At the gates

The last time scenes like this were seen so close to the royal palace was during the People’s Movement in 1990. All this week, student protestors and police fought pitched battles in the centre of Kathmandu. Many were injured as police charged students shouting inflammatory anti-monarchy slogans. Having failed to galvanise popular support for their agitation, the five-party alliance has now instructed their student wings to “go all out” with republican slogans. The protests are getting more violent, and some analysts fear it could spiral out of control. The students now say they will continue their agitation even if party bosses call it off, and they have warned politicians not to sell out to the king.

Inside the palace, King Gyanendra has been meeting a slew of political leaders one-by-one to head off an escalation. Politicians say they have so little trust in the king’s motives that they have to keep up the pressure on the streets. Gagan Thapa, the student leader arrested two weeks ago on charges of sedition, told us: “We are not going to tolerate it if the parties reach an agreement with the king. We want the king out of politics.” Students admit the Maoists have infiltrated their ranks and joined the rallies. Senior minister Kamal Thapa said the government was aware of the possibility of Maoist penetration. “That is why we want the students to carry out their protest rallies responsibly,” he said.

Maoist leader Prachanda has tried to capitalise on the turmoil with a statement Thursday accusing the king of trying to divide the parties by meeting them. But fissures have again appeared in the five-party alliance: the Congress wants restoration of parliament, the UML favours an all-party government, while the Deuba faction wants its prime minister reinstated. The parties may not be able to present a common consensus to the king even if he asks for one to defuse tensions.
I have become a cliché these days to say that the present power struggle in Nepal is between three forces: the king, the anti-monarchical forces, and the Maoists. It is because indeed it is a three-way tug-o-war that has reached a stalemate: none of the three are making much headway, they are just wearing each other down, no one is prepared to give an inch.

There is a fourth force other three have forgotten all about: the people. It is, after all, the people who won sovereign rights in the 1990 constitution and who were assured that they would henceforth command their own destiny. It was working well, despite concerns about the politics of patronage, intimidation by incumbents and the heavy hand of the local elite at the ballot box. The people at least had a chance to move up and out of the grassroots, there was closer scrutiny of the performance of elected representatives, who were forced to be good managers and provide services honestly and efficiently. If they couldn’t, they got voted out the next time around. It was really a case of the survival of the most competent.

At the national level, things were still more complicated. The leadership was preoccupied with personal or party welfare—winning power and keeping it. This demanded an ability to be selfish and corrupt as one could and armies in white power buy oneself back into power once out of it. Pretty soon, they were all taking it in like there was no tomorrow.

The safeguard mechanisms of our democratic adoption took time to kick in. Still, parliamentary committees were largely non-partisan in investigating misuse of power. Pajero’s became a pejorative, and the word ‘Nepali’ entered the Nepali language as something synonymous with scandal.

Sadly, these high-profile scams eclipsed the red rot within and made a hybrid worse. Even the most steadfast of the parties. The leaders were too busy fighting each other they didn’t notice the house was on fire. Even as the flames licked the windows, they were arguing about who got to sleep in the master bedroom. Despite the current alliance, we don’t see any major shift in their style of functioning.

When the Maoists launched their people’s war eight years ago and raised arms against a duly elected government. It was a rotten government, but we were in the process of figuring out how to make it work. The Maoists’ quick-fix solution and the state’s knee-jerk reaction have now devastated the country. As for the palace, its actions have now made the republicanism the slogan of choice—not of necessity. Nepal’s don’t trust any of the three powers who invite their name. This is not about the king, the parties or the armed rebels anymore. It’s about the fourth force and whether the people of Nepal tolerate this ill-treatment and cruelty for much longer.

GUEST COLUMN
Alok K Bohara

When the state fails to protect citizens (or even to harass and hound them in the name of counter-insurgency) it loses the hearts and minds of the people. If this is how the establishment plans to fight this insurgency, then we have a lot to be worried about.

The Thapa government seemed unwilling to reverse its decision to form civil defense forces to resist Maoists in the countryside. The Thapa may mean well and he may not have ulterior motives, but he must remember the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Good intentions without logical direction can spell disaster.

A risk assessment analysis of the formation of the civil defense forces doesn’t seem to have been carried out, and there is a danger of this spiralling out of control. (See: "Turning civilians into combatants" Neta L Mangar, Nepal Times #175.) As we have seen from other counter-insurgency theatres, this is a recipe for spurious human rights violations.

When the Algerian government cancelled elections in 1992 because Islamists would have won, it triggered an armed uprising against the ruling class. Unable to subdue the rebels militarily, the government began arming civilians in 1995 to fight the militants. By 2003, many of the remote home guards had morphed into mafia bands, warlords, and local strongmen became militia leaders. In tens of thousands of Algerians perished.

Civilian casualties and human rights violations became a matter of grave concern, but anyone who dared raise them were arrested, or even killed. There are other horrific examples from recent history of massacres by out-of-control government-sponsored militias in Lebanon, Guatemala, Peru, Columbia and El Salvador.

A civil society unified by common vision must complement a well-meaning and benign centralised power. But this is hardly the case in Nepal today. Legislation curfews and curfews are sidelined and humiliated, the current government does not feel accountable to any party or any political institution, and says so openly. With checks and balances gone, vested interests will make their presence felt. But if the past 12 years have taught us anything, it is that an election-focused illiberal democracy can fail.

The decision about civil martial law are taken by a government that is neither representative nor accountable, and appears to be vastly unpopular. Many people are saying “give us security, not gurus.”

The last Nepal Times Nepalnews.com Internet poll was overwhelmingly (89 percent) against arming civilians. Sadly, a policy of such import with such deadly consequences has been enacted through fiat without any democratic input. We are sidetracked and humiliated, the current government does not feel accountable to any party or any political institution, and says so openly. With checks and balances gone, vested interests will make their presence felt. But if the past 12 years have taught us anything, it is that an election-focused illiberal democracy can fail.

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A recent op-ed piece in *Gorkhapatra* has tried to justify the surrender of sovereignty by the Maharaja Hari Singh of Kashmir in 1947 as an “instance of crisis of confidence”. By trying to draw this historical parallel, Viburaj Gautam, the editor of the government mouthpiece who wrote the article himself, has put forth a menacing insinuation. No institution in the country is above suspicion now.

Politicians of every hue are suddenly on guard. Meanwhile, King Gyanendra has been granting audience to an assembly line of politicians, but he doesn’t seem to be any particular hurry to bring back parliamentary politics. Even Comrade Nepal, who has been eagerly waiting for a royal line-up, didn’t appear too satisfied with the Naguraj meeting. The rest of his agitating partners are bracing themselves for yet another delay tactic to keep the constitution in suspended animation.

T his wariness isn’t groundless. In the brief history of slightly over half a century since the Shah Restoration in 1950, Narayanhiti Palace has repeatedly used its time-tested tactics to keep the democratic aspirations of the people in check. It has used every trick in the book to deny, delay, divide, discredit, denigrate and then destroy mainstream political parties.

The trick is to keep them squabbling perennially. But this strategy runs the risk of putting the very existence of country in jeopardy. Politically, a state without a king is not impossible, but no country can hope to survive for long unless it has vibrant and responsible political parties competing among themselves to create an alert and organized citizenry.

In Nepal, the vilification of political parties goes hand in hand with the glorification of the king, the priesthood, the army, and business. However, none of these entrenched forces seem to have realised that it is not business as usual anymore. The experience of raucous democracy and ruthless insurgency have awakened tribalistic and authoritarian streaks embedded in our national psyche. There is no way the country can now go back to the ‘good old days’ of authoritarian certainty.

After the Third Wave of democracy swept the world, it has ceased to be merely one among the several systems of governance. Now it is an ideal that even countries like Afghanistan and Iraq are expected to live up to and for a multi-ethnic society like Nepal, it is the sole strategy of survival. Trumpe高级 the supposed benefits of an active monarchy, as the Royal Council has been doing through its regional consultations, is bound to be counter-productive.

The monarchy lost some of its traditional moorings after the royal massacre, and even when the entire country was in a state of shock in those trying weeks, it was the supreme law of the land that saved the constitutional monarchy. However, the Fourth October royal takeover has now put a question mark over the kingship. King Gyanendra has publicly sought a ‘constructive’ role for himself, thus transforming the monarchy into a political player.

Politics, by definition, is an arena of contest. Rhetoric is an inevitable part of politics, and if the king wishes to be player, he has to prepare himself for public criticism. The distressing part of it, however, is that the monarchy as a cultural symbol of all Nepalis is now directly being challenged.

Only a democratic polity has the power to protect the institution of monarchy. The people need democracy, but the king needs it even more. Any more dilly-dallying in the acceptance such interdependence will further erode the credibility of the monarchy. On National Unity Day this Sunday, we need mull these things over as we remember the king.

**Let’s save the king**

**The people need democracy, but the king needs it even more.**

 democracy and other parties in every speech. Thapa and his ilk are the biggest blot on Nepali democracy. The present set of ministers all have rival characteristics but have covered themselves in babushka cloaks. Their democratic mask is slipping and their mandala mask is showing.

Ram Bahadur Rai, email

Siddha Pokhari, Sankhuwa Sabha

**NEW TIMES**

I don’t like your new look. The earlier format was perfect, you should have left it the way it was.

AR Shrestha, email

Kalmati

**Why did you shrink the Times? I had gotten used to the size and layout of the old one. It wasn’t bright, why did you try to fix it?**

Lalit R Sharma, email

**Congratulations on going full colour and 24 pages. Nepal Times looks fresher and livelier than before. And thanks for introducing new women columnists like Anagha Neekarjan and Neeta Pokhrel.**

Renu Adhikari, Kathmandu

**There is much more to read in the new Nepal Times. Thank you for making the best Nepal paper even better. But I should point out that Newton’s laws in your editorial (#177) are laws of motion, not thermodynamics.**

S. Pokhrel, email

**I first thought Under My Hat got mistakenly printed in your page two editorial (#177) when I read about Newton’s third law of thermodynamics. Should have been the third law of motion if my memory serves me right.**

‘Hemant’, email

**I have been going through every issue of Nepal Times from the very beginning. I am one of those cover-to-cover readers, and I enjoy every article. And I really appreciate the selection you present every week. Being a transcriptionist by trade, I also read it very carefully (hazards of the profession, I guess) and found a spelling mistake in your Biz Brief section (#177). If you’d like I would be willing to go through the spellings in your forthcoming issues. That wasn’t a bad try, was it?**

Khem R Shrestha, email

**Third Law of Thermodynamics? It’s Newton’s Third Law of Motion, or just Newton’s Third Law. Newton had nothing to do with thermodynamics. The third law of thermodynamics was formulated by Walter Nernst and states that it is impossible to cool a body to absolute zero by any finite process. But then even that wouldn’t apply to Nepal, given how frozen the leadership looks.**

Tashi Tenzing, Washington DC

**Correction**

**Namaste! a game of Limbo and not Nepali (Numa’s story, #177). The correction for Elections in Maaland (#177) should have been Manipur.**
Maid to order

Despite problems, Nepali women still throng to Hong Kong to work as domestics.

2104

Predictions are, of course, a mug's game. But you have to be a bit of a mug to give your opinions in print every week. So for what it's worth, here are a few whimsical thoughts about how things might look 100 years hence, in 2104 CE.

Nepal will still be with us. Yes, all you doomsayers in the aid sector, diplomats, experts, elitists and so on, you're all wrong. This country, sovereign, beautiful, rich, poor etc—is so bright, imagine how much better things will get when the cult of age finally releases its bony grip on this place. The sooner the better. I won’t insult the current generation by calling them all ‘youth’. They are the ones who will make the difference.

India. It doesn’t take a very clear crystal ball to see that our vast southern neighbour will be, within half a century or less, an engine of the world economy in much the way America is now. India’s current role as software sweatshop will expand its middle class hugely, unleash creative and entrepreneurial talent and turn today’s under-development into prosperity on a grand scale. Again, I’m banking on those incredibly impressive young Indians that I meet every time I go to Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore and Kolkata.

Well before 2104, European society will be more than half Muslim. This is going to be one of the most startling demographic changes in history and it’s already well under way. Traditional Europeans, that is to say ‘white people’, can’t keep up. Their birthrates are low and they’re too fond of holidays and short working weeks. People from underdeveloped lands in the Mahgreb and West Asia are making their way in droves to fill in the gaps. Even nasty immigration policies won’t stop them. And I, for one, think a Muslim Europe would be a fine thing, for both Muslims and Europe.

Patriotism. Cosmopolitanism will be essential to get through tomorrow’s tolerance. America’s new culture will be in tune with the world, not at odds with it. American, an environmental campaigner or television personality. Perhaps she may even be a Muslim, married to a Jewish agnostic or a Buddhist. And there will be so many pressing domestic challenges that foreign adventurism will be impossible. By 2050, there will be 500 million people in America, most, at best, third generation descendants of immigrants. They will need education, health care and jobs, not appeals to patriotism. Cosmopolitanism will be essential to get elected.

A Nepali domestic worker is counselled by a Hong Kong employment agency at its office. Shirley Chan of the Hong Kong government's race relations unit tries to be a bridge between migrants and the authorities. From l-r: The Nepali consulate in Hong Kong is kept busy because of migrant workers with problems. An estimated 1,500 Nepali domestics work in Hong Kong.
Rita has been living in Hong Kong since 1996. A Nepali Hong Kong ID holder, she runs a small roadside stall in Kowloon selling thikheks. "Life in Hong Kong has been okay, it's a good place to make money. But I really miss my children," said Rita, on a rare visit home. Her husband is also an ID holder, and works odd jobs as a construction worker.

The couple's two children, a four-year-old daughter and a 14-month-old son live with their grandparents in Nepal. "I left my son when he was five months old. He's really grown. I'm just happy that in the last couple of days he's become quite familiar with me," says Rita as she spends a few precious days with her children in Kathmandu, before returning to Hong Kong.

"Ideally, we'd love to take them to Hong Kong. My parents love my daughter but they can't give her the help she needs with her school work, but nurses and kindergarten in Hong Kong are expensive. And we're often busy at work. Maybe when they're a bit older." FAMILIAR with Hong Kong, reasonably comfortable with Cantonese and a mother-like figure, today Rita is developing into a champion for a group of Nepali migrants joining the Hong Kong workforce as domestics. "I know at least 20 domestics who come to visit me on their days off, when we chat about home, prepare Nepali meals, go for barbecues and just talk about life and our kids (see, pls). They often don't have money since they've committed their first six months salary to the agency. They call when they are in trouble. Outside of the homes they work in, they don't really know anyone, they're alienated. I try to help as much as I can."

Helping often means providing petty cash, counseling and complaining to the employment agencies about an employer's mistreatment, or even threatening to report them to the labour tribunal. "Only two of the girls I know say they have employers who treat them well. The rest are not happy and will probably return to Nepal after saving some money and their two-year contract ends."

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"The language problem is immense," says Ah Ming, a Hong Kong social worker who helps Nepalis. "Many people come from villages, the (local) mothers don't speak English, they are not educated and so are difficult to integrate into mainstream Chinese society. Discrimination is everywhere, but it is hidden." (IPS)

Nepali workers in Hong Kong interviewed for this article did not want their real names used, nor their pictures taken.

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"They are trying to legalise illegal matters," says Prem Chandra Rai, coordinator of FEONA who says that some agencies in Nepal charge around Rs 70,000 as agency fees. "They work with agencies here and make applicants sign a paper saying they have taken a six-month leave in Nepal. That's totally false. Once they sign the contract, the worker needs to pay," Rai adds. "People don't have a clue and are in a hurry to come to Hong Kong. People don't have a clue and are in a hurry to come to Hong Kong. People don't have a clue and are in a hurry to come to Hong Kong. People don't have a clue and are in a hurry to come to Hong Kong. People don't have a clue and are in a hurry to come to Hong Kong. People don't have a clue and are in a hurry to come to Hong Kong. People don't have a clue and are in a hurry to come to Hong Kong. People don't have a clue and are in a hurry to come to Hong Kong. People don't have a clue and are in a hurry to come to Hong Kong. People don't have a clue and are in a hurry to come to Hong Kong. People don't have a clue and are in a hurry to come to Hong Kong." (IPS)

The agency's eight staff members are hard pressed providing the endless stream of domestic and migrant workers free paralegal advice on job and immigration problems. The centre also manages two shelters for domestic workers and has placement, training and language classes to help them integrate into mainstream Chinese society. It is not always easy, judging from the experiences of other Nepali migrants here, the majority of who work in construction, security and sectors like cleaning, restaurants, bars and nursing homes. Some 50,000 to 40,000 Nepalis live in Hong Kong. Many in the Nepali community were also born to former British Gurkha families and their dependents. But opportunities also come with costs. As the numbers of those like Regina and Amisha increase, the need for social support becomes crucial in an alien environment. Most Nepali workers don't have money since they have to commit their first six months' salary to the employment agency. There are some women working in entertainment clubs and even as prostitutes. Lower levels of education, language problems, and sense of marginalization can make adjustment harder.

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"Only two of the girls I know say they have employers who treat them well. The rest are not happy and will probably return to Nepal after saving some money and their two-year contract ends."

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but the number is likely to grow as Hong Kong agencies see Nepal as a viable recruiting centre. "Nepali domestics are simple. Some of the educated ones speak good English and are less likely to make trouble with unions," says Chan, an agent who runs a recruiting and training centre in Kathmandu where eager applicants are taught Cantonese, the basics of Chinese cooking and interviewed by potential employers via the Internet.

Such employment outfits are an increasing cause of concern for groups like the Hong Kong-based Far-east Overseas Nepal Association (FEONA), a non-profit social organisation that works with Nepali migrants in Southeast Asia. "They're trying to legalise illegal matters," says Prem Chandra Rai, coordinator of FEONA who says that some agencies in Nepal charge around Rs 70,000 as agency fees. "They work with agencies here and make applicants sign a paper saying they have taken a six-month leave in Nepal. That's totally false. Once they sign the contract, the worker needs to pay," Rai adds. "People don't have a clue and are in a hurry to come to Hong Kong. People don't have a clue and are in a hurry to come to Hong Kong. People don't have a clue and are in a hurry to come to Hong Kong. People don't have a clue and are in a hurry to come to Hong Kong. People don't have a clue and are in a hurry to come to Hong Kong. People don't have a clue and are in a hurry to come to Hong Kong. People don't have a clue and are in a hurry to come to Hong Kong. People don't have a clue and are in a hurry to come to Hong Kong. People don't have a clue and are in a hurry to come to Hong Kong. People don't have a clue and are in a hurry to come to Hong Kong. People don't have a clue and are in a hurry to come to Hong Kong. People don't have a clue and are in a hurry to come to Hong Kong." (IPS)

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Still peckish?

NEITHER HERE NOR THERE

Anagha Neelakantan

Why? Why a menu? Why dinner? Why winter? Why? Because. Because it is cold, because food makes us warm, because fire makes us even warmer. Even the dimmest person would gather that after a look at the streets this past month. The power of fire, beloved symbol of anthropologists, fullblotters, archaeologists and just about every hack who holds forth on Community and Socialisation, has evidently been rediscovered by our students. (There’s nothing worse than a numpicker, but I have to ask: how in god’s name can you burn an effigy of regression without calling it an ironic reversion to high modernist symbolism or something like that?) But the wildest street fire has a lining of silver-grey smoke. It is multipurpose. If the recent bursting up of things has been giving you dangerous, even incendiary, ideas, go ahead. Light that fire. Grill. If dangerous, even incendiary, ideas, up of things has been giving you lining of silver-grey smoke. It is something like that?

The wildest street fire has a lining of silver-grey smoke. It is

was a sham. A little bowl per guest, friend or foe, of a light broth made from Essence of Chicken. Same old, same old. But that’s the point, isn’t it. Who really wants change?

Your aim is to make people feel better. This treatment works best when administered like asymptotic medicine—the early stages of recovery often involve a slight but distinct worsening of symptoms. After lullying your guests into a somewhat misleading sense of security turn the tables, around, if not upside down. Look like the cabbage, as it were, and be the rose beneath it.

After chicken broth, a stew. A hearty stodgy one involving depressing winter-smells like—will anything can bring on misery in the winter if you let it—and a complete homogeneity of ingredients, at least as far as appearance goes. We like to eat this kind of thing because it induces a feeling of bunting-to-the-seams surfait without the guilt associated with junk food. It’s healthy, all the food groups can have their say, right? Potato, potato, potato, overcooked sausage, a handful of fancy lentils, the spectrum of vegetables from red tomato to green capsicum to violet pink radish to mottled turnip to two-ton squash to purple cabbage.

Nothing matters once you muck all this together. This stew will be eaten daily, dutifully, but with a general consensus that it is ‘good for you’, all the elements are pitching in, the starches, the protein, the vitamins and minerals. So what if you can’t hear what any one of them is saying. So what if the veggie’s inherent veggie nature makes them just sit there waiting for something else to

be assuage as they slowly sink into the mother liquid on the stove. The usual suspicions will take over and make it palatable, if completely undistinguished, the weepingly chopped onions, the crushed black pepper, the green onions, the herbs, the little mountain of mild garlic.

Then, the surprise. A bizarrely aggressive salad with pungent, bitter, spaggy greens, dandelion, raw mustard, rocket, raw spinach, and Super Strong and Tangy Garlic Vinaigrette. At first it will look fresh and light, sound a welcome note of authority. Your friends will help it on and dive into it with all the poetry of a young calf’s first encounter with the field. After a couple of mouthfuls, there will be grumblings, contortions and reproachful looks. The greens are offensively too much. Draw the misery out a bit more. Brightly serve something un-dessert like such as a baked red bean concoction topped with a little dollop of winter-fighting royal jelly. (Unless you have Japanese guests, in which case serve them your thickest miso mash.)

When, after all this grandstanding and these soul-sapping emotions, you casually mention that for any staid people still peckish there are sliced strawberries, sugared cream, dark chocolate and sparkling wine, your friends will like you.

Chill factor

Extreme cold in parts of the tarai has claimed dozens of lives but the government has yet to release any figures. Spokesman for the Home Ministry Gopendra Bahadur Pandey said officials had heard about the harsh winter, “but we cannot confirm if the deaths were due to the weather before the figures are compiled.”

Officials at the Department of Hydrology and Meteorology are sure that the falling temperature in the plains has affected the lives of people, especially those living in the open and beside the roads. They point to a thick fog that has blanketed most of the area since the rains last week.

“This kind of fog dissipated in this satellite town,” explains Madan Lal Shrestha, the department’s director general. “The fog keeps the temperature low and the human body begins to suffer from cold exposure.”

Meteorologists say that the maximum temperature in the tarai has dipped to single digits, but is not less than previous years. On average, the difference between the maximum and minimum range is only two degrees Celsius, whereas normally it would have been above 10 degrees.

For instance, Bhairawa recorded a maximum of 15.3 and a minimum of 13.4 degree Celsius on 28 December. Four days ago, Bharaiwa suffered from uniformly foul weather—the maximum day temperature sat just a degree higher that the 12 degree Celsius minimum. Last year, the tarai experienced a month long stretch without sunlight. All indications are that the tarai could get colder before it warms up.

FOGGY BOTTOM: The Indo-Gangetic fog in this satellite picture taken on Tuesday morning also covered the Nepal tarai, leaving the Himalayan arc clear and sunny.
shwor Pokhrel, Madhab Nepal’s comrade-in-arms, had to go through a humiliating ordeal at New Delhi airport recently. A team of Indian officials apparently from the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) and Intelligence Bureau (IB) among others, asked him about the purpose behind his Delhi trip (see p18). According to Pokhrel, they were even keen to know whether the UML would be willing to back a Constituent Assembly to sort out the Maoist problem in Nepal. Back home after 14 hours in detention, Pokhrel and his party fulminated against India and demanded an apology. UML students burnt an effigy of Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and vandalised half a dozen vehicles on the road. But after that, the issue of Pokhrel’s detention died a rapid and unnatural death. For dumfounded citizens, it was difficult to figure out whether the demonstration on that particular day was to protest Pokhrel’s detention in Delhi, or to protest ‘regression’. Why did the UML dump the Pokhrel episode like a hot potato? Why did it not even manage to secure condemnation of the behaviour of Indian authorities—asking that the issue be taken up with India. Should this act of omission on the part of the UML be condoned? After all, it will not be without consequences. The Pokhrel episode took place a month after the meeting Madhab Nepal and two of his lieutenants with the Maoist top brass in Lucknow, Indian Minister for External Affairs V. S. Vyas who chose to tell NTV’s Vishal Subedi in an interview recorded in Delhi and broadcast just before the SAARC Summit that the Lucknow encounter had really ‘embarrassed’ India. That embarrassment would have been even more acute if Pakistan had chosen to turn the table on India regarding the issue of harbouring cross-border terrorists in Islamabad. As a time when Bhutan had launched a successful operation against ULFA and other militants in Drukland, and India was demanding that Bangladesh and Burma follow the suit against “Indian terrorists”, the Lucknow meet could have been used to expose India’s ‘dual policy on terrorism’ after it had much reduced its role in Sri Lanka in the 80s. Madhab Nepal, for that reason, will continue to remain a villain in Indian eyes for some time to come. Moral of the story: incase total openness is not desirable, even the most secret peace initiatives should involve diplomatic or credible institutional channels on a minimum level it involves territories of more than one country. That is why Nepal’s Lucknow initiative should be seen as an adventure devoid of diplomacy. Comrade Pokhrel’s arrest and timing was a calculated message against ‘terrorism’ that India wanted to convey to the international community on the cusp of the SAARC summit. But Nepal is yet to be told of the real message behind the Lucknow meeting—who and what actually inspired it? Pokhrel’s release after brief detention in Delhi does not fully absolve Comrade Nepal.
The past year had given King Gyanendra a chance to make a mark in history—a chance that is rarely available for the royals in countries with constitutional monarchies. Whether the takeover of the executive power by the king in October 2002 was constitutional or not will remain a debatable issue for years to come. However, given the state of the state, which was at the brink of collapse at that time, the intervention by the king who commanded absolute loyalty of the security agencies and a majority of public was probably a politically correct step.

Hence, there was a virtual silence at the king’s move. He had the support and authority to turn things around for the better, but sadly misused both, opting for blame-game instead of the statesmanship that the times and his stature demanded. His actions did not turn out to be a momentary deviation as many had initially expected. This has resulted in a sharp erosion of his legitimacy in the past year, paradoxically making him the first Nepali monarch to directly contribute to the rise of republicanism in Nepal. If Nepal indeed turns into a republic, history will not hold the Nepali people responsible.

As he faces increasing criticism from major political parties, civil society and the Maoists, he has chosen to seek solace in the support of those in the far right of the political spectrum, who hold a striking similarity with the myopia of the far left. Both believe that winning the hearts and minds of the relatively uncritical mass in far-flung areas is more crucial to consolidate power and authority than trying to convince the small but critical mass, mainly concentrated in Kathmandu valley. However, history is witness to the fact that unless the support of that critical mass is won, one will have difficulty in bringing about sustainable political change in Nepal, a fact also acknowledged by the Maoists. It was that very mass that played a pivotal role in promoting democratic values prior to 1990 and since then has been important in sustaining those values despite the continuing battering on them from not only the far left and the far right but also those in the centre who have discredited those values for personal gain. Hence, it is natural that those in the opposite extremes find it more comfortable to deal with the less critical mass, which can be relatively easily swayed. It’s no surprise that the palace is planning more civic receptions for the king in outlying regions.

However, the new year has brought signs of a possible thaw. The king gave an audience to the UML’s Madhav Kumar Nepal last week, breaking a long stalemate. That is an encouraging start and needs to be followed up. There are important lessons from Thailand, where the monarch has intervened in times of crisis but withdrawn to a passive constitutional role afterwards and gained immense respect (see ‘The Thai Model’, #166).

The contribution of monarchy in Thailand “has been inestimable on two planes: as the primary focus of national cohesion during the long transition, and as a beacon of commitment to lawful process and hope for its realisation,” writes Roger Kershaw in his book, *Monarchy in South-East Asia*. He goes on to say that “this twin contribution forms the kernel of a new charisma of monarchy for the modern age, less magical but no less pregnant with Dharma than in ages past. Even in life, the King has come to be revered as—at least ‘as if’—a Living Buddha”.

Perhaps Nepal is waiting for exactly such a monarch. May the Living Bishnu share knowledge and wisdom with a Living Buddha, and may the unroyal politics of the past year transform into a royal politics in the year ahead. Amen!

Rabindra Mishra is a journalist with the BBC World Service in London.
Lessons of Bhatbhateni

Strictly Business
Ashutosh Tiwari

In 1987, a one-room mad-front shop dealing in cheap, curb and bottled drinks opened in Kathmandu’s Bhatbhateni. The owner, then a clerk at the New Road branch of the state-owned Nepal Bank, had rented the room together with his wife who ran the shop. From the beginning, Min Bahadur Gurung, with no previous background in business and the only member of his extended family not to join a foreign armed services, understood four things first, the business he was in was not new, second, there were hundreds of such stores all over Kathmandu, third, he has to think of new ways to differentiate his store from those of his competitors’ and, fourth, Bhatbhateni—with its spacious looking houses in the neighbourhood and located on the way to otherposh residential areas—would be where a convenience store do rather well.

Fast forward to 2004. The one-room shop has evolved into a giant multi-storied supermarket with a large parking lot. It sells everything from groceries, designer clothes and expensive jewellery and even medicine. Up to 5,000 people come everyday, making Bhatbhateni Super Market the busiest single shop in the Valley. It employs over 200 people, leaves money from the villages of Khokang in eastern Nepal, the owner’s home district.

Though old and new competition remain, Bhatbhateni has established a name for itself in terms of accessibility, choices, quality, value for money and service. What could be some lessons that aspiring Nepali entrepreneurs can draw from Gurung’s experience?

Small start: Starting small is unglamorous. But it pays off in the long run, especially if one is ambitious to grow big. Mistakes committed when a business is small are not big; they can easily be corrected and lessons are learned without wasting much money and time. Most Nepali start-ups fail and fail spectacularly—because entrepreneurs are not committed when a business is small.

Credibility: Even when his store burned down in 1993, Gurung paid all his suppliers. This act, he said, enhanced his credibility. Making a quick buck at the hapless customers’ expense may be tempting, but the Nepali market rewards those who project consistently trustworthy actions. People, after all, buy and sell with those they trust. Curiosity: Gurung knows his sales staff need better training, and that his management systems need to be professionalised. He seemed most at ease when talking about issues he did not know. This paradoxic trait is noteworthy in business because it keeps entrepreneurs humble—they ask questions, learn and strive to be better.

You know a business is going downhill when owners start exhibiting a know-all attitude and are closed to different viewpoints. Focus: Gurung is clear about his focus—to sell Nepali and foreign goods at the lowest possible prices. He avoids distractions. For instance, he does not even answer a calling head on the television. He does not dissect macroeconomic policies. And he does not hog the limelight at Chambers of Commerce gatherings. All he knows is how to sell, and has succeeded by doing only what he does best.

Nepal dialogue in Canada

Local Nepalis in Vancouver held a dialogue event last month to explore ways to bring peace and positive change back home.

Titled Nepal: Political Crisis, Economic Gathering, the event was hosted by the Nepal Concern Group with the Dialogue Institute of the Simon Fraser University. The panelists looked at socio-economic implications of the conflict, governance and the role of the international community.

The first panel, moderated by economist Khem Dahal, included speakers Ratna Shrestha, an economist and the role of the international community. The first panel, moderated by economist Khem Dahal, included speakers Ratna Shrestha, an economist and the role of the international community. The first panel, moderated by economist Khem Dahal, included speakers Ratna Shrestha, an economist and the role of the international community. The first panel, moderated by economist Khem Dahal, included speakers Ratna Shrestha, an economist and the role of the international community. The first panel, moderated by economist Khem Dahal, included speakers Ratna Shrestha, an economist and the role of the international community.
Cleared to land
A sharp rise in passenger demand is attracting foreign airlines.

NAVIN SINGH KHADKA

Although India has announced an open sky policy allowing foreign airlines full freedom to fly as many flights as they want in and out of India, Nepal is yet to follow suit. But CAAN says it has streamlined procedures, reduced service fees at Kathmandu airport and hopes that a lot more airlines will be interested in the growing Nepal market as well as use Kathmandu as a stopover for onward destinations.

Air Sahara and Jet Airways, both private Indian airlines, have announced interest in starting flights to Kathmandu. Air Sahara’s local agent, Joy Dewan, says their flights have already been cleared by the prime minister’s office in New Delhi.

“We’ll begin as soon as the ground work and other formalities are completed,” Sahara plans to operate its brand new Boeing 737-800 between Kathmandu and various Indian cities by next month, and the company has already sent a team to study ground handling and other facilities at Kathmandu airport.

Meanwhile, existing international operators have applied for increases in frequency and seat capacity. To meet a growth in demand, Thai Airways plans to double its single daily flight between Kathmandu and Bangkok by the end of the year. Last year, Thai carried 80,000 passengers into Nepal, a whopping 33 percent increase from 2002.

“We want to increase flights, but need to first revise our bilateral air service agreement and see availability of aircraft during that period,” Thai’s General Manager Vinod Sinhochak told.

From this October, Austrian Airways will double its flights to twice weekly between Amsterdam and Kathmandu. Meanwhile, Qatar Airways, the fastest growing airline flying to Kathmandu, operates 15 flights a week, 11 between Kathmandu and Doha and four between Kuala Lumpur and Kathmandu. With an 85 percent occupancy rate in both its A300-600 and A320 aircraft, Qatar plans to add three more flights to Delhi.

“We need a revision in the existing agreement with the government to allow the increase in frequency,” said Joy Dewan, who is also the local agent of Qatar Airways.

The Dutch subsidiary of KLM, Martinair is now flying a 273-seater Boeing 767 and plans to double its flights during the year, carrying both cargo and passengers to Amsterdam with a stopover in Sharjah. “We are trying to make it happen soon,” says Sabadoh Rana, Martinair’s agent in Kathmandu. “Going by the increase in tourist arrivals, our headquarters have not had to face any difficulty managing that.

Even Royal Nepal Airlines is suddenly waking up to the passenger demand, and hopes to lease a third 737 by early next month with a fourth later in the year. The airline is hoping to add flights to the Gulf and South India, and perhaps even restart its Frankfurt connection with a widebody jet. Although Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa made a stopover in Singapore last month to ask Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong to put in a good word for Singapore Airlines to restart its Kathmandu flights, it doesn’t look very likely. However, flights by SQ’s charter subsidiary, Silkair is not being ruled out.

After a series of bad news with the Indian Airlines hijacking, political instability, 9/11, SARS and India-Pakistan tensions, passenger volumes have suddenly picked up again around the region, and Nepal is benefiting. Tourist arrivals to Nepal increased 23 percent last year. In the past two months, tourist arrivals went up 50 percent compared to last year, with a 16 percent increase in overall passenger volume.

Tour operators are happy about the increased flight frequencies, are especially excited about the new airlines to and from India and China. The focus is shifting to regional tourism because of the fragility of European and American traffic due to fears of terrorism. They say Nepal can benefit by concentrating promotions in the two giant countries to the north and south.

“The new Indian and Chinese airlines, the floodgates will open on air-sea,” says Dewan. “We expect a big boost in tourist arrivals this year.

Not to be left behind, two Nepal private airlines, Cosmic Air and Air Shankri-La, have applied for Airlines Operating Certificates which could come as early as March. Air Shankri-La has permission to fly to Munich via Sharjah and other destinations, provided one of its two aircraft a widebody. Cosmic has asked for regional destinations, mainly in India and is required to operate at least one jet. Both have a year to start operations.

One: What percent of Nepali women have orgasm during sex?
Two: Given that women peak sexually when they are in their thirties and men in their twenties, why are women pairing with older men?
Three: Why can’t we have contraceptives that can be injected into men’s arms for five years?
Four: Wouldn’t it be cool if women bragged about all their sexual conquests?
Five: Why aren’t our women writers writing erotic stories for women?
Six: Should the bragging be based on conquests?

The Chelis were amazed that it takes a normal/full bodied Nepali woman five years to figure out how good sex can really get. Nepali women should be pairing with younger men, one pipped. A chorus of approved ensured its success.

Although most Chels felt the idea, they couldn’t decide on the name for the prospective, incarcerates? Defensible? It was suggested that those marketing the Pulak mobilite “Definitely Male” should be recruited to manage the advertising campaign.

Women of Ill Repute

Rosy Chhetri

Members of the Nepal underground women’s group Chetraithane Cheli (Women of Ill Repute) met last weekend at an undisclosed bar in Patan Durbar Square. Downing mugs of steaming hot drinks and juicy steak sizzlers, they sought answers to questions bothering women since Manu wrote his big fat book.

This CHC meeting, however, was different from the earlier ones, where the members had staunchly rated the sex quotient of journalists and politicians. It focused, instead, on the concerns of the Chelis themselves. Draupadi, Sita, Kali, Tara, Maya, all must have asked all these questions at one point in their lives. Now, it is the Chelis who are doing the asking:

Seven: Why don’t women ogle, hiss, whistle and click at passing men?
Eight: Why don’t we write the book our time?
Ten: Are there any single (or divorced/married) heterosexual men out there who can cook, clean, look after children and earn a little ‘lipstick money’ on the side?
On 15 January it will be 70 years since the great 1934 earthquake killed 4,500 people in Kathmandu Valley. The next big one is due any day now.

Nepal’s biggest tremors

- **1255**: One-third of Kathmandu’s population of 100,000 was killed, including King Abhaya Malla.
- **1408**: Many of Kathmandu’s temples and houses were destroyed, including the shrine of Machindranath. Thousands were killed.
- **1681**: Many houses collapsed, hundreds were killed in this quake during the reign of Srinibas Malla.
- **1767**: There was a swarm of tremors (21 shocks in 24 hours) in this Asar Ekl quake in Kathmandu.
- **1808 or 1810**: Year not confirmed, but this violent quake destroyed many houses in Bhaktapur. Temples in Kathmandu remained unscathed.
- **1823**: Another swarm of quakes in Kathmandu with 17 tremors in one day.
- **26 August 1833**: Epidemic near Phaglu, this 7.7 magnitude quake killed more than 500 people. It rocked Kathmandu and was even felt in Delhi and Kolkata.
- **23 May 1866**: 7.0 magnitude quake with epicenter north of Kathmandu rocked the valley. No major damage.
- **28 August 1916**: 7.1 magnitude earthquake, epicenter near Mt Api in western Nepal. Damage in Darchula and Indian Kumaun.
- **15 January 1934**: The Big One. 8.0 magnitude quake with epicenter in Bihar-Nepal border. Nearly 17,000 people killed, 4,500 in Kathmandu Valley. Tremors felt as far away as Mumbai.
- **27 May 1936**: 7.0 magnitude quake near Dhaulagiri in central Nepal.
- **4 September 1954**: Pokhara rocked by 6.5 magnitude quake.
- **11 January 1962**: 6.0 magnitude tremor epicenter same as 1934 quake.
- **26 September 1964**: 6.5 magnitude, epicenter in Darchula.
- **12 January 1965**: 6.1 tremor with epicenter northeast of Dhankuta.
- **27 June 1966**: Another 6.0 magnitude tremor in Darchula.
- **29 July 1980**: 6.8 magnitude epicenter in Darchula. 150-200 people killed. Felt in Kathmandu.
- **9 December 1991**: Epicentre in Bajura. 6.2 magnitude. No reports of deaths.
Coming soon

Nepalis need to remember the horror of 1934 so it doesn't happen again.

They say earthquakes don't kill people, houses do. But try telling that to the private home owners adding another floor to their fragile houses, or helping an official to pass a house design so they can save money on construction. Most of us are acting like an ostriches with heads in the sand when it comes to preparing for the next big one.

Out of the 21 cities around the world that lie in seismic zones, Kathmandu is at the highest risk of death, destruction, and unpreparedness. Matters are not helped by the city’s extremely high urban density. Kathmandu has an uncontrolled urban development with a 6.5 percent annual growth rate. The population hovers around two million and some 6,000 concrete houses are built every year, usually without proper engineering. It is not hard to imagine what will happen on a 8.0 magnitude earthquake. This city will collapse like a deck of cards when (not if) the next big ones hit.

1934 wasn’t even the worst earthquake Kathmandu has suffered. In 1255, one-third of Kathmandu (30,000 people, including King Abhaya Malla) were killed when the valley suffered a direct hit with an epicentre right below the city. The effect of such a strong earthquake would be colossal. Luckily, there are some who have seen the writing on the wall, and are working on ensuring that a maximum number of people are aware of the dangers. The first thing is to know what to do in an earthquake; what a community needs to do to prepare, how not to build houses, and when the big one does strike what can be done to care for the survivors.

Better safe than...

Like most other parts of Kathmandu Valley, the village of Chaling outside Bhaktapur is also seeing a housing boom. But look carefully, and a visitor notices a big difference. These aren’t haphazard flimsy construction. Masons like 28-year-old Biswa Ram Tyaka and five of his colleagues have just finished rebuilding the Nateswari Primary School (see pic) to make it earthquake resistant with personal donations from villagers.

They have all been trained at the National Society for Earthquake Technology (NSET) in masonry work that will survive a major earthquake without serious damage. The six have already convinced locals that it is prudent to invest in earthquake resistant houses. These days, if anyone wants to build a house in Chaling and its surrounding villages, they go straight to Tyaka and ask for advice.

While it has been relatively easy to convince Chaling to follow the earthquake safety building code plan, experts face an uphill challenge doing the same in core urban areas of Kathmandu and other major cities. Earthquake Safety Day on 16 January will commemorate the 70th anniversary of the 1934 earthquake. It’s as good a time as any to prepare for the next big one.

If Chaling’s example can be replicated, maybe the rest of Kathmandu Valley and Nepal will be a safer place the next time an earthquake strikes.

The Dharara broke in half in 1934 (left) and the old Ghantaghar was reduced to rubble (right). The ‘seismic gap’ in western Nepal where there hasn’t been a major earthquake in 200 years (see map).

“A massive awareness program is needed as our goal is to turn Nepal into a totally earthquake-safe community by 2020,” says Ramesh Guragain, a structural engineer. Indeed, a partnership between Nepali quake safety groups, the government and international organisations has resulted in a higher level of awareness about the dangers, now all that needs to be done is to put some of the disaster preparedness ideas into practice.

Historical records show that Kathmandu has been hit by a major 1934-type earthquake every 75 years. So, the next one is due, literally, any day now.

But experts have discovered that there is even greater danger of a big earthquake in central Nepal, the population of Kathmandu (30,000 people, including King Abhaya Malla) were killed when the valley suffered a direct hit with an epicentre right below the city. The effect of such a strong earthquake would be colossal. Luckily, there are some who have seen the writing on the wall, and are working on ensuring that a maximum number of people are aware of the dangers. The first thing is to know what to do in an earthquake, what a community needs to do to prepare, how not to build houses, and when the big one does strike what can be done to care for the survivors.
As a ‘seismic gap’, where tectonic energy has not been released for more than 200 years and a massive earthquake could strike at any time, the capital city of Kathmandu, as well as Pokhara town and as other major western towns at risk not just from building collapse, but also from glacial lakes bursting along snowed rivers.

The next one will be more lethal and can arrive at anytime,” says Amod M Dixit of the National Society for Earthquake Technology (NSET).

While forecasting an earthquake is imprecise and nothing can stop geological upheavals, experts are concerned by the lack of disaster preparedness here. “Nepal would be in a situation worse than what happened recently in Bam,” says Dixit of the 26 December earthquake in the ancient Iranian city.

He worries about the lack of awareness among the people and the government’s passive attitude towards the issue. “The 1998 earthquake changed my whole life because it taught me that people died when information was limited only to seismologists and geologists,” says Dixit. That 7.3 magnitude quake in eastern Nepal left 721 dead and 6,553 injured.

Inevitably, earthquake experts face allegations that they are unnecessarily scaring the public and crying wolf. But it is certain that without proper planning, the number of those who are killed in a future earthquake will be much higher. Disaster preparedness specialists say it is better to worry now and be prepared, than to wait for the quake to strike and then panic.

“We need to spread the message across the country starting right now,” says Ranesh Aryal, chief of the Earthquake Division at the Department of Mines and Geology. “This is where the government should also work actively to try to form disaster committees in every ward.”

The United Nations has also been trying to prod the government into preparedness by addressing mitigation and prevention. They want building codes helped draw up in 1994. “A strong enforcement of the code is needed, it is the best way to ensure safer housing,” says MB Thapa, a disaster program adviser at UNDP.

The only silver lining so far has been initiative taken by local governments. When Lalitpur municipality implemented the building code last year, it was the only one in the world to take such a precaution before the occurrence of an earthquake. Now Bhaktapur has followed suit, and earthquake experts hope that Kathmandu’s Mayor Krishna Shrestha will also take the initiative. “Such an effort reduces at least three-fourth of the risk from earthquake hazard,” says Dixit.

Deer has disappeared, including most of Tundikhel which was where most people camped out in 1934. People will have to spend weeks outdoors along parks, roads or river banks.

Water will be scarce. The mains, such as they are, will not work. The ground water table will recede, so most wells will go dry.

There is high risk of fires caused by explosions of gas cylinders, kerosene stoves and gas stations in the centre of the city.

Electricity and telephone lines will be cut off. If the earthquake happens during the monsoon, liquefaction will mean that the city will be floating as the soil turns to paste. Water borne diseases, exacerbated by rotting corpses, will grow into an epidemic that will kill many initial survivors.

The hospitals left standing will be understaffed and overwhelmed with the wounded.

No one has even started thinking about the social anarchy, looting, crime in the absence of a strong security presence.

Rembering Nabbe Sal

Amina Banu, 76

My family used to be in the Muslim traditional cloth business in Indra Chowk. I was six, my 10-year-old sister and I were playing on the roof that afternoon. Suddenly everything started shaking. The top floor of the house was completely destroyed. The staircase collapsed, but my elder brother managed to bring us down. We lived in the garden for 15 days, we didn’t have enough to eat. Other Muslim families helped us and gave us food.

Ram Chandra Lal Joshi, 90

Businessman

We were a small family; just my sister, my father and myself. I was in the shop when it happened. Tulsi dai dragged me out, the electric wires were sparking, the buildings were swaying wildly. When the shaking stopped, we rushed home. My sister was sitting by the stupa, then my father joined us. Everyone else was safe, but Tulsi dai died. For a month we lived out in the open. There were aftershocks for 15 days. We got loans from the government for rebuilding, which we had to pay back in five years.

Asha Ram Dhakwa, 78

Businessman

I was eight years old, an only child. I had just bought candy and was coming out the shop with the shopkeeper’s daughter when the earthquake struck. I found myself trapped under a wooden pillar and bricks. I didn’t know it was an earthquake, and wondered why the girl was so quiet. I was rescued after three hours, but the girl died. It left a very deep impression on me. If there is another earthquake, 90 percent of the houses in the Valley will be destroyed.

Mana Kumari Awasti, 83

I was 13, already married and living in Trisuli. I was the second wife. In Trisuli we felt the tremors, and our house was destroyed. My husband’s first wife was killed but the rest of us were not badly hurt.

Rajog Bajracharya, 94

Artist

My father and I were in the studio in Dilli Bazar. We ran out and saw the buildings rocking to and fro. It became very dusty with all the falling buildings. We started to make our way home past fallen buildings towards our house in Patan. The streets were paved with roof tiles. The Bagmati had become very muddy, the water level had risen three feet. At Mangal Bazar, Honaca’s eatery had collapsed, killing 22 customers inside. There were heaps of dead bodies. We used the timber from the houses to make tents and keep warm.

Interviews and pictures by Mudita Bajracharya
Refugees in limbo where the UN isn’t welcome

From the UN Wire 29 December 2003

BARBARA CROSSETTE

UNITED NATIONS – For about a dozen years, tens of thousands of people, claiming to be Bhutani citizens evicted from the mountain kingdom in a Himalayan ethnic cleansing, have been languishing in refugee camps in Nepal. Few officials in India and Nepal, or in Geneva at the International Committee of the Red Cross and the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, believe they are all Bhutani.

Then who are these people, now numbering more than 100,000? After years of wrangling between Bhutan and Nepal, complicated by Bhutanese obliquity over who qualifies to return, and by a succession of political upheavals in Nepal–punctuated by the assassination of almost the entire Nepali royal family–the two governments were finally able to agree in October to a symmetrical census in the refugee camps. Those with documented claims to Bhutani citizenship would return, others who had renounced Bhutani nationality could reapply and who had renounced Bhutani citizenship would return, others who had renounced Bhutani citizenship.

But that was not the end of the story. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was finally able to agree in Bhutan, making it impossible for us to monitor the return process, we will not promote returns.”

Bhutan’s foreign policy is decided by India, and India— which sees itself as a rising world power and wants a permanent Security Council seat—has rarely permitted the UNHCR to operate freely in its territory. This was true in the refugee crisis in 1971 when India supported a revolt by East Pakistani, which became Bangladesh with a lot of Indian help. The UNHCR did not run the Sri Lankan Tamil refugee camps in the southern Indian Tamil Nadu region in the 1980s, where guerrillas rested or trained for combat against the Sri Lankan government. In the late 1980s, a U.N. official in New Delhi, where I lived, told me that the UNHCR had to operate all but clandestinely in trying to help Afghans who fled to India during the war against Soviet occupation. It is inconceivable that India would now let the UNHCR operate extensively along the Bhutan-Indian border, whether or not the Bhutanese would accept that presence.

Lubbers said in his October speech, “I urge states, and particularly neighboring India, to assist Bhutan and Nepal to identify just, human and durable solutions for all of these people,” he said. Those words are even more important now that the first concrete steps toward that end have met with violence in Nepal.

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PrettY fABulous

Just arrived: prefabricated wooden houses.

SRADEHA BASNYAT

C ommuters and passers by have noticed a curious wooden structure up in Kopordho, upstarts from the furniture store, Home Maker. There are no bricks and no piles of cement, and has already elicited curious enquiries: ‘Is it an experiment, will it be livable, is it for display and can I have one too? Yes to all of the above, and you won’t even have a long walk to step into your own home sweet home.

Ishwari Shah is excited about her new home. Although the concept of prefabricated houses has been around, it faced several disadvantages in Nepal. People thought they were a fire hazard that wouldn’t last, or the wood would warp. After several years of research and development, the crew at Bira Furniture and Nemo Parquet in Patan Industrial Estate perfected a high-tech cement and sawdust board that can be used in construction.

The consortium has successfully completed 250 prefabricated homes throughout Nepal which can last a lifetime if maintained well—all it requires is a lick of varnish every two years to protect the exterior.

The benefits of the construction seem unlimited: no permits are required nor is it necessary for drawings to be passed by the municipality since (legally) it is not a bricks and mortar house. No real foundation is needed and the structure is also earthquake proof. Surinj Shrestha at Bira explains: “The link to the ground is limited so it’s like furniture. It’ll shake during an earthquake, but it won’t crack or fall down.”

After all the components are readied at the factory according to design, the house is then assembled on site. It requires five men and 15 days to put it together. “Once the design is finalised and the measurements taken, we do everything from electricity to painting. The customer receives the key to a finished product,” says Shrestha.

It’s still a foreign idea, but builders like Shrestha believes there is a lot of potential in the Nepali market, not least because of its economy and safety aspects. Depending on the design and size, it averages Rs 600 -2,000 per sq ft. At that rate, Shrestha estimates the Kopordho house will come to Rs 1.6 million. Only 5 percent of the material used are non-Nepali. There are minimal interior design costs as well. Why hide all that lovely wood? But wallpapering, emulsion paints and even plaster of paris can be used. Luckily, wood in Nepal is still relatively less expensive, compared to Scandinavia (where the technology was imported from), or even India where they are still using iron frames. The product itself is reusable and can even be remade into another design. “It’s like playing house when you were a child,” says Shrestha.

Prefabricated houses are also practical because wood is naturally insulating. Currently, wood used for parquet comes from eastern Nepal and dry board from western Nepal. Bira has been working with the government to get some land to grow trees for harvesting. Sustainability doesn’t look like it will be a problem if only the government land at subsidized rate was more forthcoming.

For Ishwari Shah, the greatest attraction of her new home is the simplicity in case of an earthquake. And Bira’s team has ensured that they have his office, and publicity will not be a problem since it is right on the main Patan road.

Bira Furniture: 5522253, 5524118
Nemo Parquet: 4414805

One can get rich very fast, but it is only with vision and planning that one can sustain that.

meet SURAJ VAIDYA in the January issue of THE BOSS

on news stands from Jan 15, 2004

Motivation transforms IMPOSSIBLE DREAMS into realities
Electric Vehicles Battle for SURVIVAL
Joblosses and FREE MARKETS
Knowledge Management is the NEW BUZZWORD

Nemo Parquet: 4414805

SUrAJ VAIDYA
The high-profile summit of the seven-nation South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) ended with high-profile decisions, including the signing of the much-awaited South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA). This agreement will initiate the long-awaited process of regional economic integration once it goes into operation in January 2006. Although the otherwise ineffective regional bloc also agreed to wide-ranging cooperation to curb terrorism, SAFTA is the most important outcome of the summit, as it will lead to economic interdependence and ultimately generate political harmony among the bickering South Asian nations.

“I am happy to see that the spirit of accommodation and cooperation prevailed all through our deliberations,” Bangladeshi Prime Minister Khaleda Zia told the concluding session of the summit. The next SAARC summit is set for Dhaka in January next year.

The signing of SAFTA was received warmly, particularly by the business leaders of India and Pakistan, the strongest countries of the bloc. “This is the most important achievement of SAARC ever. The 13 summits in the past achieved absolutely no socio-economic economic interdependence and ultimately generate political harmony among the bickering South Asian nations.

The agreement approved at the summit puts in place a broader framework. It binds the least-developed countries of the region to reduce their tariffs to 0 to 5 percent in a period of seven years, starting January 2006. This category is also classified as middle-income countries by the World Trade Organisation, and includes India and Pakistan. The least developed countries will, however, meet the target in a period of 10 years, starting January 2006. The agreement allows each member state to maintain a sensitive list of products on which tariffs will not be reduced. This list will be finalised by January 2008.

Not everyone is optimistic. Many sections of the industry fear they will not survive the tough competition of free international and regional trade. Pakistan’s sugar industry, for instance, drives with fears of competing with its Indian counterpart. It is these fears that indicate that the finalisation of SAFTA’s (South Asia Free Trade Area) deals and programmes of sensitive lists will be a tricky task for SAARC member nations, which also foresee a regional economic union, with perhaps a single currency, taking shape by 2020.

SAFTA’s full realisation will also hinge on the bilateral safeguards among the SAARC member states. “All of us know very well that real cooperation will not be sustainable in a political vacuum and environment of conflict and confrontation,” said Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri. It was, therefore, no surprise that the Musharraf government has no or very little intention of disarming the nuclear arsenals of Pakistan and India on the sidelines of the summit took the limelight. • (IPS)

Mid shattered hopes, dilapidated roads and destroyed homes that still have no sanitation services, everything seems to be out of order in Afghanistan. This devastated country entered 2004 with the prospect of its first democratic elections expected in June next year, after the draft of a new constitution is in place. But to many, lasting peace after the end of the Soviet occupation in the late eighties only to go under the occupation of another world power, Pakistan. The Taliban, which without naming the United States, whose troops have just finished a massive operation leaving the country and al-Qaeda fighters. “It seems our commanders and ‘maliks’ or village commanders are used to war. They don’t know what peace is and what its fruits are,” he said while selling peppermints to children wearing muddy thick clothes to ward off the cold. The thought of peace has become alien to people used to hearing gunshots and tanks rolling in the streets and over their mud-made habitats, he says.

These feelings of uncertainty are not confined to the past. In the Taliban era, most parts of the country, including the capital Kabul, have witnessed upsurge in lawlessness as well as the re-emergence of ethnic divisions some years ago. By years of conflict, AID workers have come under attack. Opium production accounts for nearly half the GDP, and the country needs $30 billion in aid and investment over the next five years. The Karzai government has no or very little authority outside the capital. It remains heavily dependent for security on foreign, including US troops, while warlords outside Kabul have been refusing to turn over revenues to the central government.

The country’s woes are not surprising, says an intelligence officer who did not wish to be named. He said the ‘liberation of Afghanistan’ in 2001, after the US-led military attacks in retribution for the 11 September terrorist attacks, was just coined by Washington. In truth, this liberation is nothing else but the beginning of another occupation, adds the intellectual, who has taught at educational institutions set up for Afghan refugees in neighbouring Pakistan. “What is the US agenda? Did it and its allies have any real plan for Afghanistan’s reconstruction?” he asked. These are the questions which need to be properly answered.

Some believe that the holding of ‘lyas jirga’ or grand assembly to discuss a new constitution—which is nearing an end after weeks of debates about whether Afghanistan should have a presidential or parliamentary form of government—will be futile if it does not address tensions among different ethnic and political groups. The ratification of the new constitution will pave the way for the 2004 poll. “Something is there that rouses my mind,” the same intellectual added. “The fact is that over 80 percent of jirga’s delegates are those whose interests could not be better served and nourished in continued warfare and ‘not in peace’. The warlords had resisted Karzai’s push for the constitution to design a strong presidency. ‘After the Taliban’s alienation and its subsequent fall, let us now alienate the warlords, the so-called commanders and tribal chiefs. This is the only panacea for all the crippling ills of over 20 years’, he said. • (IPS)

The spectre of a nuclear holocaust, which has loomed over the subcontinent ever since India and Pakistan conducted test-for-test nuclear tests in 1998, has begun to recede as they agree to resolve their differences through a ‘composite dialogue’ to begin in February. The breakthrough came on Tuesday at the close of the two-day summit of the seven-nation South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in Islamabad.

Analysis say the truly important outcome of the SAARC summit is the South Asia Free Trade Area (SAFTA), which ensures the nuclear-armed neighbours were “locked into a new collective arrangement” that included Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

The summit saw Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Pakistan President Gen Pervez Musharraf meeting, for the first time in nearly three years, at the sidelines of the summit (see pic, inset). The two officials had previous meetings, but they were failures. Vajpayee travelled to Pakistan in 1999 and Musharraf arrived in India in 2001. India insisted that any discussion of the Kashmir issue must be preceded by a “cessation of cross-border terrorism” carried out by militant groups located in the Pakistan-held part of divided Kashmir. Significantly, Tuesday’s joint statement said: “President Musharraf urged Prime Minister Vajpayee that he will not permit any territory under Pakistan’s control to be used to support terrorism in any manner.”

Musharraf last in the past insisted that the 1999 war on the Line of Control (LoC) at Kargil was carried out by indigenous freedom fighters seeking to liberate Kashmir. But Washington escalated and involved the downing of each other’s aircraft and the loss of thousands of lives before it was stopped by the intervention of then US President Bill Clinton.

The year that followed saw the leaders of both countries publicly demonstrating to use their nuclear weapons on each other. Following an attempt by a suicide squad to blow up the Indian Parliament in December 2001, follow by a similar attack in Kabul on the US Embassy in August 2002, diplomatic relations between the two countries were normalised. It took intense international ‘shuttle-diplomacy’ between New Delhi and Islamabad, led by US Secretary of State Colin Powell, to defuse a situation dangerous enough for several countries to carry out emergency evacuations of its nationals from the two countries. Since then, Pakistan has been under pressure from United States to dismantle the militant camps that India insists exist along the border.

But in the joint statement, Musharraf denied any Western power influenced the resumption of a peace dialogue with India. “There is no question of any outside force...the deal is between India and Pakistan.” • (IPS)

Vajpayee and Musharraf agreed to begin talks on a ‘composite dialogue’ to begin in February. This ‘composite dialogue’ will take place at the level of foreign ministers to discuss issues including terrorism, at the SAARC summit in January.

The summit also agreed to convene a ‘Forum on Dialogue on Peace’ to begin in June. This will be convened by the SAARC secretariat in the second half of June. “People have been waiting for a political solution to the problem,” Musharraf told the summit.

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Feeding terror
Isolation and alienation are driving us into a downward spiral of self-reinforcing fear.

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If the first casualty of the US ‘war on terror’ was truth, the second was trust. Telegraphed through the policies and pronouncements of an imperial but increasingly isolated superpower, mistrust is spreading like a virus through the global body politic, infecting not only trade relations, diplomacy, and public life but personal and professional relationships. Isolation and alienation between people are driving us into a downward spiral of self-reinforcing fear. Reversing this trend will require an awakening to our fundamental interdependence and a recognition that our worst enemy is not each other but the fear that prevents us from joining with one another to address the crises caused by our self-isolating behaviour.

Under the banner of ‘privatisation’, those who have dominated US and global politics since the end of the Cold War have systematically devalued and plundered the public realm, depriving our governments of the resources and support they need to perform effectively. But privatisation has exacted an equal and perhaps higher price in our social relations. Despite its proclaimed allegiance to family, country and community, in practice conservative ideology consistently undermines all three through policies that raid public resources, poison trust between people, and erode confidence in our collective capacity to address the challenges we face.

Those who imagine war on terror use fear to intimate and compel the compliance not only of foreign enemies but also of our own public. And that fear is best engendered by making people feel alone in any concerns they may have about their nation’s leadership. ‘Nationalism is that in which being “rednecked” or having a burning taste of patriotism if they ask the tough questions,’ Dan Rather, deixus of US TV news anchors, admitted to a BBC interviewer in July 2002. Featurizing ostracism and degrading of their lack of power to influence events, most in the American media and public life swell their doubts and so contribute to the mistaken impression of a ‘silenced majority’ that fear shares their concerns.

Yet the same authorities who counsel us to beware of one another and of ‘terrorists’ in our midst are themselves acting out of a fear-filled worldview. Imagining implacable enemies even among traditional allies, they shackle key aspects of the paranoid authoritarian rulers of the past. George W Bush and his redoubte vice president, Dick Cheney, fit a familiar pattern: a sense of tremendous opportunity wasted. Ever since George W Bush took office, America’s annual real GDP growth has averaged 2.5 percent—a pace that would have been acclaimed as normal and satisfactory when George W Bush’s father or Ronald Reagan was president, but that after the Clinton boom now seems tawdry and sluggish. Indeed, it is clear that the American economy could have grown much faster than it has. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics reports a drop in the unemployment rate to 4.4 percent in 2004 and 2.5 percent today, together with a decline in non-farm payroll employment in this period from 131.8 million to 130.2 million. Underlying the business cycle, the rapid progress of the information-technology revolution is pushing American productivity growth above all in the fast-growing sectors: telecommunications, software, biotechnology, biopharmaceuticals, nanotechnology, and computer-related industries. But has the Federal Reserve been more aggressive in pushing interest rates down, or has Bush and Congress passively acquiesced in boosting unemployment and short-term demand and employment, the US economy would have grown much faster than it actually did. Will America’s economy grasp its opportunity to grow rapidly over the next year? Probably. Unemployment may already be at a 4 percent growth rate over the next year. This may or may not be enough to produce lots of payroll jobs and significantly cut the unemployment rate, but it will be enough growth for the US to continue to be the fastest growing component of the world’s post-industrial core. But the post-industrial core’s economy as a whole will continue to be like an airplane with only one working engine. Real GDP growth from Japan and western Europe is unlikely to reach even half the pace seen in the US.

However, the absence of rapid growth in western Europe and Japan is not a great handicap for developing countries, because Europe and Japan were never all that open to imports of goods and services. But the US economy would have grown much faster than it has. Had the Federal Reserve been more aggressive in pushing interest rates down, or has Bush and Congress passively acquiesced in boosting unemployment and short-term demand and employment, the US economy would have grown much faster than it actually did.

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In 2004 the global economy will crumble in favour of the US. What will happen to the US? Unfortunately, we do not know, but we do know that it will. Similarly, we do not know when world trade in information services like from accounting, auditing, and customer service will truly boom as a result of the Internet and the fiber-optic cable. But we do know that, like the 19th century booms in trade in staple goods fueled by the iron-hulled ocean-going steamship and the telegraph, it will.

The lesson is that governments, firms, investors, workers, and parents worldwide should begin betting on the US since it is the only economy whose scope and reach are not likely to become visible over the past decade. Such bets probably won’t pay off in the next year, or two, or three. But they surely will start to pay off in the next ten.

I am not alone in thinking that the US economy has missed the boat on the revolution in information services. I have been saying it for a decade. Even before I wrote that the most important development in the world is the Internet and the revolution in information services, I had been saying that the world’s most important development was the Internet. During the Clinton Presidency.

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Hearing voices

How can we understand differences between an inspired voice, an isolated instance of hearing one’s own name, and the voices of the mentally ill?

These applications of conventional biotechnology, or genetic engineering, represent monumental scientific, technological, commercial, and humanitarian successes. But the techniques they were relatively crude and recently have been supplemented—and in many cases replaced—by “the new biotechnology,” a set of enabling techniques that enable genetic modifications at the molecular level. The prototype of these techniques, variously called gene splicing or genetic modification (“GM”) is a more precise, better understood, and more predictable technique for altering genetic material than was possible previously.

The desired product “of gene splicing” may be the engineered organism itself—a bacteria to clean up oil spills, a weakened virus used as a vaccine, or a papaya tree that resists viruses—or it may be a biosynthetic product of the cells, such as human insulin produced in bacteria, or oil expressed from seeds. Gene-spliced plants have for several years been grown worldwide on more than 100 million acres annually. More than two-thirds of processed foods in the US contain ingredients derived from gene-spliced organisms. There has not been a single mishap that resulted in injury to a single person or ecosystem. Thus, both theory and experience confirm the extraordinary predictability and safety of gene modification and its products. The new gene-splicing techniques are merely an extension, or refinement, of the kinds of genetic modification that preceded the era of “new biotechnology.” Welcome to Biotech’s Brave New World.

Ralph Hoffman is Professor of Psychiatry at Yale University.
The republican road

Nepali Congress leader Narahari Acharya in Katmandu, 5 January

The issue of a republican system has ignited a serious debate for the first time in contemporary Nepal. In 1950, the goal of the Nepali Communist Party was to establish a communist republic. Eleven years later, when the party split, the republic was still a common cause among the different communist factions, despite some leaders showing pro-king shades. In 1996, the Maoists resorted to an armed cause among the different communist factions, despite some leaders being forced to label the king’s move as regressive.

Officially and practically, the Nepali Congress, the UML and other communist blocs are in favour of monarchy even now. Even the upper echelons of the Maoists have said they would respect the king if he drops his ambition to rule the country.

So how is it that a republican state is becoming an issue? The Nepali Congress is not against a republican system. It has accepted a communist monarchy with a view to transform it for the greater good. But things changed after the palace massacre and the royal takeover a year later.

The palace massacre raised doubts and questions about the respectability and need for a traditional monarchy. The political parties and parliament failed to conduct a thorough investigation into the incident. In fact, the parliament did not even seriously discuss the issue. This clearly showed that the monarchy had not truly become constitutional even after the 1990 movement.

The Nepali Congress doubts the king for another reason: his haste and lack of procedure in naming Crown Prince Paras Shah as his heir without clearing the latter’s name of past controversies. The political parties and parliament failed to conduct a thorough investigation into the issue. This clearly showed that the monarchy had not truly become respectability and need for a traditional monarchy. The sooner we do not deign to correct our political systems backed by the Nepali Congress, the UML and other parties and parliament failed to conduct a thorough investigation into the incident.

The royal takeover of Fourth October made it clear that he had removed himself from constitutional boundaries. Those who supported a people’s republic and expected progressive reforms in the monarchy were forced to label the king’s move as regressive.

There is pressure building up from the grassroots in the Nepali Congress that the party statutes need to be changed and the party should be ready for a republic. In the past, people believed that the end of the Panchayat system meant the end of Nepal. We’re still around. Similarly, the country will probably survive without a monarchy. The people and our institutions can save the country. The constitutional monarchy has been the policy, not the principle, of the Nepali Congress. No matter how important policies are, they are subject to review. This is why the party is now debating the need of the monarchy.

The real challenge is to prepare the public for a republic. Nepal has always found itself saddled with political systems backed by the Nepali Congress, although the party often fails to run them with any lasting success. Monarchs do not design to correct themselves. It falls on the institutions of the people. We have to correct things, and respect, reform or even change the monarchy. The sooner we comprehend this, the closer we’ll find ourselves to the solution of the present crisis.

Pokhrel on India

UML leader Ishwor Pokhrel in Katmandu, 4 January

“I was about to board the plane to fly back home on 29 December in New Delhi after attending a two-day conference jointly organised by the Association of Nepal Diaspora in India and the All India Nepali Free Students’ Union. All of a sudden, Indian security personnel took me away from the departure lounge. Different officers took turns interrogating me between 10PM-3AM. They were out to humiliate and intimidate, and I could not understand why they persisted in their behaviour when I clearly stated my legal and political status. The program I attended was organised with the consent of the local administration and security agency, so why was I misused? Perhaps they were confused by my arrest they wanted to salvage their tarnished diplomatic image following their intimidation tactics with Nepal and their double-speak regarding the Maoists.”

Indian rulers have always maintained double standards toward Nepal after their independence from the British. The objective of such a policy is to harness Nepal’s natural resources for its use. It was India that made late King Tribhuvan flce his palace and exile himself in its embassy before being ‘evacuated’ to New Delhi. The Indian government caused the movement in Nepal to flare up in the name of a pissed off king. The idea was to compel Mohan Shamsher to sign a treaty in 1950 that was so unequal that it was an insult. The Rana prime minister was already on shaky ground without the patronage of the British who had already left India. It is this same treaty that has become a noose around the neck of Nepal today.”

Home soon

Himal Khabarpattna, 31 December – 14 January

Three years after he was arrested by the Indian army in Kathmandu, Prem Bahadur Balchhaidi Chhetri of Tanahu district is languishing in jail at Lucknow (pic, right). He was arrested while he was queuing up to receive his pension at Thamel, not in Lucknow as the Indian army claims. Having served in the Indian Army for 22 years, Chhetri retired five years ago and opened a grocery shop at Anubhakaireni in Tanahu. Immediately after he was taken, his family placed notices in various newspapers and TV spots asking for his whereabouts. After three long months they found out that he was imprisoned in the Indian city. His wife Kalpana (pic, right), relatives and other supporters petitioned with the Home Ministry, human rights organisations and political leaders about his unlawful detention and legal status. Chhetri’s case even made it to the floor of the parliament, but no further.

Rishi KC, the former chairman of Anubhakaireni VDC says nobody has shown any concern. It’s a sentiment that others echo. “We are sad to see the silence of our government when India jails an innocent citizen,” says social worker Ajad Kumar Mishra. Chhetri’s wife is afraid her husband may spend the rest of his life behind bars. “It looks like the Indians can do anything they want,” says the mother of two teenaged sons, Chhetri’s future is her main concern. Chhetri telephones his family once every three or four months. The last time he spoke to them, he said the Indian government hadn’t filed any case against him. “They have no ground to prove their charge,” he had said. “I’ll be home soon, don’t worry.” The Indian government provides Chhetri with food in jail but the rest of his expenses have to be borne by his family. They have already spent more than Rs 100,000 to track down his whereabouts and later to petition for his release.

Man with broken steering wheel: Political parties

Bus: Student movement

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

“The king’s effort should be to reinitiate my government and make Madhab Nepal the prime minister.”

— Sher Bahadur Deuba in Kathmandu, 6 January
NEW DELHI

In GB Road, the Indian capital’s notorious red light area, the madams are surprised and pleased to see a large number of Nepali men visiting their brothels. They are the diaspora who fled the Maoist insurgency and went to India and now they seek a little bit of comfort with sex workers, some of who are Nepali girls, after a hard day’s work. “A lot of Nepali men come here for pleasure,” says Rita, a sex worker from Dang. “Their numbers are now increasing.”

Rajdhani

“Bhabhi”, a brothel owner, says she is very happy to see so many new clients. Today, Nepali men outnumber the Indians who come to this locality. “It’s quite easy to get money from Nepalis who spend up to Rs 500 for one girl,” says Bhabhi who has four girls working for her.

Chabilal Nepali from Dang, works as a cook in brothel number 4. He says he can tell the volume of Nepali immigrants has risen simply from the increasing amount of those who come to GB Road. “Both young and old Nepalis can be seen making rounds,” says Nepali who hates the sight of the girls fighting to grab customers. “I’m forced to live here as I have no other choice.”

It’s the same predicament that forced another young man from Dang to leave home. “It wasn’t safe for me to stay, so I had to leave my family,” he says. “We have problems finding decent jobs because Indian employers look at us with suspicion.” He has been here four months and works as a day labourer. With no extra money for a room, he is forced to sleep under a bridge near the railway station. While it’s sad to see Nepalis throwing their hard earned money on sex workers, it is worse to see them being exploited by the police who regularly collect ‘protection’ money for keeping them out of prison if they have been caught going to a brothel. They are beaten if they refuse to pay.

From the Nepali Press

We will not destroy public property or kill innocent civilians, that is what the Maoist leadership repeatedly says in its press statements. But rebels on the lower rungs don’t seem to be paying attention. As a matter of fact, they are involved in activities that directly contravene the assurance of their leaders. It doesn’t help that those at the top are unable to investigate why their orders are not followed. With brutalities like burning a girl alive in a bus, breaking bones and cutting the throats of innocent villagers, the Maoists cast doubt on their true intentions time and again. What kind of message are they trying to give to Nepal by burning a van carrying police drops to a village in Chitwan? What are they trying to prove by burning medical supplies? Do the Maoists want the people to remain disabled? It is possible that the Maoists are demanding Rs 50,000 each for their release.

Hiral Khusalkar, 31 December – 14 January

On 14 November, Maoists from Dhankuta kidnapped six young men. Now they’ve offered to release them, for a ransom. Ranjan Rai, Abanish Rai, Deepak Thapa and Binod Lama, Suraj Lama and Binod Rai were abducted from a local fair and were accused of killing a 62-year-old man. The rebels have now fixed the price of their freedom at Rs 50,000 each.

Abducted students Binod Tamang, Suraj Lama. Binod Rai, Abinash Rai (Grade 8 student), Ranjan Rai. Their families say the Maoists are demanding Rs 50,000 each for their release.

Ransom

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In this second installment of the testimony of veteran Gurkhas, 89-year-old Bharati Gurung (left) recalls fighting on behalf of the British in Iraq. Some of the details of the battles bear a striking resemblance to the conditions faced by coalition forces there. The regiment moves on to Cyprus and is captured by the Germans in Tobruk and taken to a POW camp in Italy.

His story is part of Lahurey ko Katham that records the lives of Gurkha soldiers, most of them over 75 years old. This fortnightly column is translated from Nepali by Dev Bahadur Thapa for Nepali Times.

Gurkha and Indian troops advance on Tobruk before they were captured by the Germans.

In the year 1939 fighting erupted between the forces of Britain and those of Hitler. In the beginning we boarded the ship in Bombay and were off-loaded at a place called Bura in Iraq. Enemy troops were concentrated there. An encounter with the enemy forces took place. They had put up their camp and taken defense when we started disembarking from the ship. Defence meant a situation where they are shielded from getting hurt, but we were not.

In attack we had to run in the open field. Defence means to save oneself and kill others. On one occasion we marched for 16 hours. On the way there was no sign of water, nor green grass—nor even stone or soil. Just sand. We lost three or four soldiers on the march. Once in a while we could see one or two coconut trees on the banks of the river. For the night we had to dig a trench. If we didn’t we could be killed by a bomb from the air. In spite of feeling drowsy, we had to keep vigil all the time and slept turn by turn. Enemy soldiers appeared at our company supposing this to be theirs, and on other occasions we blundered into their. True, Hitler’s troops did appear there but their numbers was far more exaggerated in propaganda. For example, the rumor was rampant that a full brigade of Hitler’s troops were in Iraq, but in fact only 20,25 soldiers had been dropped from planes.

The large river Tigris runs through central Iraq, the shores of which is believed to have petrol deposits. The largest deposit of petrol is in Kuwait between Iran and Iraq. The English had sealed these oil fields since you need petrol to fly planes in the sky or for tanks. We were instructed to rush to the spot where German troops were landing and kill them while they dropped. If anyone reached the ground, then we were to kill him then and there. They too opened fire but they could hardly hit us, as they were busy trying to land and avoid falling on a tree or into the sea. We managed to kill quite a few Germans there. They killed some of our men too. One can’t keep track of how many soldiers died. Some say up to 100,000 people could have died in a single day of the war. There is no empty space in the battlefield—every inch is filled with tanks. The troops lead the way. That is followed by very many kinds of weapons. Then comes the artillery on each side of which march the foot soldiers. Weapons range from pistols to atom bombs.

We were absurdly and earnestly sought the help of God to preserve us. But once war starts, you can’t be afraid. You stand on the verge of death, but fear vanishes. There is no time to be homesick. Our sole concern is focused on whether or not we have been hit by artillery fire. Some become experts at dodging the artillery. Even when they hear the boom, they can judge the distance and direction and take cover. Only when we were free did we reminisce about home.

In Tobruk (Libya) there is a big port very similar to Bombay. Right over there our full army was captured by the troops of Hitler. They took away enough rations to feed an army for five years. At that moment Hitler disarmed all the British soldiers and set them free to go anywhere they liked. They had no weapons, nothing to eat and no clothes to wear. They were put on a cold hill in Italy. The officers numbered 150 at the minimum. There were Gurkha, British, Negro, Canadian, British, Australian and other officers from all over the world. One of our ex-ministers, Nar Bahadur from Sabet was also held captive there. A few days later American planes found out where they were held captive. They surrounded the place and sent in planes to drop bombs. This caused havoc inside the barricade and people started fleeing. The men from other nationalities started running down to the plains where they were trapped by Hitler’s tanks. The Gurkhas on the other hand fled to the slopes where the tanks could not go. Gurkha officers like Nar Bahadur managed to escape. All Indian, Negro and British officers passed by the murderers in the onslaught. They were scared of the mountains, and didn’t go there. Nobody counted how many were killed in that way. Along with Nar Bahadur, I escaped death by climbing up the hill. In all there were six Gurkha regiments of which four died in the Iraq. Two were killed. We escaped death by making ditches in the slopes and staying there. It was severely cold and we had no proper clothing. We ate roots, roots, the British forces arrived and rescued us.
Nepal’s own Tiger

Sean Navin Shrestha Einhaus was in Kathmandu last week and thrilled local golfers by shooting great scores of 67 and 68 at Gokarna Golf Club—an incredible phenomenon for a lad just turned 14. Our golf columnist, Deepak Acharya snatched the opportunity for a candid interview. Sean answered each question with the concentration and seriousness required for judging the yardage left to the hole for a match winning shot.

Deepak Acharya: How do you manage your game?
Sean Navin Shrestha Einhaus: I practice a lot, I go to the fitness centre three times a week and I also do a lot of stretching within a yoga program. In today’s competitive golf, you need to be extremely fit to compete, as this is part of the high mental toughness required.

How many events did you win last year?
Well, I had bit of success in the tournaments last year. Most notably I won the 14 and under German Championship and my team, the Northen Wastefalen, won the German title also. I was the youngest player (13 years old) to ever be in that team. And I won the Northern Wastefalen (state) championship for ages up to 16 with the score of 72 and 68 in the Hubbelrath golf course, where big names like Vijay Singh and Seve Ballesteros have won.

How supportive are your parents?
They have been extremely supportive. In fact both of them play golf and arrange all the facilities for me. They are there all the time and give me access to what I need to become a successful golfer.

What needs to be done to get more youth in Nepal interested in the game of golf?
To encourage more youth to be in the game, I feel that golf should be part of the curricular school activities for easier access to the game. Otherwise, it seems too expensive and they never get started.

What do you think existing young golfers in Nepal should do to improve their game?
Mainly, hard work. On top of that, good practice facilities, like good driving ranges, chipping and putting greens, etc. And then, play as many tournaments as possible.

What are your own goals?
Short-term or longterm? Short-term: play two German championships, win 1st division and bring my handicap to +2. Long-term—to play the US PGA (Professional Golf Association) Tour, win several Majors, top the money list and be No 1 in the world.

Who is your idol?
Tiger Woods for his personality, Shigeki Maruyama for always smiling, and Ernie Els for his swing.

Who was your first trainer?
(Smiles) Deepak Acharya from Nepal.

“I want to be World No 1”

J ust as Thailand has adopted Tiger Woods as an honorary representative through his Thai mother, Nepal is proud to have its own rising star making waves in the European Golf circuit.

Sean Navin Shrestha Einhaus turned 14 last week, and he was inspired to take up golf by his German father, Remigius, and elder brother, Rene Vijay, both of whom are good golfers. Sean’s first feel of a golf club was when he was three, here in Nepal. By the time he was six, he was playing regularly.

Today he is a scratch golfer, meaning he has a handicap of zero, a feat few ever attain and something very rare at this young age. This past year he was ranked Germany’s top under-16 player, a remarkable feat for a 13-year-old, considering the high level of competition in Europe.

When he recently won the 14 and under 14 German Championship, his scores were so good (a superb round of 3 under par 69), that he beat the older boys as well. Today he has won more national championships at Junior levels than anyone in the country has ever done before. He is the youngest player to ever be in the German National team.

Eight grader Sean goes to school at seven in the morning and returns at half past one. Three times a week he takes to the autobahns on a 110 km journey for three hours of golf training. On top of that he spends every weekend at the golf course, either practicing or playing tournaments.

Sean says, “My father and mother have given me the access to all the things that I need to be a successful golfer. They have been very supportive and I am determined to be Number One in the world one day.” Following his ambition, he leaves this month for Florida for an intensive golf training program, which includes playing tournaments in the United States—the country with the highest pressure and most competitive levels of golf in the world.
FESTIVALS AND EXHIBITIONS

- Traces Exhibition of photographs, prints and paintings till 30 January at Siddhartha Art Gallery. Baber Maharaj Rd. 4218048
- The Land I Love Photographs Kim Hung Sung till 16 January at Gallery Nine. Lazimpat. 4288924

EVENTS

- Echoes of Tomorrow on creative arts IPM on 8 January at NTB Auditorium, Bhrikuti Mandap. Entry open to all.
- Climbing Dharaa from 10AM – 5PM till 12 January to celebrate Dharaa Week. Tickets Rs 75. Student discounts available. Rs 200 for foreigners.
- The God’s Dance of Kathmandu Valley 7PM on Tuesdays. Tea-Dance. Rs 400 at Hotel Yak and Yeti.

DRINK

- Cosmic Cocktails at Mitra Lounge Bar, Thamel. 4259015
- Fusion at Dwarika’s for over 100 cocktails. 4479488

FOOD

- Lunch at Dhoikuma Café. Patan Dhoka from 12-3PM, 5 January onwards. Different menu everyday. 5522113
- Krishnarpan ceremonial Nepali lunch can be ordered for a king. 4479488
- Bring your wine every Thursday and Sunday and buy our dinner. Himalaiotte, Thamel.
- Roadhouse Café for specialty coffees. Opp St MARY’s School. Pulchrekn, 5521775
- Traditional Nepali Thai lunch at Patan Museum Café inside Patan Museum. 11AM-3:30 PM. Cocktails and snacks 2-7:30 PM. 5026271
- The best steaks in a warm dining room. Free Irish Coffee with every meal. Kendra Kailu Beer & Steakhouse, 4430043
- Raclette and Fondue Traditional Swiss table cooking at the Chimney 6:30 PM onwards at the Hotel Yak and Yeti, Kathmandu. 2489999

GETAWAYS

- Golf in the Valley’s last pristine forest. Gokarna Forest Golf Resort & Spa 4451212
- Shigra Heights Cottage at the edge of Shigra Village. Email: info@escapeenepal.com
- Weekend Special Rs 3,000 per couple. Park Village Resort, Budhanilkantha. 4375283
- Shigra Cottage, Dadaghar gourmet meals, board and transport. Highland Travel & Tours. 4250552, 4250503
- Escape to Godavari overnight package. Godavari Village Resort, Taikhel. 5506075
- Jungle Base Camp Lodge full board, stilts cottage and pickup, only Rs 10 a day (park activities extra). Email: junglebasiscamp@yahoo.com
- Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge invites you to recover from the party season. 4351500

KATHMANDU AIR QUALITY

The data for the last week of this World Bank has revealed something that Kathmandu is the most polluted city in Asia, but the data coming out of a couple of residential areas of Thamel it was more than twice the breathable threshold. Micrograms per cubic meter, three times the national minimum and in the suburbs of Kathmandu was twice more than the breathable threshold.

The only good news is that the pollution levels are not as bad as this time last year—attributed to new environment friendly trashes that have replaced the old models on the city’s outskirts.

NEPALI WEATHER

A low pressure system over Tibet and extending towards Nepal will play a role in our weather. The conditions here over the Gangetic plain has been pushed southward, forecasting a return of respiratory discomforts. The daytime temperature will remain at a very uncomfortable 24 degrees, but nights will be cool with frosty mornings.

KATHMANDU VALLEY

Jai Nepal Cinema
Call 4442290 for bookings
Call for show timings.
11.30 AM, 2.30 PM, 5.30 PM at janeplc.com

BEEFTE RALLY

The 4th Great Himalayan Volkswagen Beetle Rally will happen on Saturday 28th February, 2004. Great prizes to be won, great opportunity to support the production of peace activists, child out of poverty and medical surgery in Nepal and women’s health services in remote areas.

Contact: susan@csb.wicel.com or frances@wicel.com or sanctuary@hotelwicel.com.wc

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- To Let: Pabbbhannesh annexe storey house in a 2 bedroom 2 bathrooms, 1 kitchen living dining terrace lobby and parlor and phamplenth. Contact: Roopchut 4471510
- LIVE IN STYLE! Arcadia Apartments in the heart of Thamel. Centrally located, fully furnished apartments at unbeatable rates. For details: 98100303, 4301607
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NEPALI WEATHER

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HAPPENINGS

COMRADES: UML stalwarts, including Madhab Nepal, sing the Internationale at the inauguration of the Lalitpur District Party Convention on 4 January.

IN FULL TECHNICOLOUR: Masked dancers get ready to jive to celebrate 100 days of Keshab Sthapit’s mayorship, which he kicked off with a cultural extravaganza on Tuesday.

MOCK FUNERAL: Activists carry a mock corpse of ‘regression’ down Bagh Bazar for a cremation at Ratna Park on Wednesday. Three students and two senior police officers were seriously injured in street clashes.

PHOTO OP: Photojournalist Rajesh Gurung gets a dousing as the fire brigade arrives to put out flames during a student demo at Ratna Park on Wednesday.

SKY WRITING: Many Kathmandu residents thought this contrail of an airliner on a holding pattern at 33,000ft above Kathmandu airport for visibility to improve last week was a sign from heaven.

NEPALI SOCIETY

Freedom’s advocate

Advocate Mandira Sharma’s watchword has always been freedom. It began in her conservative Brahmin family in Baglung with a patriarch father who ruled with absolute control. “I had no freedom at all. I couldn’t wear what I liked, and couldn’t even do my hair the way I liked,” recalls Mandira.

To her father’s dismay, her best friend was a dalit, who was strictly forbidden from entering the Poudel household. Mandira didn’t let that stop her from always accompanying her friend outside her home, ignoring criticism from her high caste community. She rebelled, and hasn’t stopped rebelling.

"Of course, there was a limit to what I could do, no matter how independent I wanted to be,” says Mandira. “I was passionate about becoming a nurse but my family still regarded it as a profession for ruined women.” Her mother encouraged her not to lose hope, and inspired her to study law in Pokhara.

But Mandira’s father wanted her married off. She agreed, but on the condition that she would only marry a man of her choice. After sifting through several proposals, she came across a law graduate in Kathmandu. “Without a second thought, I decided to marry this stranger since it meant a chance to finally break free.”

As soon as she got to Kathmandu, she changed her wardrobe from traditional kurta suruwals to jeans and T-shirts, and immediately joined the Law Campus at Kamaladi. Mandira graduated with the highest marks among her female classmates and started the Advocacy Forum.

None of the disparaging lawyer jokes apply to Mandira. She believes and acts on the principle that a real lawyer’s job is to fight injustice on behalf of those who have neither money nor power.

Mandira has taken on the state apparatus, often taking legal action against the police for disregarding the rights of detainees.

As the country’s rights situation deteriorates, Mandira’s more busy than ever. In the last few years, she has sued more than 12 police officers for involvement in torturing detainees and holding them without trial. “I want people to have access to fair justice and respect,” she says.

More than anything else, what makes Mandira happiest today is to see the pride in her father’s eyes when he looks at his daughter.

(Narensh Newar)
Exclusive interview with an Effigy of Regression

Q: You mean you smoke?
A: All the time.

Q: Isn’t that, like, dangerous in your line of work?
A: I know I’m playing with fire, but what would you do in my place? It’s a stressful job.

Q: Um…
A: Here is a country going down the tubes, but there are still thousands of tykes waiting to be immolated, and there is a huge backlog of us effigies. When are we going to give everyone a chance? Isn’t this a social volcano?

Q: Wait a minute. I’m the one supposed to ask questions around here.
A: Then do it, I have a cremation to attend, an illegal torch rally at three o’clock and tomorrow they are burning me at the stake.

Q: (Shuffles through notes) Yes, how does being an Effigy of Regression compare with, say, being an Effigy of Vajpayee?
A: It’s got a lot to do with how well you get into the persona of the part you are playing. As an Effigy of Regression, I try to immerse myself totally in my role and, once I get into character then I really feel like I have regressed in a major way. You get the feeling nothing anyone says will affect the way you make decisions, and you just do it.

Q: You have been playing increasingly demanding roles of late, what would you say is your greatest dramatic challenge?
A: I’d say without hesitation, it is playing the role of Regression on a rainy winter afternoon while a fire truck approaches you menacingly. You have to take versatility to the extreme, reinvent yourself all the time, and keep everyone guessing about your next move.

Q: Thank you, Mr Regression, for your time and let me on behalf of the Nepali people wish you best of luck in your future career.