them, are still accessible by road from the city. As a result, they've already received, and will continue to receive, significant relief and aid through various, large government entities and NGO's. Not so, the more remote and isolated villages further north and deeper in.

Indeed, there are many villages, far more decimated, that have yet to receive any aid at all. Why? Because no one can get to them. Many NGOs and like minded organization are standing by ready to help—fully equipped with supplies and personnel, but lacking one significant element. Transportation. Villages still reachable by road are being helped via land. Villages cut off by road, but having larger, flat/clear areas, are being helped via heavy-lift military and government helicopters. But the villages tucked into the deepest mountain canyons, and on the edges of the steepest slopes, and on the peaks of the highest ridges—these are some of the hardest hit villages. Yet, until now, no has been providing the crucial link to get the desperately needed aid workers and relief supplies into these desperate people.

That's where MAF comes in. Managing the logistics, bookings and facilitation of two, very highly capable helicopters with some of the most experienced crew in Nepal, we are able to take relief workers directly into the places where the help is most desperately needed—where no one else is going. We're doing what we do best—using aircraft to transform the lives of the world's most isolated people in need.

Sadly, for some, no help is needed. One village we saw today was completely wiped out—totally buried under untold tons of rock and earth. But there are many who have suffered extensively, and have been waiting...and waiting...and waiting for help. Help is finally coming!

When we arrived at the first location today, the damage was extensive. The helicopter was perched on the edge of a small grassy area, it's tail pointing out over a precarious drop to a raging, glacial-melt river below, it's nose facing the destruction of part of a small village tucked into the base of a steep mountain. Many houses were extensively damaged or destroyed by the quake. But some were completely pulverized by the massive rockslide which cut loose from the towering cliffs above. As the medical team evaluated the needs here, there was a continual cloud of dust and debris rising from the scarred mountain face a thousand feet above.

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Occasionally we could hear distinct crackling pops that sounded like distant machine gun fire as larger boulders lost their grip high up on the mountain, bouncing down the steep face and bringing loads of small rocks with them, getting louder all the time as they got closer and closer. Just off to the side lay a house-size boulder that had carved a massive path down the side of the mountain to its new resting place, and taking everything in its path with it.

Yet even here, the people with a humble and gracious honesty told us they were not the worst off. The medical team had brought along a local translator from “Save the Children”. With his help, these villagers directed the us to other nearby, villages, even harder hit and more isolated. It was to one of these locations that the helicopter transported the doctors. Throughout the rest of the day they were able to treat the wounded, and at the end of the day bring two patients back with them to the city hospital.

None of this would have been possible without the helicopter. These areas are completely cutoff by land. We saw literally dozens of landslides, many still active with falling rock and debris. The road was severed in half in many locations. It will be weeks if not months before these already precarious roads are finally passible again. And in the meantime, none of the other large, rotor wing air assets available here in Kathmandu are able to get into these very tight locations. It takes a specialized helicopter and crew to safely negotiate this terrain and operate to/from these very tight landing zones .

That’s exactly why MAF has arranged, and is facilitating the local flight team that does it best. These are the ones that routinely fly people into the highest, most rugged mountains in the world. They’ve done the highest-altitude mountain rescue in the world. They’re the only ones here certified for sling loads and long line ops. With their reputation and long-time experience in operating helicopters into these toughest of locations, combined with MAF’s reputation and long-time experience in coordinating transportation logistics efficiently and effectively in disaster relief efforts throughout the world, we’re able to provide the crucial transportation link that’s been missing—that will allow the aid and relief workers to bring help to the most desperate, and most isolated in the entire Nepali Earthquake relief effort. I’m sure this will be just one of many stories where lives were changed and impacted because of the efforts facilities through MAF, and made possible through the prayers and generosity of countless people around the world.