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REPORT FROM MONGOLIA

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On the fourth day of being in Ulaan Baatar, Mongolia, after I recovered from some serious jet-lag, I took a taxi to the office of Amnesty International Mongolia, one of the host organizations for my documentary film project. I told the driver where I wanted to go, but the driver, whose face had been darkened by a life in the harsh sun and constant wind of the open steppes, turned back to me from the front seat and asked me with his western Mongolian accent if I could guide him to the address. I told him how much I was surprised by this request, saying, "I thought a taxi driver should know how to get to any destination in the city." "I'm new in the city," the driver said. He told me that he came from the provinces after his family lost their herds as a result of the last "zud," a very cold and very dry winter two years ago. Then they moved to the city with hopes of finding decent jobs to survive. It turned out to be almost impossible. However, he said he was lucky to become a taxi driver as a result of a recent taxi-car rental agreement.

The first thing I noticed after I landed in Ulaanbaatar was an overcrowded population. It was a little over 500,000 when I left Mongolia five years ago. But now this number has more than doubled and migrants like the taxi driver from the provinces are examples of what is driving this extraordinary change.

Change... This word is the most suitable in describing what is going on in Mongolia right now. Things have changed surprisingly quickly since socialism collapsed 17 years ago and problems seem to keep pace with the speed of development.

Amnesty International Mongolia is one of the organizations that deal with human rights issues in Mongolia. The campaign "Stop Violence Against Women" was one of their many projects, however when I got there, the project was over. Altantuya, director of Amnesty International Mongolia explained the brief history of this three-year campaign and also politely mentioned that the project was ended not because the problem was solved—far from it—but because of lack of funding.

The day I got to their office, about six people on the Amnesty staff were busy organizing a huge rock-pop concert to be held at the central square as part of their "Let's Make Some Noise" campaign. Their office occupies a tiny space, about the size of a two-bedroom apartment in Mongolia, considerably smaller than an American two-bedroom apartment. The office building is located on the northwest side of the well-known Zaluuchuud Hotel. Talking to the agents of rock-pop singers, dancers, and a variety of artists seemed very demanding and kept the staff busy. Unfortunately, due to this stress, the staff and Altantuya didn't have much time to talk to me. Altantuya suggested I read their three-year campaign report to get names of important people involved.

According to Amnesty International Mongolia's campaign report, the staff needed to cooperate with the Mongolian Men's Association, which caught my attention

immediately. However, I had a feeling that Amnesty International mostly works with policymakers and trainers instead of victims. In order to hear the stories of actual or potential victims of domestic violence, I decided to go to the edge of the city, where the poorest people and the newest migrants from the provinces live.

I began by interviewing the teachers and the principal of a special school at the far west end of the city which deals with kids who don't go to school regularly. As in any community there are many reasons these children do not attend. That week I concentrated on three kids who lived in extremely violent environments. It was very hard for me to handle hearing all those heart-breaking stories. "If possible, I wish I could make all alcohol drinks disappear," said Chinguun, a second grader who is now 15. He didn't go to school when he was younger because his violent alcoholic relatives always beat him, so he escaped to his herdsman grandmother's home. But she lived in a province, isolated and far from schools.

The more I heard people's stories, the more I felt that I owed them the best possible project. I decided to change my initial plan of making a documentary, which would have mostly concentrated on one central character to reveal other issues while building his or her story. I thought that it might be a better idea to use multi-media tools to process all of the stories and create an interactive website so it might interest many readers worldwide whose interest is on this issue.

My third week was spent at the National Center Against Violence (NCAV). The director of this organization, Enkhjargal, was very helpful. She "appointed" one of her staff, Bayarmaa, as my "supervisor." After a few days of reading and collecting their survey results and reports, I asked Bayarmaa to find three people from the reports to talk to me who could describe the difficulties of living in a violent environment: "One is a victim of sexual abuse, one is a victim of a violent husband, and one would be a kind of success story..." Bayarmaa didn't say anything and left the room as soon as I said "success story." Then Enkhjargal, explained that Bayarmaa herself could be a success story because she was a client when Enkhjargal was a consultant at the women's shelter. Bayarmaa knew that Enkhjargal and I might try to convince her to talk, that's why she left the room expressing her pain. Enkhjargal warned me that it might be almost impossible to ask their clients talk on camera, because the NCAV promised their clients that they wouldn't tell anybody about their stories.

Even though I explained to them that hiding their problems would allow people to think that violence is a norm of life, the staff preferred to respect their current clients' security. However, after a few days of constant talk, I finally convinced them to at least try. For the sake of making things "easier" for her since she was the one who was in charge of finding someone to tell her story, Bayarmaa agreed to discuss her own "success" story. Another victim, who is 17 now, agreed to tell her story as well, but under the strong condition that I should not ask any detailed questions about her being sexually abused by her stepfather. She did, however, permit me to write about it.

As I spend my final week in Mongolia with my family, I'm trying to forget all of the depressing stories I have been hearing for the last three weeks. But I knew these stories would remain hidden and untold, and the problems would fester unless I revealed them. Next week, I will be in California to start editing what I brought from the field. This will require at least another two months of work. So my next report will be from the dark editing room of the TV lab at J-school...