When the Maoists got their student wing to force a nationwide education shutdown two weeks ago, they wanted to put political pressure on the government to resume negotiations. It seems to be working.

The government is also hoping that an end to the education strike could mark the beginning of a peace process. “If the talks with the Maoist student wing are successful, it could pave the way for possible peace talks,” Education Minister Bimalendra Nidhi told us on Thursday afternoon, as mediators appeared closer to a deal.

Sudip Pathak, coordinator of the task force mediating between the government and the rebel students said an agreement was within reach and that there was bargaining on the precise wording of the agreement. “An agreement on opening schools could lead to peace talks,” he said.

The Maoist students’ main demand is the withdrawal of its terrorist tag, but the government first wants them to accept schools as violence free zones. Minister Nidhi told us: “If they agree to keep out of schools, we can consider withdrawing the terrorist label.”

The Maoists are under considerable pressure after the arrest of their top leaders in India and analysts say they would benefit from a monsoon breathing spell.

But the army is said to be dead against a ceasefire, citing previous truces that the Maoists used to regroup.

“It is the government’s security forces that use schools as barracks and bring violence to them,” says the Maoist AANFSU-R president, Lekhnath Neupane, who has been giving frequent phone interviews on FM stations all week.

However, it is clear that the education strike is more about politics than about education. “We believe the AANFSU-R strike is politically motivated because the real demands of the students on fees have been sidelined,” says Rajendra Rai, president of the rival UML-affiliated student union.

The Maoists, who have seen their anti-monarchy slogans hijacked by the anti-reforms street agitation of the political parties and their student wings, needed to assert themselves. An indefinite education strike was an easy way to make their presence felt. Besides closing schools, the Maoists have also been taking away thousands of students and teachers from rural schools all over Nepal for revolutionary indoctrination sessions.

If there is a silver lining in the school closure, it is that it may lead to another truce. A prominent human rights activist in the mediation task force told us: “Both the Maoists and the government want to see the negotiations between their student wing and the government leads to peace talks.”

So far, the only thing standing in the way is semantics.
Nepali dystopia

As things go from bad to worse, this country’s well-wishers keep asking us: what do you think will happen? One thing we have learnt is not to underestimate the capacity for Nepal’s circumstances to get even more dire. “Things will get worse before they get better,” we say wishfully, recognising that only the first part of that statement may hold true. 

Observe the signs of a failing state: the scant presence of the government in large parts of the country, the sagging morale of those who are supposed to be in charge and the demolition of the education system.

Expropriating this country’s accelerated slide downwards, it is easy to predict a doomsday scenario for 2064 by then: death toll in a decade of conflict reaches 25,000. The number of those wounded, maimed, bereaved, orphaned and widowed crosses the one million mark. Almost every family is bumped by tragedy. A Maoist utopia is already looking like a dystopia.

The revolution has degenerated into criminality and warlordism, with a new generation of unscathed children taking up arms. The Maoist rank and file is wrecked by ingenuity and frustration, but the leadership can’t stop fighting without risking the ruthless retribution of hardliners. The war takes a heavy toll on young lives. As the conflict becomes more desperate, the guerrillas show less and less interest in the safety of non-combatants, indeed deliberately targeting them to sow panic and chaos. The country is littered with landmines and booby-trap roadside bombs.

The military becomes even more indiscriminate in cracking down on suspected insurgents, instances of disappearances, extra-judicial killings, pillage and rape put Nepal right at the top of the list of the world’s worst violators of human rights, mentioned in the same breath as Congo and Colombia.

Tourism is a thing of the past, the civilian administration and government has long since collapsed. The political parties have been torn to shreds by the pincers of the extreme left and right, and by their own ingenuity. Five million Nepalis have fled to India and New Delhi has started voicing concerns about instability in Nepal threatening its own security. India does not allow UN peacekeeping forces to stabilise the situation, but doesn’t intervene as well for fear of being sucked into the conflict. Nepal is left to its own devices, just another hotspot in an increasingly unstable world that no one has time for. It doesn’t take a prophet to foresee this apocalyptic scenario in two year’s time.

Signs are already pointing that way, and that is the way things will go unless the comrades in the hills, the king in his palace and the political parties on the streets come to their senses and see where they are taking the country. Maybe one of them will wake up one day, but what of use is that power if there is no country left to exercise it in?

DEUBA III
He roared like a sher in 1995 and so did the Maoists. Had he Rohingied them in the bud then, 8,000 lives needn’t have been lost (#199). We all remember his second stint as prime minister: the failed talks with the Maoists, escalations in the rebel attacks on the police, armed force outposts as well as innocent citizens, the muzzled press and the draconian laws he resorted to combat the rebels. Are we now supposed to believe that he will wage a mad war and bring down the rebels, the four political parties and the palace? I wish him well because I hate to see a lost goat out a lamb.

Tirtha Mali, Florida, USA

RNC
Vijay Lama’s ‘Too much drag’ (#199) reminded me of the time I asked an RNC employee why the company was doing so badly. She told me that the airline has more than 2,000 employees for only two jet aircraft. If it were well managed, the airline could manage easily by a dozen full timers and a few part timers. As Lama points out, the company has become a kind of employment agency for politicians, but may I say this problem is not peculiar solely to RA. The NY City subway system is still running on early 20th century technology, saddled with too many workers with big paychecks. It is a repository of political favours for many political officials. The people of New York usually dismiss them as lazy good-for-nothings. The situation is so bad that there are more managers than field workers. RNC is in the same situation and the only way it will turn a profit is by going public or private.

Kiran Thapa, New York

DOGMANDU
Shradha Basnyat says, ‘Dogs are man’s best friends’ (#199) benefits in ‘Dogmandu’ (#199), citing their protection, loyalty and love. That we all agree upon, but she forgets dogs can also be nightmares. Mauling deaths, transmitting diseases and keeping us awake all night even in a different reality, IAT’s good intentions, I think, are misdirected. Sure, a bit of TLC and compassion should be extended to them but over-population and endless barking is something I personally cannot tolerate. We need to advocate castration, euthanasia and adoption to control the population of our four-legged friends. I like dogs but I like a good nights sleep better.

KK Tamang, Kathmandu

THE D WORD
Why is it that the word ‘development’ in and by itself, holds very little meaning for Nepal? The relationship between Nepal and the ‘d’ word is determined only by theJohnson’s use of ‘under’, ‘less’ and most recently ‘failed’. The existence of innumerable prettier and much more attractive adjectives is no secret, it all depends on how committed we are to reach a level where we can truly utilise them.

A recent seminar in Kathmandu highlighted the need in the financial resource requirement to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). It rightly pointed out that Nepal needs more than triple the amount available now if it is to meet the MDG. Much concern was also expressed that available financial resources are just lying in the treasury while the remaining is sought from various multilateral and bilateral donors, and other international donor agencies and social organisations. How wise is it to maintain the status quo in the name of additional financial resources? Presumably suggests that immediate steps must be initiated to address some, if not all, sectoral goals to help us achieve some MDG goals.

However, waiting for the full amount needed to achieve all this

LETTERS

The middle way

Liberating democracy from the shackles of the past

A Nepal’s choices narrow down to either a ‘guided democracy’ of the right or a ‘people’s democracy’, it is time to start looking for an alternative middle way.

Under both scenarios, the first casualty will be competitive elections and the loss of civil liberty and individual rights. From a practical geopolitical point of view, a Maoist ‘tanqua’ with a heavy dose of social engineering in the middle of the two rising free market economies is hard to imagine. 

It is hard to think how a dictatorship can suffer in its struggle for liberty from the Rana regime and the autocratic Panchayat system. But after achieving a multiparty system, their focus and priority was on winning elections and the need to raise funds by any means to win votes. They began to lose authority over the behaviour of their party cadre and the civil servants. The rot spread quickly through the system. By the end of the 1990s, Nepal was practicing an illiberal and dysfunctional democracy. But despite all this, democratic institutions were being built and a new culture of political choice and freedom was spreading across the land. The foundations of a future genuine democracy were being laid.

This glimpse of hope can be seen within the entrepreneurial spirit of our small private sector. It lost a lot in the civil war but the confidence to democratize the country to be perfect in just 10 years. But when the time comes to pick up the pieces and rebuild it with a new constitution and a new democratic process, we must put more emphasis on the rules and liberal norms rather than just elections. Many leading democracies in the West built their nations in that way. Even semi-democratic Asian economies implemented sound liberal values like rule of law, quality of regulation and accountability. We must strike a balance here, and in several ways:

The political parties must first exhibit some internal democracy. They must be brought under a strict code of conduct, including fair and transparent election finance rules, which will allow a fresh young leadership to emerge.

Those who control regional governments and some forms of mixed proportional representation system of election may give added weight to grassroots votes. Half the countries around the world have these two provisions in one way or another.

This should be followed by economic development with a 50/50 revenue sharing formula from hydropower and other resources to be ploughed into local development through federal incentives to innovate, develop and invest. This will balance regional economic growth and allow fairer benefits to local populations. Political and economic development can benefit both the center and the regional governments.

Separation of powers and the question of the army’s chain of command is one of the most intractable points of disagreement between the king, political parties and the Maoists. The current three-member Defence Council may be widened to include some key
E ven though it is the Indians who are arming us to the teeth (the latest Advanced Light Helicopters landed in Kathmandu this week), it is the Americans who get all the credit. The American contribution is insignificant in comparison to what the army has sourced from India, Belgium, Benin, Belarus, South Africa and China. In fact, American help has been confined to the services of consultants. Let’s face it, a country bogged down in a Mosaicotarian quagmire can’t have much to teach us about counterinsurgency. Influence can be peddled by putting an ideological line, by leverage or through linkages. Relationships between asymmetrical states are like those between magnates and iron filings. The filings arrange themselves in the poles. In a bipolar world, this was fairly straight forward. Today, the filings have only one choice.

With Soviet Union gone for good and the global affair, Beijing and New Delhi are falling over each other to humour the nookow hawks who run Washington. Little countries like Nepal have even less room to maneuver. They have to go along with the hyperpower, or its proxies, or be left out. King Gyanendra seems to have realised this reality rather well. Despite popular perception to the contrary, neither China nor India seem to be overly worried about the ever increasing influence of Americans in Kathmandu. An ironic twist to the Maoist legacy, China has left it up to the market. The Nepali middle-class can’t imagine a life without the cheap Khasa goods and for that they are eternally grateful to China. As for the guerrillas who are fighting in their Great Himalayan crusade, the Chinese dismiss them as ‘anti-government forces’.

The Europeans, including the British, rely on the ‘system’ (the palace-military-bureaucracy combine) to implement diplomatic policies. Outside the charmed circle of top brass, important topics and a few NGO biggies, they exercise little influence in Nepal. But being big donors, they can afford to manipulate aid to exert influence.

New Delhi has traditionally depended on Indo-Nepal linkages to influence policies here. From a soldier in the Royal Nepal Army to its Supreme Commander-in-Chief, almost everyone here has a relative, a friend, an offspring or a contact in India. Linkages of the business community are even stronger.

But Indians appear to have realised that personal linkages, like currency, may be more readily devalued by abundance than scarcity, as in the old adage of familiarity breeding contempt. Hence, they have begun to use leverage acquired through small grants directly administered by the embassy in Kathmandu.

The smartest have been the Americans who don’t need to put their money where their mouth is anymore. They have no need for leverage or linkages and have replaced the Soviets in pushing the ideological line. This time it is the mantra of non-liberal free market capitalism. Which means they really don’t have to put the money on the table any more.

Antonio Gramsci used to say that hegemony has intellectual, moral and political dimensions. The Americans have an unchallenged monopoly over all those in Nepal by assiduously cultivating academia, media, professions and ‘civil society’.

The moral leadership has been acquired by harping on democratic ideals, despite the double standards in its political agenda set by Brett Woods sisters that keep the Planning Commission and the Ministry of Finance perennially on tenderhooks.

No wonder the Maoists and al-Qaeda detest America so much—it is a serious challenge to their own ideological bigotry.
Radio wave
Community radio hastens grassroots development in Nepal

STEVE BUCKLEY

A hundred km north of the birthplace of the Buddha in Lumbini is the village of Madanpokhara. It is not easy to reach and an hour’s walk from the nearest road. Walking up through the small holdings you pass a school, temples, some tea shops and stores. At the top of the hill is a low white brick building with a tall red mast. Radio Madan Pokhara broadcasts across a rural agricultural community in which few people have access to electricity or a telephone. Yet almost every household has a radio receiver and it is the principal means of local communication and discussion of local development.

There are two dominant media forms in the world today, differentiated by private and public. There are some good examples of public service broadcasting, but many state-owned media are not sufficiently independent of the government. Instead of truly serving the public interest, they remain the instruments of the government in power.

There is almost no country in the world today that is not, by one means or another, also reached by private commercial media, whether through the liberalisation of broadcast licensing or through the rapid growth of satellite services. In many countries, growing concentration of ownership has tended to reduce the diversity of

Vote for change
Every now and then, you need to throw the bums out

A mood for change is sweeping the world’s democracies. In the manner of the Chinese proverb, these are, indeed, interesting times.

It began in Spain, a few days after the tragedy and outrage of the Madrid terror bombings. The Spanish voters turned away from the safe choice of their Prime Minister’s conservative party and opted for radical change. The socialists, however much they may have gained, are sweeping away plenty of national cobwebs and articulating the electorate’s visceral dislike of the war in Iraq. Across Europe, this past week or so, voters spoke out loudly against incumbent parties—whoever they were. Even in countries with governments that opposed the war in Iraq, notably Germany, the vote went against those in power, often to the detriment of polite politics as usual.

In Britain, the mainstream Labor and Conservative parties were swept aside in favour of an extreme anti-Europe force that claims to be in favour of “independence” for the United Kingdom. Tony Blair’s support of George Bush in Iraq probably hurt him the most. Other than the war, his government hasn’t been doing a bad job, in the eyes of many independent commentators. The public, however, does not like Blair’s war.

My own native land, Canada, is all ahoo right now as the natural governing, centre-left Liberal party looks set to lose power for the first time since 1993. Again, this was a government that refused to send troops to Iraq. But Canadians, however much they agreed with that, are fed up with politics as usual. And they’re taking a serious look at a right wing party that they’ve rejected scornfully for years now. It’s not that the country is moving to the right. It’s just a feeling that every now and then, you need to throw the bums out.

America remains the most interesting electoral battleground of all. The country went to war pretty much behind its president. George Bush convinced the majority of voters that Iraq needed to be invaded and brought to heel. Congress agreed. There was a consensus across the political spectrum that no president has had since World War II. But the latest polls show a volatile and angry group of people preparing to vote in the next election. They don’t know what to make of Iraq. Yes, it’s good that Saddam is gone, they say, but why does the aftermath seem to be such a mess? Yes, there has to be sacrifice to pay for the war against terrorist groups, but why don’t the rich assume their share of the burden? And increasingly, say the opinion polls, they’re blaming their president.

In the end, no matter what the result in any of these elections, victory by incumbents or stunning losses, this is a good time for democracy. The angry tumult among voters is getting through to politicians and if they don’t change, they pay the price. Anti-incumbency is a sign of healthy democracy. Too bad the incumbent in Nepal isn’t elected, whether you say it is Deuba or the king. Isn’t it time to change that so the voters don’t have only violence as an outlet for their frustrations? Nepalis have shown the instinct of mature democratic voters many times in the past. It’s time to let them do that again, even if it means throwing the bums out.

A soldier in Gorkha sits on a ballot box while keeping an eye on the valley below
Clockwise from left: Yamuna Saru Magar presents Karunglaam (Our path), a Radio Madan Pokhara program in Majjar. Birendra Ghimire interviews a woman working in her field, while Ramchandra Basayal interviews local blacksmith Dil Bahadur Bhirendra. A trainee practices interviewing techniques for a radio package.

private media.

A third form of community-based, independent media bar with social rather than commercial objectives, has gradually emerged from civil society to find a place alongside the established public and private media in many countries.

Country-level legislative and regulatory frameworks remain obstacles, but the general trend is growth of new services and the opening up of the airwaves. The emergence of community media builds on growing recognition that core development goals like reducing poverty can be more effectively achieved by empowering and giving a voice to poor people themselves. In Nepal, the airwaves opened up gradually after the introduction of parliamentary democracy. Progress has been slow and somewhat difficult, for community radio as well as for democracy. But wherever it was established, it has become clear that community broadcasting can play a specific and crucial role in encouraging public participation, strengthening cultural and linguistic diversity and giving voice to poor and otherwise marginalised groups.

As international development agencies accept that the most effective approaches to poverty reduction are community-driven and empowerment oriented, the role and potential of community media has also begun to enter mainstream thinking. In the past two years, the UNDP and the World Bank have both recognised the vital importance of community media. Despite constraints, community broadcasting has grown to become a global movement reaching out to many of the poorest and most remote rural areas. In Asia, we are reaching a critical mass of support and interest. Nepal and the Philippines are established community radio countries. We have seen legal reform in the last two years in India, Indonesia and Thailand that promises to open the airwaves to community broadcasting. Progress is not as fast as we would like, but it is heading in the right direction with growing civil society campaigns for community broadcasting.

Last year, the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) held its eighth world conference in Kathmandu, the first time it was held in Asia. We recognised the growing interest in community broadcasting in Asia and agreed to establish a regional section and a coordinating office in Kathmandu. The priorities are straightforward: to raise awareness of the idea that citizens should have the right to own and operate their own community-based media. To lobby for political and legislative recognition of community broadcasting. To build community media skills and capacity among local civil society groups and networks. Regardless of the national media situation within countries, it is indisputable that there is intense competition between the view that media and cultural are commodities, the domain of private companies and market forces, and the idea that media and culture are matters of public interest about which citizens should be rightly concerned.

Enlightened governments should recognise that it is in their own national interest to move beyond the instrumentalist view of media that dates from the age of monopoly and instead embrace a vision of communication in the public interest with a diversity of public service broadcasting, including community media.

Steve Buckley is the president of the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC).

DOMESTIC BRIEFS

Circus parents detained in India

Nepal-based activists fighting the recruitment of Nepali children in Indian circuses have lodged a strong protest against the detention in India of five Nepal family members this week. The parents had gone to India to seek the release of up to 35 Nepali girls being held at the Great Roman Circus in the town of Kamalpuri near Lucknow. They are currently being held at the Sub-district Magistrate’s office in the town.

The parents were accompanied by representatives from the Nepal Child Welfare Foundation (NCWF) and the South Asian Coalition Against Child Servitude (SACCS) and were engaged in a rescue of the children when it turned violent. One of the five detained Nepalis is said to be a child who managed to escape with her mother during the raid.

“The incident must be investigated and this unwarranted detention immediately ended,” NCWF said in a statement. The foundation has also asked for the release of the other missing children at the Great Roman Circus in Kamalpuri. NCWF successfully rescued 29 Nepali children from the Great Indian circus in Kerala and reunited them with their parents in April.

The five detained by Uttar Pradesh police include Sureya Bahadur Lama, Janak Bahadur Lama, Thuli Maya Lama, Vishu Maya Lama and Nita Lama all from Bajura in Mahawarpur District.

Conservation awarded

WWF Nepal Program chose seven institutions and three individuals for the Abraham Conservation Award 2004 in recognition of their outstanding contribution to nature conservation and sustainable development. In a decade of its existence, a total of 76 awards have been given to 51 individuals and 25 institutions. In the past, everyone from game scouts to committed conservationists were recognised. Institutions like the Royal Nepali Army and grassroot NGOs have also been honoured. This year the awardees were:

Institutions

Salyukaing Mother Group, Tapethok, Kangchenjunga Conservation Area
Phortse Village, Khumjung, Solukhumbu District
Royal Chitwan National Park and Purano Gorsho Gana, Royal Nepal Army
Ganchenchen Memshang Service Center, Phikungdu, Dolpa Youth in Anti-poaching Operation Awareness Campaign, Nawalparasi Gaur Maila Community Forest User Group, Kothalghat, Barda

Individuals

Har P. Neupane, FEFOFUN
Dawa Thsherig Sherpa, Kangchenjunga Conservation Area
Punam Lama, Thorhe, Manang

Each received a certificate of appreciation and cash prizes—Rs 50,000 to institutions and Rs 25,000 for individuals—at the formal award ceremony in Kathmandu on 17 June. The Abraham Conservation Award was set up in 1995 with the support of WWF-US Board Member Nancy Abraham.
The incumbent will be primarily responsible for (a) providing for a sustainable management of renewable natural resources, (b) developing a holistic approach to agriculture and natural resource management; (c) developing strategic alliances with other organisations and donors; (d) awareness raising and advocacy; and (d) training, information and publication.

Qualification, competences and requirements

- Minimum MSc in Agricultural Economy (preferably PhD) or equivalent degree in agriculture and natural resource management with a minimum of 5-years of work experience.
- Proven ability to work with diverse groups of people, including international agencies, government organisations and officials, NGOs/NGOs, and donors.
- Strong knowledge and skills in policy and strategy analysis, and project development.
- Excellent experience in policy analysis, and socio-economic research.
- Strong working experience in forging strategic partnerships with donors, and in fund raising.
- Experience in co-ordinating documentation and publication of research and development outputs.
- Experience in participatory P&D, agro-biodiversity and natural resource management.
- Experience in formulating and implementing HDG policies and procedures desired.
- Experience in dissemination, awareness raising, and lobbying and advocacy desired.
- Experience of working in multi-disciplinary, multi-cultural and INGO/NGO environment.
- Dynamic, energetic and exposed to computer based database management.
- Excellent skills in interpersonal communication and management of inter-disciplinary teams; and
- Excellent in writing skills, and written and spoken English.

The incumbent should be dynamic, energetic and exposed to computer based documentation and publication of research and development outputs; experience in participatory P&D, agro-biodiversity and natural resource management; experience in formulating and implementing HDG policies and procedures; experience in dissemination, awareness raising, and lobbying and advocacy; and excellent knowledge of internet surfing and webpage design; and

Vacancy Announcement

Local Initiatives for Biodiversity, Research and Development (LI-BIRD) is a non-profit making, non-governmental organisation (NGO) established in October 1995 with the headquarters in Pokhara. LI-BIRD is committed to capitalise on local initiatives for the protection, management of renewable natural resources and improved livelihood of people in Nepal.

1. POSITION: PROGRAMME DIRECTOR (Level 10)

The incumbent will be primarily responsible for (a) providing leadership in formulation and implementation of policies, strategies, programmes and projects to address organisational goals and objectives; (b) co-ordinating project development and fund raising; (c) strengthening HDG policies and procedures; (d) promoting strategic alliances with other organisations and donors; (e) awareness raising and advocacy; and (f) training, information and publication.

Qualification, competences and requirements

- Minimum MSc in Agricultural Economy (preferably PhD) or equivalent degree with training in information technology, and with a minimum of 2-years of experience in the relevant field;
- Experience in co-ordinating training programmes and producing training materials;
- Experience in documentation and publication (technical reports, newsletters, and other reports);
- Experience in information management relevant to agriculture and natural resource management;
- Dynamic, energetic and exposed to computer based resource and information management;
- Excellent knowledge of internet surfing and webpage designing;
- Demonstrate excellent interpersonal and writing skills, and fluent in English.

The positions are based at Head Office in Pokhara, Kaski with frequent field visits. LI-BIRD offers a nationally competitive salary and benefits package as per LI-BIRD’s Personnel Policy Manual.

Please apply to:
Executive Director, LI-BIRD
P O Box 324, Pokhara, Kaski
Email: info@libird.org
kgurung@libird.org

Join Deuba
Do the parties want to resolve Nepal’s crisis or compound it further?

From 7.00am away the goings on in Nepal look like a tragic-comedy. Let me try to get a handle on this:

When King Gyanendra announced the vacancy for the post of prime minister, the major political parties could not agree on a prime ministerial candidate leaving the king with a free hand to pick a man of his choice. Now, with the appointment of Sher Bahadur Deuba, the parties still remain divided. There are new disagreements between the parties and within the parties.

The UML took over two weeks just to come up with conditions to support the government. First, the party’s Standing Committee discussed it. As it could not reach any conclusion, the matter was handed over to the party’s Central Committee. The Central Committee discussed the matter for several days only to pass the buck back to the Standing Committee. The Standing Committee then came up with an over 50-point proposal, which the party said, the new government needed to follow. It was to resolve the parties’ cooperation. This author wonders if the UML would be able to implement its own proposals had it been given the responsibility of leading the government.

The Nepali Congress, on the other hand, has said it would only support Deuba if he restored the dissolved parliament. Again, the question is, had Girja Prasad Koirala been appointed as prime minister, would he have been ready to recommend the king restore the dissolved House?

Why are all these conditions being imposed on Deuba? Do the parties want to resolve the problem the country is currently facing or further compound it? If the resolution of the crisis is the top priority, then there can be only two conditions: the restoration of democratic process and the resolution of the Maoist insurgency. Only the issues directly related to those two conditions should be considered at this moment. This is not the time to bring up the issues of secession and the 1950 Indo-Nepal treaty.

There was no guarantee that the king would have accepted the choice of the five agitating parties if they had made a unanimous recommendation. They failed to do that. In the absence of such a candidate, Deuba’s appointment was not a bad choice after all.

Technically, Deuba may not be very different from his two predecessors—he was appointed under the same constitutional provision. However, politically the appointment of the man who was sacked for incompetence is itself an acknowledgement by the king that his action was wrong.

Therefore, comparing Deuba’s position with that of Lokendra Bahadur Chand or Surya Bahadur Thapa is incorrect. Deuba, moreover, has a democratic credential not less than that of Koirala or Nepal. There is no reason why he should not be trusted in dealing with the prevailing crisis. It will only help the ‘rejection’ and the ‘rebellion’ if parties try to impose their own conditions on him.

The best way forward for the major political parties will be to fully support Deuba and join his government—not ask him to meet their conditions before any concrete gestures could be made. That will allow all the parties to sit together and come up with a unanimous view, which the king will find hard to deny. Unless that happens, it is very unlikely that the current crisis will be resolved. Lack of unity amongst the political parties means greater benefit to the forces to the left and the right, a series of new governments, deepening of the crisis and, probably, the destruction of the country. It is up to the political parties to take some responsibility.
Cute cats

Bhuni’s four cubs are the main attraction at Jawalakhel Zoo

SRADDHA BASNYAT

It was a tense night four months ago for the keepers at the Central Zoo. The resident Royal Bengal tigress, Bhuni, was in labour. They pressed their ears against the cave wall and waited. Finally, they heard muffled grunts. Three weeks later, the proud mother emerged from her den with two cubs. A couple days later, Bhuni brought out two more.

The cubs now weigh an impressive 1 kg each. “They have voracious appetites,” says Binab Karmacharya, the zoo’s vet officer.

Each cub eats 1 kg of buffalo and 500g of chicken meat daily. They’ll be eating a lot more very soon. The cubs’ father, Jange, requires 8 kg of buffalo meat six days a week and Bhuni eats 7 kg.

Director RK Shrestha is confident about the cubs’ survival chances: “We will try to keep them healthier than in the wild with a better diet and a less stressful environment.”

As adults they won’t need to fight for territory or food, reducing the chance of death from injury. A captive tiger also lives longer. In the wild, a young male tiger pushes an older one out of his territory into areas that have less prey. Unable to hunt, the tiger eventually starves to death.

Breeding tigers in captivity is very easy. Cubs can be taken from their mother right after birth and hand raised. Tigresses can then come into heat up to three times a year. Average litters have two or three cubs. That means she can produce up to nine or 10 cubs annually. So is captive breeding all good news?

“Worldwide, there are now more tigers in captivity than there are in the wild,” says tiger expert Nanda Rana. Most of them are Royal Bengal tigers, which number more than 2,000 in the wild. Four sub-species. Three other sub-species are extinct.

The primary objective of captive breeding is to keep threatened species alive with the hope of reintroducing them back into the wild. Tigers have been protected by international regulations since the 70s. By then their numbers were already dangerously low. But reintroduction poses a serious challenge, and hasn’t been done satisfactorily.

There are several problems with releasing a captive tiger into the wild. Hunting is something a cub learns from its mother. In captivity, this is near impossible. In most cases the mother herself was born in captivity. And once they’ve had human contact, it’s very difficult to release tigers that may wander into villages, endangering human lives as well as their own.

Just over five decades ago, 100,000 Bengal tigers lived in Asia. Today, there are fewer than 5,000. Some 200 of them are in Nepal. To address such a drastic decline in their population, tigers have been bred in captivity. But Bhuni’s litter marks the first time a tigress gave birth in captivity since King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation (KMTNC) took over the zoo management in 1995.

The cubs may also find it difficult to be placed in zoos abroad since there is a glut of captive-bred tigers. Zoo experts here hope the new cubs will have some genetic value. Nine-year-old Bhuni and her 14-year-old mate Jange were both man-eaters captured in Chitwan and brought to the zoo. Since both parents are wild tigers, they feel other zoos where the Bengal tigers have been frequently inbred might make room for a Nepali tiger or two.

“We’re discussing the options and we’ll come to a decision soon. There is no need to rush it,” says Shrestha. But space is an issue. There isn’t enough room in Bhuni’s lodgings at Jawalakhel for four new adolescent tigers.

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From hydro to solar

With photovoltaics, Nepalis don’t have to curse the darkness anymore

NAVIN SINGH KHADRA

For 80 percent of Nepalis who have no access to electricity, the fact that Nepal has the highest per capita potential to generate hydropower has a hollow ring. And for the 20 percent who do, electrification is so expensive that they can’t afford to use it much.

Enter: photovoltaic (PV) technology. This system of converting sunlight into electricity and storing it in batteries, could revolutionise Nepal’s electricity use. All it needs is a solar cell set up on a sunny terrace or rooftop. PV cells used to be expensive, but prices have plummeted dramatically and it is now within reach of many Nepalis.

Hypothetically, if just 1,000 Kathmandu houses had PVs of 38W per hour capacity, we’d have 15MW of power daily, taking into consideration that the average period of sunshine is five hours per day. This would mean that the rooftops of 1,000 houses in Kathmandu could generate three percent of Nepal’s current installed hydropower capacity of 680MW. Multiply the gains by 365 days, add thousands of other rooftops all over Nepal and it would be the equivalent of an expensive new hydropower plant.

But how much does it cost? For starters, around Rs 1 million invested in PV modules, batteries, inverters for building integrated PV electrification systems and a monitoring system. For Alternative Current to get connected to the national grid all that is needed is static equipment that costs even less.

The Centre for Energy Studies at the Tribhuvan University’s Institute of Engineering has demonstrated the technology in its own building with solar panels providing 27kW of power in a day, enough for lighting the building and the wireless local area network for computers (see pic, left). The excess energy is channeled into the campus grid. When there isn’t enough power in its PV system, the CES building takes electricity from the campus grid, thus balancing the surplus and deficit and marking the name Zero Energy House.

“What we did in our building can be replicated anywhere else,” says the centre’s director, Jagannath Shestha (pictured, above). “We are creating awareness to encourage people to adopt this technology. PVs are something of a passion for Shestha who thinks it will provide cheap solar power power for the masses.

At night, when there is no sunshine, PV users can get power from the national grid. “That way, people will pay less than their usual electricity bill,” he adds. The trick is to calculate the difference between what you give from the PV system and what you take through the national grid.

But, for that there has to be some changes in the system and the law. For instance, Nepal Electricity Authority’s distribution system has a one-way flow of power from the national grid to consumers. For a reverse flow there has to be changes made in the law too. “This could take some time,” says Shestha. “But, if the government understands its value, the necessary changes should not be a big deal.”

Will it be worth the trouble? Hydro experts say that at the moment, the national power grid is cheaper than the PV system. But prices of solar panels are falling—the per watt power of a panel that cost $100 a few years ago now is $4. “The system is quite suitable for high value consumption like lighting, tv and refrigeration but not for industrial use,” says energy expert Bikash Pandey. “It would be ideal for places that have no access to hydropower generation.”

Professor Shestha at CES says that installing a solar panel to produce the AC and connecting it to the national grid through static will cost $5 per watt of power. The electricity produced through several run-of-river and storage plants in the country costs $4 per watt, on average. “Don’t forget the politics and regulations when it comes to constructing hydropower plants,” reminds Shestha.

In Germany more than 10,000 consumers already have solar panels under the Rooftop Program where roof tiles double as solar power collectors. Japan is promoting a Sunshine Program for solar electricity. By 2030, half of world’s energy is expected to come from solar power.
Networking money

SmartChoice Technologies launched an integrated shared services network for ATMs and POS terminals managed through a national switch. It supports multiple device types and is available on a subscription basis to banks and financial institutions across Nepal. So far, there are a total of eight member banks involved, including new agreements with Nepal Credit & Commerce Bank, Development Credit Bank and Machhapuchchhre Bank.

Regional tourism

Aiming to develop the tourism business between Nepal and Bangladesh and promote Nepal as a tourist destination, the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB), in association with the local Nepali embassy, organized the Media and Tour Operators Meet in Dhaka on 13 June. In 2003 alone about 24,000 tourist visas to Nepal were issued to Bangladeshis. Biman has five flights a week between Kathmandu and Dhaka.

Home loans

Everest Bank’s new EBL Home Equity Loan Scheme allows existing home loan customers to avail a line of credit against the equity they have built on their houses. Customers who have been paying installments regularly, have an increased disposable income and a house with an appreciated market value are eligible for the offer of low interest loans against the extension of the mortgage.

Keeping it Real

Dabur’s Real Taste Challenge offer is sure to keep you on your toes— or taste buds. On 18 and 19 June, 60 supermarkets and shops in Kathmandu and major towns across Nepal will give out free tastes of Real Juice and all you have to do is guess what flavour it is to be eligible for a prize.

NEW PRODUCTS

BRAIN BOOST: Offering to speed up your child’s brain development and put them on a fast track to good grades—especially in math—Universal Concept Mental Arithmetic System (UC MAS) Nepal offers courses for children 5-13. Training involves the abacus method, used in over 35 countries and aids overall brain development.

RIDE IN STYLE: June will see Perodua’s new compact model, the Kelsa, entering the Nepal market with flair. Engine enthusiasts will note the 1,000cc, three cylinder, 12-valve EFI, double overhead camshaft engine and 85hp power, while the less mechanically inclined will find the stylish five-person interior and affordable price attractive. Distributed by Nemlink International Traders, there are hopes to sell at least 500 cars in the first year.

Victory for all

Sports management in Nepal is all about teeth baring fights between top officials, if newspaper reports are anything to go by. There’s Ruhma Shamsheer Rana vs Khisro Bahadur Singh, an argument between the Nepal Olympic Committee and the National Sports Council to control the resources allocated to sports development. The other long festering quarrel is between Geeta Rana and Ganesh Thapa about who will be at the helm of the All Nepal Football Association. These fights often degenerate into tiring spectator sports—draining enthusiasm out of fans and making others hesitant to take the development of Nepal’s sports seriously. Meanwhile, a politicalised and polarised Sports Council widdles its thumb while examples of its mismanagement becomes embarrassingly visible.

Consider these examples when Nepali sportsmen and women went to Islamabad earlier this year to take part in the 9th South Asian Federation (SAF) Games; they made an anachronous cross-continent journey by train. The officials, however, flew to Karachi. Unsurprisingly, our athletes performed well below expectations, even at football, where they could’ve won gold.

At home, the lack of maintenance has eroded Danush Kangkanda a mud bath for teams competing in the ongoing Martyrs’ Memorial League Football. The players appear to spend more time avoiding swamp than dribbling. Last year, two people drowned in the stadium’s swimming pool because there was no trained lifeguard on duty. No one was held accountable and according to Namay magazine, the situation remains negligent this summer too.

Recently, two separate official delegations left Nepal to attend the same tawdros federation meeting at Seoul. Other than an obvious duplication of efforts, such junkets only divide athletes’ loyalties and send mixed signals to the world. One reason why sports management remains a mess is because of a rooted Punjabiat philosophy.

Sport is thought of as an activity that requires nurturing by the state and constant interference by the bureaucracy. While sports has metamorphosed into billion-dollar industries in other parts of the world, here in Nepal, the fight is to protect fixed shares of the pie instead of collaborative work to increase what already exists. As a result, they are unable to create incentives to attract private money to pay for repair and maintenance of sports infrastructures.

Against this depressing backdrop, the recent news about the corporate sponsoring of tawdros athlete Sringar Vaidya (pictures), the first Nepali to formally qualify for this year’s Olympics, is to be welcomed. The six companies—VOITH, ICTC, Nepal Lever, Jyoti Group, Nepal Bank and Dabur Nepal—said they were motivated by patriotism to cover 85 percent of Sringar’s costs (‘Shining Sringar’, #119). Their actions sent three positive signals: first, the Nepali corporate sector now sees the value of endorsing top athletes. Second, under certain conditions, private money is available for the development of sports. And last, access to additional funds may help boost an athlete’s chance for an Olympic medal.

Given all this, one challenge remains for our sports bureaucrats— they must stop their fights and look for ways to attract private funds for sports and athletes. This way, when Nepali athletes win, their victory reflects well on us all.

Great pictures in all conditions

All it takes is just a finger to wash your dishes...
Kyimolung, the blessed land

The people survive neglect in the valley of happiness

Stefan Priesner in Tsum

I

n the remote borderlands of the high Himalaya, several valleys are said to be Beryl—hidden lands that, according to ancient scriptures, were established by Guru Rinpoche, the 8th century Indian saint accredited for spreading Buddhism. Beryl are haven of peace, prosperity and spiritual progress and refuges for believers. In 17th century Tsum (Chekampar), a valley that branches off the Budi Gandagi towards the north of Ganesh Himal in upper Gorkha, was named Beryl Kyimolung.

Even non-Buddhists understand why Tsum is perceived as a blessed land. Perhaps one of Nepal’s most beautiful valleys, it is cut off from the southern lowlands of Nepal by deep, forested gorges and swift rivers, and from Tibet in the north by snow-covered passes. The surprisingly flat valley provides for some 4,000 inhabitants of almost exclusively Tibetan origin. Clusters of stone houses with slate roofs dot the landscape, enclosed by gentle forested slopes and snow capped mountains with cascading glaciers. This is century-old Buddhist heartland, with monasteries, stupa, chortens and mani walls omnipresent.

Beryl Kyimolung means “the valley of happiness”, a name echoed in the people, who appear proud and content—an attitude perhaps influenced by a strong feeling of identity, strong social cohesion and small income disparities. The generous Tsumpa hospitality is the highlight of a visit—countless cups of butter tea, chhindo and boiled potatoes shared genially with strangers.

And yet, one cannot help but wonder if the people’s happiness and well being is not seriously compromised as they struggle with illness, lack of education and income shortages. Tsum has been almost completely neglected by development efforts, and now this isolation is perpetuated as people see themselves in an area controlled by the Maoists and detached from the central government. The implications are clear long before entering the remote valley. A few hours north of Arughat Bazar, where the road and government outreach ends, a woman in her thirties sits beside the trail with a syringe sticking in her chest—the indigenous healer is treating her chronic cough by bloodletting. Asked whether the syringe is sterile, the healer says, “I always clean it in the river, and besides, I’ve used it on lots of patients...”

In Tsum, change is slow. For centuries people have depended on subsistence agriculture, cardamom rearing and all-important trade links to Tibet; to the east, Kyimong is only a day and a half walk over the mountains. But the cross-Himalayan trade of Tibetan salt for rice and goods from the Nepali hills has given way to one-sided shopping trips. There is hardly anything that can be bartered from the Nepali side and the once well-stocked village storages that awaited transport to Tibet are now empty. Except for the yearly yardagumbha feast in May, all other traffic over the high passes is one way into Nepal as even rice and vegetable oil is cheaper in Tibet. The Tsumpa depend on several excursions every year, sometimes taking their lives, to earn small profits from retailing. “I lost three of my fingers to the cold for Rs. 2,000 when I went to Kyimong in January,” says Deepa Nachha from Sio, showing his blackened left hand. “I had a hot walk on and on for 24 hours without stopping, I would still be up there.”

Still, the challenges in income are nothing compared to problems in health, sanitation and education. One village was completely devoid of children. Eighteen died in a single month last year, but because Tsum doesn’t have any health workers, nobody could tell us why. A middle-aged woman tells us how much she misses their laughter.

If children reach the age of five—30 percent don’t—chances that they benefit from formal schooling are slim. There are school buildings, but local confidence in public schools is close to zero. The half dozen trained local teachers in Tsum are an integral part of the social fabric, often involved in activities that distract them from their job. While we were there, one was preparing norms for a village puja, and another was repairing a bridge.

Teachers posted by the government only show up sporadically. “Sometimes they only come once a year—they do not want to stay in remote areas,” a villager explains. Irregular classes result in a low attendance rate, and Titung Gyamtse, one of the local teachers, estimates that the primary enrollment rate has dropped to almost 20 percent. Only half of those enrolled also attend school. For most children, the only alternatives are no school at all or the monastery. Santen Dorji, who runs classes in Tsum’s main monastery, Karchen Gompa, tells us, “Up to 30 percent of children are sent to monastic schools in Boudhia and India where they become monks and nuns.”

Villagers say the problems were much the same before the Maoists came in 2001. That year, police abandoned the Chokhang post and since then the Maosists come regularly in the summer to ask for contributions from villagers. But little has really changed, and since local elections were suspended in 2002, traditional village-based self-help systems for small repair and maintenance work have revived. The village headman oversees this, and, together with a group of elders, resolves small disputes over issues like trespassing cattle and unpaid debts. Two months ago, a man was suspected of having broken into a hump to steal the sacred relics. When the man denied the charges despite overwhelming evidence, the people beat him all night and then staked his leg into a hot oven.

In a place where state services don’t exist, self-help initiatives are the only option. Even further isolated by the present conflict, whatever few development benefits the area received are about to vanish. Out of the reach of the central government, but not under the aegis of the Maoists either, this is no man’s land. Tsum, it seems, is too remote to be of critical importance for those with the power to help.
Head north out of Kathmandu through Trikuti and take a left when you reach the end of the road. A mere 10 hours rattle and ride from the capital, western Rasuwa is a forgotten world.

To the east are the apple-pie shops and solar showers of Langtang, but in the neglected valleys outside the National Park earlier layers of regional history have not been overlain by the recent influx of outsiders. Memories of Prithvi Narayan Shah’s conquests, of the Nepal-Tibet wars and of Kampa guerrillas lie jumbled on the surface, largely undisturbed by more recent developments. Neither the Maoists nor the army come here.

In the villages of Goljung and Gultang, they dust down the tarnished cutlasses once used in battles and now re-erected in the bone dance. Himu Singh Tamang, a teacher in Gultang, says that the figures wheeling about the village square represent the local king’s struggle against Prithvi Narayan Shah. It is easy to see that the dancers pirouetting in horse costumes, clashing their long curved blades, had fearsome ancestors. But rather than ancient violence, the dance recalls the wisdom of making peace.

The consensus is that the tradition refers to the Nepali-Tibetan wars. In 1792, a joint Chinese-Tibetan army crossed through these valleys and advanced on Kathmandu. More invasions followed. It was not until Jang Bahadur Rana built the fort at Rasuwagadhi that the border stabilised and local relations with the Tibetans and Chinese returned to peaceful trading and cultural osmosis.

A dirt track to the zinc mines in Dhading passes near these villages, although it is barely used. Tiny power lines from the futuristic underground hydro plant at Chilime loop along the valley, dwarfed by the landscape. Only one or two houses have electricity. Mohammed Babar Pandey, the chief warden of the Langtang National Park, estimates that only a dozen trekking groups have come this way in the last decade heading for Gangeshwara.

Now, UNDP, in a partnership with the Nepal Tourism Board called the Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Programme (TRPAP), is hoping to open the area up. The locals are ready to deal with tourism after a year of exposure to concepts like ‘community mobilisation’ and ‘capacity building’.

The locals, by their own account, feel unqualified enthusiasm for the visitors they have been promised. “We will get facilities from tourists. Tourists will bring economic benefits,” says Himu Tamang of Gultang. With only 10 SLC graduates in a population of 2,000, his village has much to gain. But as excited as they are to join an economy they can barely imagine, many seem motivated by an understandable pride in their culture and surroundings. Tamang adds that he wants to “advertise this place and culture to the world. I want no change. Culture is our wealth.”

Journalists, trekking agents and local officials on the promotional trip were politely asked not to litter. One reporter earned himself a slap for grabbing a local woman in the hot springs at Tamang. There will surely be more surprises in store for both locals and visitors as trekkers add their footprints to those of the lamas, soldiers, merchants and hardymen that shaped this place.

The path climbs steeply from the valley of the Chilime Khola. The white mountains of the Tibetan border are behind and snowy Gosainkund ahead.

Hishilungt Gompa with its crumbling wall paintings, is said to be 2,000 years old. After a further, briefly alarming, climb to the summer yak pastures at the top of the ridge, the trail reaches Nagtali Gompa, Lama Kamstung Wangdi says, “The gompa is 200 generations old—before there were kings or states, older than Nepal.”

Rasuwa’s plans to promote tourism and the road to Tibet suffered a serious blow with the murder by Maoists in April of DDC chairman Bhim Lal Hirachan. He had tirelessly promoted trekking and tried always to lift his district out of poverty.

Now there are plans to build a road linking Kathmandu to Kyirong in Tibet, perhaps as soon as 2007. The last few kilometres before the border were a restricted zone until recently and foreigners need a permit arranged through a trekking agency.

The shops are stocked with Chinese noodles, beer and pungent rice wine. It was the Tibetan border that offered the final, fascinating glimpse of the layers of Himalayan history. Beyond the old stone frontier fort that gives the district of Rasuwa its name is a modern pedestrian footbridge into China. Local people pass freely to sell sheep and goats and buy clothing and shoes.

On the far side 18-year-old Zhang Wei from Beijing sprays people’s feet for SARS and offers a cigarette to the first Western imperialist he has ever seen.

Along with four colleagues in the Chinese police, some of them Tibetan, he occupies the guardhouse that is the first building on the other side. The only other building is called a reception centre for returning refugees. To the delight and amusement of many members of our group it was a brothel, where Chinese citizens of Nepali origin do a brisk trade with the small garnisons on both sides.

New tourism seems ready to add a fresh set of infatuations. Don’t expect this wild mountain world to change overnight. Without any solar showers or apple pie, only the enterprising are likely to venture into this secret place.
The UML has not deserted the movement

Madhav Kumar Nepal, general secretary of the CPN (UML) in Kathmandu, 16 June

If the government claims that it has executive powers, then this must be proven. That is why we are demanding the annulment of the amended regulation for the functioning of the ministers’ council.

If what we heard is true, the king himself wants to forget the past and begin afresh. In that case, we will have to go back to the day before King Gyanendra took over, 3 October 2002. The regulation was amended after the appointment of Lokendra Bahadur Chand and remained unchanged during the tenure of Surya Bahadur Thapa, who supposedly had executive powers, just like the new Deuba government. If that is true, there should be no difficulty in getting rid of the amended regulation. That is our primary demand. If it is not met, we will not join the government.

Deuba’s Nepali Congress (Democratic) protested the royal takeover. It is also the country’s third biggest party. Since Deuba himself was sacked from the post of prime minister, he had the support of different parties. Therefore we must take his reinstatement positively. Our demand for a constituent assembly is not something new. We already expressed our willingness for democratic alternatives but we never discussed that central idea. The reason we are stressing it now is for national consensus. A constituent assembly could guide the country out of the present crisis and solve the Maoist insurgency.

We left the street demonstrations but that does not mean that we have nothing to do: we will continue mobilising people, organising meetings, seminars and campaigns to democracy and usher in peace. No one can stop us because the CPN (UML) is based on the people—we will never be alone.

On the basis of issues, we are still ready to work together with other parties. Our experience has shown that in the long run, some co-workers tire and aim for smaller targets but we plan to reach the summit of Everest. We will do it.

Noodle currency

Rajdhani, 16 June

A packet of instant noodles for a yarachagumba—the ‘Himalayan Vagga’ is the new term of barter in Dhobhari hunting reserve this season. The collectors, who go above 16,000ft in this former conservation area in search of the fangtooth palaemonidae (NT #193), happily accept the price of Rs 50 for a packet of noodles, the only food available in the Dolpo highlands.

The Maoists have been allowing the people to collect yarachagumba for the past 50 weeks, charging them Rs 15 per piece. The government banned harvesting in the area, but the rebels defied the rule and opened the reserve for a month-long period. As a result, businessmen from Baglung, Myagdi, Dolpa, Jumla, Mehu, Jajarkot, Kathmandu, India and China have arrived in droves to buy yarachagumba. In the past two years, businessmen used Tibetan refugees to collect Rs 2.2 million worth of the medicinal animal-plant. The rebels are motivated by the bonomotive: they earned Rs 3.2 million in royalties and this year their projection is a hefty Rs 5 million. Given the rush for yarachagumba, their target does not seem overly ambitious, especially as the Maoists have succeeded in creating an atmosphere where collectors work free from government intervention. After the rebels set fire to the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) office at the Dhobhari hunting reserve, government presence is confined to the district headquarters, an eight-day walk away.

Like Abu Ghrabi

Kanpur, 13 June

PATNA – The Nepali Maoists say they are going to take the matter of what they call sustained persecution against their arrested leaders and cadres by the police of the Indian state of Bihar to international forums. “A formal allegation will be lodged with Amnesty International and at the International Committee of the Red Cross against the Bihar police for the torture of our leaders and cadres in custody,” a read a statement issued by the CPN-Maoist in Patna. The rebel party added that the police actions contravened International Humanitarian Law. The statement also compared the physical torture meted out by the Bihar police to the recent Iraqi prison scandal at Abu Ghrabi. Two weeks ago, 11 Maoists, including central leaders Rajendra Thapa and Lokendra Bista, were arrested from a Patna hotel. (Nepalnews.com)

Imperialist hack

Space time, 13 June

RIO DE JANEIRO – The Maoist campaign to counter propaganda that they are hostile to US citizens met with a little provokeerh by Brad Workman, a Florida journalist, who came to report from Rioja but fell very ill on the trail. Workman had acute dysentery and high fever as he tried to reach...
Thawang, the headquarters of the Maoist-dwelled Nagarpokhari Autonomous Regional Government. After walking for days, he meet some rebels who took him to a medical clinic. “I didn’t think I would fall ill but I was lying only semi-conscious when a team of Maoist medical personnel aided me,” says Workman. He was treated under the direction of Santosh Budhamagar, head of the rebel-controlled area, who said, “Although the party does not allow US journalists into our territory, it was our moral responsibility to help.”

Workman asked the Maoist to let him use their satellite phone to call a rescue helicopter. “I told them that I wanted to see my mother’s face before I died,” recalls Workman. After recovering from his illness, he returned to Nepalgunj on foot. The rebels didn’t accept any money. Workman is a freelance reporter and a member of US Photo Journalists Association. (Nepalnews.com)

Securing the office
Kampur 15 June

NARAYANGHAT – When the Maoists started attacking government offices, security training was initiated for employees in several district offices. The District Police Office recently trained 38 employees in 30 government offices. Employees from another 31 offices are up next. Dhruv Basnet, DSP at the District Police Office, explains, “After the danger of attacks increased, employees are being trained to protect the office building and other employees.” Trainees include police and security guards that work in government offices, corporations and banks. Basnet added that the police are willing to extend their training service to the private sector. Within a period of one year, rebels bombarded six government offices in Chitwan and looted five banks.

(Distributed by Aisha, Nepalnews.com)

Nothing to read
Rajdhani, 15 June

UDAYPUR – Despite a government policy of free textbooks to primary students, over 100,000 children in four districts of Sagarmatha zone don’t have yet to receive their two months into the new academic session. Most students in Khotang, Okhaldhunga, Siraha and Udaypur are sharing or just doing without. The distributer, Saja Prakashan’s branch office in Lahan, blames the Curriculum Development Centre at Sanathani for failing to send them the books. Rehit Pokhrel, the head of Saja Prakashan in Lahan, said out of nearly 200,000 primary level students, only 75,000 thousand students in four districts have textbooks. (Nepalnews.com)

Airlines

Ram Prasad Dahal in Rajdhani, 15 June

Almost a week after Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba formed his cabinet, the ministers’ council has yet to convene a single meeting. The regulation was amended after King Gyanendra assumed executive powers post-October Fourth and requires all cabinet decisions to have his approval.

However, a senior official told us that only the king can cancel the amendment. Now there are conflicting reports emerging from Deuba’s camp: one minister says the first meeting of the ministers’ council may bring up the amendment while another source says the prime minister will not hold the meeting without first consulting the king.

Deuba is under pressure from his own party, the Nepali Congress (Democratic) and the UML to scrap the regulation for the duty execution of the ministers’ council. He knows that if the first meeting of the ministers’ council does not do so, it will send the wrong signal.

The meeting was scheduled for last Monday. The chief secretary and other government officials waited for the prime minister and his cabinet to arrive at 9AM, but no one turned up even at the end of the work day. With the cabinet meeting yet to take place, more than a dozen files containing important government work is pending at the cabinet secretariat.

Normally, cabinet meetings take place on the day the ministers’ council is formed. But last Thursday, when Deuba named two of his cabinet colleagues, they were occupied with the swearing-in ceremony. “That is why the initial plan was to hold the meeting on Friday,” says a source close to the prime minister. “But Deuba later said the meeting would take place on Monday.” The regular cabinet meetings take place on Mondays and Fridays.

The last cabinet meeting took place almost a month-and-a-half ago under Surya Bahadur Thapa. It issued the ordinance on the royal palace expenditure and decided on the appointment of joint secretaries. It was an informal meeting that took place at the prime minister’s official residence. Deuba’s close aides have confirmed that the amended regulation for the duty execution of the ministers’ council was the main hitch. Deuba’s own party and the UML will comprehend that he holds no executive powers if he fails to challenge the amendment.

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Handwash

It could save a million lives a year

Just washing hands could save the lives of more than a million children each year, a study shows. It protects children from diarrhoea and more unexpectedly, also from pneumonia. These two are the biggest killers of children below the age of five.

The results arise from studies under “Phase” (personal hygiene and sanitation education), the project taken up in four countries by a partnership of the NGOs African Medical and Research Foundation (Amref) and Plan International, along with the pharmaceutical firm GlaxoSmithKline (GSK). The program has now taken on an extensive campaign to promote handwashing among children in Kenya, Zambia, Nicaragua and Peru.

We are now talking to NGOs in Uganda, Mexico and India to spread the program further,” said Claire Hitchcock from GSK and Phase, the implementing agency. It is also looking at a whole range of far-reaching benefits just from washing hands, Hitchcock added. “We do need more evidence to bring about change worldwide and there is certainly an incidence of pneumonia, but we find that when children are cleaner and take care of themselves, they become less susceptible to other diseases.” Children also showed far greater self-esteem when their hands are clean. “They were more confident, they were happier and their academic performance improved.”

There is a catch: children are most susceptible to diarrhoea and pneumonia below age five, and the program to promote cleanliness and handwashing is aimed at children between six and 13 years of age. Though they can reduce the risk of disease, parents teach their children. But that does not mean the program has to wait a generation to take effect. “There is a high incidence of infectious diseases even among children of that age,” says Hitchcock. Also, the program is aiming to get the message across more widely. It runs primarily through the school system in select areas in the four countries.

The best method is to use soap with water to wash hands, but Phase suggests local alternatives such as ash or herbal leaves in Kenya if soap is not available. “If you don’t wash your hands after using the toilet, your hands become a superhighway for transmitting microbes from one person to another,” warns Catherine Diris, director of the hygiene centre at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and a global expert on the beneficial effects of handwashing added in a message to the Phase program.

Diarrhoeal diseases kill nearly two million children under the age of five each year around the world, which is approximately 15 percent of all child deaths in this age group, says a statement from the Phase partners. Eighty to 90 percent of these cases are related to environmental conditions, in particular contaminated water and inadequate sanitation. The strong link found between handwashing and a decrease in respiratory infections follows one other study that showed similar results. A US Navy study showed that introducing routine handwashing for respiratory infections among trainees results by as much as 45 percent. Students are encouraged to create their own folk songs or poems on handwashing. They also create signs to place near latrines to remind both children and adults to use nearby handwashing facilities. Some of the other preventative actions the teachers encourage is keeping animals away from the home, building latrines and keeping them clean, making drying racks for kitchen utensils, wearing footwear in latrines and waste disposal safe. 

Handwash

Migrant workers

Bangkok: There seems to be light at the end of the tunnel for migrant workers in Thailand who have long resorted to the backroom of the country’s economy, but ironically lead lives in fear of arrest and deportation by the authorities. This hopeful sign stems from a policy that the Thai government will start enforcing from 1 July to regulate the presence of an estimated one over million migrant workers who live within its borders. The initiative offers both documented and undocumented migrant workers an opportunity to register themselves directly with Thai authorities, rather than doing so through their employers. It also encourages the workers to register family members who have slipped into Thailand with them but are not employed.

“The basic concept is good, because the migrant workers will be able to work legally,” said Mai Yamani, an author and Research Fellow at the Royal Institute for International Affairs. Mai Yamani is also an author and Research Fellow at the Royal Institute for International Affairs.

1,000,000 migrant workers

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The resignation by the CIA's George Tenet for 'personal reasons' may conceal more compelling factors

Why resign?

Hardly a day goes by on which we do not hear of a government minister somewhere resigning his or her office. In a sense, this is hardly surprising. After all, the 25-member states of the European Union alone employ hundreds of ministers between them—and even more if junior ministers are included. But why do ministers resign? More interestingly still: why do some resign while others appear to survive? In the absence of empirical research, generalisations must be guesswork. Ministers frequently resign because they find themselves involved in scandals, which are often connected in recent times with financing political parties. In Italy, one encounters several ghosts of such past misdeeds. Sometimes ministers resign for what they call “personal reasons”. Such reasons may conceal more compelling factors, as the recent resignation of American CIA Director George Tenet suggests. But Tony Blair lost one of his best and most loyal cabinet friends, Alan Milburn, because he genuinely wanted to spend more time with his family.

Blair also lost his ministers of foreign affairs and of development assistance, Robin Cook and Clare Short, respectively. In their case, it was a serious policy disagreement—over the Iraq war—that made them go, and Cook certainly remains a politician-in-waiting. Yet Godd Hoon, Prime Minister Blair’s defence minister, as well as his American counterpart, Donald Rumsfeld, remain in office. Neither, to be sure, is clearly involved in a manifest scandal, nor do they disagree with the policies set by their leader. On the contrary, they not only support these policies but stubbornly defend even their aberrations, like the mistreatment of prisoners of war. These ministers institute investigations, they move generals sideways or even into premature retirement, they haul perpetrators before military tribunals but they apparently see no reason to respond to those members of Congress or Parliament, let alone of the public, who wonder whether it is not time for the ministers themselves to go. The case of crimes in Iraq is particularly dramatic, but less obvious cases make the same point. The German minister of transport, for example, presided over a catastrophic and costly failure of a road toll system that he had proudly announced. But even he may stay in office to try again, having blamed others—in this case private companies—for the debacle. If something unacceptable happens without a minister’s direct involvement, he or she can get away with it, or so it seems, by pointing a finger at the bureaucrats or contractors who are responsible for implementing an approved policy.

Was it always thus? One would like to think not. In any case, two ethical concepts come to mind, neither of which is much in vogue these days when talking about government: responsibility and honor. Both values are, or at least used to be, part of the ethos of governance. Responsibility concerns the fact that ministers are accountable for everything that happens within their sphere. In fact, they alone are accountable in the strict sense. In parliamentary systems, they can and must appear before the elected representatives of the people and explain what happened.

Because they alone are directly accountable, it is not enough for a minister to point to and name the miscreants in any particular case. Civil servants cannot defend themselves in the same way. They have to be defending by their ministers. If something of such severity has happened that a minister finds it impossible to defend them, they may have to pay the penalty, but the minister must still assume responsibility. It is proper to assume that Secretary Rumsfeld did not condone, let alone order, the abuse of Iraqi prisoners. Honour may seem an old-fashioned term. What it says in Rumsfeld’s case is that there may be no legal or constitutional obligation for a responsible minister to resign over the Iraqi abuse scandal, but once upon a time it would have been regarded as a matter of honor that he does resign. Such a step not only demonstrates that the minister in question is fully aware of the burden of his responsibility, but also that he puts the integrity of democratic institutions above his personal interest, let alone the electoral prospects of those whom he served.

Democracy is a precious but also a precarious set of values. If we want to persuade others to subscribe to it, we do well to demonstrate that we not only believe in elections and majorities but also in the virtues of responsibility and honor.

The rise of Euro-skeptic parties is worrying implications

The rise of Euro-skeptic parties is worrying implications

T he drumming that many governments suffered in the EU parliament elections places them in a difficult position. Only an incurable optimist can hope that this week’s EU summit will bring glory to any of them.

The summit has two purposes: to finalise the text of a new EU Constitution and to appoint the next president of the Commission. These negotiations will be much harder in view of the spectacular repudiation of a number of key governments at the ballot box, together with the potent rise of protest and Euro-skeptic parties in several member states.

The problem for Europe’s leaders is that their own reputation by voters does not necessarily carry the same message as the rise of the Euro-skeptic parties. The record slump in the vote for Gerhard Schröder’s governing Social Democrats in Germany has little to do with his policy towards Europe, but a great deal to do with the perceived failure of his economic policies—and the persistence of low growth and high unemployment—at home. Despite the nationalist parties in France, the same is true of the setback for President Jacques Chirac’s centre-right party.

In Britain, by contrast, where the economy is strong and unemployment low, the main factor behind the collapse in the vote for the governing Labor Party has been anger with Tony Blair’s determination to go to war in Iraq beside George Bush.

Nevertheless, the rise of Euro-skeptic parties, in a number of countries including Britain, France, Belgium, Poland and the Czech Republic, has worrying implications for a summit meeting whose purpose is to take European integration a small but unmistakable step forward. In Britain, in particular, the spectacular surge of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) can only strengthen the government’s long-standing latent Euroscepticism.

The proposed constitution will contain a Charter of Fundamental Rights, which is intended to enhance the political and moral legitimacy of the EU. But will it really enhance the rights of EU citizens? Or, as the British government insists, will it merely be a declaratory document that only describes rights already existing under national legislation in the member states?

The draft constitution would enhance the policy making powers of the Union, with a bit more majority voting in the Council of Ministers and a stronger role for the European Parliament. But, despite Tony Blair’s one-time declaration that he would take Britain “into the heart of Europe,” he remains viscerally opposed to the prospect of further integration and will resist any new encroachment on British sovereignty in his red line areas of tax, foreign policy and EU budget finance.

One question always asked in this poll is whether voters tend to trust or mistrust different institutions, such as national parliaments, national governments and the European Union. Overall, the general level of trust in the European Union is not high: only 41 percent of voters tend to trust the EU, whereas 42 percent do not tend to trust it. But in Britain, the figures are dramatically different: only 19 percent trust the EU, while 55 percent distrust it.

The predicament for Europe’s leaders at this week’s summit is that they stand at the cusp of an unstable process of European integration. With the accession of 10 new members, the EU must become more integrated if it is to function. But it is not at all clear that those governments that would normally support more integration can sell it to their disaffected electorates. Tony Blair has promised a referendum on the new EU constitution, which he cannot possibly win. The central question will be whether Europe’s “leaders” deliberately play for failure, in the hope that the problem will go away.
I don’t know why I didn’t come

A little bit of coitus never hoitus.

You might be forgiven for plunging straight into this hot pink tome with unbridled enthusiasm. After all, it promises nothing less than a ride through the development and bedding habits of the Bedouin to theifique activities of an 18th-century male Scottish masturbation club known as the “Beggaj’s Bénison”. The book fulfills many functions—if you are, perhaps, an ardent young man confused by your coy mistress, a pen by the “Orgasm in the Orient” chapter will fill you in on lovemaking techniques from Ancient Chinese Tao texts. “She extends her abdomen. It indicates that she wishes shallower thrusts,” those chafing against a homophbic environment can take comfort in the fact that their discomfort would not have gone down well in ancient Greece. Or perhaps they would have. Aristophanes reflected the sentiments of the time when he wrote: “Well, this is a fine state of affairs, you villians. You meet my son fresh from the bath and you don’t kiss him. You don’t even feel his testicles. And you’re supposed to be a friend of ours!”

Speaking of testicles, Margolis offers us a wealth of criminological information for the verbally licentious. The word testify actually comes from the habit of placing one’s hand on one’s balls when taking a vow. “Fornication” comes from the Latin word for stone, fornix. Roman prostitutes working in bakers would take the opportunity to make a little cash while their buns were in the oven.

Lest you conclude that Margolis is purely a master of the anecdotal and scurrilous, I must disabuse you of that notion. I trust the book will have you guffawing, but it’s a double-edged sword, a text that amuses but also illuminates. CS Lewis referred to the “snobbery of chronology”, the conviction in any given generation that the apogee of information on a topic has been reached.

It is fascinating to read the “authorities” on sex throughout the ages, all of whom thought that they were having the last word on the subject. License has given way to repression and swung back to licence again, as human beings wrestle with the urge to merge. Prominent Christian theologians such as the 17th-century sceptic Thomas Sanchez stipulated that any person fearing an organic coagulation outside an act of procreation should “lie still... make the sign of the cross and pray fervently for God not to allow him to slip into orgastic pleasure.” In sharp contrast, pre-Christian treaties propounded guilt-free pleasure between equals. Kamasutra offers the following advice to those in search of pietistic virtuosity: “Eating many eggs fried in butter then immersed in honey will make the member hard for the whole night.”

This was undertaken with the admirable intention of making your woman happy. Unfortunately women faced an increasingly raw deal as the juggernaut of Christianity rolled onward; their previously celebrated sensuality became something feared and attacked by those who were no longer comfortable with tales of longing. Persecution and distress aside, the orgasm has survived, and one of the chief pleasures of this book is Margolis’s analysis of the potential reasons for its existence. His thesis is this: rather than viewing the orgasm as an adjunct—the cream in the coffee or the cherry on the cake—we should understand its pursuit as our primary motivation in life. It is hardwired into our systems, linked to the survival of the fittest. Male and female organs have evolved to be deliberately mismatched for specific biological reasons; a suitable pair bond is sensed and accepted by a woman if her paramour invests the time and effort to help her climax. This indicates that the chaps may be a keeper. “In short making women feel good may help men to win the Darwinian contest of supremacy.”

Thus the quest for orgasmic release propels us through the centuries. Margolis argues that testosteronism, the primary generator of sexual desire in both men and women has been the “single most influential chemical in human history.” If this seems far-fetched, one has only to go down to your local bar at closing time this evening to check out the vast ooze of testosteronism in motion. But take heart; in the words of Dorothy Parker: “A little coitus never hoitus”.

©: The Intimate History of the Orgasm
Jonathan Margolis
Century, 1996, £14.99

Lector in Nepali

Department of the Languages and Cultures of South Asia and SOAS Language Centre
£21,594 p.a. - £26,954 p.a. inclusive of London Allowance
Vacancy 04-67
Applications are invited for a fixed-term three year Lectureship in Nepali. The successful candidate will be expected to teach Nepali language, both in BA and MA classes (within the South Asia Department) and in evening and weekend degree classes (within the Language Centre). Instruction will include conversation classes as well as formal tuition. Fluency in Nepali is essential and prior experience of teaching the speaking, reading and writing of Nepali effectively to students at various levels is preferred. The position will commence on 1 October 2004.

An application form and job description may be obtained from the Human Resources Department, School of Oriental and African Studies, Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H 0DG
Tel: 020 7888 4334, Fax: 020 7877 5121, e-mail: humanresources@soas.ac.uk.
All applications must be sent directly to the HR Department. An online application is available at www.soas.ac.uk/humanresources. E-mail applications will be accepted. CV’s will only be accepted when accompanied by an application form. No agencies.

Closing date: 28 June 2004
Manindra’s course

How a golf visionary set up the Royal Nepal Golf Club

Driving down from the airport, many people wonder what the refreshing view on the right is. Exquisite and green, it is a part of the Royal Nepal Golf Club (RNGC), Nepal’s oldest golf facility. Many of Nepal’s golf enthusiasts, including myself, are proud to say that this is the place we learned the game of golf. It takes both vision and implementation for a successful result, and when we look at RNGC today, with its club atmosphere and the playing conditions of the course, one person stands out as having been instrumental in this achievement: Manindra Raj Shrestha, who has been the club’s president for over a decade.

His selfless support helped create the RNGC of today. Many members of RNGC may not know that the greens they play on came from his courtyard. Despite his wife’s misgivings, he brought grass from his lawn and introduced the first Bermuda grass greens in Nepal. I recall once morning when I was playing with him, he saw a big chunk of weed and started pulling it out immediately. It was this passion and dedication that laid the foundations for the development of golf and the RNGC. Today, many follow his footsteps, including his son Sonny.

I was fortunate to share Manindra’s thoughts on the past, present and future of golf in Nepal.

When did you start the game? How were you inspired to take it up?

I started playing golf in 1977. Before that, I had thought it was a lazy man’s game. It was Prince Bhumibol who got me into playing, and having taken it up, I became aware of the game’s potential, and took an active part in trying to promote it.

We have talked so much about golf tourism. In your opinion how is it best done?

This is a topic that has been discussed for over a decade, including with people directly related to tourism development in Nepal. However, nothing has come of it. To develop golf for tourism, RNGC and the private sector need to work together. One of the best ways would be for the government to provide the land and the private sector to develop it. The government has such a lot of unused land. They can easily provide it if they choose to.

You drove RNGC through rough roads to bring it to its present state. What do you see it as today?

RNGC, as you mentioned, is one of the most successful sports institutions in Nepal, mainly due to the selfless efforts of its members and strict adherence to its objectives and mission of bringing golf to Nepal. I feel that the effort we put in the last 10 to 12 years have paid off, as the club is still following the visions laid down then.

We have all been talking about getting more juniors started, so how can we walk this talk?

Last year, RNGC started a five year golf development plan with the basic objective of promoting golf at the junior level. All other clubs and organisations follow that model, I am sure we can have worldclass players coming out of Nepal within 10 years.

Today when we look back at all the foundations this gentleman’s vision laid for us, we must take our hats off to him.

Deepak Acharya is a Golf Instructor and Golf Director at Gokarna Forest Golf Resort & Spa, Kathmandu. prodeepak@hotmail.com

HiT! Zinedine Zidane

This isn’t what I did at the first 89 minutes, when England’s congested midfield stilled his creative veins. Rather, by nailing the equalizer and converting the winner from the penalty spot, he proved just why so many consider him the best in the world.

MISS! Portugal’s old guard

The host nation crumbled under pressure against Greece, and most worryingly, among the major culprits were Manuel Ruiz Costa, Luis Figu and Fernando Couto. These three great veterans either need to step up or make way for new blood.

HTII! Henrik Larsson

It took a petition, letters from politicians and a plea from his six-year-old son, but when the Celtic striker finally decided to return to international action, it gave all of Sweden a lift.

MISS! Alex Del Pierto and Mauro Camoranesi

They’re supposed to provide width to Italy’s 4-2-3-1 system, but against Denmark they were chaotic and wasteful. Del Pierto isn’t a natural winger, but this alone can’t explain his perennial underachievement. As for Camoranesi, who is a winger, there can be no excuses.

HTII! Thomas Sorensen

Denmark played exceptionally well as a team against Italy, but it was the goalkeeper’s three prodigious saves that avoided defeat. It’s good to see him shine again after 12 ineffective months following the 2002 World Cup.

MISS! Holland’s 4-3-3 system

Against Germany, particularly for the first hour, the players just did not seem to gel. They were slow, sluggish and stretched all over the pitch, leaving room for the Germans to exploit.

HTI! Otto Rehhagel

The Germany boss gave a tactical masterclass against Portugal. Outhashed in terms of talent, Greece responded with intelligence and organisation, converting opportunities and playing to their strengths.

MISS! Bulgaria

When you lose 5-0, it can’t be anything other than a miss. It should be noted however that Bulgaria did create a number of chances early in the game and that Sweden’s late goals came on the counterattack.

HTII! Karel Poborský

The star of EURO 96 faltered after moving to the Premiership and to Portugal. Now he’s making up for lost time, both at club level and with the national team. Against Latvia he was devastating, like the rest of his Czech teammates, who dominated their opponents from the very first minute.

MISS! Johann Vogel

A guy of his experience simply should not be getting sent off in the opening game, especially against an opponent, Croatia, that Switzerland recklessly needed to beat if they are to have any chance to get to the quarterfinals.

HTII! Latvia

OK, so the Baltic boys lost and the margin could have been far greater than the 2-1 scoreline. But they took the lead and hung on for a long time.

MISS! Michael Owen

Right now, he looks like the oldest 24-year-old in the world. True, he didn’t get much service against France, but he also showed little of the explosive quickness and ability to get into goal scoring chances.

HTII! Vicente

He may well be the best winger in the tournament, and he’s only going to get better. He took the lead in the quarterfinals left and with better finishing from Raúl and Fernando Morientes, Spain could have had a far gaudier scoreline. Army games.

MISS! Croatia’s finishing
India, a rare meteorological event. This has delayed the traditional frontal wave from the Bay. The Valley at noon shows an unusually powerful monsoon current from the Arabian Sea moving straight into northern Nepal.

After those copious pre-monsoon showers the real thing seems to have been waylaid on its way to Nepal. Lakshya is based on the 1999 Indian Army skirmishes with Pakistanis intruders in the heights of Kargil in Jammu and Kashmir.

Starting with his life as a careless rich boy, the film traces the journey of cadet Karan Shergill (Hrithik Roshan) and the changes in his character, strengths and beliefs. Co-starring Amitabh Bachchan and Preity Zinta, Lakshya aims to redefine war films in Bollywood.

Tourist attractions

Temperature: 26°C-31°C

KATHMANDU AIR QUALITY

KATHMANDU VALLEY

TV programs

NEPAL WEATHER by MAUSAM BEED

Such a terrific scene at the post-mortem where the button was not removed to keep the patient warm is likely to have been played out on his way to hospital in a car.

NEPALI WEATHER by MAUSAM BEED

KATHMANDU AIR QUALITY

Festivals

NEPAL WEATHER by MAUSAM BEED

KATHMANDU AIR QUALITY

KATHMANDU VALLEY

NEPAL WEATHER by MAUSAM BEED

KATHMANDU AIR QUALITY

Festivals

MONSOON WINE FESTIVAL

KATHMANDU VALLEY

Festivals

KATHMANDU AIR QUALITY

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NEPAL WEATHER by MAUSAM BEED

KATHMANDU VALLEY

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KATHMANDU AIR QUALITY

Festivals
After 27 years as a teacher, Tirtha Shrestha still smiles as she remembers her early school days in Myagdi. Polio left her crippled at an early age but her father said nothing was wrong with her mind and encouraged her to study. Then came the biggest hurdle in every Nepali student’s life: the SLC exams.

"Students from my village repeatedly failed, so when my turn came, my father told me not to bother as I would probably fail too," she remembers. But Tirtha had no intention of giving up. She snuck out of her house and secretly went to the exam centre in Baglung. "It took me more than six hours because back then I didn’t have crutches," she says, "so I crawled with the help of a wooden stick." When the results came out, she was one of only three girls who passed from the district that year.

Tirtha went on to be a young teacher and then the principal of Beni Secondary School. Her biggest regret is never having the opportunity to pursue academics more fully. "I got so far with just an SLC diploma, who knows what I could have done if I finished my IA or higher?" she laughs.

In Myagdi, where education was once considered a wasted exercise, public opinion began to change when Tirtha’s education launched her career. Many parents followed her father’s example and started sending their children to school. Tirtha is usually cheerful, but her face darkens when she talks about her pet peeve: NGOs.

"So much money is donated but almost nothing reaches the schools," she complains. "If it did, a lot more could have been accomplished." She is proud of Beni Secondary School and is quick to point out that she hasn’t had any problems with the Maoists. They acknowledge her immense contribution to the people and leave her alone. Students with disabilities are encouraged to attend, but as the school cannot afford special provisions for them, very few are able to do so.

This teacher hopes to open a school exclusively for the differently-abled in Myagdi someday. These plans are just a dream as Tirtha concentrates on a more immediate challenge, a task that brings her full circle, as she prepares her first batch of SLC students. Luckily, they have her for inspiration.
Since we Nepalis have given up trying to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps from the septic tank that we have got ourselves into, it now falls upon the UN Specialist Envoy to extricate us from the goo, according to a political analyst who requested anonymity because he is, um, in actual fact, none other than yours truly. So, I took time off from my busy schedule to interview the visiting dignitary, who spoke frankly and gave clear and precise answers to my queries. Some excerpts:

Q: Can you tell us something about the timing of your visit to Nepal?
A: Certainly. We arrived at 12:30 on Tuesday and are looking forward into the near to medium-term future so we can anticipate important and paradoxical trends, there are organisational, systemic and institutional issues, there is a transformative agenda in the context of economic globalisation of which Nepal cannot avoid being involved. The key to the future is therefore to maximise the strengths and minimise the weaknesses in all approaches to interdisciplinary holistic and collaborative strategies that build on potential risk scenarios.

Q: I see. Does that mean the United Nations is willing to be involved in mediation here?
A: Let me put it this way: yes, no and maybe. But whichever way, it will require a sectorwide stakeholder consultation at all levels and a strategy that will depend more on changing the structures of organisations and more importantly the institutions that embody them: especially the mainstreaming efforts and the basic organisational re-intermediarisation that are a necessary starting point. In other words, and I can’t emphasise this enough, we need an enabling environment for empowerment from the bottom up.

Q: Is that a yes or a no?
A: Since you are asking me directly, let me answer you obliquely. Although it is vitally important to be cognizant of our global, national and sub-national contexts, we need to work under a consistent interdependent framework to institutionalise multilateral monitoring mechanisms without undermining the need for strong localised initiatives, unless of course they are buffeted by various global and regional exigencies. What on earth are you talking about?
A: Let me try to explain and put it in its proper context. What it demands is a radically-participatory consultative engagement, a sustainability paradigm so that we can problematise the creation of solidarities and identity expressions, consensus-building and the prospective vision of an alternative paradigm. We have to redefine the context in which the normative discourses and pluralistic advocacy are agreed upon between systematic powers and structural shifts.

Q: And what was the prime minister’s response?
A: He said he didn’t know what the hell we were talking about.