



SANPHE

Things have never really got back to normal in Achham after the devastating Maoist attack of 16 February 2002 where 84 policemen and soldiers were killed. But for this Sanphe policeman with a sarangi, there is hope that someday peace will return to this land.

Full story p4-5

KASHISH DAS SHRESTHA

BJP OUT

There was mixed reaction in Nepal to the unexpected BJP rout in India's election. Nepal's ex-embassy in Delhi, Lok Raj Baral, thinks the return of the Congress will not affect Nepal much. "Secular democratic forces will be encouraged, but Indian parties all hold similar views on neighbours," he said. But the Congress has had strained relations with Nepal's royalty, and King Gyanendra has been using the Hindu card for influence in the BJP's Delhi. Political activist Hari Roka says India's hardline Hindu groups have been supportive of the king. "The BJP defeat will undermine the king if he continues on a path of democratic reversal," says Roka, a PhD scholar at JNU in New Delhi.

see page p14

Times nepalnews.com
Weekly Internet Poll # 136

Q. Which one of the following political alignments would be most acceptable to you?

Total votes: 1,689

Weekly Internet Poll # 137. To vote go to: www.nepaltimes.com

Q. Should King Gyanendra meet the five political leaders together?

All together now

ANALYSIS by
RAJENDRA DAHAL

One week after the resignation of Surya Bahadur Thapa, we are still where we were last Friday. King Gyanendra wants to keep the final authority to select a prime minister, but the political parties are equally determined not to allow him that role.

All three forces (the five party alliance, the RPP and the Deuba Congress) now voice that the king has no right to nominate the prime minister. They want the composition of the dissolved parliament to be the criteria in the selection.

King Gyanendra has met a procession of party leaders and ex-prime ministers who were summoned to the palace for individual royal audiences. They all came out to tell waiting reporters that the king is committed to finding a

resolution to the impasse. Girija Prasad Koirala, Madhab Kumar Nepal and Narayan Man Bijukchhe of the five-party alliance were summoned separately this week but refused to go, saying they would only do so if all five could meet the king together.

The king hasn't said he won't meet them. But he hasn't invited them together either. The strategy seems to be to call them to the palace one-by-one on short notice to influence and divide the alliance. The king may now invite the alliance, but also include the RPP, the Deuba Congress and Sadhbhabana at the meeting to mute the five parties' voice.

Koirala and Nepal met on Thursday to make plans in anticipation of a sudden summons from the palace. One of the options being put forward by the Congress and the UML cadre to break the deadlock is for Koirala and Nepal to

step aside for second-echelon leaders like Ram Chandra Poudel of the Congress and KP Oli of the UML.

So the tussle goes on. The parties are trying to pressure the king to agree to take back October Fourth through their street agitation that is increasingly dominated by student leaders openly espousing republicanism.

For his part, King Gyanendra has deliberately sent the parties confusing signals to keep them

guessing. The palace could still try to outflank the parties with a technocrat-led cabinet capable of striking a deal with the Maoists and arranging a date for elections.

Worryingly, this window of opportunity for a political resolution is narrowing and this will delay resolution of the more serious issue of the Maoist insurgency and weaken the state's ability to meet the rebels' threatened escalation of violence in the coming weeks. ●



MIN BAJRACHARYA

They want to meet the king together (from l-r): Narayan Man Bijukchhe, Amik Sherchan, Madhab Nepal, Girija Koirala, Bharat Bimal Yadab

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People's power

Give real power back to the people and see what happens

Given his past reputation and present dealings, for many Nepalis, King Gyanendra's effort to run the country by fiat is illegitimate and his aspiration for heard-and-seen monarchy suspect. His insistence on having elected

GUEST COLUMN
Pramod Mishra



representatives, however corrupt, at his beck and call is futile. The slogan of patriotism has bled itself dry for many in Nepal—they want their sovereignty back.

This has not stripped the legitimacy of the monarchy yet, but how long can the king continue to be intransigent while being violently challenged by the Maoists, impatiently sloganised by republican youths and stiffly opposed by the parties? Doesn't he

need to prevent irrevocable damage to the institution that has made him who he is?

In the short term, he may inflict some broken bones in the streets but this way he and his dynasty stand to lose big time in the long term. All his speeches about the Shah dynasty following the people's wishes may not be enough to rescue the monarchy if he waits too long.

But the agitating party leaders also have a responsibility to find a way out of this deadlock. The willingness to clash with the police may show moral courage, but it is not enough to rescue a failing state with vision, clarity and fortitude. Nor is it enough to convince the common Nepali, disillusioned by a 12-year political circus, to join the struggle for democratic revival.

Even if their head wounds allow some politicians to atone for their past sins, it will not convince skeptics that they have turned a new leaf. What guarantee is there that they will not engage in the same corruption, willful misconduct and constant, shameless backstabbing of those in power by those outside the circuit, relentless factional strife and intrigue? The way, for example, that tainted figures have been coddled and sheltered even after CIAA indictments does not bode well.

If the parties have a blueprint for a reformed democracy, they haven't told us what it is yet. Now that the Surya Bahadur Thapa government has resigned, and they are jostling for berths in a future government, we see the beginnings of the same intrigue and

fractiousness that characterised their years in power.

Do they, especially the faction-ridden Congress, have the courage to own up to their lapses and show us that this time it is going to be different? The public doesn't seem convinced that the past won't be repeated.

True, as some columnists in this paper have argued, lots of good things happened since 1990. People became sovereign, their enthusiasm rose and democracy created a grassroot demand for elected representatives who performed. Partly fueled by global tendencies, Nepalis with their limited skills are now more than willing to risk journeys abroad for betterment. But the political leadership lacked the vision and training to channel that optimism to cleanse and uplift Nepal. They became engrossed, and ultimately lost, in their own petty rituals of power.

That said, no matter how much we hate them, the reinstatement and future of democracy lies with these very parties and their untainted leaders. The conscientious and courageous among them need to step out with specific, detailed and concrete manifesto about the future. For starters: how about throwing out the rotten apples? If the people had a forum, this is what they would be asking the leaders: why should we trust you now?

Nothing is more important than a reaffirmation among the Nepali people of their right to rule themselves through their own elected representatives and the right to throw them out in the next election if they don't like them. ●

ANOTHER FRIDAY

I think our country sinks beneath the yoke
It weeps, it bleeds, and each new day a gash
Is added to her wounds
Macbeth Act IV, scene iii

Five hundred years ago when central Nepal was ruled by Magar principalities, legend has it they chose their kings by organising marathons. Whoever won was crowned king. Drabya Shah's ancestors had recently fled up to the mountains from Rajputana, and when he heard of this custom he practiced cross-country endurance and outran the locals to establish the dynasty of which King Gyanendra is now the ruling monarch.

After seeking and getting the resignation of Surya Bahadur Thapa last week, King Gyanendra says he wants the new prime minister to have a clean image, be able to strike a ceasefire deal with the Maoists and hold elections. In a sense, this is a race. And aspiring candidates are out there on the tracks limbering up for the starting gun. Except, of course, the leaders of the five parties. Given their sedentary lifestyle, they seem out of form and therefore don't agree that this is the right way to choose a prime minister.

The parties are determined to oppose whoever the king anoints to Singha Darbar, and say they should be allowed to decide on the candidate, not the king. If one side keeps saying yes, and the other side keeps saying no, we are not going to find a way out of this impasse.

The palace has been trying hard to split the parties, summon party leaders one-by-one and play divide and rule. Although the party unity showed signs of fraying last Friday when it looked like a government was within grasp, the alliance has held. The parties themselves are escalating street protests to force the king's hand.

We don't understand the reason for such brinkmanship at a time when the country is already in the grip of Maoist violence. We are also at a loss to comprehend why if the fight is over power, our rulers insist on punishing the people. The king, by doggedly refusing to meet the party leaders together, has unnecessarily dragged on the crisis, exposing the people to continued hardships and misery. He has also besmirched (some would say irreversibly) the reputation of the monarchy itself.

The political parties, by forcing a two-day strike on the people and vandalising public property, struck a citizenry already on its knees. By competing with the Maoists to force people off the streets with the threat of violence and bringing the country to a halt, they have not endeared themselves to a public still skeptical that this is about the restoration of democracy. With blockades all over the country, landmine attacks and a three-day shutdown next week, the Nepali people can only take so much.

If we all agree that the first step is an all-party government acceptable to the king and the parties, then the two forces should stop being bullheaded about it and get on with it. Do we have to wait again till Friday?



LETTERS

MEDICAL TOURISM

Your centerfold spread on medical tourism in the Annapurnas ('Trekking brings medical care to the Annapurnas', #193) is more balanced than any effort I have seen to date. But the article avoids mentioning a key fact of trade: you can't export something you don't have. Since we in the USA are less healthy than almost any other rich country (and a few poor ones) in any measure of health, how can we export knowledge of how to produce health? We spend half of the world's health care bill to accomplish this. Would you buy a mechanised plough from a farmer whose crop production was the worst among all producers of ploughs? Especially if the plough was the most expensive in the world? I hope not.

Stephen Bezruchka
School of Public Health
and Community Medicine
University of Washington
Seattle, USA

FAKE

In spite of their confession that the resignation of Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa has created a new opportunity, the political parties/leaders don't seem willing to seize this opportunity to form an all-party government and hold elections. While initially the intended result of the agitation was to put pressure on the monarch to form an all-party government to hold elections and solve the Maoist problem, now that such a possibility is close, the political parties are avoiding it. This only proves that they faked the causes they used for agitating. As you say in your editorial ('A banana monarchy?', #193), isn't the Maoist insurgency the real problem that the nation is facing right now? Aren't elections the only way to really empower the people in a democracy? Isn't it the fear of losing in elections and not being able to solve the Maoist problem causing politicians to find new obstacles? It is unfortunate that we have leaders with no basic sense of integrity. And it's even more unfortunate to have

media and professionals supporting leaders in their misguided agitation. The integrity of media is also in question: what made them resort to street violence instead of using their pen to fight for press freedom? They clearly do not have faith in their own journalistic profession. God save this country.

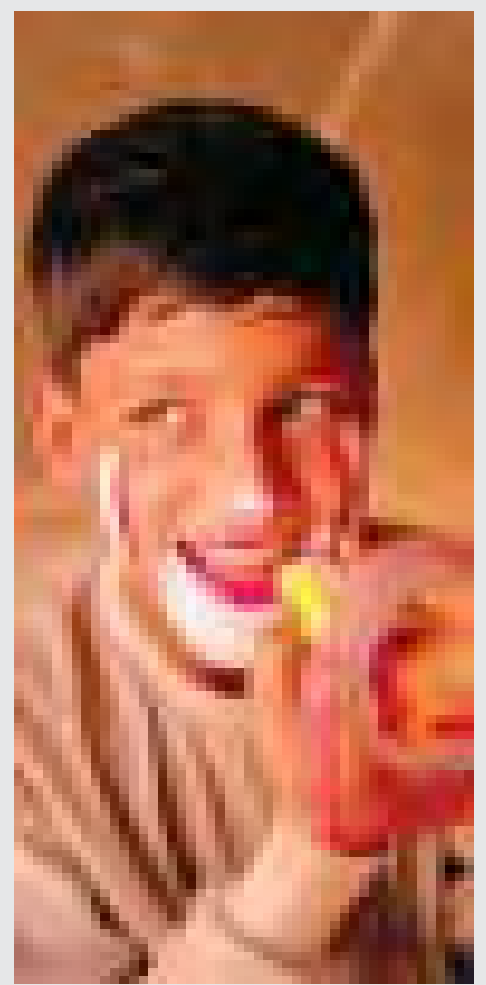
Rajeeb Lal Satyal, Bansbari

CIRCUS

A Western NGO blocked a Nepali circus in Tamil Nadu while they were just starting their tour ('Life is a circus for soem nepali children', #194). The NGO was adamant that the circus employed 33 teenagers, who were running this attraction, acting, showing tricks, etc. This action was taken under the new pretence in south India of stopping child labour. The teenage artists were sent packing back to war-stricken Nepal. The Western do-gooders must be very proud of having initiated this 'liberation operation'. It is much safer to roam the streets of a country under civil war, with no schools and no

work than to act as a clown in a circus. Of course, if they go back to school they will again face the risk of stepping on a landmine or being forcefully enrolled in the Maoist army. This was, in fact, why they initially left Nepal. So they are back to square one. It would be time for 'developing nations' to stand up for their own values and culture. Maybe they could convey to the affluent colonial powers that there is nothing wrong with work, even teenage work, as long as conditions are acceptable. Western nations used extensive child labour to develop up to the early 20th century. This is one of the means for them to keep poor nations behind, and try and keep their jobs rather than outsourcing them.

These mindless actions serve mainly to boost the good conscience of Western donors... It's called 'creating a good investment climate'. In the cities, these Western NGOs have been raiding shops and workshops in order to 'save'



MALIKA BROWNE

A semi-authoritarian route

Freedom can't be diluted, a country can't be half-democratic

Now that he has vacated Baluwatar, Surya Bahadur Thapa will have enough time to reflect upon the helplessness of prime ministers in this kingdom. During one of his earlier tenures in the Panchayat

STATE OF THE STATE

CK Lal



era, Thapa hinted darkly that an underground mafia ruled the country in the name of the palace. But when the time came to name names, Thapa turned out to be as meek as his pancha predecessors. He owes it to the nation to explain why he kept mum.

Just as he carries the cross of the 1980 referendum to this day, history will hold him responsible for helping institutionalise a 'constructive' monarchy in place of a constitutional one. King Gyanendra, by taking Nepali politics backwards, has also veered to the right, turning his regressive regime into a formidable force.

King Mahendra swore by the 'my-country-right-or-wrong' doctrine to declare all dissenters 'anti-national elements'. King Gyanendra is for the free market and wants to project a progressive image of a king fit for the 21st century. By allowing, if not actually encouraging, even seemingly harsh criticism, the regime of neo-Mahendraism exudes an air of sweet reasonableness. It has had the desired effect: the leaders of the agitating parties have been made

to look like vandals on a rampage.

Martha Brill Olcott and Marina Ottaway in the book *The Challenge of Semi-Authoritarianism* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999) write: 'Semi-authoritarian regimes are not failed democracies or democracies in transition, rather, they are carefully constructed and maintained alternative systems.' By systematically maligning and marginalising parliamentary parties, the palace made October Fourth look inevitable. Rather than the problem that it was, assumption of state power by the king was presented as a solution to political ills.

The main allegation against parliamentary parties was the

post-1990 power struggles that led to 12 governments in as many years. But the king's direct rule hasn't done any better, with three 'Bahadurs' in two years. Instability is as common to democracies with a feudal past as semi-authoritarianism is to post-colonial societies. Given the contradictions in Nepali society, a high turnover of political regimes is inevitable.

The second stick used to beat parties was their proclivity to use public office for private gain. Narayanhiti failed to set standards of public probity in the wake of the royal takeover. The budget of the royal household was arbitrarily hiked, public resources was allocated to acquire limos and sizeable sums

was squandered away on state orchestrated public felicitations. In the absence of the parliament, there is no legitimate forum to scrutinise what the royal governments of Chand and Thapa did to cultivate or combat corruption.

Corruption is the symptom of a society sick to its very core. In a culture that permits (nay, promotes) use of public office for private gain, cronyism and nepotism, politicians have to either conform to the norm or perish. The most corrupt elements of society shouted hoarse against public figures during the democratic regime.

Once the king took over, silence reigned supreme. Whether society has become

cleaner over the last 20 months is a different matter altogether.

By now, even hardcore optimists must be convinced that the royal takeover wasn't meant to correct the democratic deficit of an inefficient, inept, rapacious and "incompetent" Sher Bahadur Deuba regime. It was a carefully designed step to institute semi-authoritarianism that has all the trappings of democracy but its soul—sovereignty of the people—is held hostage.

Political pundits fantasising about a united front of 'constitutional forces' to fight the Maoist menace need to realise that it is actually the people who are simultaneously fighting on two fronts. ●

teenage workers, thereby depriving them of learning a trade. *Les jeunes qui travaillent.* They collect heavy fines from the employers and send the young staff 'home', without thinking of the consequences. This will increase the intake of street kids for the Kathmandu NGOs, which are overcrowded already. This, in turn, will lead to an increase of street delinquency due to the lack of jobs. Welcome to the Western model!

The dominant West has decided that children shouldn't work, full stop. All children, all over the world, must become useless consumers, and should be removed as soon as possible from production which brings them a degree of autonomy and self-respect. The model to attain is the overfed American teenager stuck on his computer for fear of the street dangers, demanding more and more gadgets to keep his mind at the level of an invertebrate while feeding the consumer market.

C Masai, email

Thanks to Malika Browne for investigating the plight of Nepali children in Indian circuses and to your report from Bhairawa that gives this sad story a hopeful end. As long as there are people like Kiran Thapa of the Nepal Child Welfare Society in Bhairawa and Philip Holmes of the Esther Benjamins Trust, we will be reminded in the inherent goodness of human beings and that not everyone is cruel and heartless.

Goma Manandhar,
Lazimpat

DWARIKA DAS

Everyone who knew Dwarika Das Shrestha would like to thank you for your tribute to him ('The kings and I' (#195). But why is it that people get recognition only after they die?

Uday Sunder Shrestha,
Sanepa

CORRECTION

In 'The kings and I' (#195), the young princes studied at St Joseph's School, North Point.





War-weary Sanphe

The silence of the night is broken by the sound of gunfire, no one knows who is shooting at whom, no one wants to know

KASHISH DAS SHRESTHA in SANPHE BAGAR

Armed Maoists openly patrol the hills above this roadhead town with an airfield and a security force base in western Nepal. The rebels are confident enough to hand-deliver threats to shops in the bazar. "Before the army came here, the Maoists visited regularly to collect money," says Gopal Kumar, who runs a small tea shop. "They come less often now."

The people of Sanphe tread a fine balance: the army presence gives them a sense of security, but they know it makes the area vulnerable to another Maoist offensive like the one in February 2002. And there is always the fear that the soldiers will mistake them for Maoists.

"Everyone knows what it means when people suspected of having links with the Maoists are taken out on patrols by the forces," says Min

Bahadur carefully. "They never come back."

The shops alongside Sanphe's deserted airfield may be open, but only just. In the surrounding villages of Achham, the Maoists levy their 'revolutionary tax' and locals are forced to join the militia or attend Maoist events. Thousands of villagers fleeing their homes have passed through Sanphe in recent months.

Those who can't leave do the best they can to survive. The forced recruitment of young girls into the militia has been rising, but since married women are sometimes excused, there has been an increase in female child marriages. The child bride stays home, the husband heads off to India.

"We should be stepping into the new age, but we are going back,"

says Ram Prasad Kuwar, the outspoken principal of Nawadurga Prathamik Bidhyalaya, one of the few schools not directly targeted by the Maoists yet.

Kuwar was once abducted by the Maoists and held captive for over four hours. His niece was among those forced to attend the Maoist program at Vidya Mandir Higher Secondary School in Binayak, where the Royal Nepali Army launched an aerial attack earlier this year.

"Of course, by the time the attack began the comrades had all left and locked the gate from outside, trapping the people they forced to come," he recalls. His niece survived. "But a part of her died anyway, she refuses to leave home and panics every time she hears a plane or helicopter," he adds.

There used to be a time when



ALL PICS: KASHISH DAS SHRESTHA

The Nepali words 'We women are also energetic and want justice, A red ribbon tied around black hair' jumped out at me from a *Tij* song. The red ribbon that Kamala, a 13-year-old girl in central Nepal, sang about seemed to symbolise the shackles of patriarchy, and the black hair was

LONDON EYE
Fay Adams



women's constrained vitality. Kamala's rebellious spirit was bursting to break the red ribbon and let her hair down. And so she sang for the women of Nepal.

This village girl is a far cry from a cosmopolitan, city girl. But it doesn't mean that Nepali women in London aren't expected to somehow be both. It is this double standard that Kamari, a London girl in her early twenties, has to contend with. And it is this double standard which itself becomes a red ribbon that Kamari strains to break free of.

At first glance, Kumari's

problem seems to be a pitched battle between the generations. Her parents represent traditional values and Kumari, strong-willed, ambitious and 'Westernised', represents young London Nepalis. Is this a situation of stalemate between the generations? Are the enticing freedoms of modern, city life real or merely superficial?

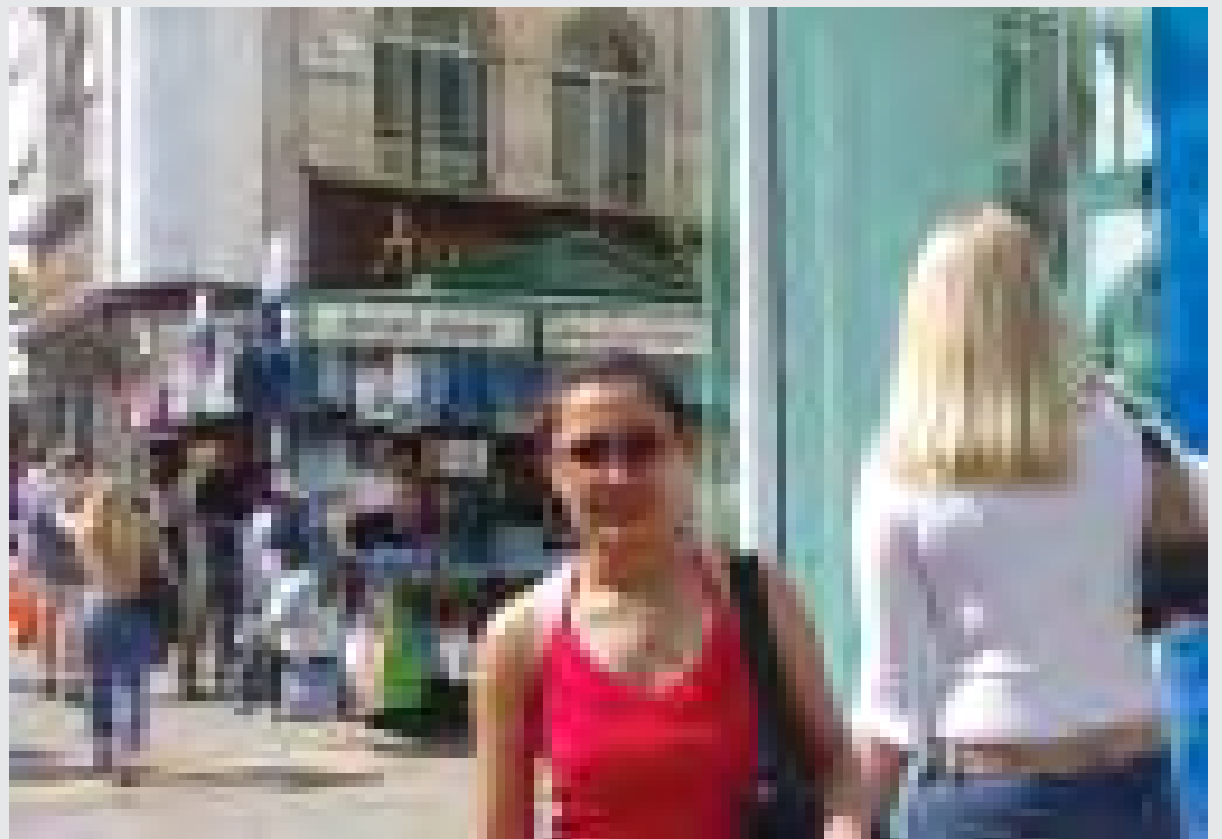
Despite the increased freedom of such a life, women still talk of how, from morning to night, they must constantly try not to do anything wrong. As Dan Maya, another city girl asked, "What kind of freedom is it that all the time imposes the subtle terror of social surveillance on women?"

Kumari relates how she does indeed feel watched and trapped. She treads a perilous path as she tries to blend in with British friends, while also safe-guarding *ijjat* for her family. "I've had to tell so many lies and I've been busted so many times. I feel really bad as well. My parents use emotional blackmail and they say that I'll bring a bad name to the family."

This adjudication of

Unique

No red ribbon will stop a girl like Kumari from letting her hair down



ne has had enough



up to seven flights landed in Sanphe every day. Now there are only four charters a week. The tower and the terminal building are still charred hulks. Across the river are the remains of the Water Department, on the opposite hill the shell of the Road Department building and in town the Forest Department signboard remains outside its ruin.

The Maoist blockade has sent prices soaring. A kg of rice that cost Rs 14 is now Rs 22, kerosene has shot up to Rs 40 per litre. "The government stated the blockade was not a big deal," says Mahesh Oli, a volunteer child counselor in Achham. "They have forgotten us."

There are still satellite antennas and electric wires, but Sanphe hasn't had electricity for years. At night there is only the flicker of oil lamps. After the Maoists destroyed the telecommunication tower in 2002, Sanphe's only direct link to the outside world is a single VSAT phone. "Just because the tower might be destroyed again does not

mean it shouldn't be fixed," says farmer Rabi Lama.

People here distrust both the king and politicians. No one is interested in or supports the current anti-king agitation, and they don't think much of elections. "If the government can't even hold SLC exams, I don't know how they plan to have elections," says Khadka.

Still, Sanphe is better off than the rest of Achham. At dusk, the local fishermen cast their nets, cattle graze in the thick grass on the runway, farmers don't go hungry at night. But as night falls, the people lock themselves up in their homes. Those who have a radio and batteries tune into the BBC Nepali Sewa to find out about the state of the nation. No one trusts the news on Radio Nepal. Late at night, the silence is broken by the sound of gunfire. No one knows who is shooting at whom. No one wants to know. ●

Some names have been changed to protect identities.

unmarried girls is not only carried out by the older generation. As Kumari said, "Even people our own age, like, educated people, young people living in England, they still... we do it as well!... I guess it's the way we were raised up." Despite this confession, Kumari is, of course, proudly Nepali. When a family member treated her differently because she grew up in the UK, she felt angry. "He expected me to turn into an English person! He didn't realise I can still maintain my Nepali culture and be a Nepali woman—I value that very highly."

Kumari bitterly lashes out against the dreams of her parents, but it is she who feels the bruises that follow. As a natural rebel, she feels the injustice of her lot, yet she is acutely aware that she embodies that very injustice. Her freedom as a Nepali woman in London is, in some ways, only skin deep. She is not so different from Kamala after all.

It seems then, that for Kumari all this is as much an inward split, as a generational

issue. At this time, women battle with an ambivalence caused by having one foot firmly on the Nepali soil of their parents and the other treading the tarmac of a London life. Can all this have a positive flipside? Perhaps it can bring a kind of uneasy emancipation in some cases. Young women like Kumari personify the meeting of two cultures. They have the opportunity to reap the benefits of both cultures and find themselves to be not of one, nor of the other, but of a third culture. Unique to London, unique to the Nepali diaspora, unique to today.

What she spoke of most poignantly was conflict, but I could see that Kumari actually negotiates her dual identity very deftly. Yes, patriarchy seems to be quite good at re-engineering itself to suit changing times. But rebellious spirit continues to challenge it. No red ribbon will stop a girl like Kumari from letting her hair down! ●

adamsfayfay@hotmail.com.



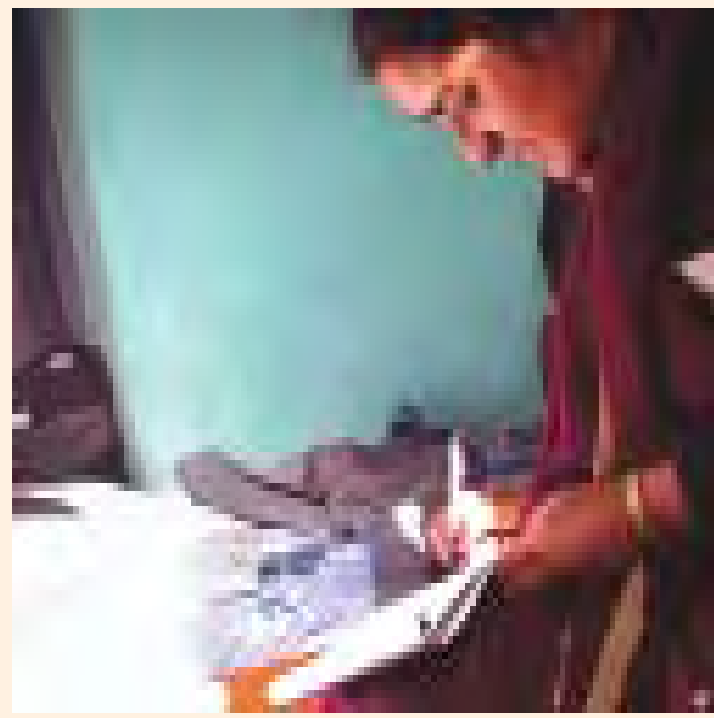
Clockwise from bottom l-r: All that's left of the Forest Department is its signboard, a young girl holds onto her mother, a dish antenna but no electricity on a Sanphe house, children carrying sacks of supplies through the bazaar and village women on their way home with meager supplies of grain and cooking oil.

Shobha's songs

Shobha is among the brightest students in Bajura: she wins top honours in every poetry, story, quiz and debate contest. She is an active volunteer and works with orphans and AIDS patients in her village. She is also a singer and songwriter, and that is what put the 18-year-old Shobha in danger.

For the past three years, the Maoists have tried to persuade her to join their cultural wing. At first they promised her glory for singing songs of the revolution, and when she refused, they threatened to kill her. Shobha promised she would join as soon as her feet healed, an excuse she concocted to buy time. The Maoists left after a warning that they would come back in three months. Like many other young people in the midwest, Shobha had to either join the Maoists or flee. She decided to flee, leaving behind her mother and younger brother.

Shobha's father works as a watchman in Mumbai. We met Shobha at Sanphe where she was waiting to get on a bus to go to her relatives. "The Maoists have taken away many of my friends," she says. Shobha is anxious about her future: how she'll fare in her new home and her exam results. "I will do well, but I can't afford college," she says. "All I really want is to be a social worker in my village and to sing my songs freely." (KDS)





Vehicles on the Mugling-Narayanghat Highway

Ruptured artery

The Department of Roads is racing against the monsoon to finish gravelling the heavily damaged Mugling-Narayanghat Highway before heavy rains arrive next month.

A cloudburst over central Nepal unleashed 500mm of rain in a 24 hour period last July, triggering more than 70 major landslides along the 36km mountain highway that follows the Narayani gorge. Only a 10km section of the road remained unscathed.

Although it was a natural disaster, the government's response in rebuilding the important artery used by some 5,000 vehicles a day has been slow. Sources told us that budget initially allocated last September for repairs were diverted to a road in the midwest for the royal visit there. But faced with the threat of Kathmandu being cut off in this monsoon, an additional Rs 35 million has been sanctioned and repair work has resumed on a war footing.

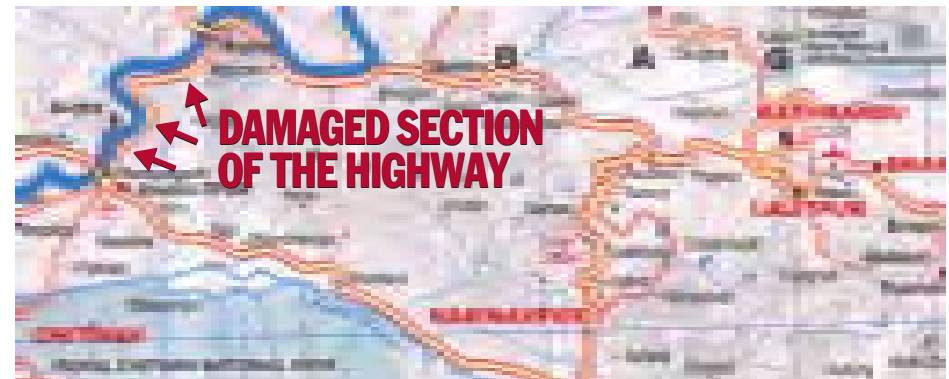
The highway was finished in 1978 with Chinese aid and passes through one of the most geologically unstable areas of the Mahabharat characterised by steep mountainsides and heavy precipitation. "The public doesn't understand this, and blame us for everything," laments Director General Madan Gopal Malekhu of the Department of Roads. "This would have been a major disaster in any country, and would take months to rebuild even with an unlimited budget and the most modern equipment."

A 120m retaining wall in the worst-affected area at the 24km point is already under construction and should be finished in a month. Although rains were mainly to blame, there are also man-made factors like deforestation along the highway caused by the tea shops and lodges mushrooming by the roadside. Mining sand and gravel along the rivers has also increased the speed of the water during monsoons.

"You can have the best highway in the world, but it won't stand a chance with rains like last year, even without taking the man-made factors into account," says Bishnu Shrestha, the senior divisional engineer in charge of the Mugling highway repairs.

Asked what are the chances of the highway remaining open during the monsoon, Shrestha is optimistic that if there are no major disruptions like bandas, blockades and heavy pre-monsoon showers, the work should be finished before the main rains arrive. ●

(Pragya Shrestha)



Vive les femmes

Why don't the Charitraheen Chelis rip apart their veils and show us who they are?

When French women took off their bras and waved them in protest around the Champs Elysees in the 1970s, they were saying enough is enough to male chauvinism.

Wearing bras was a symbol of compliance to men. That could be true, but I suppose bras also have gravity-defying attributes and it is also true that with time

NEPALI PAN
Kapil Tamot



this item of upper

female undergarment has been imbued with its own erotica.

I wonder what would happen if our Charitraheen Chelis had marched around Darbar Marg waving their bras on International Women's Day. Did our clever Chelis deliberately not do this because they knew of its fallout in Nepali society? Is this why they prefer talking about not wearing undergarments and not actually doing it? So, on International Women's Day on 8 March, the Charitraheen Chelis made public their 40 point Declaration of Independence in these pages (#186).

One of my delighted lady friends in America emailed me that declaration from this paper's online edition just to make sure that I read it. I had already read it in Nepali and in English. But reading it thrice didn't help. It raised more questions, and after many sleepless nights I discussed writing this column with my future rebel wife, who lovingly calls me 'King' but has

made me understand that no means no and when she has a headache, I should reach for Cetamol, not a condom. But she gave me permission to go ahead and write it: "It will be fun. But be ready for some dagger criticism."

First off, why International Day of Women? How about us guys? They already expect us to be gallant most of the time, if not all the time, offer roses and take them out for a candlelit tête-à-tête dinner on 14 February.

Although their identities are a closely guarded secret, I suspect I know some of the Charitraheen Chelis. We have shared several pegs of whisky on the rocks or rum with coke and hung out in discos quite late. I have never seen these women feeling uncomfortable to

talk about sex, being scared to scold corrupt politicians, fight with nasty and drunk policemen in Thamel or say that the king should make a move to bring the country out of deadlock. All this they do openly, in public. But they prefer to remain anonymous while talking about their 40 points. Why?

Changes come once we know that options exist. Ten years ago, seeing a Nepali couple holding hands would make heads turn. And kissing in public would be science fiction. Today young couples express their love on the streets of Kathmandu openly and spontaneously.

Ten years is not a long time to bring about such changes. I agree the cowards still trouble women during phau, but due to more open relations

between boys and girls there are less road side Romeos harassing girls today. Many will argue that this trend is very bad for Nepal. If display of affection is not part of our culture then it is high time that it was made a part. Outwardly expressing affection is only positive for any society. And let our society's anally-retentive prudes say what they want: they will call anyone *charitraheen* who doesn't respect their thinking.

This is probably why our Chelis liked to call themselves Charitraheen. It is understood that you are challenging those who would call you characters of ill repute, but how positive it is to start a movement with a negative? Has anyone ever dared to tell you that you are *charitraheen* when you are having fun?

If you can openly speak, write and fight for property or abortion rights then why can't you just come out on the surface and declare openly what you have to say by setting examples? It might be fun down there but it's certainly not bad up here, either.

You have your reasons to remain anonymous but being someone who firmly believes that progress will be hard to achieve unless the status of women is not improved, I simply want to say to the Chelis (Charitraheen or otherwise): you are the ones who can contribute shaping the character of us men who are feeling rather insecure because we don't have an international day dedicated to us. ●



Hitting rock bottom in Pokhara

Bandas, blockades and the murders of two prominent Ghandruk businessmen has demolished what was left of Pokhara's tourism

RAMESH POUDEL in POKHARA

Already badly hit by bandas, blockades and political instability the news of the murders of two prominent tourism entrepreneurs in Ghandruk by Maoists has sent Pokhara into deep gloom.

Ghandruk is an important trekking stop on the trails to Ghorepani and Annapurna Base Camp and used to house the headquarters of the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), which was destroyed by Maoists two years ago.

On Monday, Maoists took five prominent Ghandruk hoteliers hostage. They locked two lodges and transferred guests from one tea house to another. Then came the news that the Maoists had shot dead two of the hostages: Dil Man Gurung, 60, chairman of the Hotelier's Association of Ghandruk and Iswor Gurung, 31. The rebels told villagers not to leave their houses and trekkers are bypassing Ghandruk for now.

"Ghandruk has no trekkers now," said Iswor's cousin Prakash

Gurung, a former assistant minister, who lives in Pokhara. "We have not been able to go to the village because of the Maoists." The army too has been unable to get to Ghandruk for fear of Maoist ambushes along the way. However, an army official said aerial patrolling of the area had begun.

This is the first time that the Maoists, who claim never to attack tourists, directly attacked the tourism industry. There used to be extortion and earlier this year there were skirmishes in the Ghorepani area, but the murders and abductions in Ghandruk are sure to dampen tourism in the Annapurnas.

Pokhara has already seen a 90 percent drop in tourism in the last few days because of the two-day banda by the parties and the one week Maoist blockade of Prapat district that began on Monday. Next week's three-day banda called by the Maoists is going to affect tourism further.

More than 250 tired trekkers

returning from the Annapurna circuit were stranded in Nayapul because of the recent banda. Many had to walk the 35km to Pokhara because of the strike and the Maoist blockade. The Maoists burnt two taxis on the Baglung highway earlier this week to scare drivers.

"I was very tired and could not walk any more," said Jurgen, a trekker from Germany. "Luckily I managed to hire an ambulance to bring me here." Gerry from the UK had to pay for a chartered helicopter from Annapurna base camp. "I didn't have time to deal with all these uncertainties," he said.

In effect, tourism business has shrunk significantly despite the number of reservations. "We had reservations of around 100 tourists going to Annapurna base camp," said Tikaram Sapkota, general secretary of Trekking Agents Association of Nepal in Pokhara. "The blockade and general strike has caused a lot of cancellations." ●



Amphibians on Phewa

If all goes well, ultralights will soon be taking off from Pokhara's lake

SRADDHA BASNYAT in POKHARA

If the Annapurnas are its crowning glory, Pokhara's shimmering lakes are its jewels.

Pokhara's Avia Club, which has been conducting mountain flights in its ultralight aircraft for the past seven years, plans to use Phewa Lake as a runway to take tourists from the water to the sky in sightseeing trips.

Deepti Gurung, sales and promotion manager at Avia, is very excited about this latest initiative. "If we start a new activity here, the good news will travel abroad," she says. "It'll be good for everyone in tourism in Nepal, from the airlines to the boat renters on the lake." The service includes a boat ride back to shore.

Not everyone is happy. There are concerns about noise and gasoline leakage on the lake. But Gurung is quick to rule them out: "We are conducting an environmental study and it doesn't look like a serious problem," she says.

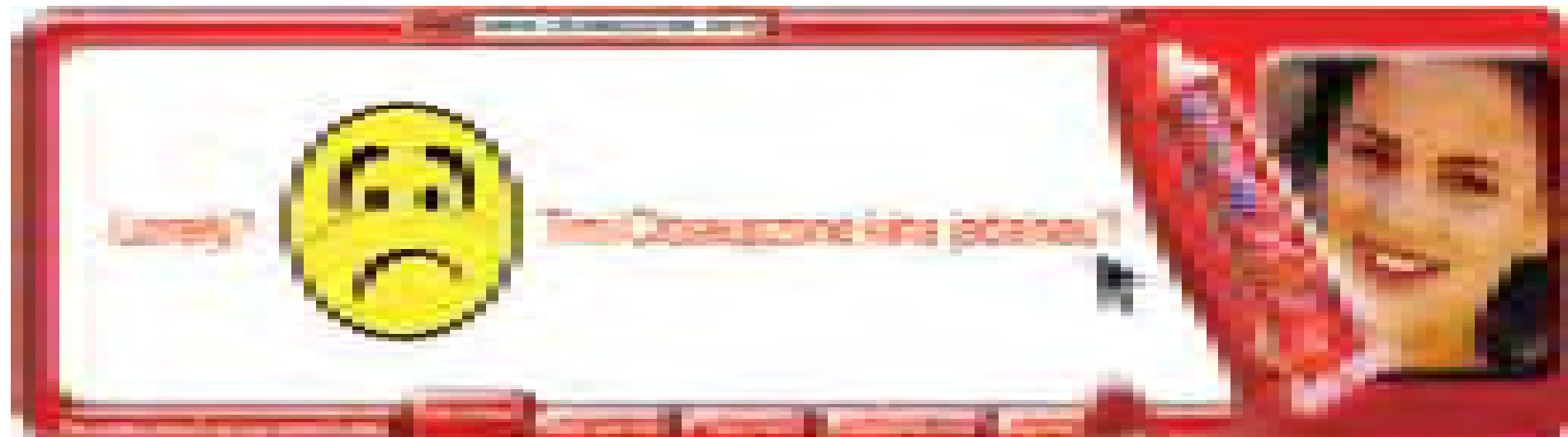
Capt Alexander Maximov of Avia has been overseeing trials on amphibian ultralights and seems satisfied with flying conditions. Says Gurung, "Capt Maximov has already been flying here for years and knows the landscape and weather patterns. He is really excited about amphibian landings." Avia Club will be using one of the three ultralights already in regular service fitted with the pontoons, which together are capable of keeping 1,000kg afloat, a cinch for the 150kg Ultra Light.

Stephen Shrestha, pilot and technical director of Avia, is confident that any impact to the lake is minimal. "The pontoons keep the engine above the water, controlling any direct leakage. Our engines are very well maintained and are so small that they make minimum sound. It's the same engine we've been authorised to fly till date. If sound was really a factor in Pokhara, people should be more worried about Mi-17 helicopters flying low overhead."

The environment ministry will be conducting an environment examination together with the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal on 15 May when Avia Club does another test run of its proposed service. Tourism entrepreneurs here have no doubt the amphibian ultralights will be a hit, but only if Pokhara's tourism stays above water. ●



ANIL SHRESTHA



Accountable to whom?



MIN BAJRACHARYA

NAVIN SINGH KHADKA

They are a vital part of democracy's check and balance: the auditor general is supposed to look over all the government accounts to see if there are any discrepancies or irregularities and the Commission of Investigation for Abuse of Authority (CIAA) is a corruption watchdog.

But since there is no parliament, the auditor general and the CIAA have handed their reports to the royal palace, which doesn't seem to know what to do with them.

Now, under donor pressure to make the government accountable, the attorney general is looking at options to make the report available for public scrutiny: hand

it over to the Upper House, or even make copies available in public libraries.

The Auditor general's office submitted an annual report 15 months ago. It's been eight months since they handed over last year's report. The CIAA confirmed that their reports were given to the palace earlier this year. "First they asked us to wait, then they said we will talk after Dasai, then Tihar, and when the report was finally submitted, the palace was reluctant to accept it," said an official at the auditor general's office.

We asked Chief Commissioner Suryanath Upadhyay if he was tracking the progress of his report. All he would say was: "The constitution has a clearcut

provision in this regard and we have already submitted our report to the palace." An official from the palace press secretariat only commented: "The respective constitutional bodies are competent enough to deal with the issue."

Clearly, the fact that it is in possession of the reports but not doing anything with it is inconveniencing the palace. The constitution requires the auditor general and the CIAA submit their reports to the king, who redirects the documents to the parliament through the prime minister. Since there is no House of Representatives, the palace has the reports but no one to pass it on to. Unfortunately, the 1990 Constitution did not foresee such a

The auditor general and the CIAA have their annual reports ready, but in the absence of parliament who is supposed to act on them?



Attorney General Sushil Pant at his office

crucial reports to the public. "If the government wanted to, the reports could have been brought out through many ways. It would also have won the government and the king popularity," said a senior auditor.

The attorney general's office recently gave the government two options: keep the reports at public libraries or present them to the Upper House. "We would have done it already had the prime minister not resigned. We are working at it," said Attorney General Sushil Pant. But why is the Thapa government only so concerned about the reports now?

Senior finance ministry officials admit it had to do with the Nepal Development Forum (NDF) meeting last week. As it happened, donors did raise the issue during the meeting. At a post-NDF press meet, when donors were asked how they could be confident their aid was not misused in the last two years, Pratul Patel, the World Bank South Asia Vice President, said that the government had been asked to make the reports public at the earliest.

Immediately after Patel's response, Finance Minister Prakash Chandra Lohani added that the attorney general's office was helping to make the reports public. ●

situation and so there are no provisions for this.

The Nepali people have therefore been deprived of the national audited accounts that include the money paid as tax and reserves in the national coffer. The importance of the CIAA report is similar.

Chief Secretary Bimal Koirala admits: "In the absence of the auditor general's report, people can question the government's discipline and transparency."

Interestingly, in the absence of a parliament, the non-elected government has succeeded in introducing and amending acts, presenting a budget through ordinances, but is neglecting to develop a mechanism to get these



HEATING UP THE SKIES

The airline industry in Nepal flying to a new beat

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ON NEWSTANDS FROM 15 MAY 2004

DOMESTIC BRIEFS

Cairn Energy still interested

British oil firm Cairn Energy has said that its efforts to launch a pioneering exploration for oil and gas in the tarai is being held up by political unrest in the country. Mike Watts, exploration director, told shareholders at the company's annual meeting in Edinburgh, Scotland, last week that the difficulties in Nepal had so far prevented the cabinet from concluding negotiations for an agreement on the split of any future oil finds without which Cairn could not begin work. However, the company, which bid last year for five giant exploration blocks covering 35,000 sq km in Nepal, confirmed its enthusiasm for the proposed project and said it hoped to at least initial the necessary production sharing contracts in the near future. Cairn has been catapulted into the international big time this year by a series of large oil finds in Rajasthan in western India, an area in which other Western oil companies had previously shown little interest.

Singing for peace

The Nepali band Nepathya has been on a 15-city nationwide roadshow advocating *Shantiko lagi Sikchya*. On 8 May it played to a packed Municipality Hall in Tansen. The audience was much larger than the 400 people in the auditorium thanks to live broadcasts on two local radio stations, Madan Pokhara FM and Srinagar FM. The band



performed all their major hits from 'Chekyo chekyo' to 'Bheda ko oon jasto'. The latter recently won Album of the Year at the Image Channel Awards. Lead singer Amrit Gurung said, "Let's all be together and start working for peace!" The audience roared their approval. Tour update: www.nepa-laya.com

Every woman

Celebrating Womanhood is an annual event that began in 2002 to honour the vision, inner beauty and the power of women in various fields like art, education, sports, community service, health and industry. Performing arts also take centre stage as they incorporate creativity, originality and talent. Initiated by Shrijana Singh Yonjan, this year's Nava Devi Recognition honourees include artist Ashmina Ranjit, writer Durga Pokhrel, educationist Rani Gurung Kakshapati and mountaineer Ang Dali Sherpa.

Celebrating Womanhood 2004, 15 May, Hotel Soaltee Crowne Plaza

Banda-aid Let's make national shutdowns too costly for the organisers

Earlier this week, private-sector firms suffered through a two-day banda. Next week, there is going to be a three-day banda. The firms give in

STRICTLY BUSINESS
Ashutosh Tiwari



to these calls for total shutdowns not out of love for the finer points of democracy, republicanism, class struggle, party-political loyalty or *(insert your reason here)*. They give in because of fear.

In the absence of risk-minimising insurance schemes and any credible opposition to bandas, they have no choice but to halt work.

As things stand, the cost of being at the receiving end of hurled stones, angry mobs and even bomb threats is much higher for most business owners than any benefit they may derive by keeping the machines and the workers productive on banda days.

Popular during the last days of Panchayat, Nepal-wide bandas have since mutated into a familiar evil. So present are they that Nepali media headlines invariably say that the bandas 'passed peacefully' with a picture of boys playing cricket or football on some deserted street. Occasionally, there may be news reports, quoting intellectuals who bemoan the loss of productivity and calculate the money that the bandas supposedly suck out of our total domestic output. Opinion-makers tick off the reasons why

bandas are against most Nepalis' interest and why they must be stopped immediately.

Yet, amidst all these hand-wringing rituals, two questions remain: Why do bandas continue to take place? And is there any way to discourage them?

Bandas continue to take place in Nepal because they cost their producers almost nothing. If you are thinking of producing one, all you need to do is pick out the dates, let word-of-mouth circulate the decision and disappear behind



KIRAN PANDAY

your party's flag. On appointed days, the invisible hand, in its ironically decentralised avatar, whips up enough fear to make shops remain closed, wheels grind to a halt and people to stay home.

In this scenario, your production costs are almost zero because the real cost is borne by millions of Nepalis, each of whom does feel the pain, but apparently

not deeply enough to form groups to defy the calls for bandas. The public bears the cost, giving up their productivity and income. As a result, producers have every incentive to call for bandas.

Broadly, there are three policy solutions, with varying degrees of effectiveness. All three solutions require an elected government and public money. First, the government can pass laws and enforce them, with high fines extracted from those who call for bandas, even from political parties.

Second, whichever party gets to run Singha Darbar can continue to push for policies aimed at market reforms, even in villages. With millions more Nepalis connected to one another through the complex web of market transactions, they will increasingly find bandas too costly to take part in, even involuntarily. That means, just like businesses in Thamel once did, they will start coming together to defy the calls for bandas.

The third way is for the government to co-opt the bandas. It can organise village *bhojs*, street festivals and other such 'public benefit' activities, thereby hijacking the organisers' agenda for its own PR purposes.

Outrage against bandas is fine. But to have fewer bandas, let's look for ways to bring in the costs associated with bandas within the framework of market-based supply and demand. This way, to most people's relief, producers will start finding the cost of producing bandas too high to handle. ●

"We dominate the small car market"

KIRAN PANDAY

Last year, Hyundai cars did exceptionally well in Nepal. The sales were so spectacular that AVCO International even bagged an award from the parent company. Dhiren Tamang, director at AVCO, the sole distributor of Hyundai in the kingdom, talked to *Nepali Times* about success, saturation and hard sell.

Nepali Times: Why did AVCO deserve the award?

Dhiren Tamang: We were honoured because we increased our market share substantially. Generally, Hyundai distributors have around 20 percent market share in countries where they are better performers. Here in Nepal, we occupy over 30 percent.

What kind of numbers are we talking about?

We started with the sale of 50 cars in 1999. Last year, we sold 750. The Santro comes from India, the rest from South Korea.

But isn't the small car market saturated?

The small car segment is quite lucrative. That's why you have so many new brands, so we are becoming more defensive. Considering the price factor and the roads and parking areas in Kathmandu, these cars are more in demand. There are new entrants every year but small cars are our strength. Our Santro dominates the market.

What other models do you have in your stables?

We have B+ segment cars, under which we recently introduced the Getz, which is a kind of upgrade for Santro drivers. These customers are our biggest base for the segment. On the slightly higher side, we have the Matrix, a multipurpose diesel vehicle with the latest technology. We imported 25 Getz cars and they all sold out. We have already sold 150 Matrix cars.

What is the resale value of these models?

Santro has a very good resale value, with instant buyers.

The depreciation is very low.

And spare parts?

In the case of cars coming in from India, there is no problem. For others, we have an inventory. If anything is needed urgently, we can always import it from regional offices in Malaysia and Singapore.

Who is your target group?

We target the middle class: their income is growing and they can afford to pay monthly installments. Even the upper bracket has begun to feel the need of a second family car. Moreover, people like to upgrade their vehicles, so sales are bound to rise.

Is such growth even sustainable in Kathmandu?

Congestion and the environment are real problems. But Hyundai has a good focus on minimising emission. We spend a lot on research and development, and now all Hyundai cars exported to Nepal are Euro III standard, even though the government's requirement is Euro I. As far as congestion is concerned, we cannot forego sales. But, we focus on compact cars. It helps in places like ours.

We hear of motor companies forming cartels internationally to prevent governments from investing in public transportation systems.

This is not happening in Nepal because the volumes of sales here would not justify such a move. We recently celebrated the sale of the 2,000th Hyundai car. While that's something big for us, for a global company like Hyundai, it isn't very much.

Handcuffed at home

They prop up our economy, but Nepal's overseas workers are hounded and duped by fellow-Nepalis every step of the way



KIRAN PANDAY

DEWAN RAI

Last June, Birman KC left his home in Pathriya, Morang to seek his fortune.

On 25 April, Birman finally entered Kathmandu's Tribhuvan International Airport (TIA) to board a flight to Doha. His brow red with vermilion, Birman looked nervous about what awaited him at

immigration on both ends of the flight.

He was flying off without the necessary work permit from the Department of Labour. "We bribed the immigration official with Rs 5,000 to get him through, so we don't expect any problem," said Birman's friend, Ramesh Bhatta.

The middlemen that fixed Birman's papers promised that he

will earn Rs 15,000 a month in Qatar. Even if he gets the full amount, it will take him a year to pay back the Nepali labour agency's cut for finding him the job. He owes loan sharks in his village Rs 150,000. Even that is a best-case scenario: some Nepalis have found out on arrival that there is no job, and many others end up earning much less than promised. Birman managed to get

through Kathmandu immigration with his forged permit, but his family hasn't heard from him yet.

Bhakta Bhattarai from Hile in Dhankuta flew to Dubai last July on the assurance of a labour agency, Kasturi Overseas, that he had a hotel job with Rs 14,000 a month waiting for him. Bhakta paid Gopal Adhikari, an agency worker, Rs

100,000, but after he arrived in Dubai he found that he had been given a visitor visa instead of a work visa that allowed him to be legally employed. "I had to return, I had no choice," says Bhakta. Gopal Adhikari has



Bhakta Bhattarai

Twice victimised

The crooks go scot-free, but the Nepalis they cheated are in handcuffs

On 23 April, 54 Nepalis wearing identical caps and T-shirts left Kathmandu and, after a transit in Dhaka, flew to Kuala Lumpur.

They were there to work for a computer company called PCA Hardware, but then immigration authorities at Kuala Lumpur airport checked their visas in a laser scanner and pronounced them fake.

They spent four days inside the airport, hungry, tired and worried, and were then flown back to Nepal. But instead of finding justice in their homeland, they were handcuffed and treated like criminals upon landing in Kathmandu and taken to Hanuman Dhoka police station to be locked up.

The next day they were taken to the Kathmandu District Court. "They treated us like murderers," said Shyam Tamang from Rautahat, who had never seen grown men cry like his friends did. "Our own Nepalis added salt to our wounds."

"We did nothing wrong, we were given fake visas, they should have caught the ones who broke the law," says Sriganesh Subedi from Parbat. Members of the group paid Rs 80,000 each for their Malaysian visas and Nepali passports. They hoped to earn that amount after six months of work in Malaysia and save about \$2,000 in two years.

"Nepali police even made us pay for the handcuffs," says an outraged Chudamani Phuyal from Jhapa. But just when the future looked bleak, four lawyers from the Kathmandu School of Law came to their rescue and got the court to free them on 5 May. "This was a gross violation of human rights," says Ram Prasad Aryal from the law school. "They were doubly victimised, first by the manpower agency and then punished by the state for something they never did."

Investigators are looking for a certain 'Lee' who charged Rs 3,000 from Nepali



workers to expedite the visa procedure, even though the visa fee is only Rs 400. Lee and his accomplice 'Joe' are missing, but police found dozens of Nepali passports at their residence. "The consulate knew who Joe was and what he did," says NP Ghimire of the agency, NP International. "He has helped get up to 30,000 workers to Malaysia."

So what went wrong? There is a suspicious coincidence between Lee's disappearance and the detention of the 54 Nepalis at Kuala Lumpur. Were they really fake visas, or was Lee getting even with someone in Nepal?

Of the 54 Nepalis, some have decided not to go to Malaysia and have been returned the money they paid the agency. Others, like Shyam Tamang and Sriganesh Subedi, are trying again. Most haven't told their families in the villages what has happened. ●

(DR)



disappeared. Stories like these are common among the tens of thousands of Nepali overseas workers. They sell off ancestral property to pay labour agencies in Kathmandu, and often end up being cheated, almost never getting the salary promised, spend up to a year in as a bonded labourer to pay off the agent and are harassed by immigration officials at the airport in Kathmandu while leaving or returning. One would think the overseas workers who prop up the Nepali economy with their annual combined remittances of about \$1 billion would be treated as national heroes. But instead of finding them good, well-paying jobs, simplifying and streamlining procedures and cracking down on those who cheat them, the workers are hounded and

tricked by fellow Nepalis every step of the way. Many Nepali workers are now so sick of the hassles at TIA that they travel overland to Delhi before flying out to the Gulf or Malaysia. No one has any record of the true number of Nepalis working in the Gulf. Unofficial reports put it at 500,000, and the Labour and Foreign Employment Department says most of the 105,000 Nepalis who travelled abroad to work last year were headed for the Gulf.

In theory, the government's rules are designed to regulate the flow of Nepali workers and prevent exploitation by middlemen. A licensed labour supplier must apply to the department with a copy of a demand letter from the foreign employer containing details of contracts and vacancies and the power of attorney. All these documents must then be authenticated by the Labour Department, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Royal Nepali Embassy. The embassy can even ask the agent to produce the service agreement between the employer and the recruiting agent. The Labour Department issues its permission only after all these documents are verified. Hikmat Magar from Dhankuta

paid Rs 60,000 to Roshan Upreti of Nepal Gulf Overseas in 2002 who promised him a job. The company couldn't find him a placement, but wouldn't give him his money back either. Hikmat has been going to the Labour Department since January, and after six months of persistence, it finally looks like he will get his money. Hikmat's case has a rare happy ending. Gembu Rai was not so lucky. He used to run a small shop in Kharikhola



near Lukla and decided to go find work in Malaysia with his brother, Dorje Rai, a primary school teacher. After borrowing Rs 200,000 from villagers at 48 percent interest, they left home in March 2003. Their agent, Dhan Prasad Yonghang from Panchthar, took them to New Delhi with a batch of 20 other workers bound for Malaysia and the Gulf. The brothers only discovered they had been given expired visitors' visas when they were not allowed to board their Kuala Lumpur flight and returned to Nepal. Today, the Rai brothers are living in Koteswor. Gembu doesn't want his brother to go back home, fearing the Maoists may recruit him. They have



(opposite) Nepali workers who were deported from Malaysia on 27 April and forced to buy their own handcuffs wait to be taken to Hanuman Dhoka, (left) a Qatari work permit for a Nepali worker flying off to Doha, (above) Nepali workers line up outside the Malaysian consulate at Hotel de l'Annapurna.

no choice but to borrow another Rs 200,000 to try for another visa and get work in Malaysia to clear their debt. Like the Rais, many Nepalis have no other option. They flee from the Maoists by borrowing money to come to Kathmandu, where they then become easy prey for unscrupulous middlemen. The government's laws don't actually protect them, and in many cases government officials are in cahoots with the crooks.

The 1985 Foreign Employment Act has a provision that if an employment agent dupes a Nepali citizen, the agent has to reimburse all fees with 18 percent interest and pay fines of up to Rs 200,000 to the government, or be jailed for up to five years. There is no record of any manpower agency receiving that punishment, even though Nepali workers are cheated all the time. I



Dhan P Yonghang

Some of the names of Nepali workers in this piece have been changed to protect their identity.



Centralised attack

Ujjir Magar in Nepal, 16 May

नेपाल

GULMI—Until a few years ago he used New Delhi, India's capital, as his base, but now Bam Deb Chettri's home district of Gulmi in midwest Nepal is a secure Maoist stronghold. This central party member is unafraid to make his presence felt at every assembly, held almost daily, flanked by battle-hardened guerillas.

Chettri was arrested by the Indian authorities in New Delhi nearly two-and-a-half years ago and handed to the Nepal government in an effort to show that India was not being used as a safe haven. Chettri was released from custody last year during the ceasefire as a government gesture of 'flexibility' and 'goodwill'.

He was suspended from the party for six months along with four other central leaders of the Maoist party who were released with him. Under the chairmanship of Sudharshan Baral, a 'district people's government' was recently declared in Gulmi. Netra Bikram Chanda, 'Biplab', a Maoist party's special sector incharge and western division commissar of the 'people's army', inaugurated the announcement ceremony.

Now the Maoists are running a 'special military campaign' in their special sectors, including Gulmi, under the party's western central command. They claim to have consolidated their military might significantly since the Myagdi attacks. Commissar Abhinash of the third battalion explained that they are capable of capturing nearly five district headquarters in the midwest, a plan that has come under serious consideration. "We have enough firepower to do this," he said. The third battalion comes under the 'Mangalsen first brigade' that was involved in the recent attacks on Myagdi.

According to Maoist claims, with the policy of mass militarisation, they have started preparing for a massive centralised attack. They are certain that they have now already crossed the level of 'decentralised', 'relatively centralised' and 'decentralised unified action'. They describe Myagdi attacks as the last of the 'decentralised unified action'. By the looks of it, and from what the top Maoist cadre were saying, massive preparations are underway for a centralised attack.

Abhinash attributes the rebel's success in Myagdi to months of rigorous preparation. "Yes, we felt very bad that we lost some of our best comrades but we were prepared to sacrifice 500 men to occupy Myagdi," says Abhinash. The Maoists say they lost 62 fighters. Under the special military campaign of the Maoist party, initiatives like meeting people, distributing land belonging to soldiers and police are underway.

The Maoist party's special military campaign has been publicised in a poster depicting a picture of Maoist supremo Prachanda in full military gear, something never seen before. The poster's text reads, 'Special people's military campaign for armed uprising and centralised military attack'. The rebels want to develop a party that is interchangeably an 'party-army, army-party'. Even political activists of the Maoist party wear fatigues like their guerilla comrades.

Bam Deb Chettri states, "The cause we are fighting for is a change for the better. This is why we are implementing this centralised plan." Chettri told us that according to the party's policy the possible dialogue between the government and the Maoists depends upon this strategic agenda. On the possibility of peace talks, he said, "We were duped by the political parties and the government on two occasions. We have lost all faith in them now. So the future dialogues should be held in the presence of the representatives of the UN, who should mediate." (Nepalnews.com)



Army school

Rajdhani, 8 May

राजधानी

BIRENDRANAGAR—The state's insensitivity towards educational institutions is clearly evident in the way it allows security forces to commandeer schools for offices and barracks. "We will all be forced to quit our studies soon," says a student of Multiple Campus. A month ago, the Armed Police Force (APF) moved its regional office from Nepalganj and placed it near the campus. Students are under severe pressure from the earsplitting noise of helicopters that constantly fly in the area. "It will worsen after more helicopters are stationed here once the office of the District Inspector General is added," says Dhanashyam Pande of the Independent Student's Union. The students are also constantly insecure about walking through the APF barracks to get to their classes. Female students are often subject to eve teasing by the security personnel. "All the students are traumatised by their presence and we will pressurise the government to promote our safety," says Tej Bikram Basnet, a student leader of Education Campus, also located near the APF regional office. Over 3,000 students from Dailekh, Kalikot, Accham, Bardiya and Jumla districts travel from their villages to get a college degree. Most despair, saying that completing their education will be impossible.

Aiding AIDS

Janadharana, 6 May

The AIDS issue featured distinctively during the Nepal Development Forum (NDF) ^{जसुरा} when the meeting started at BICC, AIDS victims and their supporters turned up in the streets and

chanted slogans against foreign aid, saying such assistance did little to help them. They also planned to submit a memorandum to Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa, but could not after police intervention. Then, the protesters reached the entrance gate of Soaltee Hotel where most NDF participants were staying. They carried banners and placards that read 'You talk, we die', blew whistles and staged a sit-in. Once again the police intervened and they were forced to go away. The protest was organised by Nava Kiran Plus and coordinated by Rajiv Kafle who said that the idea behind the rally was to let donors know that the money they gave for AIDS went to corrupt government officials.

For the people?

Editorial in Rajdhani, 11 May

The government, the Maoists, the five parties and now the donor agencies are working out ways to make the lives of rural Nepalis more difficult. For the last two weeks, since the Maoists announced indefinite road blockades in Accham, life has suddenly become much tougher. Their movement is restricted and food and essentials are in short supply. The Maoist threat has led to the closure of the Tatopani border, and we suffer a revenue loss of Rs 4.1 million everyday. The rebels have also stopped construction of the Baglung-Buribang and the Baglung-Kusmisera roads funded by the Asian Development Bank.

The five parties made it tougher for the ordinary people by launching a two-day nationwide strike. These parties that held significant roles in governing the country should act more responsibly for the sake of public

good. The strike only proves that they are not so different from the Maoists—both are insensitive towards the needs and rights of the people. And although their motives may be to target powerful forces, it is highly unlikely that the latter is affected at all, whereas ordinary Nepalis suffer.

In developed nations, political bodies do not organise protest programs that jeopardise the daily lives of the people or cause loss to the country's financial sector. Such activities only engender vengeance and fury among those who bear the losses. It is true that the Maoist activities endangered development projects in rural areas, but donor agencies chose the wrong time to suspend their work in the country's most impoverished and underdeveloped regions. Agencies like the GTZ, DANIDA, DfID, ADB, SNV Nepal, JICA, CIDA, EU and FINNIDA recently suspended their support. They cite insecurity and threats towards their staff, knowing fully well that their decision will affect only the beneficiaries in poor communities in Kailali, Jumla, Humla, Mugu and Dolpa.

Bigger army

Dhruvabari Adhikari in Nepal Samacharpatra, 11 May

Until a few years ago, the Royal Nepali Army had 50,000 soldiers. Now, the figure has reached 78,000 and there are plans ^{नेपाल सैनिकहरू} to increase it up to 100,000, according to army spokesman Rajendra Thapa.

The issue needs serious thought and consideration, otherwise the country will end up bearing not only added financial burden but also a host of other problems. The security forces are fighting Maoist rebels, which may justify additional numbers. But what will happen



Elephant: Looking for a clean prime minister who can hold general elections
Chair: Prime minister

स्पेसटाइम दैनिक Spacetime, 9 May

QUOTE OF THE WEEK



"The king is advocating elections just to satisfy the international community."

Minendra Rijal, NC (D) leader in Samay, 6 May

once the Maoist problem is solved? How can we sustain and engage such a large army? It cannot be done solely on foreign aid. It would be foolhardy for the RNA to become dependent on such assistance. This increase comes at a time of force reduction internationally and in the region. It is better to have a smaller, better trained force. Pakistan cut 50,000 soldiers and India is looking to streamline its military. China is also following the same route. We must try and learn from our neighbours. In time, we can consider other alternatives. The government can establish a temporary militia by recruiting retired soldiers and police. There must be thousands of Nepalis Gorkhas who served in the armed forces in Nepal, the UK and India. We can use them to meet our immediate needs. We don't need a big 'standby army'.

Permission to wed

Rajdhani, 11 May

DAILEKH—Villagers now need permission from the Maoists even to get married. In Bindyabasini village, the rebels abducted 41 couples, all newly married, and three Brahmin priests. Their crime was marrying without the permission of the local 'people's government', making them liable for punishment. The Maoists are now going to every village with the message that no one can marry without their approval. They also threatened the people against reporting abductions, especially to the press.

Good man

Kantipur, 12 May

RASUWA—Bhimlal Hirachan was a popular man. He was popular because he was a fearless activist who kept in touch with his constituents. He was that rare breed of politician who actually fulfilled his electoral promises. He planned to bring a motorable road to Thambuchet Tatopani and was working closely with the Chilime Hydropower Project to get electricity for the whole district. Hirachan wanted to promote more tourism to Langtang and Rasuwa because he believed it was the best way to get his people out of poverty. He arranged for easy access to main trekking routes and



trained locals in cooking, English, as guides and to make souvenirs.

Born in Tanahu and with family in Mustang, Hirachan came to Rasuwa to start a business but ended up putting down permanent roots as he married a Rasuwa woman and was elected district chairman. Regarded as a good leader and friend, Hirachan spent more time with the people than with his party. He gave up his business because he thought it was unethical for a politician. He tried to set an example that Nepalis can alleviate poverty and sponsored the education of many poor children. He also initiated a rehabilitation club for local delinquents. He cared for his people, and his people had affection for him.

That is why it came as such a shock when the Maoists killed him. He had refused to resign from his post and pay the Rs 500,000 they demanded. His body was found mutilated and beheaded under a bridge, 16km from the district headquarters of Dhunche.

A fearless UML activist, Hirachan visited all the villages in his districts, even those where Maoists were active like Yarsa, Bhorle, Dhaibung, Dandagaun and Samarthali. "I can handle two to four Maoists if they attack me," Hirachan used to tell everyone. "But I'm certain they would not hurt someone working for the welfare of the people." He was wrong. Hirachan is survived by his wife, two daughters and a son.

Soldiering on

Janastha, 12 May

Nepalis in Kabul are exploited and looked down upon. They find themselves in the lowest position in the US Army: all former Gurkhas, ex-RNA soldiers, Nepal Police personnel and other Nepalis are security guards for American residences, police training centres and other units established by the US Army. The Nepalis were contracted for the jobs through DynCorp, America's most controversial private military corporation. According to reports, about 102 Nepalis currently working under Coalition Forces received crash courses and are now armed with M16 rifles. Besides a modest salary package, they get 20 days leave every six months.

In the UK, there are concerns for the future of British Gurkhas once their regiments become redundant. The British Home Ministry was interested in approving permanent residency for the soldiers, but the senior brigade commanders of the British Army are pressuring Home Minister David Blunkett to reverse the proposal. The UK government has failed to even approve work permits for these soldiers who dedicated their lives to British causes overseas.

"There are rays of hope"

Samata Party leader, Narayan Singh Pun, in Gatibidhi, 8 May

कतिविधि

During my recent meeting with the king, I found him to be very concerned about the present situation and keen to solve the problem. He is of the opinion that the country cannot be run indefinitely under Article 127, and says the possible constitutional exit from the current situation would have to come from within the same article.

He told me, "Since I am a constitutional king, I cannot provide a political outlet. That is something politicians will have to give. Constitutionally, since Article 127 is in effect now, I will have to discontinue it at the earliest. And for such a constitutional outlet, elections are the only way. That is the only way the implementation of Article 127 will end. That is why rebels and the constitutional forces will have to work together to create an environment for elections. Then, we will have to hold free and fair polls. The political parties should come up with suggestions about the type of government and who should head it."

During the audience, two-way communications do take place. I have honestly presented my opinions to the king. He asks questions like "What is your opinion? What is the view of your party?" Any person holding an important position has

their boundaries, and that includes prime ministers, ministers and even the monarch.

But that does not mean that the king is not being allowed to work. It is false to say that the people around him gave bad advice. The election is something everyone wants but we know that a big political bloc has been continuing armed rebellion and that does not allow politicians to campaign freely.

Therefore, we need to take the initiative to restore peace by talking to the rebels. Even the Maoists are talking about a political outlet. They want peace in the country too. If we address the issues they raised and discuss them peacefully, we will certainly reach a meeting point. Some rays of hope have emerged. The political parties will have to move ahead with a joint consensus and create a conducive environment. The king's initiative to meet the leaders and the response from the agitating parties are quite encouraging. Under these circumstances, a meeting among all these forces is a must.

Many issues might come up that we may not agree with. We will have to put those on a back burner and move ahead with things we can agree on. After the meeting, we must be able to present our issues to the king. If we do all this, I am sure we will have an outlet from the present situation.



MIN BAJRACHARYA

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Democracy shining

The number 13 has turned out to be unlucky for Vajpayee

The number 13 finally proved to be unlucky for Indian prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee as also the BJP, which once boasted that it didn't find that number unlucky.

The first time BJP came to power in 1996 it lasted for EXACTLY 13 days. The next time it got to government in New Delhi in 1998, the BJP-led coalition's tenure lasted 13 months. It came to power again in 1999, emerging triumphant in the 13th Lok Sabha, with Vajpayee assuming office on 13 October, causing the BJP leaders to be carried away by the 'magic' of 13.

They started boasting that now their rule would last for a minimum period of 13 years. When the Election Commission, while announcing the poll schedule, said that counting would be held on 13 May, there was a perceptible glee in the saffron camp. The second time India conducted nuclear tests in Pokharan, a matter of pride for the BJP, were conducted on 11 May and 13 May 1998. This 13 May, however, the explosion was of a different kind.

In a stunning electoral verdict, the BJP-led NDA was voted out of power on Thursday to pave the way for the return of the Congress Party at the helm of the national affairs after eight years in the wilderness. The Congress and its allies such as DMK, MDMK, PMK, TRS and RJD appeared set to capture approximately 225 seats which could mean that the alliance led by it could reach the magic majority of 270 with the help of the left parties who have done extremely well and may get up to 50 seats.

Shortly after the trends reflected NDA rout, Vajpayee met his top party leaders and coalition convenor George Fernandes and decided to resign Thursday. A jubilant Congress said it would stake claim to form the government with individual leaders already pitching for Sonia Gandhi as prime minister. Political pundits are calling this one of the most dramatic political upsets since independence.

Unofficial results indicate that millions of rural poor people abandoned Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party believing they had been left behind by the country's economic boom (see box). "We have not got the mandate of the people," said BJP President Venkaiah Naidu, adding that the decision was taken at a 90-minute meeting of the party and its coalition partners.

Before the five-phased elections, which began 20 April, Vajpayee and his alliance had been expected to win enough seats to eventually form a government and rule the country for another five years. It was an embarrassing defeat for Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist-led government, which had called elections six months early because it felt confident of winning an even bigger majority in parliament, based on a booming economy and prospects of peace with Pakistan.

But Congress focused its campaign on the country's 300 million people who still live on less than a dollar a day. It hammered away at the lack of even basic infrastructure, electricity and potable water for millions of rural poor. A leader in Vajpayee's coalition said the results were "totally against our expectations".

Gandhi has pushed for a secular India in contrast to the BJP's Hindu nationalist message. Her two children, Rahul and Priyanka, are up-and-coming politicians and Rahul expects to be elected to parliament. ●

Drawing the line

Torture and the politics of ambiguity

Each new revelation of physical abuse, maltreatment and sexual humiliation of Iraqi prisoners by American and British soldiers shocks international public opinion, leaving officials to scramble desperately to contain the damage. US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld warns that more documentary evidence of

COMMENT

Michael Manning



wrongdoing at Abu Ghraib prison lies in store, evidently in the preemptive hope that the outrages stopped there.

As a former US military intelligence interrogator, I am convinced that the images from Abu Ghraib are just the beginning. The wanton cruelty there is all too clearly symptomatic of a systemic failure. But what system failed? Was it a failure of discipline and training—the result of sending inexperienced and unworldly reservists into poor conditions, abruptly extending their deployments, and then leaving them understaffed in the face of a growing influx of captured insurgents? Or did the pattern of abuse amount to so many orders from superiors to "soften up" prisoners for interrogation?

The answer is most likely both

and neither.

Ultimately, what gives rise to abuses such as occurred at Abu Ghraib is a policy of *deliberate ambiguity* concerning how to handle detainees. The pressure in a war setting to get information that could save lives is immense. But, just as understandably, senior political and military officials—particularly in democracies—prefer to avoid any association with torture. Ambiguity is thus a political strategy that encourages the spread of implicit, informal rules of behavior, thereby shifting accountability onto the lowest ranking, least powerful and most expendable soldiers.

I completed the US Army's three-month basic interrogation course in the late 1980's, after studying Russian at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California. The course was rigorous—only seven of 33 students finished it—as it required mastering the technical minutiae of collecting, crosschecking, standardising and reporting enormous masses of information.

But the curriculum was much less meticulous concerning interrogation techniques. An interrogation, we were instructed, should begin with polite, direct questioning, because a certain number of detainees simply want to unburden themselves. If more

persuasion was needed, we could offer rewards for cooperation—anything from cigarettes to political asylum.

Beyond this, we were taught that we could "apply pressure." The term was never defined in any formal setting, but the concept was not difficult to decipher. As US Army General Antonio Taguba's report on the abuses at Abu Ghraib puts it, the "guard force" was "actively engaged in setting the conditions for successful exploitation of the internees."

This obvious violation of the army's rule prohibiting participation by military police in interrogation sessions does not surprise me. I was never taught that military police came under a separate chain of command. On the contrary, between classes, during breaks in field training and in other informal settings, some of our instructors—typically older, more experienced interrogators—let it be known through insinuation and innuendo that we could have the guards beat uncooperative subjects.

This was never said in the classroom, but even there, it was made clear that the role of military police was to serve the interrogators. After all, an interrogator's effectiveness depends on convincing the detainee of his omnipotence. If an interrogator promises better food or an extra

India doesn't shine

There were early signs of the BJP's fall, and it wasn't just the incumbency factor



A RSS volunteer group limbers up before elections in Lucknow.

ANDERS LOMHOLT

Other than the soaring temperature of 40 degrees, the drive from Nepal's tarai to the Hindu heartland of Uttar Pradesh (UP) in India doesn't reveal much of 'India Shining' in the

mudhouses, potholes and the stench of open sewers. Not before reaching the state capital Lucknow are there signs of the modern India's feel-good factor.

One example is the newly opened call centre, Valutel. "Hello, madam. This is Nishant calling from

Startech Canada. The reason for my call is that we have selected you for a grand new long distance saving plan." The woman at the other end of the line hangs up but Nishant is not too concerned about a few non-responsive customers. He makes \$3 for every sale, and his boss Vijay



blanket, the guards *must* provide it; if an interrogator wants the detainee's cell to remain brightly lit all night, that must happen, too. The detainee simply must believe that his fate is entirely in the interrogator's hands.

The hidden rules of the game came closest to being officially acknowledged during two uninterrupted weeks of simulated interrogations towards the end of the training course. These sessions involved only a student interrogator, an instructor in the role of the detainee and a video camera.

When, during a simulation, I asked an imaginary guard to take away the detainee's chair, the instructor feigned being removed violently. When I told the non-existent guard to hit the detainee, the instructor played along. All of us knew that a failed interrogation could mean being dropped from the course. I was not dropped: I finished first in my class.

For those who benefit from the politics of ambiguity, international law is an indispensable prop. In his recent US Senate testimony, Rumsfeld claimed that the military police at Abu Ghraib were instructed to abide by the Geneva conventions.

So was I. Throughout my training as an interrogator, the admonition to follow the Geneva conventions accompanied virtually every discussion of "applying pressure". Unfortunately, like "applying pressure," the Geneva conventions were never defined. We never studied them, nor were we given a copy to read, much less tested on their contents. For many of us—teenagers or only slightly older—the Geneva conventions were at best a dimly remembered cliché from war movies that meant, "Don't do bad stuff."

Again, the tacit rules said otherwise. One instructor joked that although the Geneva conventions barred firing a 50-caliber machine

gun at an enemy soldier—an act defined as "excessive force"—we could aim at his helmet or backpack, since these were "equipment." Others shared anecdotes about torturing detainees.

Whether such talk was true is irrelevant. We were being conditioned to believe that the official rules set no clear limits, and that we could therefore set the limits wherever we liked. In the end, the politics of ambiguity may fail Rumsfeld: all those high-resolution photographs from Abu Ghraib are anything but ambiguous. If similarly shameful disclosures multiply, as I believe they will, let us at least hope that official apologies and condemnations may finally give way to wider, more genuine accountability and reform. ●

(© Project Syndicate)

Michael Manning is a former Specialist Interrogator with the 142nd Military Intelligence Battalion, US Army National Guard.

Conditions attached

What is being seen as a conditional offer by the EU to drop subsidies for agricultural exports has been conditionally welcomed by independent organisations. The European Union (EU) has offered to drop subsidies on these exports if other countries like the United States, Canada and Australia do the same.

EU commissioners say they will end export subsidies if the outcome of World Trade Organisation negotiations is acceptable to the EU. They hope the move will restart the stalled world trade talks and demonstrate its "absolute commitment" to the Doha Development Round. EU trade commissioner Pascal Lamy says the European Commission concessions could include US shipments of surpluses as food aid, boosting domestic prices, and cuts in US export credits which let buyers defer payments with preferential financing and undercut foreign competition.

The EU offer was made ahead of a WTO meeting of trade ministers from some 30 countries due in Paris 13-14 May. The bloc's refusal until now to eliminate farm export subsidies has been a major obstacle in the Doha Development Round (DDR) which aims to reach agreements in such critical areas as agricultural trade, trade in services and industrial tariffs. The EU spends some \$51 billion annually on farm subsidies.

Poorer nations have long complained that subsidies give farmers from more developed countries an unfair advantage by keeping prices artificially low. WTO talks collapsed in Cancun, Mexico, last September mainly over the billions of dollars a year rich countries spend on farm subsidies.

Lamy recently outlined three areas where the EU is ready to make further movement to kickstart the stalled trade talks—export subsidies, a package of concessions for the G-90 countries, the poorest and weakest of the WTO members, and the so-called 'Singapore issues' that cover trade facilitation, transparency in government procurement, cross-border investment and competition. The last three of these are likely to be removed from the WTO agenda—a long-standing demand of developing countries. ● (STEFANIA BIANCHI/IPS)

ne equally on everyone

Singh recently bought his first car and plans to expand the business. There is still good potential for an outsourcing industry that currently employs around 200,000 Indians. That figure is expected to pass the one million-mark by 2006.

Vijay Singh has no doubts about what icon to click on the electronic voting machine. "The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of course. The economic boom is a result of the current government. They deserve another five years in power," he tells us. This confidence is what the BJP and Atal Bihari Vajpayee banked on. They expected to coast into the next term on a seven percent economic growth topped with successful peace talks with Pakistan.

But the picture changed after the first exit-polls suggested a close race between the BJP-led coalition and the opposition headed by the Indian Congress. One of the main obstacles for the BJP is that India doesn't shine equally on everyone. One place in the shadows is Indira Gandhi Colony, a slum along the railroads outside Lucknow.

"We see 'India Shining' on big billboards but never receive any

warning before bulldozers crush our houses and clear the area," says 25-year-old Mina, a mother of one whose husband is a sweeper. The slums get only a few hours of electricity, water is collected from an occasional visit of a water tanker. There isn't a BJP-voter in sight.

"India Shining is only true for a small percentage of Indians. For the poorest half of the population things are going downhill," says Henri Tiphagne of the National Campaign of Dalit Human Rights. Egged by Muslim loyalty to the Congress, the BJP embarked on an aggressive campaign to woo new voters in UP by promising India's 140 million Muslims jobs and economic assistance. Rural India was given special attention. Armies of Hindu volunteers from the BJP-related Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) were mobilised.

Early one morning in Lucknow, Vajpayee's constituency, we saw 19 men assemble for Shakra exercises. Most of them are spindly legged and potbellied, but with more than 40,000 such groups and millions of activists, the RSS' strength lies in numbers. "We'll do

everything to ensure Vajpayee continues as prime minister," says Shakra-leader Rama K Jaiswa. The group pledges allegiance to the motherland in front of a saffron flag followed by a military drill before finally settling down for tea at a corner shop surrounded by BJP propaganda. One demands a temple be built on the site of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, another volubly criticises Congress-leader Sonia Gandhi's Italian origin and praises Vajpayee for being a strong leader with the courage to use nuclear bombs, if the need arose.

That might not be the decisive argument for poverty stricken Indians or Muslims. Memory is long, especially concerning atrocities like the RSS involvement in anti-Muslim pogroms in the BJP-led state of Gujarat in 2002. But hordes of dedicated BJP-campaigners on door-to-door campaigns all over India can hardly be underestimated.

Those who foretold a predictable election in favour of the BJP were wrong. In the world's largest democracy with 670 million potential voters, there is no easy victory. 1

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