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Weekly Internet Poll # 119

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

■ Monarchy and constitutional monarchy 44.7%
■ Communist republic 10.7%
■ Multi-party republic 38.6%
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Total votes: 1,658

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Q. Do you trust the current political leadership to lead the nation?

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KUNDA DIXIT

One month after the student unions affiliated to the political parties launched their agitation, the protests have taken a dramatic and radical republican tone.

The students appear to have the green light from their mentors in the parties to step up the rhetoric in a last-ditch attempt to pressure King Gyanendra to agree to retract his October Fourth move, and restore power to the peoples' representatives. Student leaders who began their campaign by demanding that the king restore democracy are now openly calling for him to step down from the throne.

King Gyanendra himself tried to defuse the situation by initiating a series of meetings with party leaders and presenting them with his 7-point agenda for political consensus. The leaders were not too impressed.

The palace for its part doesn't seem too worried about the street agitation or the insurgency escalating out of control. Does it know something we don't? It could be pleased about recent military gains in the see-saw war as well as old rifts opening up between the NC and the UML.

The two parties are divided about whether reinstatement of parliament or an all-party government is the way forward. Both want to have an upper hand when, and if, the king backtracks. They have also adopted a two-pronged strategy: telling the students to take a hardline anti-monarchy stance while they themselves soft-peddle it.

Most independent analysts agree that neither a republic nor a return to absolute monarchy are feasible at

STUMPED

Who is going to solve this puzzle?



BILASH RAI

present, so the palace and the parties have to meet halfway. Only then can they look for a solution to the Maoist insurgency. If the king decides to go it alone, it is sure to push the parties and the Maoists closer and rush us towards a republic.

The Maoists are taking full advantage of this polarisation.

Ideologue Baburam Bhattarai in a writeup in the party paper, *Janadesh*, this week poked fun at the king's audiences with party leaders. He urged the parties not to listen to the king and keep up the republican momentum. "King Gyanendra is

offering the parties green grass...but if they fall for it again it will be suicidal and a major blunder," Bhattarai wrote. The Maoists have declared a Magar Autonomous Region in the midwest and are planning a big gathering at a secret location to mark the event next week. ●

Editorial p2
Trail wags dog

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Times

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TAIL WAGS DOG

What a difference two weeks makes. Last month, we bit our tongues while talking about the anti-monarchy slogans being raised on the streets. Today it has become so commonplace, we don't bat an eyelid.

Till a few weeks ago, people spoke in hushed tones of the shoe garlands on royal effigies. Last week, they cremated a corpse of 'regression' wearing a crown, and it was regarded as just another street demo.

Now that the streets are resounding with republican slogans, one has to wonder why Nepalis have to kill each other for that cause anymore. Nine thousand lives and eight years of mayhem later, it now looks like the main demand of the Maoists could just as easily have been met by street protests and setting a few government vehicles alight. The party bosses unleashed the students, but will the kids listen to Grandad Girija anymore? The tail is wagging the dog.

It is difficult to gauge just how much support the students on the streets get from onlookers on the sidewalks. But the fact that so far they are just looking on, and not joining in the arson, may indicate the slogans are just that: slogans. The Nepali people still appear to be drawing a distinction between the institution of monarchy and the intention of the monarch.

Most bystanders don't trust the political parties all that much either. They take a dim view of the bonfire of government pickups bought with public money. Ripples of the anti-regression demos on Ratna Park do not reach remote Nepal. The message is magnified by television news, but the people analyse it as being less about republicanism and more about parties trying to upgrade their bargaining position vis-à-vis the king.

It doesn't help the parties' cause that the people recognize some familiar faces leading the marches, faces that are on the CIAA's watch-list. The public is also dismayed that these past weeks prove the modus operandi of the parties hasn't changed. If they get back on the saddle, they will be back to their old tricks, including fighting each other tooth-and-nail.

Meanwhile, sitting in Nagarjun and gazing down at his capital Valley, the monarch is recalcitrant. The royal audiences have failed to do the trick. The king's use of the seven-point plan seems to have underestimated the frustration of the parliamentary leadership as well as the potential of the street agitation to spiral out of control of both the government and the parties.

Now that we are forced to think the unthinkable, we have to say that Nepal will probably survive as a republic. But why get rid of an institution that is not just a symbol of our historical evolution into a nation state, but also an institution that can be the constitutional force of last resort?

If the parties showed more measured and responsible behaviour and the palace proved through its actions that it is committed to restoring the peoples' sovereign rights, there may still be a way out of this morass.



MIN BAJRACHARYA

Kleptoholics anonymous

Real regression is putting arsonists and extortionists in power.

GUEST COLUMN
Dipak Gyawali



Both Rishikesh Shaha and Shambhu Prasad Gyawali (my father) have now passed into the pages of history, but they were giants that bestrode the Nepali public sphere for half a century. Both were architects of the 1962 Constitution that lasted 30 years despite being mangled, first by Panchayati hardliners in 1975 and subsequently by the myopia in 1980 after the National Referendum. A few months before my father passed away, I remember the two debating the 1990 Constitution, which had begun to exhibit fatal flaws.

They did not doubt that it had certain democratic features, but it also contained contradictions which led to the present mess in governance. It was biased against small and emerging parties, and it effectively failed to include heterogeneous minority groups. Provisions such as the judicial council removed the onus of proper administration of justice from the shoulders of the chief justice. Under a winner-takes-all scheme, real representation was wanting. And by blurring the distinction between law making and executive functions, check-and-balance failed in a systemic way.

But was the constituent assembly advocated by the Maoists the solution? Was it right for those believing in the rule of law to fall for what those who believe in consensus at gunpoint advocate? The gist of that exuberant debate was that if the

parliament itself failed to initiate necessary reforms, it would inevitably be done from outside—either as a consensual reform process initiated by King Birendra or through the Maoist path of a constituent assembly. After having his fingers burnt in 1979 and 1990, the monarch seemed reluctant to pursue the first. Was the second option of wiping the slate clean and starting afresh even feasible?

The scenario could unfold as follows. At the very instance that a constituent assembly was declared, the 1990 Constitution would be null and void. Immediately the executive, legislative and judiciary powers of the kingdom would revert to the head of state. The constituent assembly would then be the process of bringing back those powers to public organisations and legitimating them. The difficulties inherent in that course of action, they felt, were not being seriously considered.

First, one had to decide what legitimate constituencies were. The 205 electoral districts would have already been annulled. How was one to fix new ones? On what basis? Population? Language? Ethnicity? Religion? Some or all of them? Who was to decide, and how? Second, elections would have to be held in each of those 'constituencies' because nominations would not do.

In this kingdom that consists only of minorities, would not all (Muslims, animists, every linguistic group and, heaven forbid, Brahmins) clamour for the same separate status? Third, after these practical hurdles are crossed, there would have to be a consensus about the framework of a new order, for which no one

has proposed any serious blueprint.

If one has to go for elections, why suffer the impossible feat of electing an impractical constituent assembly? Why not elect a fresh parliament that already has the right to change the constitution with a two-third majority? There is nothing in the present constitution stopping it from adding provisions of ethnic or linguistic balance or even a referendum. Why don't the parties go to the people with that clear blueprint and get the requisite mandate?

Five years ago, when the elders debated this question, there was still hope that the parties could see the light and lead to reforms. Today, we have seen much more veniality, and the governance debate is far less edifying. Congenital kleptocrats have no business calling themselves democrats. Arsonists or extortionists are no progressive vanguard. Restoring them to power without them having to face voters is the real regression.

The way out of this quagmire is to begin the process of local elections that will throw up a newer set of young leaders. Let all parties answer the seven points raised by the king and let them go to the public with their view on the constitution, preferably after reforming themselves. Then let us see what mandate the public will give. That they cannot go to the people because of the Maoists is a lame excuse: the Maoists have only stepped into the political vacuum left in the countryside by the parties unable to explain their kleptomania. This interregnum will continue until the people can decide. ●

Foreign envoys and Nepali politics

A number of Western envoys in Kathmandu have been extraordinarily strident in their advocacy of a role for political parties in resolving the Maoist problem and bringing the country back on the democratic track. (See Editorial, 'Newton's laws', #177)

Their statements, in turn, seem to have emboldened the agitating parties to regain the reins of power even without a popular mandate in an election. While their umpteen phases of 'agitation against regression' have failed to generate popular enthusiasm, the five-party alliance of a loose and opportunistic ensemble of political groupings with little in common except their lust for power, has now unleashed students to commit mayhem in the streets in a manner reminiscent of Panchayati *Mandals*.

These developments seem to put the diplomats in an awkward position because they are seen as providing 'legitimacy' to the agitation by the parties. By withholding support for this agitation, the people are punishing politicians for their sustained perfidy. Through their single-minded pursuit of shameless corruption, the party leadership brought the country to its knees

in just a dozen years. Today, they have gone to the extent of calling for a republic (otherwise an exclusive Maoist turf) aimed at intimidating the king into submission. Expediency, not principle, remains the hallmark of Nepali politicians.

Since most foreign emissaries extend generous financial assistance to Nepal's development, it is only right that they should be interested in the political goings-on here. The proper use of their aid money presupposes good governance. Therefore, their concern with Nepali politics derives essentially from their own sense of accountability to tax payers back home.

Diplomatic missions in Kathmandu wield enormous influence over politicians and even a token of intervention has acted as a magic wand in checking excesses. The international community has played the role of midwife at crucial junctures in our history. How should they use this power?

- The envoys should impress upon the parties to first tell the Nepali people they have curbed their gluttonous appetite for graft and are committed to good governance. This could be a tall order because money plays a crucial role in our elections, but the devolution of authority to grassroots

stakeholders, as against elected politicians at the DDC and VDC levels, should top such an agenda.

- Nepal is a country at war. A unity of command is indispensable. But nobody in the right frame of mind would envision any one of these morally diminutive politicians taking command of the security forces. If they continue to insist, they would only invite trouble for themselves and for the country. Working with the king is the absolute minimum they must do.
- The diplomatic community may also want to do some introspection. The paradox is that 50 years of foreign aid to Nepal has ended up breeding Maoists. There has been a fundamental flaw in the way foreign aid has been designed and dispensed. Lavishing incentives on government officials to exact approval has been standard operating procedure.
- One of Nepal's biggest donors is India, which has also bolstered the fighting capacity of the Royal Nepali Army. However, the people are asking how come the Indian security apparatus cannot apprehend Nepali Maoists in its territory where they operate quite openly.

Bihari Krishna Shrestha is an anthropologist who once served in the National Planning Commission.



MIN BAJRACHARYA

A flailing stage

The main obstacle now is regime legitimacy.

STATE OF THE STATE
CK Lal



In politics, 'normal' depends on who is talking. The country is in the grip of an unprecedented crisis, but the World Bank thinks that since governance is in the hands of technocrats, the situation is normal. A restoration of democracy seems to be as important a risk for the Bank as the fear of Nepal turning into a Failed State.

At the launch of World Bank's Country Assistance Strategy last Friday, Prakash Sharan Mahat, an adviser in Sher Bahadur Deuba's discredited regime, raised objections from the floor to the Bank's belief in normalcy. This gave Ken Ohashi another opportunity to repeat some well-worn clichés about causation and correlation.

Safeguarding democracy isn't one of the missions of the bank. Like any other commercial enterprise, predictability is the key criteria in making investment decisions. Democracy is unpredictable by definition. Hence, like all advocates of 'liberal' economy, the bank also invariably prefers illiberal politics.

However liberal Ken Ohashi may be in private, he would be failing in his duty if he ignored the natural proclivity of politicians towards populism. He could have silenced critics at the Crowne Plaza by simply asking them to read his bank's lending policies. The borrower has to bear the economic,

political, social, cultural and environmental consequences of borrowing.

Judging from his frequent contributions in the media (including this newspaper) Ohashi seems to suffer from a mild case of Napoleon Complex. Instead of reminding readers that he isn't in the charity business, Ken delivers harsh homilies on the importance of good governance, ignoring the basic premise of state accountability: no taxation without representation.

He says the country he comes from “virtually invented the concept of high growth” (Japan’s annual GDP growth exceeded 10% on a sustained basis in the 1960s) and wants us to emulate it. How can one question such a noble motive? But Japan’s economic miracle happened under a constitution that gave no power to its celestial emperor. Japanese do what they do because they have a stake in it.

For Nepal, the problem is that while our donors and lenders are so concerned about the 'ownership' of public infrastructure and institutions, the question of ownership of the state itself is not questioned. The World Bank has praised the handing over of schools and hospitals to communities, how about handing over the country to its people?

King Gyanendra passed on his seven-point agenda for national consensus to the leaders of different political parties he met last week. Sadly, it ignores the severe crisis of legitimacy slowly

engulfing the regime and seems to be another ploy by palace strategists to keep the parties mired in wrangling. The point isn't the seven points—a national consensus over their importance is a foregone conclusion. It is who has the power to set that agenda.

Legitimacy is the process by which an institution attempts to justify its existence and power. King Gyanendra hasn't done anything so far to validate his Fourth October move. The crisis arises when strains within the polity reach such a stage that the state superstructure is in imminent danger of collapse. The triangular contest between the royal government, the Maoists and the parties seems to be headed in that direction. We are in the 'flailing stage' in which a state passes through before 'falling' and then becoming a 'failed state'.

Donors and lenders like Ken-
san must note that the main
obstacle now is regime legitimacy.
Good governance, important as it
is, has become secondary. The
priorities of the state have
changed: politics now has to
return to centre-stage before
anything else can happen.

Perhaps we are too close to current events to understand the significance of slogans that the protesting students are chanting, but they are suffused with unimagined possibilities. Never before has anyone ridiculed the royalty the way the youngsters are doing. The writing on the wall is too glaring to ignore. ●

LETTERS

CIVIL MILITIA

Seira Tamang's 'Turning civilians into combatants' (#175) has some critical flaws. She attacks parachuting conflict specialists, but takes the data from another group of parachuting conflict specialists like Amnesty International and ICJ to further her arguments. She argues that certain Kathmandu-based foreign embassies are influencing Nepali politics. This is hardly a revelation. Foreign influence is a reality of world politics. Nepali political scientists should take all foreign influences into account and give thought to how best to work with them for our nation's benefit rather than making this a moral issue or merely wishing it away. Moreover, no analysis of Nepali politics and foreign influence is



KIRAN PANDEY

complete without considering the influence of the big “I” – India, especially now in the context of the Maoist Revolt when there is enough proof that Maoist leaders hide and operate from India. Regarding the civil militia, Tamang cites one selective example of failure of civil militia in Guatemala, but ignores their effective use in Thailand and Malaysia. As an advocate of democracy, why does she object to the Nepali government putting its faith on the citizens and granting them their right to protect themselves by providing the necessary tools? She claims that arming the citizens could have longterm devastating effect and points to the kidnapping of a mayor in Guatemala. Are not Nepalis, including ex-Kamaiyas, being kidnapped by Maoists today? Why does no one protest when the Maoists arm civilians?

The consequence of not defeating the Maoists is going to be even worse. The logic of fear, violence and money was thrust upon this country by the Maoists, and we had better fight back with both pens and guns.

**Ram Prasad
Nepali, email**

BUSINESS

The news of the Royal Nepali Army (RNA) demanding payment from NEA for providing security to hydroelectric installations is very disturbing and provides a dangerous precedence. This seemingly naïve proposal will have undesirable effects on the economy and the question the role and protocol of the army. The government has allocated a line item budget to maintain the army, which has a fundamental obligation to provide security to the people and assets of Nepal. The budget has increased significantly in recent times to quell Maoist activities. The budget may be underfunded, but this should not be motivation to generate funds by holding public institutions hostage.

Why should individual institutions pay the army for security? If the army is unable to provide the services for which it was formed, then what is its role? Is the RNA a mercenary force to which public institutions and (maybe in future) private and individuals pay a service charge for its protection? Is the RNA's service for sale?

Nepal's public institutions have been a pot of easy money for all. Now the utilities are also being targeted. This sort of extortion tactic was very successfully applied by the Maoists for which the people have despised them. The silence of the present government and Ministry of Defense

in particular is perplexing. This proposal has to be retracted immediately.

J Man, email

- It was getting disturbing to see how things are turning out in Nepal when I read 'At the gates' (#178) on your internet edition. The students' protests seem unlikely to die down, even if the king retracts his earlier moves. For god's sake lets give him a way out. Meanwhile, the detention of Ishwor Pokharel is a slap in the wrist by Big Brother. We blame India for not helping to end terrorism but our representatives keep meeting terrorists on Indian soil. What do you expect the Indians to do, say 'svabas'?

Basanta K Pokharel
Massachussets, USA

NOT FUNNY

I am writing to add my voice to the opinion expressed by SS Pal about Kunda Dixit's 'Under My Hat' column. To have a space for humorous rants is fine, but we need something funny to get us to laugh. Enough is enough, get rid of this stupid column from an otherwise exemplary newspaper. If you insist on keeping the column, why not get someone else to write it for a change.

Deepen Upadhyay, email

Differently-abled

Ten percent of Nepal's population is disabled. What are the others doing to help?



ALL PICS: MIN BAJRACHARYA

NARESH NEWAR

Blind at birth, Babu K Maharjan feels he lives in a different world, not because he can't see but in the way society and the government looks down on him and the rest of the disabled population. A 1995 UNICEF report put the

number of disabled Nepalis at a staggering 10 percent of the population. By today's count, that should make 2.5 million people in this country are hearing impaired, visually challenged or mentally and physically unstable. "In the villages, our disabled children and parents are crying for help but their voices are ignored,"

says Maharjan, acting president of the National Association of Disabled-Nepal (NADN). There is great awareness and sympathy, it is mostly lip-service. Since the Maoists started their 'People's War', the number of the physically and mentally disabled individuals have risen adding to the disabled population, according to experts.

"The UN and NGOs only talk about protecting children from the conflict or extend their sympathy for the dead, they never seem to care much about the children who are still alive with broken limbs and in trauma," says Nirmal K Debkota, speaking in sign language. The hearing impaired Debkota says he may not be able to scream for the

government's help, but he has millions of friends to make his voice heard. In July, Debkota joined a huge delegation from the NADN to present their case with its 15-point demand to Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa at his office. This meeting also launched the first-ever movement to demand equal rights and privileges for the disabled. All they were asking for was an amendment to the *Disabled Persons Protection and Welfare Act* introduced in 1982 during the Panchayat regime. Their demands also included five percent reservation seats in government jobs, free medical treatment in all government hospitals, 50 percent discount on transportation, free education for children and compensation for those disabled by conflict. Says Maharjan: "So far nothing has happened, but we will not give up." Nepal became the first country in South Asia to introduce an act in favour of the disabled population, but lags behind the rest in implementation. In theory, Nepal's commitment towards the disabled is probably one the best in the world but neither the government nor the NGOs have done much, despite significant funding. Most of the disabled people, whether poor or rich, rely on family support, just as they always have. "We are not asking for sympathy, just recognition for our

All eyes on 2 November

Anything can happen between now and American election day.

So it's official. Tony Blair has spoken. "Weapons of mass destruction," the British Prime Minister told a television interviewer, "may never be found in Iraq." "It's a big country," Blair continued. Don't be surprised, he counseled, if no concrete evidence was ever found to back up claims that he and George Bush were trumpeting as gospel truth before their soldiers rolled into Iraq last year.

Add to Blair's no doubt carefully timed and focus-group-tested admission that revelations of Paul O'Neill, former Bush administration Treasury Secretary. O'Neill

HERE AND THERE
Daniel Lak



says his boss got most things

wrong on both Iraq and the US economy. According to the former official, President Bush and his team were looking for an excuse to invade Iraq from the moment they came to office in 2001. O'Neill was sacked last summer, ostensibly for getting the American economy wrong and frequently putting his foot in his mouth. Speaking to US television earlier this past week, he accused the president of much the same things. He rubbished the Bush plan to cut taxes to the country's richest



citizens and said he was hamstrung in attempts to make economic sense out of administration policy. Hindsight is a wonderful thing, always clear, unwavering and accurate. And O'Neill is plugging a book about his experiences that'll no doubt earn him a few of those dollars he's supposed to have squandered as treasury secretary. But it's interesting to hear his insider's view of Bush cabinet dealings in the run-up to the

invasion of Iraq last year, whatever pinches of salt are needed. The point is that Britain and the United States did the wrong thing by rolling into Iraq, and they continue to do the wrong things during their occupation. No neutral observer could feel differently. You have to be politically partisan, or a member of one of the many groups to suffer at Saddam's bloodstained hands to support London and Washington's Iraq adventure. At least one

can understand and sympathise with these latter groups. The capture of Saddam Hussein last year was supposed to be a Christmas present for Bush and Blair, a boost for their Iraq strategy that would see public opinion soaring. Bush in particular was thought likely to turn the discovery of the vile dictator in his "spider hole" near Tikrit into an stepping stone to a second term as President in this year's elections. Yet so far, there's little sign of that happening. Not that Bush won't win a second term, on current form, he's likely to, given the weakness and disarray among his opponents. But the president remains hostage to fortune and fortune favours both the brave and the lucky. Anything can happen between now and 2 November 2004, American election day. For all the might of the US military, for all the campaign money in Republican party coffers, for all of the effort expanded in wars against Iraq, Afghanistan and terrorism, Bush's reelection hopes still depend on events beyond his control. In the end, I'm not sure that he or Blair will pay for their willful distortions of the truth over Iraq. But more and more people are learning that they lied. And that's worth something. ●



skills and capabilities,” says Arjun Timilsina (*see pic*) from Jhapa, who lost both his legs 18 years ago after a car accident while trying to save an old woman along the Jiri highway. It is difficult for Timilsina to negotiate the staircase in his wheelchair to reach the office of the Ministry of Women and Social Welfare, but he is there to convince officials that disabled people can also contribute to the nation’s development.

Maharjan gives an example of the indifferent attitude of the government: despite a provision in the 1982 Act, disabled children who are guaranteed free education are still required to pay school fees. In 2000, Maharjan and his friends won a case at the Supreme Court to provide free education to all disabled children. “As a follow up, I visited a lot of schools and was shocked to find disabled children, even those from poor families, still paying fees. The matter has been ignored by NGOs too,” says Maharjan.

It is not just indifference, government officials are ignorant about the laws. Data from the Central Bureau of Statistics in 2001 estimated that only 0.45 percent of the total population was disabled. “The government lacks a clear definition of a disabled person,” says Bishnu Kunwar Singh, 28, from Gulmi, who had

her left arm amputated. “Can you believe that I am not counted as disabled even though I don’t have an arm?” She recently completed her Masters in Nepali and is having problems finding a job. Singh runs a centre for disabled women and wants to help them be independent. “I want to encourage more girls to study whether or not there are jobs waiting for them,” she adds.

For now, this group of disabled Nepalis are preparing to launch a much stronger campaign to ensure their representation in all sectors, even politics. “We have no one but ourselves to rely on,” says Tekhnath Neupane, a visually challenged teacher. “We want the government to create an environment where there is equal opportunity for all citizens.” He wants the government to recruit more disabled people in the education sector. Out of the 200,000 teachers in government schools, only 400 are disabled.

“We don’t want to blame the government or depend on it totally, but it is high time we were recognised for our worth,” says Maharjan who believes the private sector and citizens have a role to play in giving them a chance to live with the basic rights and privileges accorded to all citizens. “There are some in the private sector who have been helping us but it is more out of pity than respect for our capability.” ●

The business of helping

Nepal's top restaurateur Shyam Kakshapati's derives joy not just from his successful restaurant business, but also from employing 40 hearing-impaired waiters and waitresses in three of his Nanglo Bakeries in the Valley.

“I wanted to show the world that they are equally professional,” says Kakshapati who has made his name as an entrepreneur with a heart. Since Kakshapati turned his small café into a successful restaurant venture, others were quick to copy his idea. Many named their cafes similarly and even copied Bakery Café's trademark green. But one thing no one copied was its social consciousness and philanthropic mission.

The idea of hiring hearing-impaired staff came to Kakshapati even before he started his first small café. He wanted to run his businesses differently by combining social service with the service industry. If he could generate employment for the disabled while satisfying his guess, he had a win-win situation.

“I'm glad this is working well,” says Kaksapati. While they have might certain disadvantages compared to normal people, Kakshapati makes sure that there is no public show of pity or special treatment. “That way we don't cross the line and take advantage of each other,” adds Kakshapati who believes that the business community has social obligations and it's not just the government's duty to change the circumstances of the disabled. “If the business community wants, they can create so many opportunities for this section of the population,” says Kakshapati.



Shyam Kakshapati (*above*) explains why he decided eight years ago to hire hearing-impaired waiters at his chain of cafes.

His next challenge is to give vocational training for disabled people in the Information Technology industry so they can get decent jobs. He also hopes to employ more disabled in his other hotels and restaurants.





Air dashing with crack sleuths

NEITHER HERE NOR THERE
Anagha Neelakantan



CHENNAI – A short visit to southern climes has been a good opportunity to review my last close acquaintance with a South Asian city where crab is readily available. It is also a time to come face-to-face with subcontinental journalism.

A Mumbai history graduate student from the University of Chicago has begun to slowly compile a 21st Century *Hobson Jobson*: 'a lexicon of the marvellous clichés, truisms, banalities and other little idiosyncrasies that litter the pages of our Great Indian Newspapers'. Nearly four years later, it is obvious that there are other contenders for greatness. Even Nepali journalism has fallen under the oppressive hold

of Language 'Ultras' in the last two years. Here is a small sampling of what it means to read newspapers in this part of the world. And, as Rao, the soul of the project, requested readers in his preface to this priceless list, I too ask you to 'pitch in', to 'leap into the fray', to 'throw in your two pence worth'.

1. confabulate: to confer. 'The party leaders confabulated about the new agreement.'
2. work out the modalities: sort out the details. 'The party leaders confabulated about working out the modalities of the new agreement.'
3. supremo: head dude. 'The party supremos confabulated about working out the modalities of the new agreement.'
4. brigand: bad dude. 'The Karnataka and Tamil Nadu supremos confabulated about working out the modalities of the new agreement with the forest brigand.'
5. crack sleuths: smart dudes. 'The Karnataka and Tamil Nadu supremos confabulated with the Special Task Force's crack sleuths about working out the modalities of the new agreement with the forest brigand.'
6. strongman: big dude. 'The

Karnataka and Tamil Nadu supremos, in consultation with the Maratha strongman, confabulated with the Special Task Force's crack sleuths about working out the modalities of the new agreement with the forest brigand. The PM himself has been airdashed in under conditions of beefed up security. Meanwhile the Mumbai police force, second only to Scotland Yard and having been called in to assist with the situation, have now swung into action and are ready to swoop down upon the brigand and his associates.'

12. nab: seize

13. hardened criminals: tough dudes

14. And finally, a favourite in those times when people are swinging into action: 'flying squads of nuisance detectors.' These are the Mumbai PD's intrepid stalwarts who have been relentlessly patrolling the city enforcing the municipality's ban on plastic bags of less than 20 microns thickness: 'The Karnataka and Tamil Nadu supremos, in consultation with the Maratha strongman, confabulated with the Special Task Force's crack sleuths about working out the modalities of the new agreement with the forest brigand. The PM himself has been airdashed in under conditions of beefed up security. Meanwhile the Mumbai police force, second only to Scotland Yard, having been called in to assist with the situation have now swung into action and are ready to swoop down upon the brigand and his associates. In other news today, a flying squad of nuisance detectors managed to nab three hardened criminals who have been remorselessly violating the ban on plastic bags.'

sleuths about working out the modalities of the new agreement with the forest brigand. The PM himself has been airdashed in under conditions of beefed up security. Meanwhile the Mumbai police force, second only to Scotland Yard and having been called in to assist with the situation, have now swung into action and are ready to swoop down upon the brigand and his associates.'



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CAPITAL LETTER
Yubaraj Ghimire



Last week, King Gyanendra undertook what appeared to be an ice-breaking exercise by inviting leaders of the political parties one by one for dialogues.

He handed them his seven-point political guideline, albeit in the form of a suggestion, so they could build a consensus around it to end the political stalemate. This belated move was received with an air of mistrust by the political leadership. Nevertheless, the king seemingly tried to impress upon the people and international community (both largely pro-democracy) that his efforts to restore the constitutional process and democracy are genuine and sincere.

Unfortunately, this gesture will not be taken at face value if it isn't followed up with matching actions. The preliminary response of the parties is proof of a crisis of confidence. The hardline that a dominant section of the palace secretariat has been pursuing continues with the king visibly a party to it. When they evaluate the king's agenda, the parties cannot remain oblivious to the political tirade that the Raj Parishad has been spreading ahead of the

If the political parties are not the solution, then they are a part of the problem.

impending public felicitation for the king in the west. This is the third public event since he invoked the controversial Article 127 and took over executive powers.

Still, the political parties have an obligation to push their own agenda with a broader understanding if they do not agree with the king. After all, they can't escape their share of the blame for having malpracticed democracy during the past 13 years. If they are not willing to be part of the solution, they will be considered a part of the problem. Burning public and private property using students and youths will only legitimise 'terrorism' as a means to demand political rights. Can G P Koirala or Madhab Nepal fully endorse what students belonging to their parties are doing on the streets?

If they do, perhaps the king should bypass Koirala and Nepal and just invite student leaders Gagan Thapa, Guru Ghimire and Rajendra Rai in for a chat. As long as he is at it, maybe he could ask the students for their views on how the elections can be held within a clear time frame so that people's sovereignty and the constitutional process are fully restored.



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A protest movement has to be fully answerable and accountable to the public. A leader cannot be absolved of any crime or damage caused to the nation, public or individual in the course of such a movement. Leaders who can't keep a situation under control should give way to someone who can. That's what democracy is all about. Mahatma Gandhi had called off the mass movement in 1921 when over enthusiastic pro-independence groups set ablaze a police station in

Chauri Chaura near Gorakhpur in violation of his appeal for a non-violent protest. It is time for GP Koirala and Madhab Nepal to decide: do they lead the students, or is it the other way round?

The times are no less challenging for the king. The slogan of 'republic' has the potential to write off established power centres. World history is replete with such instances. The present constitution makes it clear that the executive powers do not

belong to the king; it should go to the people and be exercised through an elected parliament and a government accountable to it. Nothing but elections at the earliest will do justice to the spirit of the constitution.

If the king and political parties refuse to understand this, it will be because of their reluctance to take lessons from history. Or it will mean they are both equally indifferent to the future of this country. ●

Peace summit



A team of international climbers will attempt to reach the top of the world's highest mountain this spring under the Everest Peace Project Expedition.

The nine-member expedition will have climbers from different faiths, different cultures and different nationalities, but who all believe in the need for peace within their countries and internationally. Climbers include a Buddhist, Taoist, Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Jew, a Confucian and even an Atheist.

The project has been organising a series of peace rallies in Nepal in the run-up to the climb. The rallies have been drawing attention to the violence in Nepal and the overwhelming desire of the Nepali people for a restoration of peace.

"The continued Maoist problems and a government not working hard at resolving the issues...the main hope may lie with the normal people of Nepal making their voices heard," expedition leader, Lance Trumbull writes in the project website.

He adds: "There is peace in Nepal—it lies within most of the hearts of the people, now, we just hope that the government and the Maoists will listen to the people."

Among other activities, the project will also organise a Charity Peace Trek to Everest Base Camp to raise money for peace efforts. The nine climbers include: Lance Trumbull, Daisy Lee, Micha Yaniv, Dilip Kolhatkar, David Yifrah, Masa Maeda, Quang Than, Appa Sherpa and Daisy Lee.

Over the next months in the runup to the expedition's Climb for Peace, the Everest Peace Project will be covered on www.EverestPeaceProject.com







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The disparity between the enrollment of boys and girls in Nepal is one of the highest in the world. Nepal has the one of the worst maternal mortality rates, lower even than some sub-Saharan countries.

Why do so few girls go to school? Why do so many mothers die at childbirth? The answer lies in the low status of women in Nepali society, discrimination against the girl child, sometimes even before they are born. And these disadvantages and discrimination are not being addressed meaningfully, and with the insurgency it means the situation of Nepali girls and women is not getting any better.

These alarming facts were presented by a delegation of Nepali women activists this week at the United Nations in New York which is holding the 30th Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women. Advocate Sapana Pradhan Malla, Dr Chandra Bhadra, Tulasa Lata Amatya, Lily Thapa and Anjana Shakya made the presentations, drawing international attention to specific issues of discrimination against women contained in their 'Shadow Report'.

Although there is an 80 percent enrollment rate for boys in primary schools in Nepal, the rate for girls is only 60 percent. Although girls' enrollment is rising, women's literacy is still 34 percent compared to 75 percent for men and this gap is widening.

The maternal mortality rate in

Gender agenda

A Shadow Report to an international conference in New York paints a bleak picture of women's rights in Nepal.



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Nepal is 540 for every 10,000, most of which can be prevented with better nutrition and accessible midwife services. Three quarters of Nepali women who are pregnant are anemic, and there is a huge epidemic of prolapsed uterus among women in western Nepal.

The situation is getting worse

due to the conflict, according to the Shadow Report presented in New York. Many women-focussed health programs in western Nepal have been abandoned because of the conflict, making the need greater than ever before.

The report does highlight some of the positive interventions by the

government in the past few years in reversing gender discrimination: laws guaranteeing women's right to property, rights against sexual offences, the formation of the National women's Commission and the National Dalit Commission, and compensation to spouses and children of people killed in the

insurgency.

However, the report says: "There is a persistence of a strong patriarchal culture that emphasises traditional roles for women and 137 discriminatory provisions in the laws." For instance, Nepali women cannot confer citizenship to their children or husbands, although free education for girls has been announced there hasn't been a notable increase in enrollment, practices like witchcraft and dowry are still prevalent.

An example of one step forward two steps back is the law relating to abortion which was liberalised two years ago to ensure the availability of safe and accessible abortion. But there are still 48 women in various prisons in Nepal serving terms for abortion-related offences. The report says seven more women have been arrested since the laws legalising abortion went into effect.

The report concludes: "Nepali women are discriminated against not only by social and cultural norms, but also by the law because legal provisions still exist which discriminate against women on the basis of sex." ●



LONDON EYE
ED Bowman

A small school 40 miles from London on a cold, dark and rainy night after Christmas might seem an unlikely setting for a celebration of Nepali culture and

comedy, but this year Oak Farm Community School was the venue for a typical concert which seems so appealing to the UK edition of the Nepali diaspora. Like bees to the honey pot, Nepalis from all over London and the South of England braved the winter elements and swarmed

The need to belong

The Nepali community in the UK needs a cultural fix every now and then.

Farnborough, excited to watch the famous comedy duo act and to bring some warmth to their heart.

In the UK, cultural events like this are becoming a common occurrence and Farnborough always is a must visit place for such touring 'charity' events due to the large concentration of Nepalis in the area. The format at such events is usually always the same, a basic hall with no frills shows where families and friends 5,000 miles from home take the opportunity to meet up and share a little of the Nepali cultural warmth and replenishment in the cold English climate.

There is always some VIP or film star from Kollywood (probably now living in the UK) ready to regale us with their back catalogue for the community to laugh, dance and to be magically transported back to their families and their past lives in Nepal.

The Nepali community lacks the close knit strongholds and proximity enjoyed by other communities such as the Bengalis in the UK. It is often necessary for Nepalis, (whether students, professionals or lahures) to travel great distances in order to

attend these kinds of celebrations. However, the comfort of ones' own culture and the need to belong can have a strong magnetic pull when one is in a foreign land. It can be a business opportunity for some in the community. There is some financial incentive for putting on shows, as a large audience is always assured, no distance or indeed cost (most programs now charge £15 a ticket) seems too much for the Nepali community to bear. This is because these programs satisfy our need for a cultural fix. The UK has many positive factors (honest), but to a Nepali far from home, the UK can be a cold and unwelcoming place.

I heard a man bemoaning the lack of decorations on the stage. "Shows in the past used to use a colourful curtain with the sun shining down on the mountains and hills, a river running past a village in the foreground," he went on. For him, these nights are about recalling an idealistic image of the homeland, much in the same way British tourists dream of Shangri-La. For many like him, there is an

inherent need for cultural identity and sense of belonging. That is why concerts (many mediocre) like these are there to satisfy a need. This demand has been expertly tapped by some entrepreneurial Nepali individuals, but one wonders if it could not also be tapped for a more altruistic and noble purpose.

They need not be just nostalgic meanderings, but used to promote awareness of 'disappeared' Nepalis, or those who have died needlessly in a vindictive and violent struggle for power. We could do more to support those friends and relatives who continue to live in the shadow of this war. The Nepali community should not content itself with having merely financial influence back in Nepal, it is capable of so much more. In this new year, when the need for peace in Nepal has never been greater, Nepalis in the UK must learn to face the reality of what happens far away in their home villages and towns, and we must all take responsibility for seeing that peace can return there. ●

BIZ NEWS

Journey of a lifetime

Everest Base Camp was selected in 20 Journeys of a Lifetime by *The Observer* on 11 January 2004 by journalist Jill Hartley as great adventures that one never forgets. Everest Base Camp came in seventh, beating the Galapagos Islands which placed first in UK's internet based travel company iexplore.com in 2003. Everest Base Camp is the only South Asian destination that has been included in the list. Jill Hartley writes, "To the rest of us, the crown jewel of the Himalaya invokes tales of unbelievable human courage and strength. Today a trek to Base Camp should be within range of any fit regular weekend walker. Those who've done it say nothing compares with that roof-of-the-world feeling as you stand there in awed silence, surrounded by towering snow-capped peaks." Hopefully, this will translate to more tourists in 2004.

Tee off

Nirvana Country Club Health & Golf Resort in Dharan will be playing host to His Majesty Crown Prince Paras Bir Bikram Shah Dev-All Nepal Amateur Open Golf Tournament 2004 on 17-18 January. The course is the oldest in Nepal and was designed by Nuffield Trust (UK). It has 18 holes with 5,990 yardage, 70 par. Besides golf, the resort also offers yoga, meditation, swimming, tennis, squash, white water rafting, treks, natural foods and in-house cultivated rare herbs, natural therapies include herbal steam baths, traditional oil massage, mud therapy and other rejuvenating programs. There are twenty furnished bungalows for accommodations, a multi-cuisine restaurant and catering facilities for parties and weddings.

Better stays

Shangri-La Hotel was recognised as one of the Top Ten Tourist Service Fee (TSF) contributor for the fiscal year 2002-03 by the NTB. Prabin Bahadur Panday, executive director of Shangri-La Hotel received the award on 30 December 2003. Shangri-La Group, Nepal's only boutique hotel, has been among the higher tax and tourism service fee contributors in the past year.

Top class

NIIT, the New Delhi headquartered IT training pioneer and software major, that has branches in the kingdom, has been conferred the prestigious BEST Training Award by world's premier professional association for workplace learning, the American Society for Training & Development (ASTD). In all, 23 organisations from the United States, Canada, Hong Kong, and India were recently honoured with the 2003 ASTD BEST Awards.

Newbies

Radisson Hotel Kathmandu recently appointed Klaus P Russo as the new general manager. Russo has held senior executive positions in high profile properties in Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, China, American Samoa and now in Nepal. Prior to Russo's appointment, Abhinav Rana, resident manager looked after the hotel for almost a year and a half as acting general manager. Radisson Hotel Kathmandu has also appointed Konala Ram Krishna Reddy as Executive Chef. Reddy took over Radisson's kitchen from out going Chef Nabhojit Ghosh.

Higher aims

Civil Saving and credit co-operative hold themselves up as an example to those who view organisations like theirs with pessimism. At its annual general meeting on 10 January, they decided to launch Civil Homes Phase III at Lalitpur Sunathoki after the successful completion of Phase I in Sainbu Bhaishipati and Phase II at Tinthana. It is also planning to invest in transportation, medical facilities and other industries to meet the objectives of the organisation: "To collect every small sum and invest in the development of the country."

Profits and shares

Niranjan K Tibrewala was elected to the board of Standard Chartered Bank Nepal Limited (SCBNL) to replace the outgoing Hari K Shrestha at the bank's 17th annual general meeting on 8 January. Net profit after tax amounted to Rs 507 million earned in the fiscal year 2002-03, a 5.8 percent growth. Shareholders approved the appropriations of the profits and cash dividend of 110 percent and bonus share in the ratio of one bonus share for every 10 proposed by the board of directors.



Bang for buck

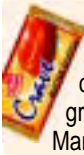
At its own AGM, Everest Bank announced an operating profit to show a 60 percent increase over last year to reach about Rs 157 million for the first six months of this fiscal year. The bank credits this to a sound lending and recovery policy resulting in lowest non-performing assets (NPAs) in the banking sector. They recently opened a new branch at Lazimpat, taking the total to 14. Everest Bank will now offer EBL Flexi Loan schemes under the credit segment, two ATMs due to open in February and plans to issue debit cards.

NEW PRODUCTS

MORE FROM DABUR: Dabur Anmol, a new range of hair care products from Dabur Nepal, was unveiled on the last day of the Dabur Anmol Motion Picture Award 2060 held on 10 January. The Anmol brand includes Dabur Natural Shine Shampoo, Dabur Anmol Coconut Oil and Dabur Anmol Sarson Amla Hair Oil.



SUGAR RUSH: Java confectionery, a part of Laxmi Groups, has introduced Crave or Rs 1 each, a rich candy combination of real cream, butter and milk with the slogan "try it to believe it". The group also produces successful brands like Chocofun, Lactofun and Mango Tart.



World Bank message
If we can get our act together, there is a lot more money for Nepal's development.

ECONOMIC SENSE
Artha Beed



Ken Ohashi, the World Bank's Nepal director, made it clear at the Country Assistance Strategy (CAS) launch last week that irrespective of the government in place, as long as reforms move ahead and the government meets targets it has set, the World Bank will continue to assist Nepal. If the performance is good, was the message, there is more money. While media latched on to the 'failed state' warnings in line with our strong belief in the *khattam chha* school of thought, the Beed takes a more positive view.

World Bank assistance is dependent on scenarios that needs a government to perform and pushes for peace to end the long years of conflict. It is very clear that money will pour in as long as any government ensures that there is a strong anti-corruption drive, true decentralisation, banking and financial sector reforms, well-managed public expenditure and the annual action plan targets that are realised. While the current base scenario looks at an assistance of \$120-200 million each year during the assistance period, the best case scenario could be \$200-250 million. For sceptics from the Khattam Chha Club, the nightmare is \$50 million or less.

It is very important to note the Bank's position on the political situation. While there are accusations that it does not support the multiparty agenda, it has more



to do with the functioning of 'patronage politics' rather than democracy itself. The Beed has often questioned whether banking reforms or Nepal's entry into the WTO would have been possible if we were still mired in the old politics.

This does not, however, suggest that we should not get back to parliamentary democracy, but surely when that happens, there will be a strong need for politicians and the government in power to realise that a reform agenda can be pursued. It is always better to achieve reform faster and reap the benefits rather than stagger it and lose out. The Bank's CAS wants to stimulate growth through private sector development, push private public

partnerships and create a better environment for investment. It is pinning more hope on the government.

It has to work with the government. But it can also work with independent agencies on specific issues. For instance, in case of economy related legislative reform, it is important to work with advocacy groups and think tanks. Similarly, working directly with successful pro-reform local governments may provide others incentive to move toward reforms.

CAS is what the Bank thinks should be done. Now, the onus is on Nepal to do its bit. At a time when the general feeling is that we are losing out, the Bank's message is that if Nepal can control its own destiny, there is help at hand. ●

NATO vs NATA

Who will ensure tourists get the best service?

Two associations of travel agents, Nepal Association of Tour Operators (NATO) and Nepal Association of Travel Agents (NATA) are divided over the issue of the bank guarantee they are required to deposit into the national coffer.

NATO has proposed to the government that any travel agent working as a tour operator should deposit Rs 2.5 million as a bank guarantee to ensure quality service to clients. NATA argues that a majority of travel agents cannot afford to deposit that amount.

NATO's chairman Basanta Mishra says the idea had to be pushed because of complaints from tourists of fraud and bad service. "We have to respond to such complaints before Nepal becomes a destination for hippies again," Mishra says. "Once the deposit is fixed, tour operators will be forced to maintain quality."

NATA says NATO just wants to monopolise the business. "The majority of travel agents are dead set against the idea," says Rabi Poudel president of NATA which has 250 travel agents. "How can we pay 2.5 million when our business has slackened, why should only big operators be allowed to do business that way?" he asks.

More than 600 travel agencies are registered with the Ministry of Tourism, but only 200 are in business. Travel agents get their operating license only after they deposit Rs 50,000 as the bank guarantee. But the government is already working on revising the amount. After NATA came to know that the revised bank guarantee would be Rs



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300,000, it approached the government to lower the amount. "We have been assured that it will be lowered," says Poudel.

NATO officials argue that since travel agents deposit bank guarantees to different airlines for ticketing transactions, there is no reason why they cannot do the same for tour operations as well.

Despite its four-decades of experience, Nepal's tourism industry does not have any accreditation program, either from the government or from the private sector. None of the tourism related organisations and government agencies have fixed criteria for services offered by travel and trekking agents.

But Poudel argues: "How can you guarantee quality by increasing the deposit?"



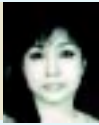
MIN BAJRACHARYA

Thoughtless food

Chow, chow and more chow.

A stroll down the street from Thapathali to Pulchok has always been an eye-opener to the state of affairs. You end up thinking a lot more than you would inside one of those vehicles jostling past one another across the bridge. Hoardings promoting chow, chow and more chow assault your eyes. Billboards pushing greed and lust communicate with the commuting masses every hour of every day.

NEPALI PAN
Sushma Amatya



My informal poll has shown that the 2003 Most Gender-Insensitive and Repulsive Billboard of the Year Award was carried away

by the 'Nothing satisfies more than Virgin?' billboard on the bridge. Feeling a bit nauseous here is not just the odours of a decaying Bagmati wafting into the vehicle. The fact that a passé macho attitude can sell whisky in this day and age must be an indication of how far back Nepali maledom still is. Yet another case of 'CD': creativity dead.

If we were to go by the barrage of media persuasions, the advertisements that assail our senses every time we turn a page, tune in to radio, switch one of the new local television channels or drive past street hoardings, it would seem that we are turning into a nation whose staple food is instant noodles.

Competition is so fierce that manufacturers try to earn brand loyalty by bribing consumers to eat their noodles with diamond tiaras, engineering scholarships or gold bars. What next: win a US diversity visa lottery with every packet of Ramen?

Instant noodles contain monosodium glutamate (MSG), a taste enhancer also known by the designer name, Ajinomoto. Qualified nutritionists in East Asia concluded long ago that MSG is toxic, and absolutely not recommended to children below 12. Not only is junk food non-nutritious, it is also harmful to health. We don't really expect the manufacturers to tell us everything, but shouldn't someone be enforcing nutrition standards? How bad it is for children and pregnant women who are shown consuming these products? Some brands do state that the packets contain one percent MSG. How safe is that one percent? Who checks if it really is one percent?

Then there is the question of this media-driven consumer culture which glamorises junkfood. Do we stop to consider why we buy what we buy? Have we become too busy to bother, or do we give in too easily to our children's coercion or are we simply brain-washed by the colourful happy looking ads? And market 'experts' know very well that nothing piques a child's curiosity more than finding a mystery prize in something they buy or the promise of one. Shouldn't there be a law against advertising targeting children for products that may not be in their best interest to consume?

We surely haven't become so dull or brain dead as to allow the manufacturers, distributors and promoters of food products to take us for a ride or get swayed so easily by the subliminal messages of the aggressive ad market. We can still think, question, discover and decide what's best for us.

In a village in Kaski, I once came across an impoverished mother reprimanding her sick daughter: "You started falling sick after eating that stale bread made from maida, you'd have been ok if you had stuck to makai and water before school." There is indigenous common sense, but is it any match for the juggernaut of consumerism carried by our ad-hungry electronic media?

As for me, just pass that saag, makai ko dhido and gundruk bhatmas. Don't have it? Then a plate of yak cheese and fruit would be fine. ●

Sushma Amatya is a Kathmandu-based writer and photographer.

The Buddhist circuit

Nepal is part of a new regional initiative to promote Buddhist pilgrimage tourism.

IMTIAZ MUQBIL IN BANGKOK

The travel and tourism pendulum swung from Southeast Asia to South Asia last week as violence in southern Thailand gave rise to safety concerns while South Asian countries made peace and announced plans to hold a Tourism Year in 2005.

Also last week, the Asian Development Bank announced the approval of a \$450,000 technical assistance grant to develop a tourism plan for Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal, the four countries belonging to the South Asia Subregional Economic Co-operation (Sasec).

The Sasec tourism plan is expected to evolve around the common themes of the Buddhist circuit and ecotourism. It will give a major boost to investment in badly-needed infrastructure for millions of potential Buddhist pilgrims, similar to the numbers of Muslim pilgrims to Saudi Arabia.

A major component of the South Asian countries' plan for regional integration and free trade, tourism featured prominently in the South Asian summit that ended on a largely positive note last week. The final Islamabad Declaration said: "Development of tourism within South Asia could bring economic, social and cultural dividends. There is a need for increasing cooperation to jointly promote tourism within South Asia as well as to promote South Asia as a tourism destination inter alia by improved air links."

The summit also designated 2005 as 'South Asia Tourism Year' and saw India and Pakistan resuming bilateral air links and overflights. PIA started Lahore-New Delhi-Lahore flights on 1

January and Karachi-Bombay-Karachi flights from 2 January. The airline plans to add flights from Karachi to New Delhi in March. PIA has also resumed its flights to Kathmandu from Karachi which overfly India.

Indian Airlines on Friday was to start a twice-weekly New Delhi-Lahore-New Delhi flight. It also plans to start a direct flight between New Delhi and Kabul. Flights over Pakistan airspace will shorten travel time by 10 to 60 minutes for Air India and Indian Airlines flights to the Gulf, Europe and the United States.

Travellers previously had to fly via Dubai to cities separated by only a few hundred kilometres. Air India said it would save about \$80 million per year on fuel costs. India's privately owned airlines Jet Airways and Air Sahara have also applied to start flights to Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal since a policy change at the Indian civil aviation ministry permitted private domestic operators to fly to South Asian countries.

Bus services had resumed last July following a ceasefire on the borders. And train services between the countries are set to resume from 15 January. The summit also announced plans for a SAARC Cultural Centre in the Sri Lankan hill resort of Kandy "as a symbol of South Asian shared cultural heritage". The centre will work on preservation of traditional skills and crafts and promotion of South Asian cultural exchanges.

The ADB funding for the Sasec tourism plan will fit in nicely with the South Asian summit goals. Les Clark, a New Zealand-based tourism planning specialist, is to undertake a similar plan for the Sasec countries, covering the

period 2004 to 2014.

He will work with the Sasec tourism industry and related parties in developing a framework program and project concepts. National workshops will be held in each of the countries hosted by the respective national tourism organisations.

Snimer Sahni, an ADB senior project economist, said: "The subregion can offer activities such as overland cultural tours and mountain trekking. Aside from bringing in foreign exchange, creating jobs and contributing to overall economic growth, this kind of tourism promotes rural development."

Focusing on the Buddhist circuit will also strengthen cultural and religious tourism linkages between South and Southeast Asia, both directly as well as via other subregional groups such as the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) and BIMST-EC (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand Economic Co-operation).

Bangkok-based ESCAP has also done extensive work on developing the potential of the Buddhist circuit. Presentations from a recent Japanese-funded seminar on the circuit are available on www.unescap.org/ttd/index.asp

The UN body's Transport and Tourism Division chief Barry Cable said: "ADB funding will certainly go a long way toward attracting interest in investment in this very important part of the world. I hope local authorities will ensure that they develop the right kind of products in line with the sense of place." ●

Imtiaz Muqbil is executive editor of Travel Impact Newswire, an e-mailed feature and analysis service focusing on the Asia-Pacific travel industry.





ALL PICS: ANIL SHRESTHA

Winter wonderland

A ‘domesticated tourist’ discovers a Khumbu deep in snow.

ANIL SHRESTHA in NAMCHE BAZAR

Namche Bazar wasn’t quite prepared for the Chirstmas-New Year rush of trekkers last month, but no one here is complaining. The lodges are not 100 percent full, but owners say they haven’t seen a winter with this many trekkers in a long time.

Namche’s restaurant owners and hotel managers who by now would be in Kathmandu only to return in spring, are staying on this winter. Many people here have varying explanations for this, but two seem to stand out: the worldwide publicity of the Everest 50th Anniversary event, which is still lingering, as well as some trekking traffic diverted from the Annapurna circuit because of news of Maoist extortion there. Ghandrung’s loss, therefore has been Namche’s gain.

No one has done an exact tally, but

information from the national park and other sources say the trekking arrival figures for 2003 was as good as Visit Nepal Year 1998, when over 35,000 trekkers visited the Everest region.

The rush can be seen in Lukla airport itself. If the visibility is good in Kathmandu, the Lukla flights start taking off at 6:45. On one day in December just before Christmas Day, there were 50 flights from Kathmandu and Phaplu, and Yeti Airlines alone is regularly doing 15 flights a day. Not all carry passengers, half the flights carry cargo or a mix of cargo and passengers. Some up market tourists staying at the Everest View Hotel fly directly to Syangboche.

The trekking demographics is also changing. No more is there a predominance of Americans and Britons. They have been replaced by more exotic nationalities: Koreans, Israelis and a growing number of South

Americans. There are advantages to being a Nepali trekker here, since there are so few of us. Thanks to NTB, there is even a name for Kathmandu people who go hiking for pleasure and not for business: ‘Antarik Paryatak’. But Nepali trekkers like me form less than one percent of the visitors to Khumbu.

Many along the trail, once they found out I was Nepali, would ask me which trek group I was leading. When I replied that I was just here to take pictures, they were surprised. But nowhere were they dismissive after finding out I was Nepali, as happens elsewhere where waiters and receptionists tend to pay more attention to ‘genuine tourists’ than ‘domesticated tourists’.

Namche is now firmly ensconced in the global village. There are internet cafes, VSAT phone booths all along the trail, pool parlours

and cable television. There will be the purists who will lament this modernisation and wish Namche remained the yak town it used to be 50 years ago. But for the people of Namche, there is no doubt which is better.

The trail from Namche to Tengboche is thick with snow. The pine and fir forests are thick, with flocks of danphes flapping off into the undergrowth when accosted while sunning themselves on a rock. Despite the number of tourists and the encroachment of modern media, the Everest trail in winter is still a great place for those getting low on battery to go up to recharge.

Lukla is surprisingly affordable for Nepalis, the local fare roundtrip is Rs 3,600. (It is just under \$100 for foreigners and some airlines offer a special rate for Indians.) It is a standard Rs 100 per tourist for a room and food prices are standard. ●



Namche in winter

It's slow, but not dull.



JEMIMA SHERPA

Climbing up to Namche always feels like an achievement: the second half of the incline seems endless, the trail always much longer than I remember it. Bend after bend, walking on until finally reaching the entrance to this amphitheatre which is still on the other side of the slope from the main bazar. Here chickens dart across the trail, porters rest their loads on the slate ledges and tourists (or anyone who looks like one) are usually accosted by “Namastes!”

from children. Taking either the higher or lower path into Namche, it is always a little bit of a shock being confronted by the bulk of the town. Every visit, there are new buildings, the confines of the town creeping ever so slightly upwards and outwards on the slopes that cradle it. Located above the point where the Bhote Koshi and Dudh Koshi converge, hotels and lodges are everywhere. In peak season (March-April and October-December) these lodges are crowded with trekkers,

each with their own plans to head further on up the trail to Tengboche or Gokyo or Everest base camp, or more rarely in the other direction up the Bhote Koshi towards Thame. Others are on their way down, full of monotonous tales of how far they got, their altitude sickness or lack thereof and their flight uncertainties in Lukla. Come winter, things are slightly different. After the first snows around the end of December, the fir trees on the hill are bent with their load. Entering or leaving Namche

can be an adventure on its own. Snow melts, only to freeze into ice. Walking is a delicate and often embarrassing process. I remember an undignified slip a few years ago that made my journey down the first part of the Namche hill considerably faster than expected. Local schoolchildren don't seem to mind though. Skiing Khumbu style consists of tying lengths of polythene pipe to one's shoes and careening down the ice, counting on a convenient snow bank or possibly a strategically located rock wall as a

landing pad. Although never quite brave enough to try this myself, I have gone down a certain slope in Khunde seated on half of an old jerry can, the accepted substitute for a toboggan. I can recommend it to anyone who doesn't mind walking stiffly for the next few days. Winter isn't all fun and games though. It's bitterly cold, particularly in the foggy mornings and afternoons. For the weeks before it snows, terrific winds blow up dust everywhere—going



Camping out in Tengboche with Ama Dablam, Lhotse and Chomolungma as backdrop (top). Namche's snowcovered roofs glisten in the afternoon sun below Thamserku (left). The snowbound trail from Namche to Tengboche in late afternoon (above).



ALL PICS: ANIL SHRESTHA

outdoors is difficult and unpleasant. In the villages, livestock is brought down from the summer pastures. The ground floors of traditional houses are crowded with animals, piles of firewood and dried dung cakes, collected and stored to burn through the winter, along with potatoes harvested before the earth froze.

Snow brings its own problems: travelling becomes difficult or impossible, and snow blindness, frostbite, avalanches and problems ranging from the sniffles to pneumonia are always a possibility. More minor irritations include having perpetually wet boots and socks, eggs with frozen yolks and on one memorable occasion, having my hair freeze with little icicles on the tips after I'd foolishly attempted to wash it one January afternoon.

Winter is time for trading. The Saturday haat bazar in Namche is a microcosm of the variety the human race has to offer. The down-valley Rais and Chettris, tourists from all over the world with their rainbows of down jackets and tinted glasses, the occasional government bureaucrat, the Khampas and of course local Sherpas, all mix together in a riot of colours, languages and

nationalities.

The mix of goods on offer is astounding—essentials like sugar, flour and noodles that people from villages like Thame and Pangboche come to collect to stock up for Losar, exotic Turkish apricots and Bulgarian salami abandoned by large trekking expeditions on their way down and jackets and tracksuits that the Khampas have bought over on their yaks from Tibet. As the day wears on, the snow around the bazar turns brown and slushy under the hundred of boots. By late afternoon, most are ready to leave.

The fog rolls in as the sun dips down. The mountains—Thamserku, Khongdi and Khumbila gradually fade into the mist. The temperature drops rapidly with another late-afternoon flurry of snow. Days are short and everyone is happy to be in warm homes by dark. The traders from below Namche set off down the hill, the Khampas return to their tents and the tourists head back to their hotels. Fortified by a few glasses of warm *chaang*, those from further afield turn towards home with large loads of goods.

All of this is familiar, yet different, every winter. ●

Jemima Sherpa was born in Khunde Hospital above Namche.

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Radio freeze

Just as 24 new FM stations were ready to go on air, the Defence Ministry has asked the Communication Ministry to cut them off. Last year, Minister Kamal Thapa was praised for allowing new community stations, pushing the total number of licenses to 60. The Communications Ministry had already stopped issuing new licenses saying it needed to review frequency allocations, but the new directive will also affect those with new licenses in the process of setting up community stations in Bajhang, Kailali, Jumla, Surkhet, Banke, Gulmi, Solukhumbu and Nawalparasi districts. Promoters of community radio are upset. "You can't do this when there so many people are already preparing to begin broadcasts," says Bharat Koirala, one of the staunchest promoters of community radio in Nepal. Community Radio Broadcast Association chairman Raghu Mainali says the medium can serve in conflict resolution, but adds: "Our leaders seem to have closed their eyes to that potential." He accuses the government of being unable to stop foreign broadcasters and Maoist underground FM, and says the ban will help fan rumours and keep the public ignorant.

Hawley honoured

Honorary New Zealand consul in Nepal, mountaineering chronicler Elizabeth Hawley was presented with the Honorary Queen's Service Medal for Public Services (QSM) by the New Zealand ambassador to Nepal, Caroline McDonald, at a function here Wednesday.



KIRAN PANDEY

Hawley was conferred the medal by Queen Elizabeth last year and was in recognition of Hawley's "contribution to New Zealand interests in Nepal" since she working in the 1970s to help its dealings in Nepal and assisting Nepali students to study in New Zealand. Hawley also works for the Himalayan Trust, which was set up by Sir Edmund Hillary in 1965 to help education and health projects in Khumbu.

"Miss Hawley has made an outstanding contribution to New Zealand's relationship with Nepal. She has done so in her personal capacity, and through her role as Honorary Consul and her position on the Himalayan Trust. I am pleased that her long years of willing service have been recognised in this way," McDonald said.

Hillary himself described Hawley as "a most remarkable person" and "a woman of great courage and determination".

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the ascent of Mount Everest, New Zealand increased its support for the Himalayan Trust to \$420,000. New Zealand has also pledged \$1.5 million for poverty reduction programs in Nepal through UNDP and UNICEF.

Hawley is known internationally as the 'walking encyclopedia of Himalayan mountaineering'. When she first arrived in Nepal in 1959 as a young journalist, she never thought she would stay so long. She was the Kathmandu-based correspondent for Reuters and Time, and covered mainly the mountaineering expeditions. Hawley's database of mountaineering is the product of a lifetime of meticulous interviews, reporting and data collection.

Tibetan leader dead

An era of Tibetan history came to an end this week with the death at age 91 of Dorje Wangdak Dongtotsang in Kathmandu.

The elected ruler and resistance leader of Kham in eastern Tibet, Dorje twice escorted the Dalai Lama out of the country to safety in India at great personal risk. Immortalised in such movies as *Kundun* and *Seven Years in Tibet*, he had led a quiet and reflective life in Nepal as head of an extensive family, honoured for his unfailing kindness and understanding despite the loss of his beloved country which stayed in his heart until the end. Dorje was cremated at daybreak on Tuesday at Swyambhunath at a function attended by 550 monks and nuns.

King to inaugurate Kali Gandaki

King Gyanendra is set to inaugurate Nepal's biggest hydroelectric project, the 144 MW Kali Gandaki A, on 22 January according to officials. The inauguration had been postponed earlier because of a lingering controversy over an unauthorised payment of cost overruns by the Nepal Electricity Authority to the project's Italian civil contractor. President Tadao Chino of the Asian Development Bank, which financed the \$428 million project, will now not be able to attend because the new dates are not suitable. The royal palace communication secretariat, however, said it did not know about the inauguration. "We have not been informed about it," said an official. The palace had sought details of the cost overruns last year (see: Nepali Times#166).

Business visas for non-businessmen

Foreigners staying in Nepal use the investment loophole for long-term visas.

DEWAN RAI

When the government introduced new business visa regulations in 1992, there was a great deal of optimism that the new rule would encourage foreign investors to flock to Nepal.

The Foreign Investment and Technology Transfer Act allowed foreigners to have 100 percent share equity in selected sectors and simplified visa procedures for such companies. There is no minimum limit for investors in Nepal, and those approved are eligible for incentives, including the business visa provision. For the first few years, the act helped boost foreign investment in hydropower, manufacturing and the tourism in Nepal.

Today, the act and the easier visa processing that went with it have become loopholes for spurious investors and fly-by-night operators to obtain longterm business visas. Even though foreign investment is at an all time low, an investigation of the paperwork at the Department of Industries showed that 50 new foreign investment ventures had been registered in the last eight months and investors had availed themselves of business visas. Most of these are restaurants, but there are also agro-based industries, IT companies, garment industries and language institutes.

questionable foreigners or non-investors.

At the Department of Immigration we were told that the office is just a clearing house, and it is duty-bound to issue a visa if the Department of Industries recommends someone. "We produce all non-tourist visas on the recommendation of the concerned department, we do not investigate every application, only if they are suspicious," says Khum Raj Punjali, director of the Department of Immigration. However, other junior officials admit that many of the business visa applicants are actually "suspicious" and most have no intention of investing in Nepal.

The immigration office issues eight kinds of visas: diplomatic, official, tourist, non-tourist, study, business, residential and non-residential. According to present provisions, a tourist visa can be granted for a maximum of 150 days in a year, whereas a non-tourist visa can be extended for as long as required, provided the person produces plausible reasons for renewal.

A business visa is different from a non-tourist visa because foreign investors or their dependants can get a one year visa during the start-up phase of their venture, and for five years after the investment is set up. It allows multiple entry into

To be sure, a business visa is a long and tedious process where the applicant has to go to several ministries for clearance before immigration puts the stamp on the passport. Still, it can all be done for cash paid slyly under the right table, and there are always 'facilitators' who know the process and can be hired for the job. In the end, what happens is that the investors doesn't really invest in Nepal at all.

Our investigations show that out of the 2,456 non-tourist visas issued lat year, 291 were business visas and most of them are not genuine foreign investments. For example, only half of the 850 foreign investment ventures registered with the Department of Industries are still functioning.

One such is a Korean-Nepali joint venture Konep Craft with an authorised capital of Rs 10 million which was supposed to produce 100,000 pieces of readymade garments a year for export. The industry was never opened. The Income Tax Office has record of the company's registration, but there are no balance sheets with profit-loss statements. Yet, the Department of Industry never deemed it necessary to investigate the applicant. Our own efforts to track down the factory in Sitapaila or call the phone number showed it was never established.

Still, Konep Craft's Korean investor got his business visa extended twice by the Foreign Investment Section of the Department of Industries. "It was a difficult case, we knew it was just a trick to get a business visa," one ministry clerk admitted to us on condition of anonymity. After finding out he was talking to a journalist, the clerk added guardedly: "I am only small fry in this office, I don't know much and shouldn't speak about these matters."

There is an unnecessary shroud of secrecy about business visa renewals at concerned government departments, which seems puzzling. But clerks speak in hushed tones of phones calls and secretive meetings after office hours preceding the renewal of visas. When we asked section officer Sushil Dhakal at the Department of Immigration how a foreign investor who had never set up the industry he was given permission for was getting his business visa renewed every year, he appeared at first defensive, and then offensive.

"Our job is to recommend a business visa if the file meets relevant requirements for foreign investors," he said testily. "I don't know anymore. I have told you as much as I know." ●

(Khoj Patrakarita Kendra)



Nepal with a fee of only \$100 for the first year and \$250 for five years.

The reason non-genuine investors opt for business visas is not only because they don't have to worry about it for five years, but also because it turns out to be cheaper than a non-tourist visa which costs \$60 a month for the first year and \$100 a month after that. "This is obviously why some people prefer business visas," admitted HIRAKAJI Shrestha at the Department of Immigration.

The fact that there is no minimum investment threshold, and it is relatively cheap to register a foreign investment makes it easy for those who want to side-step the law. And no one really seems to check whether they have actually set up an industry, paid their taxes, or even if they have registered.

However, officials interviewed for this article in various government ministries admitted that business visas are being grossly misused by some foreigners who have no intention of investing in Nepal, but bribe officials to obtain multiple-entry longterm business visas.

The 1994 Immigration Regulation Act forbids investors from starting a business other than the one that they get their visas for, and the Immigration Office has the authority to expel anyone found guilty of being involved in wrongdoing. However, no one in the ministries remembers anyone being deported for investment irregularities even when officials admitted to us that "many" of the investment visas went to



COMMENT
Praful Bidwai

The World Social Forum, to be held in the southern Indian city of Mumbai between 16-21 January could not have been convened at a more different place from Porto Alegre in Brazil, its venue for the three years since 2001. Porto Alegre is in a province of Brazil ruled by the progressive Workers' Party, as much a forward-looking popular social movement as a political organisation contesting elections, whose leader is now that country's president. Mumbai, India's financial capital, with its gleaming chrome-and-glass buildings generates more than a fourth of the country's direct tax revenue. But two-thirds of Mumbai's people live in shantytowns. In some ways this is a microcosm of India, although its urban existence bears sharp contrast to the rest of

the country, 70 percent of which is rural. Mumbai's—and India's—reality gives the lie to the Indian government's claim that globalisation, along with privatisation and deregulation, has transformed the conditions of life of the people for the better and holds the key to genuine development and progress. The government has been tom-tomming the achievements of its neoliberal economic policies through a series of advertisements entitled 'India Shining'. They are part of propaganda by the ruling coalition before a probable early parliamentary election around April. It celebrates India's "gains" and "brilliant achievements"—seven percent growth rate in GDP, rising stock prices, lower interest rates, a boom in information technology, a tripling of the number of cellular phone lines in two years, construction of new highways.

All these claims are suspect or downright meaningless from the point of view of the people. High share prices carry no relevance for the majority: less than 60 million out of India's one billion people own stocks and shares. Low interest rates are part of a new deflationary regime in India. Deflation is likely to reduce wage incomes, weaken indigenous industrial capabilities and impoverish the economy. All of India's new highways are being built as toll roads, which will raise the costs of transportation while unjustly rewarding contractors. The expansion of the cellular phone market, undoubtedly impressive, is taking place at the expense of access by the majority to basic phone lines: less than five out of 100 Indians have a simple land line. As for the IT boom, India is producing lots of "cyber-coolies", low-wage, sweatshop workers at the lowest end of the value-

Japan to cut UN aid



THALIF DEEN in NEW YORK

Faced with an increase in its mandatory contributions to the 2004-05 UN budget, Japan plans to cut voluntary contributions to more than a dozen UN agencies and humanitarian organisations worldwide. The reduction, in some cases, would be 100 percent, warned Shinichi Yamanaka of the Japanese Mission to the United Nations. Since Japan's fiscal year begins in April, the final figures will be determined only by the end of March. Last month, the UN budgetary committee approved annual spending that hit the \$3 billion mark for the first

time in the history of the 191-member world body. That 2004-05 budget represents a nominal increase of \$270 million over the previous year's budget of \$2.89 billion, Warren Sach, director of the agency's program planning and budget division, said last month. "In real terms," he added, "the budget, however, remains at the same level, as the \$270 million difference had resulted from currency and inflation adjustments." But Japan thinks otherwise. Yamanaka said Tokyo's contribution to the 2003-04 UN budget was \$263.5 million but it rose to \$279.4 million in the current fiscal year—an increase of \$15.9 million. During the budget debate last month Yamanaka said, "The amount that my government can pay is not unlimited. One should also understand that the sharp increase in the assessments for the Japanese government directly translates into lesser amounts that my government could allocate to voluntary contributions to development and humanitarian international organizations." The five major contributors to the UN's regular budget are the United States, which pays 22 percent of the budget, Japan (19.5 percent), Germany (9.8 percent), France (6.5 percent) and Britain (5.5 percent). Last year, US dues amounted to \$341.5 million, followed by Japan \$263.5 million, Germany \$131.9 million, France \$87.3 million and Britain \$74.7 million. According to several Asian diplomats, Japan is both angry and frustrated because it believes it does not get enough "bang for its buck" compared to other contributors to the UN budget. With the exception of the United States, the remaining permanent members of the Security Council—France, Britain, Russia and China pay much less than Japan. Japan has also continued to complain that it has far fewer high-ranking jobs in the UN system compared to Western nations or permanent members of the Security Council. ● (IPS)

Dark spots

Taking a closer look at 'Shining India' during the World Social Forum meeting in Mumbai this week.

addition chain. Two sobering thoughts are in order: IT accounts for under two percent of India's national income. The fastest growing sector is call centres, where young people work 12 to 14-hour shifts for \$150 a month, only to reach a career dead end. However, what of the claimed high GDP growth? India's average growth rate in the past three years has been its lowest in a decade. Ironically, India's organised-sector workforce shed 420,000 jobs in 2001-02, and now accounts for just 7 percent of total employment in India. Today, it has 910,000 fewer jobs than in 1997. So much for 'India

Shining'! The fall has not been made up by the unorganised or informal sector, where total employment has risen by a mere one percent a year over the past decade. Over the past 15 years or so, annual employment growth in India has decreased from 2.7 percent to just 1.1 percent. There are other distressing figures that tell Indian reality better: appalling stagnation in health, nutrition and education indicators. India now lags behind Bangladesh in primary education access, fallen from 124 to 127 in the UN Human Development Index. And 35 percent live below one dollar a day. ● (IPS)

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You can't nuke terrorists

UNITED

Dianne Feinstein



With the world's focus on the debate over Iraq, the war on terror and the Bush administration's doctrine of unilateral preemption, the American government's new emphasis on the utility of nuclear weapons has not received the attention it deserves. This is unfortunate, as this exploration of new uses for nuclear weapons represents a revolutionary shift in US national security policy.

Today, the world faces unprecedented challenges at the nexus of terror and weapons of mass destruction. With both North Korea and Iran openly pursuing nuclear ambitions and a potential nuclear arms race in South Asia, it is critical that America provide leadership, in both word and in deed, to reduce the risks and the role of nuclear weapons throughout the world.

The Bush administration seems intent on doing just the opposite. Many of the actions of the American administration, and much of the US government's rhetoric, may actually be increasing the threat from nuclear weapons rather than making the world safer. The Bush administration's January 2002 Nuclear Posture Review signaled a major change in US nuclear policy by advancing a new triad that

America's nuclear weapons program may promote the very proliferation it seeks to prevent.



US NAVY FILE

integrates nuclear weapons with conventional strike options and blurring the line between the use of conventional and nuclear weapons. It also specified scenarios in which the US might use nuclear weapons first, even against non-nuclear states, and called for a new generation of US nuclear warheads, including low yield or so-called "mini-nukes".

The US has never had a no-first-strike policy, but it has likewise never had a policy such as that embodied in the Nuclear Policy Review. Today, under the terms of the ideas set out in that review, the US contemplates the first use of nuclear weapons, and seeks to

integrate tactical battlefield nuclear weapons alongside conventional munitions. Despite efforts to downplay the significance of the Nuclear Posture Review since its publication, it remains, in my view, extremely provocative and dangerous.

Yet, there should be no doubt that the Bush administration is beginning the research and development of new nuclear weapons. Just this year, a 10-year-old ban on the research and development of nuclear weapons below five kilotons was eliminated. Pushed by the Bush administration, Congress authorized \$21 million for the study and development of new nuclear weapons,

including a 100-kiloton bunker buster, as well as tactical battlefield nuclear weapons. Moreover, the time to test readiness of the Nevada test site has been moved up from three years to two years, and funding has been provided to produce additional fissile material for new nuclear weapons.

I argued and voted against these new nuclear initiatives in the US Senate earlier this year. Clearly, the nuclear door is being reopened. For, by taking the steps called for in the Nuclear Posture Review, the Bush administration is lowering the threshold for the possible use of nuclear weapons by the US or other

countries. This approach is not in America's national interest, nor is it consistent with American traditions and values. A first-use of nuclear weapons by the US should be unthinkable, and responding to a non-nuclear attack with nuclear weapons violates a central tenet of just war and US military tradition.

So, if the US develops nuclear weapons that blur the distinction between conventional and nuclear forces, the message this sends to the rest of the world must be considered. Both India and Pakistan are nuclear powers, and the history of bloody warfare between them presents a major and ongoing security threat to South Asia. If either country adhered to the thinking embodied in the Bush administration's new nuclear policy, there would be little reason for each not to seek to integrate nuclear weapons even more deeply into their own contingency plans—and possibly use them.

At a time when the US brands as "evil" certain countries based, in part, on their pursuit of nuclear arms and weapons of mass destruction, it must be especially careful in how it considers its own options and contingencies regarding nuclear weapons. If the US is not careful, our own new nuclear posture could provoke the very nuclear-proliferation activities we are seeking to prevent. ● (© Project Syndicate)

Dianne Feinstein is the Democratic Senator from California.

Vegetarian cows don't go mad

RIO DE JANEIRO - In an era of mad cow disease, the ability to certify that your cattle are purely vegetarian constitutes an indispensable weapon for beef exporters like Brazil. Brazil's farm researchers have developed a fast, effective method to detect the presence of animal protein in livestock feed. It benefited from the lengthy drought that devastated cattle producers in Australia, becoming the world's biggest beef exporter, selling 1.3 million tons in 2003—30 percent more than in 2002. Brazil have also benefited from mad cow disease, or BSE, which first emerged in the 1980s among European cattle raised in feedlots and fed ration containing meat and bonemeal.

In Brazil and other South American countries, cattle are grass- and range-fed, and their diets are supplemented by feed made up exclusively of grains, which means they are considered immune to BSE. But that has not kept the country safe from the 'terrorism of rumours', such as the one that circulated in 2001 after Canadian authorities refused to rule out the presence of mad cow disease in Brazil.

To defend its growing exports of beef, Brazil decided to implement a national livestock tracing or cattle-tracking system, and to develop a method to monitor the ration fed to cattle, to ensure that it does not contain cattle or sheep by-products or other forms of animal protein. The new method allows the detection and identification of traces of animal protein within hours and the low cost of the test makes it easy to monitor the livestock feed produced by some 700 plants in Brazil by periodically analysing samples. ● (IPS)



After shock Three weeks later, Bam is picking up the pieces.

RAMIN MOSTAGHIM in BAM

"How much longer must our people suffer tragic disasters?" Hamid Birjandi asks, looking out at his hometown, this historic city in south-eastern Iran that has been left in ruins by the massive earthquake on 23 December.

Birjandi used to be a drug trafficker, running opium between Afghanistan and Pakistan. "Until five years ago, I was smuggling hundreds of kilos of opium to provide for my relatives to live decently, to study and marry. I have dug up the bodies of 30 of my relatives myself."

Last week, Birjandi was mourning beside the corpses of his relatives, when a motorcade bearing Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, rushed past. Someone nearby shouted: "The nation shall be sacrificed for the leader." Birjandi

remembers losing his temper and shouted: "No, sacrifice the leader for the nation."

"I was immediately surrounded by plainclothesmen, but after finding out that I was a prisoner of war and a war veteran, they let me go," Birjandi recalls. The incident highlights the frustration and trauma that has torn this historic town after the 6.7 magnitude earthquake.

The grief and tears are now mixed with anger and helplessness. The death toll is estimated at 50,000, but the true figure may never be known. More than 100,000 have been left homeless in a city where 90 percent of buildings were damaged or destroyed. Officially, less than 30,000 bodies have been dug up and buried in the Bam cemetery and mosque yard.

Survivors have to deal with the realities of life. That means focusing on trying to get the government to clear hundreds of tons of packed

dates now going rancid in collapsed storage areas, and the military to clear and dredge the irrigation canals for the palm groves of quake debris.

"If we get help, there is still a chance for a good harvest of dates in September," says Ali Haydarian, a 50-year-old owner of a one-acre palm grove in the quake-stricken village of Sifikan, north-east of Bam. Meantime, frustration is rising about the distribution of relief goods, even among Iranian volunteer workers.

One such worker asks a visiting reporter: "Do you journalists realise that none of the Russian, European and US relief ends up in the hands of the victims? The tents and clothes will be sold in Tehran's bazaar and the well-off will buy them." The general manager of the Iranian Red Crescent admitted in a newspaper interview that only seven percent of the dispatched tents were delivered in Bam. "The rest are missing," he said simply, hinting that the security forces who were supposed to hand out the tents took them.

"The government is behaving as if it were the first time it has seen an earthquake," says Abdulhassan Aslani, a businessman in Mashhad. "Iran is prone to earthquakes, but we don't have disaster preparedness." Indeed, there have been at least three major earthquakes in Iran after the Islamic revolution, but there isn't a rapid-reaction team, or sniffer dogs.

There had been warnings in Bam—a series of tremors throughout December that preceded the big one. Hamid Asgari, a shopkeeper is trying to retrieve what he can from the ruins of his shop to sell for food for his five children. Most people in have launched private relief drives for the victims of Bam.

But one thing there seems to be no shortage of in Bam is opium. Bibarg Shirifi is standing in a long queue for canned food. "For opium there is no queue," he says. "it's much easier to get than food." ● (IPS)

The vaccine divide

To the list of third world killer diseases, add one more: flu.

MARTY LOGAN in MONTREAL

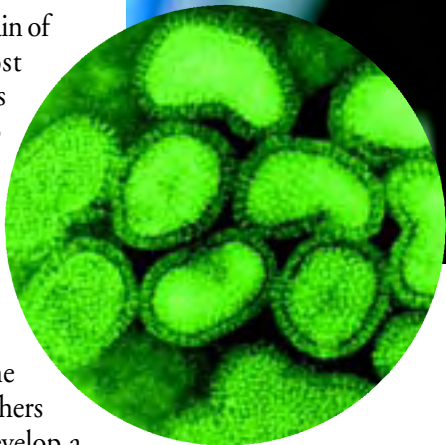
Even without SARS, there is an emerging threat of a worldwide flu epidemic. But developing countries are woefully unprepared to deal with it because the resources to fight the disease are concentrated in the rich countries.

“Our concern is that during an influenza pandemic, first, vaccines will not reach developing countries until developed countries have set aside their demand because vaccine-producing companies are there,” says Klaus Stohr, head of the WHO’s Geneva-based Global Influenza Programme. “Developing countries have not yet started with the other items that belong to pandemic preparedness, which include deciding whom to vaccinate first, how governments will allocate hospital and other medical resources, and developing treatment guidelines.”

While the Fujian strain of the flu is getting most attention this winter, it is the emergence of two avian (bird) flu strains that have experts worried. During outbreaks in 2003 each bird strain, one in Hong Kong and the other in the Netherlands, killed one person. To date, researchers have been unable to develop a vaccine against either variant and, unlike the Fujian version, no existing strains are similar enough to be used in a vaccine that would fight them.

“The only thing that has stood between us and a possible catastrophe is that the virus has not learned to transmit human to human,” said Robert Webster of the US-based St Jude Children’s Research Hospital. “That’s the only remaining step to be achieved.”

The last pandemic, the 1968-1969 Hong Kong Flu, killed an estimated 700,000 people worldwide. The next one could produce 650,000 deaths in less than



two years—in industrialised countries alone.

Countries outside of North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand accounted for 35 percent of the almost 233 million doses of influenza vaccine used in 2000. The main users included Russia, Japan, South Korea, Brazil, Argentina, Chile and Uruguay. Almost overwhelmingly, they purchased the vaccine from companies in Northern nations, which in 2000 produced 85 percent of the global vaccine supply. Those production figures have really not changed.

“Currently, China produces

around four million vaccine doses,” Stohr says. “But it’s a drop in the bucket.” But when a pandemic hits, that ‘bucket’ might be the only supply immediately available in the South, as all experts agree that developed countries will hoard (‘nationalise’) flu vaccine until they have treated their own citizens.

With just over 250 million doses now being produced worldwide, vaccinating the populations of industrialised nations could take a long time. Experts agree that a mechanism needs to be developed so that the inequities that will arise with the nationalisation of vaccine supply can be overcome. Researchers are also pushing for regulatory authorities to accept a new technique, called reverse

genetics, to produce vaccine strains. But it faces two main hurdles: what it produces is considered a genetically modified organism, which the EU does not permit, and the patent for the technique is held by one company: US-based MedImmune.

Stohr says the company is willing to discuss how it will be compensated

if reverse genetics is accepted for producing the virus strain in normal years—and to take a huge cut in compensation in the event of a pandemic—while EU officials are also open to talks. All sides will meet at the WHO in February, when plans are made for next season’s flu vaccine. ● (IPS)

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MIN BAJRACHARYA

Letter by Durga Pokhrel in *Space Time*, 9 January

स्वेसटाइम दैनिक

As the president of Nepal Student's Union in 1966, I went with my colleagues to meet BP Koirala. That was when the democracy movement launched by the Nepali Congress was gathering momentum. I clearly remember asking him one question: "What difference do you find between a leader and a king?" His reply is still fresh in mind. "A popularly elected leader has to go to the streets and should be prepared to receive both a bouquet of flowers as well as a garland of shoes. But a king never ventures into the streets and will never accept shoes."

What BP meant was so clear, and it comes in handy while analysing the present political situation. Just because a leader goes to the streets, it does not mean the king's machinery reaches there as well. The king, on the other hand, must resort to summoning the leader to ask why his effigy was garlanded with shoes and his face blackened.

The king has tried to smoothen ruffled feathers by giving the party leaders royal audiences. But of all the politicians only one, Pashupati SJB Rana, sounded positive after meeting the king. If BP had been given a royal audience, he would have taken full advantage of the opportunity. He would have taken further steps by giving new directions to his cadre. Some of the oldest party members like us are disappointed with both Girija and Deuba's statements after their meeting the king.

When BP was granted audience in 1971, would he have asked the king to return his premiership and reinstate parliament? Both Girijadaju and Deubaji failed to follow through on BP's political wisdom. They should have either gone to the king with a national agenda approved by the Nepali Congress or agreed on the seven-point agenda presented by the king and put forth clear ideas of what the Nepal Congress wants.

Girijadaju has to listen to me because I also spent my youth for the party. I was nearly martyred in 1976. Without comprehending your own mistakes and by only raising the issue of parliament, you have not only disappointed and upset your party activists but made them aggressive. Where is your interest in accepting ideas from the new and younger generation of congress workers?

Girijadaju should realise that Nepal's politics has advanced. As for Deubaji, he has to present his ideas clearly to the king as to what kind of difference he will make when he becomes a prime minister. The philosophy of maintaining the status quo will lead us nowhere. Girijadaju has to consider meeting the king once more. And this time he needs to reach a more collaborative conclusion.

"No stopping us"

Student union leader Rajendra Rai in *Gatibidhi*, 10 January

जतिविधि

Our movement has scaled new heights. It has already produced some results and forced regression to stoop. It was because of us that the regressive forces had to release three of our student leaders who were arrested on 16 December. The king is now meeting the leaders of political parties, which is also a result of our movement. We have succeeded in exerting pressure.

Many of our friends have been wounded. Many of them face legal charges. The army and the police have detained others. Security personnel killed a brother who had just returned from taking care of his hospitalised sister in Pokhara. We students are being killed in the name of controlling the Maoists. We are fighting for the reinstatement of democracy and for educational reforms.

We have the support of the people because they realise that the king betrayed the political parties in previous meetings. Now that such talks are taking place again, the movement is not about to lose momentum. Our leaders' dialogue with the king should not have any negative effect on our struggle. If the political parties decide to end the movement without attaining the goals for which there has been so much of bloodshed, they will suffer. But we believe that the parties will never make such a move.

The movement began with demands for the restoration of parliament or the formation of an-all party government. Since the king has not acceded to these demands, the present movement will not stop even if there is an all-party government. The king and the political parties must understand this. There have to



be some changes in the constitution ensuring that power is restored to the people permanently.

Some goals are attained in the long-run. Some have been campaigning for constitutional monarchy but we think that concept needs to be overhauled. After all, the monarch is responsible for reversing Nepal's democracy time and again. It is unreasonable to think Nepal needs to keep a constitutional monarch. Today, we may need a king, but the political parties must begin to think of ultimately moving away from a monarchy. We may not be able to unseat the king, but we will be satisfied if his powers are curtailed and democracy restored.

For our eyes

Annapurna Post, 12 January

अन्नपूर्ण पोष्ट

Finding eye donors is becoming difficult as the death of potential donors is not reported on time to the eye banks, creating problems for the eye donation program. The cornea has to be transplanted within six hours after a donor's death, but most of the time, family members are too grief-stricken to report the demise on time. "One person can open up a new world for two blind people," says Bhola Prasad KC, committee member of the eye donation program. He

encouraged the families of potential donors to inform the eye bank and hospital sooner so that the donor's wishes would not go to waste. He also added that the families should be aware of caring for the dead person's eyes by covering it so that dust and other waste materials does not contaminate it.

At present, there are 27,470 persons willing to donate their eyes after death. Till date, only about 2,348 blind people were lucky to have their vision back. The largest cause of blindness in Nepal is due to cataracts.

Living like Laxmi

Nepal Samachapatra, 13 January

नेपाल समाचारपत्र

As if having a beard and moustache was not bad enough, 16-year-old Laxmi Shrestha of Tanahu also has to deal with teeth that fall off and grow back every year. While the psychological pain of being different from other girls has always been difficult, Laxmi also has problems eating. The ninth-grader also does not have the luxury of staying at home, she runs a tea-shop—the only source of income for her mother and a brother. Laxmi's case is of interest to medical researchers, who say they can't make any conclusions or suggest antidotes



KIRAN PANDEY



Roadmap.

हिमाल

Robin Sayami in *Himal Khabarpatrika*, 15-30 January

QUOTE OF THE WEEK



"The five party alliance is only trying to get the king to restore democracy. We are not out to replace the monarchy with a republic."

— Bam Dev Gautam in *Himal Khabarpatrika*, 15-30 January

without further study.

Kathmandu dentist Sushil Koirala has offered free treatment in Kathmandu if someone offers to pay for her food and accommodation. Laxmi's mother is distraught. "Her life has been very painful," she says. "When she was born, people thought she was a freak." Laxmi herself is a girl of few words. She scours her library for poetry, occasionally writing some herself but is reluctant to share her work with anyone. Laxmi has never dared to dream that she would ever be 'normal'. All she wants out of life is to buy a sewing machine: "I want to make clothes and earn my living."

Help promised

Gorkhapatra, 10 January

The government has decided to form a separate commission to protect the rights of the physically handicapped after negotiations with representatives of the National Handicapped Association. Members had carried out protests demanding better facilities. Chairman Babu Krishna Maharjan confirmed that the

government has agreed to alter its appointment of a physically-able person in the Disabled Assistance Fund. There are 2.4 million physically disabled population in the country. Kiran Silpakar, general secretary of the association also said that the government had agreed to reserve five percent quota for physically disabled persons in education and health services. (Nepalnews.com Translation Service)

GPS

Rajdhani, 10 January

Satellite GPS have been installed in six airports, including Kathmandu to augment air traffic control and will soon be extended to all airports in the country. Presently, airports in Biratnagar, Bhairahawa, Janakpur, Bharatpur and Nepalgunj airports have GPS guidance. V-Sat services are also being installed in airports in western Nepal. "We take seriously the act of enhancing the standard of the airports," says Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation Sarbendra Nath Shukla. (Nepalnews.com Translation Service)

Shut down

Kantipur, 12 January

BHOJPUR – After VDCs stopped financial assistance, 70 schools in the district run by communities are about to shut down. More than 24,000 students will be affected. The Local Development Ministry directed VDCs not to spend the budget for education. Through the Social Security Directives, the Ministry advised local bodies to spend the development budget only on productive activities with immediate results in a short time span. It strictly advised no expenditures on allowances, teachers' salaries, etc. Out of all the community-handled schools, only 10 are run through internal resources. After VDCs stopped paying, 150 teachers have not received salaries in the last six months. The Thotneri Proposed Lower Secondary School at Kulung VDC used to receive Rs 72,000 every year. "This year we haven't gotten a paisa and the four teachers here haven't been paid at all," says principal Dal Bahadur Giri. (Nepalnews.com Translation Service)

Student suicide

Rajdhani, 11 January

"My son was so scared of the police that he killed himself," says the bedridden mother of Naresh Maharjan, a 17-year old schoolboy who recently committed suicide to avoid police arrest. Two years ago, Naresh was detained for three months on suspicion of being a Maoist. He was blindfolded all the time and tortured to get him to reveal the names of Maoist acquaintances. "After all that time blindfolded, his eyes became so weak that he had to start wearing spectacles," says Babita, his sister.

For the last two years, Naresh had been living under severe mental stress. Recently, when police said they were coming to arrest him again, Naresh could not bear the trauma and decided to kill himself. On 9 January, his family found him lying on the bed writhing with pain. They desperately tried to save him, but he died on the way to Patan Hospital.

His best friend Durgadutta Lamsal never thought Naresh would end up like this. "He was a brilliant student and a favourite among his friends," says Durgadutta. He remembers Naresh always asking himself what he had done wrong to merit so much hatred from the police. "He was a very nice person and I don't think he was ever involved with the Maoists."

Keeping a stiff upper lip, and reluctant to make his family worry, Naresh kept quiet about his torture. "He was afraid that our mother would worry too much," says sister Nanda Kumari. The police had come in civil dress and refused to show their identity cards. While addressing this concern to the district police office, police inspector Kushbahadur Thapa denied involvement. "The police would never conceal their identity card while arresting someone," said Thapa who added that it is also against the law to blindfold someone for long periods. Naresh was studying in grade 10 at Jansewa Secondary School in Kirtipur.



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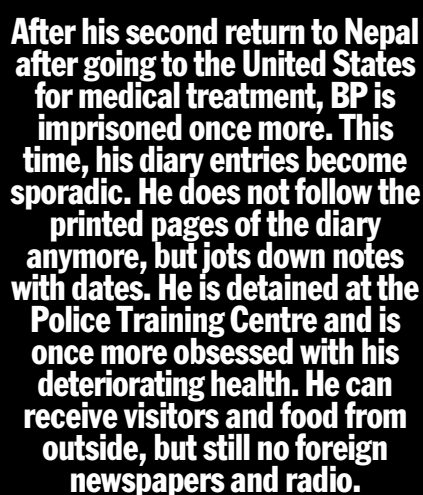
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“I am at the king’s disposal”



Dr Gangol and Dr Laxmi Narayan saw me today. My BP 110/60. My voice has developed hoarseness to a great degree than when I arrived here. It is contrary to the expectation that I will regain my old voice gradually. Hence a matter of concern. Left vocal chord is stationary, the right one is working but is being overworked.

by **CK LAL**

Nostalgia revisited

Journey to Mustang 1952
Giuseppe Tucci
Translated from Italian by Diana
Fussell, edited by HK Kuloy
Bibliotheca Himalayica,
Series I Volume 23,
Second Edition, Revised, 2003
Published by Ratna Pustak
Bhandar, Kathmandu



Always wanted totake up golf? Here is a beginner's guide.

Getting started

With my 22 years of golfing experience in Nepal, I find that generally people are quite puzzled about how to start playing golf. Reasons for this include the belief that it is an elitist game, that it will cost too much, take up too much time, the equipment is too expensive, membership is exclusive and "It is an old man's game, so why should I start now? I'll wait till I retire!"

TEE BREAK
Deepak Acharya



I have found that almost all golfers here develop an interest in the game through their friends and relatives who are already golfers.

Very few start on their own initiative. Perhaps this has to do with the lack of awareness of what golf really is all about and how to get introduced to available golfing clubs and facilities.

In general, golf is a recreational sport that can be enjoyed from youth up to a ripe old age. Though not fast-paced, it still requires a degree of fitness to play the game socially. You have to walk fairly briskly for over 8 km every four-hour round you play, and doing this regularly definitely makes you fitter.

Though golf is still not available throughout Nepal, we do have nine facilities in four cities: four in Kathmandu, three in Pokhara, and one each in Dharan and Nawalparasi.

Golf can be learnt in all these places. The two driving ranges (one in Pokhara and the other in Kathmandu) are built to help those already playing to improve, and encourage newcomers to start the game. The golf courses all have their own driving or practice facilities with dedicated golf professionals to teach the game.

To learn golf quickly and properly, one needs to take professional coaching. If not, progress is slow and bad habits develop, which can later be very difficult to correct. Additionally, the game has comprehensive rules and etiquette which you are expected to know and follow. The basics of these are taught during golf lessons.

All you really need to start playing golf are a pair of sports shoes, comfortable clothes and, if your hands are a little soft from inactivity, you may require a golf glove which is can be bought at the golf practice facilities. Next is a quick phone call to one of the golf instructors at a golfing facility. Make an appointment for your first one-hour lesson, and show up on time. That's it!

Usually included in the cost of the lesson, which will be around the Rs 500 range, the instructor will provide the golf clubs and practice balls. You may be surprised at how "not easy" and how tired you are after just an hour of practice of this so-called "old man's game".

No more reasons for procrastinating. Get out into the bright sunshine, clean air, and take up a sport that brings you in touch with nature and yourself. ●

Kathmandu

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Gokarna Forest Golf Resort – Pros are Deepak Acharya and Pashupati Sharma (01 445 0444/1212) www.gokarna.com
Army Golf Club (9 holes - private) – Pro is Ghana Shyam Thapa (01 4491761) ghanagolf@yahoo.com
Bafal Driving Range – Raj Pradhan (01 4278860)

Pokhara

Pokhara Golf School – Gyan Kaji Gurung (061 526539)
Himalayan Golf Club – Bhuban Gurung (061 521882 / 986021150) himgolf@fewanet.com.np
Yeti Golf Club at Fulbari Hotel – Roop Lama, pro is Deepak Neupane (061 523451) www.fulbari.com

Dharan

Nirvana Country Club – pro is Deoraj Pakrin (025 526801/802) www.nirvanacountryclub.com

Narayanghat

Chaudhary Group Golf Club - pro is Ghanashyam Thapa (078-529508 / 522) cug@chaudharygroup.com

Ask students in the Valley about their favourite sport and chances are you won't hear cricket or soccer. Basketball has caught the imagination of the urban youth like never before.

Basketball actually came into Nepal about 30 years ago, but it has flourished only in the last 10 years, making it a relatively new sport. As with cricket, the popularity of basketball has gone hand in hand with the spread of cable TV. American basketball team t-shirts and legends like Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson became the new icons in the early 1990s.

The popularity of the game can be measured by the number of tournaments held in Kathmandu. Last year saw unprecedented rise in tourneys: two or three inter-college competitions every month with more than two dozen teams participating. Recently, the Nepal Basket Association (NeBA) held its National Basket Championship, and before that one concluded another hosted by Don Bosco had begun.

Helga Rana Rayamajhi, NeBA member, says, "We must thank schools which have done a tremendous job in popularising this game, they created the base." At Kathmandu University, everybody loves basketball. Student Anuroop Manandhar (who is 6ft 4in) says, "It's fast-paced and you're totally involved while playing."

Last year 10 schools had basketball tournaments in almost all categories. Ramesh Silwal of Himalayan White House College says, "We don't have enough space for football or cricket but a basketball court doesn't need a large area which is why it got priority." In a city where land is scarce, this factor has certainly helped the game.

A few years ago, Lincoln School, St Xavier's and Budhanilkantha were among the top three in all tournament finals. Now Gyanodaya, Himalayan White House, Prime College, Bhanubhakta School, Apex College as well as Godavari Alumni Association have been promoting

Slam dunk

Basketball is taking Kathmandu youth by storm.

MUKUL HUMAGAIN

the game. After Gyanodaya Balbatika included basketball in its yearly sports program, Gyan Carnival, in 1994, other schools have followed suit.

NeBA and Gyanodaya are jointly organising the Gyan Carnival as a national level event. PABSON, Rhododendron International Boarding School, Milan Vidhya Mandir, Reliance International Academy, and Trungram International Academy have all had their first tournaments.

In 2003, the RIBS boys school team ruled, winning six titles including the 10th Gyan Carnival and PABSON Crown Prince Birthday Cup. Gyanodaya and the

Alphas proved themselves strongest among the girls' school teams.

Basketball has undergone a cultural transformation in Nepal. Once a game thought to be exclusively for 'rich kids', it is now becoming popular in urban areas outside Kathmandu as well. At the recently concluded national championships there were five teams from outside the Valley, and Dharan hosted the Eastern Region Inter-school tournament. Rayamajhi says: "We're trying to promote the game in other parts of Nepal and five new district associations are going to be formed in near future."

The story of Nepali teams in international tourneys is not as encouraging. The squad that went to the Middle Asia zone qualifying round of the Asian Basketball Championship returned with their confidence shattered after coming in fifth in the five-nation league. The national team finished third at the inaugural SAARC Men's Basketball Championship in 2001. We are moving forward, but not fast enough.

Another major drawback for

Nepali players is their height. NBA has recently started free training for players taller than 6ft 2in. Five players have already joined and all of them are from outside the Valley. They also hired US coach Bill Warner for the SAF Championship. Enthusiasts believe it is just a matter of time and effort before Nepal is a force in international basketball, especially with the new crop of dedicated players. Bijendra Maharjan, captain of the national team, says, "It may take 20-30 years but we should start now." ●



KIRAN PANDEY

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This year's fog in the tarai is not as bad as last year and usually lifts by afternoon. In this satellite picture taken on Thursday morning, we see an extensive fog right across the Ganga plains and another one in the Brahmaputra basin. Looming over the horizon is a massive westerly frontal system stretching all the way from Lake Victoria to Central Asia which is likely to bring overcast skies over the weekend with the chances of drizzles and snow flurries in the central and western hills. More misty mornings with frost mornings and maximum temperatures below 20 for Kathmandu Valley.

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Chameli is a new entrant in a marquee of night culture films. Directed by Sudhin 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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HAPPENINGS



KIRAN PANDEY

HALL OF FAME: Patan's famous Ashok Cinema, which got a facelift and has been converted into a modern convention hall, was inaugurated on Thursday.



ANUP PRAKASH

AND THE WINNER IS: Director Ujwal Ghimire holding aloft his Dabur Anmol Motion Picture Award on Saturday at the BICC for his film, *Biswas*.



KIRAN PANDEY

YAM BETWEEN STONES: The eve of the first day of Magh on Wednesday saw brisk sales of traditional food items, including yams on Kathmandu sidewalks.



KIRAN PANDEY

PLAINCLOTHES: Plainclothes security personnel wrestling down student protesters on the streets on Monday in Kathmandu.



KUNDA DIXIT

TRASHY AIRPORT: Two armed police guards walk past a refuse dump outside the Pokhara airport terminal building recently.

NEPALI SOCIETY

Bobby's heartbeat

His eyes bright with excitement, Manohar (Bobby) Gurung calls out the eight beat cycle, or *adhithalam*: "Tha-ki-ta-ki-ta-tha-ka-tha-ri-ki-ta-tha-ka". With his hands, he plays out this vocal percussion on his thighs as he would on the *ghatam*. Strong and rhythmical, it is one more percussion instrument to add to his repertoire.

Drums were Bobby's hobby since school days. He played the *madal* during bhajans at home at home or the tabla while his sister danced Bharatnatyam for the school. Gradually, he picked up the jembe, conga, damphu, almost anything with a skin framed over it. And if no drum was in sight, he'd play a beat on the table with his hands while his mother sang.

But Bobby's mother thought all this was taking him away from his studies. So, through college, he continued to play drums for functions or at home, never daring to dream he could take it up as a profession. Studying for an MBA in UK for a year in 1996, Bobby got bored with studies. "It became monotonous, there was no rhythm in it," he recalls, almost painfully. Bobby found places where he could listen to drums



SUSAN SELLERS

from all over the world and found London was a great place to perform. Soon Booby made friends who shared his passion and encouraged him to play. He even co-recorded an album, *Bazaar in a Nutshell*.

After seeing how music therapy could be used to help children with disabilities, Bobby decided he would be a drummer.

Back in Kathmandu, he has performed with 1974AD and Sitapati. He learned the ghatam, an earthen pot used in classical Carnatic music in south India. When Pandit Vikku Vinayakam performed in Kathmandu in 2003, Bobby was in raptures and was invited to Chennai by the master. He trained intensely with Pandit Vikku and his son TV Umashankar and has returned to Nepal to spread the sound of the ghatam.

It is hard work: Bobby practices eight hours a day, fingers turning black and blue with practice. He has chosen to specialise in the Manamadriini ghatam which is fired with five elements and is harder than the Madrasi ghatam. "The harder you hit the ghatam, the more painful. The more painful, the more beautiful the sound," Bobby explains.

Bobby has introduced a drum circle every Tuesday at Moksh in Jawalakhel. He also hopes to do more music therapy. But his dream is to have a Carnatic music school in Nepal. For now, he just wants the ghatam to be known in Nepal.

"Our rhythm is already inside us," Bobby says. "Each of us has a heartbeat. I can feel that rhythm." ●

(Sraddha Basnyat)

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