

Geomorphic changes induced by the April-May 2015 earthquake sequence in the Pharak-Khumbu area (Nepal): preliminary assessments.

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Landsliding is a common process shaping mountain slopes. There are various potential landslide triggers (rainfall, bank erosion, earthquakes) and their effectiveness depends on their distribution, frequency and magnitude. In a Himalayan context, the effects of monsoon rainfall can be assessed every year whereas the unpredictability and low frequency of large earthquakes make their role in triggering slope instability more obscure. A 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck central Nepal (Gorkha District) on 25 April 2015 and was followed by many aftershocks exceeding magnitude 5, including another strong 7.3 magnitude earthquake on May 12, 2015 (Dolakha District). This seismic crisis provides an exceptional opportunity to assess the disruptions that earthquakes may cause in “regular” geomorphic systems controlled by rainfall.

Here we present field observations carried out in the Pharak-Khumbu area (East Nepal, Dudh Kosi catchment) before and after the April-May 2015 earthquakes. The Pharak, a “middle mountains” (2000-4500 m) area, is affected by monsoon rains (3000 m/yr at 2500 m) and characterised by steep hillslopes, shaped by different geomorphic processes according to slope height and aspect, rock type and strength, inherited landforms, stream connectivity and current land use changes. This study focuses on the south of Lukla (Phakding District), and more specifically on the Khari Khola catchment and its surroundings. The area lies at the transition between the Higher Himalayan crystallines and the Lesser Himalayan meta-sediments. On the basis of our diachronic observations (March and November 2015), we surveyed and mapped new earthquake-induced slope instabilities such as rock falls, rockslides, landslides and debris flows and a combination of several of them. Interviews with local people also helped to assess the exact timing of some events. While the first M 7.8 earthquake produced significant impacts in the northern Khumbu area, the M 7.3 aftershock seems to have been more destructive in Pharak.

In Pharak, the observed geomorphic changes are not as great as in the zone between the Gorkha and Dolakha Districts. Control factors are (1) slope steepness ($>45^\circ$) and height (500-1000 m), both favouring landslide initiation near the ridge top and a series of cascading processes resulting in temporary valley damming, as observed near Nakchun, Bupsa and W of Kharikhola-Jubing; (2) lithology also appears significant: weak fractured bedrock supplied rock falls (upper Kharikhola catchment), whereas superficial deposits (alluvial, lacustrine, and colluvial soils, including landslide material) favoured larger failures (Paya, Cheubas), particularly because of (3) the proximity of the deeply incised stream network. The limited size and shallow depth of the newly generated slope failures are noteworthy. More generally, these geomorphic changes and their characteristics may be explained by the nature of the 2015 climate: while the 2014-2015 winter was unusually dry, snowfalls and rainfalls were abundant during March and April, hence increasing the pore pressure and the potential instability of slopes and/or snow cover. Conversely, the rather weak monsoon rainfall of the 2015 summer did not take advantage of the many cracks opened by seismic shaking. Yet this may leave only a short delay for large landslide development during the next monsoon seasons.