

Nepal disaster: Fake and AI images flood social media as deaths mount

By Anil Karki



Nepal asks platforms to act against AI-generated misinformation after floods

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There is a difference between holding power accountable with verifiable facts and converting tragedy into a referendum on a country one has already decided to condemn.

Reviewing Rasuwa Response

A Media Analysis of Media Coverage, Political and Geopolitical Dimensions, Climate Justice, and Misinformation/Disinformation of the Rasuwa (Bhotekoshi) Flood (26 August – 8 September 2026)

of the Himalayas crossing in Xizang

Floods in Nepal and Tibet: restrictions and disinformation are impeding vital news



In disaster aftermath, Nepal braces for flood of misinformation

As rescuers work to prevent premature burial in the disaster, social media platforms have been flooded with AI-generated videos, recycled footage and graphic content.



Video of mosque withstanding floods manipulated from footage 'miracle house'

सङ्कलमा घृणा : कारबाही गरौं

अखेर, हिमालयकै र आन्ध्रप्रदेशकै राजधानी दिल्लीको अधिवासी संसदसभामै यस्ता घटना भईन् । ती समाचार लखे बिचमम हुन् । तसर्थ सभामा हिमालयकोलाई बेवाह सम्झ्ने लक्षमा ल्याउन सकिन्छ भन्ने टिप्पणी सामाजिक बन्दा भन्नेछन्, मध्येलाई पनि प्रोत्साहन पुग्छ ।

10/2/2026 10:00

A joint initiative and publication by:
Nepal Institute of Research & Communications (NIRC)
and Ethical Media

NIRC



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September, 2026

Recommended citation

NIRC and Ethical Media (2026). *Reviewing Rasuwa Response: A Media Analysis of Media Coverage, Political and Geopolitical Dimensions, Climate Justice, and Misinformation/Disinformation of the Rasuwa (Bhotekoshi) Flood*. Kathmandu.

Executive Summary

On the morning of August 26, 2026, a mass of ice and rock estimated at 100–200 million cubic metres sheared off a slope near Langtang Lirung on the Nepal-China border, releasing energy that geohazard expert Basanta Raj Adhikari of Tribhuvan University calculated exceeded that of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima (Down To Earth, 2026a). The resulting debris flow, travelling at an estimated 193 kilometres per hour through its first 22 kilometres, dammed and then violently released the Lhende Khola into the Bhote Koshi and Trishuli river systems, devastating Rasuwa, Nuwakot, Dhading, Gorkha, Tanahun, and Chitwan districts in Nepal and destroying the Gyirong border crossing in Tibet (CNN, 2026a). This report consolidates fifteen days of national and international media monitoring, from the disaster's onset through September 8, 2026.

By September 8, Nepal Police recorded 1,357 confirmed deaths with 5,326 people still unaccounted for and more than 13,500 rescued, while a broader disaster-authority missing-persons count, aggregated separately by AFP, put the combined toll as high as 1,385 dead and over 5,500 missing (Himalayan Times, 2026c; mappr.co, 2026). Reconstruction costs are estimated at \$2.5–5 billion (South China Morning Post, 2026a; Bloomberg, 2026a), a scale of loss Nepal has formally asked the UN's Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage (FRLD) to help address — the fund's first-ever emergency, out-of-cycle request (South China Morning Post, 2026a; english.nepalnews.com, 2026a).

Coverage across the fifteen-day period moved through five broad, overlapping phases: (1) an initial casualty-and-visuals phase (Aug 26–28); (2) a scientific-explanatory phase establishing the glacier-collapse cause and a secondary barrier-lake threat (Aug 27–31); (3) a sustained rescue-and-resilience phase anchored by dramatic hydropower-tunnel rescues (Aug 28–Sep 8); (4) an accountability-and-finance phase encompassing communications failures, missing-persons verification, hydropower policy, development-bank financing scrutiny, and the Loss and Damage Fund petition (Sep 1–8); and (5) a reflective, analytically mature phase in which journalists and academics catalogued the disaster's unusually large and varied misinformation ecosystem (Sep 2–8). Running throughout was a persistent geopolitical undercurrent concerning Nepal-China data-sharing failures and a durable, bidirectional disinformation contest over Chinese responsibility for the disaster.

I. Background

At approximately 8:37–8:40 a.m. on August 26, a large hanging section of glacier and bedrock on the northern slope of Langtang Lirung collapsed, generating a seismic signal of magnitude 5.2 with no preceding earthquake (Down To Earth, 2026a; Stimson Center, 2026). The debris fell roughly 1,200 metres into the Lhende Khola, briefly damming the river before the barrier failed, unleashing a flood wave that reached Nepal's Syabrubesi within minutes and struck the Gyirong border crossing just 7.5 minutes after the initial collapse, an impact captured on Chinese CCTV cameras (icenepal.com, 2026; Stimson Center, 2026). CNN's satellite analysis found the collapse left a 3,000-foot-wide gash in the mountainside, and that the flood wave descended its first 22 kilometres at an average speed of 193 km/h nearly 14 miles in six minutes fifty seconds (CNN, 2026a).

- Aug 26–27: Flood strikes; initial reports of single-digit deaths rapidly revised upward; Gyirong crossing destroyed; communications severed across Rasuwa-Nuwakot corridor (CNN, 2026a).
- Aug 28–29: A secondary hazard emerges with debris-dammed barrier lakes begin overflowing, briefly halting rescue operations on both sides of the border as scientists warn of a possible second catastrophic wave (Al Jazeera, 2026d; CNN, 2026f).
- Aug 28–30: Death toll passes 750–900; over 900 hydropower workers reported missing across 12 damaged projects; dramatic rescues of workers who scrambled hand-over-hand through flooded tunnels (CNN, 2026b; Al Jazeera, 2026a).

- Aug 31: China penalises 10 citizens for spreading exaggerated casualty rumours; Beijing's MFA publicly rejects Indian TV claims blaming China for the disaster as "malicious speculation" (Hong Kong Free Press, 2026a; The Wire, 2026).
- Sep 1: Nepal formally petitions the FRLD for emergency assistance; death toll passes 1,000 (Al Jazeera, 2026b; english.nepalnews.com, 2026a).
- Sep 2–3: Symbolic funerals begin at Pashupatinath Temple; mass burial of unidentified remains sparks religious controversy; Sunita Narain delivers "engineering mindset" critique in New Delhi (Euronews, 2026; Down To Earth, 2026b).
- Sep 4: Two workers, Sanjay Sah and Kabir Maharjan, rescued alive after nine days trapped in the Trishuli 3A tunnel; FM Khanal's climate-compensation remarks are amplified internationally then partially walked back (Al Jazeera, 2026c; CNN, 2026d; theprint.in, 2026a).
- Sep 5–6: Death toll reaches 1,290–1,353; Nepal halts electricity exports to India amid 431 MW generation loss; international rescue teams from Malaysia and Australia join the response (Himalayan Times, 2026b; KELO, 2026; mappr.co, 2026).
- Sep 7–8: Nepal Police records 1,357 dead, 5,326 missing, 13,500-plus rescued; SCMP and Bloomberg report the FRLD request in detail; fact-checkers (Full Fact, ABC Religion & Ethics) publish retrospective analyses cataloguing the fullest range yet of disaster-related misinformation; Reuters publishes an investigative feature reconstructing Sah and Maharjan's nine days underground (Himalayan Times, 2026c; Full Fact, 2026a; ABC Religion & Ethics, 2026; Reuters, 2026b).

Mass Burials and Symbolic Funerals: A Religious and Social Flashpoint

With Nepal's mortuaries overwhelmed and many recovered bodies decomposed beyond preservation, authorities temporarily buried unidentified remains in mass graves after DNA sampling, intending to exhume and return them to families once identified. This practice sparked significant friction within Nepal's largely Hindu community, who see it as a violation of customary cremation rites. In parallel, grieving families who had lost hope of recovering a body turned to symbolic cremation, burning kush-grass effigies in place of remains at Pashupatinath Temple in Kathmandu, a ritual intended to "liberate the souls" of the missing (Euronews, 2026). This dual phenomenon, administrative mass burial alongside religious symbolic cremation, became one of the most emotionally resonant and widely photographed storylines of the disaster's second week.

Analysis

The mass-burial controversy illustrates a recurring tension in disaster reporting between administrative necessity and cultural legitimacy: DNA-sampling protocols exist precisely to eventually restore remains to families, yet the interim measure was covered largely through the lens of violation rather than procedure, reflecting how disaster journalism tends to foreground grief and ritual disruption over the forensic logic driving official decisions. Neither framing is inaccurate, but coverage rarely holds both in view simultaneously.

2. Methodology

This consolidated report draws on national (Nepali), international, regional (Indian/South Asian), and Chinese state media reporting; fact-checking investigations, including Nepal Fact Check's dedicated bulletins; government and multilateral situation reports; academic and civil-society analysis; and publicly available social media content published between August 26 and September 8, 2026. Where official casualty counts diverge as between Nepal Police's daily bulletin and the broader disaster-authority missing-persons list used by AFP, this report presents both figures rather than resolving the discrepancy, since the gap itself is analytically informative about the challenges of verification in a disaster of this scale.

3. Media Coverage Pattern

Coverage patterns differed meaningfully by outlet type across the fifteen-day window, and a comparative reading across government, national, and citizen media reveals distinct institutional postures, discussed in Section 3.6.

3.1 Domestic Nepali Media

Kathmandu Post and Onlinekhabar English produced the most granular day-by-day reporting, moving from casualty updates (Aug 26–28) through scientific explainers (Aug 28) to sustained accountability reporting from Sep 1 onward: telecommunications failure (83 Nepal Telecom towers and 27 Ncell towers damaged), 147 local officials and 600 children unaccounted for, and a National Human Rights Commission critique of federal-provincial-local coordination gaps (Kathmandu Post, 2026b, 2026c; english.nepalnews.com, 2026a). OnlineKhabar's ground reporting from Trishuli-side communities additionally documented a distinct, non-digital misinformation phenomenon: residents cut off from electricity and connectivity described terror driven by word-of-mouth rumours that China was about to "open all the dams and lakes upstream," that Gosainkunda was about to burst, or that Manasarovar had "tipped over" (OnlineKhabar English, 2026a).

Analysis

The shift from casualty reporting to accountability reporting around September 1 is worth reading critically rather than as simple journalistic maturation: it coincides almost exactly with the point at which acute rescue operations began yielding diminishing returns, meaning the accountability narrative may partly reflect a natural narrative vacuum being filled as much as a considered editorial judgment that institutional failures deserved scrutiny. This does not make the reporting less valid, but it suggests NIRC should track whether accountability coverage intensity correlates more with rescue-operation tempo than with the underlying severity of the institutional failures being reported.

3.2 International Wire and Broadcast Media

International wire services and broadcasters such as the CNN, Reuters, AP, NPR, Al Jazeera, NBC News, and CBS News supplied the bulk of English-language global coverage and showed the clearest five-phase progression described in the Executive Summary. CNN maintained near-continuous rolling live-updates coverage across the full fifteen days, supplementing casualty tracking with original scientific and satellite analysis: its finding that the flood wave travelled at 193 km/h through its first 22 kilometres, credited to Planetary Science Institute senior scientist Jeffrey Kargel, became one of the most widely cited technical details across the broader international press corps (CNN, 2026a). Reuters' contribution was distinctively investigative rather than rolling: its September 2 exclusive on the failed May 2026 Nepal-China data-sharing talks, and its September 8 reconstruction of survivors Kabir Maharjan and

Sanjay Sah's nine days in a flooded tunnel drawing on engineering drawings and family interviews rather than official briefings exemplified a slower, source-driven reporting style distinct from the rolling-update format used elsewhere (Reuters, 2026a, 2026b). Al Jazeera's coverage was notable for sustained attention to the secondary barrier-lake hazard, running dedicated pieces on August 28 warning of a possible second flood even as international attention was still concentrated on the initial disaster (Al Jazeera, 2026d).

Analysis

International broadcasters' heavy reliance on named Western scientific sources (Kargel, and University of Colorado Boulder's Alton Byers on the barrier-lake threat) gave their coverage a technically authoritative register, but also meant Nepali and Chinese scientific voices were comparatively underrepresented in the highest-circulation English-language accounts of the disaster's physical mechanics, even though Nepali institutions such as Tribhuvan University's Centre for Disaster Studies and ICIMOD were conducting parallel, and in some cases earlier, analysis. This is a pattern worth flagging for NIRC's ongoing source-diversity tracking: technical authority in international coverage skewed toward institutions outside the region even when the underlying expertise existed within it.

3.3 Chinese State and Cross-Border Coverage

Chinese coverage emphasised both a domestic-control posture and eventual cooperative engagement. On the control side, Chinese authorities penalised 10 citizens for spreading rumours that exaggerated the Chinese-side casualty count with penalties ranging from fines to 10 days' detention while separately, at a formal MFA press briefing on August 31, spokesperson Guo Jiakun rejected Indian TV claims blaming Chinese infrastructure as "malicious speculation that has no factual basis" (Hong Kong Free Press, 2026a; The Wire, 2026). On the cooperative side, later coverage (Reuters, via CNN and chinaglobalsouth.com) revealed Nepal and China had held undisclosed data-sharing talks on May 27, 2026 three months before the disaster that ended without agreement, and that Nepal is now installing seismic sensors, cameras, and a satellite link at Timure with a view to deepening cooperation (CNN, 2026e; chinaglobalsouth.com, 2026; Reuters, 2026a).

Analysis

These two postures - domestic censorship of rumour-mongering and formal diplomatic rejection of foreign media blame are not contradictory but serve a common function: both narrow the space in which the Chinese state's own conduct could be questioned, whether by its own citizens exaggerating harm or by external media assigning causal responsibility. Read together, they suggest China's information strategy in this disaster prioritised narrative discipline on both fronts simultaneously, a posture distinct from Nepal's own, comparatively more porous and self-critical domestic media environment.

3.4 Regional (Indian) Media

Indian coverage evolved from wire-syndicated reporting toward substantial original journalism. ThePrint's ground report from Bidur and Nuwakot found eyewitnesses received only seconds' warning, with no sirens, SMS, or public alerts before the flood struck, substantiating the early-warning failure at a human level (theprint.in, 2026b). ThePrint and SCMP also gave the most detailed coverage of Nepal's FRLD petition and the subsequent India-Nepal diplomatic exchange over climate compensation.

Analysis

Indian television's role as a named target of Chinese diplomatic pushback (Section 3.3) sits uneasily alongside ThePrint's more measured, ground-level reportage, a reminder that "Indian media" was not

monolithic during this disaster, and that broadcast-television sensationalism and print/digital investigative journalism operated under different incentives and produced materially different coverage quality.

3.5 Analytical and Long-Form Commentary

Himal Southasian's essay situates the disaster within a Global North culpability framework, arguing accountability must be apportioned between the Global North as the historic and largest producer of greenhouse gases, the economic model pushing infrastructure into vulnerable valleys, and Himalayan states' own failure to collaborate while noting the Hindu Kush Himalaya's combined emissions contribution is itself minuscule (Himal Southasian, 2026). Nepali Times' "A Disastrous State of Affairs in Nepal" situates the flood against the first anniversary of the September 2025 Gen-Z movement, arguing the disaster's scale was a shock but not unexpected given decades of climatologist and seismologist warnings (Nepali Times, 2026a). New Spotlight Magazine's September 7 commentary adds a more self-critical domestic counterpoint, arguing that climate justice cannot mean asking the international community to finance problems Nepal could reasonably prevent itself, and that repeatedly rebuilding the same infrastructure after known risks are ignored is a decision-making failure, not only a finance gap (New Spotlight Magazine, 2026).

Analysis

These three pieces, read together, expose a genuine and unresolved argument within Nepal's own commentary ecosystem rather than a settled domestic consensus: is the appropriate frame primarily external (Global North culpability, international finance obligation) or primarily internal (domestic land-use, infrastructure, and governance failure)? Coverage generally allowed both arguments to run in parallel without adjudicating between them, which is defensible given genuine uncertainty, but readers relying on a single outlet would encounter a substantially different account of where responsibility lies depending on which they read.

3.6 Reporting Patterns: Government, National, and Citizen Media Compared

A comparative reading across the fifteen-day period reveals three distinct reporting postures, each with a different relationship to speed, verification, and narrative control.

Government and State-Affiliated Media

Nepal's official communications, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' numbered daily press briefings and NDRRMA's periodic updates served as the primary data source cited by nearly all other outlet types, but were also criticised for lagging behind events: Nepal's disaster authority did not establish a dedicated public data tracker until several days into the crisis, contributing to inconsistent figures between Nepal Police and government sources. China's state broadcaster CCTV provided real-time operational updates (confirming the barrier-lake overflow and rescue-pause decisions) while combining this with an active information-control posture, discussed in Section 3.3.

National and Mainstream Media

Nepali outlets and international wire/broadcast media together produced the bulk of verified, on-the-record reporting and were the primary venues for fact-checking and accountability journalism. This tier showed the clearest phase progression described in the Executive Summary, and was the main channel through which fact-checking findings reached the public, Kathmandu Post in particular ran dedicated investigative features on the disaster's misinformation ecosystem.

Citizen and Social Media

Facebook, X, YouTube, and Instagram-based citizen content showed the widest quality variance: genuine eyewitness footage and official rescue-confirmation posts by lawmakers (e.g., Shri Ram Neupane's real-time Facebook updates on the Trishuli 3A rescue) circulated alongside a large volume of AI-generated, recycled, and mislabelled content, detailed extensively in Section 8. Unlike government or mainstream media, citizen content showed no equivalent editorial gate prior to publication, meaning correction consistently occurred only after significant view accumulation.

Analysis

The three-tier comparison suggests speed and accuracy traded off differently by tier: government media was slow but eventually authoritative; national media was moderately fast and self-correcting through editorial and fact-checking processes; citizen media was fastest but least reliable, with correction arriving only after a claim had often already achieved its maximum reach.

4. Domestic Political Angle

The flood constituted the first major crisis test for PM Balendra Shah's RSP-led government, formed after the 2025 Gen-Z protests and March 2026 elections. Nepal's Ministry of Foreign Affairs initially declined offers from several countries to send their own search-and-rescue teams, citing lessons learned from mismanagement and poor coordination during the joint international response to the 2015 earthquake (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nepal, 2026). Initial cross-party unity (Aug 26–28) gave way to accountability scrutiny from Sep 1 onward: the National Human Rights Commission's Sep 2 press release specifically criticised poor federal-provincial-local coordination, delays in tunnel rescues, untraced foreign tourists, inaccurate damage data, and shortages of skilled rescue technicians (english.nepalnews.com, 2026c). Foreign Minister Shishir Khanal's climate-compensation remarks to Kantipur TV — reported internationally as a direct demand for compensation from China, the US, and India (Bloomberg, 2026a) — required public clarification on September 4 that no formal demand had been made (theprint.in, 2026a; ANI, 2026). Nepali Times separately argued the new government, still working through emergency response, will next need to work with local governments to restrict dense riverside settlement — a politically sensitive long-term task (Nepali Times, 2026a).

Analysis

The decision to decline foreign search-and-rescue teams, explicitly citing 2015-earthquake coordination failures, is a striking data point that received comparatively little critical scrutiny in the coverage reviewed: it represents the government making an institutional-learning claim about its own past failure in real time, during an active crisis, without independent verification of whether the underlying coordination capacity had actually improved since 2015. Given the National Human Rights Commission's own Sep 2 finding of coordination gaps, there is at minimum an open question not resolved in current coverage about whether declining outside help reflected genuine, improved capacity or a political preference for controlling the narrative of the response. NIRC's future reporting could usefully seek an authoritative account of the specific coordination improvements made since 2015 to test this claim rather than treating it as self-evidently justified.

5. Geopolitical Angle: The Nepal–China–India Triangle

Three distinct geopolitical threads ran through the fifteen-day period. First, the data-sharing failure: Nepal and China had negotiated cross-border disaster data-sharing as recently as May 27, 2026, without concluding an agreement, a finding that sharpened accountability for the early-warning failure documented by ThePrint ([chinaglobalsouth.com](https://theprint.in), 2026; theprint.in, 2026b). Second, a bidirectional disinformation contest: false claims blaming Chinese dam infrastructure persisted on Weibo, X, and Nepali forums even after scientific consensus was reached (South China Morning Post, 2026b; DISA, 2026), while China simultaneously censored its own citizens for rumours exaggerating the disaster's severity, and formally rejected Indian television coverage as malicious (Hong Kong Free Press, 2026a; The Wire, 2026). Third, an India-Nepal exchange over climate liability: India's Ministry of External Affairs affirmed that developed countries "must take the lead" on emissions reduction under common-but-differentiated-responsibility principles, without endorsing a compensation framework, while emphasising PM Modi's direct outreach to PM Shah and India's rescue contributions (166 Indians rescued; 1,907 evacuated from the Chinese side) (ANI, 2026).

The Early-Warning Failure: A Structural Reading

Text alerts reached residents of Rasuwa, Nuwakot, Dhading, and Chitwan at 9:15 a.m. 38 minutes after the initial collapse. Anil Pokhrel, former chief executive of Nepal's disaster authority, has stated plainly that Nepal has no early warning system in practice, and that having sensors is not the same as having a system (mappr.co, 2026). The gaps identified were structural rather than incidental: the seismic department did not alert the public because the signal did not match typical earthquake patterns; river gauges were not built to detect a flood moving at the observed speed; and no transboundary monitoring arrangement with China covered the specific slope that failed (mappr.co, 2026). A rapid hazard assessment by the HiRISK group combining the Asian Mountain Academic Alliance, the Stimson Center, and China's Institute of Mountain Hazards and Environment found pre-event indications of instability in satellite imagery from days before the collapse (mappr.co, 2026).

Analysis

The failed May 2026 talks and the 38-minute alert gap are usually reported as two separate facts but read together they describe a single continuous failure: even a functioning domestic alert system would not have addressed the root cause, since the triggering slope sat within a monitoring blind spot that only a concluded cross-border agreement could have closed. This reframes the early-warning story: it is not primarily a story about Nepal's technical capacity (sensors, sirens, SMS infrastructure), which existed and partially worked, but about a diplomatic and institutional gap that no amount of domestic technical investment alone could have closed. Coverage that treats this as a domestic infrastructure failure risk understating the geopolitical dimension, and coverage that treats it purely as a Nepal-China diplomatic failure risks understating the genuine domestic gaps (the 38-minute internal alert delay, the seismic-pattern misclassification) that existed independently of the cross-border question.

6. Climate Justice Angle

Nepal's climate-justice diplomacy matured from advocacy commentary into formal action over the fifteen-day period. On September 1–2, Nepal's Finance Minister Swarnim Wagle and Environment Minister Gita Chaudhary sent a letter to the FRLD's co-chairs requesting the fund "respond rapidly, directly and effectively," without quantifying a specific requested amount (South China Morning Post, 2026a; Bloomberg, 2026b). Reconstruction costs are estimated at \$2.5–5 billion (South China Morning Post, 2026a; Bloomberg, 2026b; theprint.in, 2026c), an amount that dwarfs the FRLD's resources: as of the request, the fund had received pledges of \$822 million from 27 countries but only around \$485

million in paid contributions, against 176 prior funding requests totalling \$2.8 billion, with no funds yet disbursed to any country (Bloomberg, 2026a). Raju Pandit Chhetri of the Prakriti Resources Centre called Nepal's request "genuine and right" (South China Morning Post, 2026a), while TERI University's Arabinda Misra cautioned that the FRLD is "structurally, deliberately, and explicitly not a compensation mechanism," with no admission of fault or enforceable claim, meaning Nepal's use of the word "compensation" is a political and moral framing rather than a legal claim (ThePrint, 2026c).

Nepal's supporting case rests on a now well-established asymmetry: Nepal contributes roughly 0.1% of global emissions and emits just 0.54 tonnes of CO₂ per capita annually, against 2.17 tonnes in India, 9.3 in China, and 13.6 in the United States (OnlineKhabar English, 2026b; theprint.in, 2026c). Coverage also credits Nepal's own mitigation record over 70% of FY2024/25 passenger car imports were electric, and its grid runs predominantly on renewable hydropower (OnlineKhabar English, 2026b) even as the scientific record remains appropriately cautious: Nature and multiple outlets note it is too early to fully establish climate change's specific contribution to this event, even as warming is understood to make such cascading glacial hazards more frequent (Nature, 2026; Associated Press, 2026).

Analysis

Misra's characterisation of the FRLD as structurally not a compensation mechanism is arguably the single most consequential piece of context in the entire climate-justice narrative, yet it appears in only one of the outlets reviewed (ThePrint) and is largely absent from the higher-circulation compensation-framed coverage (Bloomberg's headline framing, Al Jazeera's earlier advocacy commentary). This creates a real risk of public expectation misalignment: readers of the more widely circulated coverage could reasonably conclude Nepal has a legal or quasi-legal compensation claim against named emitting countries, when the fund Nepal has actually petitioned explicitly disclaims any such liability finding.

7. Hydropower Policy and Financial Accountability

This period surfaced a substantial and distinct accountability thread concerning Nepal's hydropower-dependent development model and the international financiers behind it. Nepal's damaged hydropower capacity — variously reported at 431 MW (about 10% of national generation) to over 750 MW across twelve projects — forced the country to suspend its newly achieved electricity-export status to India and Bangladesh (worth roughly \$142 million in FY2025) and instead prepare to import power (KELO, 2026; Nepali Times, 2026c; Mongabay, 2026). This has triggered a live policy debate: Shree Raj Shakya of Tribhuvan University argues Nepal should reconsider export-led hydropower strategy given both physical climate risk and falling Indian electricity prices, while Electricity Regulatory Commission chairman Ram Prasad Dhital has proposed a dedicated loss-and-damage fund specifically for hydropower projects, acknowledging "someone has to pay for it" through likely higher consumer tariffs (Eco-Business, 2026a; Mongabay, 2026). Nepali Times reports camp housing for hydropower workers had in some cases been rebuilt in the same locations destroyed by the prior year's floods, with engineer Bibek Kandel calling for future camps to be sited higher up valley slopes (Nepali Times, 2026a). As of this report, Nepal's Energy Development Roadmap 2025 export targets (15,000 MW) had not been formally revised despite the disaster (Eco-Business, 2026a).

Funding Banks Knew of Flood Risk, Investigations Find

Scroll.in's investigation found the Upper Trishuli-I project funded through a \$453 million debt package including \$150 million combined from the Asian Development Bank and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank proceeded despite funding-bank policies explicitly requiring climate-risk assessment. SANDRP's parallel analysis found the neighbouring Upper Trishuli 3A project was funded by China's Export-Import Bank, and that the broader basin had already suffered serious flooding in 2024 and a GLOF event in 2025 before this disaster, meaning both Western multilateral lenders and a Chinese state lender

continued financing concentrated development in a basin with a recent, documented hazard history. Separately, the Green Climate Fund took seven years to approve a Nepal glacier-risk protection project, a delay now under renewed scrutiny (Down To Earth, 2026c).

Analysis

The rebuilding of hydropower worker camps in previously flood-destroyed locations is perhaps the most damning single fact in this section, because it does not require contested causal attribution to climate change or cross-border data-sharing failures to establish culpability. It is a straightforward, documented instance of known, site-specific risk being disregarded. This distinguishes it from the harder-to-adjudicate climate-justice and geopolitical accountability questions elsewhere in this report: where responsibility for the early-warning failure is genuinely distributed across multiple institutions and countries, responsibility for reconstructing housing in a location that had already flooded appears to sit much more narrowly with the specific project developers and camp planners involved, and coverage to date has not clearly named which entities made that decision.

8. Fake News, Misinformation, and Disinformation

The disaster's information environment proved to be one of the most extensively self-documented aspects of the crisis, drawing dedicated coverage from Nepali, Indian, Korean, Australian, and UK fact-checkers over the full fifteen-day period.

8.1 Nepal Fact Check Bulletin: Selected Findings

- A viral video purporting to show the rescue of a six-year-old girl in Rasuwa was found to be AI-generated; the underlying incident (a genuine Armed Police Force rescue) was real, but the circulating video was not authentic footage of it, and had accumulated over 2.5 million views before correction (Nepal Fact Check, 2026a).
- A video claiming to show tunnel workers rescued after twelve days was found misleading; Nepal's genuine, widely verified tunnel rescue (the Trishuli 3A operation) occurred after nine days, not twelve, indicating the circulating video either misrepresented the timeline or conflated separate incidents (Nepal Fact Check, 2026b).
- Viral videos of children carrying siblings, widely shared as depicting Nepali flood victims, were traced to unrelated footage filmed in Ha Giang, Vietnam, and had circulated online since before the Nepal disaster occurred (Nepal Fact Check, 2026c).
- A video showing a flood-damaged building was confirmed not to be from Nepal (Nepal Fact Check, 2026d).
- An early viral video, circulated within the first day of the disaster, was found misleading as to what it depicted (Nepal Fact Check, 2026e).
- A Nepal Fact Check bulletin confirmed that rescue efforts were genuinely underway for workers trapped at the Upper Trishuli 3B project — an example of the outlet verifying, rather than correcting, a developing claim (Nepal Fact Check, 2026f).
- A video claiming to show flooding specifically in Trishuli Bazaar, Nuwakot was confirmed AI-generated (Nepal Fact Check, 2026g).
- A viral video captioned as showing a glacial lake outburst flood (GLOF) in Rasuwa was traced to unrelated footage of a glacial outburst at Columbia Glacier, Alaska (Nepal Fact Check, 2026h).

- A separate viral video attributed to the Bhotekoshi flood was traced instead to glacier footage from either Svalbard or Alaska (Nepal Fact Check, 2026i).

8.2 Broader Misinformation Taxonomy

- AI-generated fabricated footage: a video with 7 million-plus views and a SynthID watermark rated 97% likely AI-generated (France 24, 2026); an F-16/dam-bombing video traced to AI content predating the disaster by three months (ABC Religion & Ethics, 2026).
- Recycled footage from unrelated disasters: Columbia Glacier, Alaska; unrelated events in Chile and India; a pre-existing viral elephant-rescue clip (France 24, 2026).
- Anti-China geopolitical disinformation: false dam-collapse and infrastructure-blame narratives persistent on Weibo, X, and Nepali forums, reportedly outlasting authoritative correction (DISA, 2026).
- State-level diplomatic dispute over blame: China's MFA formally rejected Indian TV coverage blaming China as "malicious speculation" (The Wire, 2026).
- Reverse-direction domestic censorship: China penalised 10 of its own citizens for rumours exaggerating the Chinese-side casualty count (Hong Kong Free Press, 2026a).
- Offline, non-digital rumour propagation: word-of-mouth rumours in communication-dark Trishuli communities, including claims China would "open all the dams," that Gosainkunda would burst, or that Manasarovar had "tipped over" (OnlineKhabar English, 2026a).
- Fabricated claims flattering public officials: a false video showing Home Minister Sudan Gurung personally conducting tunnel rescue work, later traced to genuine but unrelated footage from Uttarakhand, India (Kathmandu Post, 2026d).
- Graphic and exploitative content: body-desecration and uncensored injury footage concentrated on YouTube and Facebook, prompting Nepal's formal takedown requests to Meta and TikTok (Korea JoongAng Daily, 2026).
- Fringe conspiracy theories: HAARP weather-manipulation claims, debunked by UK's Full Fact, which traced the claim to a genuine landslide video repurposed with a false "made by HAARP" caption (ABC Religion & Ethics, 2026; Full Fact, 2026a).
- Hoax-denial content: claims the flood was fabricated, built on selectively outdated casualty figures, debunked by Full Fact (Full Fact, 2026b).

8.3 A Structural Explanation

ABC Religion & Ethics's retrospective analysis, by disaster-risk academic Milad Haghani, offers the fullest structural account: disasters create an information vacuum in which directly affected people seek practical guidance while a much larger global audience seeks explanation and scale, and this event, an "inland tsunami" provided unusually fertile conditions for misinformation, compounded by generative AI's novel capacity to produce persuasive fabricated visual evidence (ABC Religion & Ethics, 2026). Nepali Times' own "Digital Deluge" commentary, published eleven days into the crisis, describes "a parallel flood... surging across social media platforms" of opinions, accusations, false claims, and performative outrage, noting hostility toward scientists and climate-denier trolling occurring even as researchers were still working to establish the exact causal sequence (Nepali Times, 2026d). This self-aware, Nepal-based meta-commentary corroborates and gives authoritative domestic voice to the Kathmandu Post's earlier "information vacuum" analysis (Kathmandu Post, 2026d).

Analysis

The Nepal Fact Check bulletin (Section 8.1) shows a pattern easy to miss when only the highest-profile debunks (the 7-million-view AI video, the F-16 claim) are cited: a large share of the fact-checking workload was spent not on elaborate geopolitical disinformation but on comparatively mundane misattributions, old footage, wrong-country footage, wrong-timeline claims. The volume of misinformation was driven less by sophisticated bad-faith campaigns than by the ordinary, high-speed churn of unverified content-sharing during a fast-moving disaster, which suggests media-literacy and verification-speed interventions may have more marginal impact than efforts narrowly focused on detecting high-sophistication AI fabrication alone.

9. Social Media Analysis: X, Facebook, and YouTube

X hosted both the anti-China hashtag activity and at least one Community Notes correction of a high-view AI video, alongside independent BBC Verify confirmation (Kathmandu Post, 2026d). Facebook served a dual role: a vector for fabricated content (the false Home Minister rescue video) and, at moments of major verified developments, a fast informal channel for officials and lawmakers to confirm rescue news in real time (CBS News, 2026). YouTube hosted the most severe documented harm, body-exploitation footage with millions of views while also distributing France 24's debunking coverage (Korea JoongAng Daily, 2026; France 24, 2026). Full Fact's fact-checking work is explicitly conducted as part of a Meta content-partnership scheme, indicating persistent reliance on third-party human fact-checkers rather than fully automated detection (Full Fact, 2026a).

Analysis

The same platform (Facebook) hosted both the disaster's most damaging fabrication (the false ministerial rescue video) and some of its most valuable real-time verified information (lawmakers' rescue confirmations). This dual character means blanket platform-level judgments such as "Facebook made misinformation worse" or "social media helped coordinate the response" are both defensible and both incomplete; the more precise finding is that Facebook's lack of a uniform verification standard allowed both dynamics to coexist without a mechanism to distinguish between them for an average user scrolling past both types of post in the same feed.

10. Key Recurring Themes Across the Fifteen-Day Period

- A repeatedly revised, high casualty toll from single digits to over 1,350 dead and more than 5,300 missing that itself fuelled distrust and rumour, and that persisted as two parallel official counts (Nepal Police vs. the broader disaster-authority list) rather than converging into one.
- A rescue-and-resilience narrative, anchored by the Trishuli 3A tunnel rescue of Sanjay Sah and Kabir Maharjan, running throughout alongside a grimmer accountability narrative.
- A structural early-warning and cross-border data-sharing failure, substantiated at both the policy level (the failed May 2026 Nepal-China talks) and the human level (ThePrint's "no sirens" ground report and the documented 38-minute internal alert delay).
- A hardening, then partially walked-back, climate-compensation diplomatic push, culminating in a formal but unquantified FRLD emergency request whose actual mechanism design (not a compensation fund) was reported less prominently than its political framing.
- A hydropower-model reckoning suspended electricity exports, live policy debate over export-vs. domestic-focused strategy, and financial-accountability scrutiny of development banks

including ADB, AIIB, and China's Exim Bank, alongside at least one documented instance of camps being rebuilt in a previously flooded location.

- An unusually large, varied, and self-documented misinformation ecosystem spanning AI-generated content, recycled footage, offline rumour, state censorship in two directions, and fringe conspiracy theories with the bulk of fact-checkers' actual workload concentrated in mundane misattribution rather than sophisticated fabrication.
- A persistent anti-China disinformation narrative that outlasted authoritative correction, running alongside functional Nepal-China technical cooperation and a formal Chinese diplomatic rejection of Indian media coverage.
- Growing domestic Nepali meta-awareness of the disaster's own information crisis, reflected in self-critical commentary from Nepali Times and Kathmandu Post.
- A religious and social flashpoint around mass burial and symbolic cremation, illustrating the friction between administrative disaster-response protocol and cultural mourning practice.
- An unresolved internal argument within Nepal's own commentary ecosystem between externally directed (Global North culpability, international finance) and internally-directed (domestic land-use and governance failure) accounts of responsibility, with coverage generally presenting both without adjudicating between them.

II. Recommendations

Stakeholder	Key Issue Identified	Priority Actions
Federal Government of Nepal	Inadequate cross-border early warning and data sharing with China. 38-minute alert delay and monitoring blind spots.	• Conclude formal Nepal-China transboundary hazard data-sharing agreement. • Modernize national multi-hazard early warning systems. • Establish real-time national disaster information platform. • Review response coordination performance and lessons learned.
Federal Government of Nepal	Climate-vulnerable infrastructure and hydropower planning.	• Integrate climate and geohazard assessments into infrastructure approvals. • Reassess hydropower development roadmap and export targets. • Establish mandatory climate-risk audits for strategic infrastructure.
Provincial and Local Governments	Weak community-level preparedness and evacuation systems.	• Install local siren-based warning systems. • Conduct regular emergency preparedness drills. • Develop contingency and evacuation plans. • Strengthen local disaster management committees.
Provincial and Local Governments	Exposure of settlements and infrastructure in high-risk river corridors.	• Enforce risk-informed land-use planning. • Restrict construction in flood-prone areas. • Develop voluntary relocation and resettlement plans for highly exposed communities.
Media Organisations	Misinformation, AI-generated content,	• Strengthen disaster content verification protocols. • Partner with fact-checking organizations.

	recycled footage, and sensational reporting.	• Clearly label verified and unverified information. • Adopt ethical reporting standards during emergencies.
Media Organisations	Underrepresentation of local scientific expertise and evidence-based reporting.	• Increase engagement with Nepali scientists and research institutions. • Prioritize explanatory and accountability journalism. • Promote evidence-based climate and disaster reporting.
CSOs / NGOs / INGOs	Gaps in community resilience, preparedness, and recovery support.	• Support local preparedness initiatives and disaster education. • Strengthen community emergency response groups. • Provide psychosocial support and protection services. • Promote inclusive recovery for women, children, and vulnerable groups.
CSOs / NGOs / INGOs	Weak public understanding of misinformation and disaster risk.	• Expand media and digital literacy programmes. • Support fact-checking initiatives. • Conduct community awareness campaigns on disaster risk and climate adaptation.
Community Networks and Local Leaders	Information vacuum and rumour propagation during emergencies.	• Establish trusted local communication networks. • Use community radios, schools, and health facilities as information hubs. • Promote verified information sources during disasters.
Community Networks and Local Leaders	Limited local preparedness and self-protection capacity.	• Form volunteer emergency response groups. • Identify evacuation routes and safe shelters. • Maintain local vulnerability mapping and risk registers.
Bilateral Donors	High exposure to climate-related and transboundary hazards.	• Invest in early warning systems and climate-resilient infrastructure. • Support transboundary cooperation initiatives. • Fund preparedness and risk reduction programmes rather than only post-disaster relief.
Bilateral Donors	Need for stronger technical and scientific capacities.	• Support glacier monitoring, geohazard mapping, and forecasting systems. • Facilitate technology transfer and regional learning.
Multilateral Donors (UN, World Bank, ADB, AIIB, GCF, FRLD)	Growing climate losses and financing gaps.	• Establish rapid-disbursement mechanisms for climate disasters. • Accelerate access to Loss and Damage financing. • Support resilience and adaptation investments in mountain regions.
Multilateral Development Banks & Funds	Concerns regarding infrastructure financing in high-risk areas.	• Strengthen climate-risk due diligence requirements. • Require disclosure of hazard assessments. • Support independent monitoring of financed infrastructure. • Incorporate "build back better" principles into reconstruction investments.
Academic & Research Institutions	Limited operational use of scientific knowledge and hazard forecasting.	• Expand glacier, landslide, and cascading hazard research. • Support evidence generation for government planning. • Strengthen regional knowledge-sharing platforms.

The Rasuwa flood demonstrated that future disaster risks in Nepal cannot be addressed through isolated sectoral interventions alone. Federal and local governments, development partners, civil society, media, research institutions, and community networks should work together to establish an integrated resilience framework that combines transboundary early warning systems, real-time hazard monitoring, risk-informed land-use planning, climate-resilient infrastructure, accountable infrastructure financing, and community-based preparedness. At the same time, stakeholders should strengthen information integrity mechanisms by promoting rapid factchecking, trusted public communication, and digital literacy to reduce the impact of misinformation during emergencies. Recovery and reconstruction investments should follow a "build back better" approach that prioritizes safety, resilience, and inclusion, while ensuring that vulnerable populations are protected and actively engaged in decision-making. Collectively, these efforts would help Nepal move from a reactive disaster response model toward a proactive, risk-informed system capable of managing increasingly frequent and complex climate- and geohazard-related events.

12. Conclusion

Across the full fifteen-day period, the Rasuwa flood evolved from an acute rescue emergency into a multi-track institutional test: of Nepal's new government, of Nepal-China cross-border cooperation, of the international loss-and-damage finance architecture, of the hydropower-led development model underpinning Nepal's energy strategy, and of the resilience of public information ecosystems under acute, prolonged stress. The analytical commentary threaded through this edition points to a common pattern across nearly every dimension examined: initial coverage tends to converge quickly on a clear, singular narrative of compensation, blame, heroism, failure while the more complete picture, once verified sources and structural analysis catch up, is usually more distributed, more procedurally complicated, and less easily reducible to a single actor's responsibility.

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