Bepatta

Relatives of Nepal’s disappeared bear unending pain

In Kawasaki, Belati Khurla has nothing left to feed her family. Groups of Maoists keep coming by and there is nothing left. “They threaten to kill my husband and children if we don’t feed them,” Belati says. “The next day the soldiers come and harass and abuse us. Sometimes they are worse than the Maoists.”

Prem Bahadur Karki used to be vice-chairman of Durbar VDC near here, and says every household has at least one disappeared member. “This is new kind of terror for us.”

“This families live in dread of armed gangs that roam the village at night.”

The villagers can’t tell whether the armed men are soldiers or Maoists. “Their uniforms are similar,” says Dhawari Pande, ex-DCD chairman. So is the method: the midnight knock on the door, a sleeping husband or son dragged off into the darkness by armed men, causing a desperate search, the lack of answers.

Next week in Geneva, at the UN Commission on Human Rights, the spotlight will be on Nepal in a debate expected to be initiated by the Swiss government. Both the Maoists and the government are sure to be censured for atrocities.
Many little steps

The abortion bill was a giant leap, but many more small steps are needed to make motherhood safe

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riest advocacy efforts by women’s reproductive rights activists and strong research findings eventually convinced the government to reform Nepal’s abortion laws two years ago. The challenges in coming years will be different: disseminating information about the new law and about safe abortion to women, health workers, advocates, law enforcement officials and politicians. We have taken one giant leap toward saving thousands of women from unsafe abortions in Nepal each year, but many more little steps still need to be taken to begin improving the maternal mortality crisis in Nepal.”

Re: ‘No more circling’

The CC are only using serious political means to stop the invisible hand of the economy will continue to drive society. To portray these issues in existentialist terms: when people are driven to desperation, they may resort to violent or criminal means to seek their own survival. This is a warning to the government and to all who have a stake in the future of Nepal. It is a call to action for those who believe in human rights and the principles of democracy and social justice.

10,000+ there can be no doubt that the Maoists have engaged in gross human rights violations such as disappearances, torture, rape and murder. The CC is a well-organized and disciplined group that drove the Maoists to revolution in the first place. To place the Maoists’ human rights violations, evildoing and doctrinal squabbles aside as they are, in perspective is to realize that the rural poor who constitute the Maoist cadres is a thousand times more sinned against than sinning.

Sandip Mishra, Kathmandu

● On what basis can the Maoists call this a people’s war? How will it affect their revolution by squeezing the poorest of the poor with their bandas and blockades? Tourism and businesses are now in the verge of extinction. Why are political parties playing parties and not trying to find a solution? It is time for the leaders of all the political forces to rescue the country before it is too late.

Bishal Piya, Kirpur

CHARITREHAN SIKOLOGIE In their manifesto ‘Women in a double bind’ (1987), the Charitrehen Chelis (CC) seem to want their personal freedom but are using societal issues to give it an aura of objectivity and judicious concern toward society. Why? 1. The CC are most likely some well-educated women from Kathmandu who can afford to go to discos and drink and dine out regularly. They obviously do not have economic constraints, and therefore don’t represent the majority of Nepali people, let alone Nepali women. Their only worry seems to be a culture of consumerism, minimum supplies of cotton wool and IV fluids in far-flung health posts, bills passed in Kathmandu will have little impact. While the Ministry of Health takes its time to draw criteria for abortions in hospitals, illegal abortions in hospitals, and unsafe and costly operations by private providers continue:

It was late in the afternoon at a rural health camp in western Nepal last year when a woman came in hystericly. She looked uncomfortable and unsure. I was used to this, most women have never spoken about their intimate health problems with anyone. “I am pregnant,” she told the nurse, who asked her if she wanted to maintain.

“No,” said the woman, more loudly this time and meeting the health worker’s eyes. “I want you to help me get rid of it.”

The nurse explained that it was illegal. The woman turned to me and said: “But I heard that the government passed a law saying abortions could be done in Kathmandu.”

“That is definitely not true,” the health worker told her abruptly. The woman looked crestfallen. For a moment I was unsure who to deal with first, the patient or the health worker. I heard it on the radio,” the woman said. “Isn’t true?” I told her she was partly right. Parliament has passed the bill, but it still needs the king’s approval. It is a formality, but we can legally perform abortions until March 25.

She was downcast as she left the clinic without another word. The sadness in her eyes haunted me and I hoped that she wouldn’t resort to the illegal and untrained quack to terminate her pregnancy and put her life in danger.

The nurse turned to me once more: “We: health workers don’t know anything about making abortion legal. We knew there was a discussion going on in Kathmandu, but no one ever told us the law was passed.”

Having worked for more than a decade as a reproductive rights activist, researcher and lobbyist the government to have abortion legalised, I believed we had made an enormous impact when parliament passed the bill. But if any co-worker in this clinic in western Nepal hasn’t even heard of the bill, what was the value of our work? Are we giving it all away after another 50 years for the bill to make an impact on our maternal death rate. What had seemed an enormous step suddenly seemed frighteningly small. Little did I realise when I told the woman that we still had a long way to go, how long we really had to travel.

● Congratulations to the Charitrehen Chel for their declaration of independence. Rosy Chhinch’s piece was one of the most interesting, honest and pragmatic write ups I have read in your paper. Thanks to Nepali Times for bodying such a write up. Unlike other declarations made by politically- motivated feminist groups focusing on petty issues that really did nothing good for women except serve the vested interests of the feminist group themselves. Rajeep L Satyal, Baluwatar

VANISHING VULTURES

Re: No more circling by Samuel Thomas (1/18)

Saigha VDC in Dang and my house is near the border with Rolpa. I spent my childhood chasing vultures. These days the carcasses of animals have been replaced by corpses of guerrillas and soldiers, but there were no vultures any more. There were three nests of vultures in my VDC, on a tall pine tree were two pairs of smoky black Pileated Vultures, and eight White-rumped Vultures, one dead to animals by river banks.

● EDITORIAL

19 - 25 MARCH 2004

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The palace's cooks must accept the centrality of mainstream parties in any future election

T he knock-on effect of the Maoist 'blockade' of the western region is now being felt in Kathmandu Valley. Kerosene and cooking gas have disappeared from the shops, shortages of essential items are spreading. Oblivious to the escalating anarchy, or maybe to distract attention, the government of royal nominees is now talking of elections. What exactly is being hinted at?

To conclude a fair and free election, there has to be a perceptible improvement on four fronts: better security, competent administration, competitive politics, and vibrant civil society. Both governments since October Fourth have failed to perform on all these counts.

Security is largely a matter of perception: the country is only as secure as you and I believe it to be. The people have no little confidence in the ability of the government to protect its citizens that nobodies dares defy something as irrational as a blockade of an entire region. The people lack of faith in an administration dominated by the Joint Security Force is no less marked. Politics in the country has come to be defined by the ever-increasing mistrust between the monarch and the mainstream parties. A nascent civil society is in such disarray that it is unable to speak up. Nobody in his right mind would want an election in these uncertain times. Political parties are united in settling scores with an activist monarch from the Madhes. The Monarchs will not settle for anything less than a constituent assembly. The administration isn’t in a position to hold even free, let alone fair, elections. A capital-centric civil society is in no particular hurry to handover the governance to politicians. It is only the international community—the Europeans in particular—who want the king to hold an election and get out of the post-October Fourth mess as respectable as possible. King Gyanendra has his own reasons to invoke polls. He had dismissed Sher Bahadur Deuba as an incompetent prime minister, ostensibly because the renegade kagreis had failed to conduct polls on the promised date. An election is a convenient tool that the ‘constructive’ monarch can use to appoint and dismiss premiers at will. But the strategists at Narayanshahi know this nuse won’t work. Ultimately, the King’s success as a government can provide legitimate cover. Herein lies the dilemma for the king: he wants an election, but only one which will give him the desired result.

The tenure of the dissolved Prantadhini Sabha ends this month. So, if the myth of the constitution is to be kept alive, an announcement on polls needs to be made at the earliest. The five-phased Indian elections begin from 20 April, hence our own string-pullers must be hoping that the Maoists will be hard-pressed to reach an agreement with the Nepali government before that date to avoid the pro-poll square of militant groups across the border. The Maoist blockade may actually be a harbinger of an impending ceasefire.

There are rumours that a list of ministers for the soon-to-be-formed cabinet has already been finalised by the palace. The man who acted as bridge between the Maoists and the military to make King Gyanendra’s mid-western visit a grand success could be Surya Bahadur Thapa’s successor at Baluwatar.

Dhunik Lal Shrestha is an old court-faithful. He headed the civic reception committee that facilitated the king at Nepalganj. Earlier, he had chaired the Rapanabad Standing Committee before. Pandur Narayan Chaudhary and Keshar Jung Rajmahi. He has been the Chief Justice, and in all that, he would be a harmless face to give continuity to the active monarchy. Whether he will actually conduct polls is almost moot.

The big question is what the mainstream political parties will do. Without them, talks of polls will just be talk. The Nepali acolytes of Brother Number One in the jungle, as well as the cooks at the poll pot in the palace, will do well to accept the centrality of mainstream parties in any future elections.

Another pair of white vultures nested on a nearby cliff and were completely white. The nesting pairs used to hatch once once in two or three years but only a single chick each time. None of the nests are there anymore. Some of the other vultures were the Rajgiddha (Sarcogyps calvus). But they are also gone. The villagers blame pesticides, and the poison used to kill leopards for vultures vanishing. And it’s not just the vultures, the chemicals are killing other birds as well. Samuel Thomas reports that the vultures in India and Pakistan are dying because of the veterinary anti-inflammatory drug, Diclofenac, that causes renal failure in vultures. This may be the other reason. The Kathmandu Declaration of Insecticides and Pesticides may show government commitment, but unless this translates to action to stop agrochemicals and drugs, the birds are doomed. In the short term vulture breeding programs need to be started immediately in Chitwan and Kosi Tanni.

Matl Pun, email

MATL PUN, TIMES

EDUCATING FOREIGNERS

Manjushree Thapa’s comments (‘Educating foreigners’, #186) are right on. I have visited Nepal a number of times and dare say I know a bit more about Nepal’s history than most visitors, at the same time I know my actual knowledge of Nepal’s history is woefully lacking. She is right, too, that a country in the fierce process of defining itself presents a chaotic face to the world.

Hilary Drahm, email

• Manjushree’s Guest Column was right on the button, at least it pushed one of mine. Now, she needs to write a counter-balancing article about traditional government antipathy to ‘long-stay’ foreigners in both the development and human service sectors. As I reflect on much of the ‘aid’ and ‘assistance’ that deluged the country in the early nineties, I wonder whether too much of it was ‘invested’ in the wrong places.

What help was there for ‘the people’ to understand the true nature of the new constitution? In what way were the political parties encouraged to embrace the challenge to a new era of democratic internal organization, and discard globally discredited forms imported from ‘south of the border’? Perhaps most importantly, what assistance was there for the indigenous, internationally-informed Fifth Estate to translate the opportunities and responsibilities of parliamentary democracy in ways educative to both people and parties? May the Nepali people and Nepali organizations long have rights to the insight of Nepal-aligned and locally-informed foreigners. Such persons may contribute best to locally-appropriate solutions by warning about ‘broken wheels’.

David Stevens, Alberta, Canada

HUMAN NATURE

Daniel Lak in Hall’s warning for Nepal (#186) demarcates the actions of the US, Canada and France in Haiti. He accuses them of ‘gunboat diplomacy’ and forcing Aristide out of power. What risks him most is the claim of righteousness made by these western powers to justify what they are doing. But isn’t that totally expected? Does he not know that it is human nature to want to have the cake and eat it, too? During his time spent in Kathmandu he probably never came across a Nepal saying “Ham pan, ham pani”. If he had, he would have known that we in Nepal are no different than anyone else in wanting to have it both ways. Lak also says that what happened in Haiti should serve as a warning to Nepal. A warning for what? Should we be warned that the US and other powers who are currently backing Nepal in this fight against terrorism will withdraw their support and leave us high and dry once their interests have been served? The past is full of examples of the US first helping and later dumping people like General Pinolpot of Chile, Noriega of Panama, Marcos of the Philippines and, lately, Saddam Hussein (who?) of Iraq.

‘Arjun’, email

HOSPITAL HAZARD

I agree with Pragya Shrestha in ‘Medical menace in our backyards’ (#187). In addition to the pollution caused by population growth, deranged urbanisation, and busy traffic, mismanagement of hospital waste actually has made it worse. Hospitals should not turn into health hazards.

Dr Eli Pradhan, Kathmandu

‘PATRONANIE’

Could Mr Lak explain to the French readers of the Nepali Times what is “la patranomie”, this word or any approaching one being unknown.

Marie Lecomte-Tilouine

CRS, France

Daniel Lak replies: that was a glaring error on my part. I referred to France seeing Haiti as part of La Patronanomie, but meant La Francophonie and apologise to French friends and enemies alike.
A volcano in the Caribbean

Montserrat is a not a social volcano, it’s a real one

The British are up to something interesting in the Caribbean island of Montserrat, 700km south of me here in Miami, capital of the weird world. It pays to keep an eye on the Brits. They didn’t conquer half the world in the 18th and 19th centuries by luck alone. First though, a little background:

Poor Montserrat was once one of the happiest places in the world, a tropical paradise. A mere flyspeck at the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, it escaped the wave of decolonisation that surged in the 1960s as European countries (with the exception, as ever, of France) shed their imperial possessions. Montserrat was too small to be independent on its own, too proud to be part of some nearby island’s confederacy. So it chose to remain British. Britain didn’t really want this, but being a democracy, it went along with the wishes of the Montserratians and let them stay as one of London’s last colonies. It was good for tourism, good for the locals who wanted to go to the UK from time to time and a few pounds sterling flowed in as aid. The UK connection also kept American culture at bay. Montserrat remained stubbornly British, despite its pretensions to being Irish. The national symbol is a shamrock and all of the names of the inhabitants are O’ this, or Mc’ that.

Slavery was a distant memory. The British governor and London ruled with a light touch, letting a vibrant local democracy take root.

But something was brewing deep under the earth that was to be the snake in this paradise. For Montserrat, you see, was the tip of a vast undersea volcano.

One day in 1995, a subterranean explosion surged up to the surface in a hill called Chance’s Peak. Until that day, the hill had been a tourist attraction with steamy vents and hot water geysers showing that it was actually an active volcano.

But in 1995 and in subsequent years, lava and volcanic ash rained down on more half of the island, destroyed the quaint wooden buildings of the capital and drove half the population into exile. It also wrecked what tourist industry there was and proved somewhat of an embarrassment to Tony Blair’s newly-elected Labour government in Britain.

If you see Claire Short in Nepal anytime soon, ask her if she has any “golden elephants” in her carry-on baggage. She once told me, as DFID minister, to the Montserratians, by asking rhetorically if she was supposed to send them “golden elephants” when they were asking for more aid.

Anyway, paradise was lost. But now, DFID has cut off funds to Montserrat to pay for repairing damage caused by British and American military action in Iraq. And the latest place to get the Montserratian economy moving again: nothing less than a ‘School for Natural Disaster Management’. Jobs, foreign currency, fame, all coming Montserrat’s way courtesy of Britain and Chances Peak.

Now here’s some thinking we could apply elsewhere. India could teach the world how to take over jobs from developed countries. South Africa could use that training too. Britain, Pakistan, I’m positive, has much to teach us about how to handle Ameica. Nobody does it better. And Nepal? What sort of school could Nepal run? Let’s get some readers’ suggestions on this with the best (and worst) printed in a future column. Nepal’s School of ........................... You read it here first.
Fake medicines are concoctions with wrong ingredients or incorrect quantities of active ingredients or products without any active ingredients at all.

It is virtually impossible to differentiate between real and counterfeit medicines without proper testing.

Nearly 10 percent of the global pharmaceutical commerce is attributed to fake drugs. In India it is at 20 percent and in Nepal it is probably more.

Combating this menace should be a shared responsibility.

World Health Organization estimates that 15 percent of the fake drugs produced in the world come from India, where about 20 percent of all drugs sold are either fake or substandard.

The US Food and Drug Administration estimates that about 10 percent of all drugs around the world are counterfeit or substandard, and 60 percent of them are found in developing countries. Indian fake medicines have made their way into the African market, including in Kenya and Nigeria (see box).

What worries consumer groups here is that the manufacture and sale of fake drugs is so prevalent in India, with which Nepal shares an open border. They say our monitoring and regulation systems aren’t vigilant enough to meet this danger.

Nepalis interviewed for this article say the lack of monitoring is compounded by lax enforcement of prescription rules. Antibiotics are readily available across the border in Nepal. Fake, substandard, and deficient dosage forms are causing a danger of drug resistance. The impact of this on tuberculosis and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome could have a catastrophic impact in the future, when antibiotics prove ineffective for drug-resistant patients. TB treatment in Nepal is already hindered by multi-drug-resistant strains of the TB bacillus.

But the government plays down the extent of the problem. Khagendra Bahadur Thapa, acting director general at the DDA, says: “The counterfeit drug problem in Nepal is minimal. We have found only 3-4 cases of fake medicines in the past 15 years.” The reason is that only licensed importers are officially allowed to bring in drugs from India before they are sold to retailers. However, he admits there is a problem in the rural areas because of smuggling.

According to Indian media reports, fake drugs are already manufactured in Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Two of these Indian states border Nepal. The counterfeiters copy blister pack designs and even provide fake holograms on the packages. Fictitious batch numbers and dates of import can be made by fly-by-night outfits in Mumbai on letterheads of well-known pharmaceutical firms for a few rupees.

Consumer groups and doctors in Nepal say the only reason the DDA has failed so few cases of counterfeit drugs in Nepal is because of poor and irregular monitoring. The only way to tell a drug is fake or substandard is to do a lab test. Since the problem is so vast, not all consignments can be checked. Unscrupulous drugurers can therefore easily buy fake drugs from smugglers at a lower price and then sell them at the full price and triple their profit margins.

The government’s current regulation only allows companies certified by WHO’s Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) to bring medicines into Nepal. The DDA provides licenses to these companies after auditing them and also sends out inspection teams, as it did last month in Mumbai, Chennai and Bareilly.

There are currently 272 Indian and 38 domestic companies registered with the government, selling about 8,000 brands of medicine. Only two Chinese manufacturers are registered with the DDA, and the threat of fake Chinese medicines is said to be less because most doctors prescribe Indian brands and the Chinese ones are less in demand.

While counterfeiters of well-known brands contain no ingredients of the original product, substances that are either diluted or don’t meet the standards prescribed in a country’s pharmacy code. Analgesia, leaking and medical substances past expiry dates or with the wrong proportion of ingredients are some of the reasons why drugs are substandard.

In last month’s raids on pharmacies, the DDA found druggeries in Narayanganj, Burdwan and Krishnangar with 11 brands of unlicensed medicines and collected 18 dubious samples of standard drugs. Thapa says that of the total number of samples collected, only three percent were found to be substandard after tests at the Royal Drug Laboratory. The DDA’s main complaint is lack of manpower: it has only eight inspectors and has to make 400 laboratory tests per year.

One of the inspectors, Dibash Ram Humaqam, estimates that up to 20 percent of the drugs in the markets are substandard. In a batch of spot tests last year, 96 out of 359 samples of medicines (predominantly Thyroid, Anestol, Ominiprat capsules and Norfloxacin) were found to be substandard.

Ashok Sharma of the Nepal Pharmaceutical Producers Association says the DDA is doing a good job despite constraints, but admits that chemists and the public do not always know. “Once they are tipped off, the DDA can take action against the culprits,” he says.

The DDA seems to have realized that the main conduit for fake drugs is India, and in an effort to control smuggling has limited the transit for imported drugs to only nine points, including Kathmandu airport, Tatopani and points along the road.

Nigeria’s fake drug mafia

LAGOS—Nigeria’s fearless crusader against fake drugs, Dora Akunyili, was awarded the Transparency International Anti-Corruption Award last year for battling the scourge of fake pharmaceuticals in her country.

But this is not protecting her from harassment and intimidation by the drug mafia in her state. This year, there were arson attacks on two buildings that house Akunyili’s National Agency for Food and Drug Administration Control (NAFDAC) and last month she received death threats.

On Wednesday, the Kaduna office and laboratory of a company hit by fire and barely 72 hours earlier, NAFDAC’s office in Lagos had also burned down when the Federal Government Secretariat building caught fire. The fires were believed to have been started by dealers in counterfeit drugs who are being targeted by NAFDAC.

In December, an attempt was made on Akunyili’s life at her country home in Agul, eastern Nigeria. Sixteen people implicated in the assassination bid were later arrested, according to Nigerian police.

“The arson attacks will not deter us from waging the war against fake drugs. I can assure Nigerians (that) we shall win the war, because we know we are fighting the conscience of the country,” said Emmanuel Ekwugwu, Director of Administration and Finance at NAFDAC.

Nigeria’s fake drug market is estimated to be worth $60 a million, and most of the spurious medicines come from India and China. Akunyili’s., however, has died after a medication was ineffective in controlling an infection she had four years ago.

NAFDAC warns people to start domestic production of medicines within the next decade, to eliminate the import of fake products into the country. (IPS)

Firewood is harmful to health

Most Nepalis use firewood cooking and heating. This leads to indoor smoke pollution, which causes Acute Respiratory Infection (ARI), especially in children. According to the Ministry of Health, ARI is one of the leading causes of infant mortality in the villages. It is estimated that about three percent of Nepal is affected by ARI, out of which a quarter are children and infants. Experts say the government isn’t paying enough attention to indoor pollution as it has for more serious diseases like HIV/AIDS and malaria, despite the fact that more people die and are suffering from ARI and the fact that ARI is curable. This particular health issue has not grabbed the attention of the donor agencies, “says a paper by Intermediate Technology Development Group (ITDG), an organisation specialising in indoor pollution related activities. ITDG has been supporting poor rural communities to help reduce major health risks from kitchen smoke and creating mass awareness on the dangers of firewood used for cooking. Indoor air pollution is one the leading causes of deaths in the world’s poorest countries, where 2.4 billion people use biomass in their kitchen. It is estimated that the burning of solid fuels leads to the death of 1.6 million people, especially women and children, each year.
Nepali 1 at SOAS

The only undergraduate students in the Western world who can navigate their way through Nepali newspaper texts on demands for constitutional reform

It’s Tuesday morning in the small town where I live, 30 miles from central London. I stumble out of bed, grimy and bleary-eyed. March winds would join a small bunch of commuters huddled on the train into town.

On the train I pull out my copy of Hirat Khabarpanika and read of King Gyanendra’s recent abdication as a Hindu Samrat. Most of my fellow passengers read the Daily Telegraph, one of this country’s most boring broadsheets.

Somewhere high above the thick grey sky, the sun is probably rising as I emerge from Euston station and trudge across Bloomsbury, but it makes very little difference. London in winter is mostly grey and brown, broken only once this year by the punkish brilliance of snow.

Room 385, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. ‘Nepal 1’, a smaller than usual class of only six students this year, drifts in for its 9:00AM lecture. Many years ago, some bright spark involved in timetabling at SOAS decided that the early morning slot was best for language classes. As I watch my students yawning and rubbing their eyes I curse him once again.

But they quickly wake up and apply themselves to the task of understanding why it is that when Nepali-speakers want to construct a conditional sentence they use the past tense of the verb to talk about things that might happen in the future. Aya kaat naubhakbayal ask each one of them: how did you come today? Some said ‘walking’, some came ‘by bike’, but the others looked at me in awe. How would you come? I ask one. If the tube were to shut down tomorrow, how would you come? I ask another.

They cope well and before long the one student who has never set foot in Nepal is telling us how he would still go to SOAS on a day in which he broke both his legs, the tubes were on strike, the buses all broke down and it snowed heavily.

A quick sharp of coffee and on to my next class. These two final-year undergraduates spent eight months in Kathmandu last year and their Nepal is now solid enough for them to tackle the difficult language employed in Nepal’s news media. My friends down the road at the BBC Nepal Studio are always happy to provide a tape or two for learning practice, and to begin with we listen to one of these, with me writing up each unfamiliar word on a whiteboard. Both students find the pace of the broadcast very fast and we replay each sentence several times. I confess that I have not prepared in advance and I have to think on my feet, but I survive (I think).

Having deciphered a lengthy radio news item on the recent polio inoculation campaign, we turn our attention to some articles downloaded from the web edition of Kantipatr. I provided them with vocabulary list last week and they have prepared this material in advance, so we sail through several reports on recent political manoeuvres in Kathmandu. I think they may be the only undergraduate students in the Western world who can navigate their way through Nepali newspaper texts on demands for constitutional reform, and I’m proud of them. But they remain grumpy about the BBC tape: can’t I slow it down somehow?

I often hear myself telling the Nepali students that program at SOAS is unique. Of course, SOAS is not the only Western university where Nepal is taught: many students study the language at Cornell and Wisconsin in the USA, atINALCO in Paris and at the Sasin Institute in Heidelberg, and quite possibly elsewhere too.

However, I think it is true to say that SOAS is the only Western institution that offers Nepal as a named element of a Bachelor’s degree. Courses in Nepal are also available options within other programs, at RA and Masters level. The number of undergraduate students who opt to devote approximately 50 percent of their time over a period of four years to Nepal things will never be huge, because this is an undertaking that has to be a labour of love. The largest number we have ever had spread across the four years is 13, with 1 to 4 students in each year.

All of them combine Nepal with another subject taught at SOAS: law, anthropology, art, development studies, etc. SOAS’s ability to offer half-degrees such as this is ensured in part by the UK government’s provision of ‘non-formal funding’ for minority subjects. And long may it continue:

we offer degree-level programs in more than 20 African and Asian languages (including Arabic, Chinese, Japanese) would be viable without such funding.

This year I have had 27 students of different nationalities in my courses, almost all of whom have had some previous experience of Nepal. Each year I meet several who have spent a year between school and university in a Nepali village, usually teaching English. For many, the months they spend in Nepal are their first extended period away from home, and the experience makes a profound impression upon them. The landscape, the culture, the people of Nepal are the context in which they begin to find their feet as independent adults, and they return with a perspective on the world that is very different from that of many of their peers.

Most of these Nepali students go on to pursue ‘conventional’ degrees at ‘conventional’ universities, but a few are not satisfied with just a rudimentary knowledge of a society that fascinates them; nor can they shake off the strong emotional bond they have formed with Nepal. So they come to us, and we welcome them. All being well, they graduate with qualifications that mark them out as young people of unusual adventurousness and considerable achievement. Several now work in positions that draw on my students’ geographically-informed understanding of Nepal.

Others, of course, do not, and use their degrees as evidence of more general academic achievement. Students’ announcements of what they are studying at SOAS can provoke some perplexed reactions, and the question has to be made convincing people of the benefits of studying a language and culture radically different from one’s own.

A few years ago a Belgian student of mine graduated with a BA in Nepal and Development Studies, and returned home to receive his family’s congratulations. He was puzzled when a neighbour began to ask him some very difficult questions about French military history.

Eventually, it emerged that some years earlier the neighbour had admired his heroism in his examination papers on what it was he was studying in London. His reply had been ‘Nepali studies’ but the neighbour had heard him say ‘Napoleonic studies’. The implication was that the latter subject might be more pressing elsewhere.

Outside, meanwhile, it’s dark again before six. I remember to check the Kantipur website, and find articles there by Krishna Hachetru and Hari Roka, which I print out for my journey home. I wouldn’t want to have to resort to reading a discarded Daily Telegraph.

Michael Hutt is Reader in Nepal and Himalayan Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, where this book was written. Himalayan People’s War: Nepal’s Manchukuo Rebellion, is due out soon.

Tourism can be antidote to poverty

RAMESH JAURA IN BERLIN

The World Tourism Organisation (WTO-OMT) is urging multilateral development assistance agencies to recognise tourism as an important instrument for tackling poverty, environmental protection, giving economic value to cultural heritage, creating employment and generating foreign exchange earnings.

In a report released in Berlin this week, the UN’s specialised agency on tourismo also urged the World Bank, regional development banks and the European Union to “provide specific assistance for tourism to least developed and fragile countries,” stressing the agencies’ considerable leverage with governments of developing countries. “Before providing assistance they should ensure that national and local tourism strategies and policies that address poverty issues are in place. Individual projects assisted should be required to meet criteria that ensure benefit to the poor,” the organisation’s secretary-general, Francesco Frangialli said.

The report urges developing countries governments to include tourism in strategies for poverty reduction and ensure that tourism negotiations in the WTO framework contribute to sustainable development, adding that tourism is a key component of many countries service exports with power to deliver significant international earnings.

According to WTO-OMT, global tourism arrivals grew by 5 percent between 1999 and 2002, and now stand at about 700 million. By 2022 the figure is expected to swell to more than 1,400 million. Africa and south Asia are expected to achieve growth rates of four to five percent each year. Global earnings from international tourism amounted to $75 billion in 2002. Tourism makes up a large part of the world’s growing service sector and accounts for over 30 percent of all service exports. In countries such as some in sub-Saharan Africa, tourism accounts for as much as 55 percent of service sector exports. WTO-OMT has launched a campaign for undertaking the significance of tourism in realising the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015, and, in association with the UN Conference on Trade and Development, also launched a special initiative on poverty called SmartTourism, an acronym for Sustainable Tourism-Eliminating Poverty. ST-EF aims to encourage sustainable tourism (social, economic and ecological) in countries where it alleviates poverty, bringing development and jobs to people living on less than a dollar a day. It targets the world’s poorest countries, particularly in Africa and south Asia.
A least 16 districts face terror and shortages caused by the Maoist blockade. From sick people needing to get to hospital to vegetable vendors and dairy farmers—everyone has been hit hard. In the eyes of the people, the Maoists have revealed their inhumane face. Even ambulances are not safe from ambushes and roadside bombs.

The motivation for this blockade is ostensibly the king’s visit to the midwest and the army’s offensive against Maoist strongholds. The blockade has further marginalised the civil administration and pushed the security forces into the forefront. The king will now rush to the unified command to quell disturbances and also distribute relief and essential commodities to alleviate possible shortages in the blockade-hit areas.

He may visit more areas after the Pokhara felicitation under security cover and project himself as the only hope in the eyes of people who are fed up with the conflict and the dislocation caused by the blockade. The political parties, by their self-centred and power-driven politics, have made it easier for the king to project himself as a saviour. They themselves have neither empathised with the people directly hit by the blockade, nor shown the courage to defy it.

The blocked areas do not fall within the Maoist strongholds, but in central Nepal, which controls the supply lines to and from the capital. Last week Nepal Congress President Girija Prasad Koirala staged an underground walk-out from the five-party meeting in Bhaktapur when Amal Sharma of Jana Morcha proposed that the agitating parties should talk to the Maoists to form a pro-republican front.

While a negotiated peaceful settlement with the Maoists should always be the preferred option to resolve the conflict, forging an anti-monarchy alliance with the Maoists can only mean joining the armed struggle as well. Simply put, it will mean that besides Sherchan and Narayan Man Bijukcche, Koirala, Madhav Nepal and Lhamani Pokhrel will also be Conrade Prachanda’s foot soldiers.

Koirala understood the implications of Sherchan’s suggestion when he stayed at the walkout, but that alone will not help the Nepal Congress to prove its future relevance. For that, he needs to seize the initiative to hold political rallies—jointly with the UML or by himself—in Chitwan, Nepalgunj and Bhairawa and defy the blockade. Why should the people, even khangris or UML members, come to Kathmandu for yet another decisive street demonstration against the king’s ‘regression’ if their politics does not take into account the problems and hardships the people are facing?

The only way to take the struggle against ‘regression’ to a logical conclusion is by restoring the constitutional process, and mobilising the people in the only way to do that. The people will continue to turn towards the king or the Maoists if the political parties and their leadership fail to identify themselves with the people’s main concerns: security, jobs and development.

Koirala should know by now that he can’t get the people on his side just by projecting the king as a villain, and that also goes for his latest effort to unite two splinter groups of the Nepali Congress. In fact, it is about time that Koirala and other members of the five-party alliance reversed or redeemed the priorities of their anti-regression movement.

The new platform should be to restore peace and restart development. It should oppose the killing of civilians both by the Maoists and the security forces, and try to convince people that the political parties are the real organs of democracy. Continued indifference to the plight of the people will decimate the parties and their standing.

The parties need to convince people that they have belatedly realised their past mistakes and that they can be the vehicles to transform the country into a real democracy. They must convince the people that they no longer think the king is the villain of this piece, but a partner in the process and one who is crucial in the process of democratising and constitutionalising the institution of monarchy.
I
ost Girir in the London Eye column (Henry mentality), #181 admonished non-

residents of Nepal (NNR) for not getting “more business savvy before asking what we can do for the country.” Indeed, a few overseas Nepalis and some of their friends in Nepal consider the entire NRM movement a folly.

JUGAL BHUDEL
At times, seeing things in the right perspective through the famously dense London fog probably gets much easier even for the discerning London Eye. Girir insinuates that participants at the first NRM Conference last October in Kathmandu were mainly tandur courts returning to Nepal in search of recognition and the Nepali Diaspora itself is a “community with hard mentality”. Often, the confusion arises when we start comparing an NNR with an NRI (non-resident Indian). There are second, third and fourth generations of non-

resident Indians stretching across the globe. An estimated 20 million overseas Indians contribute to only 10 percent of India’s foreign direct investment. Many global Indians occupy places of pride in their adopted lands. The participants of the first NRM conference were not gathered in Kathmandu to have “15 minutes of fame.” It was a joint effort of the HKM, FNCCI and a few NNR enthusiasts to foster a constructive and harmonious relationship between the nation and the diaspora. The results are already in evidence. It has inspired fragmented Nepali communities around the globe to join hands.

Several NRM national coordination committees have been formed. The Non-Residents Nepal Diaspora 2000 is waiting for approval, which proposes to define a clear identification of NNRs and people of Nepal origin (PNOs), recognize the contribution of the unskilled and semi-skilled workers, permit PNOs to buy or inherit properties in Nepal, eliminate double taxation on invested capital, allow their repatriation, permit NNRs to open bank accounts and invest abroad and so on.

It took India years to create a legal framework, we achieved this in a few months. People who ask questions like “who in their sane mind would invest in Nepal under the current political and economic climate?” have no idea that NNRs have already been investing money in Nepal. A team of NNRs from Montreal spent approximately Rs 1 billion in hydropower, healthcare, media, education and banking ventures. A concept paper for a technical university incorporating medical, engineering and agricultural fields of study with an estimated cost of $50 million has been submitted to the Ministry of Education.

The Nepal Diaspora of Russia has agreed to finance Rs 9 million to build a kirtapur bhairav in the Pashupatinath Temple complex as a part of Pashupati Area Development Project. North American Nepalis are financing a hundred-room biradishram project in Dougall. At a recently held meeting in Kathmandu, the International Coordination Council of NNR Association took a bold decision to mobilize NNRs around the world to explore socially beneficial projects in all 75 districts of Nepal. It sounds ambitious, but a strong tie with Nepal begins from our emotional attachment to our villages, towns and districts. Such projects do not need huge funds. Even a tiny part of the randhir sau weekly income in London would bring smiles to many children desperately in need of primary schools in remote areas of Nepal.

You really don’t have to wait until you acquire such abilities to get involved. Note the Nepali communities in Qatar and UAE who are discussing the import of vegetables from Nepal. While it may appear insignificant, more than 150,000 Nepalis residing in these two countries are connected to Kathmandu by Qatar Airways flights weekly. If they decide to consume vegetables imported only from Nepal, just imagine the impact on vegetable growers back home!

The Nepali diaspora in the Middle East is showing us the way. Will Nepalis in places like London, New York and Washington follow suit in making resolutions to buy only ‘Nepali’ goods, only ‘Nepali’ carpet? Yes, we “must evolve” and “get more business savvy” to achieve more. But we must recognize our initial success, believe in ourselves, and keep moving in a positive direction. •

Dr Jugal Bhurdel is an environmental researcher based in Moscow.

The hastiness with which some intellectual NNRs dismiss prospects of foreign Nepalis investing in Nepal is mystifying.
**NEW PRODUCTS**

AWASH: Sahara Industries has launched Sewa Power Wash detergent powder, touting it as fragrant, effective and easy on the hands, for just Rs 7 for 200gms or Rs 15 for 500gms.

PIPING HOT: Fanchakanya Industries has introduced a new range of international-standard PVC fittings, suitable for a series of uses including drinking water supply and waste management. They boast more thickness and durability, plus the high-quality rubber gaskets ensure that there is no leakage.

**Undemanding consumers**

Nepali consumers are too meek to raise hell

M in Bahadur Gurung, owner of Bhat Bluteni Supermarket, says Nepali consumers are easy to please. “If an appliance breaks down two days after its purchase, most Nepalis just wouldn’t bring it back to the store and demand a replacement. Instead, they would return to buy another appliance altogether.”

And that pretty much sums up the easy-going and tolerant attitude of most Nepali consumers when faced with anything from faulty appliances to shoddy products to bad services. Indeed, if there was anything to wonder about on the World Consumer Rights Day that was celebrated last Monday, it was this: In a society where consumers appear to be reluctant to display a do-ortdie urgency as to how they want market players and the state to provide them with efficient and effective services, is there any hope for a consumer rights movement?

One is tempted to say no, for the time being anyway. If one considers the delivery of these two services: water and electricity.

The theme of this year’s World Consumer Rights Day was ‘Consumers and Water’. Yet, as the mercury starts heading north, the Kathmandu Valley starts reeling under a severe shortage of drinking water. Unfortunately, this is not a new event. Last year was the same story, and the years before too, despite water users’ dutifully paying monthly fees to the state-run Nepal Water Supply Corporation.

Surely, in other countries, angry consumers would have been up in arms by now, but not in Nepal. There is anger, yes, but its force is too dissipated to make any difference. The result is that government officials buy themselves time by assuring people again and again that they are working on ways to provide water.

I, however, feel the power sector too is wrapped up in its own inefficiencies. Ninety years after the first spark of electricity was generated in Pharping, only 20 percent of the national population has access to electricity. For the rest, it is unavailable and unaffordable.

Consumers and the card-carrying activists who are supposed to represent them rarely seem to push for wider and more reliable distribution by asking: How can the cost of production of electricity be lowered? And, using a bundle of schemes, how can power be distributed cheaply across Nepal? Meanwhile, quiescent consumers have quietly yielded to plan life around power cuts.

Similar stories could be told about other sectors such as telecom, fuel and education. In all these, consumers appear to be too meek to raise hell to demand better services and the activists are all too eager to hog media coverage by uttering nothing but platitudes, afraid to make enemies for causes that matter.

And so it goes on and on. I hope our new leaders and various strands of consumer rights movements to really take shape, to have an effect and not be just another donor-funded agito-do-goodism in Nepal, a few good men and women have to be single-minded public champions of concerns that consumers hold dear but lack organized outlets to express.

Otherwise, Nepali consumers will continue to celebrate occasions such as the World Water Day, but muskade along without demanding much from those who they pay to provide services. •

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The falling water levels on snow-fed rivers have reduced the capacity of powerplants like Kulekhani-1 and 2, which is situated in the valley. This means that the river level in the river goes down, so does electricity production.

The only way to get around this is to store water in reservoirs, but our only dam is Kulekhani and 1, which is situated in the valley. This means that the reservoir has enough water to generate 95MW of power during daily peak hours.

The 144MW Kali Gandaki hydropower project came into full scale operation last year. The government had trumpeted that load shedding had become a matter of past in Nepal, and officials were even boasting about exporting electricity to India. But a month into the dry season, Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) has already declared a week-long power cut lasting two hours every day beginning 13 March.

The nationwide power cut is scheduled in such a way that each area of the country will have four hours power outage in a week, two in the morning and two in the evening. So, the total load shedding even after the new grid has the installed capacity of almost 600MW.

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Yet another year of winter drought, a colder-thanusual spring and the predictable has occurred: electricity shortages leading to power cuts.

Most of Nepal’s hydropower generation comes from run-offoftheriver schemes which use the flow of the river to turn turbines to generate electricity. This means that the water level in the river goes down, so does electricity production.

The falling water levels on snow-fed rivers have reduced the capacity of power plants like Kulekhani-1 and 2, for instance, by two thirds to less than half. As the river levels go, so does the electricity production. If you are an engineer at NEA’s Load Dispatch Centre told us. But, why in the dry season when the capacity of all other sources of power plants has gone down? Because this is the right time when we can make the connections with minimum load shedding, the engineer said.

Despite misgivings about large dams, experts say the time may have come for Nepal to contemplate a large storage project to meet power shortages during early spring when the snows have not started melting and there is no rainfall. They say the best option would be to turn the Australian joint venture West Seti project in western Nepal from a run-off-of-river project into one supplying the domestic market when it comes on stream in seven years.

NEA officials say that as long as all except one of their powerplants are run-offofriver types, power cuts will be a regular feature in the future as demand rises and power supply is concentrated during the monsoon months. •
the Maoist blockade of more than a dozen districts of central Nepal couldn’t have come at a worse time for Pokhara.

At the height of the trekking season, hundreds of tourists bound for the Annapurna circuit or taking buses to Kathmandu are stranded. For this tourist-dependent town, when visitor numbers go down everyone from vegetable farmers to paragliding companies are hit.

Nepal’s tourism experts say Pokhara’s situation is symptomatic of the country’s broader problem of restrictions on the movement of goods and people. “If we can only do visible tourism, like trekking and paragliding, it’s not sufficient,” says Ram Kishore Pant, principal secretary in the Ministry of Tourism.

Now, the government is telling the people of Pokhara to show up in large numbers for the public felicitation of the king on 25 March, but they are in no mood to do so.

Pokhara’s beaches wear a deserted look as trucks bearing food and supplies from Birganj and Bhairawa have been turned away. Basic commodities like salt, oil and sugar have disappeared, and if available, they cost up to 50 percent more.

Similarly, farmers who used to supply vegetables, meat, eggs and milk from outlying areas like Syangja, Parbat, Baglung, Myagdi, Gorkha, Tanahun and Lamjung are badly affected. “There is no light in the villages and now we cannot even light the lanterns because there is no kerosene,” says Bhanu Regmi, a student from Parbat who has come to Pokhara to see if he can buy essentials.

Local produce is used instead, and some pocket money has been diverted to buy a small tractor to clear roadblocks.

The Maoists have a footproof way of enforcing their blockade: burn buses. After three local bases in Lamjung and Dhusa were set on fire last week, no bus owner dared ply the highways. “More than 50 percent of our investment in the vehicles is locked, we need to pay the interest,” says Dhaulagiri Zone Transport Coordination Committee chairman Hari Khadka.

“Trucks and buses coming to Kathmandu have been taking the old Tribhuvan Raajpat since it doesn’t fall under the current Maoist blockade.

Once that happens, foreign and domestic operators cannot provide subsidy therefore the land phone services.

The government is looking at the possibility of setting up a third party to help in the delivery of service.

Hello, hello, hello

to do now is obtain a license from the Nepal Telecommunication Authority (NTA), which is now pushing hard to have the new Telecommunication Act and rules approved. “We are working in coordination with the Ministry of Law, and the Act should be in place within few months,” said Ministry of Information and Communications spokesman Mukunda Regmi.

Once that happens, foreign and domestic investors say they are sure to flood the NTA.

Another problem is that the government has not followed up with proper service delivery. To be fair, NTC was shackled by politicians in the late 1990s who saw it as a cash cow. “Later, whenever the corporation tried to go for tendering to allow private operators, it faced political expediency,” says Min Bahadur Rai Dhalak, a NFTCCI spokesperson.

Now that NTC will have to share the market with international players, the big question is: will Nepali consumers benefit or will the service providers form a cartel and keep on fleecing them.

Given the experience in India, fair competition and open licensing cold slash prices and make telephones accessible and reliable.

In case of land phones, some believe, customers will have to pay a little more than what they are paying to the NTC right now. “It’s just for a two minute call,” says Ramesh Poudel, who is a successful bidder for mobile services two years ago, but never started the service.

Others argue that the NTC’s tariff will have to be the cap and other players will have to compete with each other for lower tariffs. “We will not be able to compete with a giant like NTC,” says a UTL spokesperson.

But under the new telecom policy, even NTC will soon have its shares sold to the public and when that happens its own tariffs may have to be hiked upwards or down. The government appears to have decided to let in private operators even while moving forward with NTC privatisation because of growing demands for competitive services.

Before the accession to the global trade body, some WTO members reportedly had demanded that the government open up the telecom sector. “Countries like the US, EU, New Zealand and Japan had said that they would be interested in investing,” NTA spokesperson Kalkash Neupane told us. “We promised, so we had to open it up.”

Louis Banks comes back

India’s premier jazz pianist returns to his roots in Nepal

SRADHNA BASNYAT

In the 1940s, Nepal had little to offer an aspiring trumpeter player. So Pushkul Budapatri and his wife Sarawati headed to Calcutta, where they had a son they named Dambar Bahadur. Later, when Pushkul changed his name to George Banks, he named his son Louis Banks after Louis Armstrong. Today Louis Banks is India’s premier jazz pianist.

At 13, Louis picked up the trumpet and guitar, so George took his son to Calcutta. Louis played at Calcutta hotels, making a name in India as a fine trumpet player and bandleader. Inspired, Louis taught himself classical piano. Over the next three decades, he has been instrumental in defining jazz in India. Now, Louis Banks is returning to his roots in Nepal as the headline act for Jazzmandu 2004.

He grew up in Darjeeling, graduating from St Joseph’s College at North Point, and Louis has never forgotten his Nepali background. During the late 60s, he was here leading a band at the Shastri Hotel, and over the years has maintained high aspirations for Nepalis. “Given the opportunity, Nepalis can excel in many fields,” Banks says with conviction.

Had he never made it in the world of music, Louis Banks would have dwelled on his time and talent to painting. Since his childhood, he was inspired by the work of Vincent van Gogh, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and the Dutch masters. Now he’s trying his brush in impressionist canvases influenced by Degas, Monet and a few contemporary Indian artists. Even in painting, his pull to Nepal is strong. “The magnificent Himalaya and the scenic beauty of the land, the rustic character of the people and the great temples are sources of great inspiration.”

But Banks is a jazz pianist at the core, even known as the godfather of jazz in India. He has performed with the likes of Volatile Buana, Charlie Mariano and Charlie Byrd and toured India with Dizzy Gillespie. Banks is known throughout Europe, Australia, Russia, China and the Middle East. He co-wrote and recorded India’s first mega-Broadway hit and has even hosted a popular broadcast named after himself, “The Louis Banks Jazz Hour Special.”

Besides being a renowned pianist, Banks is sensational at live acoustic and electronic performances on the keyboard and also as a composer. Far from being limited to any particular style, Banks is continually improving, dabbling in popular and mainstream music including Indipop, modern progressive and contemporary jazz and Indo jazz fusion.

This time around he’s even considering working Nepali music into his repertoire. “I am considering the possibility of using Nepali music, in my fusion. I want to pick up a lot of Nepali music this time and will experiment with it in my musical explorations,” he confesses. “It’ll be an entirely new element in his music and, as he says, “Nepali music is folk art.”

Since he was last here 13 years ago, Banks has noticed some changes. “Unfortunately Nepal is taking too long a time to make its mark in the world as a progressive country and capitalise on its indigenous talent. The politics has taken its toll. The people have been let down,” he says.

But Banks has returned to inspire the youth here to experiment with Nepali music, combine it with jazz, rock and pop so that their creation reaches a wider audience all over the world. “I want to urge them to achieve a high standard in performance and strive to be world class artists.” It’s the first time Banks is performing in a concert in Nepal and he says he’s honoured and thrilled that he’s been invited at Jazzmandu. Banks says without hesitating; “I am proud to be a Nepali and always make that fact known.”
An eye for an eye

A unique eye centre is giving thousands of Nepalis the gift of sight, and exporting artificial lenses to the world.

NARESH NEWAR

Sushma Limbu was only eight years old when she hurt her left eye while playing in the family maize field in the village of Imbong in Panchthar district. There was no health post and the nearest hospital was several days walk away.

Her family thought it was just a scratch and didn’t pay much attention. Soon, Sushma couldn’t see through her left eye. Her parents took Sushma from one hospital to the next all over eastern Nepal. They all had the same answer: there is no cure.

Earlier this year, a team of ophthalmologists from Tilganga Eye Centre in Kathmandu had set up an eye camp in a village near Imbong. Sushma’s parents decided to give it one last try to save their daughter’s eyesight.

The Tilganga team brought 22-year-old Sushma to Kathmandu for corneal surgery. Waiting in the lobby of the hospital for his sister to come out of the operating theatre, Santosh Limbu is anxious. But soon there is good news, Sushma can see.

“It is still like a dream,” Santosh says excitedly. “It is a miracle.” Santosh had brought the family’s entire savings with him to pay for the hospital, but Tilganga provided the surgery for free.

Every day, this eye centre near Pashupati in Kathmandu is giving back the gift of sight to hundreds of Nepalis. There is still a lot to be done, as Nepal has one of the world’s highest incidences of curable blindness. Since its establishment in 1994, Tilganga has helped Nepal make remarkable progress in pioneering modern eye care.

Nepal’s Sanduk Ruit and his team of ophthalmologists have turned Tilganga from a local eye clinic into one of the world’s best centres for cataract surgery and intraocular lens transplants.

This is one hospital that doesn’t just wait for patients to come to it — it also goes out to the patients. Tilganga’s regular microsurgical eye camps in remote areas have examined 80,000 patients and performed 17,500 cataract surgeries in the past five years.

Nepal doctors have even reached beyond Nepal to conduct 3,000 eye surgeries in Tibet and 2,000 in India. It has trained several surgeons and assistants in various ophthalmic institutions of India, China, Bhutan, Sikkim and Pakistan.

Tilganga’s real challenge was to convince Nepalis to donate the corneas of dead relatives for transplants. The centre has performed over 840 corneal transplant operations since its establishment, thanks to the Nepali eye donors.

Bhola KC, an eye bank technologist, recalls how difficult it was to convince the people to donate eyes of their dead relatives. When the Nepal Eye Bank started in 1994, it had just one donor, Chini Maya Tuladhar. In 1995, it got two donors but in 1996 again there were none. In a
What is the cornea?
The cornea is the clear transparent window at the front of the eye which allows light to enter. The cornea can be damaged by injury or infection.

How can a corneal donation help people?
Due to various factors, the transparent cornea becomes opaque like frosted glass and this may result in loss of sight. A damaged or cloudy cornea can be replaced surgically by a procedure known as corneal grafting or transplantation. During this operation, the cloudy, diseased cornea is replaced by a healthy, normal cornea donated from another individual.

Why should I consider corneal donation?
Donating your corneas is one of the most precious gifts you will ever bestow on another human being. This special gift will dramatically improve the quality of life for someone now living in darkness.

How can I become an eye or cornea donor?
Donating eye tissue does not entail any cost to the donor or the donor's family. If you wish to pledge your eyes, just fill out an Eye Donor Card (available at Nepal Eye Bank, Tilganga Eye Centre 4493884, mobile: 981020933). Carry the card with you at all times.
War without ends

“The Maoists’ only solid political foundation is their disdain for monarchy, even constitutional monarchy. At best, the platform is contradictory, at worst, a confusing reason to die.”

H THAYER WALKER III
World Press Review 4 March, 2004

The village of Solta, a dusty band of migrant workers rests in the shade of a banyan tree, eating, smoking and comforting their screaming children. They say they are going to India. In reality, they are running from Nepal. These 42 weather-beaten Nepalis, like millions of other men, old women and small children who find themselves in the same situation, are the real victims of this long war.

They walked for six days from a small village in the northwest called Narakot. They hoped to catch a bus the next day and continue to the town of Mahendranagar on the Indian border. From there, they would start walking again, looking for work as unskilled labourers in India. The youngest member of the group was four months old, the oldest 75. Some planned to work in India for three months, some six months, some longer. But many will likely stay.

Poor Nepal has been traveling to India to work for centuries. But these 42 mountain villagers, like the rest of the 80 percent of the country’s population living in rural areas, have found themselves caught in a crossfire. An immigration officer at the Mahendranagar border crossing, just one of many, estimates that he sees 500 Nepalis leave for work in India every day. He says he recently saw more than 3,000 Nepalis cross in a single day. A few years ago, he says, a busy day might have seen perhaps 100 Nepalis leaving for India.

Why are they leaving? The stories are the same: Maoist rebels, either on the run from the army or bent on extending their territory, enter a village. Sometimes they come in small groups of five or six. Other times, hundreds of heavily armed rebels will arrive. On their way through, they ask villagers for food, shelter, money, a son or a daughter. The villagers, subsistence farmers and craftsmen, are in no position to refuse.

When the Maoists leave, the security forces arrive on their trail. When they don’t find armed revolutionaries, the army often singles out villagers who gave the Maoists support, accusing them of being Maoists themselves. Sometimes they are harassment, other times jailed.

If the villages are very unlucky, the security forces will arrive while the Maoists are encamped and the village will turn into a battleground.

A large red and white ‘martyr gate’, one of many similar monuments across the country, stands at the border of Solta. Here, the gate commemorates a husband and wife from the village who had taken up arms for the Maoist cause two years ago and were killed in a nearby battle. A hammer and sickle crown the structure, ringed by the words, ‘The spilling of blood will only make us stronger.’

A group of several dozen Maoists had been in Solta a week before I arrived. When I asked how I could find them, one villager suggested hopping up into the hills. “You don’t find them, they find you,” he explained. As it happened, one found me having breakfast the next morning in the village. He introduced himself proudly as Comrade Rawal, the second in command at a nearby training camp. Unarmed, dressed in clean pants and a plaid shirt, he shook as though he could be a teacher or a farmer. The Maoists’ anonymity complicates the security forces’ jobs. As one teacher, explaining the security forces’ difficulties, put it, “Who is a Maoist? Is it you? Is it me? Is it that farmer tilling his fields, or the shopkeeper down the road? Who is a Maoist? Is it not pointing a gun in your face, how can you tell?”

Rawal and I spoke for more than an hour. He was polite and articulate. With his 10th-grade education, he may well have been one of the most educated men in the district. Now 22, he joined the movement at 18. The second of five brothers and sisters, he says he joined because he was tired of seeing his parents toil for nothing. When the Maoists came through his town, speaking of ‘getting respect for the poor’, ‘dividing land evenly’, and ‘creating a society with no rich or poor’, Rawal joined them. His family was proud of him, he explained, because he was an important man in a movement fighting for the rights of the poor. I hesitated to mention that the poor were suffering most from this war.

Rawal was in town, among other reasons, to go shoe shopping. He said he would return to the training camp, a two-day walk from Solta, after our conversation. The camp houses some 600 armed and indoctrinated guerrillas—hardcore fighters, as the military describes them. These fighters, Rawal said, eat 2,200 pounds of food a day. They must get their food somewhere, and the pressure inevitably falls on local villages. The camp buys some food with money from looted banks or local and tourists ‘donations’, but Rawal is frank about exporting the rest from villagers.

Rawal was hard-pressed to cite a country whose political model the Maoists admired, and could not explain what kind of policies the group would implement were they to come to power. But asked to write down his parting words, “To the rich of the world, the corrupt,” he said, “we poor are gathering, we are fighting and we are powerful.”

Rawal is more comfortable with dogmas and threats than with proper political platforms, it may be because the rebels lack a coherent ideology. The rebels call themselves Maoists, with hammer and sickle flags, speak of a ‘New Democracy’ and say they would implement a free-market economy were they to assume power. The two top leaders, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, aka Prachanda, and Baburam Bhattarai, an undergraduate, live in India. Their only solid political foundation is their disdain for monarchy, even constitutional monarchy. At best, the platform is contradictory, at worst, a confusing reason to die.

Of Deepak Gurung, chief information officer of the Royal Nepali Army, is a jolly, round man. He smiles often, whether he’s offering tea or explaining the difficulties of fighting a guerrilla war in Nepal. Immediately likeable, the colonel speaks seriously, yet knows how to put his audience at ease: admirable qualities in a spokesperson.

Nepal is a combination of the mountains of Afghanistan and the jungles of Vietnam,” Col Gurung explains. The army, he continues, is not fighting one enemy, it’s fighting two: the Maoists and the countryside. Nepal is an ideal chessboard for guerilla warfare. Labyrinthine hills rise into the highest mountain range on Earth, dense bush and jungles thrive in areas too steep or unfertile for cultivation. Maoists can strike and disappear back into familiar territory with ease.

Gurung points to the Annapurna region as an example of the difficulties his army faces. It is no secret that Maoism is on the rise in the hills around the villages of Ulleri, Chhompani and Ghandrung. Villagers know it, the army knows it and tourists—at this point still safe and out of the crossfire but subject to the Maoist tax when traveling through the area—know it. But it’s one thing to know Maoists are there and quite another to dislodge them.

The village of Ulleri clings to the side of a cliff nearly 1,000 feet above a river valley. Any place making in up to the village has to pass the town and into the hills would have to follow the one, well-worn footpath and would almost certainly be spotted long before it reached the village. Nearly every village has at least one small scoute to send word up the road if the military is on its way. As Gurung put it, “We know they are there, but by the time we get there, it’s too late. They’re gone.”

Numbers are vague, but official army estimates peg the number of Maoists “hardcore guerrillas” at somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000, though other estimates range as high as 5,000. Nepal’s army has been primarily on the number of weapons Maoists have seized from security forces in raids and does not include weapons that are being smuggled into the country from flashpoints like Kashmir. When added to the informal militia, variously estimated as being anywhere from 10,000 to 30,000 strong, as well as perhaps 60,000 ‘sympathisers’, the rebel pose a formidable army.

At this point, Nepal security forces number around 70,000, a number widely considered to be insufficient to suppress the rebels. Gurung merely chuckles when asked to estimate how many more troops the army will need to fight: “This is a theoretical how many troops we need,” he says. “At this point, we can only contain and degrade.” Then he pauses for a moment and suddenly the smile drops from his face. “Then,” he says, “we only say, no military solution.”
After the death of Utopia

Battles are now fought in “wars of ideas”

HANS BLOMMESTEIN

A decade ago, people spoke of the end of history, meaning the ultimate triumph of a liberal capitalist political order. Nowadays, many scoff at that notion as too simplistic. Nonetheless, we are at both the end and beginning of something remarkable.

In the wake of the death of the utopias—and often bloody—certainties of the 19th and 20th centuries, and with fading belief in the liberal welfare state, traditional views about work, retirement, education, the Church, solidarity and other social institutions are changing rapidly. The central driver of all this is today’s enormous acceleration in the underlying pace of technological and economic change. Call it fast-forward modernisation.

Of course, the worldwide crash of high-tech stocks in 2000 chilled the hype about a “new economy” that seemed to be emerging at the “end of history.” But falling share prices should not blind us to the fact that on top of the ongoing information revolution, three fresh waves of revolutionary technology are poised to hit bio-technology, nanotechnology, and robotics. Each is in its own industrial revolution, and will profoundly alter our lives and ways of thinking.

Indeed, the revolution is already upon us. For the first time in history, a global technological market system is shaping and characterised by a belief in the increasing importance of knowledge, new ideas, innovations and new technologies and a higher pace of what economist Joseph Schumpeter famously called “creative destruction.”

As a result, corporate capitalism is rapidly becoming obsolete, replaced by a creative capitalism in which entrepreneurship, combined with a greater willingness to adopt innovations, transforms the business landscape. Innovative start-ups become huge companies faster than ever before. But these infant giants are quickly threatened with eclipse by even newer enterprises.

Take the example of computers. It took 15 years for other countries to compete successfully with America’s Silicon Valley in semi-conductors, but less than five years in Internet technology. This system provides unprecedented financial incentives to scientists and entrepreneurs to aggressively develop new technologies and thus become rich. But the revolution is not only for the elite: it also offers a realistic (non-utopian) promise of dramatically improved lives for many people around the entire globe - not in 100 years, but in the everywhere now seems dominated by the “war of lifestyles” that has emerged from today’s emphasis on individual autonomy.

Not so long ago, issues such as the environment, the balance of work versus leisure in daily life, and the role of marriage, abortion and other family concerns were secondary political disputes, as politicians fought over who would receive what share of a nation’s wealth. Now these issues define domestic political agendas.

Much of the new battle over lifestyles is undeniably misunderstood, perhaps because debates about them are conducted in a simplistic way: anti-global movements versus multi-nationals, environmentalists versus corporate polluters, small farmers versus agro-business and so on.

But, beyond slogans, there is an underlying fault line between those who have the cultural capacity to embrace change and those who resist it by adhering to traditional ideas about how one’s life and, by extension, society, should be organised.

This conflict exists globally. In societies that have been preparing themselves by opening their markets and embracing universal education, the disruptions of this revolution can probably be absorbed and handled. Conflict is more acute in closed societies characterised by a politically repressive climate and culturally induced obstacles to growth. Such obstacles include the absence of an informed and capable workforce, instinctive mistrust and rejection of new ideas and technologies just because they come from the West, lack of respect for those who acquire new knowledge, and endemic discrimination against women.

The new battle of lifestyles has given rise to new enemies of open societies, such as the Taliban and Al Qaeda. It is no coincidence that terrorism thrives in societies that are instilled with hostility to today’s modernising values and belief in individual autonomy. So long as these ideas clash, violence will be.

Hans Blommestein is an economist with the OECD, and author of Alter the Death of Utopia.
Despite common interests, China has 500 short-range missiles aimed at Taiwan

By is Taiwan’s relationship with China so intrinsically linked?
Why, when they share common economic interests—one million Taiwanese live on the Mainland, working in some 50,000 firms in which Taiwanese have invested over $40 billion—does China aim 500 short-range missiles at Taiwan?

The run-up to Taiwan’s presidential election on 20 March is one current source of tension. The incumbent, Chen Shui-bian, has initiated a referendum process that might someday be used to ask Taiwanese if they want to formalise today’s de facto independence. This infuriates China.

After all, as Ma Zedong told Edgar Snow in 1936, “It is the immediate task of China to regain all our lost territories,” explicitly including “Formosa.” Since then, China has sought to make good on Mao’s pledge.

China’s new leadership often evinces a new judiciousness and moderation in its diplomacy. But few have quite the skill of the Chinese Academy of Military Sciences, recently declared that if Taiwan’s leaders “refuse to come to their senses and continue to use referenda as an excuse to seek independence, they will push their compatriots into the abyss of war.”

In an age when self-determination is a hallowed principle, how is it possible that Taiwan—which has been part of China for over 1,100 years—should be under the control of the People’s Republic of China—is shunned by every nation when it dares to wonder aloud why it should not be allowed to go its own way?

The reasons have deep historical roots. When Mao and the Chinese Communists came to power in 1949, they promised “reunification of the Motherland,” which included bringing Xinjiang (the Muslim desert regions of the West), Tibet, Mongolia, Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan back under central government control. It became a matter of national pride for a country that had been “cut up like amelon,” by predatory colonial powers, to end national feelings of humiliation by restoring itself to wholeness.

Communist propaganda relentlessly proffessed for re-unification as a “sacred” duty.

Over the last two decades, almost every other plank of the Communist Party’s platform (worldwide people’s war, proletarian struggle leading to a classless utopia, a triumph over global capitalism, etc.), has been abandoned. This leaves unification as the last tie to Mao’s revolution and justification for one-party rule. China’s leadership plays up this “revolutionary” commitment, for it helps generate nationalist sentiment, one of the few things besides strong economic performance that legitimises the Communist monopoly on power.

China and Taiwan have struggled politically even as their economies become increasingly unified. In due course, they may well be able to become more unified on the political front if they do not push their disagreements too aggressively. For economic convergence, if allowed to ripen, could set Taiwan and the PRC on an evolutionary course toward common sovereignty.

How can such a scenario be realised? China must declare loudly and clearly, that greater democracy, not mutual Leninism, is its ultimate political goal, and that as this evolutionary process takes place and the political climate becomes more congenial, they look forward to discussing how to better coexist as a political, as well as an economic, fabric with Taiwan. For its purview, Taiwan needs to calm down. Its leaders must understand that, even though “independence” may sometimes seem like a logical scenario, Taiwan is a small, vulnerable island, and China an emerging superpower.

Even though Taiwan may have a “right” to independence, its leaders need to remind their people that provocative actions will gain them little.

In 1973, at Sino-US relations were thawing, Mao admitted to Henry Kissinger that, though he did not believe reunification would come peacefully, “We can do without Taiwan for the time being, and let it come after 100 years... Why is there need to be in such great haste?”

Mao’s advice is not bad. Taiwan must take to heart its newfound dynamism and strength, and write a new scenario for its relations with Taiwan that emphasises persuasion instead of missiles. For the first time in fifty years, China and Taiwan share real interests. What blocks matrimony is China’s lack of democracy. Most Chinese would probably like to see this absence remedied as much as they favour full reunification. Only democracy in China can bring lasting peace to the Taiwan Straits.

Orville Schell

Orville Schell is a noted historian of China and a Dean at the University of California at Berkeley.
The age of neo-social democrats was little more than an episode

The Second World War had brought about the apocalyptic collapse of fascism as Hitler took Germany with him into a collective suicide. Fascism’s demise was followed by the more gradual disintegration of communism after Stalin’s death and Khrushchev’s revelations of Stalin’s crimes. The failed revolutions in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968 showed the eventual failure of the Soviet empire in 1989. While these pseudo-religions collapsed, a benighted ideology of social democracy dominated much of Europe. In its core was the belief that the state could provide both stable economic growth and social welfare to cushion the negative side effects of free markets. Not everyone subscribed to this theory, but it was the West’s strongest political force for several decades. Christian Democracy and even conservative parties, adopted it.

But by the early 1980s social democracy had exhausted itself. It had simply been too successful to remain a force for change. Moreover, it had brought about new rigidities, notably bureaucratisation and, that deadly phenomenon of the 1970s, stagnation—an economic stagnation and high unemployment coupled with galloping inflation. The reaction to this malaise turned vitriolic and it had a name—well, two names, Ronald Reagan and, above all, Margaret Thatcher. “Thatcherism” was not really much of an ideology; it was more a gut reaction to the stagnant 1970s, an attempt to draw up the straitjacket of the state and to reveal that not everything that arose from state beneficence was good. Even the word “neo-liberal” exaggerates the intellectual coherence of this counter-revolution.

This change in political direction coincided with—perhaps was precisely responsible for—the process that we now call globalisation. Thatcherism plus globalisation had many liberating consequences, but the combination also created new social problems, beggaring losses as well as winners. The Thatcherite counter-revolution was so successful that it, too, began to incite countervailing pressures. By the late 1990s, the political scene almost everywhere came to be dominated by the desire to combine competitiveness and growth-induced wealth creation on the one hand with solidarity, justice and social cohesion on the other. Both were to be achieved within a liberal order.

This is the main political project in most free societies and it is in principle acceptable to all major parties. Yet some tried to turn it into a new ideological edifice. They believed that a new age of social democracy had dawned, and for a while they sought to prove their point: Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, Gerhard Schroeder, Romano Prodi, (see pic, above) even some of those elected in the postcommunist countries seemed to belong to this political camp. The new “Third Way” spreading from Washington to London, and the rest of the world seemed to embody these leaders’ own ideology.

As it turned out, this episode was even shorter-lived than the conservative counter-revolution. Indeed, it was no more than an episode. Some of us always suspected that the Schroeder-Blair idea of “New Labour” or, in German, the “Neue Zentrum,” had no real basis. Soon it emerged that not all its apparent supporters actually supported it when Chancellor Schroeder’s proposed reforms caused squalls within his own party, he quickly dropped much of the Third Way program like a hot potato. At the same time, Blair found more sympathy for the Third Way with his Spanish conservative colleague José María Aznar than among many social democrats.

The apparent hegemony of neo-social democrat began to erode after only a few years. Aznar was not only conservative to replace a socialist government in the Mediterranean world, and the recent defeat of the socialists in Greece is unlikely to be the last. The Benelux countries, some Scandinavian states and many of the new Europeans of eastern central Europe have chosen traditionally right-of-centre parties. The German Chancellor and his “red-green” coalition still clings to power but is today severely weakened. Even Tony Blair is struggling to hold on.

All this does not augur a new change of direction in Europe. If Schroeder gave way to the Christian Democrats, indeed even if President Bush lost to his Democrat challenger, this would not imply the dawn of a new age. Domestically the one and only issue in most countries remains the same: how to provide a sustainable basis for economic growth in the harsh climate of the global marketplace while at the same time maintaining solidarity and a sense of fairness throughout society. Whoever governs must try to square this circle.

This would truly be the end of ideology as last, were it not for the new challenges arising from the temptations of various kinds of fundamentalism. Varieties of nationalism as well as the ascendency of religiously tinted forms of intangibles threaten the fabric of a free world. The invention of the Third Way mostly overlooked the value of individual liberty, but it is this that remains the single most important issue in a world where open societies still face mortal enemies.

SPEAKING OF THE EU

The EU spends most aid on itself

A new report from the European Commission, the executive arm of the European Union (EU), shows that more EU aid is spent on itself. In 2002, donors spent more resources on administrative overheads ($3.1 billion) than on basic health and education in poor countries—an allocated $2.7 billion.

The report says most member states insist on applying their own national procedures when they manage their development aid in recipient countries, meaning recipient countries are faced with a multitude of different reporting requirements. “This is imposing an administrative burden on these countries which is at times crippling their already weak administrative capacity,” said EU aid chief Paul Nielsen.

The Commission is proposing a common legal framework for aid implementation procedures. Other suggestions include improving the coordination of multi-annual programming and analytical work and outlining local EU action plans for coordination and harmonisation in partner countries where two or more EU donors have a cooperation program. Nielsen said that the Commission would also table a proposal soon for the full untying of Community aid to deliver more “efficient aid.”

But the European Commission needs to see its colleagues first, says Action Aid, a UK-based NGO. “It is untenable for the Commission’s discourse to be strongly in favour of aid untying while at the same time issuing contracts requiring all goods for EU-funded projects to be purchased in EU countries without any regard for principle or practicality,” said Louise Hilditch from Action Aid. Institutions responsible for new programming to unite aid and adopt the measures “as a matter of urgency,” she added.

The EC report shows an overall increase in aid. Based on current forecasts, the EU aid budget will increase from $38.6 billion in 2004 to $47.2 billion in 2006. That figure would represent 0.42 percent of the EU’s gross national income (GNI). The EU has pledged it will “examine the means and time frame for each EU member state to reach the UN target of 0.7 percent official development assistance of GNI, with an intermediary target of 0.5 percent by 2006.” According to figures released on 11 March, the EU is set to exceed these targets.

While we welcome the progress on aid levels, we consider that the EU should not lose sight of the 0.7 percent target which is, of course, the original commitment,” Hilditch said.

Nielsen said enlargement of the EU in May “would not jeopardise these targets. All accession countries have started to make the transition to becoming donors.” The accession states gave aid worth 0.03 percent of their GNI in 2002 on average. This commitment is expected to rise to 0.11 percent by 2006. ★ (IPS)
Democracy in a time of active monarchy

Madhah Kumar Nepal in Drishti, 14 March

From the king’s interview in Time Magazine and his statements in Nepal, we are getting to hear a new definition of democracy. The king has triggered a new debate on what kind of democracy we want: a guided democracy in which all Nepalis become slaves and compromise their democratic rights, or a democracy that protects sovereignty and ensures that the state power remains with the people’s representatives? If we follow the king’s definition, we will have to forget the worldwide concept of democracy. But if we do not subscribe to the king’s theory, we will have to go for democracy in the real sense. It should be a democracy that does not reek under the black clouds of autocracy and does not run the risk of being hijacked. Today we face a big question of the relevance and the justification of monarchy in the country. We did try to convince the king and bring him back to the democratic system, but we were unsuccessful. Instead, a succession of political parties, leaders and people with dignity had to face humiliation while trying to persuade the king. In the meantime, the taste of power made the rulers forget and even dismiss democratic achievements.

We are hearing about elections. It is a ploy to remain in power. The nominated prime minister keeps on harping about elections which are just not possible in the present circumstances. Another trick could be to stage the drama of elections and get the supporters in the fake parliament to keep the country in the shackles of slavery. But both of these options will not end the conflict in the country. Instead, clashes will increase, and that will be the way of our life. This conflict, however, will decide that there must be no compromise on our liberty and rights.

The Maoists have become a serious hurdle in our movement. On one hand, they protest inequally, the undemocratic system and feudocracy of the king, but on the other, they spread terrorism by murdering political workers and innocent people. We have repeatedly tried to make the Maoists correct their mistakes.

We admit that political parties have made mistakes in the past and that they must realize their follies. Some people in the parties have committed crimes too. There is a need to stop such crimes and punish the culprits. But it is not correct to implicate all the parties just because few politicians did wrong in the past.

When we talk about punishment, we do not mean that the people’s rights to punish the guilty ones must be transferred to the king. What we mean is that the king must remain within the framework of a constitutional monarchy. But if the king is not satisfied with the idea, it is time to ask if constitutional monarchy really suits the soil of Nepal.

Padam Ghale

Dang threatens

Kathmandu, 13 March

Under Maoist pressure, government officials in Dang have been forced to leave their official residences. In the district headquarters of Ghorahi alone, almost all 40 officials of different agencies have shifted elsewhere from the quarters they are officially entitled to.

The Maoist Thawatan Autonomous Region ‘People’s Government’ of Dang has prohibited the operation of government offices from Sunday. It has also asked government officials not to go to the office.

“Are we shifting because the rebels have threatened to blast bombs in the official residences,” said an official while he was packing his goods at the official residence in Ghorahi. The officials have been receiving threats to leave or to suffer the consequences. Many of them have now taken refuge in houses of friends and relatives. Some have rented rooms in hotels. More than 1,400 civil servants are in a dilemma about whether or not to go to their offices. The rebels have also declared a blockade in Dang for an indefinite period.

Bananomics

Kathmandu, 13 March

A recent study has revealed that each Nepali incurs a loss of about Rs 97 and the nation as a whole Rs 1 billion in losses from each day of banda or general strike. The Kathmandu Research Center says Nepal hasn’t gained anything from the series of bandas the country has gone through in the past decade, and they have only added to the woes of our already troubled economy as it has plied over the country’s debt. The study points out that among the most affected sectors due to this frequently called banda programs are education and tourism. A single day of banda means more than Rs 3,81 million of government investment in the educational sector goes down the drain. (Nepalnews.com)

Child labour

Lal Bahadur Chitrakar in Dipayal

Kalpana Samuwar is the pride of the Dalit community in her village, most of whom cannot go to school because they can’t afford to. But 11-year-old Kalpana works every morning and evening near the Seti River breaking boulders to make gravel to earn enough money to pay her way through school. Working side by side with her mother near the riverside, Kalpana also contributes her savings to augment her family’s income. Earning Rs 800 a month, she manages to buy textbooks, pens and other stationery. “I give the remaining money to my mother,” says Kalpana.

Sometimes, she has no time to finish her homework, but the teacher doesn’t understand and spansks her. More than half the Dalis in Dipayal, especially girls, can’t afford to go to school. Not a single girl out of 100 Dalit families in Dipayal has completed...
school. Even if the children get the opportunity to study, they are unable to concentrate and continue schooling. “Children go through so much mental and physical pressure that they won’t get the chance to progress in life,” says Kumar Tailor, a Dalit activist from Baita.

**Ban bandas**

Baburam Khadka in Samacharpana, March 15

The last nine years of a violent Maoist rebellion has taken its toll. And now in the name of pressuring the government, they have started to organise a series of bandas in which the innocent civilians suffer the most. Fed up with the frequent strikes, the Nepali public has started to question the Maoists’ real intentions. After all, it is the civilians who suffer the most, affecting their livelihood, health and children’s education. And the worst situation is for the daily wage laborers who have to work everyday to make a meagre income. They lose a day’s meal if there is a banda. While the business community complain about the country bearing a loss of a billion rupees in a single day’s banda, there are other significant problems faced by the ordinary people. In the five-day banda, a pregnant woman in Dharan lost her life when she was not able to reach the hospital on time. Strikes are nothing new for the Nepalis. During the multi-party governance also, people had to go through the same ordeal of the politicians using strikes as their weapon against the government to fulfill their political aims. And it was especially the CPM-UML that organized most of the strikes when they were the main opposition party against the Congress government. But now people have started to rebel, they are resisting reports of human rights abuses by the Maoists and security forces. The bombing of a bus and the blockade by Maoists deserve to be made public. The story of the Bhopal attack needed to be told. It is a cliché to say that “anything can happen during a war.” One thing is for sure: there is more press freedom today than ever before and we owe this to the evolution of democracy in this country. The Nepali media is aware of its public service role, but the minister’s statement is biased and he is blaming the messenger for the bad news.

**Blaming messengers**

Annapurna Post, March 15

Information and Communications Minister Kamal Thapa has accused the Nepali media of panicking the public and taking press freedom for granted. He has urged media not to cover news that would demoralise the public. Sure, it is unethical to report news that sows fear and sensationalises. But the government should also look at how media has helped to boost public morale. Each individual has subjective views, but in a democratic country, the media is not subject to government control over what and how news should be presented. Journalists are also accountable and it will be detrimental if they misuse the power of press freedom.

It is unreasonable to say that the media is exaggerating reports of human rights abuses by the Maoists and security forces. The bombing of a bus and the blockade by Maoists deserve to be made public. The story of the Bhopal attack needed to be told. It is a cliché to say that “anything can happen during a war.” One thing is for sure: there is more press freedom today than ever before and we owe this to the evolution of democracy in this country. The Nepali media is aware of its public service role, but the minister’s statement is biased and he is blaming the messenger for the bad news.

**Nepalnews.com**

Hinal Khubayarka, 14-28 March

Far away from home, Maya never used to miss reading news from Nepal on Nepalnews.com before going to classes every day. One day, when she did not arrive in class on time, her friend Samjhana was concerned. Maya used to be always punctual. With her teacher’s permission, Samjhana went to Maya’s room to look for her. The door was open. Maya was lying face down in front of her monitor, which displayed Nepalnews.com with a headline: ‘Husband and wife killed in early morning assassination in Kathmandu.’ They were Maya’s own parents.

**Radio Mao**

Sangba, March 15

Nepalganj—Maoists have launched a regional FM radio station, aimed from an undisclosed location in Nepalgunj. The three-hour daily broadcast can be heard from 6:30-7:30 AM and 6-8 PM on 94.2 mhz on the FM band and consists of communist songs, news of Maoist activities and adventures as well as some entertainment programs. The radio also runs commercials from local business firms and industries. Besides Banke, Bardiya, Surkhet and Kapilbastu, the radio program is also accessible across the border in India. There are reasons to believe the Maoist transmitters are located in India.

(Nepalnews.com)
Tul Bahadur Pun joined the British Army during the Second World War and was awarded the Victoria Cross for his bravery in Burma. Containing his saga, Pun recounts landing in a glider deep inside Burma. This serialisation of the testimonies of retired Gurkha soldiers is translated from Lahurey ka Katha by Dev Bahadur Thapa.

The Japanese had advanced to Manipur when we confronted them. On their arrival at Manipur, they sent word to us that the following day they would have morning tea in Phekau. Maybe they would, since they were a strong force. Their headquarters were in Moula in Burma, where they had stored their weapons and supplies. Our strategy was to capture Moula by cutting off their supply lines rather than confront them head-on. So, we marched through the jungle and approached Moula. We had 50 rounds of bullets and 7 cases of rations to last a week. The commander gave instructions to carry as much as we could, but said we must stock up on tea and salt. Since water is available everywhere, we could somehow survive by having boiled water mixed with tea and salt.

At nightfall we reached the spot. A large contingent of troops was approaching on the road under which we had laid a landmine but we didn’t have time to fix up the fuse. Since they had arrived by train, it was impossible to detonate it then. We arrived at the conclusion that there is no sense in waiting since more enemy soldiers would soon be there. We detonated the explosive and the bridge was blown up.

The enemy occupied a hilltop and had their brigade stationed at a nearby town. From time to time they came to look, but didn’t do anything else. In the previous encounter we had captured one of their wireless sets. We heard everything broadcast about their activities, yet could not decipher a single word because no one spoke Japanese. So we sought the help of a captain who had spent a considerable time in Japan and was well versed in Japanese and put him on wireless duty. He picked up their messages and informed us about their activities and the timing of their attacks. We found out that they had a tank and a second-class brigade stationed there. Their plan was to do away with us since our first regiment, only half was there and the rest had been posted elsewhere. They had an action schedule with the timings for artillery firing, aerial bombardment, attack by tank and finally an assault by the infantry.

For our part, we built bunkers and hid inside. We collected information about their plans and forwarded the message to higher authorities at Tinukha. We were told not to worry and they promised to send all possible help. Our planes dropped in wires, rations and weapons before their planes could come. We fitted in wire fences. As zero hour approached we made a plan to capture their defence positions. Only those personnel who could handle heavier weapons were placed in the camp. I was one of those as I was good at operating the three-inch hooker machine guns, rifles and pet guns. Pet guns are used in demolishing bunkers.

Their attack started with bombardment. Except for one type of bomb, the rest did not do much harm. This was the one that made big flashes, shook everything, and sank to a considerable depth and before exploding. Then came their planes. Our planes were nowhere in sight. Their tanks advanced, followed by infantry. Their troops had already approached our barbed wire fencing. Just then our fighter planes arrived and dogfights started in the air. Little parachutes started dropping from the sky, and we wondered why they were dropping food while the fighting was going on, only to realise that they were bombs. They dispersed all over and exploded with loud bangs. If one exploded nearby, everyone was killed. After eliminating the ground force the planes started attacking the tanks. The enemy planes were chased away. Some were burning as they flew away. In short, everything was smashed.

Only one enemy commander and 12 other ranks with him escaped death. All troops in the frontlines met with death. A handful of troops not in full fighting form were in the camp, yet they too were finished off by our troops.

Our next target was to capture Moges. We walked eight days to reach the hill. On the ninth day two squadrons of troops were ambushed. Luckily I escaped unhurt. We established our camp at some distance and sent forward our men for scouting. They found out where the enemy had laid more ambushed. Accordingly, we made a plan and proceeded further.

That town looked like it was surrounded by tea on all sides, the river was so wide. A company had been stationed there and a bridge built. The bridge had been blown up, but the enemy had fixed up wooden planks and made it serviceable. They had designed the bridge so that it made considerable noise when someone crossed it. A full company of enemies had been stationed to safeguard the bridge. As it was the main route leading to the town, we had no other option but to cross the bridge.

First the English battalion attacked the bridge, then the Indian regiments. In all six assaults were made, but it could not be captured. Now came the turn of our Gurkha battalion. I was assigned to scout out the area. Making the slightest noise could spell doom. One should mark the difference between shoes in use now and those used then. Then we had shoes fixed with nails and they made creaking noises. I wrapped cloth on my feet and inspected the right and left side of the bridge. They had put gun posts on both ends of the bridge.

After a thorough reconnaissance, I came back slowly and steadily.
Golfing for a cause

Do you have the spine to play golf?

A few recent developments continue to boost our optimistic outlook for golf’s future in Nepal. The first was when the recent Himalayan Bank Open Golf Championship contributed all of its proceeds towards a Golf Development Fund. Then last Saturday, the 1st Pokhara Open proved to be a big step towards golf development outside the valley. A trio of avid golfers made up of Aju Adhikari, Managing Director of Park & Shop along with colleagues Balam Thapa of German Bakery and local businessman Raju Bhattarai put together the idea of doing a Pro-Am tournament at the Himalayan Golf Course.

A Pro-Am event is where amateurs get to play in the same group as professionals, and is a great way for amateurs to experience higher levels of golf than they are used to. This is the only event for professionals in Pokhara apart from the regular annual Sonu Nepal Western Open. The tournament saw eight Nepali professionals and a number of amateur golfers participating.

It was organised with the aim of developing the standard of golf and to help boost the local tourism industry. The main sponsor was Park & Shop and the supporters were Signature Whisky along with the Pokhara business community, the Pokhara Golf Society, Pokhara Municipality, Nepal Professional Golfer’s Association and, of course, the Himalayan Golf Course.

Professional Sabin Sapkota won the tournament with a commendable gross score of one over par 71, and Pushparaj Sharma of Gokarna Forest Golf Resort came second with a score of 72. The amateur winner was Capt. MB Limbu with 38 stableford points.

This Sunday, a new idea is being tried out to use the fun of golfing for a cause. On 21st March, a charity event is being held at Gokarna Golf Club to raise funds for the Spinal Injury Rehabilitation Center (SIRC) at Jorpati near Gokarna Forest. This is a new and novel way of bringing awareness to a noble cause and raising funds for a charitable centre that houses, treats and rehabilitates Nepalis who have had falls and accidents leading to back injuries and varying degrees of paralysis.

The innovative part of the event is its appeal to non-golfers to come up to the venue along with family and friends to relax and enjoy the fresh air, sunshine and lush surroundings and participate in fun events based around the theme of golf. Meanwhile, die hard golfers will navigate their way around the picturesque and challenging par 72 golf course at Gokarna in their bid to win attractive prizes with a attractive crystal replicas of the SIRC’s innovative logo that gives a modernistic view of a person’s spine. The valuable and fun prizes for both non-golfers and golfers have been kindly donated by a host of sponsors.

To conclude, this Sunday’s SIRC charitable event has a goal of supporting the center in looking after its patients. For that reason, and as individuals with healthy backs and sturdy spines, I hope you will consider joining us on Sunday for the Tournament or Events.

Deepak Acharya is a golf instructor and Head Golf Professional at Gokarna Forest Golf Resort & Spa, Kathmandu. prodeepak@hotmail.com

The great game

Pakistani test-fired its new Sahen II missile, which can be fitted with nuclear weapons and can hit cities far into India and the Indians hardly batted an eyelid. Soon after the news broke, an influential Delhi opinion-maker said he thought the missile was fired to reassure the Pakistani public. In any case, he said, the Indians themselves were always testing such missiles. Even a few months ago, not only would the government in Delhi have been vitriolic in its response, but the general mood would also have been somber, if not fearful.

It is tempting to say that the cricket series between the two neighbours this month, the first in five years and the first visit by an Indian cricket team to Pakistan in 15 years, is what is prompting this rare show of nonchalance. Cricket might bring together two countries that have fought three wars since they became independent from Britain in 1947. They remain distant neighbours that, even today, each country allows only two journalists from the other country to operate on its soil and both get their news of each other through the BBC World Service.

Still, there are Indians who, while keen on peace, are worried that the cricket tour could go wrong and jeopardise the nascent peace process.

Vinoosh Mehta, the editor of Outlook, says: “Such is the desire for peace from on high that, although we are in the middle of a very robust general election campaign in India, there is no Pakistan-bashing this time. But, God forbid, should something happen to our star players either on the field of play or in their hotels, it could have fearful consequences in this country. The fact is politicians want this tour to show that relations between the two countries can be normal.”

All this makes this cricket tour very special. But what makes it truly unique is that, for the first time in an India-Pakistan cricket series, it will be the Indians who have reason to feel more confident about the final result.

Historically, India, the larger country, has always had a deep inferiority complex when it comes to Pakistan. On the cricket field, Pakistan, the younger nation, initially led by cricketers who had first played for a united India, have been more successful. While Pakistan has won Tests and series in India, India has yet to win a single Test in Pakistan.

Now Shining India is the campaign slogan of the ruling Indian coalition, which has been promoting an Indian feel-good factor. And this is reflected in the way Indian cricket has performed both on and off the field.

Off the field, thanks to its growing middle-class—estimated to be about 200 million—and in its appetite for televised cricket, India is now the economic powerhouse of the game. It provides 60 percent of world cricket’s income and every second person watching cricket in the world is believed to be an Indian. On this tour, 90 percent of the hotelings round the Pakistani cricket grounds will be advertising products either from Indian companies or from multinationals targeting the growing Indian middle class.

India’s now-found economic success seems to be echoed on the cricket field. The Indians have returned from a tour of Australia with a sort of keudos they had not dreamt of. Back in December, when they left to play the best cricket team in the world, most Indians feared a 4-0 whitewash and thought it would be a triumph if the margin of defeat was kept low. Instead, the Indians drew the series 1-1 and came close to beating the mighty Australians, who are unfazed at home for a decade.

Also, in one of those curious cricketing paradoxes, India will take a bowling attack to Pakistan that would have graced the Pakistan of yore, and, what is more, is led by two Muslims, both hailng from Gujarat, which has been ranked by anti-Muslim votes. One of them is the son of the muzak man, the who calls the Islamic faithful to prayer. He learnt his cricket round the mosque, but is keen to advertise his loyalty to India and the secular state it claims to be.

The Indian side has long enjoyed a reputation for wily spinners, but has always hungered for genuinely quick bowlers. It has long memories of its batsmen being humiliated by opposing pacemans; nothing hurt more than the thumping defeats inflicted by Imran Khan, as captain of Pakistan, just over 20 years ago. Just before that trip, I spoke to a leading Indian batsman who confessed that he expected India to get beaten—and they were duly thrashed.

The mood in Indian cricket and the public at large is very different today. There is a confidence there that hasn’t been seen before, a confidence that not even the Pakistan coach, Ijaz Afzal, whose six offers the last ball for a Pakistan victory in 1980 is still scarred into Indian memory, may not be able to erase.

MIHIR BOSE

India-Pakistan Tour Schedule

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FESTIVALS AND EXHIBITIONS
- French language week: 15-20 March. Various programs at the Alliance Française of Kathmandu, 4241163
- Dolpo Lives: Paintings by Tenzin Norbu until 20 March, 10AM-4PM at Shangri-la, Lazimpat
- Paintings by Asha Dangol until 4 April, 12:30-7:30 PM at Gallery Mohk, Closed Mondays
- Numangut paintings until 30 March at Gallery Nine, 4428694

EVENTS
- Osho’s book exhibition at Osho Taboan, 20 March to celebrate their 15th anniversary. Special discounts available.
- Family Day at Dokama Forest Golf Resort to benefit the spinally injured from Contemplative to Cognitive Science talk by Matthieu Ricard. 25 March at 5:30 PM at Bagkippaha, Yala Maya Kendra, Patan Dhokha, 5542554, 5543017

MUSIC
- Jazzmandu Jazzmandu with Soulmate 19 March at Shangri-la. Tickets Rs 350 and Rs 200 for students.
- Jazz at Patan 24 March, 6-9PM at Patan Museum Square. Tickets Rs 1149
- Peter Rowan live 20 March, 7:30PM onwards at Shangri-la. Tickets Rs 999 with dinner
- Bardia National Park 19 March, 6:30 PM onwards inside club Hardic, Classical & Traditional Nepali Music Concert
- Jazzmandu All Star Fever
- Peter Rowan at Moksh 19 March, 6:30 PM onwards inside club Hardic, Pulchowk. Tickets Rs 300. 5528703

FOOD
- Margarita Night on 26 March at Dwarka’s. Rs 650 per person, 4479488
- Roadhouse Cafe for speciality coffees. Opposite St Mary’s School, Pulchowk. 5521755
- Traditional Newari Thali at Kathmandu Guest House, Thamel. 4431632

GETAWAYS
- Escape to Godawari on a special halfboard package for Nepalis and expatriates at the Godawari Village Resort, Taalbek. 5566575
- Pure relaxation Award winning Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge. 01 4361500 TMPL Reservations or reservations@tigermountain.com
- Bardia National Park full board, luxury ‘on stilts’ cottage and picknicks, only Rs 10 a day (park activities extra) at Jungle Base Camp Lodge. Email: junglebasecamp@yahoo.com

KATHMANDU VALLEY

Nepal Weather

The first post-winter storm of this season hit the Valley on Tuesday night. The average March rain in Kathmandu Valley is 58mm and that snow brought 29mm. Last night’s hope it will replenish the water in our parched area and ease the power cuts. The cloud cover, first felt blown in from the southwest have brought down temperatures somewhat, but the mercury will climb back to more normal levels by next week. This capsule picture plane study on Thursday shows convection clouds over central and eastern Nepal that will continue to bring isolated showers over the Mahabharat Hills. Snow flurrys will come down to 4,700m in the high passes this weekend.

KATHMANDU AIR QUALITY

What you breathe is what you breathe

| GOOD | air quality | 0.0 - 50 |
| UNHEALTHY | 121 - 360 |
| HARMFUL | 351 - 425 |
| HAZARDOUS | >425 |

The average concentration of PM10 (particulate matter below 15 micrometers) in Kathmandu for last week was slightly less than the previous week, mainly because of the bands on Monday which reduced the pollution levels in the city by almost 30 percent. However, dual levels along busy streets such as Pusul Sitala and Patan Hospital were about the same as the natural background. The pollution was specially high on 11th March when the PM2.5 levels at those places went almost three times the national limits. PM10 can cause major health impacts and the World Health Organization does not prescribe any safe limits for PM10, as all small concentrations can damage health.

With a huge all-star cast which includes Hugh Grant, Emma Thompson, Colin Firth and Keira Knightley, Love Actually is all about – what else – love. Set almost entirely in London during five frantic weeks before Christmas. Love Actually follows a web-like pattern of inter-connected, loosely related and unrelated stories of a dozen or more various individuals with their love lives, and the clash of them. With an uplifting Christmas Eve finale, this one is billed as “the ultimate romantic comedy.”

From 26 March 2004 Call 4442220 for show timings. www.jainepal.com

CLASSIFIED

VINTAGE FOR SALE: Wanted: Nepali pilot, interested person should have experience for ultra light aircraft with Rotax 582 engine. Apply with cv, photo and contact address within 7 days to Arka Club Nepal Pvt. Ltd., P.O. Box 1568.

Modern houses for residential office or flat. Contact 4701477, 4721798

To-Let: Premium location of an Air Praid, Harihar Bhawan, Pulchowk. Large flat, 180 sq. meter. Suitable for NGO, INGO and other Commercial Offices. 2 floors of approx.900 sq. meter. Include of 1 parking space. 1st floor is fully furnished for residential office or flat. Contact: Rammani 5521656.

For Sale: Wanted Nepali pilot, interested person

BOOKWORM

CITES Implementation in Nepal and India Ravi Sharma Aryal Birkatari Academic Publications, 2004 1495

Ravi Sharma Aryal presents an in-depth analysis of the implementation stage of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) in Nepal and India, along with suggestions on how to improve the current legislation and enforcement strategies to better protect our wildlife.

Courtesy: Manda Bo Book Point, Kantiapath. 4227711, mandala@iciscl.com.np
Ashmina’s art

When she was a young girl, Ashmina Ranjit wanted to fly. She’d watch the clouds, feeling envious of their freedom. She took this as a sign that she may one day become a pilot.

However, the future had a very different path in store for her. Ashmina did well in school, and went on to Australia to do her Bachelor’s in Fine Arts. She came back and started teaching art at Tribhuvan University. Anyone who’s experienced Ashmina’s art will tell you that few walk away from it without questioning the very fabric of their own existence.

She’s moved away from canvas and is experimenting with new forms, using whatever her expression demands. “My art is social. It’s political. It works with women and sexuality. It questions,” she says.

These questions have thrown up paradoxes. She recalls a series she painted on women and sensuality to exhibit in Kathmandu. “A woman I was talking about and expressing sexuality. To know your body is your right. Women need to know their own bodies.”

Ashmina was accused of being obsessed with sex, and people put it off to her time in Australia. Back in Australia she showed the same series. There they appreciated her bold expression. Ashmina recalls, “They said, ‘You paint like this because you are from Asia, from Nepal, you’re Hindu. That’s where the karmastra comes from.’” The extremes in reaction in the two audiences threw up contradictions for Ashmina, and she felt no one really understood her work.

Ashmina got thinking about how she could bridge the divide. She wanted to create a platform for artists to interact, an organisation that would invite artists from around the world to see how Nepali artists work and send artists abroad whenever possible.

Today, Ashmina has a huge network across the globe and in November 2003 her vision was realised formally as the group ‘Sutra’.

At a workshop this week organised by Sutra at the Osho Tapoban forest retreat in Nagarjun, Ashmina and the six other core members of Sutra were working to bridge another gap: a generational one. Twenty-one writers, filmmakers and musicians alike attended a productive four-day workshop. Now at 37, Ashmina leans back and thinks: “Finally, I am flying.”

The Churia Forest Development Project (ChFDP), is a bilateral project of HMG Nepal and the German Government. The project is implemented jointly by Nepali and German partners and covers the Terai (plains) and Churia (foothills) of Siraha, Saptari and Udayapur districts of Nepal’s Eastern Development Region.

The project’s goal is to restore the ecological balance of the Churia hills for the benefit of the local population. It aims to develop approaches and strategies for the protection and sustainable management of forest resources in these areas, which could be replicated in other parts of Nepal where similar conditions prevail.

ChFDP was initiated in 1992 and is the only large bilateral project with long-term experience of forest policy implementation in the Terai and Churia region. The last 12 years have shown that the community forestry programme, which has been highly praised in international circles for its success in hill regions, is an equally relevant and valuable tool for the lowlands. Community forestry has helped to spark a remarkable recovery in the ecological condition of the Churia forests in the three districts. The considerable financial potential of the forests is starting to be realised, thanks to the skills and dedication of local communities. Community forestry ensures that this potential will be utilised for the benefit of the direct forest users and for the region as a whole, while also helping to strengthen social ties within and between communities.

The successful adaptation of community forestry in the Terai and Churia highlights the flexibility inherent in the policy framework. The project has addressed problems unique to the region, such as the unequal distribution of forest resources from North to South and the complex relationships between diverse groups of forest users.

ChFDP is now ready to move into its next phase (2004-2007). With the continuing hard work and support of our partners in HMG and NGOs, the project looks forward to further improvements in our strategy to build the forests of the Churia hills into an engine for development for all the people of the three target districts.

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A truck carrying supplies to Kathmandu that was torched by Maoists on the Prithivi Highway on Sunday to enforce their blockade of the central region.

Eight international and local jazz bands played at the packed Jazz Bazar at the Gorakarna Forest Golf Resort on Saturday.

DIPS AND SECS: the Diplomats 11 thrashed the Chief Secretaries 11 by 7-2 at a charity football match played at the Durbar Stadium on Saturday. Proceeds went to the Sahara Group, which helps children orphaned by the conflict.

Owners of Volkswagen Beetles took part in a peace rally from Patan to Dhalalich on Saturday. They raised money for debt relief surgery and for porter welfare.

A queue stretches down Lazimpat as people wait to enter the kerosene depot on Sunday.
Driving each other nuts

Friends, Romans and countrymen, lend me your ears. I have come to you today with yet another column containing valuable driving tips. To those of you who are muttering under your breath, “Oh no, not another article with silly driving tips!” let me just say that you have no choice. Take it or leave it. What? You are turning the page to read the editorial? OK, bye.

UNDER MY HAT
Kunda Dixit

Having valiantly survived the British siege at Nagalphani and the two-year Indian blockade in 1989, we Nepalis have developed a siege mentality that will see us through this blockade too. After all, if we have been able to live without water for the last four months in our neighbourhood, there is no reason why we can’t carry on without daily items of basic necessity like broccoli. But (just in case) make sure your car is tanked up with high octane kerosene from the Agni Petrol Station, so you can keep on driving around town with no worries at all.

I know, I know, we just did a motoring column, but in this day and age you can never have enough pointers on how to negotiate traffic on our streets and blockaded highways especially because the rules keep changing. So, without much ado about nothing, it is time for another periodic update with answers to frequently asked questions about driving in Nepal:

Q: On which side of the road does one drive in Nepal?
A: Those of you who thought that in Nepal we drive on the left side of the road are wrong. That rule has just been changed, and all motorcycles are henceforth required to drive on the right side (which used to be the wrong side) of the street at all times and weave suicidally in and out of dodging oncoming mucks and buses. The left side of the road will now only be used to park bricks, cement, steel rods and other construction materials.

Q: What is the latest on helmets and visors?
A: As we go to press at 1900 hrs GMT on Thursday, you are not required to wear a helmet if you have a visor on. The pillon rider must have a helmet prominently displayed, but not necessarily on the head. The ban on visors has been reimposed after being lifted, and we are not quite sure of the status but you can wear an anti-pollution mask only if you can prove to the officer on duty that you are on a terrorist mission to blow up the toilet of Kathmandu’s Ward 19 Secretariat.

Q: What are the rules on overtaking?
A: The first thing to remember is that we never overtake in Nepal, we always takeover. It is a part of our glorious culture to be territorial about a 10 m radius of asphalt around us on the street, and we besiege anyone who dares to trespass this space. And that includes you over there, yes, you on the wheelchair with two children on the zebra crossing.

Q: Are there any specific things I need to know about military checkpoints?
A: I’m glad you asked that...