The army and the Maoists are engaged in a lethal arms race.

NAVIN SINGH KHADKA

Two years after it was sucked into the war, the Royal Nepali Army has transformed itself from a largely decorative force into a battle-hardened military with modern weaponry.

The army has justified the induction of lethal new automatic weapons, artillery, transport equipment and even attack helicopters to fight the Maoist insurgency. It says the guerrillas are using increasingly sophisticated long-range weapons and have acquired AK-47s from underground suppliers in India.

Contrary to public perception, however, it’s not just the Americans who are the main suppliers of military hardware to the Royal Nepali Army, but the Indians. Belgium, Britain and even China are the other suppliers.

The army has already replaced 5,000 of its standard issue SLR rifles with American M-16s. Another 15,000 are expected soon under the US government’s $12 million military aid to the Indian assistance is worth Rs 5 billion, most of which was grant aid.

“They are very willing to supply the arms under the INSAS provision and we are happy receiving most of them as grants,” one official told us. “Such supplies are done directly by the North Bloc without too much involvement of the Indian bureaucracy.”

Present arms

The army has justified the induction of lethal new automatic weapons, artillery, transport equipment and even attack helicopters to fight the insurgency that also includes night vision equipment, body armour and military training. The army is keen to replace the rest of its unreliable 30-year-old SLRs.

In the past two years, India has increased its hardware assistance under the Infantsy Small Arms System (INSAS) that includes 5.56 caliber rifles, mortars and machine guns. It has supplied 50 military trucks, ammunition and four light attack helicopters; two Cheetahs and two Lancears equipped with cannon and rocket pods that have already seen some action during flushing-out operations in the midwest.

The INSAS assistance is worth some Rs 5 billion, most of which was grant aid. “They are very willing to supply the arms under the INSAS provision and we are happy receiving most of them as grants,” one official told us. “Such supplies are done directly by the North Bloc without too much involvement of the Indian bureaucracy.”

Over-stretched and plagued by past mistakes, the national airline struggles to pull out of a nosedive.

Royal Nepal Airlines battles battered image

The New Zealand trekking guide had reported for her flight to Bangkok at six in the morning, but her Royal Nepal Airlines flight took off at ten the next morning. She got stuck in the packed terminal.

A Nepali academic’s early morning flight to Bangkok was canceled, so he was transferred to the evening Delhi flight. After waiting at the airport for nearly 12 hours, he was told that flight was also canceled. He abandoned his trip. Hundreds of passengers who had been bumped off another Delhi flight that week couldn’t take it any more and chanted slogans.

In the past month, there were a lot of horror stories. Many vowed never to fly Royal Nepal Airlines again and travel agencies started booking clients to other carriers.

Despite having shed all its routes in the past two years, the airline is struggling to maintain existing schedules with just two 757s. And when both jets get grounded with technical glitches like they did twice in the past month, RNAC earned a lot of abusive nicknames like ‘Royal Nepal Always Cancelled’ or ‘Royal Nepal Absolutely Corrupt.’

Managing Director Mohan Khanal admits the fleet utilisation leaves no margin for error (see interview, p7). But he says the state of the airline reflects the state of the war, the Royal Nepali Army has transformed itself from a largely decorative force into a battle-hardened military with modern weaponry.

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Freebies and allowances and the board has approved an immediate lease of a third 757 to stabilise schedules. News that Indian private airlines may soon be flying to Kathmandu has also lent a sense of urgency in the airline to get its act together.

For the longer term, management is awaiting a report commissioned through ICAO to examine the airline’s nett worth for the privatisation effort. The report is said to favour going into a joint venture partnership with a big international carrier, allowing the government to keep a 45 percent stake and selling a 5-10 percent stake to Royal Nepal Airlines employees.

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E ven the most hawkish hardliner will grudgingly admit that there is no military solution to the present conflict. The Maoist leadership knows better than most that their People’s War has in the past eight years turned an ornamental army into a powerful, battle-hardened force, made the monarchy more powerful, emasculated parliamentary parties, eroded the authority of constitutional organs and tilted away the early gains of their revolution by letting it get out of hand. The military brass, for its part, will confess that killing fellow-Nepalis and being dragged down to fight a nasty civil war is not its idea of fun. No army wants to be bogged down in a guerrilla war against its own people in this kind of terrain. The military’s argument is that the Maoists can be brought to negotiate by negotiating only by force of arms. The Maoist strategy is to hit hard at targets of their choice at regular intervals, while keeping the populace cowed down by terror. By now it should be clear to both sides that they can’t win, but they think that if they can drag it on long enough they won’t really lose either. It’s a classic vortex of violence: you keep fighting because if you don’t, you have to talk. Societies in conflict reach such points of stalemate when they have exhausted all other options except the military one. But we haven’t exhausted all other options, we haven’t even tried out the most pragmatic, bloodless alternatives. There are viable compromises that have only been half-explored: ways around the locked positions on the constituent assembly.

This past week till press time, there have been 33 security forces personnel killed, upwards of 100 Maoists dead and uncounted non-combatants disappeared at large. A housewife in Bhaarmala is killed by her husband in a bedroom by a stray bullet fired by panic-stricken villagers shooting wildly at no one in particular. A student on a motorbike in Pokhara is killed at a checkpoint by jittery police, after which, or dead. A housewife in Bhairawa is killed in her bedroom by a stray bullet fired by a Maoist.’"
A culture of fear has enveloped Nepal. Parachuting conflict specialists may link it to the purported Nepali culture of violence, but there are extant intra-connecting threats, not the least the royal takeover and its backing by certain Kathmandu-based embassies followed by military aid in the name of protecting people, peace and democracy. One diplomat said at the time that the royal move had to be supported because of a lack of alternatives. One cannot but help wonder what would have happened had there been no foreign intervention at that or other crucial junctures in our history. Could Nepal, left to our own devices (a thought unbearable to many official friends apparently) have done any worse? Would we have been able to better initiate processes that militarise society and enfeeble our democratic structures? Would we have been able to cultivate an all pervasive culture of fear and suspicion?

This is spreading amidst the day-to-day anonymous deaths of villagers, and now comes the idea of the civilian military campaign and its accompanying Village-Town Security Strategy (VTSS) under which locals are to be trained and armed to resist Maoist insurgents. The plan has been widely condemned by groups such as Amnesty International, the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) and national human rights bodies. Exactly why the Rural Volunteer Security Groups and Peace Committees is such a terrible idea and we will have longterm and disastrous impact for Nepal is clear from Guatemala’s experience with such voluntary civilian militia.

As pointed out by Amnesty International, such plans “place the civilian population in grave danger by seriously compromising their neutrality.” In contamination of the Geneva Convention, the establishment of a civilian militia blurs the distinction between civilians and combatants and renders all civilians at higher risk. The term ‘volunteer’ is made irrelevant in such situations: one must volunteer or be labelled a ‘public enemy’ with all its concomitant consequences. In the long run, this will have disastrous implications in tarring apart the social fabric, forcing one either to be ‘with’ the ‘volunteers’ or ‘against’ them—there is no neutral ground. Since the government cannot risk having the guns turned back on them, the civil militia are likely to be badly trained and armed. Thus the approach in practice appears little different from the Maoists and their tactics of using human shields.

The strategy of arming civilians in counter-insurgency was used to devastating effect by US-backed regimes in Latin America, notably Peru and Guatemala. In 1995 the Committee against Torture in the United Nations called for the complete abolition of so-called ‘Voluntary Committees of Civic Defence’ in Guatemalan view of the human rights violations and violence committed by these civilian militias. While it was officially disbanded in 1996, in November 2003 civil militia in the northern area of Nepal kidnapped and demanded a ransom for the local mayor. Once initiated, these civil militias cannot be easily disbanded. The difference between civil militia and death squads, private armies, vigilantes and warlordism is less tonous that we think.

In Nepal, the RPP has taken over the civilian apparatus. We have CDOs under effective military control within a unified command structure who are unlikely to go against the directives of the army which surrounds them. Now, we also have armed civilians who constitute another coercive force. In the midst of this, the government plans to have elections. Elections can be held. The question is, will they be free, fair and unfettered by fear?

It is not clear from where the idea of a voluntary civilian militia emerged. It may have been a conflict adviser with background in Latin America who flew in, scribbled some notes and flew back out. It may have resulted from the input of Kathmandu-based analysts who must either be ‘with’ the ‘volunteers’ or ‘against’ them. If we are to go with here, we Nepalis have to live with the consequences. Explain how to keep a village safe by encircling it in a wall of barbed wire, Lt Colonel Nathan Swanns, battalion commander of the forces occupying Abu Ghobain, Iraq, said the following: “With a healthy dose of fear and violence, and a lot of money for projects, I think we can convince these people that we are here to help them.”

We have been encircled by, and ensnared in, all of those three variables in Nepal for a while now. But it is becoming harder for many of us tothreads that concern of doing of all shapes and sizes are here to help us. The paradox is that the logic of the fear, violence and money has made it harder for Nepali people to press for peace and real democratic change without the help of foreign intervention. And that is a fearful prospect.

Seira Tamang is a political scientist based at Martin Chautari.

Turning civilians into combatants

When the social fabric is in tatters, it is only a small step away from civil militia to death squads, private armies, vigilantes and warlordism. Is the idea of the civilian military campaign and its accompanying Village-Town Security Strategy (VTSS) under which locals are to be trained and armed to resist Maoist insurgents.

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**Why did they do this to us?**

After the battle, Khimdi still lies deserted, the villagers forced to live in the forest.

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**Vale of Forgetfulness and Unreality**

By Daniel Lak

W hat is it going to take to wake up the elite of this blighted land? Anyone who has not gone to a protest in Kathmandu will have heard the refrain:“Scaring away the wild elephants,” he replies, which prompts his wife to interrupt: “It’s not wild elephants, it’s tigers!”

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Perhaps it’s time for Nepal to declare its independence. From Kathmandu.

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Netra KC

I was a good place to sink their roots, fertile and green slopes of the Siwalik in far-western Nepal. The destruction of the village of Khimdi had done the job. They lived with the rhythm of the seasons and the movement of the forest and the village had shielded them from the violence, for a time. As the exception of 1 December, everything changed. In the end, it was Khimdi’s strategic location in the middle of the districts of Doli, Kafi and Kudhur that turned it into a battlefield. The pachéd battle lasted 15 hours, and then it ended. 30 people were dead, including two villagers. The Maoists claimed 25 army personnel died that day, many of whom were young. The bodies remained rotting there for two days.

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**Nertha KC** in Khimdi, Kailali

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Forgetfulness and Unreality discovers that Nepal is in deep distress.

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The economy? Forget it. The Finance Minister may have been a serious attempt to restore equilibrium, to bring the people back into the relative safety of the forests. As we get ready to depart Khimdi, the group of locals who had agreed to speak to us had just one question: “The two sides came here, they killed each other, drove us out, and then they left. Can anyone tell us why they did this to us?”

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With respect to His Majesty, what does it take to get a sense of urgency into the royal palace? Things are deteriorating badly on every level and only a serious attempt to restore equilibrium, to bring the people back into power, can offer a glimmer of hope.

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East not so red

The Maoist strategy to go east has suffered setbacks.

Maoist eastern regional in-charge, Apurup Sepaha in Jajarkot. Earlier, the army was able to recapture Gunja Subba, the deputy chief of a Maoist-affiliated group who has been speaking out openly to the media against the Maoist leadership. Said one security source: “After the raids and the arrests, we have been successful in many of our offensives and have been able to arrest many more most rebels.” Most of them are said to be from the Maoist-associated Limbu Liberation Front and the Kirat Workers’ Party, the source said. Brigadier General Man Dhoj Budhamagar at the army’s eastern command headquarter told us the main reason for the Maoist setbacks have been differences between their political workers and the military wing. The Maoist party’s relations with the associated Limbuwans and Kirat parties have also often been tenuous.

Rebels in the eastern region to launch major attacks on army bases. But the rebels appear to be adjusting to the region.

Adjusting to the region

The cadre do not seem to be as ideologically committed to the revolution as Maoists elsewhere, and military sources say they have been quite willing to pass on vital information. It was on the basis of a tip off from a captured Maoist that the security forces were able to raid a remote area of the rebels’ eastern command military chief, Bhusan Phani (‘Ananta’) in Bhairab on 9 October. The raid yielded important documents, a computer with a work plan, a satellite phone with pre-paid SIM card from Singapore and a telex. The raid was captured and provided information about the Maoist strategy in the east.

In mid-November the army raided the house of the satellite phone with pre-paid SIM card from Singapore

DAMBAR KRISHNA SHRESTHA

Nepalis want to come back and serve their terms in prison
to a hospice run by a charity a few days before he died.

Other activists who have been lobbying with the Nepali authorities to expedite an extradition treaty to bring Nepali inmates home are also perceived to be cooperating closely with Nepal in meeting this challenge, the embassy stated.

The Interestingly, the Nepali government has also expressed concern over the estortion demands against two India-Nepal joint-venture companies and said the government had agreed to provide additional security.

Nepali inmate dies in Thailand

Don’t meet in India: embassy

The Indian Embassy in Kathmandu says it doesn’t approve of Indian territory being used for clandestine meetings between Maoists and Nepali politicians like the one between the UML and Maoist leadership near Lucknow last month.

“We would urge that all concerned should refrain from such activity in future,” the embassy statement issued on Monday said. It also admitted it was possible that Maoists were using the open border to test the forces of good and evil, and that it was giving them sanctuary. “The Maoist insurgency represents as much a threat to India’s security as it does to Nepal, and we are committed to cooperating closely with Nepal in meeting this challenge,” the embassy stated.

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But in the field, it is the Belgian Minimi M249 belt-fed machine guns that soldiers are really excited about. “The Minimi is the best deterrence we have against Maoist attacks at present,” one army source told us, citing its capacity to fire 1,000 rounds a minute up to a range of 1km. The Minimis replace earlier clip-ammunition guns that took time to reload and were not useful in Maoist human wave attacks. The army bought 5,500 Minimis from Belgium last year in a controversial E25 million deal that triggered a political crisis in Belgium with the resignation of the foreign minister.

A similar controversy has now erupted in Britain over the supply of military equipment to Nepal. Last year, Britain bought two Mi-17 transport helicopters for the Royal Nepali Army under its ‘Global Conflict Prevention Pool’. However, the British government has come under fire from human rights activists for contravening its own arms exports guidelines not to supply military equipment to armies that flout human rights. A British embassy official in Kathmandu refuted this charge: “The UK has been supplying non-lethal equipment to the RNA that are not used directly to kill people.” Britain is now said to be considering an army request for secondhand short-takeoff and landing transport planes.

Having acquired anti-aircraft guns from China in the late 80s, the army has recently taken delivery of Chinese-made field communication equipment. “Of course, the anti-aircraft guns are not for firing at planes, but they are ideal in mountainous terrain,” one army source said.

Thapa tried to seize the initiative with a timebound offer of amnesty to Maoists who surrender, guaranteeing them and their families safety in a special rehabilitation camp in Tanahun. If they surrender with their weapons, they even get a cash bonus.

Thapa even spelled out plans for the medical treatment of injured rebels, higher education and even employment guarantees. Legal cases filed against them will be withdrawn and the ex-Maoists will be allowed to take part in political activities.

As long as he was at it, Thapa also criticised political parties for getting the students agitated and demonstrating against the king. Asked about the two student leaders detained and charged with sedition, he said they would be prosecuted according to the law. Students blocked roads and set fire to tyres in continuing protests for the release of their leaders.

Thapa labelled Christina Rocca’s visit to Nepal as ‘routine’, but admitted that she has raised the issue of human rights violations in meetings with government and military officials. He added: “But we assured her that we were doing our very best to prevent such violations.”

Clockwise from top: Soldiers with M-16s and tripod mounted Belgian Minimis during an exercise at an army base in the midwest, Lancer helicopters are fitted with firing pods, soldier takes aim through his belt-fed machinegun.

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A similar controversy has now erupted in Britain over the supply of military equipment to Nepal. Last year, Britain bought two Mi-17 transport helicopters for the Royal Nepali Army under its ‘Global Conflict Prevention Pool’. However, the British government has come under fire from human rights activists for contravening its own arms exports guidelines not to supply military equipment to armies that flout human rights. A British embassy official in Kathmandu refuted this charge: “The UK has been supplying non-lethal equipment to the RNA that are not used directly to kill people.” Britain is now said to be considering an army request for secondhand short-takeoff and landing transport planes.

Having acquired anti-aircraft guns from China in the late 80s, the army has recently taken delivery of Chinese-made field communication equipment. “Of course, the anti-aircraft guns are not for firing at planes, but they are ideal in mountainous terrain,” one army source said.

Thapa tried to seize the initiative with a timebound offer of amnesty to Maoists who surrender, guaranteeing them and their families safety in a special rehabilitation camp in Tanahun. If they surrender with their weapons, they even get a cash bonus.

Thapa even spelled out plans for the medical treatment of injured rebels, higher education and even employment guarantees. Legal cases filed against them will be withdrawn and the ex-Maoists will be allowed to take part in political activities.

As long as he was at it, Thapa also criticised political parties for getting the students agitated and demonstrating against the king. Asked about the two student leaders detained and charged with sedition, he said they would be prosecuted according to the law. Students blocked roads and set fire to tyres in continuing protests for the release of their leaders.

Thapa labelled Christina Rocca’s visit to Nepal as ‘routine’, but admitted that she has raised the issue of human rights violations in meetings with government and military officials. He added: “But we assured her that we were doing our very best to prevent such violations.”

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“The airline develops if the country develops.”

Mohan Khanal has been with Royal Nepal Airlines for 30 years, rising up the ranks to become general manager. He spoke to us this week about the national flag carrier’s poor reliability and what he is doing to improve services.

Nepali Times: In the past month, Royal Nepal Airlines’ image has been battered even more than usual because of severe flight disruptions. Do you have plans to overcome this?

Mohan Khanal: Unfortunately, twice this past month both our 757s were grounded for a period and I accept that this has dented our reputation. But since then, the technical problems have been fixed and the planes and our service are back to normal. Part of the reason was that the country itself is sliding. Unfortunately, twice this past month our Twin Otters flying again to regularise the service to remote area airports and that service is going very well to meet present demands.

As someone who has risen up the ranks, when would you say the rot set in?

Things started going really wrong 12 years ago. We couldn’t implement our own strategies for expansion: for example, if we had added the extra 767 and started phasing out Twin Otters in 1995 as we were supposed to, we would be in a much better shape today. In the past 12 years we had 21 general managers. They were short-term political appointees, there was no continuity and it was ad hoc. These were people who did not know the ‘A’ of aviation or the ‘T’ of tourism. What else can you call something that goes into oversupply, is quality. Unfortunately, quality has never been an issue here so catering companies trim their costs to plump up profits.

People keep saying Thai International and Royal Nepal started at the same time, and look at where Thai is now. Yeah, I’ve heard that being said many times and my standard response is: look at where Thailand is now. An airline can’t be an island of efficiency when the whole country is going downhill. When your country is like Charkhil Adda, how can you have an airline that runs like Singapore Airlines? That Indian model. The major issue in Nepal, like any other product that goes into oversupply, is quality. Unfortunately, quality has never been an issue here so catering companies trim their costs to plump up profits.

The catering business poses a challenge to hotels that operate in the organised sector. With little regulation on quality or product, unlike in hotels, caterers get away with anything. Furthermore, these companies do not have to take care of labour benefits or even pay minimum wages. It seems labour organisations have exempted this category from seeking proper labour rights and benefits. The lower costs of infrastructure and operations are a threat to hotels that have to abide by union rules, fair pay and strict quality controls. While the bigger hotels have yet to feel the pinch, smaller hotels are feeling the heat. They are beginning to comprehend that they do not operate on a level playing field. Perhaps this is why there may be a little truth in rumours that the Beed has heard about a few hotels that have their food brought in by catering companies to cut costs. If there is any truth in that, such measures can only be short-term.

Another reason why the catering business is so lucrative is because they operate outside the tax net. No bills are made, service taxes and VAT aren’t applicable and most of the business is simply ‘cash down’. Catering companies that offer no questions-asked services are a blessing for customers too, especially for those who are nervous of being revealed where their cash comes from or to those who’d rather not pay extra taxes on an already expensive wedding.

It’s only a matter of time before the Finance Ministry wise up to this business, which at current estimates, rakes in more than Rs 100 million annually. Government regulations are necessary to make catering companies improve the quality of their products and services. Catering companies worldwide have an equal share in the food service business compared to hotels and restaurants. They must be brought under the tax net, the quality of their assets must be monitored and aspects of labour legislation looked into. On the face of it, the current status quo might seem like a good thing—everyone has their cake and gets to eat it too—but it is vital to get the right regulations in place before the situation gets out of hand, just some more food for thought as we tuck into more heaped platesful at the next wedding reception.

arthabeed@yahoo.com.
The new nativity set has Mary in a phanrya and Baby Jesus sleeps in a kokro, minded by a yak or two.

We didn’t have time enough to stuff a turkey but that will be available, with all the trimmings at better hotels and Mike’s Breakfast, where the Christmas Day buffets are always gastronomically memorable. At today’s frantic pace, nobody has the time to bake their own Christmas cakes, let alone let it mature for the traditional 30 days or so. Why bake when you can buy from Jawalakhel’s Herman Helmer’s Bakerie? This holiday you might want to pass up the Bordeaux and try a little Nepali wine instead. Hinwa brings out a decent red and white. If the palate protests, you could always salvage it with Executive Chef Victor Holla’s excellent recipe: heat the red over a low flame, throw in a quartered orange, ginger, sugar (optional), lots of cinnamon, a little clove, cardamom and a dash of lemon heated through for some heart-warming grog. If you want a little more punch (no pun) add a dash of cognac or VSOP brandy.

Having established that Christmas is definitely not about deprivation and denial (the devout save that for Lent), there is something wholesomely indulgent about Wild Earth’s products. Their Tibetan aromatherapy oils in handcrafted miniature wooden chests, soap reborn as Soap Suds and other delights rival the best of Body Shop. The scented ‘Hangover’ herbal pillow should come in handy, especially post-holiday season.

We’re not certain if it is indeed better to give than to receive, another Biblical saw, but if it involves a little thought, some imagination and a dose of good taste, both will be a pleasure.
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Two-speed EU

BRUSSELS – As the conference on a new constitution for the European Union collapsed last weekend, a dispute arose over a “two-speed Europe.” At the close of the meeting, France and Germany, the core founders members of the EU, talked of the possibility of like-minded nations integrating more closely in the absence of a constitution, which could leave other states on the sidelines. “If we do not reach a consensus, a two-speed Europe will emerge,” German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder said after the talks broke down. French President Jacques Chirac added that he also hoped to see a small group working together in closer cooperation. The problem of handling the EU constitution will now fall on Ireland who takes over EU presidency in January. The breakdown capped a year in which EU member states were split over war in Iraq, when EU budget rules were bent, Sweden voted against joining the Euro and Britain delayed a referendum on the same issue. The failure of the summit will undoubtedly add to the growing crisis of confidence in the EU. The first test of this will be elections to the European Parliament next June. (IPS)

The right rises

PARIS – Recent elections and opinion polls show that parties taking neo-fascist and racist positions are winning substantial support all over Europe. A new survey in France indicates that more than a fifth of voters support the neo-fascist Front National (FN) led by Jean-Marie Le Pen. The Le Monde survey showed 22 percent support Le Pen’s party for massive expulsion of immigrants, especially of Muslims, of bringing back the death penalty and defence of “traditional values.” The survey says 50 percent of voters would find a FN candidate acceptable for presidency of a French region.

The success of neo-fascist political parties is not a French phenomenon. Right-wing extremists have risen to public office in Switzerland, Italy, Austria, Denmark and Portugal. In Italy, Austria and Denmark, openly racist politicians are or have been members of ruling coalitions. “Nationalism, fear of change and hatred of foreigners are the ingredients of this populism,” the Courrier International said in a report titled “Xenophile populists have launched the conquest of Europe.” The paper published a map of Europe in which only Sweden, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Britain, and Spain appear free of significant neo-fascist influence. (IPS)

Keeping the farm

GENT – As the conference on a new constitution for the European Union collapsed last weekend, a dispute arose over a “two-speed Europe.” At the close of the meeting, France and Germany, the core founders members of the EU, talked of the possibility of like-minded nations integrating more closely in the absence of a constitution, which could leave other states on the sidelines. “If we do not reach a consensus, a two-speed Europe will emerge,” German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder said after the talks broke down. French President Jacques Chirac added that he also hoped to see a small group working together in closer cooperation. The problem of handling the EU constitution will now fall on Ireland who takes over EU presidency in January. The breakdown capped a year in which EU member states were split over war in Iraq, when EU budget rules were bent, Sweden voted against joining the Euro and Britain delayed a referendum on the same issue. The failure of the summit will undoubtedly add to the growing crisis of confidence in the EU. The first test of this will be elections to the European Parliament next June. (IPS)

JIM LOBE in Washington

P resident George W Bush celebrated a second victory in Iraq with confirmation that occupation forces had captured fugitive former president Saddam Hussein on Saturday evening at a farmhouse outside Tikrit. But even the normally cool US commander-in-chief, who addressed the nation by television from the White House, stressed that the former Iraqi dictator’s arrest will not mean a quick end to the occupation’s armed resistance.

“The capture of Saddam Hussein does not mean the end of violence in Iraq,” Bush declared solemnly at the conclusion of a short statement that described Saddam’s detention as “crucial to the rise of a free Iraq”. Bush’s resignation to more resistance reflected much of the reaction to the day’s news, as lawmakers and analysts described the capture as a potentially major breakthrough that would not necessarily, however, prove decisive.

Indeed, some specialists warned even before Sunday’s announcement that Saddam’s death or detention would prove largely irrelevant to the difficult problems faced by US and coalition forces in Iraq. The reason lay in the fact that loyalty to Hussein—or even to his Ba’ath Party—had ceased to be a catalyst for the insurgency and the complex internal political situation in Iraq has begun to fuel more tension and violence. Some even suggested that Saddam’s capture might actually create new problems for the occupation by empowering sectors in the country’s Shi’a community to test the occupation and build up their demands for direct elections to a new Iraqi government with more militant tactics. “Now that it is publicly clear that (Hussein) is finished,” noted Iraqi specialist Juan Cole, who teaches history at the University of Michigan, “the Shias may be emboldened. They may therefore now gradually throw off their political timidity, and come out more forcefully into the streets when they despair.”

Saddam, of course, had been the target number one for US invasion forces, who actually tried to kill him in two “decapitation” air strikes in the course of the war. The US military expressed great confidence that they were closing in on the former president after his two sons, Uday and Qusay, were killed in a four-hour shootout at a house where they were hiding in Mosul. But over the days and weeks that followed, the trail appeared to cool, although US military and Iraqi told reporters constantly they believed Saddam had gone ground somewhere around Tikrit.

In the end, that proved to be correct. Tipped off by Iraqi informants, US commanders said they found him in what they described as a 2 x 2.5 “spider hole” built under a farmhouse outside the city where Saddam grew up. The bearded fugitive reportedly offered no resistance to US troops, and Iraqi political leaders who were taken to the scene Sunday described his attitude as defiant. Video tape taken by US captors showed him being examined by medics, possibly for head lice. Commanders said they did not broadcast his capture until they could determine positively through DNA testing that it was indeed the former dictator.

Although military commanders have long insisted that resistance to the occupation was being carried out primarily by “Saddam loyalists”, they had never ascribed to him any real leadership role, apart from his status as a symbol, particularly for the Shi’as. That appeared to be borne out by the circumstances of his capture. Not only was Saddam bedraggled, he also lacked any apparent means of electronic or satellite communication, such as a telephone, with his supporters.

That was noted by some observers, who said it proved the resistance was clearly operating independently of Saddam. “Given the location and circumstances of his capture, it makes clear that Saddam was not managing the insurgency, and that he had very little control or influence,” said Senator Jay Rockefeller, the Democratic leader on the Senate Intelligence Committee. “That is significant and disturbing because it means the insurgents are not fighting for Saddam: they’re fighting against the United States.”

Others argued that, regardless of Saddam’s relevance to resistance operations, his capture was bound to have a demoralising effect on the insurgents, particularly members of the Ba’ath. Michael O’Hanlon, a military specialist at the Brookings Institution, told National Public Radio (NPR) the psychological impact of the capture was a “devastating blow to (Saddam’s) supporters”. That impact could be more significant on anti-Saddam sectors in Iraq, according to observers, although they failed to agree on whether it would, on balance, favour the occupation.

These views, as well as the administration’s continued insistence that the insurgency consists mainly of “foreigners”, are clearly the ingredients of this populism, “the Courier International said in a report titled “Xenophile populists have launched the conquest of Europe.” The paper published a map of Europe in which only Sweden, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Britain, and Spain appear free of significant neo-fascist influence. (IPS)
Since World War II, Japan has played a subservient role to the United States in foreign policy on nearly every issue to come its way. Its servile role has often been embarrassing, and frequently left many observers with the impression that Japan was no more than a bit player to its master in Washington.

Nearly four years into the 21st century and more than a decade after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the relationship between the United States and Japan that was forged in the early days of the Cold War does not seem to have changed much at all. In fact, as the two nations celebrated the 50th anniversary of the US-Japan Security Treaty in November, Japanese leaders appeared to be bent on deepening their reliance on the United States, seemingly without any national debate about whether a close US military alliance with the United States is in Japan's best interest or not.

The best example of Japan’s willingness to do the United States’ bidding is the Middle East, where the cabinet of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi agreed last week to deploy 1,000 soldiers from Japan’s Self-Defence Forces (SDF) to Iraq at Washington’s request. Koizumi’s dispatch of the SDF, which comes in the aftermath of the killing of two Japanese diplomats in Iraq, marks the largest overseas deployment of Japanese troops since the Second World War.

But this significant turn in Japanese policy would never have taken place if President Bush had not reversed two centuries of US policy with his unilateralist, pre-emptive strike on Iraq. “Rebuilding Iraq is necessary for the stability of the entire Middle East and the rest of the world, and is in Japan’s best interests,” Koizumi said in a nationally broadcast news conference on 10 December. This, of course, exactly mirrors Bush’s belief that rebuilding Iraq is necessary for the stability in the Middle East and the world, as Bush has made clear in his many speeches on the subject.

Koizumi went on to say that Japan was meeting its responsibility as a long-time US ally, as opposed to a sovereign nation with its own obligations to the world. “The US is Japan’s only ally, and it is striving very hard to build a stable and democratic government in Iraq,” he said. “Japan must also be a trustworthy ally to the US.” Apparently those words were designed to reassure the Japanese public, which is overwhelmingly opposed to his decision to involve Japan in America’s overseas ventures. Recent polls show that only about one-third of Japanese voters approve of the decision to send the non-combat troops to Iraq.

Japan’s overseas deployments have been closely aligned with US policy goals as well. Its first overseas peacekeeping mission, which took place under UN auspices in 1993 in Cambodia, was widely seen in Japan as an experiment to gauge both foreign and domestic reaction. It was followed by another “blue helmet” peacekeeping mission to Kenya. In 1998, however, Japan’s overseas military capacity expanded significantly when it signed a major agreement to provide logistics support to US forces in Asia. Then, following the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001, which took the lives of 24 Japanese citizens, Japan sent 24 naval ships to the Indian Ocean.

As a junior partner to the United States in an alliance that has remained unchanged for over half a century, Japan may merely be moving in sync with the changes taking place in Washington—just as the former satellites of the Soviet Union might still be orbiting Moscow if their long-dead patron was still alive.

**A trustworthy ally**

by TIM SHORROCK

Is Japan’s relationship with the United States in their best interest?

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Needed: trust between king and parties

Keshar Jung Rayamajhi in Deshantar, 14 December

The king has said he would be happy if there is a referendum to decide whether the constitution should be amended by the parliament or whether a new constitution should be made through a constituent assembly. The peace talks failed in August because there was no agreement on the issue of a constituent assembly.

The Maoist rebels should have dropped the idea of a republic and accepted a constitutional monarchy. The government should also have accorded a referendum to elections of a constituent assembly. Pleasing everyone is not possible in politics. In a multiparty system, agreements and disagreements are bound to happen. The political parties should submit a proposal to the king for an all-party government. Under the current circumstances, the king is not to be blamed at all. He already entrusted the government with responsibilities and so the latter should function for the king. An article in the constitution clearly states that for the larger interest of the country the king will protect the constitution and will also follow it.

The king had no other choice but to sack the elected prime minister last year. After the royal palace massacre, King Gyanendra became the head of the state. He has ruled within the parameters of constitutional monarchy and multiparty democracy. The king has the duty to use his rights to maintain law and order. The fact that the palace has deployed army, police and the armed police force proves that it has certainly felt threatened by the Maoist insurgency. King Birendra was of the opinion that the government should hold talks with Maoist rebels. I agree that the rebels should give up arms and reach an understanding through talks. I believe that they can also take part in elections.

There could have been some dialogue between the palace and the rebels through mediators in the past. The king appointed Surya Bahadur Thapa as prime minister in line with the condition of the country, the mindset of the people and the international context. He saw no solution coming from the five parties. The duty of the Raj Parishad is to counsel the king whenever he wants it. During my tenure with the Raj Parishad, we used to send our representatives to different districts. They used to come back with reports on the people’s opinions and feelings. Based on that information, we counselled the king.

There has to be an understanding between the king and the parties. It is important for peace, solution of the Maoist problem and to provide a direction to the country. The political parties should stop being suspicious about the king and instead take him into their confidence.

Taxing pilgrims

Rajivani, 14 November

More and more Muslim pilgrims to Mecca are facing extortion from Maoist rebels in different districts of the country. The Maoists are said to demand between Rs 25,000-30,000 from every Muslim preparing to go to Mecca this year. Chairman of the central Maoist committee, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, says the Maoists are targeting religious people.

Maoists say that they are the only ones who can ensure safety in Mecca.

Dr. Pushpa

Unaccountable

Kantipur, 14 December

The Maoists are now in control of the government of Nepal. The Maoist rebels should have dropped their demand between Rs 25,000-30,000 from every Muslim preparing to go to Mecca. The Maoists say that they are the only ones who can ensure safety in Mecca.

Dr. Pushpa

Security first

Himal Khabarpatrika,16-30 December

Turning schools into police stations, that seems to be the way things are going in Rajhena VDC of Bajhang. Gyanakot Secondary School has been removed and replaced with Maharaja Armed Police Division’s DIG Office. There have been protests to save the only secondary school in this village. “We pleaded with them but they kept building the police station here,” says Shanker Sharma, chairman of the school’s management committee. “They should not have helped the Maoists to turn the people against the government’s Kilo Sierra II operation in the early days of the insurgency which fuelled the spread of terrorism. This operation has expanded the Maoist cadre and also offered a rare sight of a tiger in the forest. The Maoists should have dropped their demand between Rs 25,000-30,000 from every Muslim preparing to go to Mecca this year. Chairman of the central Maoist committee, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, says the Maoists are targeting religious people.

Maoists say that they are the only ones who can ensure safety in Mecca.

Dr. Pushpa
One hundred years of Nepal-Nippon

One hundred years ago, Nepal’s Rana rulers were so impressed by Japan’s process of modernisation that they looked upon it as a role model.

A mong other Rana rulers of his period, Deb-Shumshere was a reformer and he was impressed by Japan. Modernisation and the rapid strides that the country was taking in science and technology. He looked at Japan as a role model and initiated education reforms in the country in 1901.

As part of a strategy to reduce dependence on the British in India, he also seemed to have decided to cultivate closer ties with Japan. The first outcome of this decision was the departure of eight Nepali students for higher studies in Japan more than 100 years ago (see pic, top). The strategy was what is today known as ‘technology transfer’, and Nepali rulers decided on the subjects that they felt the army of the new nation needed: armaments, horticulture, and transportation.

At this time, Japan was in the process of secretly travel to Tibet and ultimately succeeded in doing so through Dolpo in July, 1900. His book Three years in Tibet, published in Madras in 1909, narrated his travels.

According to the different books on Japan-Nepal relations, Kawaguchi liked Nepal so much that he suggested to the Rana rulers that more effort should be made in education for development. It was on his suggestion that Nepali students were sent to Japan.

The scholarships materialised during the rule of Prime Minister Chandra Shumshere. Eight students, 17 cooks and attendants and a guide from India, Swami Giri, were sent to Japan. The Nepali students were aged 18-27 and they were officially called the ‘students of Nepal’.

The students were aged 18-27 and they had interpreters to overcome their language barrier. Among them were Sushila Narasingh Rana and Bika Bahadur Basnet studying armament engineering, Deb Narsingh Rana and Bal Narasingh Rajbhandari in mining, Deep Narasingh Rana in agriculture, Hem Bahadur Rajbhandari in mechanical engineering, Raul Lah Singh in applied chemistry and Bichar Man Singh in ceramics.

The students lived in a large house and because of their high caste, some had their own cooks and attendants. By all accounts, the Nepali students were diligent and worked hard. They returned to Nepal in 1905 and were immediately given jobs to put what they learnt to good use.

Students who studied armament and mining were employed to develop the Howar mountain gas, three-pound gun, and worked to modernise Nepal’s animals. Deep Narasingh, who studied agriculture, helped turn Japanese flowers into wisteria, chrysanthemum, persimmon and chestnut, which have now almost become native to Nepal. Another student was appointed to Saptari for the construction of the Charka Nadi. Nepal’s first irrigation canal. Bal Narasingh Raimahi minced the one paisa and five paisa coins at the request of the Nepali government.

Although they were enthusiastic about developing the country, some Rana rulers became suspicious that the students had been infected by the ‘democracy bug’ while in Japan. They started to talk about democracy, development and even about the ability to make grenades with which to attack government offices! Most were subsequently transferred out of government service. Some were even jailed.

The seeds that were planted then by Kawaguchi, Deb-Shumshere and the eight pioneering students is now being carried forward by more than 200 Nepali students studying in Japan. The Nepali Students’ Associations in Japan (NESA) has 138 registered student members today; 22 enrolled as undergraduates, 52 in masters programs and 65 in PhD programs.

Kumar Basnet is a PhD student at Tokyo’s Sophia University, and president of the Nepali Students’ Association in Japan. He wrote this piece on the occasion of the 100th National Day, 23 December.
The study cyclone over the Bay this week brought winds from the northwest, clearing up the air over central Nepal and dramatically bringing down night temperatures by 3 degrees in a 24-hour period. Despite overcast skies, the clouds turned out to be moisture deficient and the expected drizzles did not materialize. Another western front crossing Kathmandu in this satellite picture taken on Thursday morning will also fizzle out by the time it gets to us. So there’s just a slight possibility of a white Christmas in the higher reaches of western Nepal.

The Kathmandu air quality index has improved, rising above 140 today. Pollution levels are still above the danger mark, with the PM10 particles that are small enough to enter the human body concentration increased by 5 percent and on 13 December it crossed 300 micrograms per cubic meter for the first time this winter. The last time the air in Putali Sadak was this bad was on 13 June 2003, when pollution levels were 200 micrograms per cubic meter.

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Nepal's small Christian community is excited about Christmas, which it calls "hamro Dasai". Baby Jesus, the Virgin Mary, Joseph, the Three Kings—the Christian icons of Christmas are being Nepalified.

At the Church of the Assumption in Jawalakhel, Fr Bogati describes what attracts even people from other faiths to come see the Christmas day celebrations: "They feel at home, like in a temple." During Nepali mass anyone can perform arati with dhoop instead of the incense used in traditional Catholic services. "And after communion, they are given flowers as prasad, or blessings so they don't go away empty handed," the father explains.

The church itself is a testament to cultural overlaps. The brick exterior is lined with pillars reminiscent of those found at Hindu temples across the Valley. Guardian angels appear as dwar palaks at either side of the entrance (see pic, bottom left) and the heavy doors are carved wood complete with Buddhist lotus symbols. On the walls, thangka hangings depict various Biblical scenes. In one, Jesus and his disciples break bread over the Last Supper inside a Nepali house while ominous black clouds swirl overhead.

Before Christmas Eve mass, many Christians go carolling, a custom some say has been imported from Darjeeling. Carol khelne, or "playing carol", is similar to the deosi and bhailo traditions during Tihar. It's a door-to-door ministry, sharing the good news of Jesus' birth and being witnesses to their faith. Some of the carols are English staples translated into Nepali while others are original Nepali compositions.

Like in the last few Christmases, this year there will be no Midnight Mass because of transportation and security problems. Most churches will instead celebrate an evening mass. Then, as in Sagar Rizal's home, the service is followed by a family celebration. "It's a good time for family to come together and have a bhoj. The feast is mostly Nepali food and some bring birthday cakes. We decorate our homes and wear new clothes."

Festive Christmas celebrations 2003:

**Catholic services:**
- 24 December Christmas Eve Mass at The Church of the Assumption, Jawalakhel 6PM 5526732
- 25 December Christmas Day Mass at The Church of the Assumption, Jawalakhel 9AM & 5PM 5526732

**Protestant services:**
- 25 December Christmas Day Mass at Birendra International Convention Centre, Baneshwor 10AM 5533564 (Koinonia Patan Church)
- 25 December Christmas Day Mass at Nepali Isaimandali Gyaneshwor Church, Gyaneshwor 11AM 4414489

**FATMESTER**
- 24 December, 11AM CATH: 1200
- 24 December, 2PM CATH: 2222
- 25 December, 1PM CATH: 900
- 25 December, 6PM CATH: 1666

For more information on Christmas celebrations, visit the Christmas Edition of Nepal Times Online.
100 years of flying around aimlessly

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his week the world is celebrating the centennial of powered flight. Giant leaps have been taken ever since those two famous brothers, whose names escape me at the moment, became the first heavier-than-air humans to fly at an altitude of six feet above mean sea level, and remain airborne for exactly 2.5 seconds before smashing into a parked horse. The exhilaration! The thrill! The excruciating pain!

It is natural for us, living as we do in the technologically superior age of double-decker Airbus 380s, mothballed Concordes and Twin Otters with no toilets, to pooh-pooh the achievement of those early aviation pioneers. Just try doing controlled man-powered flight yourself. Go on, attach a pair of wings to your bicycle and attempt to soar into the wide blue yonder while coasting down Panitanki downhill. Not so easy is it?

Ever since early hominoids gazed up at the birds and watched them swoop across the heavens to drop guano on the heads of unsuspecting passersby, he has yearned to do the same (swoop across the heavens, I mean). In the course of trying to imitate the birds and the bees, mankind has had many false starts during which unexpectedly, and without warning, the force of gravity has made its presence felt, and mankind has had to be scuppered off the asphalts so he could try flying again another day. But try and large, we must say that, as a species, have made progress in the last century in pinpointing the main cause of deep vein thrombosis.

Here in Nepal, the Ministry of Civil Aviation has in the past 50 years gone through a lot of trouble to ensure that the romance of domestic airline travel keeps abreast of the latest technological advancements by making it mandatory to have family-size barf bags on all flights to Jomsom after 9AM.

Modern aviation is governed by Murphy’s Law, which states inter alia that the guy with the window seat on a long flight has to be the chap with a technical malfunction of his bladder. Or, it is always the most garrulous gentleman in the universe with his ample girth who gets to sit next to you. On a direct night flight to Europe, the bulkhead bassinet in front of you must be occupied by a baby in an advanced state of colic who wails non-stop right across the airspace of all the ex-Soviet Central Asian republics. Sooner or later another flight to Biratnagar is going to fly in hot air, but as long as it doesn’t collide with a catering truck, we don’t mind.

100 years of flying

For Nepali gaining, making it big in the music industry is a distant dream. The wandering minstrels with their unique three-string fiddles called sarangi, are often ostracised for belonging to a ‘low’ caste. But Jhalakman Gandartha rose above the social restrictions on the strength of his talent for music and lyrics. The outpouring of national loss at his death last month was a fitting tribute to a man who did more to make the gaine’s sarangi and plaintive lyrics popular in Nepal and abroad than anyone else.

Born to a poor fisherman near Pokhara, Jhalakman spent his youth fishing and singing door-to-door with his sarangi. An encounter with the legendary folk poet Dharma Thapa in his village changed the direction of his life. Jhalakman was invited to Kathmandu to participate in a nationwide folk music competition where his stirring “He Barai…” was judged first. This passionate ballad describes the loss and bereavement of a Gurkha soldier’s family after he is killed in action in a foreign war, and is relevant now more than ever because the haunting words resonate at a time when Nepalis are dying at the hands of fellow Nepalis.

The respect and honour that Jhalakman received after his death was in sharp contrast to the disregard shown to him by established musicians and singers when he was alive. The singer himself was unselfish about his talent and taught anyone keen to learn how to play the sarangi, although many never credited him when they became famous. Jhalakman’s wish to pass on his musical talent to his grandchildren remained unfulfilled and his impoverished family couldn’t even raise money for his funeral.

Modest till the end, Jhalakman played from the heart, for the love of his music. He could coax 36 different notes from his instrument and recorded more than 250 songs in his lifetime—music that will live on in Nepali hearts. Jhalakman’s immortal words in an interview shortly before his death: “As long as the madal and sarangi exist, Nepali music will never die.”

(Peshal Pokhrel)