Over the edge, again

Prime Minister Oli’s brinkmanship bought himself time. But at what cost?

Nepal has been on a knife-edge in 2020 because of the pandemic, but the country’s leaders are too involved in their internal power struggles to notice. This week, better sense prevailed once more at the last moment as the ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP) on Wednesday pulled back in the nick of time from tearing itself apart.

The struggle for supremacy between the two top leaders, Prime Minister K P Oli and party co-chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal, have become so nasty, rhetoric so acrimonious and the actions being taken so drastic, that it has now dragged all three arms of the state—the legislature, judiciary and executive—into controversy.

The latest casualty was the Office of the President which is now seen by many as just a rubber stamp for the prime minister. As head of state, Bidya Devi Bhandari, should have been beyond reproach and above the fray, but by hastily signing the ordinance to amend the law on the Constitutional Council this week, she faced unprecedented ridicule.

It was all unnecessary because Oli and Dahal smoked the peace pipe ahead of the NCP Standing Committee Meeting, and the prime minister decided to take back the ordinance (for the second time this year). The Standing Committee has also been put off till 21 December.

By passing the ordinance amending the Constitutional Council law, Oli may have just been trying to demonstrate to Dahal how far he would go to get his way. But the damage has been done. Not just to the esteem of the President’s office, but to himself, his party, the Constitution and Nepal’s democracy.

Oli’s act of defiance against his party rivals led by Dahal, has undermined the Constitution and the rule of law and pushed the Nepali state closer to the edge. Both feuding men bear responsibility.

Parties would move to cash in on the disarray in the NCP, and fill the political vacuum. Nepal’s Hindu-right held a series of rallies across the country last month which were increasingly well-attended, calling for the scrapping of the country’s secular republican constitution. There may not be widespread public support for the return of the monarchy, even a ceremonial one, but declaring Nepal a Hindu state is a popular notion among the dominant majority community.

For its part, the opposition NC had been under relentless pressure ever since its battering in the 2017 election, to play a more effective role as an opposition party. It had to assert itself for fear of the rightists pulling the rug from under them with a Hindu agenda, and since Parliament is not in session had no option but to stage its own show of force.

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The Oli-Dahal row this year has been a wrecking ball on the Nepali state, and its nascent Constitution. It was predictable, therefore, that parties would move to cash in on the disarray in the NCP, and fill the political vacuum.

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The Year of Migrant Workers

2020 was a year in which the Maoist insurgency was ongoing, and the government and police were struggling to contain the conflict. The Maoists, who are mostly based in the mountainous regions of the country, have been fighting for a radical change in the political system of Nepal. The government, on the other hand, has been trying to negotiate a peace deal with the Maoists, but so far, there has been no breakthrough.

In this context, the Year of Migrant Workers refers to the year 2020, when millions of Nepalis went abroad to work, mostly in the Gulf countries, to earn a living. This migration was driven by the economic situation in Nepal, which is characterized by poverty and unemployment.

Migration has been a significant factor in the economic development of Nepal. The Overseas Employment and Migrant Workers Development Act of 2001 has been instrumental in regulating the migration process and protecting the rights of workers abroad.

Migration has also been a source of political conflict, with the government and the Maoists both trying to leverage it for their own purposes. The Maoists have used migration as a tool to mobilize support, while the government has used it to gain international recognition and support.

In conclusion, the Year of Migrant Workers was a significant event in the history of Nepal, highlighting the country's challenges and opportunities.

Shyamal Krishna Shrestha

Editorial

2020 was a year of turmoil worldwide, and in Nepal, one of the most dramatic events of the year was the Maoist insurgency. The Maoists, who have been fighting for a radical change in the political system of Nepal, have been gaining strength. The government, on the other hand, has been trying to negotiate a peace deal with the Maoists, but so far, there has been no breakthrough.

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Shyamal Krishna Shrestha
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A Nepali great grandmother who recovered from the coronavirus that infected her whole household

Mowa lost her only daughter-in-law, Angurbasha Joshi, during the pandemic. A month after her passing, she lost her sister Bindu Shakyia with whom she was very close. Muwa developed a fever the day before that having the coronavirus meant because I still somehow believed The fact that this could be indicative water, honey, ginger, what have you. remedies, steam treatments, turmeric medicine, but we also applied home for Tihar, Muwa developed a but no fever. After she went back home for Tihar, Muwa overcame! Karunacharya (what she calls the coronavirus, and a Sanskrit word that means ‘compassion’) better than any of us. The doctors have always told us that her lungs and her heart are as healthy as a young woman’s. Muwa’s mental fortitude is a testament to the fact that she is still here, and that her memories may be blurred, but she is not inactive and silent, and will never be.

How a 105-year-old beat the virus

Rupa Joshi

Calling someone to say: “You should have had a vaccine,” said one friend. Doctors confirm that the impact of the virus is the Himal Khabarpatrika and Nepali Times reporter based in Kathmandu, covering health and development. “Why hasn’t she died?” I answered, “Yes.” Muwa was inconsolable over the next three weeks. She has begun to forget a lot of things, but she has not forgotten that her sister has passed. In her grief, she has started to reconcile with her own mortality. “My time has come, this is it,” she said one day. The grief of her having outlived all of her younger siblings, a son, a daughter-in-law, and other loved ones shows clearly on her face. She is always asking: “What happened today?” we know she wants us to know how many people died of Covid-19 that day, and we give her the figures.

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Tourist visas now open for Nepal

Restrictions on foreigners further eased and flights to India resume, but confusion persists

As Nepal finally resumed the flights between Kathmandu and New Delhi on Thursday after 11 months, and restrictions on foreigners visiting Nepal were eased, there is still confusion about the conditions for travel.

While only tourists and mountaineers had been allowed to visit Nepal after 17 November, all foreigners will now be permitted provided they got tourist entry visas from Nepal diplomatic missions abroad, or have a pre-approval or recommendation from a concerned ministry to get an on-arrival visa.

Nepal’s land borders with India and China remain closed for all foreigners, according to a notice put out by the Department of Immigration this week.

All air travellers are required to have undergone a negative COVID-19 test conducted no more than seven days before their flight. All passengers are also required to spend one week in home or hotel quarantine in Kathmandu.

Limited flights resumed between Kathmandu and Delhi on 17 December ahead of a visit by India’s Foreign Minister Pradeep Singh Gyawali. There will be only two daily flights by Air India and Nepal Airlines, and only Nepali and Indian nationals allowed, no onward travel permitted, and a two-week quarantine for passengers arriving in Delhi.

Travel trade representatives, while welcoming the move, have said that the guidelines are too complicated and confusing, and many of them cannot be enforced. For example, the list of rules for India-Nepal travel is three pages long.

Meanwhile, a visitor who applied for a tourist visa at a Nepal Embassy in Europe told Nepal Times the visa officer did not seem to have information about the new rules, and his application was forwarded to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Kathmandu.

“There is utter confusion,” said the visitor on condition of anonymity. “If my application has to be sent to Kathmandu for approval, what is the point of saying that Nepali diplomatic missions abroad have resumed issuing tourist visas?”

Indeed, there is also a lack of clarity about the kind of pre-approval or recommendation letter from a concerned ministry needed for an on-arrival visa. What should the content of such a recommendation be, who is eligible, what is a ‘concerned ministry’? There have been several passengers who have been prevented from checking in on flights to Kathmandu this week because of the confusion.

“The instructions about the on-arrival visa are so vague that our check-in officers puzzled about who is allowed and who is not,” said the representative of an international airline serving Kathmandu. Since airlines are penalised if passengers do not have proper documents, most carriers err on the side of caution.

All this means that the new rules were supposed to make it more convenient for non-Nepalis to take flights to Kathmandu have had the opposite effect. Visitors that Nepal Times spoke to who had hoped to travel to Nepal for Christmas and New Year either for tourism or to see friends said they were not going to take the risk.

Only the most determined foreign travellers, or those with connections in the travel industry or government, appear to be buying tickets to Nepal.

Most airlines report that only 5-10% of their passengers to Kathmandu on every flight are from Nepal.

Nepal had a target of attracting 2 million tourists under the Visit Nepal 2020 campaign, but after 220,000 arrivals between January and March, there were no visitors to restrictions were partially lifted in October for hikers and climbers. Since then, there have been about 500 non-Nepalis landing at Kathmandu airport every week, mostly from the United States, UK, and China.

Members of the Non-resident Nepalis Association and foreign passport holders born in Nepal have been allowed to return to Nepal to see family members, but again, airlines do not have clear instructions about what kind of documents they need.

“The main reason for this needless confusion is because there are so many agencies of government involved with their own criteria and rules, and no one is coordinating,” said the travel trade representative.

The Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation with the Nepal Tourism Board have been pushing for opening up, but the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAAN) has its own process. The Ministry of Health has been issuing contradictory statements. The Department of Immigration has its own rules. And the Covid-19 Crisis Management Centre which is supposed to streamline the process has not been able to issue clear and non-ambiguous guidelines.

Although all arriving passengers are supposed to stay one week in home isolation or hotel quarantine, there is no monitoring about whether anyone actually does so. Many who are supposed to self-isolate at home have been seen in weddings, and there is no one checking to see if a person in hotel quarantine checks out after an overnight stay.

Health checks at the airport are equally lackadaisical, with just a person with a thermal gun pointed at each passenger’s forehead.

Nepal anti-TB drone project awarded

Droned therapy for tuberculosis diagnosis in Nepal’s remote and hard to reach mountains has won at the 2020 International Air Cargo Association (TIACA) Sustainability by Design and will receive $10,000 in prize money as a start-up competition winner. Drone Optimized Therapy System (DOTS) by Nepali Flying Labs with support from First, Nepal Medical Trust (FMNT) flies from a central district hospital to health posts in the mountains to collect sputum samples and deliver both diagnostics and treatment to patients. Samples are tested using a high-end GeneXpert kit.

Says Bipan Pargay of Nepali Flying Labs: “We hope to scale up our drone cargo technology to other rural locations and establish networks of medical cargo drones to help more people in the coming days. Drones are said to be the future of air cargo but I believe they are the present and we are using it now to save lives in Nepal.”

Nepal Private Equity Association

Nepal’s prominent private equity and venture capital firms have come together to setup the Nepal Private Equity Association (NPEA) to promote alternative investment in Nepal’s expanding entrepreneurial ecosystem. One to Watch (OTW) was supported by USAID to incorporate the NPEA which will provide growing private equity/venture capital sector with representation, as well as upskilling.

TATA Service Camp

Simla based Himalayan Treks and Travel has launched the 5th edition of a week-long Tata Global Service price of the Wild Wisdom Quiz (WWQ) 2020 ahead of finalists from Colombia, India and Hong Kong. Hosted by WWF Nepal, the quiz was held on Zoom with the theme ‘Reimagining Our Planet’. New in its fourth edition, WWQ Nepal initially introduced the WWQ Wisdom Quiz (WWQ) in Nepal in 2017.

Team Nepal 1st Prize

Kapila Bhati School’s Anushna Gautam and Nightingale International School’s Sanya Sharma won the 1st prize of the Wild Wisdom Quiz (WWQ) 2020. Pankaj Juyal and Anuj Khatri from India finished as runners-up.

Nepalese mountain climbers are expected to return to Nepal taking the total to 276 across the country. The bank has already appointed suitable representatives to lead the additional sections.

Sana Bank, Nepal's prominent private equity and venture capital firms have come together to setup the Nepal Private Equity Association (NPEA) to promote alternative investment in Nepal’s expanding entrepreneurial ecosystem.いて、国際航空業界の成功の方法を示しました。
Dining

La Dolce Vita
Located in the heart of Thamel, La Dolce Vita offers a wide variety of Continental cuisine. Try their signature Chicken Mozzarella, or their Vegetarian Pizza, topped with fresh mushrooms, olives, and bell peppers.

Saturn Jupiter conjunction
This pair of giant planets will appear close and dazzle at and all rain almost together on the evening of 21 December. The show is too small to be seen with the naked eye. Watch from Kathmandu.

The world at home
Travel may be limited these days, but discovering incredible experiences across the globe doesn’t have to be. Get your travel fix with the world at home initiative, which brings some of their top tours, activity, and attractions to your online. Find everything on your guide. The world at home.

The Nepalese Honey That Makes Google’s Colorful Street Fests & Virtual street festivals
Documentary screening
See the release of the 2019 documentary Gaine by Nishon Shakya and KIMFF screening of KIMFF 2020 documentary on human trafficking in Nepal.

TEDxJamal
TEDxJamal is independently organized TED event TEDxJamal with Namrata Shenoy, Shristi Rijal, Sahil Rana, Kalash, and Rajesh Karki. TEDxJamal looks forward to showcasing and enabling ideas to be put into action.

The Online Carnival
The online carnival will feature three hours of dancehall, soca, afrobeats, and reggae, with special guest appearances, to break out the outfits and make sure the drinks are flowing. The event is also raising money for the Brain Coupes Support Center.

Christmas Eve at Nomad
Enjoy a night of good food and live music at the Piano Piano Restaurant on Christmas Eve. Special cocktails & mocktails after included. Look at the menu and make reservations now.

ONLINE ARCHIVES
Virtual street festivals
Google’s Colorful Street Fests & Virtual street festivals: A global tour of sights of the world’s best street festivals.

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI
Our pick
Released in 2018, The Kings is an epic historical war drama based on several dates back as early as 4,500 BC. Wind is a renewable, free, unlimited, clean source that doesn’t release any carbon emissions.

#FridaysForFuture

KURJESAGT
Kurjesagt – A U-turn makes a u-turn on education. Kurjesagt creates animated educational content on scientific, technological, practical, philosophical and psychological subjects. If teachers, parents, or casual viewers are looking for animated educational content on human trafficking in Nepal.

JSTOR
Need resources for assignments, research, or a research project? JSTOR has hundreds of academic journals and newspapers on a wide range of topics.

Jatra Cafe & Bar
Jatra Cafe & Bar offers an excellent variety of Continental cuisine. Try their signature King Kong or the Churchill with your meal.

Fuji Bakery
More than just a cafe, Fuji sets up a few tables and an outdoor dining area. Choose from a variety of baked goods and enjoy some coffee or tea.

Nandini Food Court
Nandini Food Court is a multi-ethnic food court in Kathmandu. Peanut to try out the delicious Newa Platter. Or order the much loved Daal and Bhat.

Christmas Eve
Mithila House in collaboration with Miller’s By Evoke has a Christmas banquet to promote local businesses, artisans, entrepreneurs and consumes products.

Mithila House in collaboration with Miller’s By Evoke

Events

Documentary screening
See the release of the 2019 documentary Gaine by Nishon Shakya and KIMFF screening of KIMFF 2020 documentary on human trafficking in Nepal.

Air quality index
This week we take a regional overview of the Air Quality Index (AQI) from the World Air Quality Index Project www.aqicn.org which carries daily highs. We can see from the table below in the People’s Party Committee on Air pollution mixed with winter fog in the plains. Kathmandu was an Unhealthy 152 on Thursday morning, while Pokhara hit 166, and Nepalganj had the worst air quality index.

Heart of Kathmandu

#1040

EXHIBITION

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A Tibetan Mastiff pup who dares to dream

The Ambassador’s Dog is a book by a former US envoy and Lo Khyi, a pup he adopted in Nepal

Tina Avale

The story begins with a tiny Tibetan Mastiff pup, cold, hungry and alone as an icy wind blows across a mountain trail in Tsarang of Upper Mustang beyond the Himalaya. A boy named Karchung scops up the ball of fluff. “Little brother, this won’t do,” says the boy, tucked into his heavy fur coat, as he scoops the little pup into his arms and takes him home.

The puppy snake up the stumpy, and as the days go by the little pup gets stronger and dreams of a warm home and family by night. An innocent wish that the high Himalayan winds carry across the land.

When he wasn’t chasing after chickens and prancing around the goats, he was famously roaming the village, exploring every corner of Saukre.

Villagers recognise pretty surely that this was the smallest and most adorable Tibetan Mastiff pup having a wandering spirit. But Karchung, his family and most of the village had never left the mountains. So, the story goes, the pup waits for his true family, perched on his rock overlooking the trail until one day a man with a white beard and white shirt comes puffing up the trail.

This is not just any other trekker, it is Scott DeLisi, at the time the American Ambassador to Nepal. He and his team were heading up to the fabled walled town of Lo Manthang.

The piercing blue eyes and dignified self-confident air immediately drew him to the pup. If it was not for the eyes, his Excellency may have walked on by since the dog’s blue-grey coat was the colour of the land itself, and perfectly camouflaged him in Mustang’s arid terrain.

Then, their eyes met, and for the first time, the puppy spoke... and Scott heard him, and that day, the world changed for them both.

The Ambassador’s Dog is a tale of Lo Khyi (for Mustang, and Khyi, which fortuitously means both ‘dog’ and ‘happiness’ in Tibetan), a pup that dared to dream big and who went on to become the source of happiness for Scott, who took the dog to America after his tenure in Nepal.

‘Scott’ in the book is Scott H. DeLisi himself, who served as ambassador to Kathmandu from 2009-12. Now retired, DeLisi is a career diplomat who spent 35 years from one embassy to the next roaming the world with multiple postings in Asia and Africa. But it was Nepal and Nepal's dassie that touched his heart like no other place, DeLisi is an avid birder, and made a new sighting of Spiny Babbler during his tenure in Nepal.

DeLisi worked on preparing Nepal for disaster risk reduction as ambassador, and after retiring had just established Soarway Foundation in April 2015, when a major earthquake rocked Nepal.

As an Executive Director of the Foundation and Engage Nepal, he continues his efforts to help Nepal with child nutrition and education, public health, employment generation and rebuilding. Part of the proceeds from this book will go to his charitable organisation.

The Ambassador’s Dog has a dream-like quality to it, but at its heart is a story of optimism and positivity. Lo Khyi is a canine medium for an important message: set goals for yourselves and believe in them. And somehow (stars will align, or you will find avenues) your dreams will come true.

Every word in this short tale reveals DeLisi’s attachment to his Bhote Kukur, a harbinger of hope and happiness. This book will surely grip many young readers and inspire them, and they will be particularly drawn by Jane Lillian Vance’s exquisite illustrations.

Vance is an acclaimed American artist, her thangka paintings of amchi healers in west Nepal resulted in the award-winning 2009 documentary A Call for the Villages. She has worked as an art therapist for children with special needs for 20 years and is a vice-president at the non-profit Help Save the Next Girl.

The illustrations on every page are not just read for the beauty of art that are intimate portrayals of the Land of Lo, its Buddhist faith, and its people. Many children in Nepal do not have access to books, and a perfect magical gift of hope for the upcoming holiday season - especially for families with children and dogs.

Nepal’s highest-ever tiger sighting

A tiger has been caught in a camera trap roaming forests at 3,165m in the forested cliffs of Ilam

A tiger has been caught on camera trap at an elevation of 1,455m in Ilam district, the highest proven sighting of a big cat ever in Nepal — and the first time that one has been sighted in the mountains of eastern Nepal.

This could be another indication that tigers may be moving higher up the mountains in Nepal due to changes in the climate, or due to habitat destruction in the plains.

The main traditional tiger habitats in Nepal are the Chitwan and Bardia National Parks in the plains, and this is the second highest altitude sighting of a tiger in Nepal. Earlier, a tiger was also caught on camera trap in the Mahabharat Range of Darchula in forests at 2,500 m.

Ecologists say tigers may have stayed into the mountains as prey got scarcer in their traditional habitats, water sources ran out, due to higher temperatures because of global warming.

The highest a tiger has ever been spotted is in Bhutan at an elevation of 4,088 metres three years ago, and in Dibang Valley of India’s Arunachal warming.

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The same tiger captured in the camera trap in Ilam (13 and 21 November 2020) on the mountains of Ilam at an altitude of 3,165m.

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Thapa of Nepal’s Department of Forests and Soil Conservation.

Ang Plut Sharpa, Country Director of the Red Panda Network agrees. “The first-ever record of a tiger in Ilam district demonstrates the significance of this nature corridor in eastern Nepal, and it needs to be a global conservation priority.”

Conservationists say that the finding broadens the scope of potential high-altitude habitats for tigers in Nepal, and it needs to establish ecological corridors for the safe crossborder dispersal of wildlife and the conservation of species.

The Royal Bengal Tiger (Panthera tigris tigris) is listed as Endangered in the International Union for Nature Conservation (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species, and protected in Nepal. Currently tigers are found in five national parks in the Terai Arc Landscape (TAL) covering 36 districts and seven biological corridors in the plains of Nepal.

Nepal is the first tiger range country to meet a target set at the St Petersburg Tiger Summit in 2010 to double the population of the big cats. A tiger census in 2018 showed that the population of tigers had risen to 235 from 121 in 2010.

“The tiger is an umbrella species that ensures the well-being of the entire ecosystem,” says Mana Bahadur Khadka, Director General of the Department of Forests and Soil Conservation. “This record of tiger presence signifies the importance of high-altitude forest in the mountains as a habitat for these endangered big cats.”
**Sons of their fathers**

Children of Nepali migrant workers are following their fathers’ footsteps to work overseas.

Khushiram Gurung started working in Bahrain as a security guard in 2010. He was introduced to Bahrain when his father worked there in 2003. Now, his children are following their fathers’ footsteps in this inter-generational mobility.

Khushiram Gurung with colleagues when he first arrived in Bahrain in 2010. His father also worked there in 2003.

Ram and his family were among the first to work in Malaysia. They were seeking work. “For many, it was a transit option. We had escaped our abusive employers or became the go-to person for many Nepalis like Nepal and Malaysia were similar. By the time I left, Malaysia had advanced so much,” he says now. But he is optimistic about the opportunities promised by mechanised agriculture in Nepal, with the right incentives and policies.

Khushiram Gurung and his family at their Kathmandu home.

Ram’s elder daughter got married recently. “Remittances helped me pay for my daughter’s wedding,” he says. But my job did not let me go back to attend it.

Upasna Khadka

“Sons of their fathers” Migrants Day

Khushiram Gurung

As a veteran migrant worker in the agriculture sector, Tika leased land and started his own initiatives in Panion. He also became the go-to person for many Nepalis who had escaped their abusive employers or were working work. “For many, it was a transit job so they could earn enough to buy their tickets home,” he says.

In 2017, Tika decided to pack up and come home. He has set up an agriculture farm in Gulmi, where he is raising 90 goats and a greenhouse for vegetable farming.

“When I went to Malaysia in 1991, it felt like Nepal and Malaysia were similar. By the time I left, Malaysia had advanced so much,” he says now. But he is optimistic about the opportunities promised by mechanised agriculture in Nepal, with the right incentives and policies.

Khushiram Gurung with his family at their Kathmandu home.

When he was growing up my father was away in India, we didn’t know when he would return. My siblings and I would wake up early and he would be in the kitchen, having arrived late in the previous night.” When his father left for Bahrain, his presence became the letters that arrived at our home. “We used to go to the post office to see if there was a letter. The day the letters arrived, we would run home from school at around 4PM and wait for my mother to return from the fields. But once she was back, my siblings and I would sit around and my elder brother would read out the letter,” recalls Khushiram.

By 2012, with three family members in Bahrain, they were building a house in Kathmandu, but then his mother was diagnosed with cancer. “The ones left behind rarely get the attention and credit they deserve for keeping families intact. We are viewed as the providers, but to me, it was my mother who was the real provider,” says Khushiram. The family gave her the treatment they could afford, but there came a time when the doctors said nothing more could be done. Khushiram and his brother decided to send their father back. “We had to convince our father it was time he left, without telling him what the doctors had said. He agreed. We cried.”

The two spent a few months together before she passed. “But we were not able to spend time with our mother even in her last days. That is the dilemma of foreign employment,” he says.

Khushiram, now a father of six-year-old boy, hopes his son will not have to go abroad for work. “While I want him to stay in Nepal, our politicians, with their self-interest and cronyism, will likely choose my son abroad just like they did my father, brother and I.”

Khushiram Gurung

Manchester

Sultan Tika left Gulmi for Malaysia in 1991. He used his connections to arrange a visit visa as there were no work permits, and Nepalis went via Thailand. “I first went to Malaysia because I had been told that there is an option for citizenship if you stay there for a few years, only to realise it wasn’t true,” Sultan recalls. The term ‘setting’ where transnational networks operated were already a thing then. He had to pay $40,000 to the agents. “For someone who had barely seen 500 rupee notes, this amount was really large. At that time, you could buy 680,000 (4.4 hectares) land at Rs40,000,” Tika was paid Rs240 a day to do agricultural work. “From Thailand, we used to go by road to Malaysia. Once, I even had to go by boat and that was the most dangerous option offered by the smugglers.”

The reluctance to hire foreign workers in Malaysia was as real then as they are now. Sector like agriculture were facing shortages, however, and without legal pathways, illegal options were the only route.

Sultan Tika working on his leased land in Panion, Malaysia, with other Nepali migrants.

Ram first went abroad for work in 1998. “Everyone said it is the place to be, so I too wanted to go,” he says. The names Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Dubai sounded familiar but it did not matter to him where he landed up as long as he could leave Nepal. Ram was charged Rs3,000 for a security job in Dubai. There was not much documentation and process in those days. There were not many Nepalis in Dubai in 1998 but it was exciting to bump into them and ask how long they had been there. “If they said 4 or 5 years, I would feel a mixture of shock and pity for them. The idea of being in a foreign country for so long was new to me,” says. “Little did I know that I would still be here in 2020.”

In Ram’s memory, Dubai almost looked like Nepal when he first arrived. “There were no tall buildings. Even the airport was small and dingy. Look at this place now. Dubai has changed a lot, but I have not changed at all.”

Working as a security guard everyday for two decades has been a repetition of the previous day for Ram. “No career progression. No change in routine. Some clever Nepali guards become group leaders, but the rest of us are always security officers.”

Every year, he spends over 4,000 hours guarding either private residences or commercial buildings. “I usually get the 12-hour night shifts from 3PM to 3AM. It is difficult to feel rested when you sleep only one hour of the day. And it takes a toll on your health.”

With low incomes, saving is a challenge. And there are always new expenses. There’s children’s education and bigger investments like land and house. “Then it is your children’s weddings. And your parents’ health costs. Just when you think you are done, some other expense shows up, and you keep postponing your return home.”

Ram’s elder daughter married recently and he could not be home. “Remittances helped me pay for my daughter’s wedding. But my job did not let me go back to attend it.”

Now in his 50s, Ram says that unlike the lyrics to the song Said that says, “we will return home at 40”, he is late by a decade. “My visa expires in 18 months. I think I will now head home for good. It is time.”

Tika says Nepal has started coming “in droves” to Malaysia from 2001, when the government introduced work permits for foreign workers, first for agriculture workers then for security guards.

As a veteran migrant worker in the agriculture sector, Tika leased land and started his own initiatives in Panion. He also became the go-to person for many Nepalis who had escaped their abusive employers or were working work. “For many, it was a transit job so they could earn enough to buy their tickets home,” he says.
Nepali migration in the 2020s

Amidst a global pandemic, the 20th International Migrants Day is a time to plan for the coming decade

Upasana Khadka

The 20th International Migrants Day on 18 December in the midst of the pandemic, with its disproportionate impact on migrants demands retrospection. Let us widen our time horizon to the last decades to see how far we have come, and review the lapses along the way.

Both timeframes are intricately connected. Many lapses in the last 20 years in governance have had an acute, amplified impact on migrants this year. Covid-19 magnified the weaknesses and highlighted achievements that helped migrants cope better.

Communication was critical during the pandemic: as that made the long hours of waiting at labour camps, quarantine areas, and even isolation centres bearable. Smart phones have empowered migrant workers, given them the opportunity to be their own storytellers.

In this paper, we reported stories of migrants who received support after they live streamed on Facebook upon facing apathy from the authorities. The Malaysian Embassy’s weekly Facebook live programs answer queries of migrants need to be made the norm.
With Brexit, new immigration rules may make it easier for Nepalis to find employment in Britain

Upasana Khadka

S antosh Shah, the now famous Nepali who is a finalist in Masterchef: The Professionals 2020, knows how the right combination of effort and luck helped him to come such a long way from a village in Siraha to Britain and onto the world stage. This is an immigrant success story that proves how everywhere, opportunities are not, and migration can be an equaliser of sorts. Hard work, determination, and passion for his chosen profession made Shah one of the finalists in the coveted cookery competition. “I can do it, so can others if they are given an opportunity – there is no shortage of talent in Nepal and I am no exception,” Shah told Nepali Times in an interview. However, the less discussed and perhaps less glamorous part of this globalisation of Nepali cuisine, is that the ‘chief’ occupation is one of the hard-to-fill occupations in the UK. The shortage of chefs in Asian restaurants across Britain led hundreds of them to close shop even before the Covid-19 crisis.

South Asian restaurants in the UK prefer to hire migrants from the Subcontinent who are familiar with the cuisine, the flavour and the spices. But British immigration with certain waivers including from outside the EU. Both Covid-19 and the end of free movement have further amplified the movement have further amplified the shortage of health workers. The share of European joiners is too high, especially with the fall in the value of the British pound after Brexit also means that staying on in Britain is no longer as attractive as it used to be. Simkhada thinks newcomers from EU countries will also drop because of added complications like the new requirement to take IELTS language tests just as non-EU migrants have to.

As a result, the proportion of health workers in Britain from the Philippines and India are on the rise. The share of European joiners to the National Health Service (NHS) since 2015/16 has decreased from 10.9% to 7.2% while non-EU/EEA nationals have increased from 8.7% to 14.5%. Some 22,000 EU nationals have reportedly quit the NHS since 2016, of which 8,600 were nurses.

This could be an opportunity for Nepal, which can offer skilled migration in the global labour market, especially in the health sector. “We have many unemployed nurses in Nepal as the health sector has not been able to absorb all graduates, so immigration is a financially safe alternative,” says Bishak Simkhada of the Nepali Nursing Association in the UK. He says English proficiency is a major obstacle, and Nepal’s immigration curriculum could be further strengthened to address the challenges.

Nursing Association in the UK.

Nirmala Simkhada has been working in the UK for the last 12 years and has seen a demographic shift among her colleagues. She says “Many of my friends from Eastern European countries like Romania and Bulgaria are returning to their countries of birth because of the Brexit uncertainty, added paperwork, lack of access to the same benefits as British nationals.” Rising wages in their own countries and the fall in the value of the British pound after Brexit also means that staying on in Britain is no longer as attractive as it used to be. Simkhada thinks newcomers from EU countries will also drop because of added complications like the new requirement to take IELTS language tests just as non-EU migrants have to.

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Domestic worker Lilamaya Dhimal calls her former Saudi employer "a monster"

Upasana Khadka and Marty Logan

Thirty years after she left Nepal, and after a dramatic rescue of her from her abusive Saudi employer, Lilamaya Dhimal returned to Kathmandu airport on Wednesday morning. (Picture, right)

She had been saved from a cruel man of the house in a well-planned rescue in the town of Tabuk by her brother, the Nepal embassy and other Nepalis. It is tragic to be back and reunited with her family in Nepal, who had given up hope that she was alive.

The Nepal Embassy in Saudi Arabia, where she had been sheltering told her to get up at 9AM on Tuesday to catch her flight via Kuwait. But the anticipation was too much for her.

"I was so excited that I could barely sleep. I was up by 3AM and was on the phone with my children," Lilamaya said after landing.

Lilamaya (who also goes by the name Sharmila Magar) had been out of touch with her family for a decade since first going to Saudi Arabia in 2009. One day, by chance, she connected with a man from Nepal on IMO, and pleaded for help.

He shared her contact information with his sister in Jhapa, who lived near Lilamaya’s house and was kind enough to go to her house to pass on her details to her family.

"It was such a shock when I received a call and heard my brother say, ‘Hello’, Lilamaya recalls. ‘I learnt that my husband, who was ill in health and drank, passed away three years back. My children were younger when I left, but I have six grandchildren now. I was out of touch for years, and they had given me up for dead.’

Lilamaya’s employer was abusive and did not pay her. When she couldn’t bear the torture, Lilamaya used to ask him what they would do if she died in Saudi Arabia? His response — a nonchalant “Dead means dead” (no problem).

I handed in the hands of a monster," she says. “All five of the family’s children were below 10 years and were quite a handful. They were gullible and emulated their parents in mistreating me. My days would begin before 6AM and end after 1AM.

Lilamaya’s brother, Hem Raj Magar, was based in the UAE and helped coordinate her rescue via the Riyadh-based Nepal Embassy which referred her case to the Jeddah-based Consulate.

“My sister can barely read and she had no idea where she was in Saudi Arabia,” says Hem Raj. “It took me a long time and several failed attempts to get her to finally send her WhatsApp location.”

Labour Attaché Pradhyutya at the Consulate in Jeddah recommended that she also send pictures of her landlord/lady’s house. Lilamaya managed to sneak out of the house one day and took pictures of a neighbourhood shop. That was enough to begin the rescue effort.

“Her location was in Tabuk, over 1,200 km from where we are based,” says Upadhyaya. “So we mobilised Nepalis in the town to confirm the location as we hit the road. We advised her to come out by the next morning once her employer had left for work. We instantly recognised her and took her away in our vehicle.”

Lilamaya recalls her nervousness. “My heart was pounding as I was scared I would be caught. I managed to take two small bags of my clothes even though I had been advised not to bring anything.”

Consulate staff coordinated with Saudi authorities to ensure that Lilamaya was fairly compensated.

“The employer was a no-show at the Labour Office on the first day but he came in the second day,” says Upadhyaya. “After much back and forth, they have finally paid her around 30,000 Riyal (Rs 95,000).”

Until her exit documentation was sorted out and she got compensated, Lilamaya was living under the protection of the Nepal Consulate and Non-Resident Nepali Association in Tabuk, and then the Embassy in Jeddah.

As soon as she reached Kathmandu, she arrived at Kathmandu airport on Wednesday, and after her rescue in Tabuk of Saudi Arabia.

Lilamaya Dhimal (Sharmila Magar) on arrival in Kathmandu on Wednesday, and after her rescue in Tabuk of Saudi Arabia.

The willingness to bypass the ban to improve their lives is also fuelled by the growing interest for domestic workers abroad which was growing in the Gulf at 8% annually pre-pandemic. Now, with employer family members home at all times, domestic workers are under added pressure to work more without adequate compensation.

While many sectors face the brunt of pandemic-induced economic fallout, the care economy is expected to grow in the Gulf region and beyond. For Nepali women, whose share in in-house employment has been limited at around 10% annually, overseas options in non-care sectors has remained poor.

But defying the ban means women are not recorded as migrants by the government. It also results in lack of pre-departure training, inability to hold agents accountable, and makes them ineligible for welfare programs — all part of the legalised recruitment process.

After years of the ban being ditched for its ineffectiveness and unintended consequences, in October the Parliamentary Committee on Industry, Commerce, Labour and Consumer Interest instructed that the ban be removed under certain conditions.

Says Himal Pradhan Shrivastav, Chair of the Committee, who led a review trip to the Gulf before the pandemic to assess the situation of domestic workers: “Rather than a blanket ban, we have recommended for country-specific policies to be taken to address the situation of domestic workers.”

In addition to a comprehensive bilateral labour agreement, those preconditions include a separate domestic worker law, a strong regional framework to resolve issues faced by domestic workers, pre-departure training, including learning the local language — and post-arrival training, equality of treatment between locals, penalties for sponsors who abuse workers, and easier access to communication with consular officials and family back home.

In early November, Saudi Arabia made some reforms to foreign worker regulations, including giving workers the freedom to change their employers. They also made it easier for Nepalis to travel outside the country without their employer’s permission.

However, the changes do not apply to domestic workers. Similar reforms made in Qatar last August this year do, however, apply to domestic workers elsewhere.

On Ittehad and Ukhane Media helped in reporting this piece.
I was evening in September 1996, and some of us Gurkha soldiers who were fed up with the way we were being treated by our British and Brunei officers were holding a meeting inside the military base to discuss the form of protest to press our case. We were to Pranjan Rai, Gajendra lobo and Naren Rai. Our grievances were that we were not getting proper pay, pension, not allowed free meals, as well as being insulted and mistreated. It had just got out of hand.

We felt that Gurkha recruitment for the Brunei security forces should not be conducted by the British Army, but be governed by a separate treaty between Nepal and Brunei.

Our meeting formed a governing committee as well as a sub-committee, and more than 2,400 out of the total 2,500 Gurkha force strength in Brunei signed in support of the movement.

We held talks with the hierarchy, and had started shouting some of the senior officers. One of our demands was that the 16-year-old Gurkha Reserve Unit (GRU) be disbanded and revert to a security guard force. We submitted a written memorandum, but it was ignored. This dragged on for months.

Then, suddenly one middle of the night, all GRU weapons were returned to the Brunei government, and our unit went back to being a security guard force. However, other demands of salary increment, end of mistreatment by arrogant officers were yet to be addressed. Notwithstanding, the officers had learnt an important lesson that Nepalis will not tolerate injustice and oppression.

The situation was again on the boil, and pressure was building up. It was obvious that the brass would come down heavily on us if we continued to raise this issue, and our time was running out. The unit had no inkling we were about toGENCY the moment and inrush of information in order to install military discipline.

After the Brunei revolt, Kandangwa, standing second from right. After the Brunei revolt, Kandangwa, standing second from right.

defence. I gave a short speech at our meeting, saying that the event was a make-or-break point, the higher-ups were about to take stern action, and talked about what step we should take in case of some of us were dismissed and sent back to Nepal.

Three days later, I had a premonition of disaster. Sure enough, 11 of us considered to be instigators were secretly dismissed, and without the rest of the unit having any inkling we were dispatched to the airport for a flight back to Nepal.

We were waiting to board at Bandar Seri Begawan airport, and did not know that back at camp word had spread about our dismissal. The Nepali soldiers then surrounded the headquarters building to protest and demand that our leaders be returned, and failing that, to dismiss them there and then, and not just fire us, but shoot the rest to contain the escalating situation and vandalize.

At about five in the afternoon, the Permanent Secretary of Brunei (the King's brother-in-law) rushed to the airport to find out from us what had happened. He asked me questions, and I told him all about what had happened, and the next thing he said was, ‘Do you want to know if I could convince the Nepalis at camp to go back to their dormitories and end the protest?’ I replied that I would do it if my employment was restored, and I was allowed to deliver a short speech to our people at the base. The Permanent Secretary agreed and drove me, along with two fellow Nepalis, to the camp in his Mercedes Benz.

The Gurkhas were still protesting and shouting slogans when we reached camp. I got up in a two minute speech told them they should now return to their quarters in a disciplined manner because the senior most official of the Brunei government had promised to address our long standing grievances. I assured them that if we were betrayed, we would once more gather to protest and raise slogans.

After I spoke, there was pin-drop silence and the Nepali troops all dispersed. The discipline and obedience of the Gurkhas seems to have surprised the Permanent Secretary who then went to confer with GRU officers. He then asked us to assemble in the gym hall.

He began by informing us that he had just fired G F D Scotton, the British officer in charge of the GRU who was our principle nemesis. Now that Scotton was gone, and the GRU had reverted back to security guard status, the Permanent Secretary assured us that all our other demands like salary and pension would be resolved.

We then collectively took the decision to suspend our agitation, and keep a low profile. Things went back to normal for a few months, but then some Gurkhas challenged the authorities again regarding their promotions. This time, the brass decided that this new rebellion needed to be nipped in the bud, and dismissed the 11 leaders from service. We decided to accept the decision because so many Nepali jobs were on the line if the Gurkha unit was disbanded. In the next 15 months, the GRU became the Gurkha Security Guard. A new mutiny-motivated in a successful resolution of our just demands. This was possible because we were united, well educated, patriotic, courageous, and willing to take the risk for the sake of justice and our beliefs. By insisting on a bilateral treaty, we had also acted to stand up to the principle of Nepal's sovereignty.

We finally returned to Nepal with our hands held high on 14 December 1997. It has been 23 years since our run-in with the GRU, and the events are still fresh in our minds. The Gurkha Security Guard is still functioning, but the British Army's involvement in recruiting Nepali servicemen to the unit still continues and there is no Gurkha-Brunei treaty. The Gurkha force was set up in 1974 with 27 former Gurkhas of the British Army and Gurkha Contingent, Singapore (Nepal). It was originally called Gurkha Security Guard but in 1983, the British and Brunei Gurkha soldiers decided to form the GRU, and had former British Gurkha soldiers serving in the new unit had to work as regular soldiers.

Ever since it was converted into GRU, the Brunei government kept augmenting its strength. By 1996, the GRU's numbers crossed 2,500 — as big as a brigade strength in the British Army. I was a British Gurkha and soldier, and joined the GRU in May 1996 even though I had signed the contract paperwork as 'security guard'. When we got there, we were forced to work as infantry soldiers. Most ex-British Gurkha soldiers serving in the GRU were above 35, and the situation was pathetic. We over-the-hill Gurkhas were serving in the GRU. But their status was lower than that of second lieutenants. However, they had handsome salaries, perks and facilities which were compared to the other ranks. Most Nepali officer regarded them as occults, as many of them used to know to British and Bruneian officers.

Des Chene writes: 'The soldiers took upon themselves with mistrust and regard them as moles who misrepresent their views to the British officers in order to carry their favours in the form of promotions, good postings, longer services, granting of honorary ranks which carry some monetary benefits on their retirements.'

There was a lot of arbitrary discrimination with regard to the Gurkhas who had been in the British Army found the rule confusing and the officers did not know what to do. But the British officers had no discipline and respect of the rank and file.

When the British were in India, and after the 1816 treaty they did not actually have to colonise Nepal, and never really recognised Nepal as a sovereign independent country until the Chandra Shumshara Rana’s Friendship Treaty of 1923. But at the heart of the Gurkha dilemma is the anomaly that even today, nationals of one country fight and die for another. It is absurd that a United Kingdom, a sovereign country, recruits soldiers from another sovereignty, independent country, and never really recognises Nepal as a sovereign independent country. It is the British Army that colonised Nepal, and gone in Nepal, and no one has authorised this arrangement? Why is it still going on? Scours of so-called democratic governments have come and gone in Nepal, and no one has shown much concern about exhaustion to the country’s sovereignty.

The Gurkhas in Singapore were kept in British Army until the late 1990s. Many of them are married, but some 1,500 of these young, educated and dynamic Nepali women are confined to the base and not allowed to leave Singapore.

Over the years, there were more than 15 retired Nepal majors and about 50 retired captains serving in the GRU. But their status was much lower than that of second lieutenants. However, they had handsome salaries, perks and facilities which were compared to the other ranks. Most Nepali officer regarded them as occults, as many of them used to know to British and Bruneian officers.

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