Ghale says they were elated to see the camp after having been lost for so many hours. As they approached the base to ask for directions, Ghale's friends say they heard a loud blast and watched as Ghale flew into the air and landed a distance away. She stepped on a landmine.

"When I gained back my consciousness after sometime, I saw a leg separated from a body," she recalls. "I had never thought that it could be my own leg. There was a pool of blood around me and I fainted seeing it."

While she was unconscious, security forces brought her to Birendra Army Hospital, by helicopter, in Kathmandu for treatment.

Ghale is one of the thousands of Nepalis who have been hurt or killed by landmines and improvised explosive devices, or IEDs, that were planted by the Nepali Army and Maoist insurgents during the decade long conflict between 1996–2006. Statistics collected by the Ban Landmines Campaign in Nepal, an NGO working to remove all hidden explosives, revealed in 2007 that 1,370 people were killed by landmines in Nepal between 1998 and 2006, according to Janardan Sharma Prabhakar, the joint commander of Maoist army.

The report estimates that as many as 3,248 people were handicapped or injured by landmines during the same period. And more than 200 people have been injured or killed by landmines and IEDs since the conflict ended.

A Treaty Ignored

The Unified Party of Nepal, also known as the Maoists, launched an armed conflict against the royal government of Nepal in February of 1996. Their stated aim was to end monarchical rule and establish Nepal as a republican state. After nearly 10 years of armed conflict between the Maoists and the Royal Army, the government of Nepal and Maoist leadership signed a peace treaty and formally declared the end of the war in November 2006. Per the treaty, both parties agreed they would not lay any new landmines and would inform each other, within 30 days of signing the agreement, the location of any remaining landmines that were set up during the conflict. The terms of treaty mandated that both parties would help to destroy all remaining explosives within 60 days or January of 2007.

Ghale stepped on a landmine more than four months after all explosives were supposed to be removed and destroyed. And today, some three to half years after the terms of the treaty are overdue, less than half of the minefields in Nepal have been cleared.

According to a report of UN Mine Action Team (UNMAT) in 2009, 23 of 53 known minefields in Nepal had been cleared. Some 52,000 explosives and other hazardous devices have been removed.

Landmines and IEDs continue to take the lives and limbs of Nepali people. According to data from United Nations’ Children Fund (UNICEF), more than 200 people have been killed or injured by landmines and other explosive devices since the ceasefire took place in 2006. Of the total casualties, 60 percent of those who have died as a result of the landmines have been children. To date, Nepal has one of the largest casualty rates from victim-activated explosions in the world.

Purna Sobha Chitrakar, coordinator of the Ban Landmines Campaign in Nepal, says landmines were laid in 71 out of 75 districts of the country. The Nepal Army is said to have planted over 10,000 mines in 53 different locations and 20,000 IEDs in 285 places. Maoist officials say they did not keep statistics or records of how many landmines and explosives their troops planted during the war. The Ban Landmines Campaign estimates that Maoist militants used as many as 10,000 mines and explosives for just one military encounter with the Army. “The war is over, but people’s lives are still in danger,” Chitrakar said “During the conflict, Maoists and the army had hundreds of clashes. On that basis, we assume that Maoists must have laid thousands of mines and explosive devices.”

"The political parties are not giving priority to this issue and there is no mapping of the fields where landmines may have been left," he says.

Government Help for Victims Remains Limited

The landmine that Ghale stepped on was planted outside the Bahundanda village of Lamjung district, a western district of Nepal, by the Royal Nepal Army. After spending more than three months in intensive care, Ghale was discharged from the hospital with one leg and a shattered home life.

Ghale was a newlywed when she stepped on the landmine. Her husband left her while she was in hospital.

There are few government resources available to aid victims of latent landmines and IEDs in Nepal. The International Commission of the Red Cross stepped in to help Ghale, by providing her with an artificial leg.

Krishna Chandra Chalise, information officer of the ICRC, says they have given artificial limbs, crutches and other treatment instruments to dozens of landmines and improvised explosives at seven different hospitals in Nepal.

Ghale says she is trying to rebuild her life. She recently completed a six month training course to become a beauctician at the Angel Beauty Parlor in Kathmandu. But she is still looking for a job. Her primary goal is to create a life for herself so she is no longer a burden on her family “I know my life has changed now, but I need a job to get my freedom back,” she says.

Lack of Tools, Funds Make Removal a Slow Process

Members of the government here blame the Maoists for injuries such as Ghale’s. Salikram Sharma, under-secretary at the Ministry of Peace, says, “Since Maoists stored the homemade bombs haphazardly during the conflict, they themselves are unaware of the whereabouts and conditions of such bombs.

However, one source familiar with Ghale's case, who requested anonymity for fear of retribution, says the landmine that crippled her was planted by the Army.

"The landmine was planted for the security of telephone tower and it was neither marked with any signs or barbed wire," he says, adding Ghale’s injury was a result of Army negligence. Leaders in the Maoist army do acknowledge that their troops did, in fact, use substantial amounts of explosive devices during the war and many of those devices were left behind.

Janardan Sharma Prabhakar, the joint commander of Maoist army, said that they are making efforts to trace the landmines. “Mines and explosive devices were left in conflict zones. The People's Republic Army of Maoists has also started to study the condition of a detailed investigation," he added.

But landmine removal is costly and Nepal remains ill-equipped. Government officials here admit that the de-mining process is taking more time than was agreed upon in the peace agreement. However, they disagree with claims that the government is not serious about the demining process.

According to Salikram Sharma, under-secretary at the ministry of peace and a member of the steering committee on mine action, “Demining is [a] time-consuming process and we need another two years to complete the job.”

Sharma says the demining process is taking longer than expected due to the lack of training, money, and proper instruments and technology.

Man power is also an issue. To plant a landmine, experts estimate it takes four to five days and costs about 400 rupees, or $5.50, but the cost to remove one is 20 times higher and can take as long as six months he says. It is also risky.

"Since the mines explode as soon as it [receipts] contact, [we have to] be very careful while removing them and it takes a long time," says Major Pankaj Pandey of the Nepal Army.

Pandey says the instruments needed for removal are expensive. He has repeatedly requested assistance from foreign experts.

Despite local dissatisfaction over the delay in removing the landmines, most furore is in regard to the repeated death of children. UN experts involved in demining say Nepal has made significant progress. “[Demining] work is being done much faster then other countries," says Indra Rana, representative of UNMAT.

Meanwhile, officials here say they have taken steps to identify known landmine sites. Several locations have been marked signs and barbed wire. Additionally, efforts are being made to raise awareness through leaflets, radio and TV broadcasts, and education campaigns, according to Brigadier General Lok Bahadur Thapa, director of Army engineers.

For Ghale and hundreds of others, these efforts are coming too late. Ghale and her friends say there were no warning signs or markings in the forest where she was injured that would indicate the Army knew landmines could be present. "If there were any signs of danger around the site where mines
where she was injured that would indicate the Army knew landmines could be present. "If there were any signs of danger around the site where mines were planted or marked with barbed wire then we wouldn't have gone near," she says.

Von: by Tara Bhattarai, The Press Institute, 29.03.2010

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