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Remote Advocacy Produces A Local Breakthrough for Conflict Survivors in Nepal

AP helps families to submit new report to the UN Human Rights Council



Tej Bahadur Bhandari, right, disappeared in Nepal in 2001. His son Ram is demanding an explanation.

Disillusioned by their government's refusal to explain the disappearance of thousands of Nepalis during the Maoist rebellion (1996-2006), family members of the victims are taking their case to the communities where the crimes occurred.

Families secured a significant victory last week when the council of Marsyangdi, a municipality of 24,000 in the center west of Nepal, voted unanimously to declare a public day of mourning for a much-respected former teacher, Tej Bahadur Bhandari, who disappeared on December 31, 2001 after being taken to the district police headquarters.

The council also voted to allocate 2 million rupees (\$16,400) for the creation of a park in memory of the disappeared, rename roads and public spaces, and provide families of conflict victims with an office in the local government building.

The council's move was welcomed by Ram Bhandari, the son of Tej Bahadur, who lobbied remotely for the new policy after being stranded by the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe. "My father's memory will be re-established and restored," he said. "This is exciting and honorable. It is better than I expected."

Tej Bahadur was one of more than 2,500 Nepalis who disappeared during the conflict and like many other family members his son has campaigned tirelessly for an explanation. In 2009, Mr Bhandari founded the [Network of Families of the Disappeared \(NEFAD\)](#), which now has 1,100 members in 70 districts and enables family members to speak with a single voice. AP has partnered with NEFAD since 2015.

But the campaign appears to have run into a dead end in Kathmandu. A 2014 law established two commissions to investigate disappearances and promote truth and reconciliation, but neither body has credibility with the families. The law also offered amnesty to perpetrators, and this has been rejected by The Supreme Court and the human rights community. The result is deadlock.

Faced by this, family members feel they may have more success in villages, where the disappeared are remembered with respect and affection by relatives, friends and neighbors, some of who are now in positions of authority. One local leader in Marsyangdi was taught by Tej Bahadur. The current deputy mayor of the municipality also remembers Ram's father from his work for social justice.

Mr Bhandari said that local government is also often attuned to the needs of family members, who yearn for closure and are more concerned with memory and reparations than legal accountability. "Local authorities understand local realities," he said.

Nepal's complex politics may be moving in the same direction. A new constitution, drafted in 2015, gives significant authority, resources and autonomy to local government. Families intend to put this to the test.

The question is whether local advocacy can advance beyond memorialization to more controversial issues, like investigations and even exhumations. This too may be tested by the Marsyangdi document which calls for "pressure to be exerted" on the provincial and national authorities to investigate the whereabouts of Tej Bahadur. Mr Bhandari plans to follow up when he returns to Nepal.

Parallel to these local efforts, the families are also seeking to influence the United Nations. Last week, NEFAD submitted a joint paper on transitional justice to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

The paper was drafted by NEFAD together with the Committee for Social Justice and Foundation of Memory of Martyrs and the Disappeared. [Beth Alexion](#), an AP Peace fellow who is working remotely for NEFAD from Boston, provided technical support.

The paper will be included in the submission by Nepali civil society when the Council conducts its 5-yearly review of Nepal's human rights record next year.



Above: AP supports a memory project by family members in Bardiya district, which experienced the highest number of disappeared (272) in Nepal. AP Board member Bobbi Fitzsimmons [visited Bardiya in 2019](#) to help the family members produce memorial quilts and Tiger bags.

[AP will launch an appeal for the Bardiya Tiger bags at 9:00 AM EST on Wednesday July 15](#)

