

THE WAKEFIELD DAILY ITEM

Journey to Nepal brings local attorney back "home"

WEDNESDAY
NOVEMBER 2, 2005
Wakefield, MA 01830

Patrick G. Curley revisits the Lophel Ling Tibetan School

(Wakefield Attorney Patrick G. Curley just returned from a trip to the remote Nepali Himalayas to revisit the Lophel Ling Tibetan School where he was a volunteer math teacher for 10 weeks in the spring 2001. Here's Part I of a two-part account of his journey.)

By PATRICK G. CURLEY

Unfortunately, the political situation declined considerably after I departed Nepal on June 1, 2001. That evening, the Crown Prince, who was heir to the throne, murdered his parents the King and Queen of Nepal along with nine other members of the Nepali Royal family. The King's brother - who happened to have been out of the country at the time of the murders - assumed the throne but many citizens question his legitimacy and hint that he may have been behind the murders.

The Maoist insurgency, which had simmered since 1996 and left more than 1,200 dead, increased dramatically following the Royal mur-



LOCAL ATTORNEY Patrick Curley with some of the children from the Lophel Ling Tibetan School wearing hooded fleece jackets that he brought to the school in the remote Nepali Himalayas.

ders and resulting political vacuum. In the last four years, an additional 10,000 Maoists, military, police and civilians have been killed in the conflict.

Earlier this year the King dismissed the government, imposed emergency rule and suspended civil rights

including freedom of expression, assembly and privacy. In response to sharp criticism at home and abroad, the King has thrown hundreds of politicians, journalists and students in prison.

Tourism - the life blood of Nepal - has dropped by two-thirds or more since its peak

in 1999 because Westerners are afraid to go there. Indeed, the United States, Japan and Australia explicitly order their citizens to defer all non-essential travel to Nepal. It is estimated that the Maoists may control

● Nepal

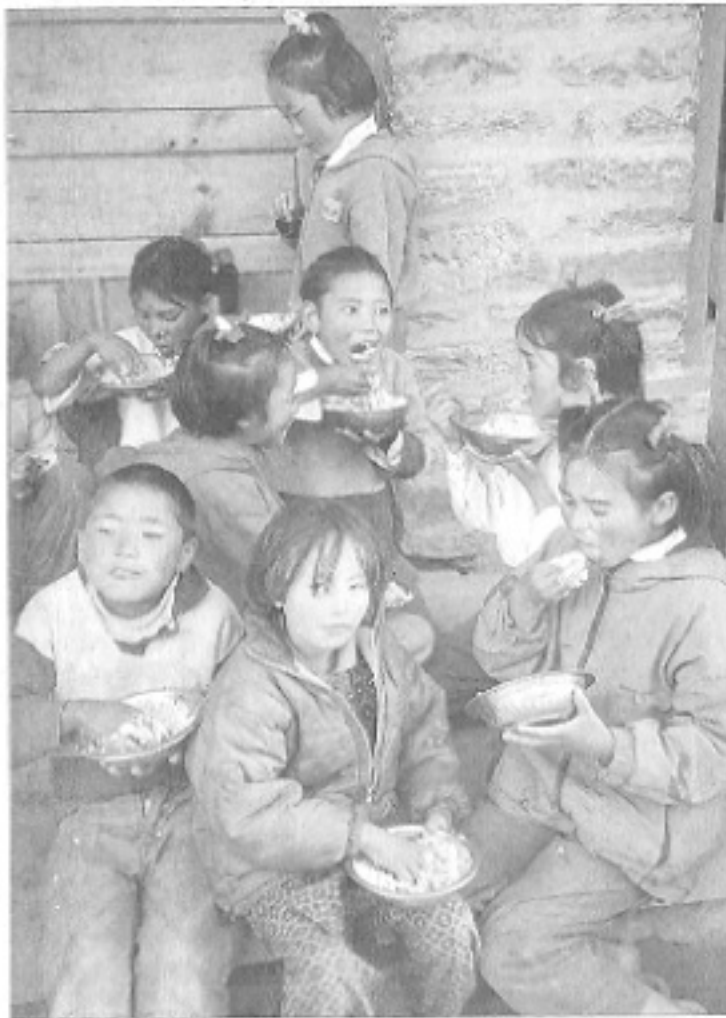
more than two-thirds of the country. While the Maoists generally have not targeted violence toward Westerners, they have made numerous threats and regularly require "forced monetary "donations" from foreign trekkers.

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