

Nepal quake leaves children traumatised

May 5 2015

Ten-year-old Ranju Giri wrings her hands as she describes how she cowered terrified under a bed with her younger brother when a massive earthquake rocked their home in Kathmandu.

Like many [children](#) in the Nepalese capital, Ranju survived the earthquake physically unharmed. But she bears the mental scars of a disaster that has devastated the country, killing thousands and leaving many more homeless.

"We were so scared, we went under the bed to protect ourselves. And after that we went to an open area. It took a long time to console my brother," said Ranju, whose mother was out working when the [quake](#) hit on April 25.

Since that day, Ranju's family has been camping out with hundreds of others on Kathmandu's Tundikhel parade ground, where UNICEF has set up tents to provide a space for children to play safely and begin to overcome their ordeal.

The UN children's agency says the trauma of surviving an earthquake has been compounded by children being left homeless and by the aftershocks that have continued to rock the city since the 7.8-magnitude quake hit on April 25.

Spokesman Kent Page said the spaces were designed to give young people "a sense of normalcy in a situation that's absolutely abnormal".

"That is important for them to recover from the traumatic experience they've been through," he said.

"We know from experience that children are very resilient. If we can get them into a normal routine and get them into a safe place to play and meet kids, they can really bounce back quickly."

Training teachers

With all government schools closed until May 15, 22 of these child-friendly spaces have been set up in the Kathmandu Valley and the UN says it wants to expand the service.

On Monday morning, children of all ages ran around in the sun laughing and playing at the space in Tundikhel, while others drew or played quietly with dolls in a corner of a large tent.

Young Nepali volunteers were on hand along with trained counsellors to ensure the children—many of whom lost relatives or friends in the quake—have someone to talk to about their experiences.

Thirteen-year-old Prakash Giri, who was playing cricket in the street with his best friend when the quake hit, said the space had given him the chance to meet other children and compare experiences.

"In my home there is only me and my sister," said Prakash, who isn't related to Ranju.

"I was scared at first but not any more—I come here and I can have fun with other children."

UNICEF child protection advisor Prakash Acharya said many of the children he spoke to had nightmares about the quake or feared it would

happen again.

"One of them could not talk about that period, but after some time he slowly started talking. He said that when the earthquake hit, his feet were sticking and he could not move," said Acharya.

"It helps them to come out here, their resilience is built up."

Acharya said UNICEF also planned to train teachers in how to deal with traumatised children when schools reopened.

Around 16,000 schools were damaged by the quake, and over a dozen teachers have been confirmed dead.

It remains unclear how many children were orphaned by the quake or separated from their parents in the chaos that followed, but the UN said it had received reports of unaccompanied children in Kathmandu and other districts. A hotline for reporting such cases has been set up.

Ranju was one of the luckier ones—her parents survived. But with both of them out at work in the day, she is left alone to look after her younger siblings.

"These children now have a place where they can come and they can do some learning activities and do things like they would do in school," said Page.

"It's a place where they can have fun, learn, play, and be kids again."

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