**Nordic jaunt**

Why is Sweden so disinterested in Nepal? Swedish aid to Nepal has dropped dramatically in the past few years, and it is the Nordic country with the lowest contribution to Nepal's development. Is it a failure of our economic diplomacy, or have the Swedes given up on Nepal?

Foreign Minister Chakra Prasad Bista is planning to get it straight from the horse's mouth when he swings through Stockholm this week. Bista then goes on to Norway, which unlike Sweden, remains fully engaged in Nepal. This will be a thank-you visit to Norway, which is the third largest investor in Nepal after India and the United States. Norway's Statoil has invested in the Khimti project.

Sweden, the largest of the Nordic economies, gave Nepal only $1.1 million in 1998, while Denmark and Norway provided $22.9 million and $8.8 million respectively.

**Encephalitis**

We called the Health Ministry to find out the status of the encephalitis epidemic raging in mid and far-western Tarai. We were told the spokesman was on an extended visit abroad. We then called the office of the Secretary of the Health. He was conferencing in France.

Next we called Dr B.D. Chautari, Director General of Health Services. He was in New Delhi attending a WHO conference. Going around in circles, all we found out was (in the words of one employee) “every one is abroad as it is most of the time.”

Only Health Minister Dr Ram Baran Yadav was where he should be: in west Nepal.

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**Dear gas**

Petrol price is headed skyward. Petrol could cost as much as Rs 50, diesel Rs 30 and kerosene Rs 18.

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Do we speak the same language?

Nepal will continue to be important for Japan. And not because of Lord Buddha, god-incarnates, Kawaguchi, or kite-flying.

He came, he saw, he smiled. He even danced a few steps at Tatan Durbar Square. And by evening he was off again. The short stopover in Kathmandu by Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori last week at the tail end of his South Asian tour left his hosts in the Himalayan kingdom gaping for breath.

Our leaders paid effusive verbal tributes to Nepal’s ‘Sarong’s’ minister. Newspaper columnists celebrated commonalities like Nepal and Japan both having kite-flying cultures. The name of Lord Buddha was solemnly invoked. Ekai Kawaguchi, the Japanese monk who had stopped by on his way to Tibet about a century ago (see facing page), was famously remembered. It was cliché time, the first-ever visit of a Japanese Prime Minister to the Kingdom of Nepal. And an opportunity to establish a more enduring basis of mutual relations with the nation. Japan and Nepal do not speak the same language. English is the mother tongue of the two countries. And yet, we made elaborate banners welcoming the Japanese prime minister in a language that most people in neither country can speak. The banners were a symbolic reminder of our lack of imagination, the inappropriateness of our actions, and the fact that we do not speak the same language.

A sizeable and influential section of Japanese population is non-Buddhist. There are Shinto people, like Mori himself, who have no particular attachment to Lumbini other than the fact that it is a World Heritage Site. In Shinto ideology, as Mori told a group of his supporters recently, it is in Japan itself that the ‘divine country’. And yet we tirelessly try to rail in and get the Japanese to do double flips for Lumbini.

Buddhism came to Japan from China in the sixth century AD. It is a painful reminder of the first cultural invasion of Japan from the mainland in historical times. In any case, international relations are seldom governed by the soft spot a country may have for another country’s religious persuasion. If that were the case, suffron Bhakt would have been daju-bhai with the god-incarnates, Kawaguchi, or kite-flying.

Nepal’s location holds strategic importance for Japan. It is the world’s only Hindu kingdom by now. Nepal officials also thought they were being gracefully polite by praising Japan for all the aid money it has poured into Nepal. Many Japanese find such genuflection quite embarrassing. It makes them at least partially responsible for the mess that we have made of foreign aid over the last 40 years. Besides, many Nepal experts from Japan know just how much more the Japanese corporate houses, the zaibatsu, have benefitted from the “aid” to Nepal. Charity has its rewards, but no sensible person or nation wants to be seen as a permanent patron of a beggar with a bottomless bowl. Aside from the ugliness of seeing our leaders grovelling for more, which is quite revolting in itself, the lack of self-esteem that this implied would have been an insult to any self-respecting nation. But not to us, somehow our sense of self-worth has taken such a beating that we don’t see the irony of it all. It is time we rethought the strategy of the UN-Japan-Japan arrangement in order to meet the challenges of changing times. In the coming days, Nepal will continue to be important for Japan. However, it will not be so because of Lord Buddha, Japanese in Burma and Malay in Myanmar during the War, has no such historical baggage. In economic terms, there is pressing need to shift emphasis from aid to trade. Japanese expatriates in South Asia feast on Japan rise given in Nepal. There is scope for further growth in this trade. It could have been either some itinerant Buddhists monk or the Nepali students who went to Japan in 1902 for further studies who brought back chrysanthemum seeds to Nepal. Today it grows wild in the vicinity of Kathmandu Valley. Considering that it’s one of the holiest flowers in Japan, where the imperial throne is named after it (and seeing how well the flower grows here) there must be a possibility of a bountiful floral trade.

Along with his ceremonial three-months address to the members of the UN General Assembly, the second most important engagement for Prime Minister Girija Koirala in New York is to attend a reception hosted by Mori. On neutral turf, it is possible that the two prime ministers will be less ceremonial and more informal. Nepal can support Japanese aspirations at the UN, but we should be assured of their assistance in learning to bake our own bread rather than be content with the leaves thrown at us in the name of aid.

One of the things they need to discuss is ways to increase the number of Nepalis who speak and write Japanese. Or getting more Japanese to learn Nepali. Learning each other’s language is perhaps the best way of starting to speak the same language over issues like trade and cooperation. And next time, let’s have the banners in Japanese. 
six - 12 SEPTEMBER 2000  NEPAL TIMES 3

PROFILE

When the Japanese Zen monk Ekai Kawaguchi went home to Japan a century ago after his tour of Nepal, Tibet and India his tales of adventure received a mixed reaction. Even as there was great celebration to mark his trip, there were some who didn’t believe his stories of the Land of the Buddha.

Eight years after Kawaguchi’s death in 1945, Jiro Kawakita set foot in Nepal as an expert in an 11-member Japanese team invited by the government of Nepal. “We walked into the slow rhythm of Kathmandu of the mid-1950s. I felt a sense of peace, and also of anticipation at all the things unexplored in this erotic land,” recalls Professor Kawakita.

It was not until he reached Pokhara that Kawaguchi stumbled upon what would turn out to be his life’s mission in Nepal to retrace the steps of his great compatriot and predecessor, Ekai Kawaguchi. Sunning himself on the banks of the Phewa Tal, he met the sons of the man who had hosted Kawaguchi in Tukche. Anang and Puran Singh, who had never heard of Kawaguchi before, and he was immediately fascinated. In Pokhara, Kawaguchi also met the famous Japanese Nepalogist and former researcher of Nepal, Chandra Shumsher. Sunning in Tukche, Kawaguchi also met the famous Japanese Nepalogist and former researcher of Nepal, Chandra Shumsher.

At Tukche, where Kawakita conducted some of his research he found that Kawaguchi had entered Tibet via Thak Khola and Mustang. The monk had reached the Tibetan border drawing maps and collecting details of villages and societal affairs of these Trans-Himalayan highland villages.

After Tukche, Kawaguchi lived in Tsurang and Marpha to read sacred texts. But all his research and study were looked upon suspiciously by locals, some of whom thought he was a British spy. Kawaguchi fled north up the Dhukhur trail to Thorp in Dolpo where he gathered information on the animistic faith of the people who pre-date Buddhism in Tibet. Kawakita went over these routes like a detective.

Comparing local descriptions with notes from Kawaguchi’s journals, Kawakita found the diaries to be accurate and the information meticulously noted and precise. “Even the population of villages, the maps, sketches and description of mountain peaks were correct,” says Kawakita, who only lamented the fact that Kawaguchi never lived to see his work taken seriously.

From Thorp, Kawaguchi’s往路 to his porter and friends with the teachings of the Buddha, Kawaguchi believed that in Tibet, he would be able to find the closest version of the original text kept safely,” says Kawakita. “Kawaguchi was sometimes labeled a spy for the British and sometimes for Meiji Japan. But he was a lonesome wanderer, a historian and a pilgrim.”

Kawaguchi, who himself is the first anthropologist to have extensively travelled in Nepal during the 1940s, also played a big role in the establishment of a cable car and water supply project in Myagdi in mid-western Nepal during the early 1970s. Kawakita remembers how the local community participation helped the project grow. He is a firm believer in the “small is beautiful” concept of projects that people can manage by themselves. “Nepal needs small projects which are flexible enough to blend technology with the society’s situations,” says the professor who remains optimistic on the growth of any colour on a revolution: today it is red. Tomorrow it may be a yellow, orange or green as long as the “iskra” (spark) is there.

Thank you for raising this critical issue to the notice of the education establishment. Who is going to control quality in these textbooks with poorly constructed language structure and poor taste? The authors have no sense of style, there is no coherence and logical connection. There is no craft in thought, no consciousness of expression and the text is stale and cliche-filled. And these books are our language models.

And it’s not just a question of English. Nepali textbooks are no better. For example, the section on Nepal’s foreign policy in the Social Studies textbook begins with the following words: “Nepal has always wished to maintain friendly relations with all the countries of the world.” This is the sort of mediocrity you see in careless journalism and boring speeches by politicians. The real worry is that no one sees anything wrong with these books.

The Kawajero Methodology is a basic problem-solving method that takes a blank slate and without pre-conceived notions. When data has to be collected, it has to be done in such a way that qualitative data is not missed out, information must be extracted as a creative synthesis of real life.

Kawakita has a cult following among the Japanese and international thinking community. A considerable number of his books are translated into English in Japan. The Japanese government and the Japanese Society is heading towards an unknown darkness. The young generation is lost in a quest for inner peace. People are getting stagnated and wise in small things. In the time I have left, I have decided to do something for the country I love, Nepal.” He is planning to open a school in Pokhara, and is currently raising money for it. One More Copy

LETTERS

DESIGNER SOLUTION

Your coverage of Maqsood (v) misses some crucial points. Oppressed and neglected people everywhere, if they are aware and well-educated, will rise up. They do not necessarily need a Mao or a Che Guevara to rise.

Don’t you get it? For those in the movement, it does not matter if the target is a school teacher, or school buses. It does not matter if the victims are: the ethnic cleansing of the people of the upper castes is going on. What you call the Maoist movement is here to stay. It has actually never really disappeared from any country where it has been “suppressed” (Sri Lanka, Peru, Philippines). Most of the time, despite the following Maqsood by the book, what you call will end in defeat. The leaders may disappear because they are not the minor class and the temptation for them to be re-integrated is high if the revolution is not attractive. Like Che Guevara or Regis Debray, they too could be killed or join the militant mainstream.

But what about the peasants? As in the case of the Maoists, “fire will continue with the struggle, because they have nothing to lose and they are angry enough to keep on fighting. The leaders will put any colour on a revolution: today it is red. Tomorrow it may be a yellow, orange or green as long as the “iskra” (spark) is there.”

Taran Ghosh Calcutta

TEXT BOOKS

Perry Tera (48) raises the important issue of whether the state. As Nepali are fed up with big speeches, false assurances and inadequacy of information. When an elected government cannot even resolve its own internal problems, who will it ever get around to solving the country’s problems? Now they want to fool us with the Melancholic Project. Millions of gallons of water are wasted through leakage and theft, all the water they have in the country’s problems. We don’t need more promises, we don’t want false dreams, and we don’t want our children to be educated in the highest standard. You can be assured that you will sell one more copy regularly from now on.

Nayak, Ekta Kathmandu

FED UP

I agree with your editorial page sentiments (RE2.34) on the state of the country. As Nepalis we are fed up with big speeches, false assurances and inadequacy of information. When an elected government cannot even resolve its own internal problems, who will it ever get around to solving the country’s problems? Now they want to fool us with the Melancholic Project. Millions of gallons of water are wasted through leakage and theft, all the water they have in the country’s problems. We don’t need more promises, we don’t want false dreams, and we don’t want our children to be educated in the highest standard. You can be assured that you will sell one more copy regularly from now on.

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A hundred years after Ekai Kawaguchi (left) travelled across Nepal and Tibet looking for the Buddha’s original teachings, a Japanese anthropologist Jiro Kawakita (above) who retraced his footsteps is back in Nepal to see how development is faring under democracy.
Inception and irregularities uncovered by this year's Auditor General's report may look petty and routine, but they add up to large losses for the exchequer. More importantly, they are violations by individuals and institutions on whom the people have put their trust.

The report shows that unsettled advances taken by government officials have shot up and so have uncollected revenues. In some instances it is just poor bookkeeping, but there are more serious offences where officials have cut corners or bent rules for personal gain.

The irregularities reported in this year's report—including everything from non-compliance to rules and even corruption—adds up to Rs 25.70 billion, of which the cumulative unsettled advances total Rs 7.31 billion. This money is almost equal to what the government plans to spend on the social sector this fiscal year.

Most of the rules were disregarded at the Ministry of Finance, which is responsible for almost 28 percent of the total irregularities, followed by Ministry of Water Resources (6.06 percent), Works and Transport (8.66 percent) and Home Affairs (8.02 percent).

By law, employee advances have to be settled within 35 days. The government has the authority to take what is due directly from the salary thereafter, but that has not happened. Where defaults on advances are not employees, the law authorises the government to publicise their names and realise the money. That too has been rare. The government, semi-government agencies and district development committees taken together accounted for a whopping Rs 11.68 billion in advances. The top five ministries with the highest unsettled advances are defence, local development, works and transport, education and home ministries.

What is more worrying is that successive governments have not even been able to collect revenues. The uncollected revenue in the past five years has reached Rs 13.55 billion. This is money that only needs to be collected. The Auditor General admits that though his figures may not be absolute and is an estimate culled from information gathered during the audit. All said and done, the Auditor General's report for the fiscal year 1999/2000 shows that as much as Rs 50.25 billion remains to be realised, in terms of uncollected revenues, foreign aid payments overdue, dividends, unaccounted advances, etc (see table).

Foreign aid also generates bad governance, sometimes. A lot of foreign aid to Nepal seems to be unaccounted for. The charitable explanation for this is that if the money has been spent without the government knowing about it, but it is equally possible that aid money may have been siphoned away from the targeted beneficiaries. Aid cease to be accounted for when it is not included in the budget. But there have been instances where grants were not budgeted, and in other cases the donors have spent the money directly, without the government knowing how it was used.

The government is required to begin spending money after the agreements are signed but there are chronic delays in reimbursement. Donors, on the other hand, don't even bother to send expense reports to the concerned ministries. The Auditor General therefore does not get the accounts for many bilateral and multilateral grants.

One example is a 1.2 million Kroner ($200,000) Danish aid grant for the implementation of the Value Added Tax. The money was not included in the budget for 1998/99 and the bilateral agreement requires the Danish Embassy to provide the government with an annual expense report. Last year the Auditor General asked for the report and was unable to get one, and neither did they get this one this year.

In the EC-funded Gulmi Integrated Rural Development Project the concerned ministry told the auditors that a Rs 14 million grant had been suspended. But when the auditors visited the project site they found that Rs 51.2 million had been released of which Rs 41.1 million had been spent. The spending hadn't been audited.

The money spent on building 22 bridges on the Mahendra Highway in West Nepal with Indian aid and the bridge in Pokhara constructed with Chinese aid are also not reflected in the books.

But these may be innocent lapses compared to other glaring irregularities with grant aid. Soon after the two Airbus crashes in 1993, an Indian company was ready to install a radar at Kathmandu airport for Rs 300 million, but a Japanese grant assistance costing twice as much was used instead. "The project was approved because it was donor money," a senior official told us. "If you do not know who the donor is, you will know how hypocritical it is for donors to talk about corruption and good governance."

National auditors are bypassed, necessary papers are not made available and no one knows where and how the money is spent. The Auditor General was provided information on only 60 of 648 agreements on technical and other assistance about which the government had informed parliament.

"I don't think that donors want to bypass parliament by not including their grants in the budget," says Auditor General Bishnu Bahadur K.C. "It may have happened because of miscommunication." He adds that his department is capable of providing the information needed by donors and that he needs to be given a chance. "Trying to audit to meet their standards will also help build our capacity," he adds.

Regulated irregularities

Irregularities add up to Rs 25.7 billion, an amount almost equal to what the government plans to spend on the social sector this year.

ARREARS

Particulars

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<th>Description</th>
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<td>Govt. guaranteed loans paid but not collected</td>
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Source: Auditor General's Report 1999/00
Women in the driver’s seat

RAMYATA LIMBU

Kathmandu may soon become famous not only for its electric tempos, but also for the women who drive them.

Dangal is Nepal’s first woman tempo driver. Having began operating three wheels four years ago, she now runs a school that teaches women how to drive tempos. The 27-year-old law graduate is up every morning to instructing housewives, former teachers and other women from low income households on the intricacies of tempo-driving. “It’s not enough being a skilled driver. You need plenty of guts, attitude, and people skills,” says Milan Shrestha, one of two dozen women tempo drivers who were taught by Dangal. “Avoiding purse snatching and mugging a tempo over uneven roads is one thing, dealing with hostile traffic cops, angry passengers and working late shifts is something else,” says Shrestha.

Today, Dangal charges Rs 5,000 for her training tempo and meets the money. A former student union activist, she managed to convince her husband and in-laws that the extra income could help the family. “A tempo driver can earn between Rs 1,500 to 4,500 rupees a month. In a good month, a driver can make as much as 10,000 rupees. The driving classes themselves were initially free. Today, Dangal charges Rs 5,000 from those who can afford to pay.”

Instructor Milan Shrestha at the wheel of an electric three-wheeler

Training comes the hard way during the rainy season

Women in the driver’s seat

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MIN BAJRACHARYA
NC elections like “General Election”

Saptathi Bimarsa, 1 September

Despite being alone in the current crisis, PM Koirala was able to have his way and bring the party back to a state of normality. A meeting between the two senior leaders proved that issues, like one man-one post and the prime minister not standing for party presidentialities, were swept under the carpet. By fulfilling some of the demands of Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, Koirala felt that he had nothing to lose. The present crisis in the party has now been resolved.

The Central Working Committee meeting on Tuesday and Wednesday was held in a congenial atmosphere. Bhattarai and other CWC members have given the PM the liberty of releasing the CWC and the Cabinet after returning from New York and at his own convenience. This means that the re-shuffling has been postponed for at least four weeks. Members of the CWC said that the meeting was very smooth and very frank and open, had no hidden agendas and the only issue concerning them was how to make the 10th party convention more open and democratic.

The result was that the convention was postponed by three months, which fulfilled the purpose of Koirala’s camp because the earlier date gave them a short period of only six weeks and the national festivals are also due soon. Bhattarai’s second demand was to allow holding of the convention by five months and the three-month compromise satisfied both to a certain extent. Bhattarai’s camp was satisfied that an election committee would be formed although they had not asked for it. It is believed that a new trend would be established by including professionals not directly connected with the party in the committee.

All issues concerning the party convention were accepted. The dissatisfied groups had only been harping on the issue of how to make the convention democratic and non-violent. At this point Bhattarai was getting fed up as no formed although they had not asked for it. Bhattarai was getting fed up as no formed although they had not asked for it. This system is extended to the members of the judiciary. It has been proved in a number of cases that the police spend more time running after political leaders than thinking of ways to tackle the rebels.

Deuba committee for continuing dialogue

Deshantar, 3 September

The Deuba committee has asked the government not to shut the door to a dialogue with the Maoist rebels even if the conditions are not favourable. A source close to the committee recommends that the government must have both a short-term policy and a long-term policy to deal with the problems. In the long term the government should go for massive development of these affected areas.

The committee has suggested a multi-pronged action consisting of economic, political and social changes to solve the problem. It is believed that many unemployed youth are attracted to the Maoist cause because of the lack of opportunities in the urban areas. Masses attract these youth with a ready supply of money and arms. The committee has criticized the government for not paying proper attention to the problem earlier and feels that had it done so the present crisis could have been averted. The committee is going to present its report as soon as the Prime Minister returns from New York.

Earlier it had been stated that since the government for the meeting had not been prepared there would be no dialogue between the two sides. Now Deuba committee is optimistic that the talks will move ahead. He has asked that all armed action be stopped while the talks are going on and that the leaders of the rebels to consider this point very seriously.

Paprazzi in Kathmandu

Naya Sakhu, 4 September

Security personnel matched the camera of photojournalist Rahi Manandhar of Naya Sakhu daily on Sunday while he was shooting the Nepal athletics preparations for the swimming complex at Sedabato.

Caused to the people of Nepal, India does not follow international rules and regulations and many villages along the banks of the Ganges have been adversely affected. Nepal leaders just cannot speak to their Indian counterparts and since India cannot be made to stop its misadventure the project they are going ahead with this project.

The committee has also stated that all understandings and agreements between the two countries should be made public and that both governments should scrapped this project.

Dalits dying of hunger

Chhalphal, 3 September

Ever since the Chamars (codbellers) of Saptari refused to handle carcasses, there have been at least 1,000 upper caste people and now slowly starving to death. There has been a social boycott of Chamars since 28 July.

More than 160 Chamars of Haripur village in Saptari are not allowed to walk on the streets, cannot work as labourers, cannot buy provinials and medicines, cannot use wells and other sources of water. Since they are completely ostracized their stock of food and drinking water has rapidly depleated and starvation has set in. Those who need medication are not able to receive them and the condition is rapidly deteriorating. The only way out for the Chamars is by paying a fine of Rs 1,000.

According to the Nepali law, discrimination against people based on their caste is considered a criminal act. Yet, both the government and the National Human Rights Commission have remained mute spectators. In fact some high ranking government officials of the district are helping the ‘higher castes’ people.

With the government officials, reporters and human rights commission people went to the district, they were manhandled by the ‘upper caste’ people, they were beaten, their cameras destroyed and made to sign a statement that they would not go to the Saptari village again. The delegation are now demanding drastic action against the police responsible.

Earlier this year Siraha district had faced the same situation. But the ‘low-castes’ people of the district were able to ensure that no harm would come their way. The Chamars of Saptari had hoped to emulate them.

Defining bribes

Himal Khabarpatrika, 1-16 September

The district and the judiciary are offering bribes and this committee recommends that the language and system should be improved upon.

This is the recommendation passed by the Bihari Anti-corruption Association. It has been passed in a number of cases that the Kaudi District court is easily influenced by money and the clout of the powerful association.

In 1998/1999, 27 people died in road accidents in Bani district. The district court is assisted by 15 instructive officers and a few of the cases registered are being pursued. Members of the Bihari community and of certain members of the judiciary can be tapped by depositing Rs17,500 with the courts that they are so great that the driver may have to spend a couple of days in custody. Even the president of the Bar Association admits the courts and members of the judiciary are easily influenced by money and the clout of the powerful association.

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Defining bribes

Himal Khabarpatrika, 1-16 September
Nepal now has a remittance economy, money sent home by workers abroad equals the annual budget.

RAJENDRA DAMAL

When Kaji Amar Singh Thapa lost his last Malauka Fort to the British 185 years ago, his Gorkha soldiers looked for alternative employment. They had two choices: join the British forces, or go over to their rival, the Punjab army under King Ranjit Singh. Pretty soon, any Nepali soldier who fought for a foreign army began to be known as a “lahurey”, so called after the Sikh king’s capital in Lahore (now in Pakistan). Today, any Nepali migrant worker abroad is known by the generic term, lahurey.

Nearly 200 years after they first started enlisting in foreign armies, the descendents of lahureys are propping up Nepal’s otherwise stagnant economy. According to investigations by Hindu magazine, remittances from Nepal’s abroad today contribute more than Rs 70 billion annually to the economy—more than tourism, foreign aid and the export of crops put together and nearly equal to this year’s budget. Nepal’s economy today is a remittance economy.

There is now so much cash in the informal economy that when a commercial bank made an initial public offering of shares worth Rs 175 million it was oversubscribed without a week to the tune of Rs 1.4 billion. Banks in remote districts report difficulty in keeping up with interest payments due to burgeoning savings.

Nepal’s per capita income grew by Rs 1,500 in 1998/99 compared to the previous fiscal year. Balance of payments rose by 100 percent to reach Rs 9 billion in Nepal’s favour. The government’s current account, which had been in the red in previous years, showed a surplus last year, and foreign currency reserves marked a 16 percent increase to reach Rs 75 billion. Although imports from India doubled, Nepal’s banks still have convertible and Indian currency reserves to cover a whole year’s imports.

Where is all this money coming from? The only explanation is the remittances from Nepalis working abroad, a cumulative amount that is now larger than the money generated by Nepal’s exports, tourism, and foreign aid put together. Government officials say the main reason the Nepali financial market is witnessing the present excess liquidity is the huge amount of remittances entering the country.

The only figures the government has on remittances from outside the country are what the British and Indian governments pay their former soldiers. And this has been substantial. Till as late as 1971, the earnings of British Gurkhas were the highest source of foreign currency for Nepal. Tourism and exports, took the top spot later.

Besides the serving soldiers, there are 26,000 pensioners from the British Army, while ex-Indian Army servicemen number 105,000. According to the government’s Economic Survey 1999, the pensions paid to these two groups amounted to Rs 6.2 billion in the first eight months of 1998/99 alone. With the the British government decision to raise Gurkha pensions by 100 percent or more from January 2000 this amount has gone up significantly.

The only known study on Nepal’s working abroad was conducted by British scholar David Sedden, with his Nepali counterparts Ganesh Gurung and Jagannath Adhikari, for the British aid agency, Department for International Development (DFID). This study released in late 1999 showed a staggering Rs 15 billion came into the country in 1997 as remittance from the 392,000 Nepalis working in nearly 20 countries around the world (see table). But because the figures mentioned in the DFID study are three years old, even they do not tell the complete story.

The number of Nepali workers in the Gulf has risen dramatically in the last few years and has crossed 200,000 (more than twice the number provided by Sedden), with almost 100,000 in Saudi Arabia alone. The number of Nepalis in Qatar has also risen rapidly. While Nepal’s出去 earlier were as labourers, drivers or brick-layers, in recent years, college graduates have been making their way over to the oil-rich countries.

The DFID study put the number of Nepalis in all of East Asia at 34,000, but the British Gurkha office in Kathmandu has a tally of some 70,000 Nepalis working in Hong Kong alone. Most of them are children and relatives of former Gurkhas who were granted Hong Kong ID’s by the departing British. There are an estimated 50,000 or so to Nepal working (legally and illegally) in the other countries of Southeast and East Asia. Of these, around 2,000 (mostly former British Gurkhas) are employed as security officers in Brunei and Singapore, and sources say their annual per capita savings range from Rs 3-4 million to Rs 1 million. There are thousands more scattered across Japan, Taiwan and South Korea.

In the case of India, the DFID calculation included only those Nepalis in the Indian Army and those working for the public sector. If the unorganised and private sectors were taken into account, the study believed there could be as many as 3 million Nepalis working in India. A Nepali Rastra Bank study estimated that Nepalis working in India were sending back Rs 40 billion annually.

The preferred mode of money transfer for Nepalis in countries other than India is gold. This entails payment in rupees within Nepal for a premium on hard currency deposited abroad. The foreign-earned wealth then comes into the country in kind, the bulk as gold. Based on the declarations of gold imports at Kathmandu airport it is believed that all the official acknowledgement of the substantial role that this money played in domestic offices is in the country’s economy.

Only in recent years has the Nepali government been taking note of the importance of foreign employment for the Nepali economy. Even then, it views it more as a safety valve to relieve the pressure of unemployment rather than as a source of income. Neither has there been any attempt by the state to facilitate entry of cash into the country.

Overseas remittances sustain the country’s economic lifeline.

Adapted from Hindu Khaborpatra

THANKA AD

Major golf course in Pokhara

Major Ram Bahadur Gurung is a retired Gurkha officer who has invested his lifetime’s earnings in a business not many would ever think of: a golf course. Golfer is Major Gurung’s hobby and he has come up with an 18-hole golf course on the banks of the Seti River in Pokhara at the confluence with Bijapur Kola. He has spent over Rs 20 million buying and holding the 700 ropani land and has named it the Himalayan Golf Course.

The Major has a genuinely Nepali technique of maintaining the grass on the greens: releasing half a dozen sheep around the course so they can trim the grass. “Golf was invented by shepherds in Scotland, so it is quite appropriate. In fact, it is more fun playing with them around.” No one has asked the sheep what they think of the round while projectiles whizzing about.

Major Gurung feels the main reason why ex-Gurkhas lack the ability to invest intelligently is because of their extended stays away from home which causes a total lack of ideas as to what business may do well.

Many Gurkhas retiree therefore stay at home with their money stashed away. Pokhara today is in an ironical situation: there is so much cash around, but there is very little besides real estate to invest. Commercial banks have very little business. “Actually it should be the government which should help ex-Gurkhas invest their money, and provide the right opportunities,” he says. “In the beginning, returning Gurkhas only believe in the government.”

The economy on their shoulders: Nepalis workers heading out to the Gulf region sign up at Tribhuvan International Airport’s Labour Desk.
Fuel prices to go up

Because of a global increase in oil prices it is only a matter of time before the government announces new rates for Nepal too. Nepal Oil Corporation sources say that diesel could cost up to Rs 30, kerosene Rs 18 and petrol Rs 50 per litre once it begins to supply oil recently imported. Selling the new consignment at existing rates would lead to huge losses, they add.

In the past one month, the international price of kerosene has increased by 15 percent and that of diesel by about 24 percent. The last consignment of NOC's kerosene import, on 10 August, had cost $286.77 per metric ton—almost 84 percent higher than compared to a year ago. After adding transport and foreign exchange costs, that kerosene was Rs 17 per litre upon reaching Kathmandu.

The prices of petroleum products have remained unchanged since September last year. That was when the price of kerosene was increased from Rs 10.50 to Rs 13 and that of diesel from Rs 15.90 to Rs 23 per litre.

Even at that price, kerosene was being subsidised by Rs 3.50. With Dasiar just around the corner, the government may continue with the old rates in order to avoid price sending the price of other commodities spiralling upwards. But it all depends on whether India decides to revise its rates or not, for even a small price difference across the border can trigger outflows from Nepal.

PPA Review

The parliament’s Finance Committee has asked the Ministry of Water Resources to look into the possibility of reviewing the power purchase agreements (PPA) between the Nepal Electricity Authority and independent power producers (PPA).

The Committee is concerned the NEA is likely to incur huge losses if it purchases power at the agreed rates and terms. The NEA has PPA with Khimti, Bhotekoshi, Indrawati and Upper Modhi hydroelectricity projects.

Committee members also rapped the NEA for purchasing the ‘food energy’ generated by the projects during the rainy months. They also asked the government to work towards finding a basis for renegotiating the PPA and renegotiating the terms. The Committee has also asked that no new agreements be reached until after the issue was resolved.

Meantime, businesses that have already invested in the power projects say that while the committee’s motivation is noble, they have no confidence that there will be any change. They argue that any attempt to re-open negotiations on agreed PPA’s would scare away the little foreign investment there is in the sector forever.

Kali Gandaki cost

The cost of the Kali Gandaki project has escalated by almost 40 percent, or $78 million more than the $330 million it was expected to cost.

The Committee is concerned the NEA is likely to incur huge losses if it purchases power at the agreed rates from the Kali Gandaki project. The government owns 96.1 percent of BPC shares.

Seventy-five percent of the shares of Butwal Power Company (BPC) is open for sale once the project is complete. The government plans to retain 10 percent of the shares.

The government owns 96.1 percent of Himal Power Limited, which owns and operates the 60 MW Khimti hydropower project. The government owns 96.1 percent of BPC shares.

Of the two foreign bidders in the earlier round, Independent Power Company, a British/ American party, withdrew after alleging the government of favouring Interkraft. Its Norwegian rival, IPC had offered US$10 million for 75 percent shares while Interkraft had said it would pay US$ 8.25 million, adding that it would offer more if the government agreed to an advance Power Purchase Agreement to be effective from 2001. Both companies had two powerful local business lobbies as local partners.

Grindlays Gazette

INTEREST RATE UPDATE

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INTERVIEW

“I am not related to the Koiralas”

― Dipendra Purush Dhakal
Governor, Nepal Rastra Bank

The sacking of Dr Tilak Rawal as governor of Nepal Rastra Bank finally put to rest the differences between him and Finance Minister Mahesh Acharya. The new appointee, Dipendra Purush Dhakal, 48, is a former government secretary, and he takes charge of the central bank at a time when urgent reforms are needed in the financial sector. Excerpts from a short conversation with the new governor follow:

How do you feel about your new appointment?

This sector is not really new to me because I have had some association with it earlier through the joint venture banks. In fact I have served four or five years as director in those banks. I am aware of policy and major problems faced by this sector. I was also appointed to the board of the Nepal Rastra Bank itself.

But you stepped as many as five consecutive meetings, and by NRB rules you should have been removed from the board.

The reason is I am now mourning my father’s death. There are a lot of rituals involved to perform every month during this month. At the same time I was also working full-time as Managing Director of Kathmandu Medical College. Because of this, I missed some meetings but I didn’t know exactly how many though.

You join NRB at a time when the finance sector is in a very bad shape. How do you plan to tackle this?

Yes, the financial sector is going through a very difficult phase. People are slowly losing confidence. Depositors are getting scared about the safety of their deposits. The amount of bad debts charged as NPA has increased—another reason for worry. The operations of many banks are also being questioned. The central bank will intervene when needed to resolve these issues.

I have also heard that operations of some financial institutions are very troublesome. If poor monitoring and supervision leads to any of the institutes becoming bankrupt it will not only damage that particular organisation but also the people who have saved there or taken loans will be affected. One dying institution can cause an upheaval in the economy.

Where do you stand on the issue of autonomy for the central bank?

The autonomy debate has been going on in the financial sector and there have also been discussions in international forums. Central banks are autonomous in many countries, in others they are not. We are also discussing what would be the most appropriate for Nepal Rastra Bank. I would rather like to assess the issue very seriously and only after making my observations will I make recommendations.

Do you have any comment on the recent economic position?

It is not very bad. It is a little different than what has been projected. Economic growth is in the range of six percent, which is good. Inflation is at 3.5 percent, which is good for a country that has at most times experienced a double-digit inflation. Similarly, government borrowing was not very high last year. These are positive indicators. There are some negative indicators also, such as revenue collection in the early months. It needs vigilance.

What about banking, interest rates?

The market determines interest rates. If savings are not up to desired levels, then interest rates will go up. This keeps on fluctuating. We used to get up to nine percent interest on savings and up to 13 percent on fixed deposits. You get that anywhere. Again it is related with the overall economic situation because we are not a closed economy anymore.

Is that not a case the central bank has to look into?

Very true. The major responsibility of the central bank is to manage money supply. You adjust monetary policy to achieve a certain bank rate, which indirectly influence the interest rates of commercial banks. The core is money supply and we have to look into that.

Are you related to the Koiralas of Bratangut? I ask this because some papers say your new appointment came because you are related.

I am not related to that family. I am from Dhading. My grandfather came to Kathmandu and we settled here. I have two brothers and four sisters. None of my sisters is married to a Koirala. My younger brother is married to a Koirala, but to one from Pokhara.

INTERNATIONAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES FOR NEPALI TIMES

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INTERVIEW

“Indian Rupee Outlook”:

The Indian rupee ended firmer at 45.77/78 per dollar as the US dollar weakened against the Japanese yen.

INR 45.77 45.65 +0.26

GBP 1.4720 1.4912 -1.29

CHF 1.7093 1.7213 -0.69

AUD 0.5861 0.6098 -2.72

INR 45.77 45.65 +0.26

*Currency bid prices as of 12 p.m. on 30th Sep., Source: Reuters

INTERNATIONAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES FOR NEPALI TIMES

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FOREX/FOREX:
The US dollar weakened against the Japanese yen.

OIL(Barrel) 31.95 31.96 -0.03

LIBOR (1M) 6.62 4.73 6.04 0.35 3.27

Currencies

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INTERNATIONAL SUPPLEMENT RATES FOR NEPAL TIMES

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Free trade is Nepal’s passport to prosperity

Trade is essential for Nepal’s survival. But Nepal must do more than survive, it needs to prosper. And to prosper quickly there is really no other way than to let trade flourish freely.

S
ome 600 years ago, the city of Bhaktapur, straddling the trade route from Tibet to the valley of Kathmandu, was the most important business centre in the valley of Kathmandu. Here caravans from Tibet found a bountiful welcome awaiting them at Bhote Bahal. The people of Bhaktapur treated the traders to feasts in which aila flowed like water, and put them in the right frame of mind for trade negotiations. Bhote Bahal still stands in Bhaktapur and there are other Bhote Bahals in Kathmandu and Patan which bespeak the trade origins of Nepal.

Being landlocked, trade was given the right frame of mind for trade negotiations. By the middle of the 20th century there were “shutter” merchants who had one pull-down door to their shops displaying a variety of goods from Tibet, India and even Czechoslovakia, from where came the “pote” beads so loved by Nepali women.

Until very recently Nepal was entirely trade-oriented, and it must get back to the days when trade was given the priority it deserved. The problem has been that it is illegal businesses that have transformed themselves into hubs for global trade and prospered dramatically. Nepal has to, indeed Nepal must, specialise in manufacturing what it is best at, from handicrafts or pashmina shawls to software and microelectronics. You then use the proceeds to buy anything else you need. Closed-door hermit policies will only turn Nepal into a North Korea.

What we need is a trading system that builds on Nepal’s natural advantages. Trade is essential for Nepal’s survival. But Nepal must do more than survive, it needs to prosper. And to prosper quickly there is really no other way than to let trade flourish freely. To achieve this the government must remove all restrictions on trade. There could be a worry: won’t we run out of dollars if we keep on importing? What about foreign exchange requirements? But that is a problem only because the government micro-manages foreign exchange.

What it should do is leave the people to fend for themselves. Let all foreign currency transactions be freed from government control: let the market decide. If I want to import, let me arrange my own foreign exchange. Similarly, if I am an exporter let me dispose off of my exchange in the manner I like. Let the government step aside and let businessmen fill the void.

If that happens, Nepal’s trade will bloom: and everyone will benefit, not just those who benefit from keeping trade restricted. When people find that they can import anything they will also realise that this alone is not enough.

They must possess the dollars, the yen, the hard currency required. This extra demand for foreign exchange will be an automatic incentive for people to earn it and trade both ways exports as well as imports. This will lay the seeds of prosperity.

Indeed, Nepal has few other options. Come April 2001, the final phase of India’s agreement with WTO will come into effect. With this, India will have no quantitative restriction left on imports: no items will be on the banned or restricted list. Also India’s customs duties are now far below what they were a few years ago.

Under the circumstances Nepal can no longer import for export to India with its present import regime and duty structure. It must, therefore, remove restrictions and eliminate or substantially reduce all customs duties if it is not to be marginalised.

To remain attractive to businessmen and foreign investors, and to generate employment, Nepal must be less restrictive and less taxed than India. After all India has the additional attraction of being a huge market, and this has to be compensated for somehow by Nepal.

If Nepal plays its cards right, there is no cause for worry. It is up to Nepal to seize this opportunity knowing that it is in good company. Country after country has prospered from free trade, low duties and a liberal economic environment.

Whether it is Singapore, Hongkong, or the United States, the formula is the same. Remove restrictions, eliminate or reduce taxes and watch the country’s businesses do the rent. There is every reason to believe that Nepal will be no different. The moment is now. Free Nepal’s trade, eliminate taxes and watch this ‘kingdom of the gods’ be blessed with unimaginable prosperity.

Judge for yourself. The table below shows that trade with Nepal and the World: A Statistical Profile 2000, FNCCI.)
Tourism is driven by fads. Last year it was Easter Island, this year it is Koh Samui. In Nepal itself, the flavour of the season is Dolpo. Following the huge global success of the IMAX film, Monsoon 2000 has seen a rush of the IMAX film, Caravan, everywhere but Kathmandu. Every tourist needs at least five porters to carry the essentials needed on a Dolpo circuit from the airstrip at Jufal to Tarap, Ringmo, Phoksundo and back.

"I haven’t seen the film myself, but we have no reason to complain. The film made Dolpo known all over the world, and people are now coming to see what this place is like,” says Kunga Tsering, who owns a tea shop in Ringmo. Earlier, Eric Valli had chosen a Tarap lass to take the part of the heroine, but the role was too demanding, and in the end he settled for the restrained acting of Lhakpa Tsamchoe from Dharmsala. Except for her part and that of Karma’s, everyone else in the film was local, including Thinley Lhondup from Saldang (who plays Thinley). The grandson was played by a Saldang boy Karma Wangel, who is now studying in an English school in Baudha in Kathmandu and is seen walking to class in a shirt and tie.

The trekkers are mainly from France, Switzerland and Germany and stay in their tented camps and eat what is brought in from Kathmandu. But the tea shops along the way are doing brisk business selling potatoes, salt, oil and tsampa to the porters that accompany the tourists. Every tourist needs at least five porters to carry the essentials needed on a Dolpo circuit from the airstrip at Jufal to Tarap, Ringmo, Phoksundo and back.

The story is centred on the Caravan, an ancient caravan route from Kharbus to Shey Gomba, a few of them even traversing the high pass into Mustang Valley. And because of Caravan, the must-sees in Dolpo these days are not just the waterfalls and Bon Po monasteries, but also the locations where memorable scenes from the film were shot.

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Himalayan viagra, the Dolpopa

Another “extra”, a lama in the local monastery, who had acted in the dance sequence following the funeral. He has gone back to his normal life of saying prayers and (left) chorten on way to Ringmo.

Clockwise from top left:
- Phoksundo Lake with lodge on far side from which yak fell in Caravan.
- Phoksundo Falls, the rear can be heard miles away.
- Yarchagompo, the Himalayan viagra.
- Summer flowers in Dolpo with yak caravan.
- Monk from Saldang who “acted” in the dance sequence in Caravan and (left) chorten on way to Ringmo.
- Dolpo in Nepal that Bon Po of Bon Po, Buddhism and modernity it is no wonder why they keep coming. Phoksundo lake is drained by one of Nepal’s great natural wonders the Phoksundo Falls. A lone lammergeier circles lazily in the watery mist that rises from the falls, and we think it could very well be the same one that “acted” in Lhakpa’s funeral scene in Caravan. The spectacular waterfall descends 1,600 m through a series of steps to the confluence of the Bheri and Tarap Chu at Dunai. From Dunai it is a three-hour climb up to the airstrip at Jufal to which private airlines now operate regular flights from Pokhara and Nepalganj. You can see that even without the film, change is coming fast to Dolpo. Powdered iodised salt from India has now replaced Tibetan rock salt from the lakes on the plateau, and with this the traditional annual salt caravans are disappearing. The yaks these days are more likely to be carrying “singha marka” Chinese whiskey or flour from the roadheads in Tibet to cater to Dolpo’s trekking industry.

Yarchagompo

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Sujata Tuladhar

It is so familiar. You put your lifetime’s saving into a state-of-the-art computer with a Viper graphics card, the mother of all motherboards, RAM, Viper graphics card, the motherboard could cause a price difference of up to Rs 7,000.

The challenge for dealers of branded computers is that the clones are so much cheaper. Rajan Man Shakya of CAS Trading House says, “The market for branded computers was not so bad in Kathmandu, 3-4 years earlier because the custom duties on the components was at par with that on the entire system. But now that the duties are far less for components than for the entire systems, the assembled pieces have become very cheap.”

But what you get in return for the extra money for a branded computer is reliability, durability. In addition, they come with a three years’ warranty. The first year of the warranty period is on site while for the rest of the years you will have to take the computer to the reseller. The warranty is an assurance that if anything happens to the computer, you need not worry about the maintenance cost. But in case of assembled computers, a dealer would not be able to give a warranty of more than a month. With assembled computers, the only guarantee you have is that it’ll hang frequently, and there will be a major problem within three months of purchase.

The advantage of clones however is that because of the higher turnover, delivery is fast. Within a few hours of ordering, you will be breathing a computer sitting on your desk, waiting to carry out your every command. There is a small catch, though: you never know when it will crash.

However, assembled computers give you a variety of choices as far as configuration is concerned. From Pentium 300 MHz to the latest Pentium III 1 GHz, everything is available in the assembled market. So, even if your requirement is for a glorified typewriter, then you can get a cheap one. Not just buying a Ferrari when all you need is a Maruti.

Designer computer brands come with only a standardised configuration and they are packed with the latest chips and that jacks up their cost. Kathmandu has various authorised branded computer resellers.

Mercurial Office Systems on Durbur Marg is the authorised reseller of IBM and Acer computers.

Computer Advance System (CAS), Kathmandu Plaza, is an authorised reseller that sells Compaq, NEC and Hewlett Packard products.

Within a delivery time of 2-3 weeks, any model of Compaq desktop or laptop computer will be served.

If your choice is Dell or Toshiba products, then there is World Distribution Nepal, Siddhi Bhawan. World Distribution does not have anything in stock but within four days of order, the chosen item can be delivered.
To export or not to export

MOSLEH UDDIN AHMED

Bangladesh is under pressure from international oil companies to allow gas exports to neighbouring India. Foreign companies, including the US giant UNOCAL, are threatening to "scale down" their investments in the Bangladesh oil sector if the government does not relent soon.

The government is indicated that unless they are assured of a profitable market for the gas discovered in the biggest field, Bibiyana, in the next 18 months they will be cutting back on their investments. The warning came in early August from Charles A. Pierce, vice-president of UNOCAL, in talks with Bangladesh journalists who were on a trip (sponsored by the oil companies) to the US and Canada.

Foreign oil companies have put millions into the country’s hydrocarbon sector and now want returns on their investment by selling the gas they have struck. But before permitting gas exports to India, Dhaka is insisting on guarantees, such as the liberal theologian Mohsen Kadivar and the well-known student association was holding its annual conference. Groups of Islamic boys tried to disrupt the meeting as best they could, by blocking the airport and preventing banned speakers such as the liberal theologian Mohsen Kadivar and the well-known philosopher Abdol Karim Sorouh from leaving the building.

The president’s brother’s warnings can be seen as an indication that unless they are assured of a profitable market for the gas discovered in the biggest field, Bibiyana, in the next 18 months they will be cutting back on their investments. The warning came in early August from Charles A. Pierce, vice-president of UNOCAL, in talks with Bangladesh journalists who were on a trip (sponsored by the oil companies) to the US and Canada.

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Bangladesh sewage gas fields

The Bangladesh government is caught between local anger at fuel price hikes and pressure from its allies to start exporting gas to India.

Until gas exports are allowed, foreign companies have a domestic market of just 260 million cubic feet per day they can sell to. The country’s daily consumption of gas is around 1,000 million cubic feet per day, of which around 150 million is exported.

Moreover, foreign oil companies which sell their produce to the government for redistribution to consumers have not been paid for months.

With the US giant UNOCAL and other foreign oil companies that recently initialed contracts under the second round of bidding, have had written into them a “dormancy period” of up to three years between the signing of the contract and the start of drilling. The companies are staying their hand on oil explorations until Bangladesh decides on whether to export or not. [Gomoni News]
The Pentagon prepares for Asian wars

A restricted Pentagon study entitled “Asia 2025” lays out the scenario for future war with China in which India is portrayed as a “potential partner of choice”. P

Planning for a war with China appears to be quite advanced at the Pentagon, where the US moves militarily to defeat an “unstable” China on an adversarial course. “Occupying more of the Philippines’ sea territory” and “intervening in a sitios-claimed Indonesia” are other scenarios anticipated in a restricted US department of defence study entitled “Asia 2025”.

The study, conducted at the US Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, in the summer of 1999, provided one of the keys to the recently released Pentagon global strategy document, Joint Vision 2020, which foresees more and more of US military concern shifting from Europe to Asia owing to the rise of China as a “peer competitor”. In each of the possible scenarios or contingencies identified by the study, one of the key “recurrent geopolitical developments” is the emergence of China as “a formidable, capable and constant competitor”. Another is the rise of India as a regional power that could be a “potential partner of choice for the United States”. India’s potential role as partner might lead the US “to rethink its strict anti-proliferation policy, as some states that acquire nuclear weapons may actually contribute to American national security goals”.

As a result of these developments, the US defence department faces several key “recurring challenges”. One is the necessity of shifting the focus of strategic planning and military resources from Europe to Asia. Another is embarking on a “substantial strengthening of the US military presence in the region which, in contrast to Europe, is said to be marked by a lack of bases, poor infrastructure, inadequate force structure, and long distances. Five possible scenarios are detailed in the report. In the “Unstable China” scenario, foreign adventurers are an attempt to whip up nationalist sentiments to regain government legitimacy that is being thwarted away by a down-market economic crisis that trigger “growing urban and rural unrest”. With the defeat of Chinese incursions in Southeast Asia by US naval intervention, Chinese politics evolves into a salubrious and strategically strengthened presence in the region, which the US sees as an US’s strategic rival that could strengthen itself both economically and politically by using US investment and trade. The conflict between “engagement” and “containment” as the strategic approach towards China will likely come to a head, perhaps in future war.

With the consistent identification of China as the US’s rival in all scenarios, the study speaks volumes about the Pentagon’s grim determination to counteract and contain what it sees as the US’s strategic hegemony in Asia. The lesson for Asia is clear.

“The Role of the United Nations in the twenty-first century” will be the theme of a report currently being discussed, discussing four key issues—peace and security, including disarmament; development, including education and eradication; human rights; and climate change. The report will provide guidelines to leaders of the United Nations on how they can support a more prominent role for the organisation they created. (The Observer)

Poverty agenda at Summit

LONDON - The yawning gap between the United Nations’ policies on debt cancellation and the action it has taken to achieve it will be discussed on 130 heads of state when they gather for the Millennium Summit in New York this week.

Though the UN claims to support wholesale death cancella-
tion, as advocated by Jubilee 2000, it put its name to a recent document endorsing existing policies on non-cancellation of debt, written by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), who govern debt relief through their Highly In-
debted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative. Many NGOs like Jubilee 2000 believe death relief is bogged down by IMF-MinBank “bureaucratic inertia”.

Amid widespread criticism of the UN, even its secretary general, Kofi Annan, has chided the International Secretariat of the World Council of Churches, of being party to a propaganda exercise for international financial institutions which are “financially in the dark”.

Annan, however, has an impressive track record on speaking out in favour of debt cancellation. He has called on donor countries, the IMF and the World Bank to consider waiving all official debts of the HPCPs in return for those countries making demonstrable commitments to poverty reduction.

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Pollution kills more than accidents

LONDON - Too many lives are killed each year in Europe by air pollution than by road traffic accidents, according to research sponsored by the World Health Organisation published this week. In a study based on analysis of deaths in France, Austria and Switzerland shows 6 per cent of all deaths—around 40,000 a year—stem from air pollution, around half due to tiny particles in vehicle exhausts, particularly diesel. In addition, traffic causes deadly new cases of chronic bronchitis in adults, 290,000 cases in children and more than 500,000 asthma attacks. The research says motorists do not pay for the true cost that driving imposes on society.

The Lancet says in an editorial that if the cost of motoring on the state health service were taken into account, spending on better public transport would appear far more reasonable, with taxes and laws to reduce driving more publicly acceptable.

The environmental pressure group Friends of the Earth said that as many as 70,000 people in Britain are killed by pollution, including pollutants, from air pollution alone.

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Global warming causes extinctions

LONDON – Global warming is likely to destroy more than half the world’s colder habitats by the end of the century, causing the extinction of species which cannot adapt or move quickly enough to reach new homes, according to a report by WWF. Wildlife will be the colder habitats of Europe, Canada, Russia and Scandinavia, where warming is expected to be most rapid as Arctic species have nowhere left to migrate. In order to adapt and survive, plants and animals will need to move 10 times more quickly than they did when reclassifying previously glaciated land at the end of the last ice age. Fruit species can move at a rate of one kilometre per year, the speed that will be required in many parts of the globe.

High migration rates will particularly threaten isolated, rare or slow-moving species but will favour weeds and pests that can spread rapidly. Further north, the report says, it can be the end for species which simply cannot tolerate the higher temperatures.

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debted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative. Many NGOs like Jubilee 2000 believe death relief is bogged down by IMF-MinBank “bureaucratic inertia”.

Amid widespread criticism of the UN, even its secretary general, Kofi Annan, has chided the International Secretariat of the World Council of Churches, of being party to a propaganda exercise for international financial institutions which are “financially in the dark”.

Annan, however, has an impressive track record on speaking out in favour of debt cancellation. He has called on donor countries, the IMF and the World Bank to consider waiving all official debts of the HPCPs in return for those countries making demonstrable commitments to poverty reduction.

“The Role of the United Nations in the twenty-first century” will be the theme of a report currently being discussed, discussing four key issues—peace and security, including disarmament; development, including education and eradication; human rights; and strengthening the UN. The report will provide guidelines to leaders of the United Nations on how they can support a more prominent role for the organisation they created. (The Observer)
The east is east, and west is west

Forty years after it was first conceived, the East-West Highway may finally link Nepal’s far west into the national mainstream.

Dhankadi - August and September are encephalitis months along the Nepal-India border, and it proved no different this year. According to an official count, more than 100 people have died so far this year. Thousands more are in poorly-equipped, understaffed hospitals all along the tarai. Many more are silently suffering and dying far away from hospitals, undiagnosed and untreated.

The only remarkable about this year’s toll of 103 deaths so far is that it is four times less than last year, though the monsoon is not yet over. We have seen from past years that the intensity of an encephalitis epidemic tends to be determined by the intensity of the monsoon and its timing because of the ponds and puddles where the virus-carrying mosquitoes breed.

As usual, Radio Nepal and Nepal Television are repeating public health announcements through the air waves: drain puddles, stay indoors, use mosquito nets. But for many the announcements came too late. Although everyone knows that encephalitis is an annual phenomenon, the announcements only started after the epidemic had already spread.

The worst affected this year are the mid- and far west tarai where hospitals and health posts are bursting at the seams under the pressure of patient numbers. Doctors are overworked, one hospital here had to pull a cloth across the corridors to hang intravenous drips administered to patients scattered on the floor.

Because the disease needs close monitoring, almost an equal number of people accompanying the sick have flocked to the hospital making disease manage-mental a nightmare. “Most of the sick are very poor and weak,” a doctor in Dhankadi told us. “These are the ones that die first.”

Older, weaker people are the most vulnerable. Children usually survive the first onslaught, but could develop neuro-psychiatric complications if the infection is not treated properly and in time. Open sewers, water logging and stagnant water on paddy fields allow mosquitoes to breed, which then transmit the disease from pigs and ducks to human beings.

Protection against mosquito bites is the most effective preventive measure. Japanese encephalitis usually spreads as a flu-like illness, with fever, chills, tiredness, headache, nausea, and vomiting. Confusion and agitation can also occur in the early stage. Symptoms usually appear a week to ten days after the bite of an infected mosquito. Then there is the danger of being wrongly diagnosed because the early symptoms are common for many tropical diseases and people tend to ignore the ailment until it is too late.

It is around Dhankadi that the epidemic has hit hardest this year, and it is here where the newly freed karmayas (bonded labourers) are crowded out in the rain after being evicted by landlords. Public health officials criticise the government for its public service announcements on radio and television that came too late and also for being unprepared to tackle an epidemic they knew would happen. Last year, the government received a donation of live SA14-14-2 vaccine from South Korea and vaccinated about 170,000 children in the tarai districts.

In Nepal, doctors say about one in ten infected patients die. But half of them suffer long-term neurological damage because the virus invades the central nervous system, including the brain and spinal cord.

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Namche Nepal Tours & Travels.
Hunt for elusive gold

NADEEM YAOUB

It has been 16 years since Pakistan won an Olympic gold medal in men’s hockey—and that’s rather a long time for a country which once dominated the sport that wherever it played the only question for bookies was who will win the game second.

But as Pakistan’s Class of 2000 left for Sydney in August, seeking the gold that has eluded them since the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984, not many pinned their hopes on the team, internal bickering within the Pakistan Hockey Federation (PHF) has hampered preparations, ending with a new management taking over just weeks before the team’s departure for warm-up matches in Australia and New Zealand.

The national training camp, which appeared to be running smoothly in the port city of Karachi, was inexplicably moved to Wah, a small town on the outskirts of the capital Islamabad, upsetting the momentum of the team.

But team manager Ishtiaquddin Siddique, in charge of his third Olympic team after Seoul in 1988 and Barcelona in 1992, argues that Sydney could well turn out to be “...a bad luck dogged us from achieving the desired results in the past Olympics. This time, I am confident we are going to win.”

A shocking gold will be tough for a side that lacks consistency and is without any star names for the first time in many years. The state of hockey in Pakistan—just like in neighbouring India—is in the doldrums. Before India’s partition in 1947, the country’s domination of the sport was total, winning all six Olympic golds and 30 consecutive matches from 1928 to 1956, before Pakistan broke the stranglehold in 1960. Pakistan rose meteorically after that—until the 1980s, which saw the rise of Australia and European countries like Germany and Holland with the introduction of the artificial Astroturf surface in place of grass.

India has not won an Olympic gold since the 1980 Moscow Olympics—a game that suffered from a Cold War boycott by the West and its allies, including Pakistan. And Pakistan, which once held the Olympic gold, the World Cup, the Junior World Cup and the Champions Trophy, is without a title today. The three-time gold medallist of the Olympic gold (1960, 1968 and 1984) took the bronze in 1992 and ended up sixth in Atlanta, its worst-ever showing. For Sydney it had to be injury, fatigue and an unseemly demobilisation of qualifying.

Pakistan players and experts alike gave away reasons for this state of affairs. At one time an important event in the sports calendar, the national hockey championship is no longer held regularly. There is a dearth of the expensive favoured pitches. The youth rarely take up hockey any more—to them cricket is more attractive and rewarding, for that is where all the money is. With no major trophies coming home, the game’s following has fallen drastically. The common perception is that poor administration is to blame.

The new PHF boss, Lt Gen Mohammad Aziz announced soon after assuming charge that he would be on the grassy lawn. But critics say Aziz, a serving army officer, is not likely to have much luck for hockey.

Among those who lament this decline the most is former Olympian Shabnam Sholih. “We have to adopt the fast changing system by making modifications in our style of play. The Asian pattern of fast flowing hockey is good only if there’s 100 percent protection in attack. If that is not the case, then we have to adjust ourselves accordingly,” the great inside left says. “We used to beat the Europeans because our percentage of attack was very good. Sadly this is not so anymore. We go for individual brilliance while our European rivals play an attack in groups.”

With the Pakistan hockey scenario presenting a depressing picture, the Indian team’s winning two Grand Slam doubles titles (French Open and Wimbledon) and reaching the finals of the other two. Said Paes: “We can do it. We’re not going to Sydney to make up the numbers. We’re going to compete, to win.”

Hunt for elusive gold
In the Kingdom of the Gods

Imagine Amitabh Bachchan in heavy disguise, a berkha perhaps, riding down Calcutta’s Bhataramma Street with not a glance in his direction. Then choosing a maximum crowd at the Eden Garden stadium, he is suddenly transformed into the glittering superstar he is, decked out in something natty, his personality blazing. The crowd howls, stampedes. The football players wait for their lives. When it appears that Mr Bachchan will be trampled into a rather unglamourous pulp, he is whisked away by his levitating mum who appeases the crowd by giving them of free seats at every one of her son’s movies that year, a promise impossible to keep. Now Mr Bachchan, for all his fame and good looks, is a mere mortal. How much more astonishingly God, a god from heaven dressed in peasant’s clothes and bent on a very human pursuit, like stealing mangoes. Paradoxical is the image of the Virgin goddess, Kumari, who chose life on earth. The deity concerned was no ordinary god. He was Indra, the Lord of Heaven.

When he descended on Kathmandu, was no ordinary god. He was the great kike. They had ventured far, when something as unfortunate as spiritual vertigo or fatigue caused the chain break and all the souls fell into a lake atop a mountain south of Kathmandu where bereaved families went to worship and honour them.

Right now, Kathmandu celebrates Indra Jatra which fused together with the festival of the Virgin goddess, Kumari, and the epic of the Nepali king Yalambar who was slain by Krishna at the battle of the Mahabharata, in Nepal’s most colourful celebration. Everyone, from the king, the royal family, ministers, government servants, the general public—even foreign diplomats—are involved.

For this is the time of the year when the king receives the blessings of the Kumari who places tika on his forehead. Superstition, well supported by strange circumstance or coincidence, enhances the belief that the Kumari, in fact, bestows upon the king the right to rule for another year. When, on occasion, she has mistakenly placed tika on the wrong forehead dire consequences have resulted. This too is the time when all the valley’s Bhairab masks are displayed, particularly the great silver mask that Yalambar wore to battle, and the even larger, bejewelled golden mask of the white Bhairab in the old palace. All over the valley, in city, town and village are strange and terrible enactments of the mortal Indra and Bhairab, incarnations of Vishnu, folk dramas, processions of masked ‘deities,’ a dancing elephant made of bamboo, painted cloth and human legs, and the massive trundle of the Kumari’s rath, followed by lesser chariots of the living Ganesha and Bhairab. Virgin boys selected in much the same way as the Kumari. For those who like a more scholarly reason for festivals such as this, it is thought that the warrior king, whose Aryan forces overpowered India, inevitably turned his attention to the Himalaya. Perhaps the warlike hill people nagged his flanks.

Leading an army against them he was captured and held prisoner until he promised some boon of settlement. The great Nepali king Yalambar ruled Nepal at the time. No one less than a god, and the Lord of Heaven at that, could have fought and come to terms with him an interesting thought as festival chariots roll through Kathmandu.

(Excerpted with permission from In the Kingdom of the Gods, HarperCollins, 1999)
Kupondole’s amazing swallow dorm

As evening approaches, Dhana Shrestha gets out large paint covers and spreads them across their small pasal in Kupondole. The birds are about to come home for the night.

Last year she believed that they were the luckiest people in town when the swallows decided to move in. She persuaded her family to let them stay even though the poop situation got worse and as the swallow population swelled. No one in the family touched the birds. “If you touch them they die,” says Dhana. “Sometimes they sit on our shoulders, but we never touch them.”

Over the years of growing up with the birds, Dhana, herself in her mid-30s, has become rather attached to them, and also it seems, they to her. With so many, they may look like an anonymous flock, but Dhana suspects there are one or two that are particularly close to her. “Once they are comfortable in the ceiling, some of them look down at me quizzes, as if wanting to communicate,” she says.

By the first light of dawn, the swallows swoop out once more for a day on the wing above the Kathmandu skyline. You see them in the glint of the morning sun, soaring past temples or skimming the surface of the Bagmati to take an in-flight sip of water.

And that is what worries Dhana, if the people of Kathmandu are so badly affected by the dirty water, polluted air and the garbage, what is happening to the health of her swallows? So far though it seems, not much.

However, Kathmandu’s loss of green cover and pollution has affected other migratory birds that used to make Kathmandu their stopover. And resident scavengers like crows have driven all other birds away.

But with the Kupondole swallows, it is the other way around. They have stopped migrating north in winter and have now decided to stay in Kathmandu all year round. The biggest calamity for the birds was during the uprising in 1990. Because there were curfews that lasted days, Dhana’s mother had to keep the shop doors closed and the swallows could not go out to feed. Many died.

The swallow house also draws curious Kathmandu residents, school children on field trips and even bird-watching tourists from Britain, Japan and Taiwan. Some of them, like the Wild Bird Society of Taipei, leave their banners, with the date of visit: February 1994.

Next time you are crossing the Bagmati Bridge, do take the time off to go and say hi to Dhana Shrestha and her amazing swallows.

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SALI SUBEDI

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hey come in ones and twos, then by the dozen. A cloud of swallows circles in a holding pattern above the Bagmati Bridge before sweeping down one by one through the door for a landing. Then begins the noisy squabble for the favourite perches on the rafters. The chirping is shrill, as 600 birds get ready to call it a day. Slowly, the shops close, and the doors to a deep rustle of feathers.

By this time, Dhana Shrestha has covered most of the waives in her pasal with a large plastic sheet to protect them from swallow droppings. She moves around the pasal under a small umbrella as she attends to her clients—most are from the neighbourhood and they have got accustomed to a ceiling alive with birds. One little bird doesn’t make much poop, but multiply that by 600 and you have a gusano factory. No one’s quite sure why the swallows have adopted Dhana’s pasal at their base camp. But for Dhana’s family, it is an auspicious sign and a good luck omen. It started with one pair nearly 35 years ago and the numbers just grew and grew.

After you cross Bagmati Bridge while going from Kathmandu to Patan, there is a small shop with a yellow sign on the right. The shop itself smells like the inside of a cave with the pungent odour of birds do-do. “These are free birds, and when they come in every evening, it is like your children coming home,” says Dhana. “They are free birds, and we are honoured that they have chosen our house.”

Dhana’s mother who passed away in her mid-30s, has become rather attached to the birds, Dhana, herself in her mid-30s, has become rather attached to them. “If you touch them they die,” says Dhana. “Sometimes they sit on our shoulders, but we never touch them.”

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Next time you are crossing the Bagmati Bridge, do the take the time off to go and say hi to Dhana Shrestha and her amazing swallows.
Don't write off the monsoons yet. There is still plenty of clouds massed up all along the coast of the Bay of Bengal and they are headed our way. Some of this is a part of a low pressure circulation driven by southwesterly winds which will change direction to the left when they hit the wall of the Himalaya. For the rest of this week and into next week, expect typical sharp and localised bursts of bhadaure rain in the day time and night drizzle. Clearer weather with fine sunny spells towards the end of next week.

NEPALI SOCIETY

It is hard to tell when you see the 'Made in Nepal' girl Monica Chand in advertisements that the confident-looking face belongs to a 19-year-old high school girl from Kathmandu. Monica is already a "household face" in Nepal, easily recognized when she goes out to shop or eat. She has also made up her mind about what she wants to be when she grows up: a fashion designer. "I want to represent Nepal through fashion designing," she says, and Monica would like to go abroad to widen her wings and get a broader perspective on the world.

Despite the glamour that has come with modelling, Monica at home is as normal a girl as any. A bit shy and reluctant to open up in the beginning, but increasingly animated as she talks about her passion in life or about her career. She loves to read Agatha Christie whodunits, and she also imagines herself as the main character in Mills & Boon stories. She is a vegetarian and loves titaura and fried instant noodles (mmm, I'd go easy on the junk food, Monica, have to watch that complexion).

How does it feel to have a huge billboard with your face staring down at you at Bagmati Bridge? Many people who see the billboard, the newspaper ad or the television commercial are shocked to hear that Monica is actually a full-blooded Nepali. She is tired of people who ask her where in Europe she is from. Actually her family is from Baitadi in western Nepal.

And what does she feel about the fairness cream that she models for, is the colour of a person's skin important? "No, it's not important," she says. "What is important is what is inside. Intelligence and personality are more important.”

Although she has been portrayed as a vibrant, modern girl in the commercials she appears on, Monica seldom goes out and prefers to spend time reading or watching television at home. Dad is retired army colonel Lal Bahadur Chand, who is quite protective of Monica and her two sisters. He vets all visitors, including journalists.

“We take a careful look at the colonel and drop the inevitable question about boys. Monica fields the question with a diplomatic "I'll only think about it once I am fully independent, but definitely not an army man." 6

Hillayri Travels

DHL ad
You must have noticed by now that there are no cats in Katmandu. During the monsoon it never rains cats and dogs here. It rains only dogs. This is a meteorological oddity, for which many explanations have been put forward, none of them quite satisfactory. One reason could be that since the top of the food chain has been occupied by omnivorous dogs, fussy cats never had a chance here.

In the centuries since, the valley has made steady progress towards being a true melting pot for dogdom. Today, Katmandu has emerged as the most canine-friendly city in the SAARC region. It’s a paradise for Man’s Best Friend. Where else are dogs allowed to roam freely through the corridors of a government-run hospital? We passed one the other day and greeted him: “Whassup, Dog?” He wagged his tail and disappeared into the orthopaedic ward, he must have been a bone specialist. At Katmandu airport, the Runway Dogs are some of the most pampered and best nourished in Bagmati Zone. There they sit near the plane’s hind undercarriage, bibs around their necks, waiting for the stewardess in a serving kebaya to come down the ramp and ask: “Mutton with rice, or prawn with noodles for you today, sir?”

Then there are those who live in the wild side, denizens of the city’s rough neighbourhoods, who would feel perfectly at home in the dog-eat-dog world of Nepali politics. You can’t teach an old dog new tricks, but senior leaders of the Nepali Congress are up to their old tricks and don’t need to learn any new ones. The fight to be Top Dog is hotting up in the runup to the Party Convention in Pokhara in January. Not to worry, the bark of our toothless leaders is worse than their bite. But the dog days for Kathmandu dogs may be coming to an end. Our canines need to use all their streetwise skills to survive new threats. The mayor’s office does not believe in letting sleeping dog lie and is planning to forcibly vasectomise them. Not only does this deprive the Dingos of Dogmandu of one of the few pleasures in life, but it may also decimate the hardy species altogether. There have also been reported cases of dognapping by certain embassies of dog-eating nations in Katmandu whose national delicacy is Fido marinated in kimchi sauce. Police have deployed radio-collared undercover labs to nab dog-eating dips.

And last but not least, an increasing number of dogs are being martyred on our streets by hit-and-run drivers. Enough is enough. You can’t run over my dogma with your karma.