A s Nepal’s tri-polar power struggle remains deadlocked, the three main outside powers are increasingly worried about its outcome. In its febrile state, Kathmandu is more susceptible to outside pressure than ever before, and post-9/11 convergence of US, Indian and Chinese interest in the region has changed the nature of that influence.

Nepal’s two neighbours and the global power are worried about the possibility of a Maoist victory and the inability of constitutional forces in Nepal to unite against it. Their styles may differ and there may be some irritants, but the US, India and China no longer seem to be working at cross purposes.

Analysts see India’s arrest of senior Maoists as a result of Anglo-US insistence that it do more. The Chinese have disavowed any support for ‘anti-government rebels’ here. Nepal and US militaries have held joint night exercises for the first time involving terrain-hugging EC-130 surveillance aircraft, apparently with Indian and Chinese concurrence.

Indian officials confirmed regular consultations between Washington, Beijing and New Delhi about Nepal, adding: “Our bottom line is that instability in Nepal will harm our national interest and there is a danger of spill-over of the Maoist revolution.”

But within Nepal, distrust of Big Brother still runs deep. Some believe New Delhi has used the insurgency to wrest concessions from Nepal. “It has been proven time and again that India takes advantage of instability here,” says foreign affairs analyst Himanshu Lal Shrestha, citing recent bilateral talks on transport, hydropower and security preceding Indian arrest of senior Maoists.

Foreign Minister Bhekh Bahadur Shapu, who served as ambassador in New Delhi for six years denies Nepal has sold out to India in return for a get-tough policy on Maoists. "There is nothing brewing behind the scenes," he says.

Indian officials also deny a correlation. "We are alarmed when nothing moves, and we are blamed when we make progress," Indian ambassador Shyam Saran has said. India also denies recent crackdowns against Maoists in India is new. "Our policy on terrorist activities of Nepal Maoists and support for the Nepalese government has always been consistent and clear," says Indian Embassy First Secretary Sanjay Verma. Indeed, Indian military support in training and hardware to the Royal Nepali Army far exceeds anything the Americans or the British have given so far.

Pradip Giri’s of the Nepali Congress (D) says xenophobic rules in Kathmandu are so used to exaggerating Indian and Chinese omnipotence that they believe their own myths. “India is a factor, we should acknowledge that,” he said in a TV interview this week. “Indian support is a necessary, but not sufficient condition, for resolving the Maoist issue.”

India, the US and Britain have divided up the work of forging a palace party rapprochement. So far this year, India has issued three statements strongly advocating that the king and parties patch up. The Chinese probably agree, but steadfastly refuse to talk. Chinese ambassador Sun Heping told a press meet recently: "We never comment on the internal affairs of another country.”

The Maoist strategy has been to try to drive a wedge between the US against India and China by stoking fears of superpower adventurism in their backyard. While there may still be cold warriors in the corridors of power in Beijing and New Delhi, who are suspicious of US intentions vis-a-vis Nepal, it is clear that regional geopolitics has moved on.

(Reporting by Navin Singh Khadka)
The India card
Time for the Maoists to thwart their people’s war into a peaceful people’s movement

Maoist leader Prachanda tried to put on a brave face after the detection of his comrade and ideological guru, sharing rivers and natural resources. He did not give us the gory details of exactly what he meant.

Even while they were reeling in the military victories in Bhujpur, Beni and Pashupatinagar, the Maoists were at the receiving end of a true crossfire from the box of a senior leader and important documents in the underground office of their eastern command. They have had enough of a challenge for the Maoist movement. India has now sent the message: “We can catch you five times” and it has also shown that the Maoists are not outside the Indian security net.

The Maoist’s relations with India has been a tricky business. Nine years ago, when they started their ‘People’s War’, India was a enemy number one. They launched a series of anti-Indian military moves and stopped vehicles with Indian license plates. But for eight years after that, they didn’t harm any Indian embassies, businesses and personalities. Cadres of the Babu Bhabha Party, which the Maoists used to call ‘pro-Indian’ were never harmed. In fact, the Maoists themselves earned the reputation of being pro-Indian, and New Delhi derived economic and strategic benefit from Maoist policies and activities.

Much more than the United States, it was the Indian military that was providing the Royal Nepali Army with training and hardware all along. Yet, paradoxically, it was ‘American imperialism’ that the Maoists consistently slammed. In 1996, when they launched their armed struggle, the Maoists said with characteristic rhetorical flourish: “The main enemy of the people’s war is the democratic capitalist and royalist class which is backed by Indian expansionists.” In the next eight years, the ‘Indian expansionists’ part of that statement vanished.

Now, New Delhi is making up for having ignored or tolerated Nepali Maoists. The recent arrest and extraditions of senior Maoist figures and the declaration of the Maoist-affiliated All-India Nepal Solidarity Society a terrorist outfit indicates that there is now convergence between the policies of the United States, India and King Gyanendra’s Nepal.

The Maoist response to all this was to use Indian territory to launch the attack on the Nepali border town of Pashupatinagar on April 7. They set fire to 18 Indian-registered gas tankers in Dhumadhi, and had the help and support of an Indian army, and burned cinemas not to show Indian movies in Nepal. After a strong diplomatic move by the Indian Embassy in Kathmandu, Maoist spokesman Krishna Mohan Baidya, Indian police in Sligatun on 29 March. He said Comrade Karan’s death and the case of collaboration between the rulers in Kathmandu and New Delhi over the differences between the constitutional forces are plain wrong. He should also get that there is a clash of values during the reign of the elected governments that Lal wants restored. Lal needs to meet the daily demand of 60,000 villagers in the country. So, having golf courses in water stressed Kathmandu or even meant a huge additional water demand met primarily by heavily extracting groundwater reserves. Replenishment is always lower as most of the water is lost to evaporation. Ground water reserves, forests and open spaces are local commons and they are usually encroached upon by private businesses, resentment of affected communities is an expected outcome. There is no denying that golf generates enough revenue to take care of its own problems. But we must address the land, water use and pesticides issues so as to ensure that local communities’ needs are also properly taken care of. Limiting construction of new courses only in water abundant areas, strictly applying integrated pest management technology, avoiding conventional irrigation systems, following mandatory environmental impact assessments and equity sharing benefits with local communities should be some ways to minimise socio-environmental impacts. We have an excellent opportunity to learn from the mistakes of other countries.

Jugal Bhurtil, Moscow

EYE
Mr. Narah Newar queries in his article about Tilganga Eye Centre (An eye for an eye, #18), we are a completely Nepali operation in our technical, administrative, financial and personnel departments. In the absence of a group of Nepalis led by Jagdish Ghimire, sat down with almost but a wild dream to provide world-class and sustainable ophthalmic services in Nepal and to infect similar countries around the world with this dream. The board of directors, under Ghimire’s chairmanship, are Nepali volunteers from varied professions and businesses, dedicated to providing world-class eye care.

There has also been strong financial support from the Icelandic firm, Ananda Sangh and others. As Newar mentions, TEC’s eye care has been sought after by organisations such as the Gramen Bank, the Fred Holmes Foundation and others. We still have miles to go.

working in Nepal is difficult, but not impossible.

Sandru Kuit, Tilganga Eye Centre

AIBOOK
Bharti Krishna Shrestha’s review of Kathmandu: A Capital City, by P. G. L. Maddern, is rife with misquotes and inaccuracy. It cannot be read without the two block”. The first two sentences mystify more that they reveal and quoted by Shrestha out of context.

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Bahadur Mahara clarified that the attacks were ‘emotional outbursts’ and not official party policy. The Maoist leadership seems still wary of stirring up further unrest. Meanwhile, Indian deputy prime minister Lal Krishna Advani equated the threat from Nepali Maoists with that posed by India’s own People’s War Group and MCC during its election campaign last week. Advani’s statement is official policy, it looks like Nepali Maoists are running out of options. In fact they have only two alternatives: join the mainstream political parties to begin a dialogue with the king.

After last year’s ceasefire broke down, the Maoists have rejected any peace deal with King Gyanendra. It is unlikely that they now want a negotiated settlement, especially because they think they are winning. The government understood this and is trying to respond with increased military pressure. But Mohan Baidya’s arrest in Kathmandu for sedition and the arrests of several other leaders of the Maoist movement, for example, the chair of the party’s top decision-making body, are signs that the Maoist position is weakening.

The Maoist are fighting an increasingly unpopular war in the name of the people. Villagers fed up with Maoist atrocities rose up and killed seven Maoists in Kanchanpur this week. The rebels are also paying the price of public outrage with their frequent and widespread ‘blackmail war’. It is ridiculous for a group that boasts about raising a 50,000 strong child militia to ask for UN mediation.

It is now time for the Maoists to transform that people’s war into a peaceful people’s movement and join the mainstream pro-democracy agitation. Otherwise not only will victory be impossible for Mahara, but this may also be the beginning of the end.

The Gautam Plan
Despotic states fail, not democratic ones

Despotic monarchs are wont to condemn the political parties that replaced the Panchayat. But if it wasn’t for the People’s Movement, this state would have failed in 1990 itself. It was democracy that pulled the country back from the brink of rain after nearly two years of the Indian blockade.

Our own Kailendra Gautam at UNICEF in New York knows that states with democratic regimes seldom fail, while despotic ones always do. Hence his public displeasure with “the King’s shenanigans” and the present government’s action plan for the formation of a government made up of major parliamentary parties.

Until quite recently, that was all the agitating mainstream wanted. But the ruthless suppression of the anti-regression agitation has rekindled the embers of the anti-monarchy fire that had nearly died out in 1990. The two royal governments after the October Fourth takeover has succeeded in doing what the Maoists failed to achieve in the eight years of their brutal insurgency: mainstreaming the republican discourse. The five-party leadership may see it otherwise, but as far as the world media sees it, the demonstrations on the streets of Kathmandu are against the monarchy. The slogans are getting shinier and more extreme.

Through all this, King Gyanendra looks not the least bit perturbed. In his new year message, he once again dared mainstream parties to show a “constructive democratic style”. It appears that he hasn’t lost faith in the capacity of the Indo-American joint enterprise of bringing the Maoist leadership to the negotiating table through force.

With CP Gaajal and Mohan Baidya in Indian jails, the morale of the Maoists must be down. But to bring the insurgents back into politics, there is no alternative to making the polity more accommodating. An unofficial announcement by the king that the sovereignty of the country is indivisible—and it rests with the people to be exercised by their representatives—is the least he can do to end the stalemate.

Fixing a failed state must begin with a four-step plan that starts with understanding the fundamental nature of the problem. Hindutva is 20/20: we now know the truce between Singh Darbar and Narayanshree Dubbar for the control of the state is at the root of the crisis. Unless the people are restored their sovereignty, insurgencies will be chronic here. It’s a class conflict now, ethnic ones in future will be much more virulent. The only antidote is an independent and inclusive governance. The 18-point agenda of the parties may not go far enough, but it is headed in the right direction. And the required changes in the constitution to achieve these reforms won’t happen without the restoration of parliament.

Once diagnosed, the second step is to treat the symptoms and make life bearable until the disease is fully cured. This would imply strict monitoring of human rights violations by the warring sides and providing emergency relief. Amnesty International pursed Nepal with Iraq in terms of human rights violations. Clearly, it needs more than the rhetoric of Bhatta.

Royal Salute
We read with interest the articles and letters in the #191 edition of your paper. I salute the officer who fought in Beni and his brave brothers in the security forces for their gallant and selfless action in defending the interests of the nation. I also salute those brave brothers and sisters who fought on the opposite side. At least they showed that they have the courage of their convictions, unlike the failed so-called leaders of the mainstream political parties who are responsible for getting us into this mess and now have nothing better to do than clog up our streets with demonstrations. SN Singh, in the same issue, calls for the mobilisation of British, Indian and Nepal army ex-servicemen in this time of crisis. As one who has the honour and privilege of serving alongside such gallant gentlemen, I wish to declare my readiness to serve king and country and appeal to my former comrades-in-arms to do likewise. For some 200 years the citizens of this country have been prepared to fight and die for the British Crown. It is time that we returned that favour.

Martin Andrew Duncan, King Edward VII’s Own Gurkhas (The Simorol Rifles)

Happy New Year

Pray for a world of peace and good will, for a world that is God’s light ever shining, love and may all join heart and hands, and so we can

Happy New Year

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pray for a world of peace and good will, and for a world that is God’s light ever shining, love and may all join heart and hands, and so we can
Nepal conflict keeps

After the ICRC’s role in securing the release of Beni prisoners, Nepal’s warring sides may have finally found the need for this international organisation

The mad dynamic of war

For Iraqis, as any proud people anywhere including Nepalis, foreigners calling the shots is unacceptable

He viciously suppressed them. He killed large numbers of them during his reign of terror. America assumed, not unreasonably, that the Shia would support them against a horrible dictator. And they did, up to a point. But after Saddam fell, even after his capture last December, nothing seemed to improve for the Shia majority of Iraq. Car bombs, set by Sunni radicals probably, claimed hundreds of lives in their holy places. The Americans couldn’t protect the community from crime, rape, murder, terrorism.

The last straw came a week ago when an American military spokesman, who like his commander-in-chief, had seen far too many cowboy and cop movies, announced that US forces intended to track down and arrest a prominent Shia cleric. The community rose up against the audacity of the American forces. Never mind that they were only trying to enforce a warrant issued by an Iraqi judge last year. For Iraqis, as any proud people anywhere including Nepalis, foreigners calling the shots in such matters is quite simply unacceptable.

At the same time, Sunni Muslim militants were fighting the Americans in Fallujah and other places in the so-called Sunni Triangle. Hundreds of US troops were killed or wounded in just over a week of fighting, countless thousands of Iraqis lost lives, family members, livelihoods. We’ll never know the real toll of Iraqi victims of George Bush’s war.

As his tongue tied news conference in Washington on Tuesday, the president was asked if he had any regrets, if he’d made any mistakes in his time so far as leader of the world’s most powerful country. He stumbled and he stuttered, and his words meandered well off topic, covering Osama Bin Laden, ordinary Americans fear of terror and death in Iraq. None of that was presented as a mistake, but by way of illustrating, however convolutedly, that this was a man who thought he’d made no mistakes. None whatsoever.

Now that is something truly frightening.
Government wants aid commitment

The pre-consultative meetings of the Nepal Development Forum (NDF) end on Friday, and have brought heightened donor concern about Nepal’s parliamentary crisis and the conflict to the fore. Most donors have made restoration of democracy and conflict resolution conditionalities to future aid, with some even including respect for human rights by the security forces as a pre-requisite.

Government officials admit the crises have made it difficult to ask for more aid, but say they know the level of program, sectoral and project support to plan future activities.

The fortnight-long consultations focused on revising progress since the last NDF in 2002 and reviewing changes given the altered security, development and governance scenario. “We have been discussing future strategies to continue the programs that were decided during the last NDF,” said National Planning Commission Vice Chairman Shankar Sharma.

The discussions focused on how to keep the development momentum from slipping under the conflict situation. Both bilateral and multilateral donors have stressed the need to change development models given the problems Nepal is reeling under. “We have received some new funds despite the conflict,” said Sharma.

Some bilateral donors have placed their programs under the UN umbrella while others have started work without associating themselves with government networks to avoid Maoist confrontation. Some donors have argued again that service delivery should be attempted in Maoist-held areas, even if it means working with the rebels.

But by far the major disagreement between the government and donors is over making specific aid commitments. Government officials want donors to commit before the main conference on 5-6 May. Donors have been saying that there has to be adequate discussion on aid policy first, while the government has been insisting that they ease their conditions.

the ICRC busy

visits to army barracks and police stations to assess the condition of detention cells, the treatment of detainees and record disappearances. It doesn’t use Nepali staff during these visits and even the interpreters are non-Nepali. “This is so that we don’t lose our neutrality and objectivity,” Bachmann explains.

After the visits and interviews with detainees, the team submits a confidential evaluation report and recommendations to improve the conditions of detainees. The ICRC has completed about 900 visits in more than 300 detention posts around Nepal. “We have easy access to detainees as we always keep our reports confidential,” adds Bachmann.

The ICRC has also collected complaints from the relatives of detainees and submitted a list of missing relatives to the authorities. Families are informed as soon as news is available. With the cooperation of the Nepal Red Cross Society, the ICRC also exchanges messages between family members and detainees.

There was a time when the ICRC only hired Swiss citizens but today it is a patchwork of different nationalities, although there are restrictions. For instance, the French aren’t hired in Rwanda. And in Nepal, a British or American ICRC delegate would not be a good idea.

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Vacancy announcement
An open letter to Nepal’s movers and shakers

Wanted: a hero.
Must be farsighted, charismatic and humble. Must put the nation’s interests first. Compensation: a better country and the loyalty of the people.

To His Majesty:
You sense correctly that the people want a strong leader. But what your advisers won’t tell you is that only a few of your subjects want you to be that strong leader. Fewer still want anything to do with authoritarianism or a return to the Panchayat. You can’t turn back the clock. Your subjects know what freedom of expression is: they won’t give it up. And they want to elect their leaders, however flawed.

Most the people give you when you say you are a democrat. That’s why the only demonstrators in the streets right now are hard-core party cashes. But that change. Ordinary Nepalis are appalled by stories of the security forces brutality and what seems to be a ‘shoot first and hide the truth’ policy. Your subjects are also wondering why your governments aren’t any more effective than the parties. What happened to the anti-corruption drive? What about all those wonderful intentions to be pro-business, pro-poor and to operate efficiently?

The good news is that you could easily be the nation’s hero. Be flexible, intelligent and diplomatic. We know you have those skills. There is no desireable future for Nepal without the political parties. Patch up a working agreement with them. By stepping back you could move the country forward: the people would love you for it.

To party leaders:
You surely don’t believe you are personally responsible for ruining the country, and perhaps you have not grown wealthy by abusing your positions. But you must understand that the vast majority of people blame you and think you are corrupt. Ordinary Nepalis don’t believe for a working agreement with them. By stepping back you could move the country forward: the people would love you for it.

To the MoMolets:
Congratulations. You have won. Actually you won two years ago and have been losing ground since. Bandas, blockades and bombings hurt and alienate the people you say you are fighting for. Every brutal murder and every terrible citizen weights against your cause. The Great Helmison would have told you so. It may not be the victory you planned, marching into Singh Darbar at the head of a battalion. That’s never going to happen. But you can march into Singh Darbar at the head of a majority party.

You control enough territory to ensure your representation at a constituent assembly or in the next parliament. It’s time to stop fighting and use what you’ve won to make this a better country. Show us that you mean what you have been saying.

Comrade Prachanda, are you ready to be a hero?
This conflict is child’s play

The Maoists are recruiting the only people still left in the villages: the young and elderly

RAMESHWOR BOHARA in JUNILA

Even though the Maoist leadership has consistently denied that the rebel group uses child soldiers, across western Nepal the sight of 10-year-old children in combat fatigues, carrying guns, socked bombs or grenades has become a common sight.

The Maoists are sensitive to criticism that they are using child soldiers since they want to be seen following international warfare norms. They have either denied it outright or tried to keep the presence of child soldiers secret. However, local Maoists don’t seem aware of this and freely admit recruiting children.

Rajukala Rawat of Jumla is only 10-years-old but she already has a nom de guerre: Comrade Srijana. When we spoke to her, she was carrying two grenades and told us her job was to sit by the trail and fling them at any army patrol passing by. “If the enemy come, we are supposed to throw it and run away,” she told us matter-of-factly.

Her friend Serena Buda is known as Comrade Samjhana. She is 11-years-old. The two form part of a six-member sentry, all armed with grenades. Serena tells us defiantly: “Today we are carrying grenades, but when we grow up we will take part in attacks on Royal Nepali Army bases.”

Neither Serena nor Rajukala seem to know what or why they are fighting. When asked they reply: “To defeat imperialism.” But they don’t seem to know what imperialism is and just repeat what they were taught in their training camp.

The head of the ‘people’s government’ of Jumla, Gajendra Mahat has a bodyguard: 14-year-old Comrade Bimarsha. He was studying in grade eight at Dang’s Srigau Secondary School. Bimarsha, who joined the militia while studying in grade eight at Dang’s Srigau Secondary School

However, the Maoists are not getting as many recruits as they had planned. To make it look more exciting to join the movement, they are using school yards and playing fields for parades and military training. Recruits are given training in ‘hit and run’ and other warfare techniques.

At 39 VDCs in Dang now have two militia units and 200 new units have been set up, according to the leader of the Dang district people’s government, Indrajit Chaudhary.

Rajukala and Serena pose for a photograph in Dang. Both carry two grenades each (left, top).

Comrade Bimarsha is the bodyguard of the head of the Jumla ‘people’s government’ (right).

The only people left in the villages in Dang are the really young and really old, both are recruited into the militia (above).
Opening our sky

Indian private airlines are gearing up to fly to Nepal

NAVIN SINGH KHADKA

S tarting 12 May, passengers who have suffered inflated ticket prices and costly service from the state-run airlines of India and Nepal will have more choice with India’s private Air Sahara plans for a new daily New Delhi-Kathmandu connection. Its rival Jet Airways, is expected to launch its own service soon after.

An Indian cabinet decision in January opened the skies for India’s private operators to fly to international destinations and Jet and Sahara have already started operations to Sri Lanka, Nepal and Tibet. The Air Service Agreement between Nepal and India allows each side to operate six daily services between the two countries weekly. So far, Royal Nepal and Indian Airlines use only 60 percent of that volume and trade analysts say that at the rate traffic is growing there is a market for double that number if service is improved and competition brings prices down.

Air Sahara’s local agent Joy Dowan of Zenith Travel told us: “The groundwork for the flight-operation is in the final stages.” The airline will use its brand new Boeing 737-800 between Kathmandu and Delhi. Meanwhile, Jet Airways is shopping for a GSA in Kathmandu, and has reportedly settled for the Lufthansa agents. Sahara’s crew is currently undergoing flight simulator practice for landings and takeoffs from Kathmandu airport.

New Delhi is regarded as a bottleneck for Nepal’s tourism, and if the Kathmandu-Delhi shuttle can be improved, it will boost travel. Inbound air traffic to Nepal increased by 60 percent in March 2004 compared to the same period in 2003, and half the increase was from India. This increase could have been much greater if Royal Nepal had not dropped its morning flights to New Delhi.

Besides the benefit of more tourists, the government is also happy about increased revenue from air traffic. “We will make money from landing and parking charges, as well as passenger service,” says Nagendra Prasad Ghimire, director general of the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal. While it is understandable for the government to be interested in squeezing carriers, analysts say it should be working harder to shorten the Kathmandu-New Delhi air route by overflying Nepal. This would reduce airline time from the current 90 minutes to up to 14 minutes, and allow massive savings in fuel for the airlines.

Bhola Thapa of President Travels says the arrival of private Indian airlines will force Indian Airlines to also upgrade services. “Since Royal Nepal is more or less out of the picture, it is Indian Airlines that will have to compete to survive on this route,” Thapa said.

The additional flights will augment a new bi-weekly link between Kathmandu and Chengdu by Air China. China Eastern is interested in a direct Kathmandu-Beijing flight and Philippine Airlines is negotiating a Manila stopover for flights to the US from Kathmandu. The new year also began on a favourable note with PA resuming its Islamabad flights after a two year Indian ban on overflights. However, passenger growth on a sector that has the capacity of 25,000 seats a year is reported to be sluggish.

In more good news, existing international operators have applied for increases in frequency and seat capacity to meet the higher demand. Thai Airways plans to double its single daily flight between Kathmandu and Bangkok by December. The airline has been suffering load penalties on its 777 takeoffs from because higher temperatures do not allow fully-loaded takeoffs from Kathmandu short runway.

Last year, Thai carried 80,000 passengers into Nepal, a whopping 33 percent increase from 2002.

The Dutch charter airline Martinair will double its flights to twice weekly between Amsterdam and Kathmandu later this year. The KLM subsidiary is known operating a 274-seater Boeing 747 and plans to carry both cargo and passengers to Amsterdam with a stopover in Sharjah.

Meanwhile, Qatar Airways, the fastest-growing airline flying into Kathmandu, operates 15 flights a week, 11 between Kathmandu and Doha and four between Kuala Lumpur and Kathmandu. With 85 percent occupancy rate in both in A300- 600 and A320 aircraft, Qatar plans to add three more flights to Doha this year.●

757 lease hits snag

Royal Nepal Airlines’ plans to lease a 757 while one of its two jets is grounded for regular maintenance has hit a snag, threatening to throw the flag carrier’s international schedules into disarray during the peak tourist season.

In preparation for one of the airline’s two 757s being out of action for two months starting this week, the management had invited tender bids to lease an additional jet in March. Seven suppliers applied, but none of them were found eligible.

Left with only one 757 to handle all its routes to Delhi, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Osaka, Hong Kong and Seoul, the airline is facing another one of its legendary disruptions. “We have rescheduled passengers for one week,” Managing Director Mr Khaniyal told us. “After that we will see what we do.”

After the applications were rejected, the state-run airline even began direct negotiations with suppliers and one company was shortlisted. But that deal fell through on the lease price.

Sources told us Royal Nepal is now in negotiation with a Chinese carrier to lease a 757 for two months, but the deal will take 10 days to be finalised.

Given past scandals, airline officials are wary of lease deals and want everything to be above board. They can’t take short-cuts even if it has become seriously urgent to expedite a lease because they know the CAA is watching. The anti-corruption watchdog wants Royal Nepal to go for global tendering and follow all official procedures for aircraft lease.●
Brewing partnerships

Carlsberg and San Miguel Corporation extended their cooperation to include Nepal by recently signing an agreement allowing Carlsberg to brew San Miguel beer through its joint venture company Gorkha Brewery. Nepal consumers now get teamwork in every sip. Cheers!

Noodle jackpot

Since they entered the crowded noodle market in 2003, Asian Carlsberg Asia and San Miguel

STRICTLY BUSINESS

Ashutosh Tiwari

Glutamine’s transistor Duti Kinuwa, the successor joyed by Nabin Subba’s Narrating, and the documentary Bhadalo Oun Jaste. True as those examples are, they add up to only a tiny fraction of the movies made in Nepal every year. The fact remains that a majority of movies are so bad that even top actors publicly admit they are ashamed of being Nepali cinema artists.

On the other hand, Nepali music videos seem to be getting better, slicker, bolder, more creative, technically sophisticated and a lot more entertaining year after year. You can’t really compare a full-length feature film and a five-minute’s song, both are forms of audiovisual expression, one can’t but help ask if the quality-stared Nepali music video makers have learned a few tricks from Nepali music video makers, what would those be?

The making people making music videos are young, educated, English-speaking urban hipsters who are flexible enough to borrow and mix ideas from a wide variety of influences from fashion, retro art, advertising, computer graphics, hip-hop, Kathmandu’s underground music scenes and changing aspects of urban Nepali societies. They don’t
call themselves kaalmar. Nor do they demand that the state and the public honour them. They form loose alliances among themselves and appear to have chosen to concentrate on their work.

In contrast, people calling the shots in the movie industry are from the older generation with fixed views about what a ‘Nepali’ movie should be. Most are so busy being declarations of National Treasures that one seldom wonders when they ever find the time to think seriously about making good movies. So, unless some of today’s most creative music video or documentary makers graduate to full-length films, the quality of talents sustaining the mainstream Nepali cinema will continue to remain low.

A piece of good work is often the result of many experiments. One reason why music videos are good is that their bravery and relative low-budget make them ideal for experiments with style, technique and substance in the hands of creative directors. In contrast, most privately financed Nepali movies are stuck in being the usual three-hour-long fare that cannot afford to take any risky experiments.

This is where a state-funded body such as Film Development Board should keep in and use the money it already has to fund new and old filmmakers to make a diverse range of films in which they have the freedom to take stylistic and technical risks. Lessons thus learned can be applied to make better mainstream movies.

Otherwise, in the absence of experiments and artistic playfulness, Nepali movies will remain dull and boring. Anyone can make and act in music videos in Nepal, and music video makers have no formal training in this.

This makes entry into and exit from their industry easier, with talented people floating to the top while others drift out. But players in the Nepali movie industry are members of various serious-sounding associations that emerge to any thinking Nepali.

To be sure, some aspects of Nepali cinema are indeed changing. But for much to change for the better, the Nepali music video makers can teach the older movie industry about the importance of right people, experimental attitude and an openness which helps it adapt to changes.

“Women can bring peace”

Nepali Times: Why did the International Federation of Business and Professional Women choose Nepal for the meeting?
Antonette JA Riegg: We are a worldwide organisation founded at Geneva in 1930 with the main aim that women participate more as professionals in economics, politics and society. BPW will be celebrating its 75th anniversary next year. We are very active in networking, lobbying and learning from each other. And that is why we chose Nepal. Nepal has an excellent strategy and has been a part of the federation since 1975.
Isle Spritzendorfer: Nepal took the initiative. My compliments to the members of BPW Nepal. They did excellent work and are very active. I was surprised how many attended the congress. We are very pleased that Nepal is so active at the international level.

What is your overall impression of Nepal and its people?
IS: This is my second time here, and I like the country and the people very much. I regret the trouble going on because the situation is such a peaceful development area which make this situation hard to understand. Despite the difficulties, we had a very good conference. I must say the women in Nepal organised everything in a very professional way. I’m really impressed. The international delegates had to walk to the meeting because of the bandana. This was really very exciting.

Apart from this conflict and despite the problems with travel, how did the conference go?
IS: It was very successful. BPW at the moment, working on the ‘World of Peace’ theme. We want to bring peace to Nepal as well. How can we do that? We want to strengthen relationships because women and children suffer most if any conflict. Women can bring peace to a country. There must be more women in decision-making positions.

Where does the professional Nepali woman fit in?
AR: We heard different topics at the congress—peace, the environment, economic independence. I am convinced that economic independence is absolutely basic to the development of the nation.

Did anyone stand out?
AR: I can say that, if ever you have a leader in a country who is able not only to pull herself forward but who the whole group, then you have a very strong single-music video maker.
IS: And if we have to mention her, it would be Ambika Shrestha.

Any role for the menfolk?
AR: We like to work together with men in a real partnership, to build peaceful developments and stability. It addresses our whole society’s evolution. Forty years ago, women stayed at home and took care of the children. The men did the earning. But after raising the children, mothers are still strong and that means the rules had to change.
IS: At BPW, we believe in life-long learning. This means even if you’re in your 40s, you’re not too old to learn. Children grow up and women begin new careers. Our aim is to see that girls are well-educated.
AR: Because when women have that, then society benefits as a whole.
LiRil freshness all day long
Yes to constituent assembly
Pradip Girij of the Nepali Congress (D) Nepal, 4-11 April

When Napoleon Bonaparte was returning from his victory in Italy, tens of thousands gathered to welcome him home. His bodyguard said his popularity was so immense that all of France had come to honour him. “More people will come when I am hanged,” Napoleon replied wistfully.

If King Gyanendra is under the impression that the people are turning up to felicitate him because of his popularity, then he is wrong. The reason they are there is because of who he is: the brother of Birendra, Mahendra’s son and heir to Prithbi Narayan Shah. It is the same as Sonia Gandhi, who rose in public estimation for being Rajiv Gandhi’s wife.

If Prachanda were to come out today, Tundikhel would not be large enough to hold people anxious to see him. Politically, this is defined as Bonaparitism. During the king’s tour of rural Nepal, the people who met him poured out their sorrows, asked for employment, electricity, water and above all, peace. But he can’t do much, and their hopes will be dashed.

This is not the same as when Jang Bahadur and Chandra Shamsher travelled around the kingdom to meet their subjects. Society is different today. The king must not assume that he is popular just because villagers thronged to see him. If he really cares for the people, then he must reinstate their sovereign right.

I don’t want to question the king’s intentions. He may be motivated by genuine concern for the people’s welfare. But it is also true that his tour is happening at a time the country is going down a spiral of violence, brutality and authoritarianism. The need of the hour is peace and right now the king’s priority should be to restore peace by defeating the Maoists. Public feckless declarations don’t serve that purpose.

Both the king and the rebels have serious national concerns. While the king wants to restore and strengthen the state as his ancestors had by uniting Nepal, the Maoists want to form a new society. Unfortunately, both have become too headstrong. They have deviated from the right path. Just as the king fails to recognise the realities of a modern world, the rebels have not learnt from the mistakes of the communist movements in Russia and China.

It’s good to study Marxism in order to understand the world, but unmindful of good and evil, to fight is to fight. The Maoists studied old ideas and philosophies that failed to evolve with the times. An underground leadership is like being held immobile in a spider web—distances them from the masses. This is exactly what is happening with the rebels. The ideological and philosophical leaders are in India while the guerillae are here in Nepal.

The Maoists talk about democracy but they lack vision. More importantly, they lack confidence in the people. How long will they keep on killing innocents? How long will they remain underground? We are losing our trust in them: they say one thing and do another. Why do they deprive other political parties of the right to express their views openly and prohibit political activity? They have reached a dead end and that is why they always talk about a roundtable conference and a constituent assembly.

I strongly believe that a constituent assembly is the only way out of the national crisis. Our country is not ready for another new constitution under the king’s terms because we have been betrayed too many times. This time too, the king says he believes in the constitution but his actions are different. Initially, when the Maoists demanded a constituent assembly, I objected to the idea strongly because it would jeopardise our constitution. But since the king started his active rule, I have started to believe democrats should not be afraid of a constituent assembly. It is time for all political leaders to advocate this. It is really surprising that the major political parties are still undecided on this issue.

Cops ‘n children
Samacharpana, 11 April

On Saturday’s demonstration near the Padma Kanya Campus, riot police grabbed and dragged young boys and girls into vans when they failed to arrest real demonstrators. A policeman was seen chasing an innocent bystander, 12-year-old Surej Khadgi, in Bagbazar who was beaten up in his house and then yanked towards the van. In another scene, a young girl, Kamsang Lama, was just walking towards the bus stop when she was suddenly surrounded by police and forced inside the van. When she could not reason with them, she started hirings back and screaming with frustration, “I am not a demonstrator. I’m just going home.” The police were given strict orders that only the female police should be handling female demonstrators, but the arrests were getting out of control. One young woman in a red t-shirt was seen pelting stones at the police. Later, all women wearing red clothes were arrested.

Assault on history
Editorial in Rajyabani, 11 April

The Maoists bombed and completely destroyed the statue of King Prithvi Narayan Shah in Devighat of Nawalokot district. The destruction of this great Nepali unifier is a tragedy and unbearable for everyone proud to be Nepali. This action is a direct assault on our nation’s integrity, unity and existence, the virtues and symbols of what King Prithvi Narayan Shah stood for. Each country has a symbolic national hero that all citizens identify with. King Prithvi is the historical leader who united the nation and brought integrity to Nepal. He is will always be cherished as a great father of the nation. Without him, Nepal would not exist. The Maoist leadership should be concerned about the destruction of his statue, because even the Maoists are first of all Nepalis. Everything is secondary.

Broken legs
Himal Khabarpancha 13-27 April

Yambahadur Sunwar was working in his metallurgical shop when six Maoists came by two weeks ago and asked him to give them his goat. “It costs Rs 5,000,” he told them, “pay the money and take it.” The enraged Maoists told his family to go inside the house, dragged him away and crushed both his legs with rocks. Sunwar begged them to kill him instead of torturing him. This angered them even more and they beat him mercilessly. Sunwar thinks the goat was just an excuse, the Maoists targeted him because his son is in the army. Sunwar, who is recuperating in Sukhdev hospital, says: “We thought they were fighting for poor people like us...I never imagined they would make me a cripple.”

Foes to friends
Samacharpana, 13 April

It has become a routine affair—students and riot police scuffling on the streets of the Valley. But in the general chaos, we detected a change: for the better. After hours of stone-throwing and lathi charges, at the end of the day the two sides shake hands and adjourn proceedings till the following day of the ongoing agitation of the five political parties. It’s an interesting phenomenon. “Why not?” says a protestor, when we asked him about these amicable partings. “We have to fight against each tomorrow too.” Turning to a group of riot policeman he jokes, “You’d better eat well tonight.” A policeman, equally in jest, says, “You may want to return that banza you snatched from us earlier.” Another protestor joins the conversation and wishes the police, “A happy new year and may you not lose the will to suppress our movement!” Quick as a flash, an officer replies: “The same good wishes to you too.”

New Year Greetings!
Robin Sayami in Himal Khabarpancha, 13-27 April

"There is no need for a movement now. If the king wants to hold elections, let us give him a chance.”

Manisha Koirala, Bollywood actress and BP Koirala’s granddaughter on Kanpur Television, 11 April
Nepal will remain a constitutional monarchy

Lok Raj Baral in Deshanter, 11 April

I don’t believe King Gyanendra is our national unifier. This is why I don’t subscribe to the theory that without the king there will be no Nepal. It is logical to say the nation won’t exist without a monarch just because we are geographically sandwiched between China and India.

In this day and age, a country can’t simply annex another. People must stop worrying about Nepal being overrun. China is engaged in its own affairs and though we have problems with India, they are relatively small and usually stem from having an open border. Of course, both our neighbours are interested in Nepal. When we establish ourselves as a republic, we must not be used by one country against the other. If we adopt a balanced foreign policy, we will face no danger from these neighbours. They don’t care what system we have in Nepal.

We must stop worrying about India, they are relatively new on the scene. Of course, both India and China have problems with Nepal. Of course, both countries are interested in Nepal. When we establish ourselves as a republic, we must not be used by one country against the other. If we adopt a balanced foreign policy, we will face no danger from these neighbours. They don’t care what system we have in Nepal.

The political parties are also unclear about their future course and this has made them unable to lead the republican agenda. During the Panchayat era, there was much speculation that the country would split under the multiparty system. It didn’t happen.

Now we hear predictions that we will lose our national identity if we opt for a republican system. We have already seen that we cannot have a figurehead monarch like in the UK. No one wishes to see an active monarchy. This leaves us with no other option but a republican system. There is no guarantee that even this will be permanent. Some republics have brought back their king. We need to think things through before we finally settle on a republic.
India does IT better

And job outsourcing thrives despite US backlash

RANJIT DEVRAJ in NEW DELHI

Despite massive political backlash in the United States, the outsourcing of jobs overseas not only thrives but is drawing more global information-technology (IT) companies to invest in the outsourcing industry in India.

Last Wednesday, International Business Machines (IBM) announced the purchase of Dallas-based e-Services, one of India’s leading business process outsourcing (BPO) firms at an estimated $1.5 billion. According to figures released by the National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM), an umbrella organisation, IT and BPO together earned India $12 billion this past year and is slated to touch $14 billion by 2012. Nearly 200,000 people are employed in the BPO sector.

The growth in outsourcing to countries like India of services such as accounting, billing, transcription, call centres, medical transcription and diagnosis, number-crunching, administration and anything that is technology-enabled reflects a desire by big companies and the US government to save costs at home.

But it has also become a political hot potato in the US, where firms that have been outsourcing these jobs have been accused of being traitors in an election year. Laws were also passed in January to curb outsourcing. In 2002, the US spent $450 billion on services outsourced to India and other countries that have educated high-speed data transmission facilities and English-speaking people, such as the Philippines and Ireland.

A clear trend was discernible earlier this week when the US outsourcing firm Keane Inc announced plans to invest an additional $25 million to expand existing BPO and IT operations in India — where it already has 1,600 professionals on its rolls. “We are seeing increased demand for solutions that leverage application outsourcing, business process outsourcing and offshore delivery to achieve significant cost deductions and business improvements,” said Brian Keane of Keane Inc.

Union Minister for Information Technology and Telecommunications Arun Shourie described the IBM purchase as “great news” but one which demanded that Indian companies now begin to look beyond call centres and IT outsourcing — and consider handling legal outsourcing, accountancy, architecture and contract research and development of global companies. Indian companies could set up companies in the North America Free Trade Area (NAFTA), employ locals and repatriate profits to India, Shourie suggested.

Some of that is already happening. Wipro, for example, works on a large scale integration project for Noka, the Finnish cellular phone giant, using centres in Bangalore and the US although it mostly hires Indian personnel and sends them to work in foreign on-site locations. But Singh said that in the coming years, as many as a fourth of Wipro’s employees in the United States could be from among local people. This, he said, would certainly silence the widespread and politically explosive criticism in the US that jobs are being taken away from that country and moved to India.

According to the US business consultancy firm AT Kearney, India continues to be a major destination for outsourcing because of a combination of two factors — low costs and the availability of skilled labour.

Drive thru

The ambitious dream of linking the continent by the 140,000km Asian Highway

A n ambitious project to link major cities and capitals of Asian countries through a network of highways is due to begin its hopeful journey late April, at a regional conference to be held in Shanghai, China. Already, 52 Asian countries have shown interest in the proposed Asian Highway, which is expected to span over 140,000km, say senior UN officials. Officials, 20 countries are ready to sign the highway agreement in the Chinese city, which will host the 60th session of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the Bangkok-based UN regional agency, from 22-28 April.

They include Japan, on the eastern corner of the highway, to Georgia, on the western fringes of the territory ESCAP covers. The other countries also stepping up to support this transport project are Afghanistan, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Uzbekistan and Vietnam.

According to Raj Kumar, ESCAP’s chief economist, the network of roads that enable goods to move overland from, say, Ho Chi Minh City to Moscow will help boost trade in the region. “It will offer countries an alternative to transporting goods by air or by sea,” he added. “Landlocked countries like Bhutan, Nepal and Laos stand to gain from this project.”

“This is ‘the first time that countries made a formal commitment to the linkages and alignment of highways totalling over 140,000km and connecting 32 member countries,’” states a new study, “Meeting the Challenges in an Era of Globalisation by Strengthening Regional Development Cooperation.” The genesis of this plan dates back to 1959, adds the report that was released last Friday.

With concrete support for the Asian Highway coming from one-third of ESCAP’s 62-member countries, the region will mark a “major step towards the realisation of a massive land transport network linking Asia’s capital cities, tourism areas, industrial and agricultural centres and sea and river ports,” the report observes.

What had slowed plans for this project till now was the Cold War, said Kim Hak Su, ESCAP’s executive secretary. “During the Cold War period, we could not think of linking highways in China, the former Soviet Union and Korea.” Other political realities had also put the brakes on the Asian Highway blueprint, the report states. “Conflicts and lack of trust caused considerable damage to the land transport infrastructure in many countries and created barriers to international land transport.”

For ESCAP, which is leading the way in this transportation effort, the agreement to be signed in Shanghai will underscore the willingness among Asian countries to forge a new level of cooperation after decades of mistrust and hostility towards one another. The agreement calls on countries endorsing the idea to work on existing roadways that will become part of the Asian Highway. That will include conforming to a common standard for road signs, design standards and also uniform measures, including “traffic and regulations, to facilitate border crossings.

However, ESCAP officials are unable to give a date by when this sprawling web of roadways will become a reality. Nor, for that matter, can they give an estimated cost of this venture. “This highway is really necessary to connect neighbouring countries,” said Kim. “It will take a long time to complete but we have to start somewhere.”

MARTWAAN MACAN-MARKAR in BANGKOK

• (IP)
Love thy neighbour
As the EU widens, it must reach out to its less developed neighbours

According to the European security document adopted in 2003, “it is in the interest of the European Union to promote a ring of well-governed countries on its borders with whom it can enjoy close and cooperative relations.” The European Commission is now elaborating this principle in the form of a “Wider Europe Initiative.”

But the initiative cannot fulfil its great promise as long as it stays within the Brando bureaucracy. It needs to become a political initiative. The EU needs to reach out to its less developed neighbours. This is of vital interest to Europe, but it cannot succeed without adequate political and financial support.

The most powerful tool that the EU has for influencing political and economic development in neighbouring countries is the prospect of membership. Unfortunately, the problems created by the current enlargement make it unrealistic to hold out membership to additional countries beyond the ones now under consideration—Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey and possibly the Balkan countries.

In the past, the road to membership was paved with Association Agreements. The defining characteristic of the countries on the eastern and southern borders of Europe is that they lack many attributes needed for membership. The Wider Europe Initiative is meant to help develop those attributes. Association Agreements, although desirable, may not be adequate, as the EU’s Balkan experiences indicate.

The EU began with the right idea in the Balkans: to bring those countries closer to each other by bringing them closer to the Union. Foreign ministers translated that idea into the Stability Pact, but finance ministers refused to finance it, so the pact remained an empty shell.

Then the European Commission took the idea and translated it into bilateral Stability and Association Agreements, but the original idea—regional reconciliation—got lost. As a consequence, developments in the Balkans are unsatisfactory, as the recent riots in Kosovo and Serbia demonstrate.

The Wider Europe Initiative also starts with a good idea: recognition that relations between the EU and its neighbourhood are inherently asymmetrical. The EU must promote democratic development in neighbouring countries without expecting or demanding reciprocal concessions.

It should, however, expect and demand progress and tailor its assistance to the performance of the countries concerned. Conditionality may not be the right word to describe the relationship, because it implies that certain conditions must be met before the Union bestows benefits. For EU, however, the EU must take the initiative and offer incentives. Concessions could then be withdrawn if expectations are not fulfilled.

This means that EU policy must be tailor-made for individual countries. It would be desirable to set up joint working groups with the countries concerned to establish, monitor and adjust individual action plans. The European Commission is already engaged in preparing such plans. They need to be given greater substance.

There is a fundamental difference between the EU’s Eastern and Southern flanks. I am personally involved in the neighbouring countries to the east, so I shall confine my remarks to that region. Wider Europe in the east happens to coincide with Russia’s “near abroad.” While the EU cannot hold out the prospect of membership, Russia is happy to offer membership in a reconstituted empire. The EU must therefore offer inducements that outweigh pressure from Russia.

Such inducements are not hard to find: greater access to Europe’s common market, more favorable visa regimes, job and immigration opportunities, access to capital, cultural contacts, and technical assistance. Admittedly, the Union’s budget does not have space for the Wider Europe Initiative before 2007, but where there is a will, there is a way.

Giving substance to the initiative would offer an attractive alternative to the Bush administration’s policy of spreading democracy by military means.

I established Open Society Foundations in all the countries of the former Soviet Union. They do on a small scale what the Wider Europe Initiative ought to do on a large scale: promote democratic development by supporting civil society while working with governments when possible. The less receptive the government, the more important supporting civil society becomes. The same principle ought to guide the EU. A civil society component must be included in every action plan.

Individual action plans are urgently needed even before the general Wider Europe Initiative emerges. Elections are pending in Ukraine and Moldova, and abuses normally accompanying elections are on the increase. It ought to be possible to persuade governments in those countries to curb such behavior by holding out the prospect of substantial rewards.

Georgia’s peaceful revolution is not replicable elsewhere, but it has made neighbouring regimes nervous. They ought to be persuaded through a judicious mixture of carrots and sticks—that strengthening the rule of law and democratic institutions would work to their advantage. Georgia itself needs all the help it can get, which requires an emergency action plan different from the others.

Belarus seems beyond redemption, but appearances are deceptive. Because President Alexander Lukashenko’s behavior is so outrageous, a change of regime becomes possible. EU member states reacted strongly when Lukashenko tried to sack the rector of the

George Soros
Chairman of Soros Fund Management and the Open Society Institute
In this final installment of his recollections as a Gurkha soldier in the British Army, Lachhum Gurung speaks of receiving his Victoria Cross for bravery in Burma. He shares his views on war and describes the horrors of the final days on the Burma front. This and other testimonies of living Gurkha soldiers are taken from Lahure ka Katha, published by Himal books and translated for Nepali Times in this space every week by Dev Bahadur Thapa.

“If we didn’t kill them, they’d kill us.”

I have no idea where I was kept for five or six days. After that I was on another plane. We arrived at Comilla at a well equipped hospital. Some were bleeding from fresh wounds and others were recuperating. I had a lot of trouble because of my wounded hand. It had to be operated on three times. In the first operation, the hand was only shortened a little, yet it would not heal. So I had another operation where my hand was amputated. I stayed for 22 days in Comilla and was then shifted to Calcutta where I was taken to Muzafabad for three months. By then I slowly started regaining my strength and was walking a little. After that I was sent to Poona to get an artificial limb. A Gurkha captain and a lance corporal went as escorts. I was brought back in time for the Dasai festival. I was then told that I was to go to Delhi for the investiture ceremony. It was earlier proposed that I go to London, but I had never been there before and did not know any English. So I chose Delhi instead of London. My father, mother and elder brother arrived from home for the ceremony. I was awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery on the Burma front, and then I went home.

In the meantime, the armistice was signed. I was on the front only a short while compared to others who spent up to seven years fighting. One of my instructors served right through the war but remained un scarred—well, they command from the rear and face little chances of being hit. On the other hand, we were involved in the front. A number of my comrades-in-arms laid down their lives. Many millions had died. The sole purpose of the war was to lower the population, which it succeeded in doing. Politics warranted the state to lessen its people when it could not provide food and shelter. The sons and descendants of rulers were spared. Ordinary people became victims. Many just disappeared. In the war we focused on fighting and how to do away with the enemy. If we didn’t kill them, they killed us. Since we were recruited by the British, we had to fight on their behalf. We knew they were fighting the Japanese and the Germans. At that time, Germany was a big power. Physically too, they were big. They were strong enough to thrust in the laymen in the body of a Gurkha soldier and then raise his body up. They could squeeze a Gurkha to death using one arm.

Quite a few Nepalis died in the war. One of them was my brother in law. Unfortunately, no one can collect his pension because his father and mother were long dead and as he joined the army as a lad and died in the war, he never had the chance to marry. I enrolled at the age of 22 and was a bachelor. I married my wife at the end of war. In those days no one could refuse to enlist in the army. I did not inform my family about my own voluntary enlistment till after I had joined the army. I knew how to read and write a little, so I sent them a letter. Since we belonged to the family of headmen, our grandparents had taught us to read and write. Quite a few of the other soldiers were illiterate.

Ivan Fr Eugene Watrin passed away on 29 February at the age of 94. Most of the eulogies praised his contribution to Nepal education and social service. Although his association with the Fulbright commission was mentioned, Fr Watrin had kept a low profile and few knew that he was also a volunteer representative of the Ashoka Foundation, a global fellowship dedicated to identifying and supporting social entrepreneurs.

The Ashoka Foundation works to create a critical mass of social innovators worldwide. Like business entrepreneurs, not all social entrepreneurs succeed. However, the ones that do help transform society. Journalist and media trainer Bharat Dutta Koirala is an Ashoka Fellow who went on to win the Maggay Awards two years ago for his contributions to the institutionalisation of media in this country.

Entrepreneurial and heritage conservationist Anil Chitrakar, journalist Rajendra Dahal and women’s empowerment activist Rita Thapa are some other Ashoka Fellows who have made their mark on Nepali society. There are many like them all over the globe. This book is a saga of some of these remarkable people and their pioneering work. The story is not in this book, but his life is reflected in almost all narratives in the collection.

Deep down, Babsi Ram felt there was more to life than fighting.
**Turning pro**

**Young Nepali amateur all set to go**

He named Chuda B R Bhandari is well known in Nepal’s golfing circles. Fondly known as CB, he has consistently been Nepal’s top amateur. He started golf quite late, but has worked his way up to being a scratch golfer (zero handicap) within just a few years. CB is now 26 and all set to further improve his game through intensive training abroad. He ambition is to be a successful professional in the not too distant future.

CB practices at least 6 hours a day, and can be seen at the Royal Nepal Golf Club working on his game through rain or shine. He is very passionate about the game, and in fact is so in love with it that he aims to make it his career.

**Golf is my passion. I feel very lucky to be able to say that I want to make it my profession one day. I will put in every thing I have to be a successful golfer, and now I am looking for some sponsors to support my training.**

I caught up with CB while he was practicing at the RNNC and stole a few moments of his practice time.

**Deepak Acharya:**

CB: Without counting my initial visits to some golf driving ranges, it has been six years now.

**How did you start the game?**

Through my uncle who lives in Scotland. He invited me for a holiday in Bangkok in 1997. While we were wandering around, we came across a driving range and he asked me if I wanted to try a golf ball. That was the first time I held a golf club in my hand. I knew of the RNNC back home, and right there and then I decided to pick up this sport. I saw an advert for a cheap golf set and bought it right away. That’s how I got started.

**Who supports you and what is your source of inspiration?**

My uncle. He has been very supportive and wants me to be a successful golfer. He is my source of inspiration.

**What kind of future do you see in golf?**

Golf is gaining popularity every day. It is a very lucrative sport and the prize money in professional golf tour in the continent is very substantial. If the economy of our country improves, it would also be much better here.

**What are your goals?**

I don’t want to sound too optimistic, but I plan to go for intensive training in the summer, play as many regional amateur tournaments as I can and establish myself as a good amateur player. Then in two years time I plan to turn professional.

**What are some essential things Nepal Golf Association should do to bring up the standard of golf in the country?**

Well, what we really need here are more regional amateur tournaments. The Nepal Amateur Open that started last year was a perfect example and needs continuity. More regional golf tournaments should be organised.

This would get more golfers into the tournament mindset and result in better performances in international golf tournaments.

**Who is your idol?**

I like watching Phil Mickelson and Vijay Singh play, but don’t have any idol.

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**Sports**

**Martial love affair**

Everybody is taekwondo and karate fighting, and winning

**Sraddha Basnyat**

It was the taekwondo Bantamweight finals at the South Asian Federation (SAF) Games in Islamabad two weeks ago, Nepal vs India. Sangina Baidya was fighting for gold. The crowd supported her, but with an injured right hand and knee, Sangina found herself sizing up a much taller opponent. That’s when the switched strategy, using her feared slap kicks aimed at her opponent’s face to defend herself.

Sangina won. “I was confident I would win”, says the 27-year-old champion (pic, bottom right).

How is it that Nepal has become such a powerhouse in martial arts? Sangina replies: “Nepalis are very hard working, especially in this sport.” Her own training regime is proof: Sangina practiced up to six hours a day two months before the SAF Games this year.

Karate coach Hina Singh Dangol, who led the team to Pakistan, believes the martial arts appeal to the Nepali psyche. “The biggest thing in karate is discipline: how to respect your elders and behave with peers is taught from the beginning. This is why martial arts gained such a popular following in Nepal.”

It is part of Prakash Pradhan’s job as deputy director of the National Sports Council to discover what drives athletes to perform better. He says Nepalis perform well consistently in martial arts because they are very self-motivated. As Nepal’s first PhD in sports science, Pradhan understands that both nurture and nature play a role. “Martial arts suit Nepal because a good fighter is determined by courage and coordination. The fighting spirit is something training alone cannot bring, it’s hereditary,” he says. Then there are the physical attributes. Nepalis aren’t very tall, this means they have a lower centre of gravity which is suited to speed and balance. “Biomechanically, we are built for it,” says Pradhan.

Bog Gen Chhautar Man Singh Gurung is director of physical training at the Royal Nepali Army and a taekwondo blackbelt. He thinks Nepal’s rugged terrain has built us up to be physically tough. “Nepali people are fit and their physical structure is good for this type of training, and they are very interested in taekwondo so they have the aptitude as well.”

But fourth place at the 9th SAF Games in Islamabad was a disappointment for Nepal, which had come second in the medals tally on home turf last time. The taekwondo team garnered all the major wins: Nirnala Shrestha and Renuka Magar clinched the deal in the men’s and women’s bantam weight category, Deepak Bista (pic, red vest) and Rupa Kumari Shyamjog took men’s and women’s feather weight titles, and

Niranjan Shrestha the lightweight title.

Squabbles over controversial decisions in karate and boxing affected the morale of Nepali athletes, but we still took nine karate medals, including two silver by Sunanda Shrestha (under-80kg) and Kushal Shrestha (under-65kg).

Deepak Shrestha was the true karate kid, winning first place in the under-60kg category.

“Karate is what I know best,” says Deepak. The 27-year-old started learning the sport since he was 12 and works as assistant coach at the district head dojo in Lalitpur. Despite winning gold this year, he is concerned that his fight has not improved as much as it could have.

The karate team held closed camp trainings just a week prior to the games. Deepak thinks it should have started at least six months ago.

“The Nepali Karate Federation just took it for granted that we’d win because we did well in the 8th SAF Games. We plateaued while other nations got better,” he explains. “This year, we had such good results only because of our motivation.”

Prakash Pradhan admits that martial arts is often neglected: “If they are given priority, I don’t see why we can’t win golds at the Olympics.” And that is exactly what Sangina Baidya is aiming for as she prepares to head off to Athens in August as the first Nepali to qualify for the Olympics.
NEPALI WEATHER
by MAUSAM BEED
The heat is on, and it will continue to sizzle in the low valleys and tara next week. Eastern and central Nepal will experience local thunderstorms in the afternoons and at night, but in the absence of moisture infiltration these will not bring much by way of rain.
After a brief respite, the wind direction has shifted again to southwesterly which means more wind-blow sand up to 3.5kmh and increased temperatures. Expect clear mornings with brick-dusk smog in Kathmandu Valley obstructing visibility.

KATHMANDU VALLEY

Fri 27-13
Sat 28-11
Sun 30-13
Mon 31-13
Tues 19-14
Wed 28-12

KATHMANDU AIR QUALITY
There was a significant improvement in Kathmandu’s air quality last week. Part of this was due to reduced vehicular movement due to the daily demonstrations in central Kathmandu. Overall, the average PM10 (particles that are small enough to enter the human body) concentration in Kathmandu’s air went down by more than 40 percent. However, even with this improvement, Kathmandu’s air remains harmful for health. The lack of moisture in these dry winds will not bring much by way of rain.

FESTIVALS AND EXHIBITIONS
Genius at work - Paintings by senior Nepali artists till 24 April at Gallery Nine, Lazimpat. 4428694
Still Life - Street Life Photographs by Wayne Amtas till 3 May, poetry reading 5.30 PM on 15 April at Siddhartha Art Gallery. 4218048
Samadhi - A journey through Sri Lanka mixed media of Buddha images till 26 April at Lazimpat Gallery Café. 4428549

EVENTS
A Little Night Music by The Diplomatic Notes to benefit Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust. 5.30 PM on 18 April at Baber Mahal Restaurant. Contact: g2@gmail.com.np
Film Club Presents: Satyaaji Roy Special from 18-26 April at Bagghikana, Patan. 5542545

MUSIC
Chris Masand and The Modern Jazz Live Band at Not Just the Jazz Bar, Friday and Saturday nights. Shangri-la Hotel. 4412999
Abhya & The Steam Injuns at Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge. 4361500

FOOD
Splash Spring BBQ 6PM every Wednesday and Friday, Hotel Kathmandu, Lazimpat.
The Executive Lunch Weekdays at Toran Restaurant, Dwarka’s. 4479488
Sunny Side Up Weekend BBQ at Soaltee Café. 4273999
The Beer Garden at Valijyanya/Weekends with beer and snacks at the Godavari Village Resort. 5560875
Café U dinners Friday and Saturday. Opp British School. 5523283
Roadhouse Café for woodfired pizzas. Opp St Mary’s School, Pulchowk. 5521755
Traditional Newari Thali at Kathmandu Guest House. 4431632

GETAWAYS
Wet & Wild Summer Splash Weekends at Godavari Village Resort. 5560875
Pure relaxation at Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge. 4361500
Luxury package for Shivaspur cottage, Dadagach, Highland Travel & Tours. 4833892
Bardia National Park $10 a day at Jungle Base Camp Lodge. Email: junglebasecamp@yahoo.com
Golf in the Valley’s last pristine forest at Gokama Forest Golf Resort & Spa. 4461213
Weekend Special for Rs 3,000 per couple, Park Village Resort, Buddhanartha. 4375280
Early Bird discounts at Hotel Shangri-la during April. 4421899

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BOOKWORM
Manual for Urban Rural Linkage and Rural Development Analysis Pushkar K Pradhan
New Hit Book Enterprises, 2003
Rs 800

Pushkar Pradhan’s book centers around the theme that, contrary to common focus, simply concentrating on development in rural areas isn’t enough. Rather, he encourages simultaneous planning for development in small towns and urban areas as well to make development an collective, well-balanced effort.

Courtesy: Mandaia Book Point, Kantipath. 4227711, mandala@ccsi.com.np

ABOUT TOWN

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At a time when most Nepali youth are either mired in cynicism or desperately trying to win a visa lottery, Puja Gurung has found her niche in Nepal’s booming television industry.

At 20, she has a respected television show which she presents with a maturity that belies her age. Aba Hamro Palo (Our Turn Now) on Kantipur Television is definitely not your standard call-in music video program. Held in a comfortable cocktail of English and Nepali, it is a forum for urban youth to speak their minds on subjects ranging from politics to social attitudes, entertainment, careers and anything else that matters.

“I was always hanging around with my friends talking about politics and social issues when I realised that I could do this on camera,” recalls Puja. Her challenge lay in finding teenagers who had opinions on more than just music and movies.

Aba Hamro Palo became an instant hit and the friends she recruited to appear on her first few episodes gave way to a deluge of interested participants.

“I was surprised to find so many intelligent and radical young people,” she says. “Most of the time they talk sense, unlike what adults assume about us.”

Within 38 episodes, Puja has had school students, engineers, architects, business people, underground metal heads, rappers, gays and lesbians on her show. The only criteria seems to be age: no one above 25 allowed on camera.

Puja began her tv career hosting the fashion-based program Pahiran on Channel Nepal. Puja has proven that if Nepali viewers have access to relevant and interesting programming in Nepal they prefer it to anything on foreign channels. “What we really need to do is connect ourselves with Nepali viewers, give them something that is more lively and unconventional,” she says.

Puja is happy to be thought of as an example to her peers.

“There is no need to go abroad for jobs because there are lots of opportunities right here in the country,” she says echoing something she said in a recent program. “All you need is focus.”

Aba Hamro Palo airs at 9PM every Thursday on Kantipur Television.
Look out, the earth is going to get hit by a haemorrhoid

It is when our homeland sinks slowly into the quagmire right in front of our eyes that we helpless citizens feel the need for a statesmanlike leader like Emperor Nero who had the presence of mind to play second fiddle, even as his capital city was set fire to his capital city. In other words, what we need is a President Bhattarai who parrots all night at Jativa’s nightclub and casino while Comrade Fidel practiced his fiery oratory on the outskirts of the city.

Tragically, our motherland has yet to give birth to such a leader as did Italy or Bhattarai who can pull anxious inhabitants into thinking that all is hunky-dory here in the boonocks. That is why, as our country goes down the tubes, we need to look for other ways of coping with stress by adopting such selective activities as alcoholism, procrastination and overeating.

So, are you wallowing in depression? Do you have sleepless nights about the future of the country? And none of the usual antidotes like deep breathing exercises, reducing caffeine intake, the 45-day vipassana, biofeedback techniques and acupuncturist work here? Hmmmm, then we have a problem.

Drastic disorders need drastic cures, and the only way to stop worrying and start living is to for about bigger and scarier things so that Nepal’s woes will pale into insignificance. Here are some larger overarching catastrophes that you can agonise over so that our country’s current travails will just be like water off a duck’s back:

Recommended Worry Number 1: Asteroid hit
A direct hit by a near earth asteroid the size of Sano Thimi off the coast of Osaka. This is so, so scary that it is unthinkable. And if you take into account the fact that the earth gets hit by a large haemorrhoid once every two million years, you can gauge for yourself how easily mankind, as we know it, could be wiped off the face of the planet. Brood over the effect of this cataclysm twice a day after meals, and nothing that happens in the vicinity of Bag Bazaar is ever going to spook you again.

Recommended Worry Number 2: Volcano eruption
The beauty about volcanoes is that, unlike asteroids, you don’t see them coming. They can therefore hit us anytime, anywhere, without warning. Even as we speak, magma chambers deep within the earth’s bowels are churning away, ready to erupt with the impact of a million Hiroshimas. The ash and pyroclastic flows will soar into the stratosphere and blanket the earth in a nuclear winter that will last centuries. With disasters like that to frighten you, why worry about Kathmandu Valley smog?

Recommended Worry Number 3: Global climate change
When you’re down and troubled about the state Nepal is in, just turn your attention to the catastrophic side-effects of global warming in the next 50 years and you will immediately feel relatively better. Melting polar ice caps, Greenland’s glaciers carving off into the North Atlantic, rainforests turned into dust bowls, all will help make our problems seem insignificant in comparison. The Maldives will be turned into an underwater republic, while we go underground.

These are longterm catastrophes, but for immediate relief from the fears of being a failed state, stuff formaldehyde, get a root canal and read crazy columns like this every week.