

September 2026

सुरक्षित संसार

towards total loss prevention

SAFER WORLD

NEPAL

FLASH FLOODS A NATION IN DISTRESS

*Nepal's Spirit Endures: From
Crisis to Recovery*



THE DISASTER
How It Unfolded



THE AFTERMATH
Lives, Homes, Livelihoods



THE IMPACT
Communities & Economy



RESCUE OPERATIONS
Hope in Action



THE WAY FORWARD
Building a More
Resilient Future



Nepal Floods

Five Months Ago Before Disaster,
Experts Warned Of Massive Glacier
Melting In Himalayas

Nepal's Bhote Koshi flood showed that we can now watch the Himalaya in extraordinary detail. It also showed that watching is not the same as warning.

Dr. Sanjay K.
Srivastava

EARTH OBSERVATION | ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE | DISASTER RISK

THE MOUNTAIN SENT A SIGNAL

At **8:37** on the morning of 26 August 2026, seismometers on the far side of the planet registered what looked like a magnitude-5.2 earthquake beneath the Langtang Himal. It was not an earthquake. A slab of glacier and rock roughly 600 metres across had let go from near 5,600 metres and fallen more than a kilometre into the headwaters of the Lhende Khola. The debris briefly dammed the river. When that dam failed, something on the order of 100 million cubic metres of water, pulverised ice

and sediment went down the valley, covering the first 22 kilometres at an average of 193 kilometres an hour.

The sky was clear. No rain had fallen. Within seven minutes the Gyirong border port on the Tibetan side of China had

been destroyed; within thirteen, the river gauge at Syabrubesi had stopped transmitting. The Trishuli rose by as much as nine metres in half an hour. Nepal has since confirmed more than 1,340 dead and nearly 4,900 missing, with further losses across the border. Bodies were recovered 240 kilometres downstream, in India.

Figure 1 · The cascade, minute by minute

One ice-rock collapse became five different hazards in under an hour. Clear sky, no rain.



Figure 1. The event as a chain, not an incident. Each stage produced a different hazard with a different warning requirement.

An improvised constellation

What happened next deserves more attention than it has received. Within days, a detailed picture of a disaster in one of the least accessible valleys in Asia had been assembled - not by any single agency, but by an ad hoc coalition of satellites, sensors and volunteers that nobody had convened in advance. The first useful images crossed a border. Chinese and Indian authorities passed pre- and post-event scenes to Nepal's Department of Hydrology and Meteorology, showing debris blocking the river some 20 kilometres upstream of the Miteri Bridge. ICIMOD relayed further assessments from Chinese sources to Nepal's disaster authority before any official channel had produced an account. Europe contributed in

parallel: Copernicus Sentinel-2 imagery supported the early diagnosis of the source zone, with an Emergency Management Service rapid mapping activation over two areas of interest.

Commercial operators moved fastest, and in this case most openly. Planet published within about a day, including sub-metre SkySat collections over Rasuwagadhi and Syabrubesi; its scenes revealed the detachment. Vantor, formerly Maxar Intelligence, released 30-centimetre stereo imagery free of charge. Beneath both sat NASA terrain models already in the public domain and a global seismic network that had timed the trigger to the second. On that base, an independent team reconstructed flow heights and velocities in three

days - work that a decade ago would have been a funded research project and a season of effort. When one of their sediment measurements proved wrong, they retracted it publicly and released the corrected analysis. Nepal's own space research association ran a parallel Flood Watch service, careful to label it situational awareness rather than official warning.

Drones supplied what orbit could not: detail beneath cloud, in shadowed gorges, in near-real time. The Nepal Drone Association mobilised its members within hours, asking operators to keep batteries charged and to coordinate rather than freelance. Pilots flew thermal cameras to search for survivors across Rasuwa, Nuwakot and Dhading, and LiDAR to

Figure 2 - The improvised constellation

No single country or agency saw the event. The picture was assembled from instruments nobody had arranged in advance.

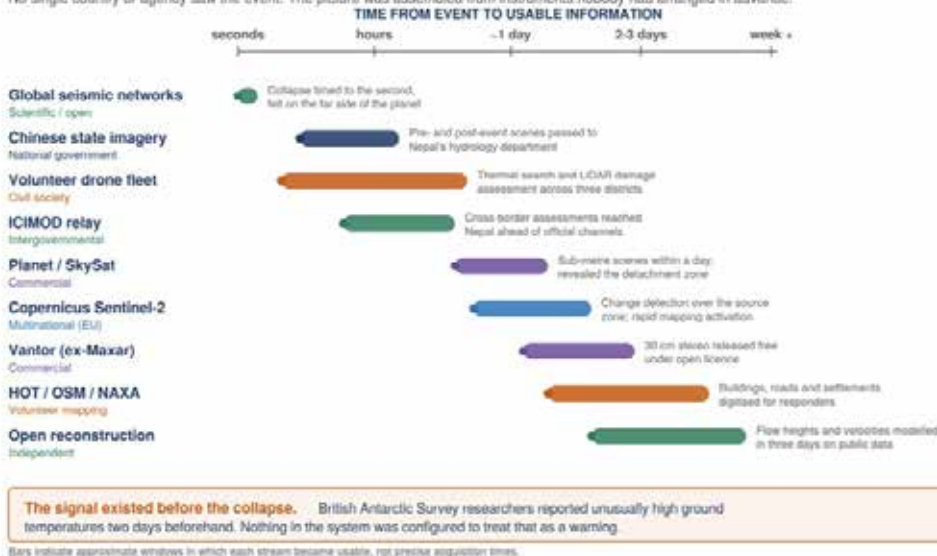


Figure 2. Nine independent streams, four ownership models, no prior coordination. The capability is real; the architecture is accidental.

measure damage where roads and communications had failed. The Robotics Association of Nepal and other civil technology groups worked alongside state agencies. Authorities required prior approval from district administrations or the Home Ministry before any flight, to keep small aircraft clear of rescue helicopters - an early and quite practical instance of airspace governance for a volunteer sensing fleet. Meanwhile the Humanitarian OpenStreetMap Team, NAXA and local mappers digitised buildings, roads and settlements so that responders had something to navigate by.

Where the chain broke

Set against that, the warning failure is stark. Every instrument worked. The failure was in the links

between them.

Consider what was known. Researchers at the British Antarctic Survey reported unusually high ground temperatures in the area two days before the collapse. The seismic signal announced the event to the world within seconds. Satellites were overhead. Nepal's Flood Forecasting Division issued its downstream alert within minutes of learning what had happened from the district administration. And yet: the telemetric stations on the upper Bhote Koshi were destroyed before they could transmit, taken out by precisely the thing they existed to detect. Around 120 telecom towers went down across three districts. The seismic signal, which told the world what had occurred well before anyone in Kathmandu

knew, was not wired to anything capable of issuing a warning. Attribution itself took days - whether this was a glacial lake outburst, an ice-rock avalanche or a landslide-induced flood was still contested a week later.

What actually saved lives was analogue. At a secondary school in Bidur, an accountant took a telephone call from a relative up in Rasuwa and handed it to the headmaster about fourteen minutes before the water arrived. He stopped the class and rang the bell. Roughly 900 students and 16 staff were off the campus in time. Nothing formal reached them. A single phone call passed down a line of relatives is the clearest possible measure of what the valley did not have.

Figure 3 · Where the chain broke

Every instrument worked. The failure was in the links between them.



Observation scaled. Extraction did not.



Relative capability demonstrated during the response — indicative, not measured.
Soldiers searched a flooded hydropower tunnel by the light of their phones while portals, drones and GIS converged on the valley.

Figure 3. The warning chain has six links. Detection was excellent; decision and delivery failed; action was improvised.

What AI can and cannot fix

It is tempting to read this as an argument for more artificial intelligence, and in part it is. Machine learning is genuinely well suited to several of these gaps. Seismic discrimination - distinguishing a moving mountain from a slipping fault in the first seconds of a signal - is a classification problem of exactly the kind modern methods handle well. Automated change detection across optical, radar and elevation data can flag unusual glacier movement and evolving barrier lakes without waiting for an analyst. Computer vision can map destroyed buildings and washed-out roads from high-resolution imagery far faster than volunteers can trace them.

The more ambitious vision is a Himalayan digital twin: Earth observation, hydrological models, cryosphere monitoring and infrastructure databases fused into a dynamic representation of the mountain system, capable of simulating a hazard chain before it happens. This is a serious proposition and worth pursuing. Cascading hazards are precisely what single-hazard models miss, and the Bhote Koshi ran through five distinct hazard types in under an hour.

But it is worth being honest about where the binding constraint lies. The upper layers of that architecture attract research funding, publications and vendor enthusiasm. The bottom layer - an alert that arrives on a phone in Timure and is believed - attracts almost none.

Nepal's response was, in one observer's phrase, high technology meeting low-technology reality: government agencies using portals, drones, GIS and AI to collect and share information, while soldiers searched a flooded hydropower tunnel by the light of their smartphones.

The tractable agenda

Four things follow, and none of them requires a decade or a breakthrough.

Wire the seismic network to an alerting protocol. A discriminator that separates slope collapses from tectonic events, coupled to automated satellite tasking and a message that goes out without waiting for human confirmation of what the mountain has already said, is protocol design rather than frontier science.

Figure 4 · A Himalayan digital twin, and the layer that matters

The architecture is buildable today. Its value depends entirely on the bottom layer.



Figure 4. Every layer above the bottom one is a research programme. The bottom one is a protocol, and it is cheap.

Site monitoring for survival. At least one node above the design flood line, with satellite-backed communication, for every instrumented high-mountain catchment. The stations that died on 26 August were placed for the event that killed them.

Watch permafrost. It is the glue holding these slopes together and the least monitored variable in the region. Ground temperature anomalies preceded this collapse; almost nothing in the system was configured to treat them as actionable.

Formalise the volunteers. The drone association, the mappers and the open-data analysts outperformed several official channels. That capability should be pre-registered, insured, airspace-deconflicted and funded, not reassembled

from scratch after each disaster.

None of this displaces the digital twin agenda; it is what makes the agenda worth funding. A model that can simulate a hazard chain in a valley where no alert can reach the valley floor is an academic exercise. The Bhote Koshi has given the region a rare, well-documented cascade to learn from, captured in more detail than any comparable Himalayan event, by more independent instruments, at lower cost. That dataset is itself a resource: training material for the very models that might anticipate the next one.

A barrier lake sat upstream for days after the collapse. Somewhere along this arc the next one is forming now. We will almost certainly see it. Whether

anyone is told, and in time, is a different question - and it is not a technical one.

(Author is the S. Radhakrishnan Chair Professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Indian Institute of Science Campus, Bengaluru. A former Chief of Disaster Risk Reduction at the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, he has over 25 years of experience in early warning systems, space-based technologies and risk governance across the Asia-Pacific.)

A note on figures
Casualty figures, debris volumes and velocity estimates vary between sources and remain provisional. Figures here draw on Nepal's NDRRMA and DHM, ICIMOD, Copernicus, and published satellite analyses, and should be checked against official releases and peer-reviewed studies before republication.