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A year of living dangerously

Throughout 2020, the ruling Nepal Communist Party has been so embroiled in an internal power struggle that its senior leaders either do not realise (or do not care) that there is a Covid-19 crisis.

Helloooo. There is a pandemic going on. Now, in addition to the health crisis, Nepal is also facing a political crisis.

In this year-end issue of *Nepali Times*, we take a look back at 2020 and how the coronavirus pandemic has impacted on the economy, environment, and socio-cultural lives of Nepalis. We have mined data that show a clear correlation between the spread of Covid-19 from January to December with positive aspects like cleaner air and fewer highway fatalities. (page 10-11)

The Air Quality Index (AQI) in Kathmandu started improving immediately after the lockdown went into effect on 24 March, and excepted from a spike in April because of forest fires, got even better after the monsoon rains

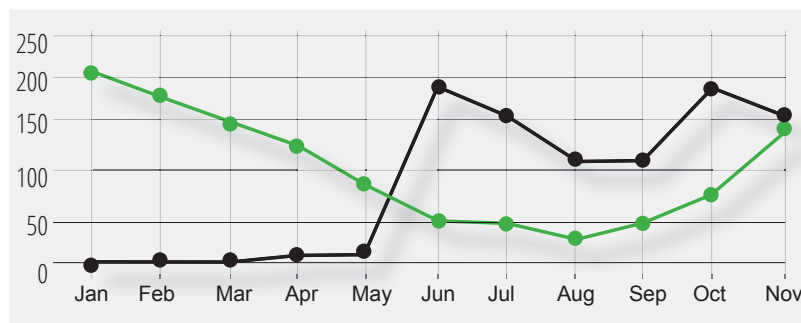
began.

Road traffic accidents had claimed 1,400 lives between March-August 2019, but because of the lockdown it dropped to less than 700 this year. Our graph (right) shows AQI worsened after September, and road fatalities per month was creeping back up more 'normal' levels by December.

Traffic Police spokesperson, Shyam Krishna Adhikari tells us, "People have been driving more recklessly after the lockdown, they are drinking and driving because there is less checking."

On the other hand, various other parameters like suicides, rape, domestic violence, child marriages (*page 12*), all worsened dramatically from April-August. The most worrying are police figures for suicides: the monthly average for suicide cases in Nepal pre-Covid used to be 350. It shot up to 668 in June and 972 in July. By October, monthly total suicides had dropped again to near pre-Covid levels.

There is a parallel mental health pandemic across Nepal.



● Air Quality Index (AQI) ● Covid-19 Cases

Uncertainty, job loss, and lack of social contact has led to depression and psycho-social disorders. Societal taboos mean mental health is not mentioned. To make matters worse, Nepal is now also worried about political uncertainty and the fear of renewed violence.

“Being cooped up at home for months and being socially distanced is one of the main causes for the high number of suicides, the lockdown has not been helpful at all,” says psychiatrist Kamal Gautam, who also blames the

“infodemic” of news of death and sickness in the media.

At least 1 million people depended directly on tourism, and indirectly it benefited many more.

The Visit Nepal 2020 campaign with a target of 2 million tourists had to be cancelled, and it looks like 2021 will also be a washout.

Still, the former CEO of the Nepal Tourism Board Deepak Raj Joshi is hopeful: "The motto is to survive 2020, revive in 2021 and thrive in 2022." 🇳🇵

FULL STORY PAGE 10-11

Alisha Sijapati



PRINT IS BACK

From Friday, 1 January 2021, *Nepali Times* is resuming its weekly hardcopy edition with the world-class design and content that it has been always known for.

The return to print represents a new year,
new decade and new hope for Nepal.

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We wish all our readers and partners a
Healthy and Happy 2021.



Himalmedia



Step back from the brink

As feared, Prime Minister KP Oli's brinkmanship has led the country to the edge of the cliff. This cartoon in *Nepali Times* last week was prescient, which is why we are republishing it.

The coming days will show whether we as a nation go over, or take a step back. While the role of the Prime Minister to bring matters to the point of dissolving the House is obvious, it is also important to recognise the cast of characters who pushed him to the rim of the precipice.

Nepal has not had a prime minister serve a full term since the end of the Rana regime in 1950. The continuity of the Head of Government in office itself was bound to have provided political stability and economic stimulus. That was PM Oli's promise during the 2017 elections, which is why he was voted to power.

K P Oli had a second kidney transplant in May, and the past ten months have been overtaken by the Covid-19 crisis, but it is his style of leadership that has undermined the government's performance.

He turned the Prime Minister's Office into a parallel power centre to Singha Darbar. Decision-making was centralised, and the he seemed to revel in acting imperious and allowing animosities to fester.

Most inexplicable has been his deliberate sidelining of Madhav Kumar Nepal, which made the latter go into an unnatural embrace of Pushpa Kamal Dahal and his Maoist legacy.

The train of events that made the prime minister violate the Constitution has to do with his inability to 'manage' Dahal. It was a matter of massaging his ego, and adhering to their agreement to serve two-and-half years each as PM. Oli could have placated his party more, instead of going it alone. Why was that so difficult to do?

So, Dahal made common cause with the top-line ex-UML leadership who had not got over Oli's sweeping victory at the party General Convention six years ago. He also deftly placed his comrade Agni Sapkota as Speaker, despite him carrying the conflict-era murder case of Arjun Bahadur Lama.

Oli came to believe that Dahal wanted him to fail. Just as President Bidya Devi Bhandari is being described as doing Oli's bidding, Sapkota was following Dahal's orders in the Speaker's chair, by blocking the MCC and boycotting the Constitutional Council.

In essence, this boiled down to a Maoist/

Leninist control of the Government by the Party, against which the Prime Minister became increasingly angry and rigid.

Oli feels Dahal will endanger the polity, and does not want him to take over the government under the new Constitution without showing contrition for the conflict. He also sees himself as the rightfully elected party Chair, and believes Nepal should wait for the upcoming General Convention to succeed him.

On the one hand, lack of effective governance meant that Oli did not have a buffer of public support, and he has been further burdened by an implacably hostile press.

On the other hand, Nepal and Dahal wanted to be party Chair and prime minister right away.

As the divisions within the NCP got more and more intractable, everyone who supported political stability had hoped that it was prospect of a party split that would make the three main actors – Oli, Dahal and Nepal –

backtrack at the last moment. This did not happen.

Getting wind of a no-confidence vote by the Dahal-Nepal faction on Sunday morning, the prime minister recommended dissolution of the Lower House, and President Bhandari (who tends to see things in the same light as the Prime Minister) promptly signed the letter.

Prime Minister Oli overstepped the Constitution in calling for a disbandment of the House. It was an anti-democratic move that has put the country at peril.

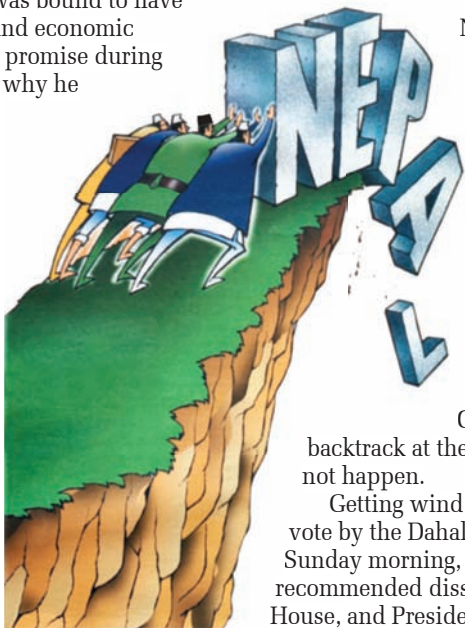
Today, the party is virtually split. There are parallel Central Committees, both factions claim

the party banner at the Election Commission. Despite their outward opposition to Oli's move, the opposition Nepali Congress and smaller parties including the RPP and JSP want elections, and are already in campaign mode.

Meanwhile, a Communist prime minister who espouses multiparty democracy is on the back foot, while a former Maoist chieftain who proposes party control of government and an executive presidency, has the upper hand.

The ball is in the Supreme Court's court. And its decision will determine the next course of Nepali politics.

PM Oli has acted as a boss and not a statesman, unable to rein in Dahal's nervous ambition. Peering through Kathmandu's murky smog, next year's elections, if they happen, would be an opportunity for other parties to capitalise on the NCP's disarray.



SUBHAS RAI / NEPALI TIMES #22, 22-28 DECEMBER 2000

When the dust settles, let's plan for a free, fair and peaceful elections in 2021

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Twenty years ago this week, the *Nepali Times* year-end issue #23 of 29 December 2000 - 4 January 2001 listed the good, bad and ugly that happened during the year.

Just as with 2020, there was not much to cheer about in 2000. The Maoist conflict was gaining strength, the government in Kathmandu was in disarray – infighting between the UML and the NC had paralysed government with frequent strikes. And on top of that, Maoist-backed trade unions were attacking school and exhorting industries.

Excerpts from the report 'The Good, The Bad and The Ugly' from 20 years ago:

The Good

It is the spirit of the season that we must begin our roundup of Year 00 by picking out things that went right. In Nepal if things go well it is usually an act of god, and if things go wrong then you can be sure someone messed something up. So it is with the economy: we will probably register a six percent growth this year not because of good planning, an efficient administration or an honest government, but because of nature. A healthy monsoon, well-spaced rains, no drought, and no major floods all contributed to growth. Our rain-fed economy is doing well despite government. Imagine what would happen if we didn't commit hara-kiri with hotels, if we resolved the Maoist problem through negotiations, if we spent our budgets properly without leakage.



The Bad

To recap: fallout from the hijacking of IC814 damaged ties with India and nearly ruined tourism, there were six bandhs that didn't achieve much, there were no new foreign investors and some existing ones shut up shop and left, the textile industry is in deep crisis, farmers are suffering record low rice prices, the hotel crisis threatens to carry over into 2001, the Maoist insurgency claimed the lives of 600 Nepalis. Attempts to resolve the violence through talks failed miserably, and there are fears of a dangerous escalation.

... and The Ugly

Members within the cabinet claw at each other, Congress factions are at each other's throats, the Congress and the main opposition barely tolerate one another, the UML, ML and RPP all suffer internal rifts, the police and army have daggers drawn, the government and palace are playing cat and mouse. Of course it is, because no one is governing. The result is there for everyone to see: a law and order crisis, a paralysed administration, an epidemic of graft and corruption, a fear psychosis, uncertainty and a nationwide sense of dread. It's not about Hirithik at all.

From the archives of *Nepali Times* of the past 20 years, site search: www.nepalitimes.com

ONLINE PACKAGES



RED-HANDED

Watch video of a Department of Foreign Employment sting operation at a recruiting agency that had overcharged two workers going to Saudi Arabia. The department has conducted 11 such operations in the past month to deter Nepalis desperate for jobs being cheated. Story: [page 5](#).

RESCUED MIGRANT

Poor lady, I am glad she is safe now ('Nepali in Saudi Arabia rescued after 12 years', Upasana Khadka and Marty Logan, #1040). How many more Nepalis are kept prisoners like her? Don't go to Saudi-Arabia, Middle- East countries as domestic help. Rarely are they treated well.

Arctic Traveller Eira

- Rs953,000 as compensation for thirteen years' work and maltreatment? Is there not some international court where we can sue the employer/ the Saudi Arabian state?

Elif Ledrön

- Many of those poverty stricken and naive people don't know if there is anything called ICJ or the existence of basic rights to get compensation, that's why people from countries like Nepal need to work for them, so that its workers are protected.

Ngawang Tenzin

GURKHA REBELLION

A legacy of British imperialism ('A forgotten Gurkha rebellion', Ram Kandangwa, #1040). Time to stop. No Nepali would join British, Brunei, Singapore or Indian Army if the pay wasn't good.

Raj Shrestha

- It was liberating reading the real experience and not all the rhetoric of a British Gurkha soldier. I agree with your assessment, the British involvement in recruitment process should be eliminated. It's appalling that they keep more than half of your salary.

Samyek Shrestha

- Just one comment on this extract, "The Brunei Security Guard is still functioning, but the British Army's involvement in recruiting Nepali servicemen to the unit still continues." The Gurkha Reserve Unit in Brunei, to give it its proper designation, employs ex British, Nepali and Indian Army soldiers and officers alongside Bruneian servicemen and women. The unit has nothing at all to do with UK or with Britain's Brigade of Gurkhas. We don't recruit them, nor have we anything to do with the terms of service offered. At the time, there were two retired ex British Army officers serving with the unit, both recruited by the Brunei authorities. There are none now.

Sam Cowan

HIGHEST TIGER SIGHTING

That's high for a 'Bengal' Tiger ('Nepal's highest-ever tiger sighting', #1040). Must have gone to enjoy the view of the third highest mountain in the world, quick tourism while the humans stay indoors!

Raj Gyawali

- This is the result of habitat destruction - just another reason why we don't really need Nijgad airport.

J-wal Gurung

- Aren't we worried that this incidence could be because of climate crisis? We had done a study to see the change in the pattern of pest incidence due to global warming which came back positive.

Radip Tandukar

MIGRANTS DAY SPECIAL

Labour migration is such a key part of Nepal's economy (and now its politics, society and culture) that it deserves this kind of comprehensive media coverage. Also, most migrant workers go to India, yet they are on the bottom rung in terms of treatment by the government. Improving their lot should be a priority.

Nepal Now

COVID VACCINE

Perhaps if Nepal government spent less time on internal squabbling, commie jockeying and power brokering and graft, then it may start to think about acquiring and distributing vaccines which will be made available at some point ('90% in poor countries will miss Covid vaccinations', nepalitimes.com). But frankly as the vaccines were developed with public funds and private enterprises, none of them from Nepal, it cannot expect to be at the frontline of receiving the shots. And a very large portion of vaccines that does get to Nepal will likely be hoarded and resold at inflated prices (or ruined by inadequate storage).

Roger Ray

Times.com WHAT'S TRENDING



Nepal's highest-ever tiger sighting

A tiger was caught in a camera trap at 3,165m - the highest proven sighting in Nepal. This could be another indication that tigers may be moving higher up the mountains due to changes in the climate, or due to habitat destruction in the plains. Details in this story on our website.

Most reached and shared on Facebook



How a 105-year-old beat the virus

By Rupa Joshi

Meet a 105-year-old Nepali great-great grandmother who recovered from the coronavirus that infected her whole household. Read how she beat Covid-19 on nepalitimes.com

Most popular on Twitter



Nepali in Saudi Arabia rescued after 12 years

By Upasana Khadka and Marty Logan

Lilamaya Dhimal spoke exclusively to *Nepali Times* after landing in Kathmandu last week after 13 years working for the family of an abusive Saudi employer. Read the story online and watch her describe her torture, dramatic rescue and return to Nepal in this video on our YouTube channel.

Most commented



Tourist visas now open for Nepal

Restrictions on foreigners has been further eased with tourists visas open again and flights to India have resumed after 11 months, but confusion about travel condition persists. Follow our social media platforms for latest updates.

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS

- Nepali Times** @NepaliTimes Pushing #Nepal off the edge. PM #Oli's dissolution of Lower House undermines #democracy and the#Constitution: Experts.
- Zenish** @zenishniraula Oli has played brinkmanship the whole of 2020.
- Mahavir Singh** @MahavirSingh66 Things can be sorted out, #Nepal can also be saved if and only if @kpharmaoli govt acts wisely...
- Nepali Times** @NepaliTimes A #Gurkha recalls a rebellion in his unit against #British and #Brunei officers 23 years ago.
- Sanju Gurung** @sanjugurung "the country was never colonised." Or, perhaps we could frame it the other way: Nepal was colonised by other means even though the means was not physical.
- Nepali Times** @NepaliTimes Tourist visas finally open for foreigners but lack of coordination between different #government agencies has ensued confusion about the conditions for #travel.
- Sameer M Dixit, PhD** @smadixit Having a weeklong quarantine for tourist will be a major hindrance to attracting those here. Why not reduce it to 3 nights maximum, PCR test on 4th day? I certainly won't visit any country requiring 1 week quarantine!
- Nepali Times** @NepaliTimes "I feel safe now, at least I know I will live." A Nepali domestic worker in #SaudiArabia escapes abusive employer, is rescued after 13 years, and finally flew back to Kathmandu on Wednesday. Exclusive report by @martyloganand Upasana Khadka
- Indra Raj Bhattarai** @1976indrai Good to hear. Let's talk about the permanent solution for domestic workers in gulf.

Times

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A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER 

A NEW YEAR A NEW CHAPTER

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HAPPY NEW YEAR



TURKISH AIRLINES

Collateral benefits

‘Bravest of the brave, most generous of the generous, never had country more faithful friends than you...’

It was the night after Christmas 1993 and we all thought the bumps were just someone else going to the bathroom. Next morning downstairs was devastation. Christmas gifts were strewn amongst the chintz-covered sofas, draws emptied onto the carpets, the silver candlesticks gone along with a camera, binoculars and the children’s new toys.



SO FAR SO GOOD
Lisa Choegyal

The night-time robbery with a houseful of sleeping friends and family was all the more daring as this was the home of the head of the special elite Gurkha force hired to protect the royal family, deep within the Sultanate of Brunei.

I was visiting the Colonel during a break from one of my first consulting jobs with New Zealand teammates in neighbouring Sabah and Sarawak – marketing specialist for the Malaysian states’ tourism masterplans. Lessons learned from the jungle, wildlife and ecotourism experiences in Nepal were being applied to the bio-rich rainforests of Borneo.

At Tiger Tops we had a long association with the military – British Gurkha as well as the Royal Nepal Army who guarded the wildlife of Chitwan National Park, manned the guard posts, and whose major would often drop by the Lodge for a cup of tea.

A retired Nepal general reminded me recently of the occasion in the mid-1970s when as a junior officer he led parachutist’s training at Meghauli. Camping overnight on the grass airstrip, I had accepted their invitation for a दाल भात meal around the campfire, complete with customary Nepali dancing featuring squaddies dressed as women. What most impressed him, he told me, was my bare feet in the jungle.

Our boss Jim Edwards favoured running jungle tourism operations along military lines, and many of my colleagues had army backgrounds, especially Nepali officers trained in admin, engineers, drivers and mechanics. As did our ancient green Land Rovers, their legacy of action evidenced by bullet holes that riddled their chassis, along with the occasional dent made by a charging rhino.

One of Jim’s proudest moments in later life was being made an honorary British Gurkha, and he regularly sported the green and red striped regimental tie with the iconic crossed खुकुरी knives.

The Colonel was one of a long line of commanders of the Brigade of Gurkhas Nepal, who now holds the multiple roles of Defence Attaché and director Gurkha Welfare Trust, based in the British Embassy compound Kathmandu.

These British officers speak fluent Nepali with a clipped Gurkhalhi accent, and most would find any excuse to leave the diplomatic confines of the office to escape into their beloved hills with the soldiers to whom they are so dedicated.

Not only are Nepal’s still being recruited as an integral part of the British Army, but significant funding and energy goes into pension paying and ensuring veterans returning to Nepal are well supported. The British Gurkha connection put over £140 million into Nepal’s economy last year, and the Gurkha Welfare Trust works in health and education throughout the length of rural Nepal.



Gurkhas on parade during the 2015 G200 celebrations in London 2015.

ALL PHOTOS: JOHNNY FENN PHOTOGRAPHY



Gurkhas recruitment exercises in Pokhara where the competition for places remains high.



Escorted by Gurkhas HM the Queen arriving at the 200 pageant celebrations in London 2015 with the Sultan of Brunei (on her right) and General Sir Peter Wall, the former Chief of the General Staff and Chairman of the GWT.

The first British Defence and Military Attaché appointed to Kathmandu in 1958 was mountaineer Lt Col JOM Roberts MVO MBE MC 2GR, distinguished for his war service in India and founder of Nepal’s trekking industry, providing employment for the Sherpas he so admired. Jimmy made Nepal his home and stayed on rearing rare pheasants in Pokhara post retirement until his death in 1997. He was followed by some fabled and highly decorated army names in the 1960s, Wylie, Kemmis Betty and Hickey.

Others are remembered for less

illustrious traits. One officer’s Land Rover mowed down the white posts that line the Embassy driveway after an evening of revelry, and another was infuriated when his wife eloped with the tennis coach. One colonel astounded the congregation by bursting into tears during a remembrance service, and another enjoyed slipping into army fatigues with an officious clipboard at the slightest provocation.

My favourite story about Col David Scotson, DA in the late 1980s, was how he got married on crutches, both legs encased in plaster casts, having wandered out of the first

floor window of his future in-law’s Swiss chalet to admire the view only to realise too late that there was no balcony.

The curfew that accompanied the end of the single-party system provided the perfect cover for one officer to pursue an extra-marital affair, whilst others preferred *mahseer* fishing, rafting and camping on the remote rivers of western Nepal. During a royal visit, at a pre-trek mess dinner under a military camp *shamiana*, the colonel’s wife was overhead counselling the Prince of Wales not to listen to ‘his mother’ about marital difficulties with

Princess Diana, and to ‘follow his heart.’

The British Gurkha Khukris team were a fixture at Tiger Tops’ annual elephant polo championships, often attracting the top brass from Hong Kong HQ and always handy as reliable timekeepers to monitor the matches. The players were most celebrated as winners of the best-dressed award with their natty uniforms, whilst actual goals scored were usually few and far between.

One Defence Attaché, Col Mike Allen, pursued his passion for moths, and could regularly be found at dusk with bright lights and a white sheet, adding new species to scientific collections for Nepal. Col Mike Kefford led a British joint services expedition to scale Everest before abandoning his military career to sail around the world.

One commander went on to become Prince Philip’s private secretary living in Kensington Palace. And a couple of former incumbents have remained closely connected to Nepal, reinventing themselves in new Pokhara-based jobs supervising privately funded agricultural and livelihood projects throughout the countryside.

Gurkha recruitment dates back over 200 years to 1815, even before the Treaty of Sugauli formalised the Nepal British relationship and ended the Anglo-Nepal war 1814-1816. Highly impressed by the fighting spirit shown by his opponents, General Sir David Ochterlony had led the East India Company attack, a colourful character alleged to have kept thirteen concubines and gifted each an elephant whilst British resident to the Mughal court in Delhi.

In the early 1960s the British Gurkhas numbered nearly 18,000 men, recruited from their headquarters near Dharan in southeast Nepal, with brigades stationed in Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong as well as the United Kingdom. Today they total about one quarter of that, and are all assigned in UK except for a battalion in Brunei. The selection process remains famously hard won – last year 12,000 young men competed for just 400 places.

I took my mother to the Gurkha bicentenary pageant celebration at the Royal Hospital in Chelsea one chilly June evening in 2015 – lots of smart green uniforms, precision marching, wailing bagpipes and whirling खुकुरी. The purpling London night sky faded above us, and tall windowpanes glowed gold in the elegant Wren building backdrop to our ringside seats.

Actress Joanna Lumley made a speech, and the VVIP stand contained a full hand of all the immediate British royal family led by Queen Elizabeth II, a tribute to the legendary esteem in which Gurkha servicemen continue to be held in Britain.

In the words of Sir Ralph Turner MC 1888-1983, former Gurkha, linguist, philologist and Professor of Sanskrit: ‘Once more I see you in your bivouacs or about your fires, on forced march or in the trenches, now shivering with wet and cold, now scorched by a pitiless and burning sun. Uncomplaining you endure hunger and thirst and wounds; and at the last your unwavering lines disappear into the smoke and wrath of battle. Bravest of the brave, most generous of the generous, never had country more faithful friends than you.’

Lisa Choegyal is a Brit who has made Nepal her home since the mid 1970s. This fortnightly *So Far So Good* column is about her personal stories and encounters with a colourful cast of characters during a lifetime of adventure working in tourism and conservation. © Lisa Choegyal



DOFE agents had photocopied all the bank notes that the two migrant workers used to pay the illegal fees to the recruiter for job placements in Saudi Arabia in the sting operation this week.

Labour recruiter netted in sting raid

Agency taking illegal fees from migrant workers caught red-handed in undercover operation

Upasana Khadka

It was a chilly 5:30 in the evening of 22 December, and a team from Nepal's Department of Foreign Employment (DOFE) was staking out the overseas job recruitment agency, Manaslu, in Kathmandu's Dhumbarahi neighbourhood.

Two Nepali migrant workers, Dambar Karki and Sailendra Singh, were inside making payments that had been demanded for jobs in Saudi Arabia. What the management at Manaslu did not know was that it was all a setup, and part of a sting operation.

Earlier that day, a distraught Karki and Singh had showed up at DOFE to file a complaint. The recruiter had told them before the pandemic that they would have to pay Rs80,000 each for their job placements as coffeemakers in Saudi Arabia.

The Covid-19 crisis brought overseas contract work to a halt for 10 months, but placements are opening up again. After Karki and Singh were done with their paperwork and had finally got the government's labour approvals, Manaslu demanded Rs110,000 each as fee.

The two reached out to a nearby police station, and were told to file a complaint at DOFE. There, officials decided to organise a sting operation. Legally, recruiters are only allowed to charge Rs10,000 as fee for an overseas job placement.

At Dhumbarahi on Tuesday evening, the DOFE officials finally got a call from one of the migrants inside indicating that they had handed over the money to the recruiters and it was all right for them to enter. The raiding team rushed in, ordered the security

guard to shut the gates and caught Manaslu's management red-handed with the money.

The DOFE team had already made photocopies of all the bank notes that Karki and Singh were handing over to the recruiters. The officials found that the numbers on the planted money matched the cash that was retrieved from the recruiter's drawer.

The case was documented in the presence of Manaslu management, and signatures obtained. Staff at the recruitment agency looked shocked, and admitted that in their 20 years in the business this was the first time something like this had happened.

The owners were summoned to DOFE the next morning. They will now be required to send the migrants to Saudi Arabia at the legally allowed fee of Rs10,000, their activities will be suspended for up to a maximum of six months until the case is fully resolved.

To cope with similar complaints of extortion like this, DOFE has set up a well-equipped and trained sting unit to monitor illegal overcharging and gouging of desperate migrant workers. Their operations range from regular monitoring, surprise inspections, or just like in this case, sting operations that can take place at any time and day based on complaints received.

"In institutional cases like this one, it is much easier to take action and hold perpetrators accountable because there is paperwork involved and recruiters have deposited escrow amounts," explains DOFE Director General Kumar Dahal. "It is when individuals mislead migrants that things get trickier as there is no proof, and the perpetrators are not in our records."

Dahal says there are many cases like the one this week where innocent migrants are taken advantage of in the name of foreign employment. With the backlog of workers and economic desperation due to the pandemic, such extortion is likely to increase.

The DOFE Monitoring Team is led by Section Officer Kushal Baral, and he has taken part in 11 sting raids like this in the past month. One of those was the DOFE raids in November of three companies (SOS Manpower Services, DD Human Resources and Hope International) for conducting interviews without permission for jobs in the Qatar Police.

DOFE also raided 4 companies (Sky Blue International, Om Overseas, Surkhet Overseas and H.M.T. Overseas) that have been misusing visit visas to send workers to the UAE. All the companies have been ordered to suspend activities while investigations are ongoing.

In addition to the Monitoring Section that conducts the sting operations, there is also a separate Complaint Section at DOFE that has blocked activities of recruiters engaged in unethical practices.

While workers who are cheated can lodge complaints via the DOFE phone or through social media, most migrants usually report in person at the DOFE office, especially when they are overcharged by recruiters. The financial exchanges take place at the last moment before the flight, so migrants are usually in Kathmandu and in-person complaints are easier, says Baral.

But recruiters who are embroiled in unhealthy competition, also lodge complaints against each other about illegal activities such as conducting interviews for overseas work without obtaining permits.

"There is a general sense of hopelessness among migrant workers that lodging complaints with agencies like DOFE will not yield results. So they feel it is not worth turning recruiters into enemies," says Baral, adding that he hopes the recent raids will encourage more migrants to come forward with complaints.

He says, "It is only when they share information with us, preferably while they are still in Nepal, that we will be able to take corrective actions."



Watch video of a Department of Foreign Employment sting operation at a recruiting agency that had overcharged two workers going to Saudi Arabia. The department has conducted 11 such operations in the past month to deter Nepalis desperate for jobs being cheated.

nepalitimes.com

prabhu BANK

UK passengers stopped

Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAAN) has imposed a ban on entry for people arriving from the UK over fears of a highly



contagious new strain of SARS-CoV-2 circulating in London. The decision will also affect people travelling to UK from Nepal. CAAN has also asked all airlines not to bring passengers from or transiting UK airports. India, and most European countries have also banned passengers from UK and this has had a dampening effect on air travel which was just starting to revive ahead of the holiday season.

Hyatt are also experiencing major profit plunge. Many employees have been offered leave without pay, retrenchment or voluntary retirement.

Cathay Covid insurance

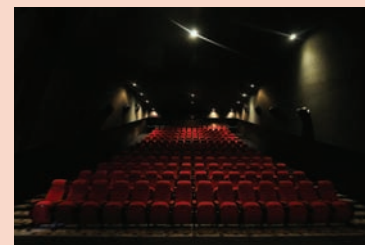
Cathay Pacific is providing free Covid-19 insurance to all passengers under which they will receive a daily allowance of \$100



up to 14 days to help them during periods of unforeseen and mandatory quarantine. The insurance is valid for 30 days from departure or until travelers return home, whichever is earliest.

Outreach Nepal ECI award

Outreach Nepal agency has won the ECI Marketing Innovation Award for their 'Basic Humanity' campaign in the ceremony held in Shanghai, China. Initiated in March



cinema halls will observe strict protocols, including mask, half-capacity halls, disinfection after each show and no food and drinks.

Hotel Annapurna closes

Kathmandu's iconic Hotel Annapurna has shut down all business until the Covid-19 crisis is over. Management said this was



because of a sustained lack of guests projected well into 2021. Other star hotels like Soaltee, Radisson, Yellow Pagoda and

amidst the pandemic, the campaign has been adapted by six countries and in eight languages.

IME funds hospital

Global IME has provided Rs250,000 to Nagarik Care Centre in Biratnagar for hospital construction as part of its



corporate social responsibility. The bank has 264 branches in 73 districts, 239 ATM terminal and 239 branchless banking units under its network.

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EVENTS



World's highest New Year

Celebrate the end of what has been a crazy year in the quiet company of loved ones at the highest hotel in the world, Hotel Everest View. See Everest up close and allow Trishala Gurung and Rohit Shukla to serenade the cozy ambience. Visit their website for more.
31 December



Kathmandu Vegfest 2020

The vegfest is planned with the aim to help the public make positive changes in the way they eat and live and aspires to promote a plant-based/vegan lifestyle.
26 December, 5 pm, Nepal House Restaurant

New Year Bazaar

Bid goodbye to 2020 and usher in 2021 with Outdoor Adventure Centre Nepal's New Year Bazaar that is promoting the local products. The event is being held with Covid safety protocols in place.
26 December, 11am - 6pm, Outdoor Adventure Center



Online Food Carnival

Foodmario's online food festival celebrates home cooking and the hardship of delivery staff. Under the theme 'unsung heroes', it will host hundreds of home cooks and thousands of customers on a daily basis throughout the week. Visit Foodmario's website for details.
25-31 December



Saglo Samaj

Don't miss the first episode of *Saglo Samaj*, an upcoming TV magazine that provides a complete perspective on Nepali society with solution-oriented coverage of issues of national importance.
Pilot: *Sipahi ko dukha*
28 December, Sarokar TV, Dish Home Channel #130

Hike for Nepal

Hike for Nepal is organising a Dhulikhel-Nagarkot hike this weekend for some solace among the hills and snow capped mountains. Hike for Nepal has been organising fortnightly hikes and treks post earthquake to promote tourism and support local communities and schools.
25 December, 7am - 6pm



ART FOR THE SOUL

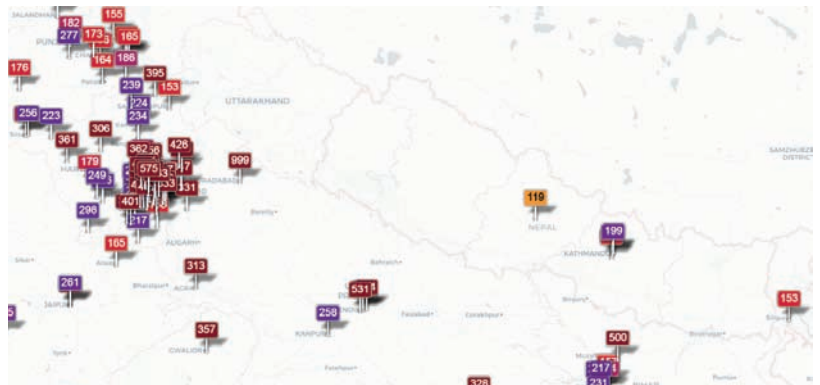
Dhokaima Cafe is presenting artist Binod Pradhan's vibrant collection this Christmas with soulful music by Prasanna Shah.
4pm onwards, 25 December, Van Gogh Gallery, Dhokaima Cafe, Patan Dhoka.



After relatively milder temperatures this week, we are headed to another frigid weekend with smoggy mornings, sunny days with clear skies, and chilly evenings. The smog in the Indo-Gangetic plains is particularly bad this year, and while the fog will stay thick on the ground in most of the Tarai, in the afternoon, up-valley wind will bring the pollution haze up to the mountains. This will filter the sun, keeping the maximum temperature on the lower side, too.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
18° 3°	18° 2°	18° 4°

AIR QUALITY INDEX

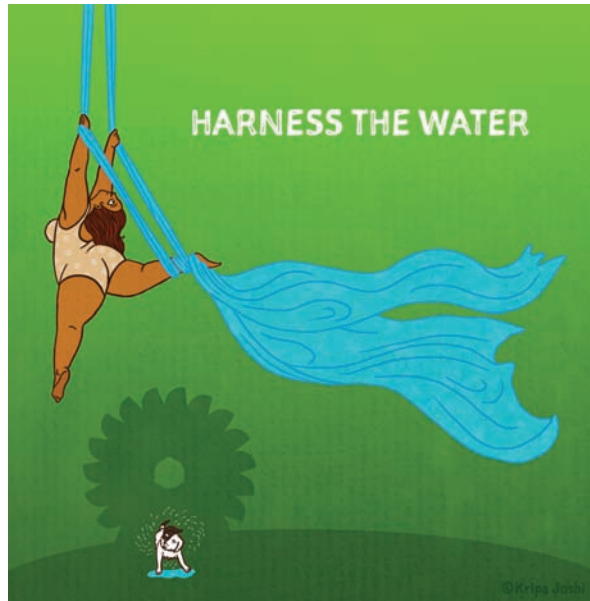


Another look this week at the thickening smog in the Indo-Gangetic Plains that includes the Nepal Tarai. The soot particles mix with water vapour to blanket the terrain at ground level for days on end. This map of the region's Air Quality Index (AQI) from the World Air Quality Index Project www.aqicn.org shows just how bad things are, with New Delhi and its surroundings having AQI at nearly 600, which is in the Hazardous Zone. Kathmandu Valley has also got worse because of winter inversion, recording an unhealthy 199 on Thursday morning. Pokhara was at 119, which is Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups. The Nepal Tarai cities bordering India all had Hazardous AQI readings.

<https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/>

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

KRIPA JOSHI



People have harnessed the energy of water in motion for a millennia. While small scale run-of-the-river project have little environmental impact, big dams can have significant consequences. Dams have to be planned more strategically to be friendly to the ecosystems around them. Once a hydro project has been built, the energy source—flowing water—is free. It's a clean fuel source renewed by snow and rainfall. Hydropower is a more predictable, consistent and flexible form of electricity generation and thus is the most commonly-used renewable energy in the world. #FridaysForFuture



OUR PICK

Based on a notorious Indian stock-broker, Harshad Mehta, *Scam 1992: The Harshad Mehta Story* documents the biggest scam the Indian stock market has ever seen. The series, which streamed on SonyLiv Originals is adapted from journalist Sucheta Dalal and Debashish Basu's book *The Scam: Who Won, Who Lost, Who Got Away*. The series is directed by award-winning filmmakers Hansal Mehta and Jai Mehta and stars Pratik Gandhi in the lead role.

बालबालिका माथि हुने हिंसा, दुर्व्यवहार, शोषण भएको, जोखिमपूर्ण अवस्थामा रहेको वा बालअधिकारको उल्लंघन भएको छ भने बाल हेल्पलाइनको पैसा नलाग्ने
फोन: नं. १०९८ मा खबर गरौं ।



नेपाल सरकार

सञ्चार तथा सूचना प्रविधि मन्त्रालय

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The Nature Picture Library provides access to more than 500,000 images and videos covering every aspect of the nature: wild animals, plants, landscapes, environmental issues, marine life, pets and native people. Browse through the galleries.



DINING



1905

Perfect for those looking for peace in midst of the city's hustle and bustle, 1905 has great menu choices and its service can appease both locals and tourists alike.
Naxal (01) 4411348



Country Yard Restaurant and Bar

Country yard is popular for its royalty flavored multi cuisine delicacies ranging from Nepali, Indian, Chinese to Continental. Quench your hunger with their firewood pizzas.
Paknaji, 9808827029

Tukuche Thakali Kitchen

Probably the most fitting setting to experience bona fide home cooked Thakali cuisine, give this kitchen a visit.
Gairidhara, 9803064809



Cafe Imago dei

Visit for the best cheesecake in town and stay for their variety of meals. Imago is also popular for business meetings and private conferences.
Gairidhara, 9803064809



Pho99

A Vietnamese restaurant with a beautiful courtyard garden and fine dining experience. Pho99 reflects food culture of this Southeast Asian country.
Boudha, 9803203119

2020 vision

A *Nepali Times* selection of the most impactful Nepali films this year

Shristi Karki

As with all spheres of national life that make up our social and cultural fabric, Nepal's film industry has also been hit hard. Cinemas are closed, shooting has stopped, and there is even less investment in new movies.

As with the global film industry, Nepali producers are also disseminating directly through YouTube and other streaming platforms. Film festivals are being held online.

The Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival (KIMFF) took place virtually from 10-14 December and had 300 entries this year, out of which 12 films were chosen for the Nepal Panorama and 18 for the international competition.

"Because we went virtual, many people outside Nepal were able to see the films, and the number of entries was surprisingly high even given the times we're in," KIMFF director Ramyata Limbu told *Nepali Times*.

"If you can't get people to the hall in terms of logistics and time, doing festivals online in this multimedia era would make it more accessible for people who don't have the time or inclination to make it to the theatres," says Limbu. "The more accessible we can make it, the more people will take the time to view independent films."

A selection of notable films from 2020:

The Cremator

Nishon Shakya's documentary which premiered at KIMFF, follows elderly cremator Gyan Bahadur, who is nearing the end of his professional life at the Bhasmeshwar *ghat* at Pashupati. Gyan Bahadur's narration of his life is accompanied by powerful visuals of cremations at Pashupati. Caution: Viewer Discretion Advised. Shakya is uncompromising in his visuals of the dead, and in a way a macabre reminder of the times we live in.



Gyan Bahadur cremates the dead, a cigarette held tight between his lips, discusses politics, offers medical advice, and tells the story of his life. Having himself lost two of his sons in their childhood, Gyan Bahadur says he makes money off other people's losses. At times, he is scathing about the living, who like to send off their dead with style but have no words of kindness to the people who help them pass on. Surrounded by mortality, he

speaks matter-of-factly about his own death, accepting that he will eventually find his way back to Pashupati and move on from this world the same way he helped countless others.

Day 33

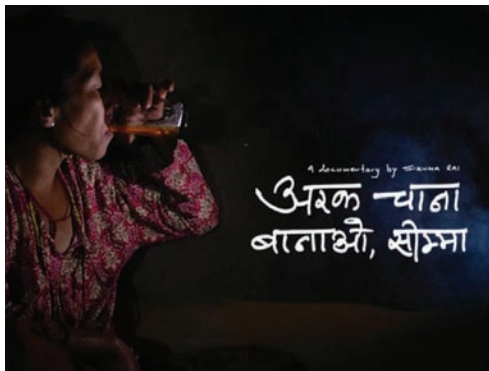
Filmed in the throes of the Covid-19 lockdown, LSM's (Sailesh RC) relevant short film captures a young man's increasing agitation as he searches for food in his room on the 33rd day of the shutdown. In the barely furnished space, surrounded by empty food containers and an empty wallet, he doesn't find any. And so he must settle for anything that he can find within the space that he can move in.



The brevity of the film works in its favour — there are no unnecessary drawn-out scenes that attempt to force more meaning or gravitas to the story. There are no dialogues, no angry soliloquies, not one word from the protagonist. The film doesn't need them. There is just weariness and resignation.

Come Over for a Drink, Kanchhi

Sikuma Rai's documentary played at the Pame Film Festival, NHRIF, and KIMFF. *Come Over for a Drink, Kanchhi* is a deeply personal narrative of the Rai women of Bhojpur for whom alcohol is woven into the fabric of their daily lives. The women sing and smile and drink in groups throughout the film, even as they hold immense sadness within themselves. Weathered by the loss of children and loved ones to disease and suicide, they make and drink alcohol to deal with grief and trauma. Because alcohol is as much a part of ceremony and celebration as much as melancholy, the women are not apologetic about drinking.



"There is a big hole in my heart," says one of the women, who suffers from depression. In a country where mental health is stigmatised, the film shines a light on how people deal with depression in rural areas.

The Snow Leopards Calling

Tshiring Lhamu Lama was inspired to work for the conservation of snow leopards when she saw how the endangered Himalayan cats were tortured and poisoned by locals in Dolpo in retaliation for killing their livestock. Sonam Choekyi Lama's award-winning short documentary is the story of her sister Tshiring's drive and determination to save and protect a part of her world through snow



leopard conservation. Tshiring treks across the freezing, harsh but stunning winter landscape of Phoksundo to capture the movement of Snow Leopards, recognising the importance of the footage for conservation as well as much-needed tourism in the area.

The film includes heartbreaking footage of snow leopards being dragged by their tails and kicked by locals into holes in the ground. However, Tshiring's joy and enthusiasm at having captured snow leopards on film end the visually beautiful documentary on a hopeful, optimistic note.

Bare Trees in the Mist

Filmmaker Rajan Kathet's *Bare Trees in the Mist* made its rounds in festivals around the world, including Toronto in 2019, South Korea, Turkey, Italy, the UK, Finland and India before being screened at home during KIMFF 2020. In this stunning drama, Kaali's son informs his mother that a neighbour's husband has returned from abroad bearing gifts for the two of them. Kaali, whose own husband has left home telling his wife that he's going to Arab ("Which Arab?" her neighbour's husband asks. Kaali doesn't know) makes the journey to visit them.



Kaali's tense yet hopeful wait in silence, the choice of aspect ratio, everything adds to the film's atmosphere, underlying urgency and anxiety of the protagonists.

Babu

In Eelum Mani Dixit's film, the eponymous Babu finds his village and home torn apart by the 2015 earthquake that takes the life of his mother, and takes his desperate father away to India in search for work. A story of three generations of men in post-earthquake Nepal, the film brims with a young boy's anger and heartbreak, a father's helplessness, and a grandfather's sorrow.



Dixit packs a lot of emotion into subtle gestures throughout the film, like when Babu's father hands him sweets before he leaves for India. Or when Babu gives a marble to the girl he likes, someone he is probably never going to see again as she and her family move away to India. And especially when Babu buys his grandfather, with whom he has a tumultuous relationship, a pen for his journal with the money he had painstakingly saved up working to bring his father back home sooner.

The film is not only emblematic of the mass exodus of Nepali men and women to foreign lands, but also a look at how out-migration can be a 'trend' that turns working-class Nepalis into hard-bitten cynics unwilling to work their own land, even when it is available and possible.

Song of Clouds

Ankit Poudel's film is an ethereal, empathetic, abstract story of life and death shifting from this world to the next as the dead communicate with the living they leave behind. Described as a fever dream, there is no plot or narrative structure to the film. There are long stretches of silence punctuated by sudden disjointed communications about regret and longing. A story without direction



or an end told through still photographs.

Premiering at Sundance earlier this year and making rounds in festival circuits around the world, Poudel's film has garnered multiple awards, including the Grand Prix at the Split Film festival in Croatia and the Best Fiction award in Nepal Panorama at KIMFF 2020.

The Winter Tap

In the hills of Sankhuwasabha, a young man has undertaken the solo task of building a water tap that will take water right to his home during the dry winter. Working methodically in silence, he cuts bamboo into pipes and tree branches to prop up the bamboo against. He then cuts strips out of some more bamboo and ties the pipe and the branches to make a long and winding canal wrapped around the hills.



As with *Day 33*, words are unnecessary, the only sound is the wind blowing across the hills as the man lays his bamboo pipe, the rhythmic thwack of his *khukuri* as he cuts branches to support his canal, and the final, musical sound of the water flowing through the pipes toward his home. Simple, meaningful, and immensely satisfying, this film by Aashish Limbu and Debin Rai won Best student film at Film South Asia 2019 and was screened during KIMFF 2020.

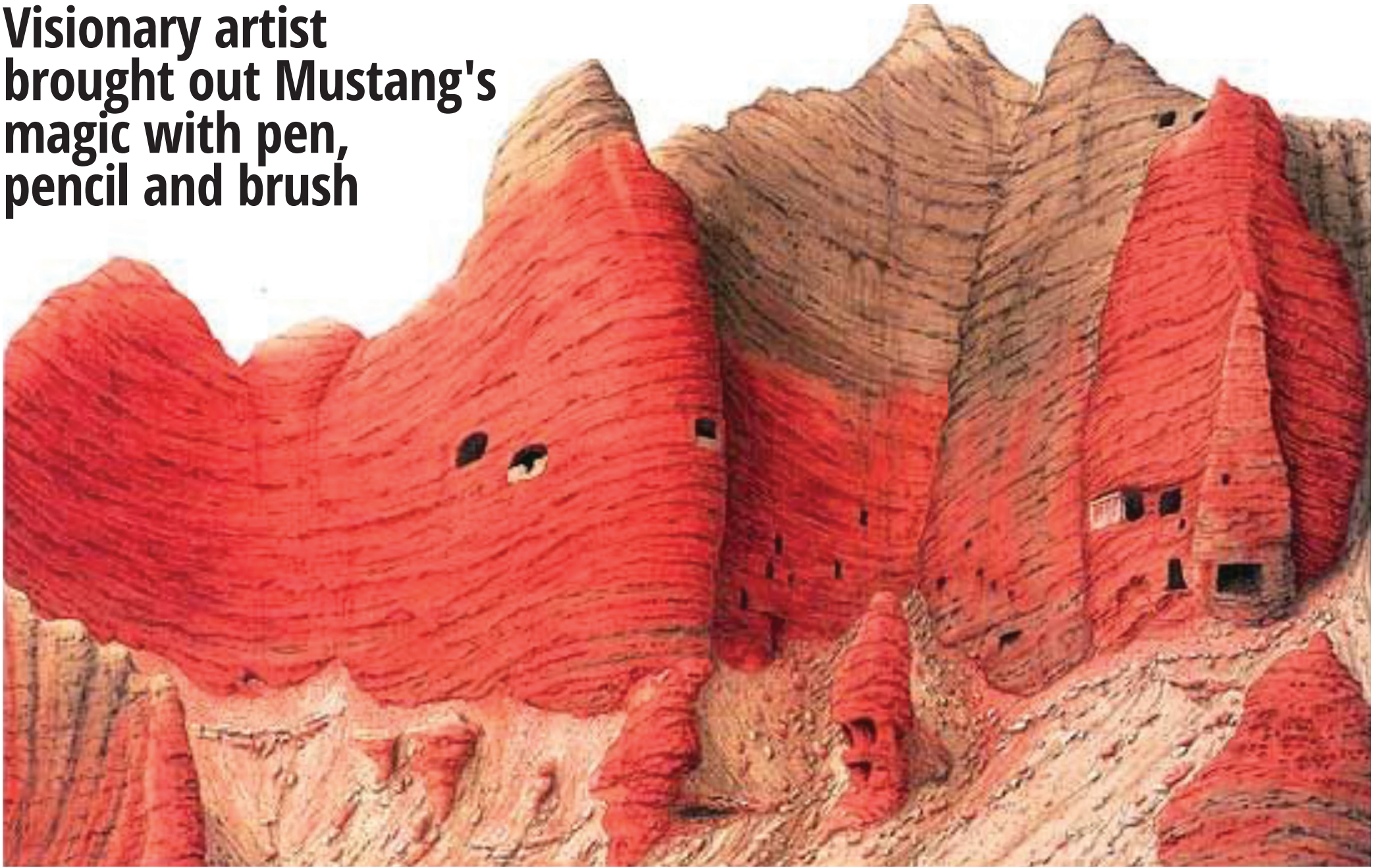
The Big-headed Boy

The Big-Headed Boy, Shamans & Samurais was screened at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam this November. Made by Pooja Gurung and Bibhusan Basnet, award-winning creative



minds behind *The Contagious Apparitions of Dambarey Dendrite* and *Dadyaa*, the black-and-white travelogue is an account of the filmmakers' quest to find an actor for their movie. When they do find an actor, the village Shaman is reluctant to let him go. 🇳🇵

Visionary artist brought out Mustang's magic with pen, pencil and brush



Blood of the Ogress, Drakmar.

Robert G Powell, 1948-2020

Linda Kentro and
James Giambrone

Last Wednesday, 16 December 2020, marked the passing of a visionary artist who shared his unique perceptions of Asian architecture, art and culture with the world.

With an eye beguiled by beauty and a heart attuned to the strange and ineffable qualities of physical heritage, Robert Gordon Powell was a magician with pen, pencil and brush.

Born in Australia in 1948, Rob was teaching art and studying architecture when the Baul clan just divided state of Bengal in India, came to perform songs, dance and rituals in his university town.

This initial introduction to the human-spirit world deeply intrigued him, and the Bauls, who stayed at his home, recognised in him a kindred soul. Laxman Das Baul invited Rob to visit their Bengali village.

Arriving at the teeming Howrah train station, riding the branch line through idyllic rice paddies and ending with an hour-long rickshaw ride deeper into mud-walled thatched-roofed villages, the young man from 'down under' was transported into an utterly different reality.

While sketching and experiencing life in Bengal, Rob heard that Ladakh had recently opened to foreigners, and determined to visit there as well. His

camera disappeared en route, being fate's way of telling him that hand drawings were to be his primary means of documenting what he encountered.

This foray immersed him in Himalayan culture which became his most famous subject matter. He first documented Ladakhi buildings painstakingly with dots, the lightest possible method of rendition, well-suited to a patient artist and perfectly suited to the high mountain light, soft palette of colours and often eroded surfaces of Ladakhi architecture.

Rob recorded architecture in Swat and Kalash Valleys of Pakistan, evolving a still detailed but faster illustration of light and shadow through cross-hatching in ink.

He documented the shamanistic culture of Western Nepal, portraying the initiation of a female shaman who meditated all night on a makeshift perch of perilously few small branches lashed high on a pole above her village. He drew drums, amulets and drumsticks – ritual implements that shamans used to mesmerise the world and captivate those journeying with them.

These ethnographically rich locales were sparse in material comforts, and Rob found his way to Kathmandu to more comfortably complete and develop paintings from his sketches. Here he became familiar with the Newa brick, wood and plaster architecture of the Kathmandu Valley. He recognised that temples and residences follow traditional shapes, incorporate sacred proportions, and create a feeling that resonates with community, professional, and visitor.

He turned to red pigment watercolours to depict the *zaro* *maro* brick and tile work, and used

browns, creams and greys to show how time tempers wood, plaster and stone. He was commissioned to design the Green Pastures Hospital in Pokhara, a comely complex resembling monastic quarters in layout, with the warm detailing of a traditional, welcoming inn.

Early in Rob's three decades in Kathmandu, he encountered the German government's largest development project in the world at the time – the restoration and conservation of the traditional city of Bhaktapur.

Fortuitously meeting its leader,

the Austrian conservation architect Götz Hagmüller and his wife Ludmilla before they departed on holiday, they commissioned Rob to produce eleven drawings of Bhaktapur, including the Kuthu Math priest's house that they would later renovate as their exquisite residence. These drawings were exhibited at the Vajra Hotel art gallery.

The most challenging piece was a small Kuthu Math room which had been used for years for distilling *chyaab* beer. The first sketch showed it cluttered and with blackened walls.

After careful cleaning, Rob painted it as the three-century old *puja* room it originally was — every inch of wall richly decorated with sacred Krishna-Lila murals.

Rob's Bhaktapur work generated a lifelong friendship with Götz, and professional recognition that brought further work in cultural heritage. His skills had arrived at a moment when the world was athirst for all things Himalayan, including the Kathmandu Valley's ten World Heritage sites. Rob deeply appreciated the works of the great traditional Newa Malla



Agamche (Sacred House) of Unmatta Bhairava, Panauti 1984.



Tree with Horns.



Mani Wall with Horns, Gemi.



Yak Horn Device.

artisans and honed what he saw into radiant compositions that elicited ancient memories and enticed new perceptions.

Before long, Rob was engaged by the Nepal government's Department of Archaeology to accompany their team to Mustang. He travelled on foot and horseback to Lo Manthang, sketching the luminous, mineral-laden mountain-landscape.

At the town of Lo, he spent hours on site, absorbing the forms and feelings of the buildings. He celebrated the rich red, white and black colours painted and poured down walls, to call forth the protection of the gods, Manjushri, Avalokitesvara, and Vajrapani on vulnerable building corners and doorways. He vividly highlighted the ram skulls and horns that are positioned above an opening to protect the inhabitants against malicious spirits.

When Rob met Mary Slusser, cultural researcher and author of *Nepal Mandala*, she was impressed with his virtuoso artwork and arranged for him to show at the Sackler Gallery, part of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC.

That exhibition, 'Earth Door, Sky Door, Paintings of Mustang' in 1999 introduced the global art world to Robert Powell. His works

embraced and slipped beyond the boundaries of ethnography into apparitional forms that reflect the essence of the Himalaya. Michael O'Sullivan of *The Washington Post* said it well, 'Robert draws buildings in an animistic way that reveals something that lies beyond what can be seen.'

In 1992, Rob married Lieve Aerts, a Belgian woman and teacher of yoga and *chi gong*, who became his partner for life. After three decades happily settled in the centre of the culture that he portrayed so well, Rob contracted a lung infection that left his health vulnerable.

Rehabilitating at length in Europe, he was advised not to return to the poor air quality of Kathmandu. Rob and Lieve moved to Koh Samui, Thailand, where he designed the Kamalaya spa and an exquisite home for themselves that encompassed huge hillside boulders, lush trees and a sublime view over the Gulf of Thailand. As the inside trees grew, so did the building, with some roof sections rebuilt several times to accommodate the surging foliage.

In Thailand, Rob expanded upon the Himalayan themes that had fascinated him. Rams' horns that protected the doors of Lo Manthang grew to a full, fantastical wall of hornery.



Rob Powell in his Koh Samui studio.



Chorten and Lhato, Tangbe.

Mountainsides that had housed the awesome Bamyán Buddhas in northern Afghanistan were re-depicted with *dakinis*, looming, sensual female figures with small fangs to ward off treacherous foes.

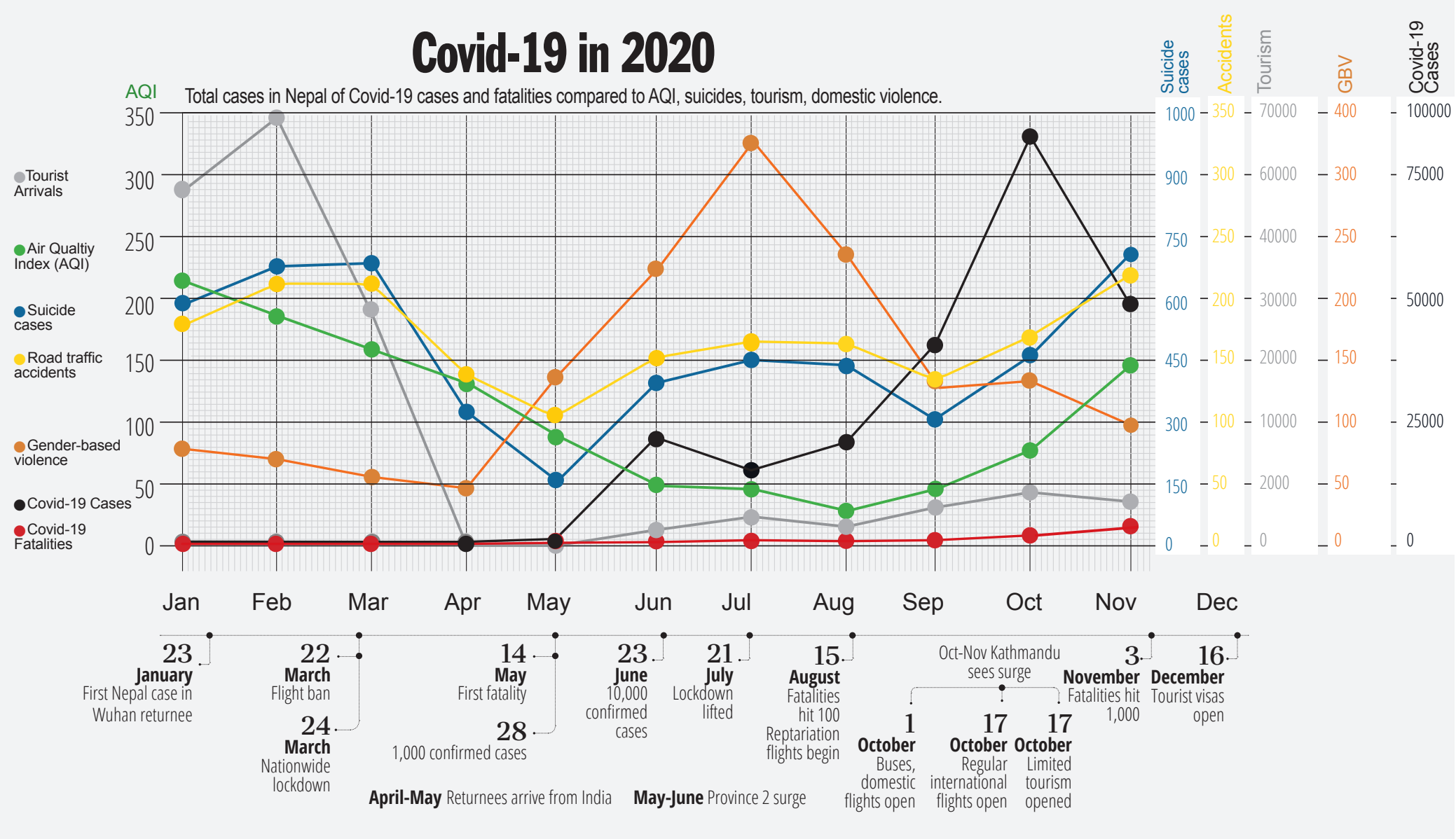
He discovered new media, moving into acrylics to capture the brilliant, evanescent skies and water around them, and to explore singularly potent spiritual symbols.

In 2019 Andrei Jewell made the documentary, *Enchanted Matter*, capturing Rob's life, art and philosophy. Sadly his health gradually deteriorated. He passed away with Lieve at his side, in a room brightened by a view to a brilliant, orange-flowered tree, with music and candles to accompany his final journey.

Robert will not be forgotten. He will live on in our memories as a beloved, gentle being and a prodigious creator of wondrous works of art, who encouraged us to let the strange and beautiful lift us into enchantment. 

Linda Kentro and James Giambrone are founders of the Indigo Art Gallery in Kathmandu.

A year of living dangerously



US EMBASSY, WOREC, DEPARTMENT OF TOURISM, MINISTRY OF HEALTH

The pandemic affected every facet of Nepal’s economy, environment and socio-cultural life

Alisha Sijapati

It was December 2019, and world was gearing up for a brand new decade. The most worrying things in most people’s minds were the climate crisis and Trumpism.

The 2020s were expected to be a harbinger of new hopes and beginnings. Then the coronavirus pandemic hit, throwing the world upside down, sowing uncertainty, loss and panic across the world.

Nepal recorded its first Covid-19 case on 23 January from a male student who had returned from Wuhan, and was infected ten days previously. Now, almost a year later, the numbers are nearing 260,000 and the death toll has crossed 1,750.

The government response has been characterised by flip-flopping policies, contradictory rules and lack of coordination. Political leaders and the bureaucracy were wrapped up in the power struggle in the ruling party that lasted the whole year, and led to the dissolution of the Lower House this week.

The government promptly established the Covid-19 Crisis Management Committee (CCMC) after the second Covid-19 case was detected, and Nepal was one of the first countries in the region to go into strict nationwide lockdown.

“We panicked before time and when it was time to act, the people have given up fighting Covid, when



BIKRAM RAI

QFX Multiplex in Labim Mall is reopening from X-mas Day 25 December with all health protocols in place.

they should be even more vigilant now,” public health expert Sher Bahadur Pun told *Nepali Times*, warning about the virus variants that could make the pandemic spread even faster.

Pun adds: “The government had ample time to learn from China, Europe and other countries to curb the spread of the virus, but it lacked the commitment and resources. Because of this, things could get worse.”

When the first Covid-19 case was recorded in January, Pun who was an employee at the Sukraraj Hospital saw people returning from China get ostracised. Then the

discrimination shifted to people from the plains, and to frontline health workers.

In Kathmandu, many doctors, nurses, caregivers were asked to move out from their rented apartments. “Covid unleashed the worst side of people and this will have a long term effect,” Pun adds.

Indeed, the impact has gone beyond strictly public health aspects of the disease. The prolonged lockdowns, uncertainty, job loss, and lack of social contact has led to pandemics of depression and mental health problems, suicides, exacerbated the condition of those with pre-existing health conditions.

Statistic also show a direct correlation between the lockdown period and the incidents of gender-based violence and rape, which also rose dramatically in April-August. (See graphs).

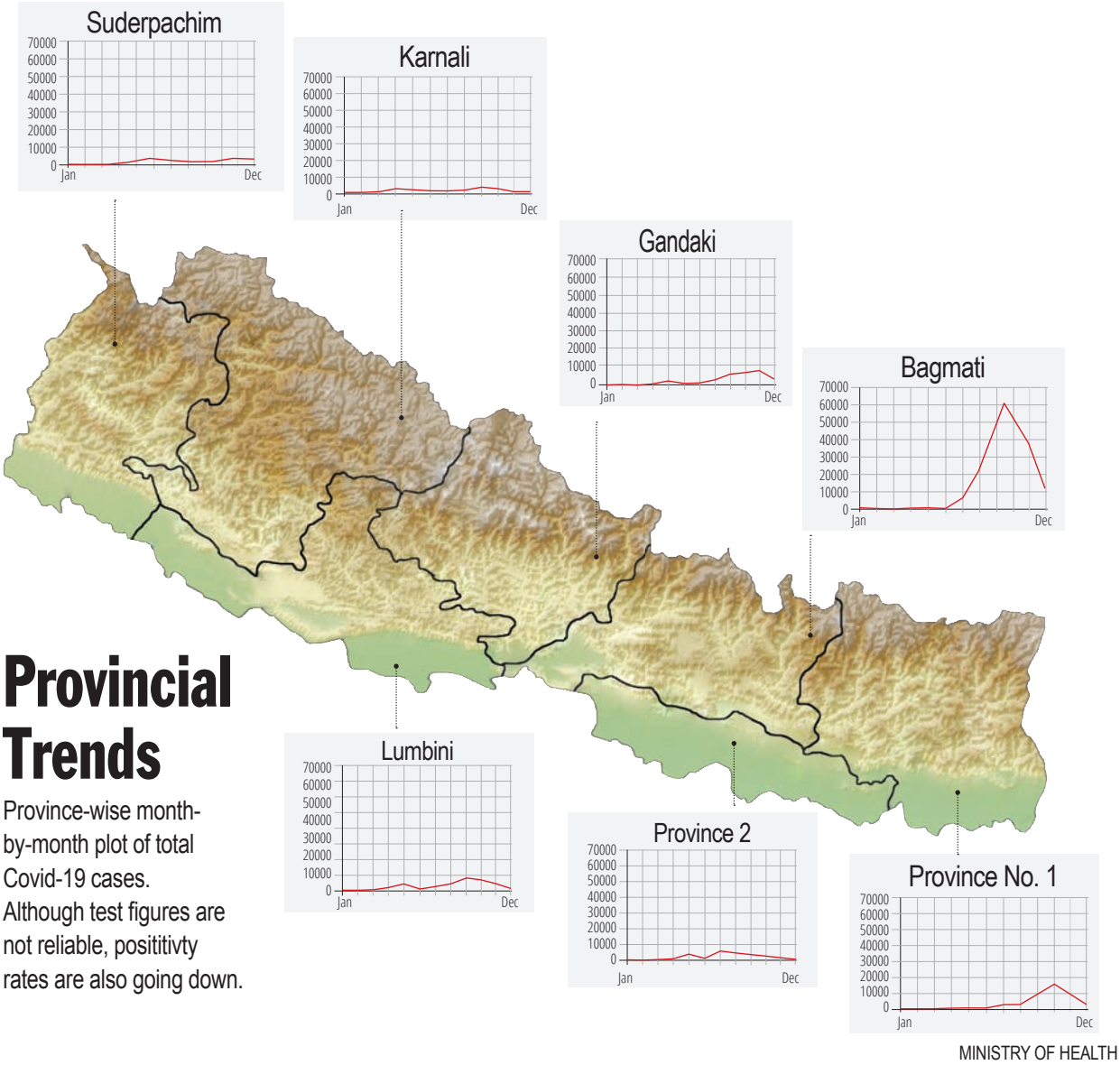
The lockdowns did have some indirect positive impact: the Air Quality Index (AQI) in Kathmandu and the plains improved dramatically in April-July as vehicles went off the roads. The number of highway fatalities went down by half to less than 700 in March-August 2020, compared to the same period the previous year.

“Nepalis outside the urban sphere have very little idea about

mental health, and the lockdown was not helpful at all. Being cooped up at home for months and being socially distanced is one of the main causes for the high number of suicides,” explains psychiatrist Kamal Gautam at Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation (TPO) Nepal.

Nepal Police data shows that the monthly total of reported suicides in Nepal shot up to 972 in July from 668 in June, and 352 in January before the lockdowns.

“If people do not get treatment in time and still think mental health is a taboo, suicides are bound to happen. Economic hardships and



being cooped up at home are the major reasons for the increase in the number of suicides,” Gautam says.

A survey by TPO Nepal with over 2,000 participants showed that 50% of those sampled showed some symptoms of psychological disorders such as anxiety and stress.

Gautam blames the increasing disorders to the ‘infodemic’ of death and sickness in the mainstream

press and social media. “What do you do at home for three months? Get on social media and become experts on every topic possible and perhaps misinform people creating panic,” Gautam warned.

There was also an alarming rise in gender-based violence. In April, the group WOREC Nepal registered 36 cases of domestic violence against women, but by July

this number had risen to 380. Forms of violence included domestic violence, rape, attempted rape and sexual abuse.

“It’s women who have had to bear the brunt of the Covid lockdown. The economic hardship and the increasing mental and sexual frustration in men has led to an increase of such incidents. Those who are weaker in the family get



Temperature check at the Central Zoo last week when it reopened after 10 months.

BIKRAM RAI

attacked,” says WOREC’S Sulochana Khanal.

Statistics show that suicide and violence against women increased steeply during the lockdown and started falling gradually when it was lifted in August. Similarly, as businesses opened and traffic picked up in August, air pollution in Kathmandu Valley and along highways got worse and the number of fatalities on the roads soared. By the Dasain-Tihar festival in November, the number of deaths on the roads had spiked to 242 after falling to 52 in May.

“The lockdown helped bring the AQI level from unhealthy to good, but if you look at the trend in the past, it shows that January always has unhealthy air to breathe while it goes down to breathable air during monsoon,” says environmentalist Bhushan Tuladhar.

Traffic Police are among those worst affected by the pandemic. Since March, 407 traffic police have tested positive for SARS-Cov-2. And now with the increase in pollution, they are exposed to COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease) risk.

“Everyone is in a rush, where do

they have to go?” asks a frustrated Traffic Police spokesperson, Shyam Krishna Adhikari. “People have been driving more recklessly after the lockdown, they are drinking and driving because there is less checking.”

Nepal also had high hopes for Visit Nepal 2020 with a target of welcoming 2 million tourists. But the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) was forced to cancel the campaign. Tourist arrival figures show a dramatic drop after March to zero for three months after, and although the numbers picked up a bit after flights resumed in October, it looks like 2021 will also be a washout.

“Despite recent vaccine developments, it will take a few years for people to start travelling as they used to. The tourism sector will likely recover by mid-2022,” says Deepak Raj Joshi, former CEO of NTB. “But if we are well equipped for other future crises, communicate to the world about our preparedness and tap into the growing South Asian market, we can recover.”

Joshi’s motto is: “Survive 2020, revive in 2021 and thrive in 2022.”

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Child marriages spike during pandemic

Faced with the economic fallout of the pandemic, under-age marriages have increased

Marty Logan and
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Thirty child marriages took place in one municipality in Sarlahi District during the lockdown earlier this year. This startling fact highlights how girls are at particular risk as the Covid-19 crisis impacts Nepal's economy.

The legal marriage age in Nepal is 20. Globally, girls who marry before 18 are considered child brides, yet close to 40% girls under the age of 18 are married in Nepal, making the country one of the worst examples in Asia.



Girls attending an interaction program.

UNFPA

"There were more child marriages than usual in Sarlahi, Dailekh and Surkhet districts

during the lockdown," says Samita Pradhan of the Women's Reproductive Rights Programme

daughters, I will die of debt."

His reasons for arranging Puja's marriage echo those often heard from parents. "I have five daughters and you know how hard it is to marry daughters in our society," he says.

Financial issues can lead families to push their daughters to get married early, because it is one person less to feed and clothe. However, experts also argue that there is also the norm of having to get girls married before 19.

"But the biggest reason for child marriage we could draw after investigating was the economic cause," says Anju Sah, a gender and sexual reproductive health rights activist in Sarlahi. Parents were also worried about their daughters eloping because of the growing use of smartphones that girls and boys use to meet, chat and sometimes to arrange to elope.

The lockdown also became an incentive to some families as they could easily complete marriage rituals of girls between 16-18 with smaller budgets.

"They are mostly illiterate and they often have a hard time figuring out what to do if any kind of problems come their way," says Sah. Young mothers are unable to birth normal babies, while pregnancy and motherhood also takes a toll on their health. Miscarriages are also common among young mothers.

When we talked to Puja in November, she had returned from her in-laws' to live with her parents while she wrote the Grade 11 exams.

"My husband and I don't have plans to have children until I finish my studies. There is no pressure from my relatives to have kids right now. I am lucky to have a husband who is understanding and supports my studies," Puja says.

Creating opportunities for families to lessen the impact of the current economic downturn and creating awareness on gender-based violence would go a long way in reducing child marriage says Rana Khatri. "Reopening schools is a key step in eliminating the risk of child marriage during the pandemic."

Samita Pradhan from CAED told *Nepal Now* podcast about 38 child marriages that had occurred in Sarlahi during the lockdown. In September we began to follow up that report.

Sarlahi staff of the NGO confirmed that the marriages took place in just one ward: Godaita-10. But they corrected the number to 30. One of the names they provided was that of Puja, and soon after that we contacted Puja and her father, but they both denied that she was 18 when she got married, insisting she had been 20.

We then reached out to municipal officials in Sarlahi. One of them denied that the reported marriages had taken place, while another confirmed that "a large number" had occurred.

Another NGO told us no child marriages happened in the ward during lockdown, adding Puja had not been married, but only engaged.

Conflicting information is a shared experience for organisations doing work around child marriage. While parents are aware of the legal marrying age, marriages continue to take place before girls reach the legal age. Official documents providing evidence of their marriage are often missing.

Some names have been changed.

at the Centre for Agro-ecology and Development (CAED). "I think people are following their culture — marry your daughters at an early age because they are a burden."

A survey by the British agency Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) shows that 11 out of 152 girls had been married in the four districts during the lockdown, and Room to Read said it had discovered at least seven child marriages in May. Lumbini Province reported 49 cases in the past three years.

"Children were not going to school, so they had more time and parents might have thought 'let them go'," says Pradhan.

In Nepal, following the 2015 earthquakes, child marriages rose when increased economic pressure led to more marriages of under-aged boys and girls.

'Destruction of houses and property and interruption of livelihoods from the earthquake resulted in additional financial strain. For some parents, this directly related to decisions made to marry daughters early,' according to the report, *Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in South Asia*.

Factors for child marriage are similar in most humanitarian situations, says Apekcha Rana Khatri at the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) in Nepal: "One very important driver is the socio-cultural norms and practices, which value girls less. It starts from there."

In Dolakha and Sindhupalchok, the trend of arranged marriages before age 18 had been decreasing before the earthquake. Love marriages and elopements among older adolescents rose after the earthquake. Each area is a unique setting for child marriage, with the level of education, proximity to urban areas, culture and religion playing instrumental roles.

Puja of Godaita Rural Municipality in Sarlahi says she got married during the lockdown and was 20 at the time. Puja's father, Raj Kumar says his daughter is 'marriageable'.

"I married two of my daughters only after they reached the age of 20," says Raj Kumar. "I married my third daughter Puja in March to a man who is working in a foreign country, because they did not ask for a dowry. I could not say no to such an offer because I already have debt to pay and if I have to take further loans for dowry in order to marry my

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