

2 WARNINGS, THEN A SCAMPER TO HIGHER GROUND

Principal who saved 900 pupils

Bidur, Nepal: Rajendra Dawadi was inside his classroom when the school's accountant rushed in with a warning: Floodwaters were racing through Nepal's Trishuli Valley, tearing apart homes, bridges and entire villages.

Then a teacher received another warning over phone. Moments later, a parent arrived to take her child home. The danger had not yet been confirmed, but Dawadi had little time to act. He rang the school bell and ordered his students and staff out of the building and towards higher ground.

"I immediately decided to stop... school and (get the children out)," he told The Associated Press.

As he followed them to a nearby hill, the floodwaters rose behind him. From the safety of the hillside, he turned to watch the school

where he had once been a student — and where he had spent years teaching — disappear beneath a torrent of water, mud, boulders and debris. Two staff members could not make it and remain missing.

Dawadi's decision to evacuate the school saved at least 900 students from last week's devastating flash floods in Nepal, unleashed after a glacial collapse in the Himalayas.

As Nepal grapples with the catastrophic natural disaster, Dawadi's story has emerged as a striking example of foresight and courage.

The Tribhuvan Trishuli Secondary School in the Trishuli Valley of north-central Nepal had 1,643 students. At least 900 were on campus that morning, while some students were still making their way to school. Dawadi ordered



Rajendra Dawadi. (Reuters)

those already there to leave and called bus drivers, telling them to only stop at safer places.

One bus, packed with students, had already reached the school when Dawadi told the driver to turn back, he said. The bus crossed a newly constructed bridge and, moments later, the old bridge beside it collapsed.

For Dawadi, the scale of the destruction has become personal, as the school had been both his workplace and a large part of his life.

"I have no words. I got education from that school. And I gave education at that school," he said.

The destruction of Dawadi's school was not an isolated loss.

Across northern Nepal, the floods have left thousands of children without classrooms, disrupted their education and raised fears that the disaster could cost them months of schooling. Charity group Save the Children said in a statement that at least 69 schools in northern Nepal have been completely destroyed, putting the education of nearly 19,000 students at risk.

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Dawadi's quick thinking and swift response during the disaster have been hailed as an act of heroism. When he returned to the site of the school days later, parents embraced him as they thanked him for saving their children.

"Their parents hugged me, they cried with me," he said. "They were emotional."

Student Suvina Tamang, 14, said the school's three-storey building was swept away shortly after all the students had been evacuated.

"I will thank him when I see him" for saving my life, she said.

But Dawadi is reluctant to accept the role of hero. For him, rescuing his students was his responsibility. Now he says, students will need psychological counselling. Then, lessons must begin again, even if the school must temporarily relocate.

His appeal to the Nepalese government is simple: rebuild the schools and get children back to classes.