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Opinion Column

A Canadian interning in peace and security issues with the UN in Nepal learns first hand how quickly those can be lost

Interning in disaster

Erika Simpson, Special to Postmedia Network

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Earthquake victims argue with police officers during a protest against the government's lack of aid provided to the victims in Kathmandu , Nepal. Canadian UN intern Nicholas DiClemente, based in Nepal, sees these kinds of protests as part of a pattern anti-government sentiment that preceded the quake. (Adnan Abidi, Reuters).

Was Nicholas alive, dead or injured in the earthquake in Nepal?

Nicholas DiClemente, an intern working in Nepal for the United Nations, had completed a master of arts degree in political science under my supervision in 2012. Since then, we had seldom been in touch — unless he wanted another reference letter. One of my most important tasks is writing references so students can go onto graduate school, obtain internships or pursue careers. Like Nicholas's, most of the internships are outside Canada, due to the lack of opportunity here.

A few days after the April 25 earthquake, Nicholas wrote to me: “I was in fact in the middle of the earthquake and nearly died. It was a surreal experience. I am finally safe now in Malaysia, I haven't slept in three days. Off to Thailand still. I'll be back in Kathmandu on Monday.”

Later when he caught up on his sleep, he wrote again: “The earthquake has also had its effect on me personally. I am constantly on high alert and have found sleeping to be difficult. Seeing people run even scares me. The movies don't quite do an earthquake justice. I will never forget the sounds and images of the two major tremors.

“I am now in Thailand, but I do still plan to return to Kathmandu on Monday. The people I've met in Nepal have shown me such an incredible capacity for compassion that I couldn't bear simply leaving. My plan is to continue out my contract and to volunteer wherever possible.

“The situation over here however is dire and to be quite frank with you, I think this may become far worse. If it gets to the point where I fear my own safety, I will leave.”

The death toll has now eclipsed 7,500.

But Nicholas saw damage beyond the physical.

“The media tells the tragic story of the lives and monuments lost, but what they have failed to mention is the growing anti-government sentiment among the people. Prior to the earthquake, there was already widespread political unrest. Quite often (bi-weekly), there would be ‘bandh’. People would not be allowed to go to work and cars were not allowed on the roads; those who didn't comply would be punished, their shops destroyed and their cars burned.”

Due to the earthquake and the dismal response by the government, Nicholas suspects the situation is reaching a breaking point. “On my way out, I witnessed a mob attack police and military caravans.

“I feared for my own car, but we were allowed to pass with no issues.”

Nicholas began a six-month internship in Kathmandu in late January with the United Nations Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Asia and the Pacific as a junior professional consultant. He hopes the internship will transition into a full-time career with the UN.

Nicholas was a first-class master's graduate from Western University. He wrote an outstanding research paper that helped advance our understanding of the foremost terrorist threats to North America and the measures that have been implemented by each government to combat these threats.

When he wrote me just a few days before the earthquake to request yet another reference letter, he felt elated: “Life in Nepal has been a great experience so far. I have definitely enjoyed the work I have been tasked with.

“As of this moment I am working on a security assessment of Malaysia, keeping up to date on the conflict in Bangladesh as we have a (Program of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons/Arms Trade Treaty) workshop tentatively scheduled in Dhaka, assisting a workshop on maritime security (and UN Security Council Resolution) 1540 in Maldives, and getting ready to draft a project proposal for Sri Lanka (which I had previously completed an assessment for).”

Before the earthquake, Nicholas blithely wrote, “Next week I will be taking leave to Thailand and after I return I will be off to Dubai for the other job interview. After such a long wait and losing hope multiple times, it seems I may have finally forged a career in international security! We’ll see; here’s hoping that interview goes as planned.”

My former students often send hard-earned advice to the next generation of students. Nicholas’s advice before the earthquake was valuable: “I have learned many lessons whilst searching for work in this field and I believe I have some advice for your students who may come to you for career advice.

- **Get a master’s.** I haven’t met one person with simply a BA. The Europeans have a different setup than we do; it seems they all have graduate degrees.
- **Learn languages.** French is clearly the most beneficial but outside of Canada, you wouldn’t believe how many languages my colleagues speak. Again, the Europeans have quite the upper hand on us. In my office, I am the only unilingual speaker. Everyone else speaks between two and six languages!
- **Intern.** Don’t bother looking for paid work. Find an internship or co-op and get real professional experience. Even if you have to pay for the placement, such as you do with the UN and other organizations, it will pay off.”

We can all be proud of the next generation of young people, like Nicholas, who want to work hard to help others caught in all types of disasters.

Erika Simpson is an associate professor of international relations in the department of political science at Western.