Nepal requires a master plan to get out of crisis situation: EU Ambassador, Rensje Teerink tells The Oslo Times.


May 24, Kathmandu: According to a report published by the Government of Nepal, the overall initial cost estimates of the damage caused by the Gorkha Earthquake and its numerous aftershocks stands at a staggering $10 billion, which is over half of the country’s National Gross Domestic Product. At a time when the country faces its worst crisis in years, which threatens to push Nepal further into a humanitarian and economic crisis, The Oslo Times met with the European Union’s Ambassador to Nepal Rensje Teerink to talk about the efforts made by the European Union to help Nepal at this time of dire need.

The Excerpts below, give us an insight into the work the EU has been doing in Nepal, before and after the quake, Ambassador Teernik’s personal experiences during the quake and the steps Nepal can take to curb the post traumatic effect of the aftermath.

Excerpts:

TOT: Thank You, for giving us an opportunity to talk to you at such a short notice, before we start can you tell us a little about yourself?

Teerink: Okay, I am not really a career diplomat, let’s say in the normal sense. I started my career basically as an anthropologist specializing in Asia and South Asia. I have done extensive field research in India, before joining the European institutions. I joined the European Commission back in 1995, always in external relations and development cooperation, and here again always maintaining focus on Asia. For the last one and half years I have been the European Union’s Ambassador to Nepal.

TOT: Will you tell us about EU’s role in Nepal, especially during this time of crisis what kind of role has EU played in the “rescue and relief” efforts?

Teerink: EU is one of the major development partners for Nepal and it has been so for many years. It all started off when EU began cooperating with Nepal way back in the early eighties, and since 1994 we have had a cooperation agreement. Basically, our role here is helping with development objectives and its growth projection, so through development cooperation; we have been active for many years, especially in the basic education sector. We have also been one of the major contributors to Nepal Peace Trust Fund after the CPA was signed. We are also now looking into agriculture, sustainable rural development and trade. We also helped Nepal become a member of the WTO. We still have an ongoing project (worth six million) for trade relations, helping trade facilitation and economic capacity building especially in the coffee sector, so that is, you know, working on the value chain. We are now going to look at a vocational training and that is a new project.

But, of course apart from that we are serving the people of Nepal in this humanitarian crisis. We were here last year with the floods, we gave, I think, more than 750,000 Euros for the flood relief, but now this is a major disaster earthquake, has solicited a much bigger response. We initially gave six million Euros for “humanitarian assistance” through our European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO), and our commissioner, Christos Stylianides, had come here, soon after the earthquake to see the damage it had caused, and assess the situation and this was on Monday after the Earthquake. We had initially decided to give 3 million Euros but after his visit he realized it was a huge catastrophe that’s why -we had to double the amount and gave six million in aid, instead.

Now the main challenge will be, how can we help Nepal in the long term to get over the crisis this terrible disaster has caused.
TOT: The Gorkha Quake has been devastating, and Nepal has received a lot of support from countries around the World, however this Earthquake was expected and the European Commission had been active in supporting Earthquake awareness and risk management programs, but a lot of people are now complaining that those programs were not really effective, what do you have to say about this and how do you think symposiums and knowledge gained from workshops can be effectively implemented when such disasters strike?

Teerink: Well, I think all this disaster preparedness work has actually been very useful in many ways. Through the disaster preparedness programs we were funding, we had been working with the Ministry of Education to do some retrofitting in many of the schools, also to adapt a curriculum and see how for example children can be taught to react in earthquakes. All these things are extremely important, now thank God the earthquake struck on Saturday and not many children were in school because the retrofitting was a humongous exercise and even with our funding the government had not been able to retrofit them all and many classrooms were destroyed which is very sad. But in fact luckily it happened on Saturday.

I also think in many ways the disaster preparedness has been helpful for example with DFID and some other partners, a humanitarian

A woman cooks food amidst the debris of what used to be her home, in Falping, Danda-4 at Sindhupalchok. Photo: Gopen Rai/TOT

staging area which was set up near the airport and I had gone there two months ago to its inauguration. You know the food rations, the sleeping bags, the tents, were all there. The WFP was there the UN was there and it was actually presented as a way in case of a major disaster this was one area that will be logistically very important as they had food rations for 200,000 people for a couple of weeks. So, it was very impressive. Now, nobody could have foreseen that this would have come in handy, almost immediately.

Another reason why many houses were damaged was because the building code had not been followed. Now that we have seen how devastating ignoring the building law has been, I hope that buildings will be built according to the building laws. Though this earthquake was devastating, we were all preparing for an eight plus scenario, where crucial infrastructures like the airport, roads and bridges would have been damaged, all 60 percent of the houses would have been damaged and more than 100,000 immediate death, this was the actual disaster scenario that we had been preparing for. And in fact this was a 7.9, however the crucial infrastructures were still intact which was very lucky, so the government and development partners were able to provide help almost immediately.

TOT: The EC has approved of a financial support worth over €20 million in aid, to assist Nepal, but how can you ensure that these funds are used effectively and don’t end up in the pockets of a few greedy and corrupt politicians?

Teerink: Well, we don’t of course give the money to the politicians but what we do is – work with the government. This government is an elected government so it is the representative of the people of Nepal and it would not be
good if we spent all our money in parallel systems because you don’t build up capacity this way and capacity building is what the government needs.

So, let me tell you how we work. The six million that came in as humanitarian assistance through ECHO was actually channeled through our local NGO partners that is the way ECHO operates worldwide. It operates through NGO’s and through the UN. So, in this case we worked with WFP, we paid for some of the Helicopter services which was very crucial to get the aid delivered. We have worked with OXFAM, Save the Children and so forth. Now, the bigger money for the rehabilitation and for the construction is yet to come, what we have done so far is made available 16.6 million Euros, but that is the money that had been already committed for some of our bigger programs but we fast tracked that amount which was going to the government for sector budget support, and we made it available now because we thought the government needs cash now.

An earthquake victim in tears while queuing up for water, Kathmandu: Photo:Gopen Rai/TOT

This was fast tracked it’s not fresh money, now the challenge will be to convince our people in Brussels and our leaders to get more money, because we have a big portfolio for Nepal and we had agreed 360 million Euros over the next seven years. But now that will not be enough and it is not easy to get fresh money allocated, maybe it will have to come from some other countries you know. reallocation needs to be done. We have to see how it can be done and I will try my best to help Nepal get the help it requires.

And you said the politicians, well we are ready to work with the government and have always worked with the government. I think also the government should work on how these funds will be used appropriately. The government must also look at different sources of how – help and investment can come into Nepal, for example I hope that – the European Investment Bank will also be ready to give a few more soft loans, as Nepal is not a country that is very much in debt, so a few more soft loans could be available. Another thing that could be done is – – to write off the debt that is already there.

However, I think, one important thing is to work on capacity building at the local level. I mean I have had people coming to Kathmandu and asking me– what earthquake, okay there were monuments which were destroyed, everything else looks pretty okay,—but that is not the case in the rural regions of the country, the scenario there is very different.

I have gone to Sindhupalchowk myself, I have been to Gorkha and in those places it is a completely different story because aid has
not reached there, so the relief efforts should not be centralized to Kathmandu, and regional help needs to reach the most affected VDCs. In the long run I think there will be a need for a master plan for these villages and for the poor who have lost everything.

It is very sad to see some of the efforts which successfully translated into economic success stories of the beneficiaries, were reversed by the earthquake. For example, I saw one project, with UNDP, where they were training local people for micro enterprises, it was successful and had been going on for ten years, we saw women who started off with one sewing machine and really managed to get their life together, they ended up with eight sewing machines, or they made candy out of Lapsi, or poultry, you know, all these economic activities have been destroyed, they are all gone. All these investments have gone barren as these people have loans, they cannot pay them off, and they have nothing. So what do you do for these people? To get their lives back on track, that has to be the issue. So, I think you should look at financial services locally and of course to really manage this, I think local governance is important. There should be local elections at some point because the problem is that this country has not had local elections for such a long time.

**TOT:** The Quake has been traumatizing, especially for young children whose entire lives are now in peril as a lot them have lost either one or both their parents to the quake and over thousands have been left homeless, in such a situation what steps do you think should be taken to ease trauma and begin rehabilitation of children?

**Teerink:** That is a very relevant question, and though I am not an expert on trauma I know that it has been very traumatic for
An earthquake victim from Sindhuli, 5-year-old Sumit Acharya receiving treatment from doctors at Dhulikhel hospital in Kavre outskirts of Kathmandu, after the May 12 quake. Photo: Gopen Rai/TOT

children, whose lives completely changed in a matter of seconds. They were at homes but now they are in orphanages. And, there is a massive pressure on the government to respond to this and I guess best thing at this point would be most probably for these children to be accommodated in their families and with other relatives who can take care of them. Despite this, I think there is a massive need for psychological support and it should not be given by outsiders, it should be initiated by Nepali doctors, psychologists and psychiatrists. They should reach out and try to see how they can best address these issues as it is an enormous challenge.

TOT: Like you said, this has been a very traumatic experience for children especially because they lost their loved ones and their homes and are forced to make changes in their lives, and to top it off over 1000 schools have been damaged in the Quakes, there are over a million children who are now out of schools at the moment, what would you say would be necessary for schools to resume as soon as possible and why is this important?

Teerink: I think it is very important for schools to resume. We feel education is really the basis and that is why we have been supporting the education sector since the early 90’s. And now the fact that children have been out of schools due to obvious reasons -for such a long time means they will continue to feel that they are in a different situation and this may also contribute to their anxiety. My son is very privileged, he goes to a school here but he goes to the British School, and maybe this cannot be compared to other schools in Nepal, as they have only been closed for two days and then it was business as usual. And my son, he is also not a small kid and he has put on quite a brave face about this, for him things have more or less come back to routine.

"The fact that children have been out of schools will continue to make them feel like they are in a different situation and this may also contribute to their anxiety."-- Rensje Teerink

I think even if a classroom has been destroyed that doesn’t matter so much, it is more a matter of gathering the children together and getting a teacher there, you know maybe even just talking about the earthquake, sharing their experiences. And, how to go through it let them draw things and talk about it amongst their friends. Even that is very useful. So, they don’t necessarily have to start learning the curriculum as usual, but schools need to start just as a matter of dealing with what happened.
TOT: Like you said, things need to come back to routine and though life is slowly coming back to normal, how do you think Nepal can address the post traumatic effect? As after the massive number of aftershocks including the massive one on May 13 2015, a lot of people not just children, but young adults, adults and the old alike are not only experiencing nightmares but even a small banging sound scares them, how do you think these issues can be addressed at community levels?

Teerink: It is very difficult and I must say I have not experienced anything like this before and I myself for the past three weeks have not slept well, you know you are always on the edge, and I don’t think anyone can understand this unless they have actually lived through it themselves. So, I guess what we need to see in the health sector is that we need to make funds available for psycho-social support, for this trauma and maybe create self help groups that could address these issues.

I feel, Nepal will come out of this, because if you see the people you will notice they are still smiling despite their loss, and this is very impressive. They are also very nice people who help each other out. For instance, when I was in Chautara-walking through the main street where everything has been destroyed, there really are no words to describe the destruction there, yet people were helping each other they were smiling, so it didn’t feel like there is stress in the air, people could be seen sitting around playing cards. It’s like you know, they are trying to get on with their lives and that is a very healthy disposition. So hopefully that will also help them overcome this disaster.

TOT: What was your initial reaction when the Earthquake hit Kathmandu, were you in Kathmandu at that time?

Teerink: I was in Kathmandu, in fact my husband and I had to fly out to Bangkok because we were attending a seminar there, and I had just said goodbye to my son, who is 17-years-old. He was leaving the house as well with his backpack and was going to Thamel for shopping. I said good bye to my mum who is 88, and she stays with us in Kathmandu. We said okay take care and her didi (care taker) was with her. So after bidding farewell to everyone, we left for the airport. We were sitting inside the airport when all of a sudden the electricity failed and the whole building started to sway. I thought at that moment, well this is it, this is the big one we had been expecting, the big one is happening now.

And I was in a total panic, I am not ashamed to say it, I was like okay we have to get out of this building before it collapses, but how
The road in Lokanthali, Bhaktapur had been damaged by a powerful earthquake that rattled Nepal on April 25.

Photo: Gopen Rai/TOT

will we get out? The staircases are narrow, people were screaming and were running like headless chickens and you just don’t know what to do. So were just staring, my husband— he managed to get under a counter and he had five panicked Chinese tourists on top of him, and I was standing next to a pillar saying okay, you have to find a safe place and I had a big window behind me so it wasn’t a safe place had the building collapsed. After the jolts stopped we managed to get out of the airport and the ground was still shaking and it goes on in your mind, as it seemed like it was very long but it was only 57 seconds.

And then while we were staying outside near the parking, it was like the whole valley was covered in mist. And, I was like thinking, these were all the buildings and they have turned to clouds of dust. We didn’t know what to expect, so I didn’t know what to do. Of course there was no question of taking that plane. So, we decided to get back to the residence.
Armed Police Force personnel taking out the dead bodies from the demolished buildings in Bhaktapur on April 27, 2015. Photo: Gopen Rai/TOT

All this time, I was thinking to myself, where is my son, is he in Thamel or at Civil Mall, or in one of those shopping centers. I couldn’t phone him, my radios were not working, so we were just standing there not knowing what to do and then at that moment I said to the driver let’s just drive back to the residence, see how the road looks.

And driving was quite a surreal experience because in fact most of the buildings were still standing, the only damage I saw while driving back from the airport to Naxal were the compound walls.

But, houses even precarious ones were still standing. So I said, oh well, maybe it wasn’t that big, it wasn’t that bad. And then we reached the house, luckily my son had come back, he had hidden somewhere in Thamel under a table and he then came home. And, my mom was just sitting in the garden. They were all fine, there had been no damage. So, at that point you don’t really gather that it had been a serious quake, the facts of the devastation it had caused came later.

TOT: When it comes to “gender issues” and violence against women and children Nepal has been struggling to give its women the rights they deserve, especially in the rural region, at a time like this, as a woman yourself what kind of steps do you think should be taken to prevent VAW?

Teerink: I think a lot is already underway, if you look at what UNFPA is doing they have been distributing dignity kits to women living in camps or are outside. Here the local NGO’s also have a very important role to play, it’s also about self help and the government should also look into that.

TOT: Girls are especially vulnerable to violence and human trafficking, as approximately 1.4 million children have been left homeless, is the EU doing anything to help to prevent child predators from taking advantage of them and traffickers taking them to brothels across the border?

Teerink: Also with trafficking it is the same issue I think the activities of organizations like UNFPA, Maiti Nepal should continue. We have to look at how to address this now, but before the earthquake Maiti Nepal was one of our partners, we worked with IOM and ILO, we have had some projects that tackle migration and making migration to other countries more secure, by identifying for example who the recruiters are and if they are reliable. But in terms of trafficking of women and children the local NGO’s are doing a fantastic job and they need to be supported more.
TOT: My, next question, is a question we ask all our guests, can you tell us what Human Rights mean, to you?

Teerink: For me it means that any human being whether they are male, female, transgender, whatever race, whatever religion, whatever color should have the same rights to live a decent, happy life and it shouldn’t matter what their political opinions or religious beliefs are. Everybody should have the same rights. And, this is also a value that the European Union has very strongly sought to propagate worldwide. That is why we consider ourselves as a soft power.

A new born baby, born during the April 25 quake at a health camp. Photo: Gopen Rai/TOT

If you look at for example the earthquake response, The British came here with their military assets, the Americans everybody came with the assets they have. We don’t have that the only thing we have is self power and the messages we can give and the work we carry out with our local partners.

So that is what the EU is and what we stand for and that is what we have been advocating.

TOT: Finally, is there anything that you would like to say to our global readers?

Teerink: Well, because you are working for an international media, I would like to say that Nepal needs help, don’t forget about Nepal now. It is sad to see that the international press has relegated Nepal already, a week after the main earthquake, this is not over so, I think the real work will all start now and it is a massive undertaking. So, people need to remain in solidarity with Nepal and also continue visiting Nepal after the monsoon when things will have more-or-less come back to normal. As this is one way of helping the country overcome this natural disaster.
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