Spreading east

Now there are echoes of Rukum and Rolpa in Taplejung.

NAVIN SINGH KHADKA

“I am a happy man,” said Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa, deplaning last Tuesday after his visit to Bhutan, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in preparation for the upcoming SAARC summit in Islamabad.

And well he might be, having been saved by the regional association when national politics was demanding his departure from the top job at Singha Durbar.

Thapa inherited the chairmanship of SAARC from Sher Bahadur Deuba, who had ruled the roost when the summit happened last in Kathmandu in January 2002. He left for his subcontinental whirlwind just as his party, RPP, exploded with demands for him to step down and make way for an all-party government.

Meanwhile, the other political parties were gearing up for renewed protests against the king and his government. Madhab Kumar Nepal’s Lucknow dash to meet Messrs Prachanda and Baburam seemed also to have the capacity to show Thapa the door.

And ironically, the most significant outcome of Thapa’s confab with Atal Behari Vajpayee on 24 November was South Block’s suggestion via press release that the king and the parties consider sorting out their differences so as better to tackle the insurgents at the door.
orders never cease in the kingdom of the absurd. Last year, the king fired an elected prime minister, saying in effect, ‘I do my own way.’ Since then, the leaders of the political parties who ran the country with their greed and ineptitude, haven’t given the people a convincing argument why the same venal and vision-challenged chieftains should be put back in the saddle. We see no signs that they have mended their ways: just look at how they are jostling again for advantage in the race to occupy choice berths in the next national government.

UML bossMadhav Nepal slipped out of his house in Nepalganj at three in the morning last month to cross the border to meet the Maistri Ivo. There was bitter irony in the ensuing confusion of his security detail—and all the times his armed police bodyguards had to head off a secret meeting with the leaders of a group that they are supposed to guard against him against Nepal doesn’t even tell his own party colleagues what he is up to, whereas just about everyone knows through media leaks that the meeting is in Hotel Kapur at Luknow, located (we might add) in a country that has actually labelled the group ‘terrorists.’

We give up trying to make sense of all this. Maybe British special envoy Sir Jeffrey James, back in town this week, will help kicking things out. He has made more unsolicited advice to the people who need it least—the Royal Nepali Army, followed by rounds of meetings with political party bosses, waving carrots and sticks. He may even try to fence with the king. Sir Jeffrey seems to have his works cut out, but we wonder if he shouldn’t have his office closer to his line of duty, New Delhi for instance?

What have we brought on ourselves that we have handed over the destiny and decision-making in this country to outsiders? Human rights violations have become so somber that they have set off international alarm bells. The palace and parties are so stubborn that foreign envoys have to go in to grab them to patch up. It is pointless blaming outsiders when we have utterly failed to solve the crisis that they are so impatient to see solved. The parliamentarians and street protests may have been triggered calling for the resignation of the home minister. There may have been some practical or moral and human rights groups would have taken up the cause with janakitar activists perhaps launching a signature campaign.

None of this happened when the OMCSTichtament Lanka and Ravi was released. The army and its intelligence agency had no induction of our sagging morality, and a sad commentary as to how brutal we have become as a society. The army has been found guilty of rights and wrongs. Nepalis have begun to accept that national institutions have very little respect for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The name of fighting the Maistri insurgency, the state has now become a law unto itself. It took the direct presence of three very conspicuous European diplomats in dark suits to deter soldiers outside Singh Darbar from ro-arresting leftist poet Purabramh last month. Many others haven’t been as lucky, an unaccounted number of victims continue to be in illegal detention. The several have died in captivity without even being acknowledged by the detaining authorities.

These days, if a youth is not spotted in the countryside for five consecutive days, people automatically assume that he has been a killed in a staged encounter, b) ‘taken away’ by the UN Mission Command. c) abducted by Maoists, d) hiding from the fear of both forces or e) has fled down south. The protection of the rule of law began when Sher Bahadur Deuba was prevailed upon by the army to make the army’s constitutional emergency. Even at that time, many legal experts pointed out that there were enough provisions in the law and there was no need to sacrifice fundamental rights to protect the people from insurrection.

Deuba was later persuaded that putting the constitution in virtual suspension by (defying a mid-term election, which was made hold for the same reason that warranted the imposition and continuation of the state of emergency. The option was the easiest way to get out of the scrutiny of rights activists. The slide gained further momentum in the wake of the October Fourth royal takeover. One of Deuba’s favourite quips used to be that activists were always using condemnation government excesses while much more outrageous violations of human rights by the royal army were uncensured. There was more than a grain of truth in his allegations. In the wake of the stages of the insurgency, civil society not only failed to denounce Maistri killings and abductions, it went to the extent of condemning their tyranny by blaming the government for everything. This is the reason civil society’s voice has reason of very few takes even when violations these days are overwhelming by the forces of the state. Civil society leaders like Padma Rama Paudyal, Dhungana, Sindhu Nati Pyakurel and Birendra Keshari Pokhrel failed then to recognise a family that is not doing enough to take a better guarantee of human rights than the most benevolent of dictatorships.

After countless experiments with controlled regimes all over the world, it is clear that human rights and democracy are two sides of the same coin. One can’t exist in the absence of the other. Democratic societies are less likely to tolerate human rights abusers can be removed by their own party, opposition parties can check, and even by the most inarticulate is not reckless enough to permit violence. And civil liberties allow the media to be a weapon against the terms of the repression. The challenge before international organisations in these times isn’t limited to ensuring that the human rights situation in the kingdom is better monitored.

Coercive forces must be made accountable to the people’s representatives if they are to be accountable for their excesses. As long as armed men are used against unarmed activists, no political, no amount of monitoring can make them exercise restraint. All universal values—gender equity, human rights, equality of opportunity, environmental concerns—spring from an abiding faith in the exercise of democracy and human rights. It is not the Nepali government which is obstructing the exercise of democracy and human rights in Nepal; it is a Maistri term.

The Maistri have slaughtered thousands of people in a most gruesome manner for their beliefs. thousands of peoples have been killed and thousands of thousands have been exterminated. People of people of those unable to leave are coming under Maoist terror outside Kathmandu city limits. It is the Maistri who systematically destroyed the VDCs and NGOs. They made it impossible for political leaders to visit villages and constituencies and at this is the Maistri who are preventing the holding of democratic elections. It is the areas that they control, the Maistri don’t allow free press, civil society.

As a British citizen, I felt rather embarrassed to explain this to my landlord: something about how the ambassador ‘had to make a good impression and the vital importance of spotless vehicles to that end. At one point, I gave up trying and grieved with them instead. I know all these things are more in comparison to what goes in Nepal, but it is important that foreign communities consider more carefully the effects of living like this.

At the moment, I feel that you do raise some valid points that both INGO diplomatie workers and Nepali politicians will do well to consider. When I lived in Nepal as a student, the antics of the Pajero embassy fleet of Land Rovers being liberally used were never conspicuous. But we can still seize the opportunity to settle political scores. An impatient king decided to solve things by throwing parliamentarian party leadership exacerbated it by playing with the fire of rebellion outside fix. It is pointless blaming outsiders when we have utterly failed to solve the crisis that they are so impatient to see solved. The parliamentarians and street protests may have been triggered calling for the resignation of the home minister. There may have been some practical or moral and human rights groups would have taken up the cause with janakitar activists perhaps launching a signature campaign.

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Humpty dumpty had a great fall

The constitutional forces are still in disarray, the Maoists are not in the mood for concessions and, like his predecessor, Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa has failed to persuade opposition leaders to join an all-party government. He says he wants to militarily soften the Maoists, and has vowed to hold elections. Some domestic sources fear their freedoms are endangered, but others see him as a skilled administrator and a source of stability. The question for this divided nation is: where do we go from here? Most people seem to agree that we should be headed towards multi-party democracy and not return to the dictatorial authoritarianism of a totalitarian communist republic. But they can’t agree on how to get there. In the year after the king took over the Nepalese state showed remarkable tolerance towards two Panchayat-era prime ministers.

The fact that the country’s transition towards democracy coincided with the rise of the insurgency raises some questions, and people can live without fear. If the Maoists so that killings can stop, the government will have adopted a device to transfer power where it belongs: to the people’s representatives. Any attempt to subvert democracy permanently in the name of security will actually have far-reaching consequences. Democracy, no matter how messy, is essential in inhibiting conflict.

An analysis of the empirical data from Nepal’s 75 districts over the last seven years and a behavioral link with socio-economic factors reveal interesting results. Communities with a higher level of trust and civic participation, as measured by an index of social capital, have been found to be less vulnerable to Maoist violence and the killings have been less pervasive. Similar results are found for the democracy index that was measured by the voters’ participation rate and the level of success of the smaller parties in garnering votes. The implication is that the current winner-takes-all system, where one or two parties dominate the political spectrum, is not particularly conducive to peace. Single-party dominated communities are likely to produce resentment and less communal harmony, making them vulnerable to social strife and conflict.

Similarly, communities which received a higher level of government grants on a per capita basis are less vulnerable to violence. Neglected areas with chronic poverty are more susceptible to Maoist violence. For example, of the 25 least developed districts, 17 are hotbeds of Maoist insurgency. Only one of these is the east, and it is interesting that during the last 12 years the country was ruled by almost 10 elected prime ministers. Reforms to bring about regional balance must therefore form the backbone of a future resolution by devolving fiscal and political power to regional governments. These could be given financial incentives to develop, for example, hydropower in their regions, and allowed to retain the half the proceeds to create a trust fund to spend on local development.

The bottom line is that all the constitutional forces must unite to assess their last 12 years and work towards more genuine democracy with better safeguards for the rule of law, good governance, economic freedom, free speech and social justice. Internal democracy and financial transparency within the party is as important. Liberal democracy will require the monarch to make concessions and stay inside the constitutional boundary and remain a symbol of unity. The political leadership, for its part, should show a new commitment to the national interest and accept reforms to devote political and economic power to the grassroots.

This is the middle ground that the parties need to push to counter the extremism exposed by the revolutionaries as we work towards a new peace process, perhaps this time with the help of the United Nations and other international bodies.

Jack Shaw, by email

Communities with a higher level of civic participation are less vulnerable to Maoist violence.
Getting out of grinding poverty

Traditional water mills survive the test of time.

Technology is being rapidly replaced by diesel and electric mills. Wherever roads have reached remote areas, traditional ghuttas owners have lost their jobs to the march of time. But as Ram Sharma’s experience shows, small is still beautiful. The ghutta is still the simplest, cheapest and most convenient way for farmers to earn a living.

"The start-up investment is very small and the technology is indigenous," says Nakal Debota, a student of the nearby Basamati village. "If there is money for motor-driven mills, there is no reason why we should not revive ghutta." Fellow-student, Sunil Lami lists some advantages of the traditional technology: "This ancient tradition has not just survived in modern times, it is still useful and provides a living."

You would expect young college students like Nakal and Sunil to be infatuated with modern technology, but they seem to think it is their community’s duty to preserve ghutta. "Just because we are in a hurry to keep up with these fast times, there is no reason to abandon what our ancestors left us. If we don’t preserve what we have, future generations will see ghuttas only on television," says college student Dhruba Debota. They are not saying this for the effect, the students seem to genuinely believe what they say.

Basamati is all of them do a good trade. Competition has improved services and brought prices down for ordinary villagers. Despite having their ghuttas washed away by the Rapit during the monsoon, the owners rebuild them annually. Demand for flour is high and the owners make a regular income. We saw school children carry sacks of maize to the mills before school. The flour is ready to take home in the evenings.

Water mills often raise the question of sharing water between mill owners and farmers but at Basamati the villagers managed to sort out their disputes amicably. The ghuttas are allowed to channel water since, the farmers reasoned, the mills don’t actually expend the resource as much as use its energy. We also managed to convince the villagers that ghuttas wouldn’t affect farming as long as we make them upstream from their farms," says ghutta-owner Han Sharan Karki.

Creeping urbanisation from nearby Hetauda and the proliferation of diesel and electric mills has meant that many busy villagers are going to town to take their grain to the market. "People are busy on the farm or in the office and don’t have the patience to wait so they choose to take their grain to electric mills," says Rajesh Upreti, owner of an electric mill. Although charges for the traditional ghutta are cheap, they are time consuming. What takes an electric mill a few hours is often a full day’s work on the old water mills.

In time, villagers like Basamati could become like Handikhola where ghuttas are being replaced by the offerings of urbanisations. But all is not lost. Traditional ghutta can now be made more efficient by upgrading the turbines. One of the organisations specialising in ghutta is the Centre for Rural Technology (CRT) that has designed ghuttas with Improved Water Mill Technology. The main upgrade is changing the traditional wooden runner with a hydraulically-designed penstock and replacing the wooden paddles with cup shaped blades. This increases its operational efficiency and makes it useful with additional tasks like hauling, electricity generation and oil- expelled.

Dil Maya Tamang has been running her ghutta for the past 18 years and is the only one with an improved water mill in Basamati. For the last two years her income has improved and the efficiency of her mill has more than doubled. "I used to grind only three pathis in one day. Now I can finish seven pathis," says Dil Maya, who is helping other women try out the new mill. "I’m not greedy, I just want to earn more and become more independent too."

But for Ram Sharma, even an old ghutta is still good enough. Despite his age, he walks for hours with a 50kg sack of flour on his back to sell at Hetauda for a Rs 50 profit. "I wish the sahas paid me more, but at least there is some cash," he says.

Shop owner, Kedar Shrestha is a regular buyer and is very impressed with the quality of flour from traditional mills. "Make sure you bring more and early in the morning," Kedar tells Ram. His customers all prefer ghutta flour, "It’s clean and keeps better."
The improved water mill is an upgraded version of a traditional water mill (TMM) that converts hydro-power from water into mechanical power. The two upgraded versions are the improved ghata (IG) and Multi-Purpose Power Unit (MPPU). The mechanical power generated by the IG and MPPU is used mainly to process local agricultural products, generate micro-level electricity and pump water. Twenty kilograms of cereals like maize, wheat and millet are ground in an hour by a TMM and 65-90 kg per hour with an MPPU compared to just 15 kg in a TMM. The power output can range from 2 to 5 kilowatts and machines like a rice huller, oil expeller and dynamo can be fitted easily. The small-scale cottage industries can run a saw, planer and looms.

In upgraded mills, metals replace all wooden parts like paddles, shaft, chute or penstock pipe and the hopper. The grinding stones are replaced with artificial cast-stones. These improvements make the water wheels last longer.

A traditional water mill can be upgraded to the improved ghata by two workers in a couple of days. It can be made with the same tools used for making the traditional style. Iron parts can be fitted with regular hand tools. MPPUs can be manufactured in an urban workshop in 15 days and installed on site in a week by two people. Efforts to improve traditional ghattas started nearly 36 years ago by Swiss engineer Andreas Bachmann who worked with Nepal small-hydro pioneer Akal Man Nakarmi. Various organisations and manufactures like Centre for Rural Technology, Kathmandu Metal Industries (KMI) and Nepal Yanta Shala (NYS) Energy have followed up on the technology and improved around 400 ghattas all over the country.

The improvement has brought about positive economic and social benefits: increase in income, employment opportunities and flexibility in time management. With its capability to generate electricity in rural areas, establishing small-scale cottage industries has become possible. More time is saved, helping to serve more customers during seasonal peak periods and last longer than traditional ghattas.

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DOMESTIC BRIEFS

Ignorance is death

Nepal women's ignorance about their right to a safe abortion is contributing to at least half of all pregnant-related deaths in Nepal where the maternal mortality rate is one of the highest in the world. The Centre for Research on Environment Health and Population Activities (CREPHA) says in their new report that a large number of Nepali women are unaware of their right to terminate a pregnancy although the bill to legalise abortion was passed by parliament in March 2002. It also says fewer women than men were aware of the abortion bill but a greater number of those surveyed supported abortion.

The law permits women to abort a foetus during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy if her life is in danger and in cases of rape, incest and forcible impregnation. Before abortion became legal, conviction on abortion charges meant long years of incarceration since abortion was considered the same as infanticide. Most women were sentenced to 20 years dived legal representation and accused of other violations. CREPHA said lack of awareness has dire consequences for women who, fearing arrest, opt for unsafe or anonymous abortions that lead to health complications and often, death.

The paper concludes by CREPHA's in 10 major cities from all over Nepal interviewed about 50,000 people in the 18-30 age group.

Religious allies

"Religious allies play an important role in combating the social stigma attached to people who have HIV/AIDS," says college student, Rika Shrestha, who believes that allies should take on a new direction against the epidemic. Public awareness should not be limited to just street campaigns but can be more effectively used by religious leaders to reach out to their communities. "Our priests should be involved in educating the community about the disease as people take them very seriously," says Shrestha, who represented Nepali youth at a conference, South Asia Inter-faith Consultation: Young People and HIV/AIDS, held in Kathmandu.

A delegation of 140 youth, religious leaders and religious groups from Buddhist, Muslim, Christian and Bahá'í communities from South East Asia met in the city to discuss their response to the HIV epidemic in the region. "Religious leaders are in a unique position. They are listened to. This is an important anti-AIDS initiative that could have significant results in combating the epidemic," says Sadik Rashid, regional director of UNICEF South Asia. It is estimated that South Asia is home to 5 million people living with HIV/AIDS and the disease is spreading widely in all eight countries due to the lack of knowledge, denial and stigma, an uneven health infrastructure and societal behaviour.

One of the serious concerns raised was the cultural and social pressures that prevents the afflicted from seeking treatment. "Stigma and prejudice ostracises those in need of compassion," says Rashid. With 1.25 million children born to HIV-positive mothers, UNICEF is encouraging youth to work as activists by raising awareness and reaching out directly to communities, both adult and young. "When I return home, I want to organise awareness programs in the villages and towns with the help of my friends," says 16-year-old Raviraj Dugar from India. Praabudha Dayama, a schoolboy from Mumbai, wants to see religious leaders shaking hands and counseling their communities. "They can help to moderate the inner conscience of their people. They can help to talk about AIDS in public, which can reduce social stigma," says Dugar.

In the Indian state of Maharashtra, 200 schools have introduced AIDS Prevention Awareness Program (APAP) for senior students as a compulsory extra-curricular course. "I'm sure that youth in Nepal will make a difference and bring a new kind of activism by encouraging religious leaders to work with us," concludes Shrestha.

For the girls

The Indian government has sanctioned Rs 8.20 million for the construction of a girls' hostel at the Nepal Bharat Maitri Kanya Chhatrabas, at Panchthar Multiple Campus at Phidim. The Indian Ambassador Shyan Saran laid the foundation stone of a girls' hostel last year. The project is aimed at reducing gender disparity in education in Nepal.

The 140 girls' boarding hostel is in the process of being completed and will help minimize the influence of cultural and social pressures that prevents girls from accessing education.

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**ONLY SHORTLISTED CANDIDATES WILL BE CALLED FOR AN INTERVIEW**

**DURING THE WEEK OF 19-23 JANUARY 2004**
Three years ago, Taplejung was untouched by the insurgency and had a bright future ahead. The infusion of remittances from soldiers and workers abroad was making a visible difference to living standards, and local elected officials had started improving health and education.

Farmers were farming cardamom, and the cash crop was bringing in up to Rs 450 per kg. The Kanchenjunga Conservation Area Project (KCAP) initiated by the World Wide Fund was promoting ecotourism as a way to raise living standards and conserve the region’s biodiversity around the world’s third highest mountain.

It was just when the future was getting rosy that the Maoists started taxing rugged land to understand. First, Gurung villagers were far too simple. “I joined.” Several other choice,” Navin tells us.

The Maoists officially claim to raise only nominal donations from trekkers and insist it is totally voluntary. Even though receipts are given, tourists on the Kanchenjunga trail told us extortion is arbitrary. In Yampush, a group of 14 British trekkers were looted of everything including clothes, tents and money. They were helped back to Taplejung by headquarters of locals.

Navin used to own a shop in his village of Sanwa. Three years ago the police came looking for him. When they didn’t find him, Navin tells us, they beat up his wife so badly nearly she died. “I had no other choice,” Navin tells us.

Several villagers standing around nod their heads as they listen. This is just one of many stories of brutality perpetrated by security personnel in these remote mountains.

Later, in the privacy of their homes, people in these remote villages speak in hushed tones of fear of reprisal. People here have been unable to go to the district headquarters, and people like Pasang pay with their lives. It was just when the future was getting rosy that the Maoists brought in up to Rs 450 per kg. The Kanchenjunga was bringing in up to Rs 450 per kg.

There is one bright spot in this, however. A hydro-power plant brought here nearly a decade ago has finally started working. The police post at Olangchungola was burnt down two years ago, and the old customs post is abandoned. The border is only a day away and trade goes on. A kilogram of rice brought from Taplejung costs Rs 200 here, while rice from Tibet costs Rs 90. The irony is the latter is actually from Hetauda and was exported to Tibet via Khassa.

There is one bright spot in the horizon: a hydro-power plant brought here nearly a decade ago has finally started working. Only a few houses in Olangchungola have electricity because the army doesn’t allow electric wire to be brought here. As darkness falls, the people lock their doors and hope the Maoists won’t come calling.” Day will bring little relief. t
The last month has been a nightmare for anyone associated with Royal Nepal Airlines Corporation (RNAC). A schedule marred by cancellations is more than just a pesky nuisance, but one has to agree with this snide remark overheard in an international airport: ‘What can you expect of an airline with one and a half aircraft?’ So while Nepal Tourism Board and private tourism entrepreneurs do the hard sell of Destination Nepal through promos and sales blitzes in India and abroad, the national carrier is spending more time grounded than in the air.

The RNAC has long been dogged by controversy and corruption (‘Royal Nepal and Corruption’, #22) and the Beed sees distinct parallels between Corruption’, #22) and the Beed sees distinct parallels between ‘Royal Nepal and Corruption’, #22) and the Beed sees distinct parallels between and the parastatal entity and the state of the nation. There are whispers that the cancellations were ‘created’ to support the case for a new aircraft, but the problem does not lie in merely having new planes—though it would be nice for longhaul RNAC flights to have personal entertainment centres à la better international fleets. Wonder what went wrong with governance and flourishing institutions post-democracy? Look no further than RNAC. Once a profitable airline that made enough money to pay the foreign exchange lease rentals on their Boeings, today its fleet is less than half of what it boasted 15 years ago. The politicians milked the cash cow, bureaucrats and employees had their share too and of course monetary subsidies in the form of jobs-for-life bloated expenditures. Financial discipline became a foreign notion with audits that never took place in time. And the game of musical CEO chairs at Royal Nepal was ravilled only by that of the prime ministerial karsu race. Perhaps setting RNAC in order will send the right signals to the people running the country, irrespective of who is in power or what system should be ruling. They both need a shake-up of national proportions.

The Beed suggests a shake-up of national proportions.

And leave that to private operators. However, regulations must be put in place for private airlines to fly low-margin, non-commercial routes. It’s not strange that several businessmen who boast about the imminent arrival of their fleet of Boeings and Airbuses never seem to lift their plans out of the cockpit circuit. What they are not able to admit is that perhaps Nepal hasn’t produced the potential to start a private international airline. The financial commitment is too much given the risks.

The solution is simple enough. Let in a strategic partner. Give RNAC enough finances and smart people at the helm. It will succeed. So what if bigger international players are not interested? We will be content with formidable regional players. We have always tried to find a perfect solution, let us start with a good one.

arthabeed@yahoo.com
It was a misty dawn as the group of five hot air balloons from the Nepal Ballooning 2003 expedition ascended to 1,100m above Bharatpur. The view made the ballooners, some of them veteran Himalayan mountaineers, gasp.

“You could see nearly 500km of the Himalaya—from Dhaulagiri to Everest,” said Austrian mountaineer, Wolfgang Nairz. “It was one of my best flights.”

You’d think that after visiting Nepal 56 times Nairz would have run out of things to see and do, but no. Nairz first came to Nepal in 1970 and then as team leader of the expedition that put the first men (Reinhold Messner and Peter Habeler) on the top of Mt Everest without using bottled oxygen. Since then, he just kept coming back.

An author and a ballooning buff, Nairz first took off on a gondola over Nepal in 1994 and produced the bestseller in Europe, *Ballonfahren zwischen Alpen und Himalaya*. And later, on his lecture tours, the most asked question was: “When are you organising your next balloon tour to Nepal?” It would take another nine years, four of which went in planning and two in postponements because of political instability in Nepal.

“The media reports were negative, but our local partners kept us updated and I was here for the Everest Golden Jubilee celebrations and knew that things would be okay,” Nairz told us.

Finally, five teams from Austria, France and Switzerland braved the bad press and the cautionary advisories from their embassies and decided to come.

And they are all glad they did. The 17-member team brought their private balloons for the first time in ballooning history, and made three flights from Pokhara, three in Kathmandu Valley and for the first time in Chitwan. The teams also did two charity flights at the SOS Village and Mount Everest School in Kathmandu.

“It was completely different from 1994,” says Nairz. “At that time, we had several problems with air traffic control, the airport was not equipped with radar and members of the local support team didn’t know how to handle balloons.” The second time round it was smoother sailing. Devendra Gurung, the managing director of Lamjung Treks & Expeditions even went to Austria and Germany to learn a bit of ballooning himself. “I had to know what I was doing if I was expected to talk with civil aviation and show my boys the right way to set up the equipment,” says Gurung.

And it was smooth sailing all the way with glorious weather. Except a hairy situation in Pokhara when a French balloon drifted over an army base and the crew was taken in for questioning. Hot air balloons are at the mercy of the wind direction, and can only control their up and down movements. “We were just having a good time up there playing the trumpet, and a few soldiers even waved at us,” says Phillipe Boeglin. But the friendliness seems to have evaporated when the balloon landed just across from the base.

“I know what the problem was,” jokes Boeglin. “They don’t like French jazz.” It took Gurung a harrowing few hours till the army reviewed the video footage and a Frenchman dramatically exposed his camera film to show there would be no threat to the balloonists were deemed not to be a security threat.

For the French team, Bhaktapur was the best flight. Boeglin was tooting his trumpet, and families watching the aerial parade from their rooftops gave them well-deserved applause. The balloonists showered presents as they made low passes near Nyatapola and skidded over the rooftops. The impressive Boeglin left Kathmandu with a Tibetan gyalin, and its sonorous sound will soon be echoing from balloons in the French Alps.

It was Swiss banker Peter R Schmid’s sixth visit to Nepal but this time it was pleasure, not business. He describes the moment with reverence: “We were 4,000m over Pokhara with Annapurna looming ahead. It was a childhood dream coming true, but till I saw it, I never imagined the Himalaya was so overwhelming!”

Walter Mattenberger, a pilot of one of the Swiss balloons, was more impressed with the Nepalis. “I received more smiles, especially from women, than I have in my entire life. The beauty of the country and the friendliness of the people is not a cliché.” Thousands of awe-struck children and adults rushed to meet the balloonists wherever they landed. “We felt safe all the time,” says Schmid.

The real nightmare for Nepal Ballooning’s 2003 ground team was logistics. Each balloon weighs approximately 300kg, nearly half of which are the gas cylinders. It took four strong men, one flatbed truck and at least two mobile phones per team before anything got off the ground. And once they were up, up and away, it was anybody’s guess where it would set down. Nairz is already planning his next ballooning trip for 2005. He’s delighted to see that many locals and expatriates are taking an interest.
George W Bush is obsessed with the war on terrorism, especially with the military response to terrorism. American foreign policy reflects that obsession. This year, the US will spend around $450 billion for the military, including the costs of the Iraq War, while it will spend no more than $15 billion to overcome global poverty, global environmental degradation and global diseases. In other words, US foreign policy spending is thirty times more focused on the military than on building global prosperity, public health and a sustainable environment.

Throughout 2003, the world lived with Bush’s obsession. Debate over Iraq dominated international diplomacy, and took up almost the entire UN agenda. The war in Iraq cost countless innocent lives, such as when the UN headquarters in Baghdad was bombed. At the same time, Bush’s emphasis on a one-dimensional, militarized approach to global problems has fueled unrest and instability throughout the Islamic world, leading to increased terrorism in Turkey, North Africa, Saudi Arabia and Southeast Asia.

The nature of suffering around the world hardly justifies this narrow strategy. Focusing on terrorism to the exclusion of other issues, and emphasizing the military response to it, will not bring prosperity and peace, or even a significant reduction in the number of attacks. While 3,000 innocent people died in the US on September 11, 2001, in Africa 8,000 innocent children die every day from malaria.

Yet malaria is preventable and treatable. The problem is that most of Africa is too poor to mobilise the methods of prevention (bed nets) and treatments (anti-malarial medicines) that could save millions of children every year. The US spends more on Iraq each day than it does on Africa’s malaria in a year.

As 2003 draws to a close, it is time for world leaders to help guide the world away from the obsessive, failing approach of America’s government. President Bush should be made to understand that the US will find no true international support if America speaks incessantly about terrorism while doing almost nothing about the problems that really affect most of the world: poverty, lack of access to safe water and sanitation, vulnerability to disease and climate change.

Ironically, President Bush claims that the UN does not follow through on its word. He declared in London recently that “the credibility of the UN depends on a willingness to keep its word and to act when action is required.” Yet the US repeatedly violates its own UN pledges.

For example, at the International Conference on Financing for Development, in Monterrey, Mexico in March 2002, America signed the Monterrey Consensus, which includes a promise by rich countries to raise their development assistance towards 0.7 percent of national income. That would bring an additional $60 billion per year in foreign assistance to the poorest countries—approximately what it spent on Iraq this year. Yet President Bush has simply ignored this promise.

There are many other similar commitments that the US has made in recent years to the UN that remain unfulfilled. The US promised action to fight man-made climate change as a signatory to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCC) in 1992. It has so far failed to act. America also promised—in the Doha Declaration in 2001—to open its markets to the world’s poorest countries. Yet at Cancun, Mexico earlier this summer, it refused to open its markets even to exports from struggling African economies.

The list goes on and on. At the Millennium Assembly in 2000, the US promised to pursue reduction of global poverty, yet it has taken few steps in that direction. At the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, America committed itself to protect global ecosystems, yet little has been seen or heard from US policy makers on this issue since then.

America is certainly not alone in failing to promote the international goals adopted in the UN. But because the US is the richest, most powerful country in the world, its neglect is devastating. If the US really wants to undercut terrorism, it must recognize the interconnectedness of extremism, poverty and environmental degradation, and it will need to understand the struggles for survival that are underway among the poor everywhere.

But the world should not wait for America to come to its senses. The US spent just 5 percent of the world’s population, and just one vote of 191 countries in the UN General Assembly. Poor countries, especially the democracies of the developing world—Brazil, South Africa, India, Mexico, Ghana, the Philippines—should say, “We need to act on issues that concern us, not just on the issues that concern the US.”

What the world needs most in 2004 is a declaration of independence from American willfulness.
“No real strategic interest”

OUTSIDERS

Japan is stepping up its vigilance on foreigners.

SUNENDRI KALUCHE IN TOKYO

The Japanese government’s wariness of foreigners has been rising, especially with critical voices for greater integration of immigrants and local businesses demanding foreign labor migrants. About 1.7 million Turks have stepped up their vigilance on foreigners, playing into traditional xenophobia against outsiders, which has long thrived in national homogeneous society, as its uniqueness as the world.

The negative perceptions of foreigners as “outsiders” has heightened by sensationalized media reports after the September attacks on an international financing of the LTTE and foreign groups might have helped bring the LTTE to the table,” says Anil Swamy, a research fellow at the East-West Centre in Honolulu.

The extent of US involvement may however also be determined by India, the military and economic interests of the two nations’ and the peace process breaks down. "The United States will not get involved militarily but will support with logistics," said Lasantha Wickrematunge, editor of the Colombo-based The Sunday Leader, newspaper, who was with Richard Armitage, to Sri Lanka. Armitage visited the front lines in the north, the region most affected by the ethnic conflict.

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Outsiders

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by AMANTHA PERERA

The United States has been appearing more often in the political agenda of Sri Lanka’s Prime Minister, due to events both in and out of the South Asian nation. In recent months, the US has increased its support for the government, both financially and politically. According to 2002 figures, the US has spent about $11 billion in the last four years—on everything from infrastructure to training exercises. But experts both in Sri Lanka and in the United States say that the US involvement may however also be determined by India, the military and economic interests of the two nations’ and the peace process breaks down. "The United States will not get involved militarily but will support with logistics," said Lasantha Wickrematunge, editor of the Colombo-based The Sunday Leader, newspaper, who was with Richard Armitage, to Sri Lanka. Armitage visited the front lines in the north, the region most affected by the ethnic conflict.

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It is quite natural that the recent meeting held in India between the top leaders from the Maoists and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist) raised so much discussion and speculation within the country and internationally. It is normal for state and global power centres to interpret what took place within their frame of interest and on their level of comprehension.

But it needs to be clarified that the dialogue between the leaders of the two parties was planned and designed in advance. The leaders of both parties admitted that there has to be tripartite power equilibrium among the Maoists, parliamentary parties and the monarchists. This is why we have been proposing a dialogue among these three forces to work towards a permanent solution.

During the last ceasefire and peace talks period, we regularly met supporters of the old regime and monarchy, and the parliamentarians who are at present between the old and the new regimes. The current return to conflict is thanks to a militarily intoxicated group who were instigated by some foreign powers with vested interests, and that led to the collapse of the peace negotiations.

We have had four channels of discussion open with the parliamentary parties agitation against the royal regression. The politburo meeting of our party last month analysed that the struggle among the three forces in the country was gradually changing, melding into a fusible between two factions. In line with that analysis, it also concluded that a new type of dialogue had to be initiated with the parliamentary parties. Hence, the kind of meeting between top Maoist and UML leaders.

We are not surprised at the royal fascist elements’ concern at our meeting. Bullseye! We feel good about it. The only surprise we have is the way these elements, who cannot survive even for one day without aims from foreigners, have been shooting crocodile’s tears just because we chose to meet on foreign soil. They are also demonstrating their intellectual bankruptcy when they say that the meeting between Maoist and UML leaders in Siliguri two years ago and the latest one in Lucknow justifies their claim. The Maoists have shed crocodile tears just because we chose to meet on foreign soil. They are also afraid of our party last month analysed that the peace negotiations.

For the issue regarding meeting in India, one must understand that we have a problem and an enemy with the Indian reactionary ruling class, not with India and the people. Secondly, everyone must remember that there are more than 10 million poor Nepals who earn their livelihood in India. We are trying to organise them and under their protection we plan to hold talks with different quarters. There is nothing wrong about it. It is rather a big revolutionally responsibility. Thirdly, this is the time when the Maoists have already occupied more than 80 percent of the total land area of Nepal, so we are under no compulsion to hold meetings in foreign lands. The people should also know that many national and foreign political powers have lined up to hold talks with our party.

We would like to urge some genuine patriots who are misguided by Goebbelen-style propaganda of the old regime. They no need to give it a mysterious tone. They are also harping on about how the Indian state has protected the Maoists. Moreover, some people are demonstrating their intellectual bankruptcy when they say that the meeting between Maoist and UML leaders in Siliguri two years ago and the latest one in Lucknow justifies their claim.

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Back at Sundarjal >49

“The king is a well-meaning person…”

HISTORY AND CULTURE

27 May-28 May [No entries]

Sunday, 29 May
Police Training Centre (Detention Camp)
Dr Mingendra Raj Pandey examined me. He took almost one hour to do so. He seems to suspect heart trouble. He doesn’t tell me what he suspects, perhaps not to allarm him. But by the kind of advice he gave me—not to do any physical exercise, not to bathe in cold water, to avoid flavoured tea, to avoid oil in food, to eat a little at a time but frequently, and by the nature of the questions that he asked me, I could gather in his opinion my heart condition is not OK. He said that he would consult some of his colleagues and determine the kind of investigation before he would prescribe treatment. He has taken my case seriously. As he was departing he told me by the way that he himself was not perfectly all right and had given up hectic schedule of work, and a very limited no. of patients, like me etc. I inquired about his wife + asked him to remember me to her. I am a little worried as a result of his detainment, also he told me to take things easy. An hour after he came, I had a further attack of black-out in my left eye. My vision from the left eye was gone for about 15 minutes after which it again started reappearing slowly. This is the 3rd attack since the last two months. Fortunately Dr Mingendra Raj came after that, so I could tell him about this attack also.

In the evening immediately after dinner at about 7.45 pm General Malla (of Royal Guards) visited me on behalf of the king with a message that since a meeting between the king and myself at the juncture wouldn’t be good to either party, the proper channel would be Malla through whom I could communicate whatever I have in mind to the king in full trust. I told Malla that I would like to discuss things with the king face to face without any intermediary. Malla’s points of talk: (i) He is king’s envoy, (ii) I therefore could trust him fully (iii) A direct meeting between us would be harmful for both of us because interested parties could make capital out of it. (iv) Any abrupt change in the present system would create more problems than solve them. (v) That this visit to me should be strictly private, nobody, not even my family members, should get an inkling of it. (see 28.5.77)

Great Scots!
A Nepali dance master is teaching them how to

C haran Pradhan is at the Bongo Club in Edinburgh, teaching exotic Bollywood dances to a mixed crowd of Asians and Scots, all of whom want a bit of desi style. Pradhan, 40, looks the part, dressed in a silver tunic and an orange turban. When he lived in Nepal, Pradhan did some choreography for Bollywood films and even acted in a few. He also choreographed Bollywood movies for television shows, but this is the first Bollywood class he ever held.

Bollywood is becoming more mainstream in Scotland. It’s used to sell everything from banks to luggage: “A lot of the people who have come along to my dance classes say they are doing it because they saw a Bollywood movie,” says Pradhan, who has a degree in dance from the University of Coventry. Now, fans of the world’s most popular films can learn to move like their favourite stars. Pradhan takes enthusiasts through dance routines, to avoid oil in food, to eat a little at a time but frequently, and by the nature of the questions that he asked me, I could gather in his opinion my heart condition is not OK. He said that he would consult some of his colleagues and determine the kind of investigation before he would prescribe treatment. He has taken my case seriously. As he was departing he told me by the way that he himself was not perfectly all right and had given up hectic schedule of work, and a very limited no. of patients, like me etc. I inquired about his wife + asked him to remember me to her. I am a little worried as a result of his detainment, also he told me to take things easy. An hour after he came, I had a further attack of black-out in my left eye. My vision from the left eye was gone for about 15 minutes after which it again started reappearing slowly. This is the 3rd attack since the last two months. Fortunately Dr Mingendra Raj came after that, so I could tell him about this attack also.

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from 28.5.77
friends + reaction to it here has created an unfavourable atmosphere—which would go on worsening. (ii) But the self it has created a situation—I had to defend myself in terms which are not conducive or a favourable atmosphere for talks. I did take a stand in my defence which I wouldn’t have otherwise taken in the interest of a proactive meeting with the king.

Malla was with me for about half-an-hour. Malla stressed that this meeting must be kept secret. When I told him that IG (Police) himself had brought Malla to me, that IG knew how to keep his mouth shut. About ½ an hour before Malla came the sentry posted at the gate of my camp had been withdrawn. He came back ½ hour after Malla left me. When I asked him if he would see me again he said unless I had anything specific to convey to the king he wouldn’t be coming. In case I wanted to see I should send word to him through the IG.

My 1st reaction after he was gone was of frustration. The king perhaps doesn’t want to do anything soon + later the situation may not so develop as to necessitate a meeting between us. Therefore I have to be prepared to be in prison for a long long time—considering my health it may be too long.
**KATHMANDU AIR QUALITY**

As the cold intensifies, the pollution level in Kathmandu continues to edge up. The concentration of particles that are small enough to enter the human body (PM10) in urban areas such as Patul Sadak, Thamel and Patan Hospital was once again significantly higher than the national standards throughout the week, and the highest, when the previous day. Even in urban areas like Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, the PM10 increased by 15 percent compared to last week.

To avoid serious lung problems, people suffering from heart and lung conditions should limit their time outside. Stay away from areas in the Kathmandu Valley with the highest pollution levels. For air quality forecast in Kathmandu region, visit www.kathmanduairquality.com.
Patan: thinking outside the square.

Residents are pitching in to conserve their collective heritage.

By the 18th century the splendour of Patan rivaled that of any great civilization. Today, anyone who visits that ancient city square has to visually edit out the rising number of tall cement buildings to imagine what it must have been like when the Malla kings commissioned this remarkable legacy to Nepali architecture. Residents are beginning to realise that they have something irreplaceable and are taking an active interest in preserving and renovating what most people consider the jewel among Kathmandu’s seven World Heritage Sites.

Historically, temples and monuments were safeguarded by the traditional guthi system within the mainly Newari communities that inhabited Patan. Guthis were given land from which the edifices were maintained. But the guthi system soon fell into disrepair with guthiyars selling off the land and siphoning money. The monuments they were supposed to safeguard fell into disrepair, with barely enough funds to conduct daily pujas, let alone think about restoring them. They need to earn some kind of return from their homes.

Dilendra Raj Shrestha has always lived in Patan and owns the Third World Restaurant just behind Krishna Mandir. Growing up, he saw the Patan of his youth change as new buildings replaced traditional homes. No one had thought of preserving private structures or even renovating them with traditional elements, so Shrestha decided to do something about it.

Shrestha set up Patan Tourism Development Organisation (PTDO), initially with help from GTZ. Realizing that people must benefit economically from traditional homes if they are to maintain them, Shrestha suggested converting their homes into quality tourist accommodations. A home in Kalimati is nearly finished with UNESCO support and two others are in the pipeline. Shrestha completely restored his own home using traditional materials and using all the timber used to build the house in 1936. PTDO funded the restoration with a soft loan scheme with a 3 percent service charge that will be used to promote restored homes. The rest goes back into the revolving fund for restoring more homes. Shrestha’s home is now open to all as a source of inspiration.

An investment of Rs 1.5 million is not within everyone’s reach and PTDO has limitations. Shrestha says the government should be more supportive through subsidies like that on timber and show greater leniency on their strict restoration specifications. “A concrete structure with a traditional facade will at least look nice from the outside,” he says.

At Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust (KVPT), Rohit Ranjitkar disagrees: he would rather see homes preserved than restored. KVPT focuses on raising funds to preserve public monuments. Since 1991 they have restored 19 buildings, mostly in Patan, and see a bright future for similar work. For Ranjitkar it’s a question of awareness—residents must realise they are part of a collective heritage. A 115-page document issued by the government through Kathmandu Valley Town Development Committee has building bylaws complete with definitions, diagrams and maps for Kathmandu and Lalitpur. The cities are classified into inner city area and residential zones, both further divided into sub-zones. Guidelines are set for everything from damp proofing building sites to specifications for floor height in a traditional Nepali style structure in each subzone.

With modern buildings replacing traditional homes, we’re all heading towards a mass homogeneity. People want hassle-free buildings and easy maintenance. But Ranjitkar points out that the new structures have an average lifespan of eight decades. ‘Traditional mud mortar timber houses last longer—timber can be replaced, the walls, which are natural insulators, are not difficult to redo and reinforce.’ It’s more expensive, but to Ranjitkar, it is worth every rupee to preserve centuries of Nepal’s heritage. While KVPT offers technical solutions to private homeowners, it’s difficult to get outside funding for the latter.

Meanwhile, Shrestha dreams of a time when the Patan skyline will once again resemble the glory of old because, “In the future, no one will come to Patan to see just four temples and a darbar. If we are to survive, heritage conservation is crucial.”

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SRADDA BASNAYAT

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NEPALI TIMES #173

All they need is love

Street educator Rajkumar Tripathi wants to deconstruct the myth that poverty drives children to the street. “It’s lack of love that makes them run away from home, they are not homeless and they are not always poor,” he says. Rajkumar should know, he’s 22 years old, and became a street child himself.

He was only four when his mother left him after a row with her husband and in-laws. “I always wanted my mother to love me but she was never there,” he says, Rajkumar was neglected by his father, and wasn’t sent to school. One day, he ended up in front of Panch Kanya secondary school in his village Ratlamati (distant from Banepa), where he was lying on the floor crying, with a book in hand. After hearing his story, the school principal took pity and sponsored his education.

Four years later, his mother returned but showed no love for her son. Rajkumar was so heartbroken he left home and ended up on the streets of Kathmandu alone and cold. Thus began his street life: begging in Thamel, sleeping in the cold, exploited by carpet factories and small hotels, getting beaten up by employers. The children’s organisation Bal Kendra, took him off the street and gave Rajkumar and several others like him food, shelter and most importantly love and care.

“Some of us decided that instead of going back to the streets, we should be helping each other,” says Rajkumar who set up Bal Chetna Samuha when he was 14. Just when he started getting bored, Rajkumar met Surendra Pokhari, the street theatre director of Patan and, started organising street plays.

Today, Rajkumar is back on the streets—this time with the group Saathi Saathi to counsel children on the streets, helping to find sponsors for their education and medical aid. He started his own theatre called Andhero Bato (Dark Road) and says the negative connotation is deliberate. “Life on the streets is still bleak and the children there are living in trauma everyday,” he says.

Rajkumar is married and has a two-year-old daughter, and his main message to the children on the streets is to hope and aspire for something better. But for Rajkumar, personally, there is still a hole in his heart that his mother’s love should have filled. He hopes he will get it one day.

(Manish Halawa)
Man bites hotdog

The news that there are over 800 cannibals in Germany means our news values must adapt to the relentless march of time and reflect the evolution of societal feeding habits. So, let's say, a dog bites man. That is not news unless the canine in question is a female perpetrator in which case the headline would read: 'Bitch bites man'. On the other hand, as has been known to happen in the heat of the moment, if some men do end up biting dogs, then the story deserves a banner headline:

Man Bit Me, Alleges Mongrel

BY OUR MEDIA WATCHDOG

Lalitpur - Police took a Patan resident into custody Friday night after a neighbourhood dog lodged an FIR that he (the man) had chewed off part of his (the dog's) ear during a fracas at the garbage pile at Ekanta Kunu.

"I wasn't trying to grab headlines," the man said in an exclusive interview from his jail cell, "I was just rummaging through the rubbish, and this mongrel dared me to bite him. So I did." The dog, which was reported in critical but stable condition at B&B Hospital, did not return calls and could not be reached for comment.

But his lawyer told journalists at a Meet the Press function (chaired by Rishi Dhamala) yesterday that the dog was only trying to liven things up on a slow news day. "If my client had bitten the man, it wouldn't be news would it?" he asked rhetorically.

Mock Emergency Declared

BY ANOTHER ONE OF OUR ANALYSES

The government Tuesday re-imposed a state of national emergency, but said later it was just only a mock exercise to test the public's reaction. This came the day after HMG conducted a pretend emergency at the BICC with pretended dead and wounded to gauge the response time of pretend ambulances and fire trucks. There was also an anti-aircraft battery test-firing exercise in Jawalakhel at midnight Thursday to measure the panic level of the capital's residents. "Most people just snored right through it," said the director of the National Emergency Monitoring Unit. "If you want my frank opinion, I think people in Kathmandu have all fainted with boredom."

No English Speeches: Minister

In a cabinet decision, the government instructed government officials Tuesday to henceforth deliver all keynote addresses in Nepali. The move was generally welcomed by Kathmandu-based diplomats who said they would now no longer have to pretend to be asleep during ministerial speeches. They would be able to really fall asleep.