

● Nepal

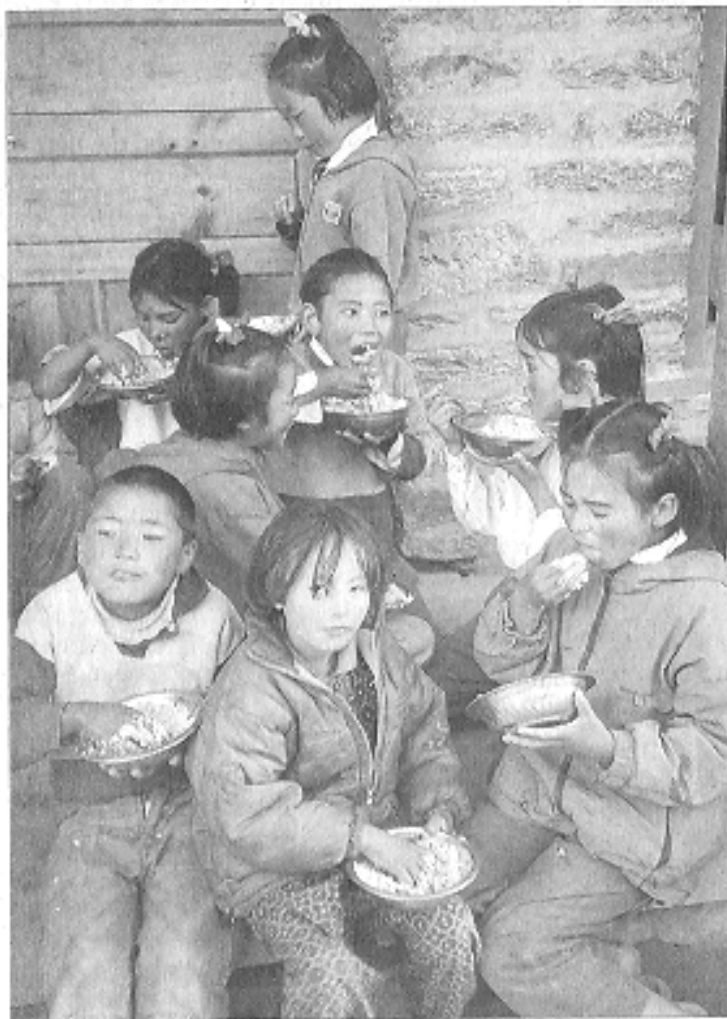
more than two-thirds of the country. While the Maoists generally have not targeted violence toward Westerners, they have made numerous threats and regularly require "forced monetary "donations" from foreign trekkers.

Despite the political chaos and potential for violence, I have wanted very badly to return to my Tibetan school over the last few years. Earlier this fall I realized that if I waited for peace to return to Nepal, I could be waiting decades. I communicated with several Nepali friends in Kathmandu and they assured me that the last couple of months have been relatively stable.

I decided to take my chances and bought my ticket to depart for Kathmandu on Sept. 27.

The flights were part of the adventure. I flew Thai Airways nonstop from New York City to Bangkok straight over the North Pole. At just under 17 hours flight time, it is the second-longest flight in the world. More importantly, it cuts more than 10 hours off of an already exhausting 24-hour plus journey. From Bangkok I flew to Kathmandu and then on to Pokhara, the staging point for treks in the Annapurna region of western Nepal.

In order to reach the



A DIET OF rice, potatoes, lentils, Tibetan bread and two eggs per week are among the staples in the rugged mountain village.

school in Manang, which is more than four days hike from the nearest road, I flew "Shangrila" Airlines' ancient turboprop with five other Nepali passengers. Flights to Manang had just commenced in late September following the close of the summer long

monsoon. But flights are irregular at best because of ferocious winds in the Himalayas that develop each day after 10 a.m. and because of frequent technical and equipment problems.

Seated in front of me was a Tibetan monk - called a

Lama - who runs the monastery in Manang. The engines roared to life and we gazed out the windows to the rising Himalayas below us. After 25 minutes flying straight up the Himalayas, we crossed a mountain ridge and glided down to a remote dirt landing strip on the floor of a valley at 12,000 feet elevation. Stepping onto the tarmac, I gasped for oxygen and stood in awe at the sight of the 25,000 foot plus Himalayan peaks soaring all around me.

Because flights are a rarity, villagers race to the airport at the first sound of the buzzing engines entering the valley. Many people recognized me from my last trip. The villagers directed me to a new steel suspension foot bridge, which had been constructed across the river gorge that divides the valley and separates the Lophel Ling School from the airport village of Humde.

The length of the bridge and high winds caused the bridge to sway as I crossed it. Hundreds of colorful Tibetan prayer flags are tied across the length of the bridge. As they flap in the wind, the flags send their prayers into the world. This offered some reassurance as I carefully stepped across the swinging bridge.

Next: Curley returns to the Ling Tibetan School