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Kathmandu Connection

Kathmandu used to be a transshipment point for narcotics, now it has also emerged as a global centre for human smuggling.



MIN BAURACHARYA

SHIVA GAUNLE

Name any human smuggling racket these days, and Kathmandu most likely will figure in the scam.

Scams like: Nepalis travelling on fake passports, often with phony visas. Nepalis deported from cities around the world because the photo on their passports have been switched. Iraqis with fake Portuguese passports travelling to Europe through Kathmandu. Chinese nationals using fake Japanese passports bought in Bangkok transiting Kathmandu en route Kansai.

Kathmandu airport is not just where Nepalis use fake documents to get out of their country, it is also getting the reputation among the international human smuggling networks as an 'easy' airport to transit. Our lax controls, immigration desks with inadequate counterfeit detection equipment, rampant corruption, and a huge domestic demand for fake travel documents from Nepalis desperate to migrate for a better life make it an ideal jump-off point.

continued ➡ p4-5



NEPALNEWS.COM

Back on track

Maoists agree to resume talks, want parties to join.

NAVIN SINGH KHADKA

In the latest salvo in the Battle of the Letters, the Maoists replied Thursday to a government reply to their earlier reply to the government's letter last week accepting an invitation to restart the stalled peace process.

The statement from Maoist leader Prachanda followed a government gesture Tuesday releasing three imprisoned Maoist leaders and giving details of the whereabouts of 35 cadres. "The government hasn't agreed to all our demands, but overall its response is positive," Prachanda said. "We must now move from technical issues to political ones." The

Maoists have also asked the government to bring the political parties into the peace process.

Member of the negotiating team and information minister Kamal Thapa told us a major hurdle had been overcome. "It is clear we agree on the goals, but we differ on the approach," he said. "We will try our best to get the political parties on board, and hope the talks can begin as soon as possible."

Thapa and his boss have reason to be relieved, since the government has not been able to hold formal talks with the Maoists since coming to power two months ago.

Statements by the Maoists and the

government this week clearly show that both have yielded to overwhelming public opinion against a resumption of hostilities. There also appears to have been international pressure, with letters urging a resumption of talks from UN Secretary General Kofi Anan and British development minister Baroness Amos. There was also a push from parliamentary parties, with a big pro-peace UML rally in Kathmandu on Thursday (see pic).

The Maoists seem to have used a carrot-and-stick approach, timing their agreement to resume talks with a socket bomb attack on an army vehicle Wednesday afternoon in Sindhuli that killed two soldiers. In Nuwakot, Maoists issued a specific threat against charities taking money from 'American imperialists' warning them of dire consequences.

The talks may restart, but the peace process is still fragile. The code of conduct is being openly flouted by both sides, and the next round will have to move beyond confidence building measures to difficult political and military issues. ♦

Landslides: 35 killed

GORKHA—A massive monsoon cloudburst over central Nepal has left at least 35 people dead, most of them in landslides and floods near Manakamana. The Kathmandu-Pokhara Prithvi Highway has been completely washed off at two points. The Marsyangdi power house was hit by a landslide that also buried five NEA vehicles. Gorkha and parts of Tanahu have been cut off. Two army rescue helicopters turned back to Kathmandu Thursday evening because of bad weather en route.

Times

nepalnews.com

Weekly Internet Poll #96

Q. Which side is more responsible in delaying the peace process?

Bar 1: 441

Bar 2: 251

Bar 3: 211

Bar 4: 211

Bar 5: 111

Total votes: 1,099

Weekly Internet Poll # 97. To vote go to: www.nepaltimes.com

Q. Do you support the budget item for grants to parties for election expenditure?

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Ahead of its time?

Public funding of election expenditures is a noble idea, but with the present caliber of our politicians, the money may be better spent elsewhere.

The provision for government grants for election expenditures of political parties announced by Finance Minister Prakash C Lohani in his budget speech has been tried out in many countries. It is a novel idea for Nepal, and worth exploring.

An unregulated political process produces two types of corruption: kickbacks and influence peddling by big business.

The purpose of the public funding for polls should be to root out the cause of bribery by making elections affordable. The influence of big businesses is curtailed by putting limitations on the contribution amount.

In many developed countries, spending caps are put on parties and/or candidates. Strong watchdogs, stiff penalties and public education are the prerequisites for its successful implementation. Trouble is, Nepal lacks many of these safeguards.

Many developed countries have succeeded in rooting out the first type of corruption: kickbacks and bribery. But, they are still struggling to stop influence-peddling by big business. Even though the parties and the candidates may legally abide by the spending law, big businesses will pour in money to help out candidates and parties through independent television, radio ads and other medium. Many European countries have put strict rules in place on campaign-related activities. In the US, such restrictions are seen by some as an attack on liberty and free expression.

In France public opinion polls are not published during the week of the election. In Britain and other European countries there are limitations in television and radio campaign ads. But because of the influence of soft monies, campaign spending in the United States is many folds higher than in Europe. Consequently, European campaigns are much shorter than US ones.

The economic incentive in Nepal has encouraged both intra- and inter-party struggles: parties clamour to grab power, aging party bosses cling on to party chairmanships, intra-party competition is stifled, rival leaderships are expelled, nepotism gets promoted in party hierarchy, nomination not election becomes the norm in forming important party committees, candidates are fielded undemocratically through nomination process. Public confidence in the political process tends to wane. Despite some

superficial electoral reforms that are rarely enforced, many developing countries like India, Bangladesh and scores of African nations suffer from this disease, and Nepal is no exception.

Mexico with its strict enforcement mechanism, total transparency, and various electoral reforms (spending limits, disclosure rules, legal consequences of fines and prison terms in case of violations) has successfully implemented a form of public financing provision. The country saw a new party in power after decades of one party rule when Vicente Fox got elected in 2000. Malaysia, on the other hand, still regulates campaign exercises and state resources in favour of the dominant party.

In theory, public funding of election frees politicians from fund raising pressure, reduces corruption, encourages transparency in public projects, and gives them more time to concentrate on the welfare of the general public. Many proponents of public funding of election expenditures have used this argument, and Lohani's budget highlights that provision. In practice, however, things may not quite go according to plan.

The massive taxing apparatus instituted to fund this program has not seen any public debate, and such sweeping reforms should come from a representative parliament. After all, it involves a huge resource allocation coming out of the people's taxes that could have been spent on other pressing needs such as education, roads, communication, and health. Public funding of elections can, and should, be an important part of the constitutional debate.

Given the 12-year record of parliamentary parties, the public should get something in return before handing them over a chunk of their taxes to fund their election expenditures. For starters, they can come forward and offer to lead the negotiation team to solve the Maoist problem, or show other progressive solutions to get the country out of the current rut like pushing for a mixed proportional representation election, regionally decentralised devolutionary government, mechanisms to lower frequent house dissolutions, separation of power

between the prime minister and the party bosses, or the direct election of the prime minister.

The political parties should start showing that they have turned a new leaf before the people's money goes to them. The country cannot afford another round of killing.

Other than that, Lohani's proposal is sound, and it should help make Nepali democracy more liberal. Here are some suggestions for fine-tuning the arrangement:

1 Private individuals are at present barred from donating, and this may constitute a violation of basic freedoms, especially in light of the fact that the business houses have been allowed to 'influence' legislations through sizable donations. A capped private donation should be allowed.

2 At Rs 5 million, the political contribution ceiling for businesses is too high. A spending cap must be strictly enforced. Businesses should not be allowed to contribute more than 5 percent of their net profit.

3 An election trust fund can be created in advance with a fixed amount of money and the voting percentage decides the allocation. There should also be a minimum voting percentage for each constituency to qualify for such funds (5 percent) as in the US presidential election. Independent candidates should also have an access to such funds.

4 The amount should be approved by a two-third majority in parliament prior to election. This allows smaller parties to band together and oppose self-serving perks by those who control the House.

5 In return, the parties should undertaken certain commitments to national welfare, like not forcing countrywide closures which is a violation of basic civic rights, turning schools into Zones of Peace to free them from organised political activities.

6 Names of the donors and the amount should be made public every year,

especially before elections.

7 Violators should be fined and/or imprisoned. An independent non-partisan institution like the Election Commission should have complete authority to audit, monitor, and prosecute.

8 The parties must undertake to adhere to democratic principles while running their internal affairs.

Under the current environment, state funding for elections will not deter under-the-table 'donations'. There is no monitoring mechanism worth its name to make it work, and certification by a CPA firm is not enough. Second, many parties are undemocratically run private clubs, and it would be immoral to use tax monies to fund these operations until they reform themselves and allow a fresh crop of young leaders to rise up.

Until then, Lohani may be better off thinking about using that money to uplift the education status of some of the thousands who can't afford expensive private schools. With a ten percentage estimated increase in upcoming election counts of 15 million voters, an education trust fund of Rs 300 million

(at the proposed Rs 20 per voter) can be created to fund 25,000 poor students for one year of undergraduate education at the rate of Rs 3,000 per student in a non-profit private school or any other public schools of their choice. Using these vouchers, 5,000 students in each region can stimulate healthy competition among the public and the private institutions. A larger voucher scheme can help bright but disadvantaged children to level the playing field.

It may be a better investment for now to spend the money on education rather than on financing nefarious political parties and their undemocratic leaders with tax- payers' money.

♦

Alok K Bohara, PhD, is professor of economics at the University of New Mexico. bohara@unm.edu



in achieving the CO2 emission reduction required by the Kyoto protocol on global warming. Fuel efficient diesel engines are installed in roughly 40 percent of all new cars sold in Europe and are expected to exceed 50 percent of sales by 2005. European diesels meet the stringent Euro III emission standards, and will soon be meeting the even tougher Euro IV and Euro V standards.

The common rail fuel injection systems, catalytic converters, and exhaust particulate filters required to meet the regulatory standards require diesel fuel with very low levels of sulphur, and herein lies the problem with use of modern diesels in Nepal. Even in some advanced countries outside of Europe, such as the US and Canada, sulphur levels in diesel fuel are 20 times higher than the 15 parts per million (ppm) maximum that European emissions control systems can tolerate.

Presumably sulphur levels in the diesel fuel available in Kathmandu are higher still. Until

sulphur levels drop to the 15ppm range, no emission control system on a diesel would function for long in Kathmandu.

However, before dismissing diesels in Nepal, their benefits (even without a modern emissions control system) must also be considered. The primary benefit is increased fuel economy, typically 30 to 40 percent in real world conditions, which is accompanied by a corresponding reduction in CO2 emissions. It would be unfair and unwise to penalise all of Nepal by depriving the country of the savings that diesel engines offer just because of the special circumstances in Kathmandu that concentrate particulate emissions. Perhaps banning diesels from Kathmandu only is part of the answer to Kathmandu's particulate problem; however, a ban on diesels shouldn't be extended to the whole country.

**Ken Pumford
Ford Motor Company
V Diesel Engineering
Dunton, UK**

TRASHY

It is unethical for a contributor to review a compendium containing his work, but that doesn't deter CK Lal from reviewing *Understanding the Maoist Movement* ('Red-faced Maobadis', #154) to settle scores with other contributors. Who made the mistake of commissioning the review? Or was the reviewer just making sure someone else did not describe his contribution in the terms he reserves for others (the doctrine of a 'pre-emptive scribe')? If indeed the editor has "opted for variety over authority" the contributor Lal (and the reviewer Lal) should thank him, since he is no authority. Having violated the first principle, the reviewer appears to be troubled by the fact that the 'official line' is missing. Then he gets into nitpicking mode calling SNM Abdi's piece "out and out trashy" for containing detail on Prachanda's dietary habits "two big glasses of buffalo milk..." General curiosity into the enigma

that is Prachanda is high, and such details are usually of interest to average readers. Lal compares Abdi's "trashy" piece with a "scholarly" piece by Anne de Sales. I wonder if de Sales can write such scholarly stuff about the State's brutal exploitation of "martial" ethnic groups as cannon fodder since colonial times. Interesting to us readers is how concerned the reviewer is that the "compulsions of the government to be ruthless on the other" be included. Lal would also do better to inform us what greater store of information exists on the Maoist movement that he would call authoritative and analytical. Lal also suggests, half jokingly, somewhere in his trashy review that "if handled well, we might even see Maoist militia recruits heading for stabilisation duty in Iraq". The problem with getting personal in reviews ("social misfits") is that the same principle can just as easily be applied in reverse.

Dorjee Lhakpa, Boudha

TALEJU

Reading Sophia Pande's 'Danger Zone' (#155) reminded me of my own pet peeve the Taleju Temple at Hanuman Dhoka. An ugly guardhouse was added to one of the corner structures during the Rana period that totally ruins the architectural harmony of the temple.

The guardhouse was added to safeguard the treasures inside the temple. Today it serves no purpose, why not remove this eyesore?

This would be the simplest of restorations and would bring peace to the tormented souls of the Taleju's ancient builders.

Dinesh Rai, Naxal

HODGSON

I was totally fascinated by Kanak Mani Dixit's article on the work of Ramesh Dhungel on Brian Hodgson's manuscripts ('Looking for Mr Hodgson', #154). It is a historical treasure that tells us a lot about our socio-economic, and political thinking during the period of our own Dark Ages.

Ironic, isn't it, that the same national paranoia which helped us preserve our sovereignty, was also instrumental in making us miss the bus on the entire industrial revolution that was taking place all around us, including in India.

Achyut Bhatta, email

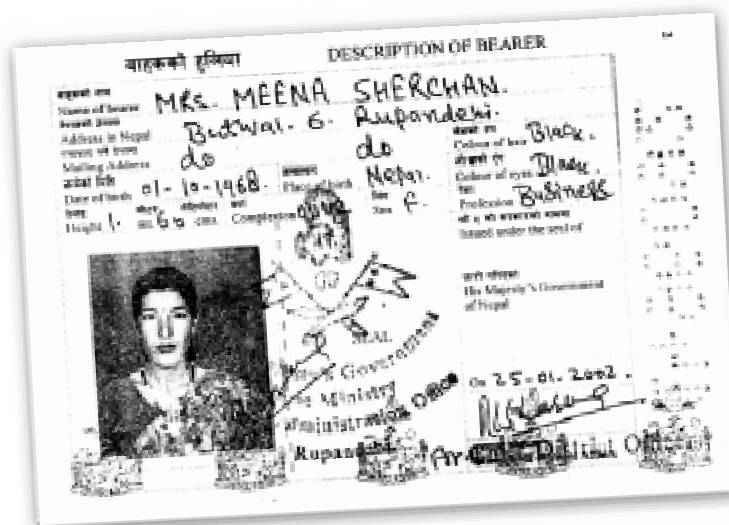
● 'Updated rough guide' (Under My hat, #155) was one of the best pieces in recent times. Why does the international page which is in the hardcopy of *Nepali Times* not feature on your website? By the way, please inform Gorkhapatra Sansthan that its online edition of *The Rising Nepal* has not been updated since 22 April, 2003.

**Shyamal Krishna Shrestha
The Hague**

Correction

The architect at Dwarika's Hotel is Bibhuti Man Singh, and not as otherwise stated. ('Danger zone', #155).

“A low-risk, high-profit



from p1

Last year, a Chinese national travelling on a stolen US passport with the photograph changed, chose Kathmandu as a transit point to sneak into the US because he knew he would not be detected by airport authorities here. Interestingly, the man had already cleared immigration when he was caught, but his passport had no departure stamp. A retired immigration official told us there are numerous instances where a person who cleared immigration on one passport and ticket has left Kathmandu on another.

Many of these passengers are deported back to Kathmandu when their bogus documents are detected at US, European, Gulf and East Asian entry points. In the last three months alone, there have been 60 cases of fraudulent passports and citizenship registered by the government prosecutor at the Kathmandu District Court. These days, the police Special Investigation Cell is preoccupied with passport and visa fraud cases, and has had to deal with 30 deported Nepali passen-

gers since May.

We put it to police superintendent Rajendra Singh Bhandari that corruption at the immigration desk seems to be the main reason Kathmandu has earned this reputation. “It is a combination of factors,” he replied. “It could be that they find Nepal an easy place to transit on their way to other places. More and more people are being deported back to Kathmandu from airports abroad, and Nepalis are getting a bad reputation.”

According to one police testimony, Dipak Sherchan used to go to Japan often for his pashmina export business. His wife, Meena, also had a Japanese visa in her passport. Meena’s picture was replaced with that of her niece’s. In May this year, Dipak and his niece checked in for the Royal Nepal flight to Osaka, they cleared immigration and security and were waiting in the lounge when the suspicion of police inspector Satis Gyawali was aroused. The two were not speaking to each other, the inspector recalls, and were not behaving like husband and wife. Upon re-examination, the niece’s passport was discovered to be ‘PC’

(photo-changed). According to a testimony by the niece to the police, a man named Gopal Silwal had made the photo switch for Rs 600,000.

The going rate for a Nepali passport with a genuine US, UK or Japanese visa is anywhere up to Rs 1.2 million. But if the passport and/or visas are both fake, there are discounts. Foreign passports stolen from tourists can also be sold to Nepalis who can pass off as Japanese or British Asians. As visa rules are tightened and there is increased vigilance at foreign airports for passengers with Nepali passports, locals are using ingenious methods to go abroad. A Nepali passenger who boarded a recent flight in Kathmandu dressed in blue jeans emerged at Bangkok airport as a Buddhist monk to catch an onward flight.

Diplomatic sources told us that just before the UK announced visas were required by Nepalis to even transit London, 10 Nepalis with round-the-world tickets had flown in from Argentina, destroyed their travel documents at Heathrow and sought political asylum in Britain. Three years ago 12

Nepalis on their way to a youth conference in Algiers got off during their London transit and disappeared. Senior figures of a political party were implicated in the scam.

Another testimony to the police reveals how desperate people have taken on the identities of the wives of important people to obtain citizenship certificates, passports and even visas.

In her testimony to police after being arrested, Elisa Thapa confessed she wanted to join her husband in the US, and paid a certain Ram Bahadur Thapa Rs 200,000 to get her the documents. He took her to the Foreign Ministry to make a passport in the name of Padma Chaudhary, the wife of then state minister of communications, Hari Narayan Chaudhary. An accomplice who claimed to be the personal assistant of Minister Chaudhary, Rudraraj Poudel, then took Elisa to the American Embassy, but her visa was refused. Ram Bahadur had another passport made, this time in the name of Sunita Singh, the wife of the MP of Mahottari, Ramjivan Singh. When she went for a visa the

L-R: A fake Japanese passport of a Chinese national travelling via Kathmandu to Osaka in June, the photo on this Nepali passport with a genuine Japanese visa was replaced with a picture of the bearer’s niece, a Nepali passport with a fake British visa that was detected in Doha, the Nepali passport of Bihari gangster Pappu Dev aka Anil Sharma..

second time, she was arrested.

According to testimonies by Nepalis caught with fake or altered documents, a mafia connected to international networks is involved in human smuggling and has direct connections to senior political levels in Nepal. According to recent documents found by police in a flat belonging to a passport counterfeiter, 26 Indian nationals from Darjeeling were recently supplied with Nepali passports for Rs 50,000 each.

Passport and fake citizenship scams are now also beginning to have an impact on security. An Indian gangster named Pappu Dev who is wanted in Bihar was caught last month at Kathmandu airport while boarding a flight to Dubai with a Nepali passport bearing the name of Anil Sharma. According to a testimony made by his associate to Nepali police, Pappu Dev aka Anil Sharma had been smuggling

AK-47s to India through Nepal.

Last year, Bihar police arrested four Pappu Dev gang members in possession of AK-47s. The guns were supplied to him by ex-MP Salim Miya Ansari of Bara. The informant, Hareram Chaudhary, was Pappu Dev’s accomplice and was himself caught recently trying to smuggle counterfeit Indian currency into India.

Chaudhary told police that former home minister Khum Bahadur Khadka called him and Pappu Dev to his residence in Harihar Bhawan two years ago to order Salim Miya’s execution. Pappu Dev reportedly said he’d think about it.

According to police records, Pappu Dev actually carries a Nepali citizenship certificate from Kaski district and a passport under the name Anil Sharma. Both bear photographs of him wearing a large Nepali *topi*. The

Conjoined rivers

KEYA ACHARYA in HYDERABAD

A \$120 billion plan by India’s ruling Bharatiya Janata Party to link the country’s major rivers by 2016 is causing a debate that has divided the country. The project would link India’s Himalayan rivers with those in its peninsular region through 30 massive interlinking canal systems to provide drinking water, power and irrigation.

The government has set up a Task Force Committee for the implementation of the river linking plan headed by former federal Power Minister Suresh Prabhu. The government says the project will alleviate droughts and floods, supply 34,000 MW of hydropower and irrigate 300,000 sq km. Several major dams and some 40,000km of

A mammoth scheme to unite rivers may end up dividing India.

canals are planned.

India’s rivers have an average annual flow of 1,869 billion cubic metres (bcm) of which 1,122 bcm is useable. By 2050, the country’s demand for water will swell by 1,300 bcm, and the government aims to close this gap by transferring ‘surplus’ waters from high rainfall zones in northeastern India to drought prone states in western and southern India.

The eastern Indian tributaries of the river Ganges would supply water to dry areas in Uttar Pradesh, Uttaranchal, Haryana, Rajasthan and Gujarat in western India. The Mahanadi and Godavari rivers of

peninsular India would supply dry basins in southern India’s Karnataka, Tamilnadu and Maharashtra.

Two previous plans to link India’s rivers by the Water Resources Ministry failed in 1972 and 1977 for technical and financial reasons. The scheme was given added weight by the Supreme Court of India which, on a public interest litigation, filed by farmers from southern India asking the government to provide water to all, passed an Order requiring the project to be completed by 2016. “There will be more food for the poor, more irrigation potential especially for subsistence farmers and a huge generation of jobs. Think of its positive socioeconomic impact,” said Chetan Pandit, chief engineer of India’s Water Resources Ministry.

But activists and academics are sharply critical of the plan. Their concerns include submergence of forest tracts, displacement of communities and lifestyles, changes in water quality and microclimatic conditions and public health consequences.

Waterlogging and soil salinity, already a result of irrigated agriculture in India, could increase with more monoculture cropping and its related loss of biodiversity and soil fertility from heavy usage of chemicals, critics warn. “None of the feasibility and impact studies on this gigantic project have been put in the public domain,” said international water expert Jayanto Bandyopadhyay of the Indian Institute of Management’s Center for Development and Environment Policy in Calcutta.

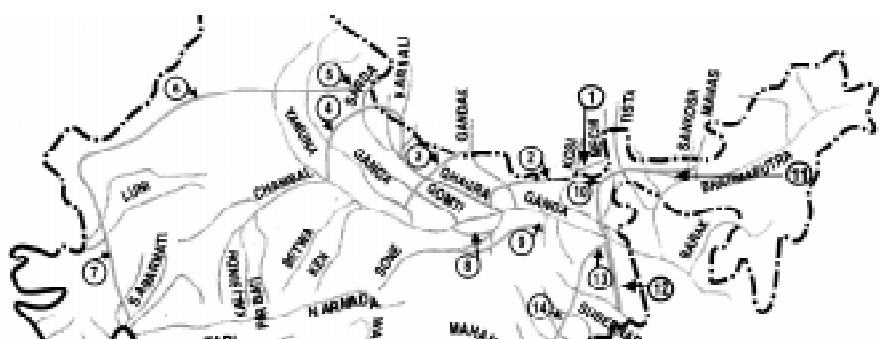
Bandyopadhyay says the government has failed to provide calculations on water availability for various ecosystems, drinking water costs and evaporation levels in existing large dams. “The concept of surplus waters is itself faulty. Reducing what has been termed surplus or flood waters will impact fishery ecosystems in Bangladesh that depend on monsoonal flows for regeneration,” he warned. There is also concern among neighbouring countries like Nepal and Bangladesh with which India shares its rivers.

India’s former Secretary of Water Resources Ramaswamy Iyer, now honorary research professor at the Centre for Policy Research, believes political mileage is partly what drives the scheme. “There has been no mention of something this big in the Ninth Plan or even in the Tenth Plan,” said Iyer. “How did we arrive at this strange idea that all of India’s rivers must be linked?” India should learn from the environmental disasters like the Aral Sea, say other researchers.

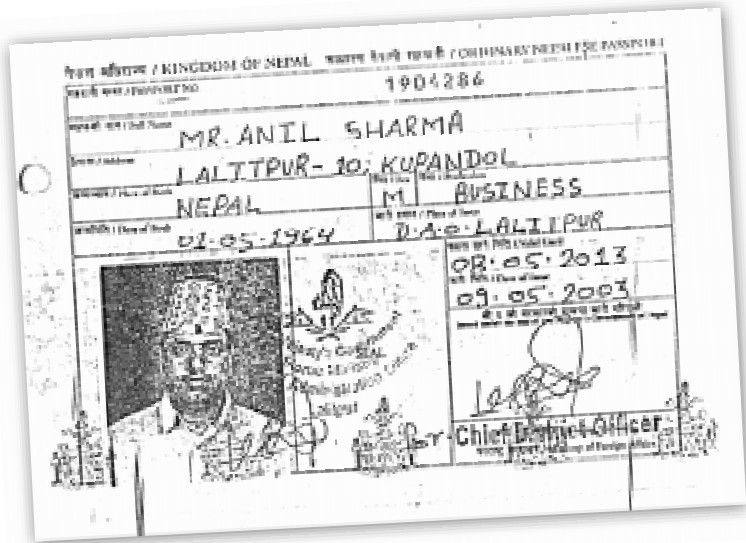
Another water expert, B G Verghese says the idea of interlinking rivers is age old and is impatient with the criticism. “Why don’t the critics shut up?” Verghese wrote in *Outlook* magazine.

Task Force Chairman Prabhu is optimistic. In an attempt to mollify civil society, he has started talking to activist groups, assuring them that “the laws of the land will be adhered to” with regard to forests and environment.

But activists are not persuaded, and others are even less easily pacified. Bittu Sahgal, prominent wildlife advocate and editor of *Sanctuary* magazine, called Prabhu’s attempt to win public opinion “a whitewash”. ♦ (Environment News Service)



job...



passport (no. 1004286) was issued at the CDO office at Lalitpur on the recommendation of an official in the Home Ministry.

According to our investigation, the fraudulent issuance of passports, tampering with them, the activities of counterfeiters, unscrupulous human traffickers and blatant corruption are now affecting more and more innocent Nepalis. Last year three Malaysia-bound Nepalis were arrested at Tribhuban International Airport. All three were found to be trying to fly off on passports belonging to someone else and with photos switched. The migrant labour agency involved was never prosecuted. The three Nepalis lost their entire investment, and are

now heavily indebted to friends and relatives.

Tashi Dolma (passport no. 0997890) had spent a lot of money trying to travel to the US with a photo change on someone else's passport with a genuine US visa. He had no problems getting through Kathmandu immigration, but was caught at Bangkok airport and deported back to Kathmandu. Hari Gurung was travelling on Tsiring Lama's passport (no. 1120656) and Jit Bahadur Gurung was travelling on Pema Gurung's passport (no. 0971446) and also got caught in transit at Bangkok airport after their photo-changes went undetected in Kathmandu. Usually, it is the airlines that end up paying fines

and are forced to fly back passengers to their home airports. Airline officials complain that Kathmandu airport immigration doesn't have the technical capacity to detect passports that have been tampered with, and privately allege that officials are on the take.

"This is a low risk, high profit job, international networks are involved, that is why it is so difficult to control," says inspector Gobinda Prasad Thapa head of the Crime Investigation Unit. And even if traffickers or passengers are caught, they can usually buy their freedom immediately after posting light bail. A man caught at Min Bhawan two months ago with a bag full of fake rubber stamps, empty passports and citizenship certificates, was set free as soon as he was caught after paying Rs 9,000 bail.

Human trafficking gangs use imaginative methods to change the photos on passports with genuine visas. Some iron the page with the photo, and carefully peel off the lamination to change the picture. Others put the passport in the deep freeze because it makes it easier to change pictures. There are reports that traffickers have imported a sophisticated lamination machine costing Rs 1.5 million that makes it even more difficult for officials to detect tampered passports.

Fuelled by a heightened demand from Nepalis keen to leave the country, human trafficking from and through Nepal can only get worse. Police say Kathmandu is getting the same reputation as Delhi, Bangkok or Amsterdam as a source of fake travel documents, which means any Nepali or passenger travelling from Nepal faces extra scrutiny and hassles at foreign airports. ♦

DOMESTIC BRIEFS

Homework

The government has not done any preparatory work on the child rights situation in Nepal for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child hearing in January next year, an advocacy organisation warned this week. Nepal was almost two years late when it submitted the last periodic report to the world body last February, Child Workers in Nepal Concerned Centre (CWIN-Nepal) said in its half yearly report. In the first six months of this year, CWIN found that children had a slightly easier life thanks in great part to the January ceasefire. Unfortunately, the ensuing chaos in education, resulting from a rift between the king and political parties, ruined what little progress there was. CWIN warns the confrontation and violence between the student wings of political parties and educationists is likely to negatively impact the psychology of children. The organisation's report also says child labour, racial and caste discrimination, gender and social discrimination, and sexual abuse continue unabated in Nepali society.

Raising funds

LONDON – A colourful annual fund-raising dinner by Help Nepal Network (HeNN), a UK-based charity, brought together 100 Nepalis and their families living and working in the UK. Over £1,200 was raised during the event, including a donation of £695 by student Anil Thapa who raised the amount by participating in the British 10K open road race in July. Since September 1999, HeNN has raised over £23,000 from branches in Austria, Australia, Belarus, Belgium, Finland, Italy, Nepal, New Zealand, UK and USA. The money is directed mainly into health and education projects in Nepal. HeNN also supports Sahara in Nepalganj, which works for the rehabilitation of children orphaned during the insurgency, and is involved in constructing a health post in remote Mugu district. (Bhagirath Yogi in London)

Indian grant for trauma centre

The Indian government is helping Nepal set up a 200-bed emergency trauma centre in Kathmandu next to Bir Hospital. An agreement to this effect was signed by Indian ambassador Shyam Saran and finance Secretary Bhanu Acharya on Wednesday. India helped set up the original Bir Hospital as well as its expansion in 1985. The project for the trauma centre was designed by the Hospital Services Consultancy Corporation (India) Ltd, under the guidance of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi. The Rs 757 million centre will have five major operation theatres, and aims to provide the best trauma medical care in Nepal.

WEEKEND PACKAGE

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FEEDBACK

by TIRTH UPADHYAY



Little to bank on

Things are not going as smoothly as planned with banking sector reforms.



Now that the honeymoon period of the new foreign management of Nepal Bank Ltd (NBL) and Rastriya Banijya Bank (RBB) are over, stakeholders have begun to have doubts about reforms. Even though an official report on the reform process over the past year is awaited, it looks like Nepal Rastriya Bank is getting impatient with the results. While making its monetary policy public recently, governor Tilak Rawal expressed dissatisfaction with the slow pace of reform.

Rawal's concern is worth noting, especially because the architects of the reforms are upbeat about it. World Bank country director Ken Ohashi wrote in an op-ed piece in May in *Kantipur* in which he gave the impression that banking sector reforms were on track, a view that was echoed by Sukhwinder Singh of the IMF in an interview in this paper ('Nepal needs help for self-help', #154).

But the general public, which does not have access to the real behind-the-scenes information, has begun to sense that things are not going as smoothly as the reformers had planned. In fact, there is a feeling that the situation at the ailing banks may be getting worse.

The main task assigned to the new management was debt recovery, and it was committed to bringing down non-performing assets (NPA) to 10 percent and 5 percent of the total outstanding portfolio in the first and second year of its management control, respectively. The performance has fallen short of target. It could perhaps be argued that the target itself was unrealistic, but management control was handed over on a fundamental premise that the new manager would be a financial wizard with experience in turning around sick banks.

The Rastra Bank can't be absolved of its responsibility either, as the contractors were hired without adequate spadework. Bad loans amassed by these banks were not analysed, classified and realistically valued, to be agreed with the new managers. This left room for ambiguity and dispute. The new management made a smart move by making provisions to check non-performing assets in the period prior to their takeover. NBL and RBB managements claim that they have recovered over Rs 1 billion each from delinquent borrowers. The loan administration process has been streamlined, accounts are updated and the latest audited financial statements

are available. But since all bad and doubtful debts were provided for, the new management could ride over mounting non-performing assets and highlight its success, however slight that may have been.

The major problem with loan recovery is inadequacy of information available within the banks about borrowers, including cash flows, quality of security, management and financial information, industry environment, marketability of collateral, etc. Very little seems to have been achieved after the new management took control in creating borrowers' profiles that could be relied upon for developing recovery or exit strategies.

In a bid to cover up its lapses the management of NBL has moved to the CIAA for recovery of debt that it alleges was fraudulently lent, a move sharply criticised by the business community. NBL's move could further delay the recovery process as the borrower would become subjudice and other recovery proceedings are stalled till the final court verdict is pronounced.

The second challenge facing the banks was to stabilise their deteriorating operating results. Due to

the ever narrowing spread (difference between interest income and the interest expense), the banks faced increasing difficulty in serving the interest on deposits from the interest income, let alone defraying other operating and administrative costs.

The audited result of one full year's operation under the new management will take some time to be made public. The claim from certain quarters that the situation is improving is premature. The reality appears to be that very little success has been achieved in interest recovery, especially from chronic defaulters and the 'Big Fish'.

There has been some recovery from borderline borrowers and others are merely book adjustments by rescheduling overdue principal. Unless a significant portion of overdue principal and the interest are realised in a timely and regular manner, it will be hard to rescue these banks from technical bankruptcy.

The new management has been entrusted with turning the banks around, putting in place internal control systems, automating operations, book keeping, updating accounting, bringing everything upto international standards, and modernising the management and making it capable of managing the banks independently. All this was supposed to be achieved within three years.

Going by the pace of present progress, it doesn't look like the goals will be met. There is mistrust and a crisis of confidence between employees of the banks and the new management team. Their authoritarian style has failed to win the managers goodwill and support. Salaries at these banks are far lower than prevailing rates in Nepal's banking industry and, furthermore, there is a glaring gap in remunerations between employees and the management team.

Very little is achieved by updating accounts since major problem areas like the adjustment of reconciling items in branch, agency, inter-bank accounts, and the reconciliation of government transactions, identification of fixed assets and quantification of retirement payments remain largely unaddressed.

Plans for upgrading qualifications and skills of employees have not yet been implemented. Instead, a voluntary retirement scheme has been introduced that has angered unions about the whole reform process. The most serious constraint is the absence of a management succession plan. What happens when the three years are up?

The highly-motivated and excessively paid management team will run things as long as the World Bank is generous enough to fund them. But after the contract period, the management will again fall upon 'dead wood': under-motivated, under-paid, unskilled and incapable employees. And we will be back to square one.

The Nepali public would be burdened with an additional debt of over Rs 2 billion - the cost of the banking reform - which was financed by a World Bank loan. NBL and RBB are not liable for the repayment of this loan, and it goes unrecognised in their books. This could be a classic example of innovative accounting and might draw the attention of NRB, which is advocating implementation of International Accounting Standards in the banking industry. ♦

Tirth Upadhyay is a practising chartered accountant and a leading banking consultant. He was involved in the diagnostic review of NBL and RBB whose recommendations form the basis for the banking sector reform program.

Political capital

Time to move our nation's capital to Gorkha?

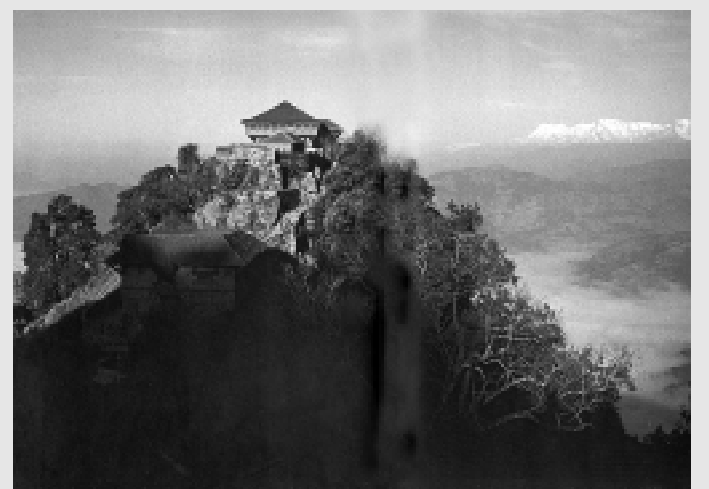
KABINDRA PRADHAN in BUTWAL.

There is a spot in one corner of my rice field that worries me a lot. Last year some fertiliser spilled there and was ploughed in by mistake. This spot became so fertile that the rice and next season's wheat did not yield anything at all—just lots of straw that was all bent over and half-rotten.

This plot would have been ideal for fodder grass, not for grain crops. Somewhat like the taxes the government harvests from businessmen. The crop on this spot in my field has parallels to the leaders we send to govern in Kathmandu.

Kathmandu Valley was and is too rich to raise visionary leaders. Ask any farmer: a fat animal is a sterile one, good only for the butcher. And so it is with soil. Very fertile land is better for fodder or salad crops—very little seed production there. The plant expends too much on the vegetative greens and not enough on forming healthy seeds for the future survival of the species. And so it has been with our leaders. They spend all the nourishment on themselves, leaving nothing for the rest of the country, or for the next generation.

If only King Prithibi Narayan Shah had not been so infatuated with this emerald valley. If only he had not moved his capital to Kathmandu. On the day Kathmandu fell to the invading king of Gorkha, the people and the Malla king of Kathmandu were celebrating Indra Jatra. Does that have a familiar ring? Our country is being brought to its knees with problems that are critical to the nation and our leaders are all involved in a perpetual *jatra* that has little to do with solving problems.



The Valley has a long history of foreign rulers being assimilated into the local culture who are all called Newars now. Only the Shah kings and other recent rulers have not been called Newars. But look now at what they have become: feasting on buffalo meat, *raksi* and non-stop bhoj—and most of them are Brahmins and other 'high' castes! They even imitated the Newari business skills and applied it to statecraft: the only value system the leaders have is making money and having a good time. Today government holidays rival the number of traditional Newari *bhoj* days. Felicitation advertisements to officials and government corporations cover more than half the revenue of major newspapers. Is this a not-so-subtle bribe to keep the media from prying into the rotten mess inside?

The territorial acquisitiveness of our past leaders is mostly over. The borders of Nepal are more or less well defined, but there are other territories to conquer: controlling corruption, reducing our shameful mortality rate among children and mothers and overcoming poverty and diseases running rampant in the hinterland. But none of these campaigns are of importance to leaders embedded in the Valley. Like the strong pull of gravity within a black hole that prevents even light from escaping, their attention rarely makes it beyond the Valley rim. All roads lead into Kathmandu - nothing seems to leave from here.

Prithibi Narayan Shah would have been wiser to let Gorkha remain the political capital. Kathmandu could have remained the economic and cultural capital. It's not too late to shift back to Gorkha, which is not such a far-fetched idea considering most of our leaders, including the Maoists, seem to germinate on the *tars* by the Marsyangdi. Perhaps in Gorkha some of the traits of our visionary past kings will rub off on their descendants.

What we need is a political capital that is in tune with the rest of this rugged and far-flung kingdom. This is certainly not so in Kathmandu, the nation's most fertile valley. ♦

Kabindra Pradhan runs a farm in Butwal.



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BIZ NEWS

Election time

No, not general elections. But elections on Saturday for the new executive committee of the 400-member strong business body, FNCCI. In the fray for president are acting president Binod Bahadur Shrestha and businessman Gopal Prasad Shrestha. Binod insists the election is vital because President Rabi Bhakta Shrestha has not been functional, and FNCCI members are looking for a fresh new face. "We need a president who has an ability to unite the business community instead of washing dirty linen in public," he says. Gopal is of almost identical view, but isn't surprised there is no unanimity about the candidates. "When there is no agreement among businessmen in Kathmandu, you can't expect it to happen in the outlying districts," he says

The umbrella organisation of the business community has always remained divided along the lines of their trade commodities as well as geography and communal differences. "The problem is we never had a common leader," says Rajendra Khetan, second vice president, now contesting for position of first president. "The challenge now is to bring radical changes in the administrative and constitutional aspects of our organisation."

At the helm

This week Christopher Low was unanimously elected chairman of the board of Standard Chartered Bank Nepal Ltd. Low, is Regional CEO of SCB India and has been on the board of the bank since April. He replaces Bhoj Raj Pokharel who was recently recalled by HMG after a successful tenure as chairman.



Yeti's Royal Orchid

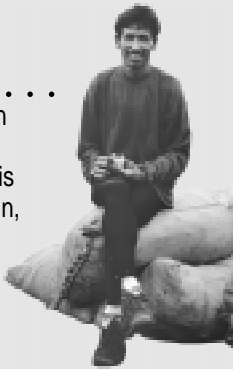
Thailand is set to become an even more popular holiday destination for Nepalis with Yeti Travels' appointment as the wholesale agent in the kingdom for Thai's Royal Orchid Holidays. This package from Thailand's national flag carrier is a self-plan inclusive tour. Developed and marketed by Thai, it pioneered vacation opportunities in many destinations worldwide.

Colour fast

A lot of detergents promise to wash whiter than white but Active Wheel Detergent promises to keep your colours true. Nepal Lever claims its new product not only smells good, but is tough on the stains and gentle on the clothes. Available in all retail shops, the 500g powder pack is reasonably priced at Rs 40.

Salt Trading to sponsor Rokaya

Noted Nepali marathon winner Hari Bahadur Rokaya from Jumla who is trying to get in shape for the Everest Marathon this autumn is going to be sponsored by Salt Trading Corporation, the company announced this week. Rokaya's financial difficulties and his commitment to helping other young athletes in Jumla was profiled in Nepali Times ('Run, Hari, run', #153). Salt Trading is going to take care of Rokaya's nutritional supplements costing Rs 3,000 a month and also pay his expenses of Rs 50,000 for the Everest Marathon. "We thought that was the least we could do to a deserving and patriotic athlete like Hari," Salt Trading said in a statement.



"A lot of room for growth."

Nepali Times: How come when the economy is down, the courier business is up?

Mukunda Malla: That is because we are not just in the business of moving urgent envelopes from one place to another. That is not our core business anymore. When DHL came to Nepal in 1981 we only handled documents. It was only in 2000 that we registered ourselves as a 100 percent foreign investment company in Nepal.

We are often asked why we carry handicrafts, garment samples and not documents. The international business of air express is moving from document to parcels. Document delivery is at 50 percent volume of former years. By 2005, we estimate only 20 percent of our revenue will be generated from this sector. We plan to increase our parcel business ten-fold with an aim to generate 80 percent of our revenue.

Unfortunately, the authorities in Nepal seem to think we should restrict ourselves to moving documents. Yes, there are certain guidelines. The parcels cannot exceed 35kg because we handle express deliveries right to the doorstep. It's a different value added service—freight in express-mode.

And how is the competition?

It is hard to survive in this industry. Cut-throat competition and price wars have become the rule. Nobody is talking about service, infrastructure or service enhancement. While there are companies doing 100 percent business independently, there also are those we call co-loaders who get business in the name of major air express companies. The latter definitely involves some hanky-panky.

That must make for problems with freight forwarders.

Yes, misunderstandings do crop up every now and then because all of us fall under the cargo bracket. We might appear to be competing for the same market, but what separates us is the time factor. Consumers who need urgent service use us and those with enough time opt for freight forwarders. We carry sample shipments of garments and carpets, and when the clients abroad okay them then cargo handlers get the major chunk of business. As it turns out, we actually generate business for them.

The inefficiency of our postal service must work to your advantage.

That is true. If they improve their service, we will lose a part of our market. But it will take them a while to get there. DHL has a track-and-trace system that allows customers access to their shipment en-route. We even know what shipment is arriving before they reach us.

How seasonal is the business in Nepal?

Our busiest time is little before Christmas, starting in October, especially in the export of handicrafts. In our document business, when it is

admission time in schools and colleges abroad, we see an influx of students' documents. This happens especially in March and April. But our business is not exactly seasonal, just some months with spikes.

After a recent takeover by the German company, Deutsche Post Worldwide Net, courier giant DHL has received a boost in strengthening its presence in the global market. Although the Nepal market is small, DHL's country manager for Nepal, Mukunda Malla, has big expansion plans, as he told Nepali Times.

Is your clientele changing?

We have three categories: 15 percent are from services that include banks, financial institutes, insurance companies and government and international offices. Some 70 percent of our revenue comes from manufacturing textiles, carpets, handicraft and leather goods. The third section is import-export and trading, which covers computer hardware and software, and automobiles that require spare parts and domestic airlines.

How does turnover in Nepal compare to a similarly-sized country in the region like, say, Sri Lanka?

We used to be foremost among smaller countries in the region till recently, when the pashmina business contributed to about 40 percent of our revenue. As far as performance is concerned, the turnover in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka stand at about •12 million, while we are just •1.5.

We hear many courier businesses do not collect or submit VAT.

We do both. Even if 95 percent of the cost involved in this business has to be paid elsewhere. Kathmandu ends up getting only five percent of the entire cost, and yet we collect and deposit VAT. It's something cargo companies are exempt from and I feel if it is compulsory, it should be applicable to all the companies. Right now there are companies who quote a lower price than DHL because they do not charge VAT.

Has there been any strategic change after the Deutsche Post took over DHL?

Yes, it was a great leap forward for DHL. It went from a company valued at •6 billion to part of a •40 billion conglomerate. We are now part of a bigger picture with more strength. Changes are being put through. DPWN has integrated other companies under DHL. For customers this means they will have access to different services through a single window.

Back here, what is your experience at customs in Tribhuban

STRICTLY BUSINESS

by ASHUTOSH TIWARI



Underselling MBAs

Why invest in an MBA program only to market yourself shoddily?

About a month ago, I received a copy of the booklet containing resumes of graduating Master's of Business Administration (MBA) students of the 11th batch from the Kathmandu University School of Management (KUSOM). Such resumes are usually the first point of contact between job seekers and job providers, with the seekers usually presenting themselves in the strongest possible light to make enough of a good impression to secure an interview or two. Anyway, I flipped through the booklet, and saw that a part of the introduction said, "[w]e believe that our students will do well as managers for companies like yours which value professionalism in management."

But after poring over the contents of 26 resumes on offer, I, as a prospective employer, started to wonder whether anyone would seriously want to hire these MBAs on the basis of how they came across in the booklet. The resumes were, to put it charitably, awfully long on irrelevant details and inexplicably short on information that those making the hiring decisions really want to know. If this is how these guys sell their own skills to the job market, you ask yourself how good can they really be when it comes to selling goods and services to customers?

Irrelevantly highlighted info: More than half the information on all the resumes is about where the MBAs live, when they were born, contact addresses and other such dross. Yes, these are necessary, but could easily have been



tucked into a small section. The inordinate amount of space given to it signals that perhaps the students do not have skills to offer, which, as KUSOM knows, is far from true. Besides, hardly any employer makes hiring decisions based on where people live and what their phone numbers are.

Vague information: One student's typical summer project was "Loyalty Programmes at Hyatt Regency". As an employer, you want to know whether the student helped raise the number of loyal customers at Hyatt, and if so, by how many. Vague information takes the shine off most resumes. You want to know whether he used new ways to attract business, and get other such quantitative and qualitative measures to help you to gauge the kind of skills the student possesses. Alas! The student, like all his classmates, merely put the title of his summer job and other such

project works, thereby underselling his hard-earned business skills. Why would anyone invest time and money to earn an MBA program only to end up doing a shoddy job at marketing himself?

Advice: In the West, business schools have woken up to the fact that the most valuable skill they can impart to their freshly-minted MBAs is a skill to find jobs throughout their lives. An MBA in and of itself is not a guarantee for lifetime employment. The nature of the job market is changing rapidly everywhere, and with that, frequent job-hopping has become a common practice, even among Kathmandu's upwardly mobile professionals. That is why, regardless of how job markets change in Nepal, the only thing that's going to be constant is how strongly and clearly one can present himself to the changing situation to find new and better jobs.

In this context, KUSOM might as well admit that 30 or 40 years down the road, the most important skill its graduates will have will not be related to the principles of marketing, finance or human resource management (all of which will change with the times), but how quickly and readily they can adapt to the changing times. When and if KUSOM takes such a long view, it should start offering intensive "resume workshops" to its students so that they can better sell their skills to the market throughout their lives and not just for their first post-graduation job. ♦



NIN BAIRACHARYA

International Airport?

Because of our reputation, we get the best cooperation from customs. There are limitations for the air express industry for clearance of high value shipment but the system can be improved. All the SAARC countries except Nepal and Bhutan have DHL bonded warehouses. Here, they have allocated space for DHL, but it is within the premises of the cargo complex under customs. We would like to have a separate space for quality service because things come to a standstill during national holidays like Dasain.

Airport security says freight are not screened and are conduits for contraband.

General air freight does not have an x-ray machine in the new cargo complex, but we in the air express business use the passenger terminal. All air express packages are scanned. If there is any suspicion, the shipment is opened, checked and repacked to assure the safety of the airline and the passengers. Despite these measures, there have been some instances of contraband being smuggled out through air express.

NARESH NEWAR

It's high noon. Perfect for showdowns. Kollywood superstar Rajesh Hamal stares down a gang of ne'er-do-wells. They charge towards the fearless hero who demolishes them with his bare hands. (Later, when the effects are put in, the sound of fist meeting chin will be 'dishum-dishum'.) A crowd has gathered on the sets of *Jetho Kancha*, a new movie being filmed in a tiny village on the western outskirts of the city, to see Nepal's favourite leading man in action.

There is take after take of the carefully choreographed fight till the director, Daya Ram Dhakal, declares a print. He is satisfied with the day's work and tells us, "I am convinced this movie will bring new perspective to Nepali cinema." After hearing the barebones of the script, it's more likely this will be yet another utterly forgettable celluloid inanity on a growing heap of unremarkable masala movies.

Look out for yet another happy ending preceeded by a lot of uneven fist fights, florid damsels being chased around pine trees, a villain or two and their entourage plunging to their gruesome deaths, plus the comic relief breaks and song-and-dance sequences set amidst the backdrop of Nagarkot hill. Vintage Kollywood, in other

words. The Nepali audience better brace itself for more of the same; a formulaic plot and suspension of disbelief.

It's not as if we can't do better (see box, *'Unforgettables'*) and it certainly isn't the case that the viewers are not ready to accept more cerebral cinema, even with the masala mix. Kollywood used to produce an average of 40-50 films a year, more than any other country in South Asia except India's mammoth Bollywood dream machine. But for the most part, it's quantity over quality.

Recently, cinema hall owners have begun to demand a qualitative revolution in Nepali films. They are playing hard ball, saying if they screen only Hindi movies they won't run at a loss. What's left unsaid, but tacitly understood by insiders, is that Kollywood will face very hard times without their continuing support.

The insurgency has already taken an indirect toll on the industry—film production has halved. The number of films made every year has plummeted to 10-15. Unlike India, there is no print rental system in Nepal to act as a safety net for investors. Prints for Hindi movies are priced according to the actors and the pre-release hype, and cost an average of Rs 50,000 per week. But Nepali

movies lack distributors: the producer usually doubles up for this role. And cinema halls don't pay a single paisa for rental.

The real fly in the ointment is that producers, who invest upwards of Rs 5 million on a single film, can recoup their investment only through ticket sales—50 percent at a time. The other half goes to the hall owners. With the rise in pirated movies and the spread of cable TV, people watch new Bollywood releases at home. Consequently, there is a drop in sales soon after the opening week. On the other hand, new Nepali films like *Sukha Dukha*, *Miteri* and *Afnopan* run successfully for weeks, pulling 60 percent of the audience.

The producers are now adamant to get more, at least 58 percent, of the sales revenue. At loggerheads with hall owners, they stopped their films from being screened for the past 40 days. This has led to the first major dissension between the two groups in Nepal's 52-year-old film history. Sunil Thapa, a veteran actor told us: "This is really sad. I've worked in the film industry for 27 years and realise now that hall owners never really cared about Nepali films. They are just after money." The Nepali Film Producers Association (NPFA) say the producers are the good guys and the bad guys are exploiting them. Actors, technicians and directors all support who they regard as the good guys.

Rajesh Hamal, Nepal's highest paid actor, believes there's more to the matter. "Money is not the issue. This is about creating an atmosphere to

give a respectable status to the industry. I'm sure this strike won't last long," he said. Popular actress Melina Manandhar (*pic, far right*) is worried about the overall impact. "This conflict is giving our industry a bad name,"

It's not the same old song-and-dance anymore in Nepal's film industry.

she said.

Uddhab Poudel, owner of Gopi Krishna—Nepal's largest multiplex—is in a dilemma. He has been made the mediator in the conflict between producers and cinema hall owners. His comment to us was carefully worded not to show any bias: "We will sort this out as soon as possible. This is not just about money but promoting our Nepali film industry." The NPFA says that several hall owners are slowly beginning to show their support for the producers.

Kathmandu has 40 of the nation's 1,100 cinemas.

Fifteen that were dependent exclusively on Nepali films have closed down after the strike began. Bigger venues are feeling

the pinch too but don't seem willing to reach a compromise.

"The owners are not ready to accept that the lack of Nepali films is affecting their business. No matter how bad the films, people still like to watch them," says Naresh Poudel, vice president of NPFA.

Whether the film producers and hall owners reach an agreement or not, the audience has moved on. "Unless we go beyond aping Bollywood, we will never be able to expand the film market. It's time to take the risks of bringing originality to our approach," says new wave film director Nabin Subba.

Meanwhile, serious filmmakers have not really shown any keen interest to actively involve themselves in the tussle between the two parties.

Tulsi Ghimire, another versatile director, says the reason why the industry doesn't receive respect is a combination of low quality films and a less than satisfactory cine-environment.

Unforgettables

Despite Kollywood's prolific output, only a handful of Nepali movies have withstood the test of time. *Satyaharischandra* (1950) earned the distinction of being the first movie in the Nepali language—even though it was shot, produced and released in India. It was directed and scripted by DB Pariyar, a Nepali living in India. It took another 14 years before *Aama* appeared in Kathmandu's halls.

Perhaps the most beloved of all Nepali movies is *'Maiti Ghar'* (1966), the feature largely credited with establishing the national film industry. Today, this movie based on the novel by Lain Singh Bangdel, is regarded as a masterpiece and part of our national film heritage.

Maiti Ghar was privately produced by Yogendra Jha and Nara Shumshere Rana. Directed by BS Thapa, it starred Mala Sinha and CP Lohani.

Prem Pinda (1992) was a bold production, vastly different from mainstream commercial cinema. Scripted on the romantic drama by one of Nepal's greatest dramatists, Bal Krishna Sama, *Prem Pinda* received good reviews from critics here and abroad, but the audience did not warm up to it outside the capital. Director Yadav Kharel's vision should have set a new trend among filmmakers, but it didn't.

More recently, in *Numafung* (2002), innovative filmmaker Nabin Subba wanted to prove artistic films with a purely Nepali element can put the nation on the international movie map. *Numafung* is in the indigenous Limbu language with English subtitles, and it is currently doing the international circuit through Europe, having won an award at the 9th Vesoul Film Festival in France.

Mukundo (2002) is a rare offering that attempts to reinvent the genre. Director Tshering Ritar Sherpa explores the true story of an innocent woman accused of being a witch and subjected to a painful exorcism by her superstitious community. The atypical movie broke every norm of commercial Nepali film with horrifying scenes delineated with sharp realism. *Mukundo* received critical acclaim at film festivals in Japan, Sweden, Switzerland, USA, Canada and India.

Upcoming Kollywood stars Nikhil Upreti and Sajja Mainali.



RAJIB SHRESTHA

Ood

He dares to voice the unthinkable: "Do we really need a Nepali film industry?" He believes that if Nepali films were of high quality, the hall owners would have no choice but to screen them. "A film should be a permanent asset. Most of our filmmakers have little knowledge about how to turn films into part of our national heritage," he says.



The future of Kollywood looks bleak. Not even a supposedly indiscriminating Nepali audience will deign to watch some of today's movies after a few years in the archives. Filmmaker Tshering Ritar Sherpa concludes: "It's high time we created a niche for ourselves. We have to prove ourselves." ♦



Escapist clones

VIJAY LAMA

For a long time we excused the Nepali film industry's deficiencies, saying it was in its infancy. Then it went into pimply adolescence during which it thrived on copying Bollywood. Now, it has attained a certain maturity with creative young directors who have come up to offer original ideas.

One could say that in terms of quantity the industry got a great boost post-1990 with the explosion of film-making. Till then, Nepali movie-goers were treated to feature films produced by the Ministry of Information. With private producers entering the fray, it set out on a new growth trend. From up to 10 films a year before 1990, the numbers shot up to 50 films a year by the mid-1990s. This rapid growth witnessed the entrance of lots of new faces with eager enthusiasm to boost the industry.

New production houses along with new directors, actors, actresses, technicians, storywriters and music directors arrived with fresh ideas and approaches. Finally, one could make a living acting in Nepali films, you didn't have to moonlight as a bureaucrat! As viewership grew, the industry became self-sufficient without having to rely on foreign technical support.

What the films lacked in originality they more than made up for with Nepali oomph. For the audience, which had grown accustomed to the glamour and glitz of Hindi films, it was a treat to watch a film in our own language, with our Himalaya as a backdrop, tackling our own contemporary social issues. So what if they were escapist and clones of Bollywood?

But the novelty started wearing off and the audience got more sophisticated with the variety availability on cable at home. The industry failed to move B-grade Bollywood musicals. Nepali filmdom also showed signs of complacency, with pampered celebrities throwing tantrums and becoming indisciplined. On the technical side, using a 16mm format and blowing it up later to 35mm for public viewing reduced the quality of the projection image. The Nepali film industry has yet to adapt to the times.

These days, every other person from the Nepali cineworld, be they actresses, directors, or technical crew, expresses dissatisfaction with the way things are run. The security situation has meant that attendance at the box office has plummeted, reducing the number of films being made. Producers are losing money, some have gone bankrupt. Then there are constant internal squabbles within the industry. The high-handedness of the exhibitors further eroded the morale. Their exorbitant charges didn't make it worthwhile to invest in films anymore.

But all is not lost, a new generation of talented and creative artists are coming up, and sooner or later the audiences will go back to theatres and the industry will rebound.

Vijay Lama, an airline pilot, is also an actor.

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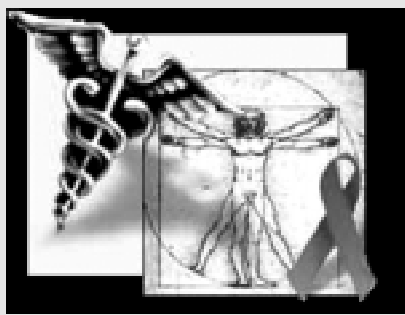
Road to recovery

ROME – The \$2.2 billion UN appeal for humanitarian assistance to Iraq has drawn a positive response, but it is uncertain how far it will take the Iraqis. Within this appeal, the World Food Programme (WFP) of the United Nations (UN) has almost all of the \$1.7 dollars it asked for. But the current WFP undertaking is scheduled to last only until November. The requirement of half a million tonnes of food a month makes this the largest food aid operation in history, involving 320 international and 800 domestic staff. About 25,000 truckloads of food were brought into Iraq last month to feed its 27 million people.

Close to two-thirds of the \$1.7 billion operation is covered through contracts negotiated within the oil-for-food program, and donors have already contributed \$535 million dollars to the WFP. Rebuilding the entire state's structure requires an extra \$4 billion a month, which other countries are not willing to contribute. In the meantime, worsening security is an immediate threat to food supply. The WFP reports an increase in shootings and looting at storage facilities, and attacks on trucks bringing food into southern Iraq. Distribution to food agents in Baghdad was recently suspended for more than a week. (IPS)

AIDS vaccine

NEW YORK – While most scientists are convinced that a vaccine is the best hope to turn the tide of HIV/AIDS, such research is proceeding at a leisurely pace because it gets only a fraction of the already inadequate funding doled out for prevention and



treatment, experts say. Giant drug companies, most notably Merck and Aventis, have recently sped up their quest for an AIDS vaccine, but they need increased government support to maintain the momentum. Although the pandemic is still years from peaking,

there are at least 42 million adults and children living with HIV/AIDS worldwide. Defying the billions of dollars spent on prevention programs, HIV continues to spread, infecting more than 14,000 people each day, 95 percent of them in the developing world. Today, AIDS is the leading cause of death in Africa, and the fourth worldwide. But researchers warn that more money must be found to boost vaccine research, which only gets about two percent of the \$20 billion spent on AIDS annually. If no vaccine or miracle treatment is found by 2020, at least 70 million people are expected to be dead from AIDS. (IPS)

ANALYSIS

Rethinking trade sanctions

The US Congress has voted almost unanimously (418 to 2 in the House of

Representatives and 94 to 1 in the Senate) to tighten trade and financial sanctions against Myanmar, whose despotic regime harasses and repeatedly imprisons the country's rightful leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. She won the presidential election in 1990 but the military prevented her from taking power.

But sanctions are the wrong approach, for international marginalisation hurts ordinary citizens far more than it hurts dictatorial regimes. It's time to curtail the use of economic sanctions and to make them better targeted at despots.

The most famous sanctions in recent history were those imposed on South Africa during the apartheid era. Much of the world community stopped trading with South Africa, and stopped making investments in South African-based enterprises. Those sanctions did, it seems, help speed the demise of that barbaric system. But one great success does not negate the many failures. Moreover, it is quite possible that the world community could have supported the overthrow of apartheid in other ways.

Of course, sanctions can be effective in hurting the economy of the target country. Economic development in today's global economy depends on each country being integrated into the worldwide

network of production, trade and investment. A national economy that is excluded by sanctions is likely to stagnate or even collapse.

Thus, the South African economy experienced an absolute decline in per capita output during the years of widespread sanctions. But sanctions were not the only reason for decline. Political unrest also devastated the economy, as did a fall in world gold prices that coincided with the anti-apartheid movement in the final years. Still, South Africa was hurt badly by sanctions, and the same has been true for many other countries.

Cuba bears a heavy economic burden today not only as a result of its own internal economic mistakes but also because of the barriers to trade and investment imposed by the US since the 1960s. Haiti went into an economic tailspin when America imposed sanctions in the 1990s, ostensibly to re-establish democracy. Even today, the US blocks aid for Haiti because some right-wing US Congressmen are intent on toppling President Aristide, whom they abhor.

Iraq and North Korea have likewise been battered by sanctions. In Iraq during the 1990s, millions of children suffered repeated illnesses and vast numbers died because international sanctions contributed to ruining the country's economy. North Korea's economy utterly collapsed in the 1990s, leading to widespread famine. Once again, this results

International marginalisation hurts ordinary citizens far more than it hurts dictatorial regimes.



A woman looks at coffins symbolising the supposed 300 child deaths per day that occur in Iraq due to US sanctions.

from a combination of North Korea's political despotism, atrocious economic policy and international sanctions.

Myanmar has already paid an extremely high price for its isolation. International organisations have cut

back or eliminated their work in the country, and much bilateral foreign aid has been eliminated, too. One result is that HIV/AIDS has run rampant, and the country has received almost no help in getting the epidemic under control.

Global warning

Bush seeks second opinion again on climate change



STEPHEN LEAHY in BROOKLIN, CANADA

The US announced a new 10-year plan last week to study the "uncertainty" around global climate change, instead of taking action to fix it, scientists and environmentalists say.

"The Bush administration is using the scientific uncertainty around climate change to delay taking concrete actions in reducing its greenhouse gas emissions," Steven Guilbeault, a political advisor for Greenpeace International, told IPS. "It's clear to everyone that this is a delaying action."

Eight years ago, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), involving more than 2,000 scientists from 100 countries, agreed that human-produced emissions of greenhouse gases, primarily from burning oil, coal and natural gas, were changing the planet's climate.

Given the enormous ramifications, most countries, including the United States under Pres. Bill Clinton, signed on to the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, which commits countries in the North to small reductions in their greenhouse gas emissions.

However, not long after taking power,

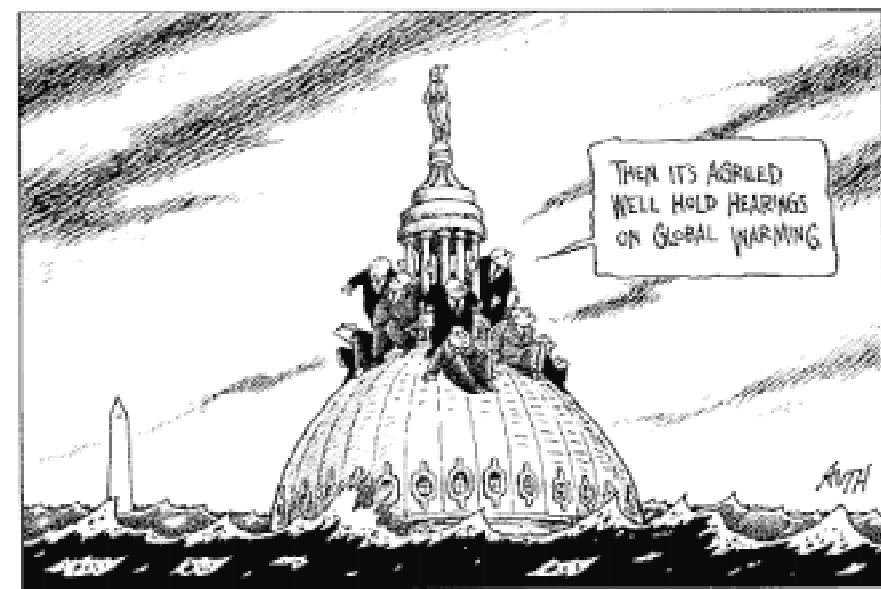
Bush withdrew from Kyoto and backed away from campaign promises to regulate carbon dioxide emissions from coal-fired power plants. Bush argued that reducing emissions of fossil fuels would cost too much, and that the science around the causes and impacts of climate change were too uncertain.

This selective use of the fact that few things in science are ever 100 percent certain irks Michael MacCracken, an atmospheric scientist who headed U.S. efforts to determine the impacts of global warming from 1993 to 2001. "This administration appears to have no uncertainty about the safety of genetically modified foods, another new and complex scientific endeavour," MacCracken said. "We can't wait until we have perfect knowledge on climate change."

An outline of the goals and objectives of the 10-year plan is contained in the 330-page *US Climate Change Science Program Strategic Plan* released last week. It is intended to bring together expertise from 13 federal agencies that are spending \$4.5 billion per year on programmes that touch on climate change.

Under 'CCSP Priorities', the plan lists "three broad sets of scientific uncertainties: atmospheric distributions and effects of aerosols; climate feedbacks and sensitivity, initially focusing on polar feedbacks; and carbon sources and sinks, focusing particularly on North America."

The plan does not mention



mandatory emissions reductions or other active steps. Rather, it promises that US researchers will produce 20 new reports on various aspects of climate change over the next four years. US Secretary of Commerce Don Evans also announced a 103-million-dollar, two-year federal initiative to accelerate the deployment of new global observation technologies.

But many scientists note that a vast amount of research on this topic has already been completed. MacCracken was involved with the IPCC, an intense and laborious process that sorts through the enormous amount of scientific data on climate. More remarkably, the scientists and government representatives from more than 150 countries have managed to reach a consensus.

"Scientists around the world recognise the threat of climate change and the need to act now, not a decade from now as Bush suggests in his new plan," said Guilbeault. MacCracken agrees that the Bush administration is ignoring the international scientific community. "While allowing the need for

additional research the new plan looks like it could be a stall," he said.

Greenpeace and other environmental groups are convinced it is a deliberate attempt to stall action by insisting on more research. US citizens are worried about climate change and this is a way for Bush to defend his administration from accusations they are doing nothing, says Guilbeault.

The state of Maine has formally committed to reduce its emissions by 70 to 80 percent and dozens of regions and cities in the United States are moving in the same direction, Guilbeault observes. The city of San Francisco will soon be the leading producer of solar energy in the world. "Solutions are there, it's just that Bush and his backers at Exxon don't like them: More solar, wind, energy efficiency and conservation," Guilbeault said.

Only two days before the release of Bush's Climate Change Science Program Strategic Plan, NASA released satellite photos on its website that clearly show the rapid retreat of the massive Greenland ice sheet. ♦ (IPS)

by JEFFREY D SACHS



Myanmar's HIV/AIDS crisis is now by far Southeast Asia's worst.

Although sanctions clearly create suffering in many places, how often have they achieved the desired goal? In Myanmar, Iraq, North Korea and Cuba, despotic regimes not only survived the imposition of sanctions, but became more despotic. These regimes were able to blame foreigners for domestic hardships, even when it was their own policy mistakes and human rights abuses that caused the crises.

Indeed, sanctions weaken an economy and public health, but do not necessarily make it more likely that a despotic regime will collapse. Sanctions purportedly undermine the regime by causing widespread unrest and by reducing the government's power base and tax collections. But sanctions also weaken the ability of the private sector to finance an opposition, tend to cut off the domestic opposition from international sources of support, and reduce, rather than increase, international awareness of the abuses taking place.

Some additional effects are even more pernicious. When legal means of business are outlawed, illegal means become more attractive. Many countries under sanction, such as Myanmar, become sources of global illegal trafficking in drugs, arms, money laundering and forced labour. Drug trafficking or other illegal activities can overtake the

whole government, turning it from despotism to international organized crime.

Does this mean that the world should do nothing about despotic regimes? There is no easy answer, but to the extent that it is possible to weaken a government without weakening an economy, such steps should be taken. For example, so-called "smart sanctions" focus more narrowly on the political leadership.

Smart sanctions include denial of international travel privileges to despots and their families, and subjecting those despots to the risk of international prosecution. Leaders can thus be made prisoners in their own countries. Smart sanctions can also specifically target the trade in military goods, cutting off despotic regimes' armed forces. Moreover, foreign aid can be shifted away from government towards non-governmental organisations, strengthening the civil societies in such countries.

It is easy to vote against Myanmar's government, but it is harder to foster political change. Starving Myanmar's economy is unlikely to help, but it is certain to deepen the suffering of its people. Of course, countries that embrace the use of sanctions do not intend this, but that does not lessen their responsibility for the outcome. ♦

(© Project Syndicate)

Jeffrey D Sachs is professor of economics and director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University.

War trauma

More than two decades of war has left Afghanis with grave mental disorders.

P V UNNIKRISHNAN in MAZAR-I-SHARIF

Staring blankly out of a window in the Shafakhan Mulki Hospital here, Munira (not her real name) contemplates an uncertain future in a country torn by a quarter century of superpower meddling and civil strife. This mother of four suffers from depression, insomnia, heart palpitations and apathy—symptoms typical of the trauma that too many of Afghanistan's 27 million people suffer from with little chance of relief.

"Hers is a case of panic attack and depressive disorder," explains Mohammed Nadir Alemyi, head of psychiatry and neurology at this hospital. Shafakhan Mulki Hospital is one of the few that survived the intense aerial bombardments and shelling by military forces of the former Soviet Union in the eighties and, more recently in late 2001, by the United States.

Women are the worst sufferers of Afghanistan's more than two decades of civil war and turmoil. Various studies, including one by the prestigious Journal of American Medical Association (JAMA), have shown that more than 90 percent of women in Kabul, the capital, and in the refugee camps set up in neighbouring Pakistan show signs of depression and anxiety.

But these studies were conducted before the last round of bombings, in retaliation for the 11 September terrorist attacks, carried out by the United States and its allies that were bent on pursuing their 'war against terror' in this forbidding land of rugged mountains and uncompromising religious ideology. Munira's case adds to cold research statistics that show the extent of the problem in Afghanistan, although updated estimates on how many people are suffering from mental trauma are hard to come by.

According to research cited by the World Health Organisation (WHO), overall statistics in normal circumstances suggest that more than 3 percent of the population suffer from a grave mental disorder at any point of time. In conflicts, WHO says, a tenth of the people who undergo traumatic experiences are likely to end up with serious mental health problems—and another tenth likely to develop behaviour "that will hinder their ability to function efficiently".

"In Afghanistan, some five million people are very likely to be affected by psychosocial distress. The most common conditions are depression, anxiety and psychosomatic problems, such as insomnia, or back and stomachaches," a WHO document says. Many aid workers here say that at least half of Afghanistan's 27 million people need urgent medical attention. A report by WHO's Project Atlas said that in 2001, there were only eight psychiatrists in Afghanistan, 18 psychiatric nurses and 20 psychologists.

Particularly vulnerable are women and children, often bereft of support from family and communities destroyed by decades of fighting. Often, too, they do not have male family members who traditionally might have provided some protection against destitution. The situation is worse for those still recovering from injuries from bombs and landmines.

Add to that the sheer poverty that comes from a shattered post-war economy, and it is easy to see why life continues to be a struggle for survival in a land long after the US bombings stopped a year and a half after the Taliban fell. Already, voluntary agencies and international organisations in Afghanistan are dismantling their offices and heading for another shattered society, Iraq,



which was targeted in the second phase of the US 'war against terror'.

Munira's ailments, which make her try to harm herself, stem as much from trauma as from having to face a life of hopeless poverty. "Her anxiety originates from financial insecurity," says Alemyi. Munira's husband works as a casual labourer and hangs about the streets of this city, the second largest in Afghanistan, hoping that someone would give him a day's work. On a rare, lucky day he may earn a princely \$2. Compared to the world outside, the overflowing wards of this hospital seems like a haven even if they are packed with people identified with psychiatric and neurotic disorders, and drug addiction.

Now 62 years into its founding, this hospital has withstood the test of time. There is no medicine, the equipment is ramshackle and the doctors too few, but this hospital is the last refuge of a people brutalised for the interests of others. The Soviets, the 'mujahideen' forces that were created to fight them, and the US-led forces that turned around to destroy the 'mujahideen' have all chosen not to target the hospital along with the 15th century mosque and shrine to Hazrat Ali that gives Mazar-i-Sharif (Tomb of the Exalted) its name.

It would seem that even peace is adding to the Afghans' miseries. Between March and September 2002, some 1.7 million refugees streamed back into Afghanistan from neighbouring Pakistan and Iran as part of what critics have said is an unrealistic repatriation program. At the hospital, there is an unending stream of patients arriving on foot, donkeys, horses and by bus and car from distant places, so that the doctors are never able to cope with the added pressure on the already poor health infrastructure.

"We need refresher courses on new developments in medical care and mental health," says Alemyi, who is always hurrying to his next patient or to his duties as a member of the Loya Jirga, a traditional governing body. Plans are now afoot to hand over the health care system to the private sector, but experts say this may not work especially in the rural areas where few can afford to pay even for basic services.

Afghanistan has some of the worst health indicators today. One in four children do not survive beyond their fifth birthdays, and maternal mortality is at a high 1,600 deaths per 100,000 live births. "In the absence of successful experiments, even in non-conflict situations, the sensitivity of the private sector to real needs is a matter of concern," says S Parasuraman, Asia policy coordinator of ActionAid, the INGO that has taken on work in Afghanistan.

Even international agencies do not always recognise the psychosocial needs of the Afghans, people like Alemyi say. "Mental health is on nobody's agenda," remarks Alemyi. ♦ (IPS)

OPINION

by CHRISTINE AHN



The real solution

If President Bush truly cared about ending the starvation of millions of North Koreans, he would sign a peace treaty with their government and end the Korean War that has isolated the country for 50 years.

"I have no respect for a man who starves his own people," Bush declared, justifying US military aggression towards North Korea and painting an image of Kim Jong Il as an evil dictator forsaking malnourished children to stockpile nuclear weapons. But is Kim Jong Il really starving his people or is it the fact that the US is still technically at war with North Korea that explains the persistence of famine? 27 July marks the 50th anniversary of the temporary armistice between the US and North Korea. This occasion provides an opportunity for the two nations to sign a treaty ending the war and sanctions, the real cause of hunger in North Korea.

Contrary to Bush's assertion, most experts agree that the North Korean famine in the 1990s was produced by a one-two punch of geopolitical and ecological events. The first major blow to North Korean food production was the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the socialist trading bloc, which eliminated North Korea's major trading partners. The end of subsidised oil from the former Soviet Union and China literally

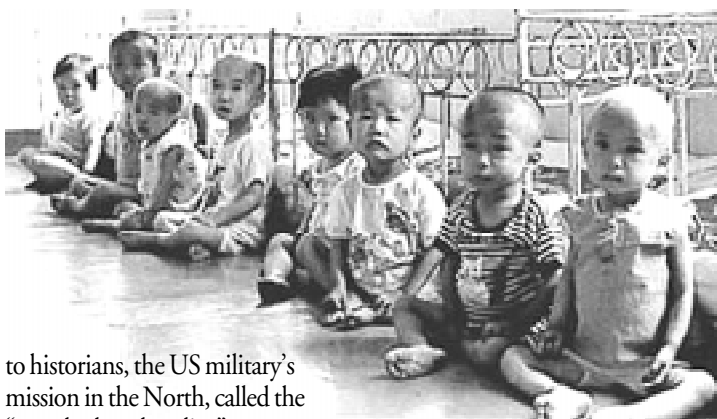
halted the tractors of North Korean farmers.

The second blow—major droughts and floods that were the worst of the century—destroyed much of the harvest and forced Pyongyang to seek Western and Japanese aid. The persistence of famine, however, is caused by economic sanctions led by the US and its refusal to end the 50-year Korean War. What is scarcely known about North Korea is that until the 1980s, North Korea's agricultural and economic growth far outpaced that of South Korea.

The World Health Organisation and other United Nations agencies have praised their delivery of basic health services, noting that North Korean children were far better vaccinated than American children, and that life expectancy rates in North Korea surpass those of South Korea. Furthermore, only about 20 percent of North Korea's mostly mountainous land is suitable for agriculture. Before the Korean peninsula was divided, the north served as Korea's industrial base and the south as its breadbasket. Despite these odds, by 1961 North Korea achieved agricultural self-sufficiency, an amazing feat for a nation that scarcely a decade before was bombed into rubble.

The Korean War claimed four million lives and left North Korean agriculture decimated. According

...to famine in North Korea



to historians, the US military's mission in the North, called the "scorched earth policy", demonstrated an unprecedented brutality, greater even than shown in the Vietnam War. The US Air Force used napalm to destroy irrigation dams and facilities that provided 75 percent of North Korea's food production. This same act of aggression was considered a war crime when Nazis destroyed much smaller facilities in Holland.

After North Korea signed the armistice, the North Korean people set out to rebuild their devastated nation according to the *juche* philosophy that promoted self-reliance and national independence. This inspired two New York Times writers in 1972 to note with astonishment that this country, the size of Mississippi, had developed a "well organised and highly industrialised socialist economy, largely self-

sufficient, with a disciplined and productive work force".

Despite their efforts to remain food sovereign, and because of events beyond their control, North Korea could not withstand the stranglehold of the United States. For five decades, the US has pursued military and economic policies that have held 22 million North Koreans hostage and threatened them with nuclear annihilation. These same mad politics are driving the insane military budgets of both nations, diverting vital government resources that would improve the welfare of its people. ♦ (IPS)

Christine Ahn coordinates the Economic and Social Human Rights Program at Food First and is a member of the Korea Solidarity Committee in San Francisco.

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Restoring balance

Raghu Pant of the CPN-UML in *Nepal Samacharpatra*, 24 July



Baburam Bhattarai's letter to the government dated 23 July did not bring very positive tidings. This is a disappointment to the Nepali people who have so much pinned on the peace talks. Bhattarai seems more intent on accusing the political parties instead of finding a solution to the crisis.

The Maoists have disrupted the environment for negotiations by breaking the code of conduct. Even after the ceasefire, they did not stop extortions, beatings, killing party workers and terrorising ordinary people. They reduced the code to a mere scrap of paper, thereby opening the door for violations by the government and its agencies. The Maoists also ignored requests from the UML and the Nepali Congress to stop harassing their workers. Their true intentions are now suspect.

It's unfortunate Baburam did not express a commitment to peace in his letter. But then neither side has shown sincerity towards ending the conflict. Instead, they have used the ceasefire period to strengthen their armies. The public's main concern now is the looming threat of war. The Maoists say the third round of talks is inappropriate because the government did not fulfill agreements reached during the first and second rounds. They reason the government failed to honour its part of the deal.

Both the Chand and Thapa governments are unconstitutional bodies. They don't have the approval, support and trust of the people. The Maoists should realise that ongoing negotiations with an undemocratic government will not be fruitful. The Chand administration's negotiating team had incapable and incompetent people with no background in politics. The present government does not have the status to make decisions. Even so, the Maoists can't plan now to return to the jungle.

It is meaningless for the Maoists to liken themselves to Vietnam's freedom fighters. No more killing fields, we need peace and security. The great war fought by the Vietnamese for independence from imperialism cannot be compared to the campaign that the Maoists are waging in their 'people's war'. We can no longer bear the deaths of more Nepalis. The victims are children of the poor, not the exploitative rich and the aristocrats. If the Maoists truly want to respect the wishes of the people, they would not speak of war but advocate peace.

The Maoists should have the courage to ask themselves whether the people's war has empowered the public or weakened them. The only ones who benefited are the king and the monarchists. Their war has stripped us of our sovereign rights and has led to increased militarisation. This is a difficult time even for the king. If the Maoists go underground, he will be held responsible. This is only natural considering he installed the last two governments—he is ultimately accountable for both their mistakes.

We must now form an all-party government and reinstate parliament. By doing so the king can distance himself from political disputes, and political conflicts will be resolved by elected representatives. How can there be a middle ground between a monarch who hungers for absolute power and Maoists who demand a republican state? The lack of any concrete progress in peace talks stems from this irreconcilable difference. Only the democratic parties can restore political balance. The sooner the king and the Maoists comprehend this reality, the better for the nation.



MIN BAURACHARYA

The King and I

Yubraj Ghimire in *Kantipur*, 27 July

क्रान्तिपुर

Having remained indifferent to politics for a while now, Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, the founding member of the Nepali Congress, recently broke his vow of silence.

Bhattarai came out of his cocoon unexpectedly last week and met King Gyanendra. Bhattarai said he expressed his dissatisfaction about the October Fourth move to the monarch, and the king reassured him of his commitment to restore democracy. Bhattarai quoted the king as saying, "I don't want to be blacklisted in history as the king who usurped people's rights." Bhattarai, however, chose not to comment on the ongoing agitation spearheaded by the five parties of the dissolved parliament. He did urge the Maoist rebels to stop the violence, adding that he believed they would abandon that road. The elderly politician, still has a sharp sense of humour, and has not given up his trips to New Road to indulge in a well-made paan and buying Indian newspapers. Amita Kapali, his personal aide, jokingly complains that her charge is more regular with those trips than the physiotherapy.

The septuagenarian centrist leader said his knowledge of current affairs is up-to-date thanks to all the national dailies and the *Times of India*. Bhattarai is currently putting finishing touches to his autobiography,



culled from material taken from his diaries. He is a prolific writer and says the old journals came in handy for cross-referencing dates. Those that were confiscated by Indian and Nepali authorities in the 1950s haven't been given back to him. "I have requested the return of my diaries several times, but they have not done so," he said.

Murky plot

Mohan Bikram Singh, general secretary of the Nepal Communist Party (United Centre Masaal) in *Rajdhani*, 29 July

राजधानी

The CPN (Maoist) is being remade in the image of the CPN (UML). That is why the Maoist rebels are talking about a 'people's democracy for the 21st century'—exactly the same way the UML advocated a multiparty people's democracy in the past. The Maoists used to talk about a new democratic model that would unite the Nepali Congress, the UML and the king. When the UML did the same thing and joined hands with the king and India, we said the party had betrayed the country. Now the Maoists have taken up a similar role. They have expressed their soft corner for the monarch and are getting closer to India by criticising US imperialism. They are smart enough to know which side their bread is buttered. The Maoists have not even raised a voice against matters like the WTO, privatisation and liberalism. They know that protesting all these would pit them against the king. They have also dumped their earlier manifesto and are now pulling all kinds of strings to reach an agreement with the king. This is sheer opportunism.

One thing that we have said time and again is that the pro-monarchists have always wanted to keep the Maoists' war going. This is not to say that the two sides are hand-in-glove. It benefits the royal palace to

sustain the Maoist insurgency because it renders null-and-void the achievements of the 1990s movement, including the new constitution and parliamentary democracy. The Maoists, for their part, never targeted pro-monarchy individuals and organisations while targetting political activists and the general public.

On the other hand, India has also used the Maoists to weaken the Nepali state, including the army and police. They probably think this will force us to seek their help, eventually turning our independent status into something more like Sikkim or Bhutan.

On track

Narayan Singh Pun in interview with *BBC Nepali Service*, 29 July

BBC

"Having seen the government's flexibility in the peace process, the Maoist rebels must understand it is committed to peace. If there are disagreements, they should sit across a table instead of limiting their communication to letters. A few informal meetings before the third round of negotiations should iron out complications. One side alone cannot be held with the responsibility of building a conducive environment for talks. The government's moves are quite positive and I believe the Maoist rebels will reciprocate in the same way.

I don't believe that the Maoists will walk away. The rebels were serious about the peace talks earlier and I have no doubt that they still believe it is the only way out. In the last few months there was a change in government, and subsequently, in the negotiation team. The ensuing confusion probably prompted the Maoists to go underground. Since the government has made good arrangements for their security, the rebels should cast suspicion aside and resume talks."

ADVERTISEMENT

The Real Story

It has come to our notice that a company named ORG MARG/Nepal has been involved in a scheme to bring disrepute to the commercial credibility of the popular weekly program

Disha Nirdesh aired on Nepal Television.

The company has resorted to unethically underestimating the viewership of this highly-regarded and popular interview programme.

The result of this biased and erroneous poll is totally contradicted by results of other viewership surveys about the

highly-rated Disha Nirdesh programme.

We sincerely believe that our viewers will themselves reject this absurd survey which has also cast doubts on the credibility of the company that conducted it.

We have always respected the right of the viewers to like or dislike our programs, but we alert viewers not to be swayed by dubious polls carried out by companies with questionable intentions which challenge the

tremendous support and interest the

Nepali public harbours towards Disha Nirdesh.

Dishanirdesh

Vijay Kumar Pandey

Executive Producer, Disha Nirdesh

comments@mosconrup



Briefcase: Budget

Himal Khabarpatrika, 1-17 August

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

The government has been totally unsuccessful [regarding the peace talks] and the king has to take responsibility for this failure.

- Bamdev Gautam, CPN-UML leader in *Nepal Samacharpatra*, 31 July.

NEPALITERATURE



MIN BAIRACHARYA

I went to listen, recently, to one of the hot rock bands of Kathmandu. I had heard very high praises of it over the years, and was curious to hear whether it lived up to its considerable reputation.

Its music was, indeed, great—the drums, the bass guitar and the lead guitar were all jiving with occasional riffs of the flute, and I was thoroughly impressed: here, I thought, was sizzling talent. Here was a band to match Kathmandu’s verve and dash.

Until the band’s members began to sing. Suddenly, the lyrics spoiled the performance—not because they were bad, but because they came from a very different sensibility, the sensibility of sentimental songs such as those sung by Narayan Gopal, Amber Gurung, Fatteman. The down-in-the-dumps laments and woe-is-me wails that belong to the gazal-derived tradition of

Basanta Thapa Of songs and philosophy

modern Nepali songs sounded plain flat accompanied by the raucous music of the rock band.

If this example and the songs that are daily belted out by the FM radios are anything to go by, songwriting is an art that is little evidenced in Nepal’s rock and pop music scene. To write a song, one must have a basic sense of music and meter; but a songwriter must also have a poetic bent to her/his words. There must be a union of lyric and music. Writing lyrics to set to rock music would require one to abandon the high sanskritic tones of written Nepali, and to begin to express the less pathos-drenched emotions of anger, lust, waywardness, rebellion. Young spirit is, after all, what rock and pop are about.

The songs below are written in the sentimental tradition, the tradition that express the typically South Asian mix of emotions of longing, frustration, despair, sorrow... Their author, Basanta Thapa, is a writer and well-known columnist, and is thus an emblematic figure of the sentimental tradition, in which the songwriter is a philosophier-poet, a man or woman of letters, a world-weary thinker, an intellectual.

SOME TAKE IT TO BE A TEAR

Some take it to be a tear and so they cry it
Some take it to be flesh and so they grab it

Life has so many meanings—
We must live it, so we give it our own variations
It is an ailment, it never stops hurting
It is a wound, it never ceases inflaming
Life is water, water—
It flows always, without stopping
Some take it to be a game and so they play it
Some take it to be a drug and get high on it

In places it swims in abandon and joy
In places it drowns in sorrow and grief
It walks on till it reaches
That place where all of us take rest
Some take it to be a lament and so they sigh it
Some take it to be a laugh and so they expell it

YOU ARE HERE

You are right here
In my presence
No matter where you go
You stay with me night and day

In my heart is grief
And in my eyes
Are the rains that just won’t pause
And memories of you
Who at all times are in my presence
Like blood
Inmost in my heart

THE STREAM

Where is this stream going
Getting buried beneath landslides
Getting blocked by all these hills
Dashing against boulders
Hiding, losing itself, trilling
It rushes on and on—
Why does it hurry so?

Flowing to mix elsewhere
To vanish into a river
To lose itself there
And yet to flow on without cease
The essence of springhead to confluence
That is all you can say of a stream
That which we call life is also like that
Stream, stream, and stream
The essence of birth until death

These are, as one can see, songs for the timeless old soul, songs to listen to while looking at the setting sun, or at the stars, or while taking a romantic walk with one’s lover—who one does not dare to touch in public, for one is of that generation that does not touch in public. These lyrics are not suited to the kind of music that more intrepid lovers would publicly groove by...

Till they figure out how to find lyrics energetic enough to match their music, rock bands may be best advised to stick to music, and leave the singing to the sentimental singers.

FROM THE FOREIGN PRESS

Washington *ko simsime panima* Prem Raja Mahat traded stardom for opportunity.



KIMBERLY AC WILSON

WASHINGTON – Prem Raja Mahat bustles through the lunch rush, topping off the ice water and making cheerful small talk. He recommends a refreshing glass of iced mango yoghurt. He buses the dirty buffet plates—in every way the consummate Charles Street restaurant manager.

It’s a performance that provides a comfortable life for Mahat, his wife and four children. But it is his other gig—headlining concerts and singing—that makes him a favourite son in his native Nepal. Mahat, the man who just delivered the check to a table near the kitchen, is one of Nepal’s best-loved folk singers.

His paintbrush moustache and the inky feathered hair on his brow grace the covers of nearly 40 albums. Among the community of some 50,000 Nepali nationals in the United States, the sound of Mahat playing a bow across the strings of a traditional *sarangi* is the sound of home.

“I am a fan,” says Krishna Aryal, first secretary and cultural attache at the Royal Nepali Embassy in Washington. “I can sing his songs; everyone knows his songs. He is very important.”

In Baltimore, greeting

lunchtime arrivals at Mughal Garden restaurant, Mahat has achieved a level of anonymity American stars might envy. “It is funny,” says Manoj Acharya, a folk music radio presenter at Kathmandu’s Hits FM 91.2. “He is a very popular musician in Nepal. His mega hit ‘*Simsime Panima*’ with Rekha Shahi was the number one hit in the Nepali music industry for a month or two.”

Why would a showstopper ever trade in his fame for the uniformed life of a restaurant worker? It’s partially a matter of economics and lifestyle. As a star in Kathmandu, Mahat made roughly Rs 60,000—about \$1,000—a month. As a manager of an Indian restaurant in Baltimore, he is making three times as much.

Seventy-six hundred miles from his homeland, Mahat, 42, leans over the arm of a chair in his snug semi-detached brick house in Towson. The walls are covered by newspaper clippings and photographs of a grinning Mahat with famous Indian actresses and shaking hands with the crown prince of Nepal. Outside, two tiny flags wave in the shade of a tall evergreen: one American, the other from Nepal. A maroon SUV with a Hindu sticker on the rear hatch is parked in the drive.

“I made a good amount of money in Nepal,” Mahat says in a rich-timbred voice. “I had a good income. Every day there was a concert.” In Nepal, his performer’s income earned him

enough for two houses, frequent travel, a car, a motorcycle and other middle class comforts. But seven years ago Mahat left his poor country.

Among its 25 million people, Mahat’s was a familiar voice by the time his plane landed in Houston in 1996. When his concert schedule ended, the US Bureau of Immigration and Naturalisation Services awarded him an O-1 category visa as an artist with “extraordinary ability”.

For five years, he lived alone in the US while his wife and four children remained behind in Kathmandu. “That was difficult,” Mahat says. So was learning to make a living at something other than concert performances and album releases. The restaurant offered a more generous salary, but the long hours—and a much smaller audience for Nepali folk music, leave time only for a dozen intimate concerts and two larger shows each year.

“Now I am very used to not working at music. But [managing the restaurant] isn’t my occupation. This,” he says, cradling the neck of his carved *sarangi*, “this is my occupation. This is my talent.”

In the years since Mahat came to America, a flock of Nepali performers have followed in his footsteps including Saroj Khanal, Yaman Shrestha, Sunil Upreti, Raja Ram Poudel and Saranga Shrestha. The creative drain remains a subject of critical debate in Nepal and among their countrymen here.

Just last month, a column that ran on nepalnews.com lamented the

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ABOUT TOWN

FESTIVALS AND EXHIBITIONS

- ❖ **Traditional and modern Nepali paintings** 4-8PM at The October Gallery, Hotel Vajra. 4271545
- ❖ **Life in Kashmir** Photographs by Usha Titikshu till 5 August at Nepal Art Council, Babarmahal, Madan Bhandar Path, Kathmandu

EVENTS

- ❖ **The Good, the Bad and the Google** by Entre Nous from Mumbai on 9 August at Soaltee Crowne Plaza, Kathmandu.
- ❖ **Lecture Series III** Ramesh Dhungel on *Opening the Chest of Nepal's History: The Survey of Brian Houghton Hodgson's Manuscripts from the British Library and Royal Asiatic Society*. Social Science Baha and Institute for Social and Environmental Transformation (ISET). 5.30 PM on 1 August at Baggikhana, Yala Maya Kendra, Patan Dhoka. Open to all. 5542544/ 5543017
- ❖ **Reiki Level One Workshop** led by Elif Koksai on 1-3 August at the Himalayan Buddhist Meditation Centre, Thamel. Email: reiki@eld.org.uk 4256618
- ❖ **South Indian Percussion** by Pandit "Vikku" Vinayakram on the Ghatam (Earthen pot) to celebrate Indian Independence Day. 5.30 PM on 15 August, BICC. For passes email: eipi@mos.com.np. Collect from Indian Embassy Gate 11 August onwards. Lecture-demonstration from 10-12 noon 16 August, Hotel Yak & Yeti. Open to all.
- ❖ **Pipalboat Playback Theatre** share your stories on 17,18 August. Inside Saipal Academy, New Baneshwor. 4437746
- ❖ **Martin Chautari Discussions** *Future of SAARC* by Mubashir Hasan, 5-6.30 PM on 1 August at Hotel Himalaya, Kupondole.

MUSIC

- ❖ **1974 AD live** at Rox Bar on 1 August from 8PM onwards. Happy hours: 6-9PM. Hyatt Regency, Kathmandu.
- ❖ **African Best Beats** with DJ Aye (Ghana). Free entry. 10PM onwards, 2 August at Via Via Café, Paknajol. 4435184
- ❖ **Cadenza live** 7.30PM every Wednesday and Saturday. Entry Rs 200. Interested musicians welcome to jam. Upstairs Jazz Bar, Lazimpat.
- ❖ **Full Circle** acoustic jam every Friday at New Orleans Café, Thamel. 4427311
- ❖ **jHOLA live** on 1 August. Entry Rs 300 (one welcome drink) at The Jazz Bar, Shangri-la Hotel, Lazimpat. 4412999

DRINKS

- ❖ **Uncorked wine festival** Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay and much more from Chile this week. Sunrise Café and Chimney at Hotel Yak & Yeti, Darbar Marg. 4248999
- ❖ **Fusion** features the Rusty Nails with their Jazz, Blues and more every Friday from 7:30 PM onwards. Happy Hour from 6-7PM. Dwarika's Hotel. 4479488
- ❖ **Liquor Buffet** 7-9PM at the Splash Bar & Grill. Rs 550 per person. Radisson Hotel, Kathmandu. 4411818
- ❖ **K-too! Special** Tropical Khukri drinks Rs 125 or Rs 750 for every 1.5 litre. Free Irish Coffee with every main course. K-too! Beer & Steakhouse, Thamel. 4433043.
- ❖ **Kilroy's Monsoon Wine Festival** 14 different wines at Kilroy's of Kathmandu, Thamel. 4250440

FOOD

- ❖ **Café Mitra reopens 1 August** New menu, spicy Chinese food every Saturday. Thamel. 4259015
- ❖ **Chimney Refreshed** Fine continental cuisine at The Chimney Restaurant, Hotel Yak & Yeti. 4248999
- ❖ **Executive lunch meals** at Bhanchha Ghar Restaurant and Bar, Kamaladi. 4225172
- ❖ **Espresso Bar** newly renovated at La Dolce Vita, Thamel.4419612
- ❖ **Friday BBQ** at the Summit Hotel with 6.30 PM onwards. Rs 500+tax. 5521810.
- ❖ **Breakaway Buffet Lunch** Rs 325-375 (weekdays), Rs 650 (weekends) at the Radisson Hotel, Kathmandu. 4411818
- ❖ **Traditional Nepali Thali lunch** at Patan Museum Café inside Patan Museum. 11AM-2.30 PM. Cocktails and snacks 2-7.30 PM. 5526271
- ❖ **Roadhouse Café** now in Patan, opposite St Mary's School. Wood fired pizzas, Baskin Robbins icecream, cocktails and coffee. 5521755
- ❖ **Saturday BBQ Lunch** at Club Himalaya Nagarkot. Rs 500 per person. 4680083
- ❖ **All new buffet** for lunch and dinner at The Cafe, Hyatt Regency. 4491234



GETAWAYS

- ❖ **Great Godavari Getaway** special weekend packages. Godavari Village Resort. 5560675
- ❖ **TGIF package** for local residents Friday BBQ featuring The Rusty Nails, luxurious deluxe room and a sumptuous breakfast for \$90 plus tax for double, \$75 plus tax for single occupancy. Dwarika's Hotel. 4479488
- ❖ **Shivapuri Cottage** a natural environment, luxurious rooms at Shivapuri Dadagaon. Email: cbbasnyat@hotmail.com 4354331
- ❖ **Escape to Jomsom** this summer. Rs 3,999 per person at Jomsom Mountain Resort, inclusive of airfare from Pokhara-Jomsom-Pokhara. Nepalis only. Special rates for expats too! 4496110

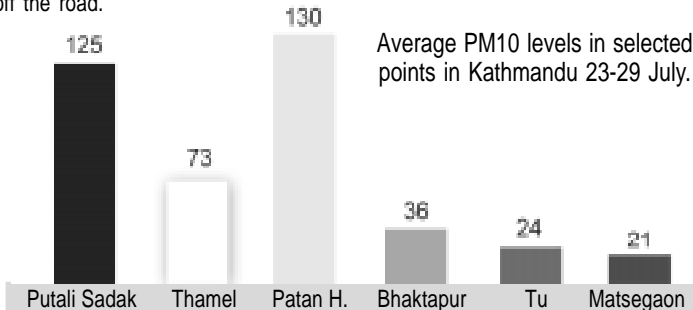
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Fine dust PM10 pollution in the valley is up from last week, possibly due to rains being confined to the night-time. Pollutants generated during the day from vehicular exhausts and other sources therefore were suspended in the air, especially along busy thoroughfares like Patan Hospital and Putali Sadak. The average weekly concentration of PM10 (particules that are less than 10 micron in size and small enough to go into your lungs) in these two places was above the national minimum standard of 120 micrograms per cubic meter. All the six air quality monitoring stations recorded their lowest PM10 levels on Saturday when most vehicles stay off the road.



Average PM10 levels in selected points in Kathmandu 23-29 July.

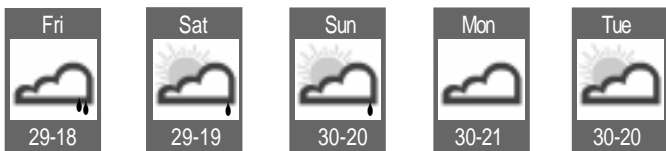
NEPALI WEATHER

VIS-31-07-2003 02:00 GMT



Nepal's eastern half is completely under cloud cover, as this satellite picture taken on Wednesday morning shows. The mass is static because of a strategic equilibrium between two pressure patterns. However, as ominous as it looks, the cloud is still developing, so when it does begin to rain, it will be of moderate intensity with several intermittent showers over into the weekend. The Valley will have overcast skies into the early parts of next week, bringing welcome relief from the muggy heat with maximum temperatures dropping by an average two degrees.

KATHMANDU VALLEY



by NGAMINDRA DAHAL

BOOKWORM

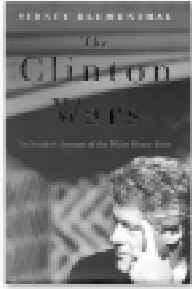


Border Management of Nepal Buddhi Narayan Shrestha
Bhumichitra, 2003
Rs 500

Nepal shares its border with two Asian giants, and compared to its boundaries to the north, the south remains porous and unregulated. Over the years this has been both beneficial and a hindrance. This book is a sequel to *Boundary of Nepal* that won the prestigious Madan Puraskar in 2000. The author carefully analyses the emerging issues surrounding border management, together with its history, present status and attending problems.

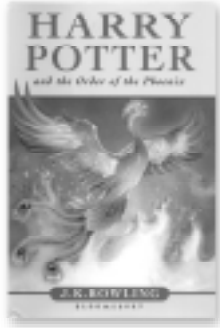
The Clinton Wars Sidney Blumenthal
Penguin Viking,
Rs 2,060

This is an invaluable first-hand history of an extraordinary presidency and the political odyssey of a generation. In 1997, when Blumenthal joined the White House as Assistant, he was catapulted into the front lines of the Clinton wars. This history documents the unprecedented assault on the highly successful two-term presidency by the right wing. Critics are calling this "a lasting and thought-provoking contribution to 20th century history".



Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix JK Rowling
Bloomsbury, 2003
Rs 1,275

The fifth installment in the Harry Potter series will not disappoint fans, both children and adults. Rowling's character is now in his fifth year at Hogwarts Schools of Witchcraft and Wizardry and is in for a rollercoaster ride of suspense, secrets and magic.



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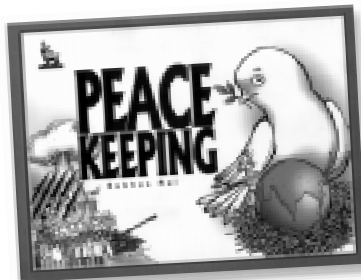
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Peace Keepers

Subhas Rai
Himalmedia, 2003
Rs 200

The cartoons in Rai's first book cements what we already know: this is an insightful, talented artist who has a keen eye and a light touch. One of Nepal's foremost political cartoonists, his work has appeared regularly in *Nepali Times* and *Himal Khabarpatrika*. His work in *Peace Keeping* embraces a wider global perspective with a finesse we have come to expect.

Guess who's back? Arnold Schwarzenegger has returned in the third installment of the Terminator series. The last time around he said, "*Hasta la vista, baby...*" and he meant it. *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* more or less follows the same formula as the first two flicks: John Connor (Nick Stahl) is being hunted by a new terminator, the T-X, and once again our man Arnie, the faithful but obsolete T-101, has to save him. The twist in the tale is that T-X comes in a beautiful but lethal female package played by Kristanna Loken, who is also preying upon a veterinarian Kate Brewster (Claire Danes). Why? You'll have to watch the film to find out! T3 should have Arnie working some more of his action-packed magic, with a little (or lot) of help from the special effects department. Look out for some more memorable phrases delivered in his signature accent.

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Heroes' homecoming

The victorious Nepali under-19 cricket team is propelling the nation onto the international stage.



Clockwise L-R: Man of the match Sarad Vesawkar and skipper Shakti Gauchan, Nepali players grabbing stumps after winning the finals, opening batsman Yaswant Subedi, fast bowler Manjeet Shrestha.

In the Dream Team

Five Nepali cricketers have found place in the ACC dream team: skipper Shakti Gauchan, Kaniska Chaugain, Sarad Vesawkar, Manoj Katuwal and Manjeet Shrestha. All of them played a crucial role in Nepal's victory. The only player missing is Yaswant Subedi. The tournament organising committee judged opener Kaniska Chaugain and Manoj Katuwal best batsman and best wicketkeeper respectively.



MUKUL HUMAGAIN

The national under-19 Nepali cricket team is having a dream run. In 2001 it won the 3rd Youth Asia Cup, followed by a stellar showing at the U-19 World Cup and now the boys have emerged victorious with the 4th Youth Asia Cup.

The onus was on them to defend their title this year in Karachi, and this they did in style. Their win has gone a long way in proving that these boys are no flukes.

They have either won or made their presence felt in every major tourney they played in the last two years. We are on the fast track to becoming a cricketing nation.

Talking to the press at Tribhuban International Airport on his triumphant return on Wednesday, skipper Shakti Gauchan said, "I hope this victory will add a new chapter to Nepal's cricket history and will prove instrumental for the development of the game." We second that.

This success is special for Nepali cricket. Not only were they defending a title, but it was also played 'Away'. The maturity and responsibility our players displayed in the rained out final against Malaysia was commendable. In earlier matches, we often displayed a tendency to falter at crucial matches. This time the team played with precision and passion. Our U-19 team was by far the best team in the tourney, and it's not just saying that. Nepal dominated: none of its opponents scored over a century except in the finals. Even Singapore and the UAE—the two countries thought most likely to defeat us—were dismissed with less than 100 runs.

This second victory was hard won. Batting first on the damp pitch wasn't easy. The responsibility fell on the frontline batsmen to introduce a quick start and accelerate the run rate. After the openers began, Sharad Vesawkar, who had earlier failed to bat in keeping with his reputation, played a gem of an inning cracking off 55 runs in 51 deliveries. He was ably supported by Yaswant Subedi and skipper Shakti Gauchan.

A superb 155 runs in 25 overs was a defendable target, and the Nepali bowlers lead by Manjeet Shrestha ensured Malaysia didn't reach it. Taking three Malaysian wickets, Shrestha showed why he is the strike bowler. His accuracy and out-swing was too hot to handle for the

Malaysians as their three top-orders batsmen returned to the pavilion with only 12 runs on the board. Malaysia did try to make a comeback in the match with a 66 run stand for the fifth wicket but lost the initiative after Ariffin Bin Ramly and Sathiswaran were out.

In the past Nepali bowlers won the matches. This time, it was the batsmen. Impressive batting performances came from Kaniska Chaugain, Yaswant Subedi and Sarad Vesawkar. Chaugain scored a century against the Maldives while Subedi was consistent throughout the tourney. Vesawkar, promoted in U-19 after his wonderful batting at the U-15 Asia Cup, rose to the occasion in the match against Malaysia.

The other positive thing to come out from this Asia Cup was the emergence of Manjeet Shrestha as strike bowler. His bowling in the final made all the difference. With deadly accuracy, Shrestha put Malaysia on the defence with his three quick wickets.

This win should go a long way in raising the profile of cricket in a

country where football is the most popular sport. Media coverage and public accolades are making heroes of these young players. The Nepal Sports Council (NSC) has announced Rs 10,000 will be given to each member, and the Cricket Association of Nepal (CAN) has already awarded individual awards of Rs 15,000. Other jubilant donors have jumped in.

But cash prizes are not enough. CAN must capitalise on the momentum of what the U-19 team has achieved. There has long been talk of Nepal qualifying for the next Cricket World Cup in 2007 but will the association be able to ensure and maintain steady growth? Is the present infrastructure enough to train our cricketers to compete with world class players from India, Australia and other cricketing nations?

We also have to graduate from one-day cricket to longer versions of the game, and players must have access to more than the sole cricket stadium in the nation. Can CAN find the sponsors? ♦

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Under My Hat

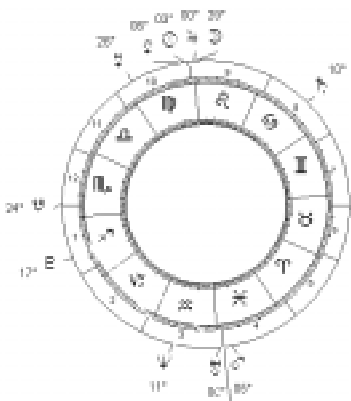
by Kunda Dixit

Que sera sera

If the number of futuristic Indian astrologers descending upon us these days is any indication, then this country is heading into a glorious sunset. Anthropologists have long been convinced that only when a people develop an extraordinary interest in their own future do they strive for betterment. One thing we now know for sure is that Nepal has a future, we just don't know what kind of future it is. And that is why the invasion of Indian soothsayers, each more famous than the other according to ads in the national press, is a welcome development. We need these foreign zodiacal consultants to help fill the yawning gap in our national early warning system so we can better prepare ourselves to deal with untoward incidents in the coming months.

Our own expertise in the arena of futurology is comparatively insignificant. Peptic ulcers being Nepal's national disease, we are more preoccupied with the here and now. No doubt, when it comes to our tummies we are the world's foremost authorities on gastronomy, gastrophysics and gastrology. But it is in astrology that we lag behind the rest of the world. For comparison, just look at the rapid strides our next-door neighbour, India, has taken in the high-tech field of fortune-telling.

Forewarned is forearmed. And our motto, too, should be: "When you have a horoscope, you don't need a telescope." The sooner we realise that our nation's destiny is governed by the position of the



constellations vis-à-vis the asteroid belt and develop our own indigenous expertise, the better it will be for all concerned. But till that time, alas, we will have to rely on foreigners to drive our destiny.

Some of the Indian astrologers currently in the capital can allegedly make extraordinarily accurate predictions by reading the photos or faces of clients, even without consulting their horoscopes. Wow. If you are worried about remarriage, divorce, the ceasefire, your cinematic career or even your peptic ulcers, you can have your future, however dire, foretold.

Nations, too, have horoscopes. And in these uncertain times it is good to know what is pre-ordained, so that we can all sit back and relax, safe in the knowledge that what will be, will be. We have here in our possession a leaked classified copy of Nepal's horoscope, and in the national interest we reprint it below in the strictest confidence provided you promise not to tell anyone:

"With Mars in midheaven in Nepal and closest to Earth than it has ever been since the days of the Neanderthal Man, we are looking at a lot more monkeying around in the Himalaya. The current Libra-Aries opposition is identical to their placement during the Peloponnesian War in 476 BC when the plague struck Athens and Rome sacked Carthage. But, not to worry, all is hunky-dory because of a Neptune-Uranus conjunction in the 7th. There is nothing that can go wrong, because nothing is going on." ♦

NEPALI SOCIETY

Bimala's beat

Superintendent Bimala Thapa Sharma means business. "Rules are not made to be broken," says the cop responsible for many high profile operations in the country's toughest and arguably most corrupt beat—Tribhuban International Airport. Within two months this year, she made two record seizures of Rs 41 million and Rs 34 million of currency being smuggled out of Nepal. This was followed by a spate of drug hauls from foreigners, again in unprecedented quantities.

With her short-cropped hair and uniform Bimala exudes an air of no-nonsense professionalism. She may

measure barely over 5ft in her black boots, but her male subordinates have found to their discomfort, that they disobey her orders at their own peril. Policemen unable to control crowds milling about the arrival area are mercilessly berated in public by Bimala.

She is conscious of the airport's reputation for corruption and is determined to make her mark in cleaning it up. "If you have devotion and sincerity, the mess can be sorted out," she told us. "I believe leadership must lead by example."

With Bimala this is not just lip-service, she practices what she preaches. At first she had to overcome cliques in her own ranks, many who ran well-oiled smuggling and extortion rackets. Then Bimala took action against 60 'dirty' officers at the airport. Many were sent off to the police correction training centre. "Today, my staff is much more efficient," she chuckles.

It took a while for Bimala to find her niche. As a schoolgirl in Nuwakot, north of Kathmandu, she wanted to join the army till she was told women couldn't enlist. So she was a teacher for a while, and joined the civil service, followed by a brief stint in journalism before finding her true calling: in the Nepal Police. This mother of two differs from most female stereotypes. Dedication to the job keeps her running around the airport troubleshooting, sometimes up to 19 hours a day. "That's how I stay trim and fit," quips Bimala.

Only three percent of the police staff in Nepal are female, but this does not intimidate her. The chain of command means she is there to do a job, and it doesn't matter what gender she is. "Besides, I saw how incompetent many men were when I trained with them for the force," Bimala recalls. She confesses sometimes using charm to extract information, but would-be criminals better watch out: "For crooks, I am a cop first, and then a woman." ♦



MIN. BARACHARYA

१९,२५,०००

किता शेयरहरु

नेपालको बैकिङ्ग इतिहासकै बृहत शेयर लगानीमा तपाईं सहभागी बन्ने एक अमूल्य मौका



लक्ष्मी बैंक सँगैरव प्रस्तुत गर्दछ नेपालको बैकिङ्ग इतिहासकै बृहत शेयर निस्काशन । बैकले आरम्भ १९, २०६० देखि रु १९ करोड २५ लाख बराबरको १९ लाख २५ हजार किता शेयरहरु निष्काशन गर्दैछ । व्यवसायिक कार्य प्रणाली, विकसित प्रविधि अनि नौलोपनालाई आत्मसाथ गर्दै stakeholders को अत्यधिक लाभको लागि सम्पूर्ण वित्तीय क्षेत्रमा उत्कृष्ट सेवा प्रदान गर्न लक्ष्मी बैंक प्रतिबद्ध छ ।



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