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Caught in Nepal's Earthquakes

By Ellen Barry May. 15, 2015 1

When Daniel Berehulak flew into Kathmandu four days after a 7.8-magnitude earthquake struck Nepal in April, his initial impression was that the damage was not as catastrophic as he had expected. His first days were spent photographing people pulling valuables — televisions and teddy bears and kitchen cupboards — from rubble piles around the city, sometimes carrying them away balanced on their heads. It was a sight that struck him as brave and hopeful.

But as he worked, the reality of what had happened in Nepal gradually emerged into focus: The worst damage was in towns and villages that required a five- to seven-hour drive from the city, followed by a six-hour hike on trails scaling mountains studded with landslides and boulders shaken loose by the earthquake.

Photographing any disaster is 80 or 90 percent logistics, by Mr. Berehulak's reckoning, and his attention swung to the people who could help him get the story: helicopter pilots from the Indian and Nepalese military who were deployed on aid and rescue missions, navigating ravines and mountain passes, racing away from fast-moving weather systems, and mathematically calibrating the weight-to-fuel ratio, all at extremely high altitudes. On some missions, the pilots were forced to dump fuel so they could safely carry passengers. Several times his helicopter reached villages built on such narrow terraces and on such steep terrain that it was unable to land and had to turn back.

"You had these villages perched on mountainsides, and it's incredible that they were able to scratch out an existence there," he said. "From the air, they look like the prints on your fingers."

He was fiercely preoccupied with keeping his camera batteries, laptop batteries and satellite phone charged, so much so that when he found shelter his first thought — one that crowded out the need to eat or wash or sleep — was finding a way to plug in. Power supply was no trivial consideration, as the only way he could reach the village of Barpak, near the epicenter of the April 25 earthquake, was to

have a helicopter crew leave him in the village during an aid drop. He knew that if no helicopters returned in the next few days, he would have no option but to trek out on foot.

“We weren’t sure how we were going to get out,” Mr. Berehulak said. “I had a sat phone, I could transmit my images. My only concern was getting onto the ground shooting.”

Once in place, he worked by instinct, following whatever was happening on the ground. In one village in the Gorkha district, he found people talking about a 3-year-old girl, and he was with them three hours later when they found her body. He followed the family up to a small cemetery, where the women grieved over the child’s body for two hours. In the days before, he had seen other families mourn, but they had been mourning for adults, he said. This was different.

“Seeing them react to a child that they were meant to be protecting – that was – yes. That was the most challenging thing to see,” he said. “Children are so helpless.”

The hours in shattered villages sped by, and often Mr. Berehulak set out with no idea what he would find.

“I am not necessarily drawn to an aesthetic scene, I am drawn by the people,” he said. “More times than not, some of the situations we’ve come upon are purely by chance, purely by physically being there. When it does happen, and you do see it, you know where you need to be.”

Mr. Berehulak had spent two weeks documenting the destruction caused by the April 25 earthquake when, after sitting down for lunch in a Kathmandu restaurant, he was caught in Tuesday’s 7.3-magnitude aftershock. He called it “one of the scariest things I’ve ever seen,” and he said that powerful instinct immediately propelled him out of the building into open space.

“It took one or two seconds to realize what was happening,” Mr. Berehulak said. “You feel the start of the tremor, you basically run out to the door, not even taking into account what’s happening. You just react. You go. You run.”

He finally flew out of Nepal on Friday, torn about leaving, but physically and emotionally drained.

“There was a little fatigue that was setting in,” he said. “You start looking at the scenes and feeling that they are the same thing you had seen yesterday. I thought, ‘Maybe it’s time for a short break.’”

Daniel Berehulak was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for feature photography earlier this year for his coverage of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa for The New York Times.

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