

NEPALI Times

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 Weekly Internet Poll # 118

Q. Do you agree with the government's plan to arm civilians to fight Maoists?

Total votes: 1,465

Weekly Internet Poll # 119. To vote go to: www.nepalintimes.com

Q. If a referendum were to be held, what type of system would you vote for?

At the gates

Parties unleash students to put pressure on the king.



A phalanx of police block the approach to the royal palace at Darbar Marg from student protesters on Tuesday afternoon.

NARENDRA SHRESTHA

NAVIN SINGH KHADKA

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 protesters 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

Editorial p2 The impossible triangle

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. ●

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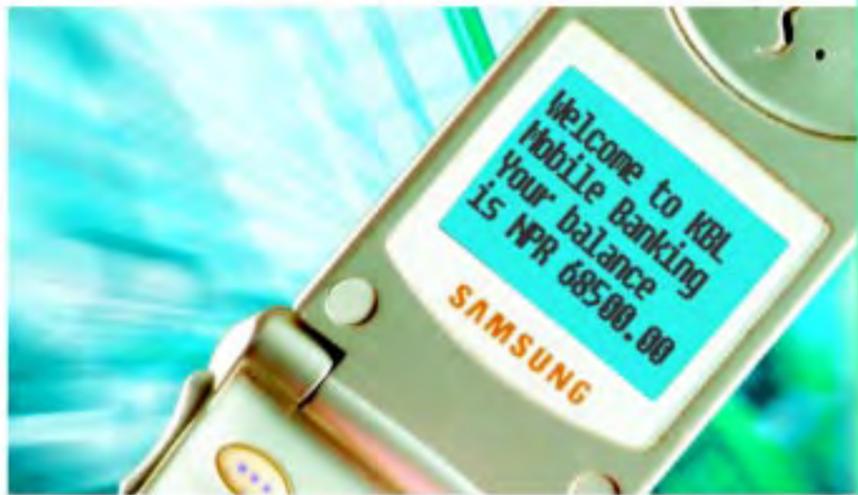
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THE IMPOSSIBLE TRIANGLE

It has become a cliché these days to say that the present power struggle in Nepal is between three forces: the king, the parliamentary parties and the Maoists. In a sense it is indeed a three-way tug-o-war that has reached a triangular stalemate: none of the three are making much headway, they are just wearing each other down, no one is prepared to give an inch.

However, there is a fourth force that the 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 henceforth commanded 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 choice. At 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.

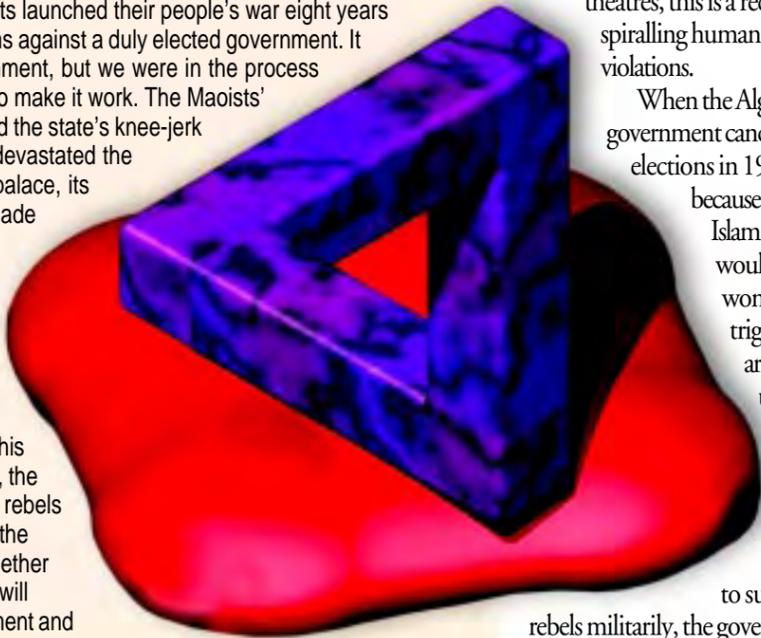
At the national level, things were slightly more complicated. The leadership was preoccupied with personal or party welfare—winning power and keeping it. This demanded an ability to be selfish and corrupt so one could amass the resources while in power to buy oneself back into power once out of it. Pretty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

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

Sadly, these high-profile scams eclipsed the real rot within and made a jaded public even more distrustful of the parties. The leaders were so 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 their 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, they 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 republicanism the slogan of streets—not just of the Maoists.

Nepalis don't trust any of the three powers who invoke their name. This is not about the king, the parties or the armed rebels anymore. It is about the fourth force and whether the people of Nepal will tolerate this ill-treatment and cruelty for much longer.



An uncivil society

Good intentions without logical direction can spell disaster.

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 lose and a long way to go.

The Thapa government seems unwilling to reverse its decision to form civil defence forces to resist Maoists in the countryside. 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 force doesn't seem to have been carried out, and there is a danger of this spiralling out of control. (See: 'Turning civilians into combatants', Seira Tamang, *Nepali Times* #175). As we have seen from other counter-insurgency theatres, this is a recipe for spiralling human rights violations.

When the Algerian government cancelled elections in 1992 because Islamicists 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. 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. Legitimate parliamentary forces 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-focussed illiberal democracy can falter.

The decision about civil militia has been taken by a government that is neither representative nor accountable, and appears to be vastly unpopular. Many people are saying "give us security, not guns". The last *Nepali Times* Nepalnews.com Internet poll was overwhelmingly (69 percent) against arming civilians. Sadly, a policy of such import with such potentially far-reaching and deadly consequences has been enacted through fiat without any debates and participation.

What guarantee is there that armed and poorly-trained militia will not turn against the state and plunge the country into a full-fledged civil war? The thinly stretched state apparatus is

already in trouble because it has lost control of large swaths of territory. How can you trust them to monitor these civilian militia, while their own kind within the ranks are being accused of rights violations?

After all, the civil defence forces will not be fighting an imperialist foreign force in Kumaun or Gharwal. They will have to hunt down their own brothers and sisters. This strategy is just too high-risk.

On the political front, the reaction is predictable. Notwithstanding his wild threats, Girija Koirala's response to the proposal is logical. He knows that you can't win elections against well-endowed armed opponents, and so he announced his own plans to form local militias. Thapa's nemesis, Pashupati Rana, also saw the dangers of having an all-too-powerful openly defiant prime minister from his own party. He had no choice but to demand his resignation. This is Politics 101, you can't blame these gentlemen for following text book paranoia.

The Nepali people have suffered a lot and have been extremely patient. They have refrained from joining the street protests to give two Panchayat-era prime ministers a chance to bring peace. The people's growing apathy is reflected on the current *Nepali Times* Nepalnews.com Internet poll, which is going fifty-fifty on republic vs monarchy.

Many Nepalis are at a loss, and their patience will run out eventually. It appears that an all-party government with parliamentary forces at the helm is the only rational course. How long can the monarch remain silent? ●

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

LETTERS

TRADEOFF

Kavita Rai's 'Dam development' (#176) depicts inevitable changes in the process of development. The construction of the Mahendra Highway resulted in similar processes where tradeoffs and sacrifices had to be made with local needs so that the entire nation could benefit. Within a sovereign nation, resources must be shared amongst the resource-endowed and the resource-scarce regions.

Missing out on Arun III was a fatal blow to the future generation of Nepalis. Communities in the Arun watershed area are worse off economically, socially and ecologically today than in the Sri Krishna Gandaki area today. So long as capital can be pumped in rural Nepal for infrastructure development, the longterm gains and aspirations of the majority needs to be considered. This is democracy in the real sense.

Bhaskar Singh Karky,
 The Netherlands

TRAFFIC

'Trafficking in Kathmandu' (#176) by David Cloud described the lack of traffic rules in our city in an entertaining manner. There is no doubt that Kathmanduites have very little traffic sense. However, I would really like to appreciate the huge effort made by some pedestrians to climb the overhead bridges.

Eli Pradhan, Kathmandu

BIRDS

Thank you for the beautifully written coverage of the Shibapuri National Park and the bird count by Sradha Basnet ('Birds of a feather', #177). One mistake crept in: we didn't see a Danfe but a Kalij pheasant.

Rajendra Suwal,
 nepalnature.com

FULL CIRCLE

This is in reference to the article 'Full circle' (#176) on the Los Angeles County Museum of Art exhibition on Himalayan Buddhism. It was indeed enthralling and exciting. Being in

the US for about a month or so, and trying to figure out my way around in my school in this town, the word Nepal appearing in the magazines advertising the exhibition gave me some level of comfort. After seeing



familiar monuments, artwork and gods and goddesses in the exhibition, I felt truly blessed by their presence. However, as your article mentioned, many of the exhibits belonged to private collectors. How on earth did these collectors get hold of religious objects that were still being worshipped back home? Who sold it to them? Who sold them to the guy who sold it to them? We should probably feel thankful that at least there were people who were interested enough to collect it, preserve it and make it available for exhibitions. Had it not been for these art lovers and friends of Asia, those valuable pieces would have been lost or destroyed. But it still nags me that these objects were stolen from Nepal.

Pravesh Gurung,
 California Institute of the Arts,
 Valencia

BLOT

Leaders like Kamal Thapa seem to forget their past as soon as they are given ministerial berths by the king. They abuse

Let's save the king

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,

STATE OF THE STATE
CK Lal

Yubraj 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 tête-à-tête, didn't appear too satisfied with the Nagarjun meeting. The rest of his agitating partners are bracing themselves for yet another delay tactic to keep the constitution in suspended animation.

This 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 organised 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's 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.

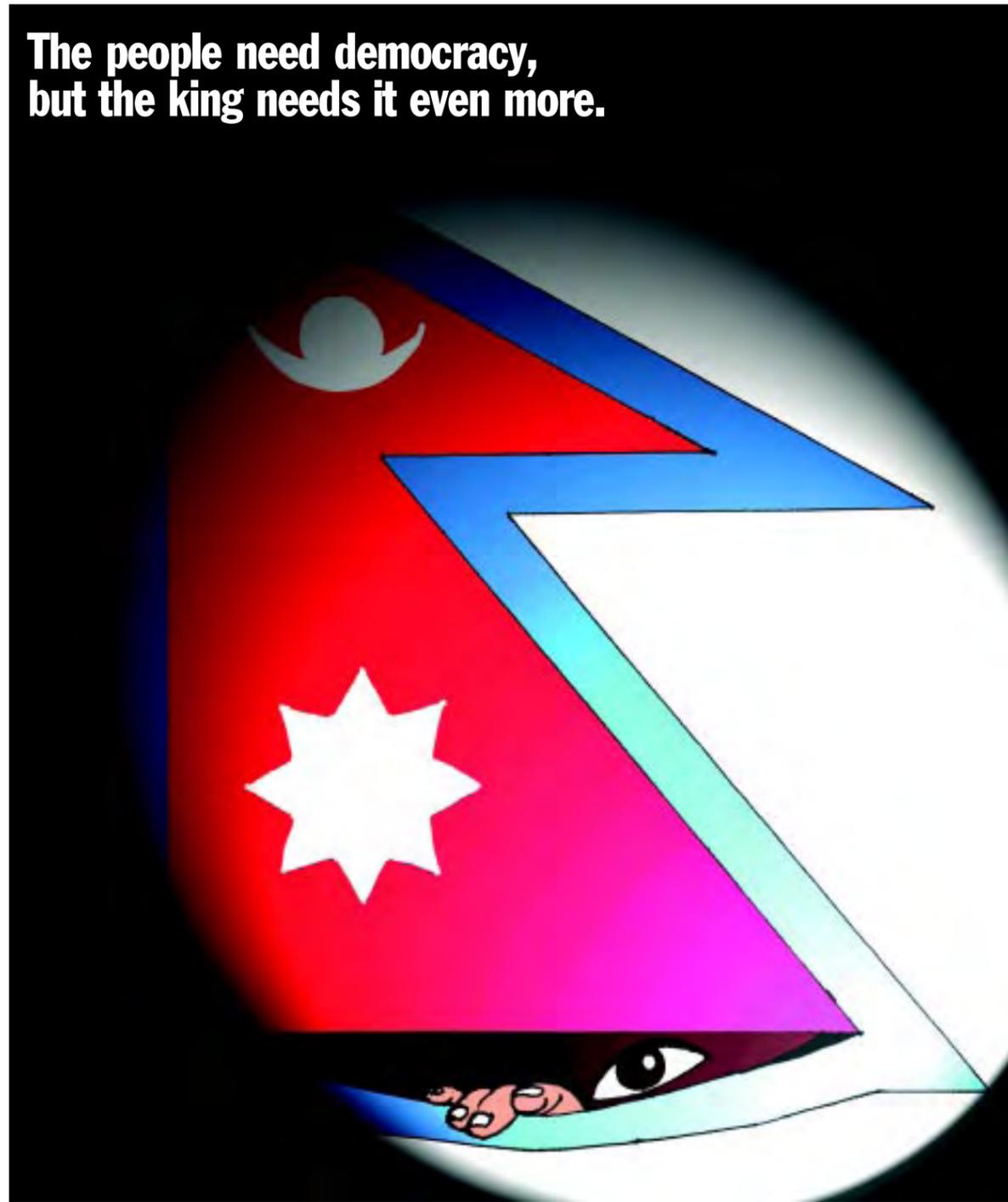
After the Third Wave of democracy swept the world, it has ceased to be merely one among the several systems of governance. Now it is an ideal that even countries like Afghanistan and Iraq are expected to live up to and for a multi-ethnic society like Nepal, it is the sole strategy of survival. Trumpeting 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 contribution of King Prithvi Narayan Shah the Great in weaving together this diverse land. ●

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



NAREN

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 *nirdal* characteristics but have covered themselves in *bahudal* cloaks. Their democratic mask is slipping and their *mandale* mask is showing.

Ram Bahadur Rai
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
Kalimati

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

Lalit R Sharma, email

● Congratulations on going full colour and

24 pages. *Nepali Times* looks fresher and livelier than before. And thanks for introducing new women columnists like Anagha Neelkantan and Neeta Pokhrel.

Renu Adhikari, Kathmandu

● There is much more to read in the new *Nepali Times*. Thank you for making the best Nepali paper even better. But I should point out that Newton's laws in your editorial (#177) are his 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 *Nepali 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 Shreesh, 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

- *Numafung* is a tale of a Limbu girl and not Lepcha ('Numa's story', #177).
- The correct byline for 'Elections in Maoland' (#177) should have been Manmohan Swar.

Maid to order

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



RAMYATA LIMBU

RAMYATA LIMBU in HONG KONG

Twenty-seven-year-old Regina sits pensively on a sofa in a tiny apartment in Hong Kong's central neighbourhood as Chinese soap opera stars jabber away on television in a language that sounds both harsh and alien to her.

Beside her, 21-year-old Amisha ruefully cuts her long painted nails on the sharp instructions of Ms

Chan, the women's domestic employment agent in Hong Kong. "You can't afford to have long nails if you're here to work, it's not hygienic," says Chan, a stern, non-nonsense woman who picked the women up at the airport. The entire trip from the airport to the agency's boarding house is interspersed with Chan's instructions—a long list of

household do's and don'ts, and upon arrival an impromptu lesson in lighting a gas stove and cleaning the bathroom.

Both the women, one a married mother of two, the other a college student, have arrived in this bustling Chinese territory to fulfill a two-year contract as domestic workers. "I know it's going to be



From l-r: The Nepali consulate in Hong Kong is kept busy because of migrant workers with problems. 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.

hard working in a foreign country where the language and culture is unfamiliar," says Regina. "There's no one to love you, people only expect you to work." She left behind an ailing husband and a five and 10-year-old in the care of her elderly mother so that she can earn enough money to pay debts and her husband's medical fees.

Armed with a smattering of Cantonese, very little English, and the basics of Chinese cooking, Regina is nervous about meeting her employers and fulfilling the long list of household duties she is expected to carry out in Hong Kong. But she is determined to stick it out. "I can't go back without making some money. I'd be letting my family down."

Despite her parents' disapproval, Amisha decided to quit college and come to Hong Kong to see life in a big city. "I know I can make much more

money in Hong Kong as a domestic than working in Nepal with a college degree." By Nepali standards, the US\$421 minimum monthly salary for domestic work is a lot of money. Although both women have agreed to pay their agents six months' salary in return for getting them a job, Regina says: "Even then I'll make more money than I would back home. And if I'm careful, I can save. It's hard to say what kind of employer I'll get, good or bad. But given time I'm sure I'll adjust. I've heard of some bad experiences but also about some domestics who've got great employers."

There are 240,000 live-in domestic workers in Hong Kong, a territory of 6.8 million people. About 100,000 are from the Philippines, followed by Indonesians, Thais and Nepalis. An estimated 1,500 Nepali domestics work in Hong Kong,

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, stubbornly unique, will be around and probably thriving. It may be part of a larger South Asian Union, modelled on Europe. Perhaps Kathmandu will be the Brussels of the SAU. Whatever the format, Nepal will

be there. Why am I so sure? Because almost every young Nepali I

HERE AND THERE
Daniel Lak



meet is impressive, savvy and aware of what's wrong with this place. I won't insult the current generation by questioning its intelligence but guys—choice of gender deliberate—smell the coffee. And, if the current crop of under-30-somethings—urban, rural, Hindu, Buddhist, 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.

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

Lak takes a leap to predict things a century hence.



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.

People from dictatorships like Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia will increasingly learn democratic skills. Europeans will finally stop giving such immense status to the Roman Catholic Church, and learn that true secularism means tolerance, awareness and encouragement of integration on important matters like democracy. Needless to say, France will no longer ban headscarves.

As for America, oh boy will it be a vastly different place in 100 years. The president will not be a white lawyer from a corporate background. Most likely, she will be of mixed race, Latino-Asian perhaps, or African-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. Today's high security follies will be replaced by tomorrow's tolerance. America's new culture will be in tune with the world, not at odds with it.

Wishful thinking? Perhaps. But why not? Why not? ●

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 Nepali 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 loan from the agency. 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. They take advantage of that weakness." There is concern that problems already occurring in places like Indonesia are likely to be duplicated among Nepali workers.

This is illegal in Hong Kong, where the rule is that workers can have up to 10 percent of the first month's salary deducted after a job is found. But usually a recruiter or agent will have the workers sign contracts that they don't normally read or that are in English and often not translated explained Kim Warren, manager at the Christian Action's Domestic Helpers and Migrant Workers Programme in Kowloon. "So a worker from Nepal, India or Sri Lanka may work for less than \$100. Underpayment and non payment are common, especially among Indonesians for



up to a year," says Warren.

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 30,000 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 marginalisation can make adjustment harder.

"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.

Rita's story

Rita has been living in Hong Kong since 1996. A Nepali Hong Kong ID holder, she runs a small roadside stall in Kowloon selling trinkets. "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 nurseries and kindergartens 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, pic). 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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Still peckish?

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

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, folklorists, 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 nitpicker, 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 hotting up of things has been giving you dangerous, even incendiary, ideas, go ahead. Light that fire. Grill. If there's a better way of starting the evening off than with a shared platterful of little grilled veggies—infant potatoes, tomatoes and



radishes, thick-sliced aubergines and zucchini-brushed with olive oil and herbs, redolent with the delicate ambient odours of newsprint, vulcanisation, and spring, send it along to me with a bottle of Nepal's finest brew, please.

Next, come in from the cold and let everyone feel faintly (but only faintly) let down by guessing your true intention, promising a whole lot more than you can deliver. All your friends will believe with shamefaced relief that the hyped Special Winter Menu

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 ayurvedic medicine—the early stages of recovery often involve a slight but distinct worsening of symptoms. After lulling 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't.

After chicken broth, a stew. A heavy stodgy one involving depressing winter smells like—well 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 bursting-to-the-seams surfeit 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 violent pink radish to mottled turnip to two-ton squash to purple cabbage.

Nothing matters once you mush all this together. This stew will be eaten dully, 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 veggies' inherent veggie nature makes them just sit there waiting for something else to

be assertive as they slowly wilt into the mother liquid on the stove. The usual suspects 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 minced garlic.

Then, the surprise. A highly aggressive salad with pungent, bitter, soapy greens, dandelion, raw mustard, rocket, raw spinach, and Super Strong and Tanga Garlic Vinaigrette. At first it will look fresh and light, sound a welcome note of authority. Your friends will heap 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 grimaces, 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 confection topped with a little dollop of winter-fighting royal jelly. (Unless you have Japanese guests, in which case serve them your thickest ras malai.)

When, after all this grandstanding and these seesawing emotions, you casually mention that for anyone still peckish there are sliced strawberries, sugared cream, dark chocolate and sparkling wine, your friends will love you. ●

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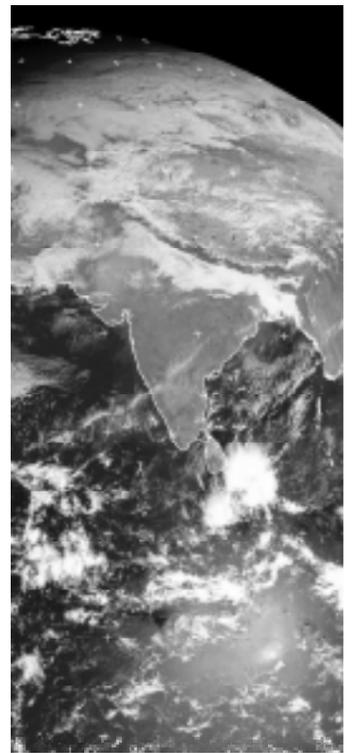
Chill factor

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 officialdom 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 Metrology are sure that the falling temperature in the plains has affected the lives of people, especially those living in the open and beside 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 the hills, but in the tarai it lingers for a longer period of time," 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, Biratnagar recorded a maximum of 15.3 and a minimum of 13.4 degree Celsius on 28 December. Four days ago, Bhairawa suffered from uniformly foul weather—the maximum day temperature sat just a degree higher than 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.

Lucknow, Ishwor Pokhrel and the Summit



Why did the UML dump the Pokhrel episode like a hot potato?

NEPALNEWS.COM

chosen to turn the table on India regarding the issue of harbouring cross-border terrorism in Islamabad. At 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 its much reviled 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 if 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. ●

CAPITAL LETTER
Yubaraj Ghimire



Ishwor 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—

and by extension that of the Government of India—from four political parties jointly agitating with the UML for the restoration of democracy? On the other hand, the Indian Embassy in Kathmandu demanded that the government of Nepal take action against those who burnt the effigy of Vajpayee, ignoring the fact that burning of effigies is so common in both countries that it doesn't even constitute a major offence.

Yet Pokhrel's visit to Delhi, his detention by the Indian authorities, and a feeble, half-hearted and ritualistic protest by the UML should be a future lesson at least for Nepali political parties about how to conduct themselves on issues that have bearings on foreign affairs. Any sensible leader travelling abroad on a public and political mission ought to first notify the local diplomatic mission. And secondly, once such a "humiliating treatment in violation of the treaty between the two countries" is meted out, his party should have informed the government firsthand: 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 Yashwant Sinha chose to tell NTV's *Dishanirdeshi* 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



Vacancy Announcement
Executive Assistant

The World Bank Nepal Country Office, located in Kathmandu, seeks to recruit a highly motivated Executive Assistant. The key responsibilities of the position include, but are not limited the following.

Duties and Responsibilities

Executive Assistance

As the Executive Assistant the incumbent will: (i) provide high quality secretarial support to the Country Director (CD); (ii) draft routine correspondence; (iii) review documents prepared for the CD's signature; (iv) coordinate preparation of briefs for meetings of the CD; (v) maintain records and files; (vi) arrange representational activities; (vi) maintain the CD's calendar; and (viii) coordinate the work of several Program Assistants across different units in the Country Office and provide professional mentoring to them.

Human Resources Management

Under the guidance of the HR Officer based in the Bangladesh Country Office, the incumbent will: (i) coordinate recruitment, processing appointments and terminations; (ii) coordinate staff training and development, new staff induction and orientation, counseling, staff relations and welfare; (iii) assist the CD and other managers administration of HR policies & procedures with regard to Country Office staff; (iv) prepare and coordinate leave rosters for all staff in the Country Office; (v) liaise with HQ on HR issues in the Country Office; and (vi) maintain an appropriate human resources computer database and ensure integrity of personnel information.

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- Bachelor's degree or equivalent, combined with advanced commercial secretarial training with some knowledge of human resources management and relevant systems/procedures.
- At least seven years of professional experience as senior secretary, personnel or executive assistant in an organization of international character (including bilateral/multilateral organization).
- Excellent knowledge of English and Nepali languages and good communication/interpersonal skills.
- Knowledge of government structure and procedures.
- Demonstrated ability to handle confidential matters.
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More loyal, less royal

If Nepal indeed turns into a republic, history will not hold the Nepali people responsible.



BASANTA CHITRAKAR

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 Madhab Kumar Nepal late 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—or 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.

LONDON EYE
Rabindra Mishra



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

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BIZ NEWS

Dial-up banking

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Come together

A merger between finance company Hisef and Laxmi Bank will be the first in the history of Nepal's financial sector. The merger is proposed to be executed 1:1. While Laxmi Bank's shares are in the process of being listed with the national stock exchange, Hisef's share with a face value of Rs 100 was last traded for Rs 116. Nepal Rastra Bank has already sent their in-principle approval. Post-merger, Laxmi Bank will have a paid up capital base of Rs 610 million, making it the largest bank in the country.

Remittances

Nepal receives nearly Rs 74 billion in foreign remittances every year, most of which originates in the Gulf countries. With a goal to make transactions safer, faster and easier, CGI Finco, principal agent of Western Union Financial Services, signed an agreement with Standard Chartered Bank Nepal to carry out money transfers in Nepal. Customers will be able to receive money through the bank's branches in Kathmandu and Pokhara.



NEW PRODUCTS

CLOSE SHAVE: Korean company Dorco is playing it fine with its brand of shaving gear for both men and women, imported by Nepal Marketing Services. The men have a wide choice among several high-tech razors, and ladies too can pick from specialty products for the eyebrows and the body. Dorco cartridges work with other branded razors and cost less.



COLOUR ME: If you need a little splash of wearable colour then Lolane's extensive palette could have you crowing over your crowning glory. The Thai hair dyes are available in more than 27 different shades and range from Rs 125 - 600. Nepal Marketing Services say that one box of Lolane's permanent hair dye is enough for three applications while semi-permanent colours can be bought in smaller sachets.



SCOOTING OFF: Even girls do it—ride scooties, that is. With an ever expanding market of upwardly mobile Nepalis, Indian company TVS is doing brisk business. It has introduced two new models, TVS Fiero F2 and Scooty Pep to Nepal through M/S AIT. Rahul Sachdev, marketing manager at AIT hopes the new entrants will "explore and capture the biking opportunities of the younger generation". Models: Fiero F2 sports and Scooty Pep can take both Jack and Jill up the hill quite comfortably.



PROJECTING MARVEL: Mercantile Office System introduces Epson's EMP-S1, the sleek new LCD projector that's easy on the eye and effortless in its functionality. Its futuristic look complements what's on the inside—cutting edge projector technology. With its user friendly controls, quick power and shut down feature to its versatility to project in any environment, the EMP-S1 is a comprehensive tool.



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, Voices and Possibilities', 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 public finance specialist, who outlined the socioeconomic consequences of political violence in Nepal and argued that it will take another 15 years to rebuild the infrastructure and rehabilitate displaced people. Suresh Bhatta, an international development consultant, said power centres and external actors have historically maintained a close relationship with each other and neglected the people and their problems. Maureen Minden of the University of British Columbia spoke of the increased difficulty of working in rural areas. Rosamelia Andrade of the Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society moderated the second panel in which Aditya Sharma, a graduate student at UBC Lomas Regmi, shared the stories of pain and suffering of Nepalis caught between the Maoists and the security forces.

Environmental expert, Ajay Pradhan moderated the third panel which included Amanda Gibbs and engineer Naresh Koirala who spoke on the role of mass media in peace building, and the role of Nepali diaspora in conflict resolution. Also speaking were Ritendra Tamang, research associate at the Institute of Asian Research, UBC and Nepal's Honorary Consul General, Chris Considine. (Naresh Koirala in Vancouver)

Lessons of Bhatbhateni

STRICTLY BUSINESS
Ashutosh Tiwari



In 1987, a one-room road-front shop selling cheese, curd 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 expensive-looking houses in the neighbourhood and located on the way to other posh 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 to expensive jewellery and even treadmills. Up to 5,000 people come everyday, making Bhatbhateni Super Market the busiest single shop in the

Valley. It employs over 200 salespersons, drawn mostly from the villages of Khotang in eastern Nepal, the owner's home district.

Though old and new competitors remain, Bhatbhateni has made 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

expense may be tempting, but the 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 paradoxical trait is noteworthy in business because it keeps entrepreneurs humble—they ask questions, learn and strive to buy



MIN BAJRACHARYA

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 almost offended to think 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'

and sell 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 appear as a talking 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. ●

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Cleared to land

A sharp rise in passenger demand is attracting foreign airlines.

NAVIN SINGH KHADKA

Bolstered by a dramatic resurgence in tourism last year and a surge in passenger demand, international airlines are increasing flights and capacity in 2004. If all goes well and there isn't much official red tape to tie things down, six more foreign carriers are expected to start operations by year-end.

The new year started on an optimistic note with the resumption of flights by Pakistan International Airways on 4 January after a two-year suspension of flights caused by India's ban on overflights. This alone will increase the number of inbound and outbound passenger seats by 25,000 this year, according to trade sources.

The Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAAN) is currently evaluating applications by China Eastern Airlines and Philippines Airlines to start operations. China Eastern is interested in a direct Beijing flight to complement the twice weekly Air China flights to Chengdu, whereas Philippine Airlines wants to offer a Manila stopover for flights to the US. Nepal has signed air service agreements with 33 countries worldwide, but the Philippines isn't one of them, which may delay the arrival of PAL flights. "We are considering signing an agreement with Philippine Airlines at the earliest," CAAN director general Nagendra Prasad Ghimire told us. "That is the only hurdle."

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 Viroj Sirihorachai told us.

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 Doha. "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 274-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 Subodh Rana, Martinair's agent in Kathmandu. "Going by the increase in tourist arrivals, our headquarters should have no difficulty managing that."

Even Royal Nepal Airlines is suddenly waking up to the passenger demand, and hopes to

lease a third 757 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 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 increase and 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. "With the new Indian and Chinese airlines, the floodgates will open on air-seats," says Dewan. "We expect a big boost in tourist arrivals this year."

Not to be left behind, two Nepali private airlines, Cosmic Air and Air Shangri-La, have applied for Airlines Operating Certificates which could come as early as March. Air Shangri-La has permission to fly to Munich via Sharjah and other destinations, provided one of its two aircraft is 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. ●

Minutes of the meeting

CHELIS
Rosy Chhetri



Women of Ill Repute have ten burning questions.

Members of the Nepali underground women's group Charitraheen 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.

A relatively young group, CHC members came together some two months ago. In that time they have managed to receive wide media coverage in the Nepali and English Language papers published from Kathmandu. (See 'Media hunks', *Nepali Times*, #171).

This CHC meeting, however, was different from the earlier ones, where the members had raunchily 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:

One: What percent of Nepali women have orgasm during sex?

Few Chelis reported having heard a Nepali woman describe the excitement of this most intense of sexual pleasures. Consequent questions raised included: Is it because so few actually experience it? Isn't this a violation of a basic human right? Should this be reported to the Human Rights Commission somewhere?



Two: Given that women peak sexually when they are in their thirties and men in their twenties, why are women pairing with older men?

The Chelis were amazed that it takes a normal/full bodied Nepali woman so long to figure out how good sex can really get. Nepali women should be pairing with younger men, one piped up. A chorus of approval ensued from members.

Three: Why can't we have contraceptives that can be injected into men's arms for five years?

Although most Chelis liked the idea, they couldn't decide on the name for the contraceptive. Injectables? Preventibles? Defensibles? It was suggested that those marketing the Pulsar motorcycle "Definitely Male" should be recruited to manage the advertising campaign.

Four: Wouldn't it be cool if women bragged about all their sexual conquests?

The Chelis thought this was a great idea. Should the bragging be based on quantity or quality, one asked. Parameters could not be decided.

Five: Why aren't our women writers writing erotic stories for women?

The Chelis could not agree on whether it was women writers not writing erotica or male publishers too chicken to publish them. The Chelis unanimously agreed that they should contact the media hunks from their last survey and ask them to keep some space for erotic writing.

Sex: What, really, is the point of Charitraheen Chelis?

The Chelis ask this question each time they meet. They will be asking this question again.

Seven: Why don't women ogle, hiss, whistle and click at passing men? What the hell are we doing with our time?

A crash course on the basics of these activities were suggested so they could be managed in the course of the day-to-day activities which suck up our time. Time management and multi-tasking à la Chelis.

Eight: Why don't women invite each other to bhattis for jaand and raksi every day, the way men do?

Become Charitraheen. Begin your journey...

Nine: Why can't men finish zipping their flies while they're still inside public toilets?

This was seen as an enduring mystery. Women in all their complicated sari and kurta gear (complete with safety pins to hold up their kurtha shawls and sari pallus) manage to assemble themselves before exiting. Men can't stay there the extra 1.5 seconds it takes to zip?

Ten: Are there any single (or divorce-minded) heterosexual men out there who can cook, clean, look after children and earn a little 'lipstick money' on the side?

Apply with a 6X6 digital photograph to charitraheencheli@hotmail.com. Physical attributes most important and will be considered during the selection process. Age bar has been lifted.

Rosy Chhetri is a feminist with unrestricted access to the Charitraheen Chelis, and will be filing minutes of their underground meetings once a month.

70 years after

It was sunny winter afternoon, bright blue sky and a slight breeze from the west. Most families in Kathmandu were on their roof terraces, or in the fields. Suddenly, birds took flight, dogs started howling, there was a deep underground rumble, fields started undulating like waves on the ocean, houses crumbled, long fissures appeared on the roads and a great pall of dust rose over the city.

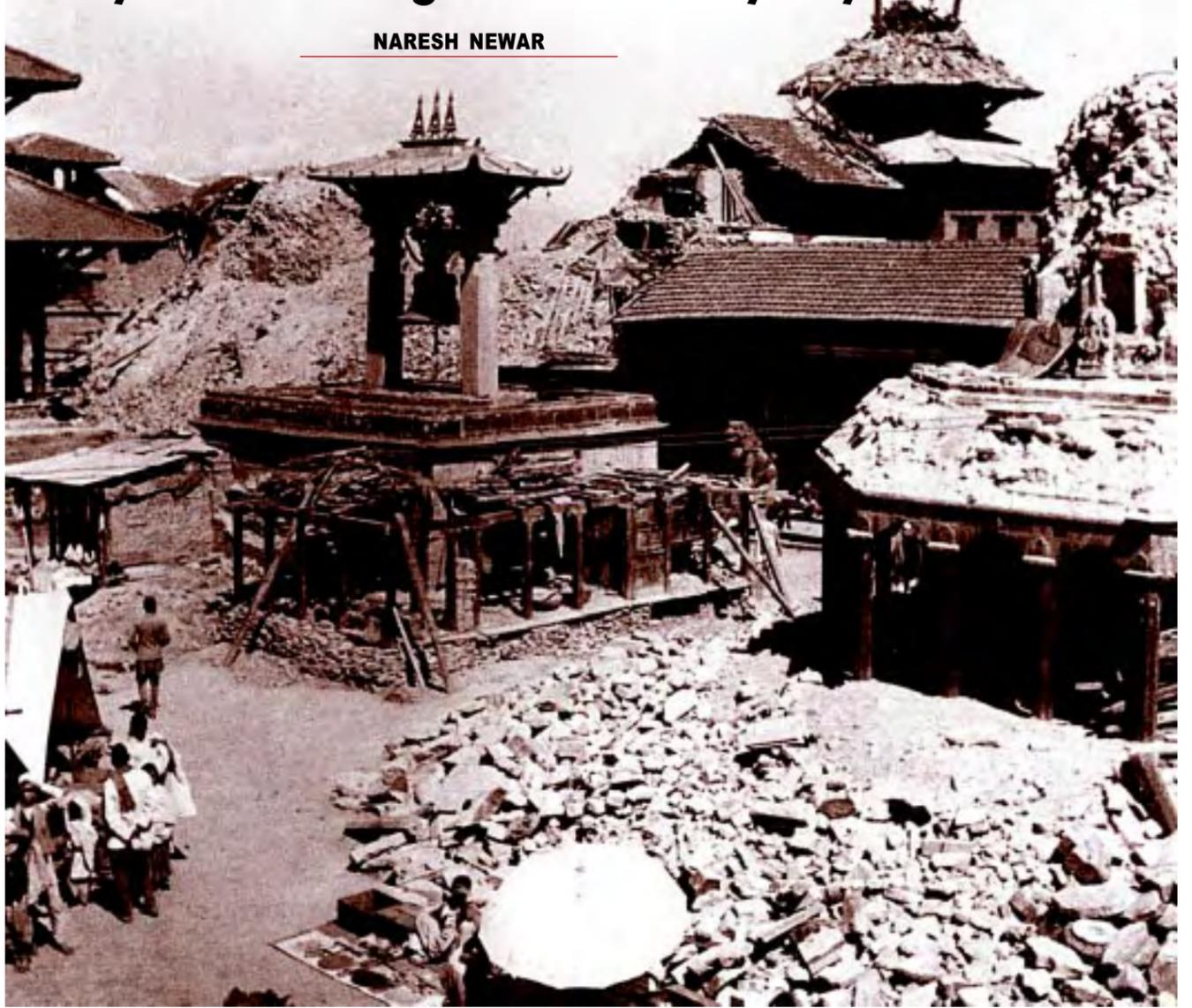
Within a minute, 17,000 people were dead in Nepal and northern Bihar, many of them in Kathmandu Valley. Among the dead were two of King Tribhuban's daughters and a daughter of Juddha Shumshere. Most houses were destroyed or damaged. This 8.0 magnitude earthquake with its epicentre along the Nepal-Bihar faultline snaps every 75 years. Aftershocks kept coming for two weeks, and the survivors camped out in the freezing cold.

What is frightening to many is not the memory of that fateful day 70 years ago. What will happen the next time an earthquake of that magnitude hits Kathmandu is the real concern. And many were reminded just how bad it could be when they watched the devastation of the Iranian city of Bam last month, where 50,000 people were killed.

Given Kathmandu's rampant growth and flimsy housing, the next big one will kill at least 100,000 people. Those who die may be the lucky ones.

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.

NARESH NEWAR



MIN BAJRACHARYA

Nepal's biggest temblors

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 Ek* 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

Epicentre near Phaplu, 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 Kumaon.

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

6.2 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

21 August 1988

6.8 magnitude epicenter in Udaipur, killed 900 in Nepal, Bihar. Damage reported in Sikkim. Felt in New Delhi.

9 December 1991

Epicentre in Bajura, 6.2 magnitude. No reports of deaths.

Coming soon

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 bribing 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 one hits.

1934 wasn't even the worst earthquake Kathmandu has suffered. In 1255, one-third of

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



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.

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,

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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.

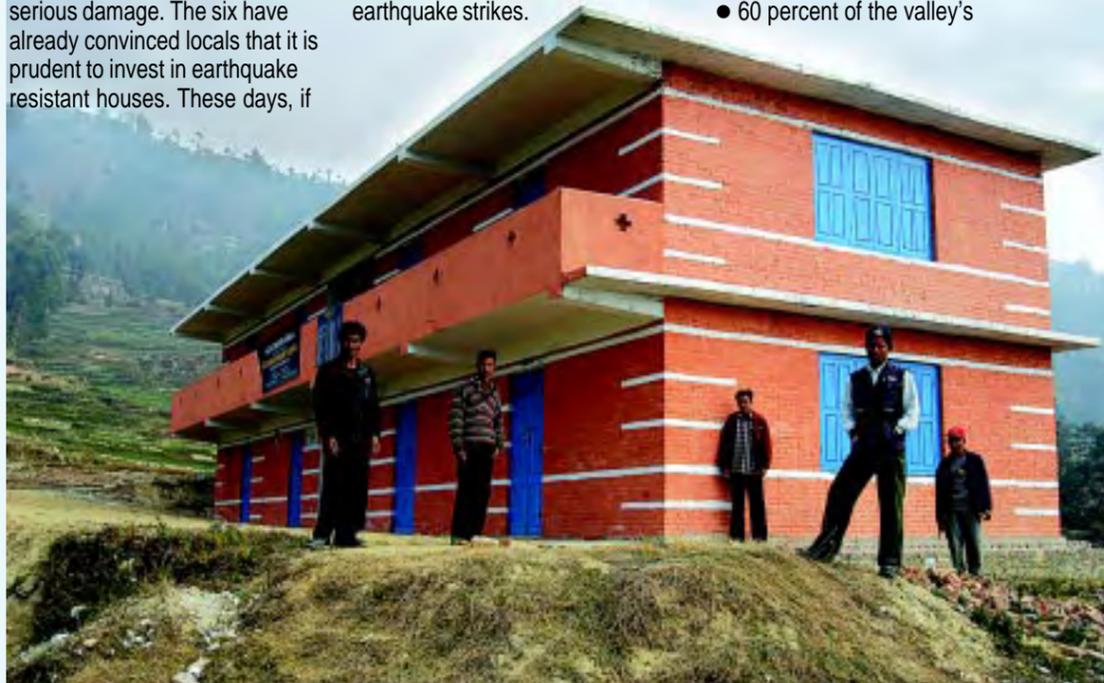
If Chaling's example can be replicated, maybe the rest of Kathmandu Valley and Nepal will be a safer place the next time an earthquake strikes.

An 8 magnitude earthquake in Kathmandu Valley is like nuclear war. Most of us don't want to think about it.

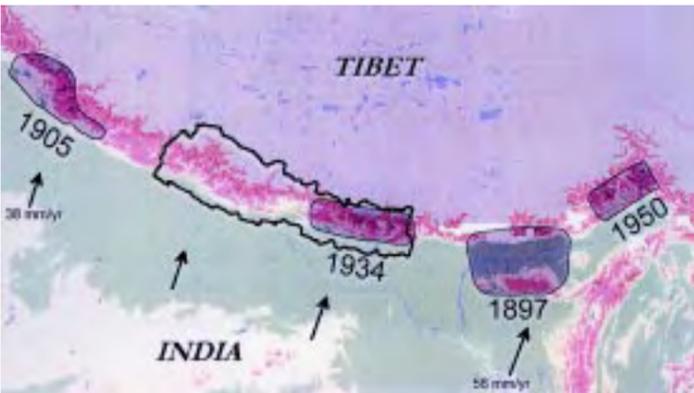
"I know it sounds scary but we are living under extremely vulnerable circumstances. The magnitude of destruction will be unimaginable," says Gyan Jung Thapa, national security officer at UNDP. Things could be worse, but they could also be better if we are prepared. Start now.

The job of most earthquake experts is to think of the worst-case scenario and plan for it. As things are now, what will happen to Kathmandu in the next major earthquake of 8 magnitude or above?

• 60 percent of the valley's



MIN BAJRACHARYA



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. This puts the lake town of Pokhara as well as other major western towns at risk not just from building collapse, but also from glacial lake outbursts 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 Ramesh 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 government bodies. 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 Keshab Sthapit will also take the initiative. "Such an effort reduces at least three-fourth of the risk from earthquake hazard," says Dixit. ●

Remembering Nabbe Sal

Amina Banu, 76

My family used to be in the Muslim traditional cloth businessmen 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. Everyone is building tall houses, we should warn them about the danger.



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.



Jog Raj 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, Honacha'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

sorry

buildings will collapse. If it happens at night when people are sleeping, as many as 125,000 people may be killed.

- Anything more than two storeys high will either collapse or sustain severe damage.
- Rockfalls and landslides will block all main highways leading into Kathmandu, the airport will be unserviceable so international relief will have to be parachute dropped, which will take at least four days to arrive.
- Most open spaces have 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.

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NEPAL IN THE FOREIGN PRESS

Refugees in limbo where the UN isn't welcome

U.N. WIRE

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 Bhutani obstinacy 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 systematic census in the refugee camps. Those with documented claims to Bhutani citizenship would return, others who had renounced Bhutani nationality could reapply and those with no claim or desire to live in Bhutan would be resettled in Nepal or possibly abroad. A fair number of the people in the

camps are known to be people from within impoverished Nepal or from India, particularly West Bengal and the northeast India, where they have also been harassed or expelled.

Easy enough to sort this out? Not at all. This issue has now become so politicised in Nepal that when a Bhutani verification team arrived at a Nepali camp last Monday to explain the agreement to residents, they were assaulted by a mob wielding bamboo rods and stones. The team was immediately recalled to Bhutan.

Where has the UNHCR been through all of this? Mostly on the sidelines. Neither Nepal nor Bhutan has wanted the refugee agency to be in charge of the

census. The UNHCR, however, has cared for the people in five camps at a substantial cost of \$5 million annually, not counting World Food Program aid, and would have the expertise to help if not actually conduct the repatriation process. Instead, the UNHCR, under Ruud Lubbers, decided in October that because the Bhutani would not permit the agency to monitor returns to Bhutan, it was essentially pulling out of the process.

"This is totally unacceptable," Lubbers, the high commissioner, said in a speech to the agency's executive committee that is worth quoting verbatim because it rewrote agency policy on this issue. "I have therefore decided to take three key measures. First, since the

Nepali government has offered to settle those willing to remain and to grant them citizenship, my office will promote self-reliance projects to facilitate their integration, and will gradually phase out its direct involvement in the camps. Second, my office will support resettlement initiatives for vulnerable cases. Third, because of the denial of access to UNHCR 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 Pakistan, 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. ●

PREtTy FABulous

Just arrived: prefabricated wooden houses.

SRADDHA BASNYAT

Commuters and passers by have noticed a curious wooden structure going up in Kupondol, upstairs 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 wait to step into your own home sweet home.

Ishwari Shah is excited about her new home. Although the concept of prefab houses have 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 finally have 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.



MIN BAJRACHARYA

Ishwari Shah posing under the eaves of her prefabricated house.

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. Suresh 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."

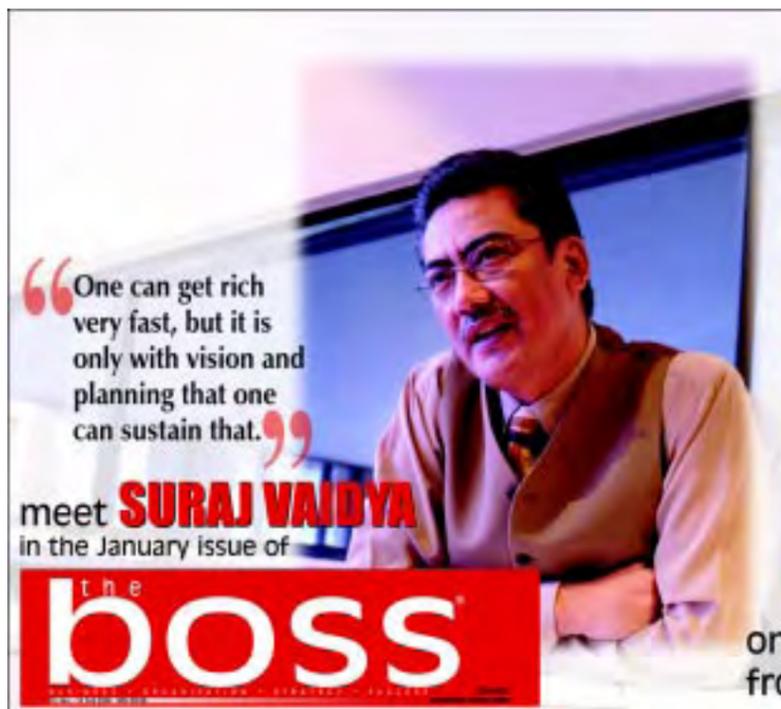
After all the components are readied at the factory according to design, the house is then assembled on site. It requires five men and 15 days to put it together. "Once the design is finalised and the measurements taken, we do everything from electricity to painting. The customer receives the key to 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 Kupondol 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 reuseable and can even be remodeled 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 ply 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 and the safety in case of an earthquake. And Bira hopes to rent the house to have his office, and publicity will not be a problem since it is right on the main Patan road.

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Sweet SAARC deals



Economic integration

MUDDASSIR RIZVI in ISLAMABAD

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 greater 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 11 summits in the past achieved absolutely no socio-economic gains for the region where 20 percent of the world population resides," commented Riaz Ahmed Tata, president of the Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FPCCI).

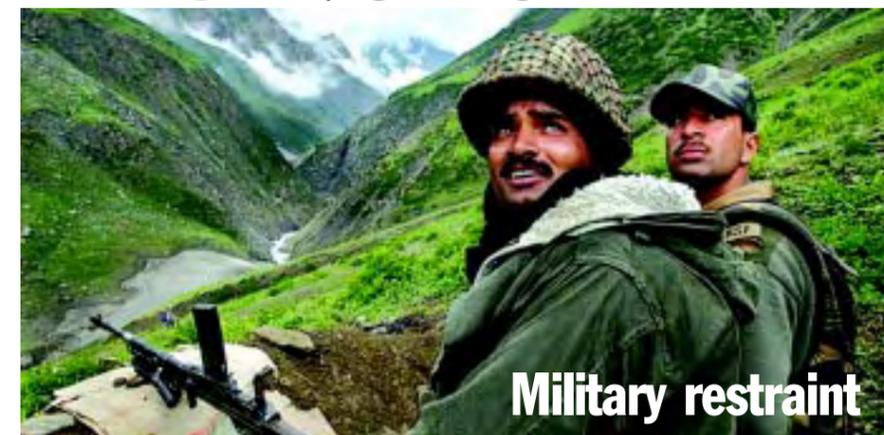
The agreement approved at the summit puts in place its broader framework. It binds the non-least developed countries of the region to reduce their tariffs to 0 to 5 percent in a period of seven years, starting January

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 1 January 2006.

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, shivers with fears of competing with its Indian counterpart.

It is these fears that indicate that the finalisation of SAFTA details and preparation of sensitive lists will be a tricky task for SAARC's 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 relations among the SAARC member states. "All of us know very well that real cooperation will not be sustainable in a political vacuum and an environment of conflict and confrontation," said Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri. It was, therefore, no surprise that the Monday talk between the leaders of Pakistan and India on the sidelines of the summit took the limelight. ● (IPS)



Military restraint

RANJIT DEVRAJ in NEW DELHI

The spectre of a nuclear holocaust, which has loomed over the subcontinent ever since India and Pakistan conducted tit-for-that 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.

Analysts 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 the Indian city of Agra 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 reassured Prime Minister Vajpayee that he will not permit any territory under Pakistan's control to be used to support terrorism in any manner." Musharraf has 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 hostilities 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 years that followed saw the leaders of both countries publicly threatening to use their nuclear weapons on each other. Following an attempt by a suicide squad to blow up the Indian Parliament in December 2000, India withdrew its high commissioner from Islamabad, suspended overflights by Pakistani aircraft and massed some 700,000 troops on the border.

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 LoC.

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)

Amid shattered hopes, dilapidated roads and destroyed homes that still have no sanitation services, everything seems to be out of order in the life of many Afghans. This war-devastated country enters 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 looks a distant, if not impossible, dream.

"It will be a miracle if our cherished dream to see peace comes true. But the ground realities suggest something else, maybe something worse in the days to come," says trader Mohammad Rehman. Sitting in his tiny mud-made shop in suburbs of Jalalabad, the capital of eastern Nangarhar province, he looks and sounds hopeless about peace more than two years after the Taliban's ouster in November 2001.

Our Watan—the term he used for his country—came out of the Soviet occupation in the late eighties only to go under the occupation of another world power, Rehman said, without naming the United States, whose troops have just finished a massive operation going after Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters. "It seems our commanders and 'maliks' or village

Distant peace

'Liberation' has not brought what it promised to Afghanistan.

FIDA HUSSAIN in JALALABAD

leaders 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 a 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 helped by the fact that in the post-Taliban era, most parts of the country, including the capital Kabul, have witnessed an upsurge in lawlessness as well as the re-emergence of ethnic divisions sown 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 intellectual who did not wish to be named. He says 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?"

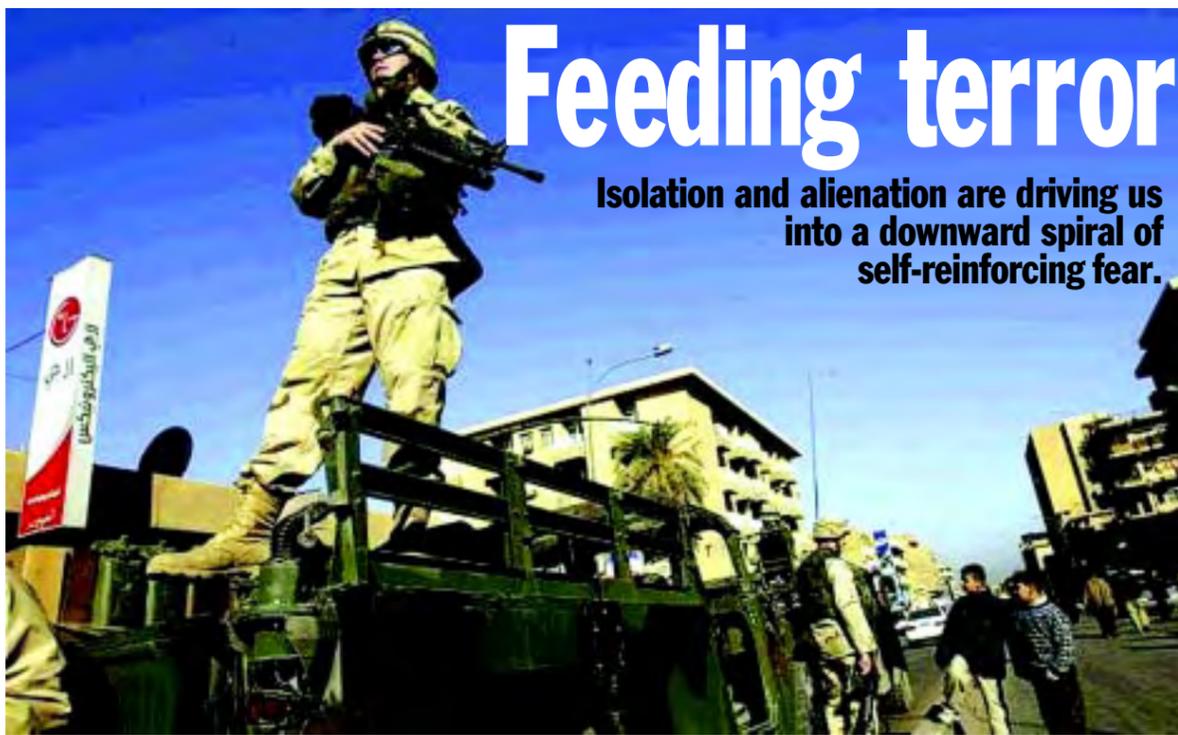


he asked. "These are the questions which need to be properly answered."

Some believe that the holding of 'loya 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 that over 80 percent of jirga's delegates are those whose interests could 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)



Feeding terror

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

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

COMMENT
Mark Sommer



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 equally high 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 wage the war on terror use fear to intimidate and compel the compliance not only of foreign enemies but also of their own publics. And that fear is best engendered by making people feel alone in any concerns they may have about their nation's leadership. "Journalists live in fear of being 'necklaced' with a burning tire of patriotism if they ask the tough questions," Dan Rather, dean of US TV news anchors, admitted to a BBC interviewer in July 2002. Fearing ostracism and despairing of their lack of power to influence events, most in the American media and public life swallow their doubts and so contribute to the mistaken impression among a "silenced majority" that few share 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 share key aspects of the paranoid authoritarian rulers of the past. George W Bush and his reclusive vice president, Dick Cheney, fit a familiar pattern

of individuals with little understanding of themselves but an exaggerated sense of their personal destiny. Driven by insecurity and resentment, they seek absolute power, becoming increasingly secretive and obsessed with any challenge to their control, losing touch with reality and those they rule. Ultimately, they inflict their personal torment on everyone around them and plunge their world into a vortex of destruction that culminates more often than not in political suicide.

The pattern set by those at the top of the power pyramid sets the tone for relationships all the way down, infecting an entire global culture with a terrorised image of human nature. Tyranny thrives on isolation and alienation. The ragtag terrorists who strike fear into the hearts of the elite and the public alike are themselves acting out of a traumatised sense of their own exclusion. The decades-long decline in civic participation in democratic countries is both a symptom of this fearful isolation and a boon to authoritarian leaders since it fragments all opposition and undermines confidence in its capacity to reverse the course of history.

In such a dispiriting civic environment, the most effective antidote is to reach out and connect with others. Knowing that silence and distance only fuel fear and suspicion, we must rouse ourselves from our isolation and discover our common ground, where we will find strength and courage we could never muster alone. While in itself this reaching out is a purely personal act, it has enormous political implications, opening up a horizon of shared life and shattering what is in fact just the illusion of isolation. To say that we are all connected is not merely a wish or spiritual aspiration but a simple material fact. Our existence is supported at all times and in all ways by a web of relationships without which we could not survive. Recognising this is itself a source of profound reassurance.

The appalling truth is that in certain crucial respects we are even connected to those whose actions we most abhor. We may not share responsibility for their criminal actions but we share their range of emotions and potential behaviour. This understanding is the wellspring of compassion. And compassion is a potent weapon against the inner terrors that torment both our fellow citizens and our fear-driven, fear-provoking leaders. Our true enemy is not each other but the emotional terrors that plague us all. And the best antidote to this is the simple if daunting act of reaching out to others. ● (IPS)

Mark Sommer directs the US-based Mainstream Media Project and hosts an award-winning syndicated radio program, "A World of Possibilities" (www.aworldofpossibilities.com).



Fortune cookie

In 2004 the global economy will crumble in favour of the US.

ANALYSIS
J Bradford DeLong



sense of tremendous opportunity wasted.

Ever since George W Bush took office, America's annual real GDP growth has averaged 2.3 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 employment/population ratio from 64.4 percent in 2000 to 62.3 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 ahead as fast as—or faster than—ever. Had the Federal Reserve been more aggressive in pushing interest rates down, or had Bush and Congress passed tax cuts aimed at boosting short-term demand and employment, the US economy would have grown at a pace not seen in a generation and a half.

Will America's economy grasp its opportunity to grow rapidly over the next year? Probably. Unless stagnant employment causes a sudden cutback in household consumption, tax rebates and low interest rates should push the US economy ahead 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 economy'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 in 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 from developing countries to begin with. Solid demand growth in the US will provide increased demand for developing-country exports—albeit not at the prices that prevailed when the dollar was stronger.

More importantly, the developing world has little to fear from sudden panic on Wall Street. American domestic interest rates are so low and the fear of a large further decline in the dollar so great that it is nearly impossible to envision a sudden withdrawal of capital from developing countries to the post-industrial core.

More important than short-run cycles, however, are long-run trends. Annual Labor productivity growth in the US has accelerated steadily in the past 30 years, from 1.2 percent in the period from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, to 2.3 percent in the late 1990s and to 4.2 percent since 2000. How much of the second jump in productivity growth will be sustained is uncertain, but it is safe to bet that some of it will.

The more intriguing question is this: when will the rapid IT-driven productivity growth seen in the US spread to the rest of the rich countries? We do not know, but we

do know that it will. Similarly, we do not know when world trade in information services like form processing, accounting, and customer service will truly boom as a result of the Internet and the fiber-optic cable. But we do know that, like the late 19th-century boom in trade in staple goods fueled by the iron-hulled ocean-going steamship and the submarine telegraph, it will.

The lesson is that governments, firms, investors, workers, and parents worldwide should begin betting on the long-run trends that have 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.

Karl Marx was not wholly wrong when he wrote that the most industrialised countries are mirrors in which the rest of the world can see its own future. The mirror that is the US shows that the returns from taking advantage of the economic changes made possible by the IT revolution are very high. The hard question for other countries is how to do this. ● (© Project Syndicate)

J Bradford DeLong is Professor of Economics at the University of California at Berkeley and was Assistant US Treasury Secretary during the Clinton Presidency.

RESEARCH
Ralph Hoffman


You are in a crowd when you hear your name. You turn, looking for the speaker. No one meets your gaze. It dawns on you that the voice you heard must have sprung from your own mind.

This foray into the uncanny is as close as most people come to experiencing auditory hallucinations or “hearing voices”, a condition that affects 70 percent of patients with schizophrenia and 15 percent of patients with mood disorders such as mania or depression. For these individuals, instead of hearing just one’s name, voices produce a stream of speech, often vulgar or derogatory or a running commentary on one’s most private thoughts.

The compelling aura of reality about these experiences often produces distress and disrupts thought and behavior. The sound of the voice is sometimes that of a family member or someone from one’s past, or is like that of no known person but has distinct and immediately recognisable features—say, a deep, growling voice. Often certain actual external sounds, such as fans or running water, become transformed into perceived speech.

One patient described the recurrence of voices as akin to being “in a constant state of mental rape”. In the worst cases, voices command the listener to undertake destructive acts such as suicide or assault. But hearing voices is not necessarily a sign of mental illness, so understanding the mechanics of auditory hallucinations is crucial to understanding schizophrenia and

related disorders.

For example, your occasional illusionary perception of your name spoken in a crowd occurs because this utterance is uniquely important. Our brains are primed to register such events, so on rare occasions the brain makes a mistake and reconstructs unrelated sounds (such as people talking indistinctly) into a false perception of the spoken name.

Hallucinated voices are also known to occur during states of religious or creative inspiration. Joan of Arc described hearing the voices of saints telling her to free her country from the English. Rainer Maria Rilke heard the voice of a “terrible angel” amidst the sound of a crashing sea after living alone in a castle for two months. This experience prompted his writing the *Duino Elegies*.

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? One answer is that “non-pathological” voices occur rarely or perhaps only once. Not so for the person with mental illness. Without treatment, these experiences recur relentlessly.

Brain imaging studies have found that parts of the temporal lobe activate during these hallucinations. Our research at Yale University, as well as studies conducted at the Institute of Psychiatry in London, also detected activation in an area of the brain known as Broca’s region during production of “inner speech” or verbal thought.

One theory is that voices arise because Broca’s area “dumps” language outputs into parts of the



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?

brain that ordinarily receive speech inputs from the outside. To test this theory we are using trans-cranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) to reduce the excitability of portions of the temporal lobe and Broca’s region.

What remains unaddressed is the root cause of abnormal brain activations. We are pursuing three intertwined ideas. The first is based on studies suggesting that schizophrenia patients suffer from reduced brain connectivity. As a result, certain groups of neurons, such as those responsible for producing and perceiving language, may begin to function autonomously, beyond the control or influence of other brain systems.

The second idea is that deprivation of social interaction—namely human conversation—makes

the brain more likely to produce hallucinated conversations. Often one of the first signs of schizophrenia—occurring well before manifestations such as hearing voices—is social isolation. An example is Charles Bonnet Syndrome, where visual impairments in the elderly can produce visions of human figures.

Third, heightened emotions may play a role in producing voices. It is possible that intense states of emotion could pre-select and perhaps elicit from the brain certain verbal messages having the same emotional charge.

When schizophrenia begins, these persons are often in states of extreme fear or elation. It could be that these powerful emotional states increase the propensity of the brain

to produce corresponding verbal “messages”.

This would account for the fact that voices also emerge during states of extreme, but incidental, emotionality brought on by inspired thought, mania, depression, or ingestion of certain drugs. Here the voices disappear when the emotional states return to normal.

Our hypothesis is that voices arise from different combinations of these three factors—reduced brain integration, social isolation, and high levels of emotionality. This view has become the focus of efforts to understand and help patients with mental illness quiet their minds. ●

(© Project Syndicate)

Ralph Hoffman is Professor of Psychiatry at Yale University.



Biotech is nothing new. Brave Old World

Skeptics about agricultural biotechnology lambaste it as unproven, untested, unnatural, and uncontrollable. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Early biotechnology—the application of biological systems to technical or industrial processes—dates to 6000 BC, when the Babylonians used specialised microorganisms in fermentation to brew alcoholic beverages.

Genetic engineering can be dated from man’s recognition that animals and crop plants can be selected and bred to enhance desired characteristics. Early biologists and

agriculturists carried out selection for desired traits, generating poorly understood changes in the organisms’ genetic material.

Opponents of biotech repeatedly raise dire warnings of the movement of “rogue genes” between the modified crop and wild (or domesticated) relatives. But, at the risk of mixing metaphors, this is a red herring. Gene flow is ubiquitous. All crop plants have relatives somewhere and some gene flow commonly occurs if the two populations are grown close together. Gene flow from wild relatives to crop plants may even be encouraged by subsistence farmers to maintain the broad genetic base of the varieties that they plant using seed harvested from an earlier crop. Such gene flow does not

occur when farmers buy their seeds from seed producers, of course, but in that case gene flow in the other direction is still possible, with genes from the cultivated crop ending up in the wild relative.

That is most likely if genes from the crop confer a selective advantage on the recipient, an occurrence that is uncommon with gene-splicing, where most often the added gene places the recipient at a natural disadvantage. The worst-case scenario would be gene transfer from plants engineered for enhanced resistance to certain herbicides. But even this scenario raises no issues of ecological or food safety. For if the use of one herbicide were compromised, farmers would simply use another.

Gene transfer is an age-old concern for farmers. Growing hundreds of crops, virtually all of which have been genetically improved, the practitioners of “conventional” agriculture in North America meticulously developed strategies for preventing pollen cross-contamination in the field—when and if it is necessary for commercial reasons.

A good example is Canola—the genetically improved rapeseed developed by Canadian plant breeders a half-century ago. The original rapeseed oil was harmful when ingested because of high levels of erucic acid. After conventional plant breeding led to the development of rapeseed varieties with low concentrations of erucic acid, canola oil became the most commonly consumed oil in Canada. But high-erucic acid rapeseed oil is still used as a lubricant and plasticiser. So the high- and low-erucic acid varieties of rapeseed plants must be carefully segregated in the field and thereafter. Canadian farmers and processors accomplish this routinely and without difficulty.

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 modification 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 method 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-splicing technology 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 bio-technology”. Welcome to Biotech’s Brave Old World. ● (© Project Syndicate)

Henry I Miller, a fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, was the founding director of the Office of Biotechnology at the US Food & Drug Administration, 1989-1993.

The republican road

Nepali Congress leader Narahari Acharya in *Kantipur*, 5 January

कान्तिपुर

The issue of a republican system has ignited a serious debate for the first time in contemporary Nepal. In 1950, the goal of the Nepal 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 struggle to usher in a people's republic. But it was only after the Nepali Congress started to consider the matter that it finally became a matter of national debate.

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 republic state is becoming an issue? The Nepali Congress is not against a republican system. It has accepted a constitutional 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.

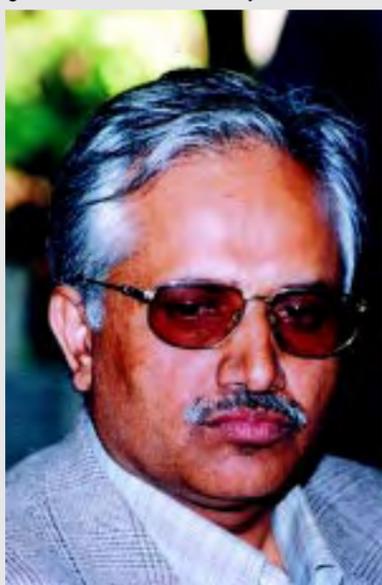


MIN BAJRACHARYA

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 royal takeover of Fourth October made it clear that he had removed taking 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 a monarchy. Even if the streets become quiet again or the Maoist guns fall silent, the country will travel on the republican road.



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 deign 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 *Kantipur*, 4 January

कान्तिपुर

"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 Nepali 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 mistreated? Perhaps through 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 Tribhuwan flee his palace and take refuge in its embassy before being 'evacuated' to New Delhi. The Indian government caused the movement in Nepal to flare up in the name of the ousted king. The idea was to compel Mohan Shumshere 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 Khabarpatrika, 31 December – 14 January

Three years after he was arrested by the Indian army in Kathmandu, Prem Bahadur Balchhaudi Chhetri of Tanahu district is languishing in jail at Lucknow (*pic, right*). He was arrested while 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 Anbukhaireni 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 Anbukhaireni VDC says nobody has shown any concern. It's a sentiment that others echo. "It is 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, whose 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

राजधानी *Rajdhani*, 4 January

QUOTE OF THE WEEK



"The king's effort should be to reinstate my government and make Madhab Nepal the prime minister."

— Sher Bahadur Deuba in *Rajdhani*, 6 January

Succour

Rajdhani, 5 January

राजधानी

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." '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 away 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.

Protect

Space Time, 5 January

स्वेच्छासम दैनिक

CHARIKOT – School teacher Prem Prasad Kharel was injured severely after he was beaten by the security forces while he was on his way to his school. Even when he told them that he was a teacher, the security forces showed no mercy because they believed him to be a Maoist. Kharel had a pile of schoolbooks, his lunch and his teacher's identity card with him that Saturday morning. "They kept hitting me, saying my name was not on the card," says Kharel. After a leaving him nearly unconscious, they ordered him to show up at the district headquarters in a few days. With the help of human rights activists, Kharel has filed a case at the district administration office at Dolakha stating that the security force should be accountable to the people. "They are here to protect not abuse us," he said.

Enough of this

Editorial in Kantipur, 7 January

कान्तिपुर

We will not destroy public property or kill innocent citizens, 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 doubts about their true intentions time and again. What kind of message are they trying to give to Nepalis by burning a van carrying polio 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? If polio can make a person healthy, why are they trying to stop this from happening? Enough is enough.



Ransom



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

Himal Khabarpatrika, 31 December – 14 January

हिमाल

On 14 November, Maoists from Dhankuta kidnapped six young men. Now they've offered to release them, for a ransom. Ranjan Rai, Abinash 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. Locals believe they were kidnapped for teasing female Maoists who were bathing near Papani Bazar. But the Maoists district secretary 'Sudarshan' told the press they were taken hostage by the district people's government for accusing Maoists of Padam Bahadur Rai's murder, which they themselves committed. Rai was serving in the Royal Nepali Army battalion in Okhaldhunga.

Dhan Shoba Rai, Suraj's mother says the Maoists made the demand for ransom over the phone. She says, "They have called us many times. When I told that I could not afford their demand they threatened me and told me to bring whatever I could." Parents are in a dilemma: if they accede to the rebels' demands, they will be harassed by the security forces. If not, their boys could end up as human shields in the next Maoist offensive.

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Gurkhas invade Iraq!



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 Katha* 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*.

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 trampled 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 perished in the onslaught. They were scared of the mountains, and didn't go there. Nobody counted how many were killed that day. Along with Nar Bahadur, I escaped death by climbing up the hill. In all there were six Gurkha regiments of which a few got lost, others 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. A few days later, the British forces arrived and rescued us.

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 Basra 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 trudged for 16 hours. On the way there was no sign of water, nor green grass—not 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 trenches, 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 bases. True, Hitler's troops did appear there but their numbers was far more exaggerated in propaganda. For example, the rumour 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 seized these oil fields since you need petrol to fly planes in the sky or for tanks. The monopoly of the British on the oil had put Hitler in a predicament.

No sooner did the war in Iran end, another front opened in Iraq. After Iraq lies Turkey. A high hill

stands on the left side of Turkey. We had orders to make trenches and with it check the onward march of the Germans. We proceeded further and arrived at Cyprus, lying in the middle of a sea. As we reached there, a whole lot of German troops were dropped by parachutes. We were instructed to rush to the spot where German troops were landing and kill them while they dropped. If anyone touched 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

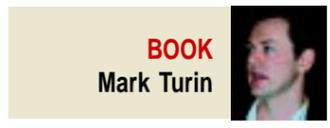
died in a single day of the war. There is no empty space in the battlefield—every inch is filled with troops. The tanks lead the way. That is followed by very many kinds of weapons. Then comes the artillery on each side of which march the foot soldiers. Weapons range from pistols to atom bombs.

We were afraid and earnestly sought the help of God to prevent war. 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 focussed 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

Bhutan flower book

The reflexive Himalayan travelogue, pensive and Buddhist-tinged, is a tried and tested formula. Classics, such as Peter Matthieson's *The Snow Leopard*, are already in their umpteenth reprint. So too are the heavier and more serious plant books, such as Polunin and Stainton's *Flowers of the Himalaya*, which document with scientific precision the incredible botanical diversity of the region. In *A Painter's Year in the Forests of Bhutan*, the author combines splendid colour plates of Bhutani plants with cultural

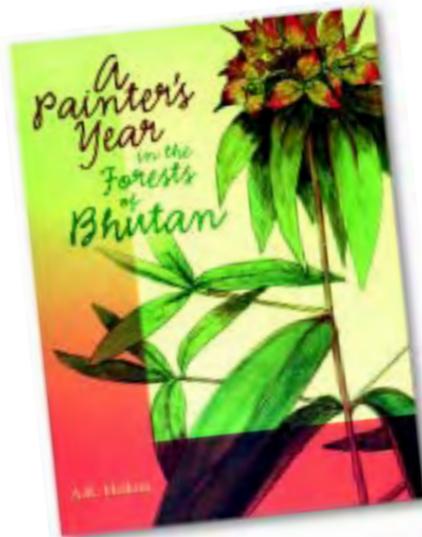
anecdotes of a spiritual dimension, and in so



BOOK
Mark Turin

doing, has created a winning hybrid.

Hellum is both a scholar and a painter, having taught silviculture at the University of Alberta in Edmonton and exhibited his art in at least three continents. His interest in Bhutan, we learn, dates back to his days in elementary school in Norway where his teacher regaled the class with stories of exotic places. This sense of exoticism and romantic Orientalism pervades the book, and at times comes to the fore.



The structure of the book is pleasantly simple. Hellum divides his plant paintings by the seasons he recorded them in: spring, summer, autumn and winter. His description of painting the common rhododendron is one of the most touching—a young girl leads him to a flower, sits beside him as he paints, and becomes increasingly fascinated by the painter and the painting. As one would

expect from such a fairytale meeting, the description concludes with Hellum giving her the painting and making another one for himself.

Such feelings of mystery and magic pervade the book, and Hellum spends much of his time in wondrous rapture at Bhutan, its plants and its people. The aim, as he makes clear in the introduction, is not to list each plant in the country. Rather, he "completed most of the drawings and paintings in this book in the field as exercises in meditation and concentration", a theme to which he often returns. Couched in conspicuously Buddhist terminology, the reader is reminded that "flowers are an ideal medium for such meditation, because what is more transient than the beauty of a flower?"

Hellum feels this so strongly that he even explains to a hitch-hiking Tibetan monk that "the paintings were only vehicles to concentration, and not ends in themselves". No wonder then, that the monk "nodded and sat silently for the rest of the trip". Hellum is not preaching to the converted, he is simply filled with respect for the ways of Bhutan, a country he wishes would "send ambassadors abroad to bring some sanity

and relaxation to the frenzy of Western living".

Language is an issue to which Hellum frequently returns, primarily because he is frustrated by his inability to communicate with people in Dzongkha, Hindi or Nepali. Given this manifest barrier, it is a little surprising that he finds it "very difficult to return to [his] own culture after having been immersed in Bhutan's". His description of the Nepali road workers he encounters as "aliens" is not the most sensitive of terms to have chosen given the present problems.

A Painter's Year is a beautifully produced personal voyage through the plants and seasons of Bhutan. By breaking with convention and merging different styles, the author has created an extremely original and engaging book which brings together the natural and the spiritual in a successful way. As Hellum himself concludes: "Every story in this book brought a different kind of silence." ●

A Painter's Year in the Forests of Bhutan
AK Hellum
University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu. 2001
ISBN 0-8248-2486-5
Price: \$35

Nepal's own Tiger Woods

Watch this name:
Sean Navin Shrestha Einhaus.



TEE BREAK
Deepak Acharya



Just 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. ●

"I want to be World No 1"

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 Northern Westfalen, won the German title also. I was the youngest player (13 years old) to ever be in that team. And I won the Northern Westfalen (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 extra 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. Longterm—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.

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"Lata ko desh ma qaando tanderi..." (In a land of fools, a man with a goat is a hero.)

HELL! NAMASSTHAY!
by Jiggy Gatton

...in the West
momma, where's my cuff-links?
ya know, the diamond ones.
I got this party tonite...

...in Nepal
didi, mero t-shirt kaha cha?
ya know, the bob marley one.
I got this party tonite...

KE GARNE? WHATEVER.
Do whatever, but respect your mother.
Change your mind, not your appearance.
— ancient Buddhist proverb

Next Change: Harjig shops for a decent car-poner, presses -1 on KTM elevator and gets lost, and is also mistaken for a famous Hollywood actor in Durbar Marg.

(c) 2003 by Jiggy Gatton but only when - or if - Nepal ratifies WTO agreement.

ABOUT TOWN

FESTIVALS AND EXHIBITIONS

- ❖ **Traces** Exhibition of photographs, prints and paintings till 30 January at Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal Revisited. 4218048
- ❖ **The Land I Love** Photographs Kim Hong Sung till 16 January at Gallery Nine, Lazimpat. 4428694

EVENTS

- ❖ **Echoes of Tomorrow** discourse on creative arts 1PM on 8 January at NTB Auditorium, Bhrikuti Mandap. Entry open to all.
- ❖ **Climb Dharara** from 10AM – 5PM till 12 January to celebrate Dharara Week. Tickets Rs 75. Student discounts available. Rs 200 for foreigners.
- ❖ **The God's Dance of Kathmandu Valley** 7PM on Tuesdays. Tea+Ticket: Rs 400 at Hotel Vajra.



DRINK

- ❖ **Cosmic Cocktails** at Mitra Lounge Bar. Thamel. 4259015
- ❖ **Fusion** at Dwarika's for over 100 cocktails. 4479488

FOOD

- ❖ **Lunch at Dhokaima Café**, Patan Dhoka from 12-3PM, 5 January onwards. Different menu everyday. 5522113
- ❖ **Krishnarpan** ceremonial Nepali cuisine fit for a king. 4479488
- ❖ **Bring your wine** every Thursday and Sunday and buy our dinner. Himalatte Café, Thamel.
- ❖ **Roadhouse Cafe** for speciality coffees. Opp St Mary's School, Pulchowk. 5521755
- ❖ **Traditional Nepali Thali lunch** at Patan Museum Café inside Patan Museum. 11AM-2.30 PM. Cocktails and snacks 2-7.30 PM. 5526271
- ❖ **The best steaks** in a warm dining room. Free Irish Coffee with every main course. K-too! Beer & Steakhouse, 4433043
- ❖ **Raclette and Fondue** Traditional Swiss table cooking at the Chimney 6:30 PM onwards at the Hotel Yak and Yeti, Kathmandu. 4248999

GETAWAYS

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- ❖ **Weekend Special** Rs 3,000 per couple, Park Village Resort, Budhanilkantha. 4375280
- ❖ **Shivapuri Cottage, Dadagaon** gourmet meals, board and transport. Highland Travel & Tours. 4253352, 4253053
- ❖ **Escape to Godavari** overnight package. Godavari Village Resort, Taukhel, Lalitpur 5560675
- ❖ **Jungle Base Camp Lodge** Full board, stilts cottage and pickup, only \$10 a day (park activities extra). Email: junglebasecamp@yahoo.com
- ❖ **Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge** invites you to recover from the party season. 4361500

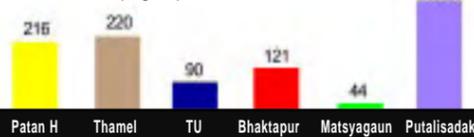
KATHMANDU AIR QUALITY



We may feel relieved that the World Bank has denied ever saying that Kathmandu is the most polluted city in Asia, but the data coming out of six monitoring stations in the valley continues to tell us that the air we breathe is unhealthy. On 30 December, the PM10 (particles that are small enough to enter the human body) concentration in Putali Sadak was 360 micrograms per cubic meter, three times the national minimum and in the residential area of Thamel it was more than twice 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 brick kilns that have replaced the old models on the city's outskirts.

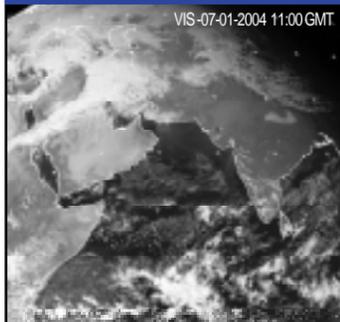
Good	< 60
Ok	61 to 120
Unhealthy	121 to 350
Harmful	351 to 425
Hazardous	>425

Average PM10 levels at selected points in Kathmandu
28 December - 3 January in micrograms per cubic meter.
Source: www.mope.gov.np



NEPALI WEATHER

by MAUSAM BEED



A low-pressure system over Tibet and extending towards Nepal will play a role in our weather. The heavy layer of smog over the Gangetic plain has been pushed southward, heralding a return of sunshine over the Siwalik and parts of the northern tarai. A big frontal system is once again moving in, as seen in this satellite picture taken on Wednesday evening. This one may bring a flurry of snow and some sleet to the central and western hills. So enjoy the sun till it lasts. Kathmandu's daytime temperature will remain at a very comfortable 20 degrees, but nights will be cold with frosty mornings.

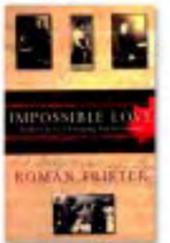
KATHMANDU VALLEY



BOOKWORM

Impossible Love: Ascher Levy's Longing for Germany
Roman Frister Phoenix, 2003
Rs 785

In an old cardboard suitcase found in a flea market in Jaffa, the author discovered the scraps of paper that were to form the basis of this remarkable history. Using everything from upholsterer's bills to personal letters, he reconstructs the story of the Levy family, who struggled to become one of the richest and most respected families in Pomerania, Prussia, but whose fortunes turned to dust in Nazi Germany.



Courtesy: Mandala Book Point, Kantipath, 4227711, mandala@csl.com.np



Chameli

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Chameli is a new entrant in a marquee of night culture films. Directed by Sudhir Mishra, this movie revolves around a one night stand between a suave socialite (Rahul Bose) and a prostitute (Kareena Kapoor). Rahul and Kareena both need a hit to rejuvenate their sagging career. With the success of movies like *Chandni Bar*, *Chameli* could strike the right note with audiences.

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BEETLE 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 stickers, cleft lip and palate surgery in Nepal, and women's health services in remote areas.

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HAPPENINGS


NEPALNEWS.COM

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



MIN BAJRACHARYA

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.



MIN BAJRACHARYA

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.



MIN BAJRACHARYA

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.



ANIL SHRESTHA

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 regard 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 takes her life's mission to be an advocate for justice and freedom seriously. 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. ●

(Naresh Newar)



MIN BAJRACHARYA



Exclusive interview with an Effigy of Regression

UNDER MY HAT
Kunda Dixit



He may have attained a certain celebrity status in the past year and become a household name, but Mr Regression is a hard man to pin down. Perennially media-shy, he prefers to keep a low profile, and is only seen in effigy these days being chased by paparazzi all over Ratna Park. In this rare and candid interview, an Effigy of Regression gives us unique insight into his hopes and aspirations, and the deep-seated grudge he harbours against mass-producers of effigies who have of late started using substandard fire-retardant material.

Q: Mr Refugee...

A: (Gruffly) I'm an Effigy, not a Refugee.

Q: Whatever. Mr Effigy, sir, let me begin by asking you...

A: You don't happen to have a light, do you?

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 tyres 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.



MIN BAJRACHARYA

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.

With Vajpayee, I have only played that part once, and I must say it didn't carry the same oomph. I have met some effigy colleagues from India who regularly play Vajpayee, and there it seems to be much more fun because the straw is drier, and kerosene is not adulterated.

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.

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