2005
On wings and a prayer

As 2004 drew to a close, Nepalis fed up with the conflict launched spontaneous peace rallies across the country. In Kathmandu more than 50,000 people took part in a mammoth peace rally on Monday to put pressure on the Maoists and the government to find a negotiated settlement. An army helicopter (above) escorting King Gyanendra to the Gadhimai Mata in Bara takes off with hundreds of doves on 18 December.
It’s a multi-party night

The town is throwing lots of parties to celebrate the end of a lousy year

AARTI BASNYAT

With the influx of MTV culture, celebrating the Gregorian new year has become another excuse to party. Though some old timers still shimp it off as ‘foreign culture’, the trend is catching on with many Nepalis making plans to ring in 2005.

The year 2004 was filled with contradictions and unresolved issues. The Maoist conflict remains unresolved, people are still killing and being killed, education has taken a backseat to political aspirations and nature herself has rebelled. There have also been many positive changes with people growing liberal and working towards uplifting Nepali art, culture and music. They have refused to be harassed and are standing up for their rights, becoming more aware of environmental issues while others are being raised or put to rest. All in all, it’s been a year most people wouldn’t mind saying goodbye to.

But where will you be this new year’s eve? Hotels, resorts and nightclubs around the country are offering special deals, packages and new year parties. Each is trying to outdo the other in an attempt to draw the masses to ‘special and exclusive’ celebrations. Nightpynal.com, Nepal’s own and only party portal, as they call themselves, are going all out for the Big Day. Last year it only covered events, this year it plans to make up for the lapse. Known to be pioneers of the multi-party system in Nepal, Nightpynal.com has come up with yet another innovative and first of its kind event with the Swasthya Rhythm Nights – Freedom Zone. It plans to hold it at three different venues: Himalayan Java Coffee House, J-bar and Dechering Garden restaurant, all in Thamel. The parties begin with a pre-party at Dechering and move on to the other venues. The Rs 1,600 cover charge is valid for all the venues and include dinner, snacks and two welcome drinks.

At Hotel Yak & Yeti is also having three events simultaneously. ‘Haute Couture’ is aimed at the fashion savvy with a fashion theme and a fashion show during dinner. The other events include dinner for an exclusive clientele with a seven-course meal at The Chimney and the regular ‘Sinners in Heaven’ party. Each event is being marketed separately and their tickets vary according to its packaging.

Hotel Soaltee Crowne Plaza is organizing two separate parties, the first to be hosted in its banquet hall with dance, an international dance troupe and sparkling wine. The second is in the Garden Terrace with Nepali bands like Axs, Anitha and Amil Singh performing live. Both events have door prizes for holidays to international destinations. At Soaltee, if you don’t have people to take care of your children, bring them along. A special children’s party with babysitters is also being organised, so parents can be assured that the little darlings are in good hands while they wear cone hats and toot the tubes in the next room.

For the late nightlife or early risers, Club Himalaya invites you to view the first sunrise of 2005 from Nagarkot with tea and cookies at a minimum fee of Rs 50. It also has a dinner package with a dance party but if you are planning to book a room for the night, think twice because the resort is booked to its maximum capacity.

There will be a hundred places to choose from and to make it simpler here is a list with time, place, event and cover charge. Each event caters to a different crowd and you can choose your party according to your mood. So take out those dancing shoes, iron your best ghar and get set to paint the town red. •

Nepal Pashmina Industry

"Pashmina from NPI
I never leave with out it"
NARENDRA SHRESTHA

Indian expanded


Our recent activities, military and otherwise, certainly have

Right from the general convention 13 years ago as the United People's

As far as our attitude towards India is concerned, we will be more sensitive

nispakshya

Janadharana

Nispakshya

Security lapse

Until six months ago, Comrade Ajay was a loyal Maoist militant. But he renounced the party and joined Maoist Communist party after discovering that his comrades were involved in corruption, irregularities and criminal activities. Ajay, alias Shambu Prasad Yadav, joined the armed Madhesi Tigers as one of its most active members. A Maoist rebel attack on Bajhang way brought in from Sindhuli to hunt down Ajay and his group. They went away, but Ajay was helping Rutahat villagers fight back against the Maoists and rebel activity there has decreased. More than 20 Rutahati villagers now fearlessly tread Dudhikhawa, north of Rutahat, are now rarely seen. “They want to show more than the army or the police. He knows us too well,” says a member of the Rutahat district committee. Currently 29 non-evasive militant Maoists carry 3.5mm pistols and two grenades. The Maoists are very much alive and they say that Ajay and the Royal Nepalese Army are working together. Ajay has been actively contributing to the process of providing arms and influence with information on the rebel leaders. He helped them locate Tharivanabaran Liberation Front’s headquarters in Khudahauri. Former rebels, UML and Nepali Congress workers, displaced villagers and the security forces have been helping him support.

Sixty displaced rich and powerful Yadav leaders have been his main supporters from their shelters at the district headquarters. Some rebels, still within the party, support Ajay’s campaign. They believe he was right to raise concern over the prevailing system of corruption and ethnic politics among the Maoists. Ajay himself was not a model citizen before he joined the Maoists. He was a local fierce robber and now the Maoists regret having recruited him. They admit to have helped him in collecting many robbers and using them to carry out killings. After these infamous citizens survived the Maoist state, the police pursued them for information.

Of course, security officials claim that the state has offered Rs 50,000 to all rebels leaving the party but the sides are six people. “We would rather have 33%,” says military commissar Rupesh adding that the rebels in the turmoil aren’t as loyal as those from other regions. Maoists have begun a “clean out” campaign to eliminate dissident members. Three weeks ago, they killed Rajajan Sahani, a criminal who had joined the party and then quit. Two former militants Nitai Yadav and Ashad Mithi were accused of working against Maoist principles and killed.

gunfire and ran out side to see what was happening. A large group of Maoists were storming the police station. Police inspector Indra Basu Lama came face to face with one of them who had tried to shoot his gun out but was failed by another Maoist. After seeing him die, the rest of the police staff surrendered and most of those who tried to fire were attacked. Five were killed and 1 injured. The rebels ran over the police post in just 10 minutes and seized 15,300 rifles, three Mauers, eight shotguns, 36 hand grenades, a communication set, mobile phone, two tear gas guns and 2,400 bullets. The attack was well planned. Local residents had seen two young men on a motorcycle scouting the area. The police did not bother to check them although they were seen to be moving in and out of the place several times, just an hour before the official report. Three to four young men had come asking for work at a construction site. They pretended to need manual work. When the attack began, the men pretending to be construction workers took a huge amount of weapons from the uniforms, jackets and started firing at the police post. More Maoists moved from the bus station locating at local residents to pull down their shutters. Many police personnel were seen flying, those who tried to shoot back were attacked. They also heard the rebel commander shouting orders not to shoot at fleeing police and at the public. Some of the attackers were women.

More than 65 militaments were involved in the attack led by Commander ‘Sabini’ from Rolpa and Commander ‘Dinesh’ from Sindhupalchok. Only 25 of them were actually involved in storming the police station, the rest were guarding the four main entry points to Sankhu. After the successful attack, one group left through the jungle near Bajangjini Temple and the other headed towards the road to Ghongs Nepal. The remaining sped off towards Kathmandu on the five-day bus ride through Dachi. The rebels used a bus loaded with people who were returning from a picnic. Although Inspector Lamsa had radioed for help before being killed, help came only after 90 minutes. For half an hour, the rebels were seen wandering leisurely in Sankhu Bajar. It was a clear indication that their helicopter finally came from the nearby airport. There are several army posts in the vicinity, including Nagarjun. The question is: why didn’t any of them come help the beleaguered police? This indicated lack of coordination between the security bodies. Intelligence inside the capital is also ineffective. The Maoists have been quite successful in their psywar strategy. All it took were some fake seldom talents to spook the police. Before the attack, the Maoists spread the false rumour that they had planted a bomb at a bridge near Khulathar and the police were busy looking for it. In the end, theBlame must go to Sankhu police for not being better prepared. Since it was Saturday the police personnel were in a holiday mood, neglecting their duty. Several police personnel were injured, four, 44.82, 48.29, 48.58, playing camron and watching television. Not one rebel was hurt during the attack.

Tuition classes

According to local Maoist leaders, they will start free tuition centres for students appearing in SLC exams from the remote villages of Karnali zone. They stated that the idea was to help poor students who would otherwise have to travel to other districts for SLC preparation. At the rebels’ initiative, all five districts in Karnali will have at least two tuition centres. “We will arrange these tuition centres from students belonging to well-off families but the centres will offer free classes for the classes,” said Nirak Baburah Bana, chief of the Okaniga village people’s government. “Competent teachers will be given the responsibility of giving these tuition classes.” The number of contact teachers has been increased and students failing the SLC exams despite spending more than Rs 1 million in lodging is being spent on tuition annually. An average of 1,500 students travel from Karnali to Sankhu for SLC tuition. “The students taking tuition in the Karnali rebel-run centres have to bring their own ration food.

Security lapse

At Sankhu, the police were busy watching a football game and they heard the sound of gunshots. When they ran to see what was happening, a large group of Maoists were storming the police station. Police inspector Indra Basu Lama came face to face with one of them who had tried to shoot his gun out but was failed by another Maoist. After seeing him die, the rest of the police staff surrendered and most of those who tried to fire were attacked. Five were killed and 1 injured. The rebels ran over the police post in just 10 minutes and seized 15,300 rifles, three Mauers, eight shotguns, 36 hand grenades, a communication set, mobile phone, two tear gas guns and 2,400 bullets. The attack was well planned. Local residents had seen two young men on a motorcycle scouting the area. The police did not bother to check them although they were seen to be moving in and out of the place several times, just an hour before the official report. Three to four young men had come asking for work at a construction site. They pretended to need manual work. When the attack began, the men pretending to be construction workers took a huge amount of weapons from the uniforms, jackets and started firing at the police post. More Maoists moved from the bus station locating at local residents to pull down their shutters. Many police personnel were seen flying, those who tried to shoot back were attacked. They also heard the rebel commander shouting orders not to shoot at fleeing police and at the public. Some of the attackers were women.

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India looks east
BEIJING—Just as China has been seeking to limit India by cultivating its immediate neighbors like Pakistan and Burma, India is now reaching out to countries like Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia that have borders with China. The China-ASEAN trade is now set to cross $100 billion annually. India’s trade with ASEAN is only $12 billion and it wants to triple it by 2007. India came up with a lame explanation that it planned to concentrate on the poorer countries of the ASEAN—Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Burma countries that were left out in the Beijing deal anyway. India is determined to catch up with China by levelling up its strengths in the private sector with the software and services industry.

The Indian show at Vientiane included the Indo-ASEAN car rally which traversed 7,000 km from Gwahati to Batam in Indonesia to prove the feasibility of an overland connection linking the two regions. India and China are both competing to woo Burma. India laid out the red carpet for Burma’s Senior General Than Shwe on October, the first visit by a Burmese head of state to New Delhi in 25 years. There were deals signed to build hydropower projects and a security agreement to curb insurgency along Burma’s border with India’s turbulent northeast. But there was no mention of the incarcerated, pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi who went to school and college in Delhi and has many friends there. Burma returned the favour by increasing pressure on Naga insurgents.

There are signs that India’s Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, a former World Bank economist, is taking the hint. His plans to develop Gwahati as an international commercial hub for India’s ‘Least Cost’ policy is similar to what China has done for Kunming. (IPS)

The dragon awakens
BEIJING—Every ripple from this giant economy, which is driven by the fast-expanding needs of 1.3 billion consumers, can now be felt across the world. The country’s frenetic construction is driving up world prices of nearly every commodity while large-scale foreign investment is powering a flood of exports bringing down global prices for manufactured goods.

China is the world’s second largest buyer of US government debt as it recycles a $242 billion trade surplus with the US. A series of recent multibillion-dollar acquisitions announced by Chinese companies around the world show that Beijing is aiming for even a bigger role on the global stage. China has long been the world’s strongest magnet for foreign investment and is now sitting on a near $460 billion pile of hard currency, which it seems anxious to spend as the dollar plunges.

Intended buy-offs are in industries that include car manufacturing, minerals, airlines, banks, consumer electronics, oil and telecommunications. Not all of them have taken off. Officially, China represents less than four percent of the world’s economy but its spectacular rate of industrial production—which grew by 16.3 percent last year alone—is making its effects felt all over the world. Last year, China accounted for seven percent of global oil consumption, 27 percent of steel, 31 percent of coal and 40 percent of cement.

The lifting of global restrictions on the textile trade from 1 January means China will be able to flood the world with even more low-cost clothing. The most populous country already accounts for 20 percent of the global textile trade but industry analysts are predicting that this is set to go up by another 50 percent by 2007. The damage of China’s emergence as a textile giant could be particularly devastating for smaller developing countries such as Nepal with less diversified economies which can’t compete with Chinese clothing produced by a workforce that cannot form independent unions and has one of the worst industrial accident rates in the world.

For the industrialised west, China has already become both a key engine of global trade and a major player in the US. Many countries have already bought into China, Italy is the latest, its 2006 budget highlighted the country’s decision to fund a massive infrastructure programme worth $10 billion—$2 billion of which will go towards a rail project in the south of Italy including a station in Rome. (IPS)

Indo-Pak uphill stretch
NEW DELHI—A year after India and Pakistan launched their first serious attempt at bilateral dialogue, the prospect of success looks tantalisingly close and yet it is a steep uphill on the last stretch. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf will have to struggle to overcome long-standing obstacles. Unlike past talks, bilateral discussions this time around have been more structured, systematic and better prepared. Public opinion in both countries overwhelmingly favours reconciliation. The two leaders have also got to know each other well. And the Pakistani establishment has shed much of its initial prejudice against Manmohan Singh.

Yet, going by the multiple rounds of talks held at various levels so far, the going will not be easy. All that India and Pakistan have managed to achieve over the past year is to restore communication links, including air, bus and train services ruptured after a December 2001 attack on the Indian parliament. Although they agreed in June to reopen their consulates in Karachi and Mumbai, little progress has been made. There is stagnation over trade and economic cooperation, in particular proposed energy links through an overland gas pipeline from Iran to India via Pakistan. Easier visas and greater freedom to travel are the only areas where there has been mutual cooperation. But these are reversible. On the two thorny issues, Kashmir and nuclear weapons, there has been no forward movement even though the two sides have agreed to discuss Kashmir for the first time ever. (IPS)

Malaysians wait for Anwar
PENANG—The euphoria that greeted Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi’s stunning electoral victory in March is waning as Malaysians turn their eyes to another star: former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim.

Before the polls, Abdullah stole the thunder by launching an anti-corruption drive. But a growing number of Malaysians feel the new administration has faltered in its war on graft and not making the Anti-Corruption Agency a fully independent body answerable to parliament. To be sure, Abdullah’s position is secure, at least for now. On 2 September Malaysia’s highest court quashed a sodomy conviction against Anwar and freed him from almost six years in jail. Later, however, it denied a request to re-hear his appeal against his final charge of corruption.

As a convicted felon, Anwar is barred by election laws from contesting or holding public office for five years from date of release or until 2006 but he can still participate in party politics as an adviser. Not everyone is jumping in line behind Anwar, though. He does not have the automatic, undivided loyalty of civil society and ‘reformasi’ activists, people are waiting to see how he plays his cards. In the meantime, challenges are emerging on the economic front despite some strong growth figures. Price hikes, in recent months, have fuelled a sense of unease while a few farms have started shedding workers. (IPS)

Hardline days in Burma
BANGKOK—The strong spirit of Burma’s top dissident, Aung San Suu Kyi, will be put to the test in 2005 with grave concerns for her safety. The Burmese junta extended her house detention last month for another year. Suu Kyi’s personal security members at her home in the capital, Rangoon, have been cut to six from 13 and visits from her doctor slashed from three a week to one, her National League for Democracy (NLD) said in a statement. This is Suu Kyi’s third year of house arrest since she took up the democracy struggle in 1988. Today the party is not even authorised to have a fax machine.

The prognosis for Burma in the coming new year is bleak according to ALTSAN. By February 2004, an estimated 265 people had been arrested, disappeared, or killed. Among those arrested were many leaders of the NLD party. Hardline generals have said NLD parliamentarians will remain closed “until the present problem is solved”. On 14 December, 13 more NLD officials were arrested in Bago, southwest of Rangoon. 2005 will be a year of uncertainty for Burma with the hardliners now in control of the country and the regime being insensitive to outside pressure. (IPS)
Controversy swirls around reported donor preferences for the new governor at Nepal Rastra Bank

The bank knows, as does just about everyone in Kathmandu, that the search for a new governor is always a highly-charged politicalised affair. At the time the appointment was announced four years ago of the incumbent governor, Tilak Rawal, there were accusations that donor agencies were influencing the appointment. And because candidates have their political patrons, rivals accuse each other of being unfairly backed by donors.

Until the final hour on Thursday when the cabinet was discussing recommended names for the new governor to succeed Tilak Rawal, fingers pointed at certain donors lobbying for their favourite candidate.

Donor agencies have denied any favouritism, insisting that while they follow the appointment keenly they don’t want to be seen to have any say in it. But even some non-government officials have cried foul, accusing donors of "extra-terrestrial" interference. Economist Dilli Raj Khanal, adviser to the coalition partner UML, says some donors are openly lobbying for a certain candidate, “They have even been visiting them in delegations,” he told us. Another economist, Bijaya Pyakurel says the donor lobby had heard of this but it is nothing new. “We have known some donors who even recommended names for the position in public, as foreign assistance increases in the country so does the interference,” Pyakurel says.

Donor officials told us they just want to make sure the right man gets the post because the Rastra Bank governor plays a key role in the financial sector reforms program. “We have not endorsed any candidate’s name,” says Sukwinder Singh, director of International Monetary Fund (IMF) for Nepal. “But we believe that whoever becomes the governor should be able to accelerate the financial sector reforms program and command the respect of the financial and business community.”

Who becomes the next governor also matters to the World Bank, IMF, the British aid group, DFID, and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). They are all involved in the financial sector reforms that the central bank coordinates. Under this program, the World Bank has the financial sector restructuring project with four main components: voluntary retirement schemes, hiring of advisors, the engineering of Nepali Rastra Bank and management team support to Nepal Rastra Bank and Nepal Bank Limited. The financial sector reforms program has the World Bank’s $75.5 million assistance. DFID is more involved in the administrative side of things, and ADB is involved in the rural financing.

Among donors, the World Bank has the leading role and at the centre of the governor appointment controversy is its outspoken Nepali government, Ken Ohashi. Critics have accused Ohashi in the past of being anti-Bratasha Koirala as candidate. “We know that he has even been visiting Koirala’s office for that purpose and then tried to cover his tracks,” economist Khanal told us. A source at the National Planning Commission confirmed Ohashi had met him after visiting Koirala. “He was trying to explain that he was not actually pushing for Koirala,” Ken Ohashi denies lobbying for any candidate, “The process of appointing the central bank governor is clearly laid down in the new Central Bank Act. It is designed to ensure the selection is not made on the basis of political pressure or for that matter donor preferences and we respect that.”

Donors say the government sometimes dangles a few names to seek donor reaction, but doesn’t ask for recommendations. “Government officials and policy makers ask us general questions regarding our view on the appointment,” the IMF’s Singh says. Ohashi shares his viewpoint. “We do provide advice when sought, we consider this very much a part of our development mandate in your country. At the end of the day, it is up to the authorities to take or leave our advice.”

Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Bimal Mohan Adhikari says the government is following its procedures for the appointment. A three-member committee was formed through cabinet decision to recommend three candidates for the position. The rule allows the government to choose one of the three recommendations.

Adhikari denies that the government goes around asking donors for the green light. “We never ask them for suggestions,” he told us. “We will make the appointment within the stipulated time otherwise.”

"We know that (Ohashi) has even been visiting (Bimal) Koirala’s office for that purpose and then tried to cover his tracks." Dilli Raj Khanal, UML

Cor blimey, guv’nor

Navin Singh Khadka

For the donor community which finances nearly three-quarters of the country’s development, it is getting more and more difficult to get involved in policy decisions without being seen to be interfering. But when a nation’s dependency on the outside becomes so acute, that is a thankless task.

No matter what donors do they will be accused of interference, as the latest controversy over their supposedly overt pushing of a favourite candidate for the post of Rastra Bank governor proves. For the World Bank which has been backing the financial sector reforms and is the lead agency in the Nepal Development Forum, which becomes the next governor of the central bank is a critical question.

The bank knows, as does just about everyone in Kathmandu, that the search for a new governor is always a highly-charged politicalised affair. After shocks from appointment four years ago of the incumbent governor, Tilak Rawal, fingers pointed at certain donors lobbying for their favourite candidate.

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Outgoing governor of the Nepal Rastra Bank, Tilak Rawal

Dilli Raj Khanal, UML

"We know that (Ohashi) has even been visiting (Bimal) Koirala’s office for that purpose and then tried to cover his tracks.”

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Atlas shrugs

Even in Nepal, despair and doom

Leap years are supposed to be auspicious. And sure enough, 2004 lived up to its image with its parting kick: the killer tsunami around the Indian Ocean.

Even for Nepal, it has been a year of despair and doom. At the end of the year, there doesn’t seem to be any light at the end of the dark tunnel of insurgency. Institutions crumbled so fast this year that many Nepalis have begun to believe the doomsday ‘failed state’ predictions of paratroopers. The Maoist blockade devastated the working class and was an inconvenience to socialite socialists in Kathmandu as they hopped from one conflict resolution workshop to another.

For sometime to come, Kathmandu’s middle class will find it hard to live with the sorrow and shame of 1 September 2004 when rampaging mobs took to the city streets and vandalised minority businesses, mosques and media houses with ruthless efficiency. The ignominy of the event was made worse by the nonbalance that the security forces showed towards the tragedy.

In almost every election, residents of Kathmandu Valley have overwhelmingly supported leftist candidates of which the UML has been the main beneficiary. They will repent their choice for years to come.

Comrade Madhav Nepal disappointed the entire petty-bourgeoisie by algebraically surrendering this year to the regressive regime. The UML has further disgraced itself by deciding to stay in government despite the helplessness and humiliation of its nominees in the cabinet. Its own party cadres allege that UML ministers do little more than provide official consent to the palace’s whims. In return, some of them have reaped significant financial benefits at the expense of the party’s reputation.

As is always the case, the proletariat has lost the most in this suicidal war being waged in their name under the Maoist banner. Nearly 11,000 people have been killed in nine years, most of them innocent civilians. Many more have been displaced and millions have been indirectly affected by the consequences of violent conflict. All hopes of rapprochement between the warring factions were dashed in 2004 as the government and the guerrillas intensified their atrocities making Nepal earn the dubious distinction of being one of the major human rights hot-spots in the world. Despite all the excesses, if the state hadn’t failed so far, the insurgents and security forces can’t be blamed for not trying hard enough to lead Nepali society towards disintegration.

The international community may not have done anything directly to intensify the conflict, but it has certainly added fuel to the fire by supporting undemocratic governments after October Fourth. The European Union has been no less complicit than the Americans, British and Indian governments.

A recent study by two Oxford University scholars show that a substantial chunk of development aid invariably leaks into military spending either directly or through fungibility of projects. The study has also established that despotic regimes spend substantially higher on defence than democratic ones even though such military build-up have almost no deterrent effect in internal conflicts. The international community is propping up the Royal Nepali Army with weapons and arms supplies even as the military aspires to wield more power over the state.

Militarisation of society became even more visible in 2004, as state security gave itself a larger and larger share of the budget to fund unprecedented expansion. The sight of the king and crown prince in combat fatigues causes to surprise.

But even amidst the enveloping darkness, the lamp of democracy continues to flicker. Whether it is held by an octogenarian or a child, Nepalis will not allow themselves to be ruled by a junta. And they will resist the rise of Pot Pot totalitarianism even more ferociously.

In times of despair, the biggest challenge is to save the seeds of hope for a future garden to grow.
Begone, 2004

This has been a year none of us will be sad to see the sun setting on. In Nepal, the escalating violence left at least 2,500 dead in the past 365 days. One-fourth of those who have died in the past nine years of conflict were killed in 2004.

The fact that most of them were non-combatants means this has already become a case of engagement in the conduct of this war. It is hard to see what perverse revolutionary logic justifies the forced recruitment of children or blockades enforced by fear of death to strangle the very people one is supposed to liberate. And despite rhetoric about hearts and minds, we see state security falling into the classic trap of guerilla war: pushing ordinary people into the Maoist fold with its impunity.

A disastrous end to a disastrous year has been the apocalyptic devastation of the coastal regions of the Indian Ocean. Some near to us have got in the land that we love. Thanks to JB Pun Magar for his illustration of the situation, a hair-trigger point which there was no dearth of those fishing in murky waters. State security mysteriously stood by and watched the capital burn even though they had prior warning of the sectarian mayhem that was unleashed. The hired guns of one anti-repression party went on a pre-mediated orgy of arson to capitalise on the chaos and the bomb-again obscurantists who arrived in their wake added fuel to the fires. How can we trust the leadership of this country to enthrall members of parliament who demonstrated in 2004 that they have no qualms about stoking communal violence for political ends? Or those who wish to take the country back to political authoritarianism by provoking a stampede of religious orthodoxy?

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Doctors without
SHREYA MUKHERJEE
in NAMCHE

The towerings peaks of the Khumbu formed an inspiring backdrop to an international conference on Tibetan medicine here recently in which traditional healers from across the Himalayan region participated.

Amchis, as the healers are known, had journeyed here from Lhasa, Mustang and Dolpo with one common concern: how to protect their unique medical heritage and the rare high-altitude herbs on which their profession depends.

The Everest Conference of Amchis was held in Namche earlier this month by Nepal’s Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation, Royal Sagarmatha National Park, Tengboche Monastery and the World Wildlife Fund for Nature Nepal. The national park spread out below the world’s highest mountain was chosen for its conservation success story, and to attach a higher profile to the world of the Amchis.

The Himalayan arc is 3,500 km long, stretching from Afghanistan to Burma and nurturing an incredible biodiversity. This variety is also evident in an estimated 10,000 species of medicinal and aromatic plants found here, many of these rare and found nowhere else in the world. These precious plants are restricted, as happens in remote regions of the Tibetan plateau and along the high rimlands in neighbouring countries.

Through millennia, the inhabitants of the Himalayas discovered the medicinal value of these plants and passed the knowledge from one generation of Amchis to the next, right down to the present day.

Like the herbs, the Amchi tradition of ‘sowa rigpa’ has also become endangered. But a renewed worldwide interest in traditional medicine spurred by the realisation of the limitations of western medicine has breathed new life into the world of the Amchi.

For centuries, these plants were only picked by the gentle, knowing hands of Amchis. medical professionals trained in traditional and spiritual healing.

The potent qualities of high-altitude medicinal and aromatic plants have since then been scientifically recognised. This has turned the plants into cash crops, often picked and collected in an unsustainable manner. “Very often, only the tip of the plant may be needed but the plant is still yanked out by its root,” says Helen Cawley, project co-ordinator of Sacred Land Healing Centre, a small local initiative set up to help conserve the medical tradition and plant resources of the Chomolungma region.

As demand for Tibetan remedies increases, the plants are under pressure. As long as the demand was local, regeneration compensated for harvesting. Species that are facing new threats include those that have proved popular in modern pharmaceutical compounds, Ayurvedic, cosmetics and fashionable ‘natural’ products in the Indian market.

More than 100 tons of herbs are transported to holy Himalayan valleys in Nepal to the Indian border every year. Suppliers can even afford to charter cargo planes to take the plants down because of the prices they fetch.

High altitude plants grow slowly but have more potent medical qualities. Plants growing up to and beyond 5,000m are in huge demand and as a result, the rate of extraction is slowly exceeding that of re-growth. They are also susceptible to climatic changes and overgrazing.

Some of the more popular medicinal plants include jatamansi, known by its Latin name, Nardostachys grandiflora and kokkii, Picrorhiza kurroa which are traded in huge amounts between the Tibetan plateau and the lower valleys on the Nepalese side from where they find their way to the international market.

High demands on the herbs resulted in prices going up. In Lhasa, Amchis can afford to buy them more readily. Having provided free medical services to patients in their communities for many generations, the traditional healers now are forced to respond to the laws of supply and demand. “Keeping my patients healthy is what keeps me alive,” says Rinpoche Tserwang Dorje Tulku of the Dolpa district.

The Namche conference succeeded in bringing about keen discussions on regional variations in medical plants, how they are best utilised, whether or not they are

First to come, first to go

Darwinism is at work in the absolute anatomy of Kathmandu’s traffic

Kathmandu’s chaotic traffic is growing worse by the day and we have our own explanations: exponential growth in the number of vehicles, limited road space, violation of traffic rules, frequent demos and lack of rapid mass transportation.

However, even if all these problems are addressed, traffic would soon or later become as chaotic as it is now.

Better roads, mass transit and enforcement of traffic rules will not solve the problem. We need a better sociological and anthropological understanding of Nepal’s urban culture and how this impacts the traffic.

What are the attitudes of drivers and pedestrians concerning both public property in general and public spaces? Is there a meaning attached to driving a vehicle and does it vary according to the type of vehicle? What do official traffic laws and the people’s own rules tell us about the Nepali urban social structure?

How do we share space and time on our roads? One way is to treat them as common property to be shared equitably according to some prevalent ‘rules’ such as first-to-come-first-to-go and pedestrians, especially the four-legged ones, have priority over vehicles. But more commonly, they are treated as what property theorists call an ‘open access property regime’ in which everyone tries to maximise their interest, trying to get ahead of others, even if everyone else suffers. Every other road-user is a potential rival. This mad, frantic rush to get ahead reveals the individualistic and self-centred nature of the urban Nepali.

Road users have their own hierarchy. The drivers of mammoth SUVs claim superior status. Might is right of way. The swifl, zipping motorcyclists, pla the guerillas who thumb their noses at the Big Boys in this post-colonial and post-modern age of deconstruction of tradition and status. Blue plated vehicles often get priority because the donors they belong to probably constructed the roads in the first place and demand respect and don’t like to be deconstructed.

Pedestrians question and envy the status and rights of veicle owners so that it doesn’t count when they decide to obstruct traffic. They don’t have the right to the roads because, as one taxi-driver explained to me, pedestrians do not pay taxes to use the roads. They should walk only on the sidewalks, even if most of Kathmandu does not have them.

When tradition, hierarchy, post-modern individualism, primal antagonism and survival instincts are so entrenched, change is to be expected.

Readers may argue that enacting better laws and strictly enforcing them will solve these problems. But as legal anthropologists argue, state laws have to compete with rules people make based on various principles or norms.
Saving sacred plants

When Helen Cawley, started the Sacred Land Initiatives ten years ago, she knew it was only the beginning. Together with her husband, Michael Schmitz (see pic, right), she moved to the Khumbu and little by little the impact of their work on environment and heritage conservation is becoming apparent in the region.

“I didn’t come seeking a spiritual path. I just happened to meet some extraordinary meditation teachers that introduced me to a whole new dimension,” recalls the 41-year-old Scot, looking very content with the turn her life took at that point. She met her husband-to-be at Boudha, accompanying him when he was asked to head the project to help Tengboche Monastery manage its tourism sustainably to benefit the monks, people and trekkers.

Cawley says she is simply helping implement the Tengboche Rinpoche’s ideas, as is under his direction that the monastery has not only been restored after a devastating fire 25 years ago, but also expanded and improved. Much of the help has come from individuals and organisations like the Himalayan Trust founded by Sir Edmund Hillary.

The Rinpoche of Tengboche has always been involved in conservation (see interview with the abbot, #217) and has been worried that the Himalayan medicine if it received official recognition and political backing. "Himalayan medicine if it received official recognition and political backing would be a miracle. There would be no problem," says Helen. "If we were to register it as an Ayurvedic centre, there would be no problem." Michael has reason to believe in Tibetan medicine after the tiny black pills given to her by an Amchi cured a painful abscess on her tooth in a day, a miraculous substitute for an extraction.

"I’ve gone back to him twice already," she adds smilingly, hoping these selfless practitioners will receive the acknowledgement they deserve. Michael and Helen, with the help of WWF Nepal, are working on an exhibition in April 2005 at the Sacred Land Healing Centre in Namche. It will include information on conservation issues, photos of medicinal plants and striking images in 16th century thangkas depicting medicinal treatments and plants used by Amchis.

If the centre has come so far just on the commitment and passion of a few people, imagine how much more successful it would be in reviving the endangered knowledge system of traditional Himalayan medicine if it received official recognition and political backing.
Home thoughts from abroad

Some disappearances can be easily explained

I am one of those growing number of ageing Nepalis that have lived abroad for a long time. For all of my experiences on Nepal is from the internet, local cocktail parties, and episodic visits to Kathmandu where I end up in Thamel at Kilo’s most of the time. In other words, I am an ignorantus about Nepal and perhaps other things as well. But despite all this, I am told still rank a couple of intellectual notches above the politicians, monarchy and the Maoists combined. So I don’t feel so bad now. I might even start calling myself an intellectual.

After going through readers’ comments on my last piece (‘Unilateral fatalism’, 226) I have new respect for Nepal Times columnists like Lak and Lal. How do these guys do it week after week? And the abuse you get. Mostly, I received unprintable responses like: ‘Hey Pravin, give it up. Haven’t you feudalistic, reactionary, hareem-keeping Ranas already mosed up Nepal enough? Here you are, you &d****, showing zero respect for people that churn out heavy-lifting articles week-in and week-out and they look a lot better than you. Stick to your regular job you &d****. And that was just my wife.

So the UN’s disappearance team was in town, I see. What qualifications are necessary for that job: psychic abilities coupled with an affinity for mind-boggling bureaucracy and doublespeak? As they compile their report, I hope they take into account that some disappearances are an everyday aspect of Nepali culture and do not necessarily involve security forces or the Maoists.

For example, one of my uncles (like most Nepalis, I have about 40) disappeared when I was five only to turn up 10 years later with two Bengali girls in tow. Turns out he’d been carousing in Calcutta the whole time squiring beautiful Bengali girls. I asked him how I could disappear. Then there’s my aunt (among another 40)… oh well, you get the idea.

One of the UN team’s findings was that in some cases security forces didn’t keep a list of the prisoners in detention. Well, that’s kind of hard to explain away in a press conference. Since Donald Rumsfeld may be out of a job soon, they might consider hiring him as spokesperson. He knows how to drive reports and about half the world crazy. “Well, you have known lists and unknown lists and at any given time during the process you might even have unknown unknown lists. But you have to go with the list you have. Unless of course, you don’t have one. Next question please.”

The only people that do not need a list are those that were part of the UN’s For-Food (Note: replace food with luxury goods, weapons and ostentatious palaces) Program. This I know because I regularly read the UN Charters and I bet Kofi Annan wishes he could make his son disappear right about now.

Reminder to self to add to my shopping list when I next visit Nepal: multi-function shovelers (also known as a low tech Maoist substitute for cyanide capsules) of the type used by the Maoist’s Chief Extortionist, sorry, coordinator for Kathmandu Valley, to commit suicide while in detention.

Ok but let’s be fair, we have to hand it to our security forces for fighting a thankless war while dealing with relentless pressure from just about everyone: human rights groups (about 100 of them); people that use the word ‘regression’ ad naseum; Manjushree “why can’t we ALL be intellectuals’ about everyone: human rights groups (about 100 of them); people that use the word ‘regression’ ad naseum; Manjushree “why can’t we ALL be intellectuals.

So go ahead, you try to fight an insurgency while these guys stick to their regular job you &d****. ‘Hey Pravin, give it up. Haven’t you feudalistic, reactionary, hareem-keeping Ranas already mosed up Nepal enough?’ Here you are, you &d****, showing zero respect for people that churn out heavy-lifting articles week-in and week-out and they look a lot better than you. Stick to your regular job you &d****.

Bibi Funyal in Jiri

The sound of guns and bombs are never far away in rural Nepal these days. And so it is here, in the scenic Dolakha town of Jiri. This is where the road from Lamosangu ends and the start of the trek to Lukla began in the old days. There are still some intrepid trekkers looking for adventure who walk this way, but for the most part the night-stops along the trail are ghost towns.

Despite the brilliant sunshine, it is a freezing winter morning here at nearly 2,000m above sea level. Thousands of people from in and around Jiri have gathered at the Jiri Higher Secondary School. Most are alumni of the school and the students body is also present to celebrate the 38th anniversary of the school and an alumni reunion.

Sukhbir Biswokarma’s eyes are moist with emotion. He is a labourer from a simple Dalit family and can’t contain himself after receiving a Letter of Appreciation from Ambika Prasad Regmi, Dolakha’s DDC. “It is my happiness overflowing,” he says, “these are tears of joy.”

Biswaokarma and his friends have been respected for their dedication in finishing work on the school library in time despite all hardships. Krishna Jirel is a close friend of Biswokarma and says this is the first time “simple people” like him have been honoured and their work recognised. It was a very small gesture by the school that made an immovable impact on Sukheer and Krishina. Principal Tik Bahadur Jirel felicitates Gertrude Lieberich, a volunteer from Basel for her contribution to the school. Jirel reminds those gathered that Jiri has strong links to Switzerland ever since the Swiss built this highway 25 years ago. In fact, Switzerland seems to have done more for Jiri than Kathmandu ever did.

A helicopter passes overhead and all eyes look up at the sky. It is flying high and headed east towards Lukla. There is a collective sigh of relief. For the past few days...
The surrounding hills have reverberated with the sound of gunfire and explosions. Some who have come to the school from Chuchure, Lachan and Ranchhare in the adjacent district of Rampur shap speak of a bloody battle that lasted all day. The attacks on many villages.

the army doesn’t want to be seen as a butcher of fellow Nepalis. Sixty-two-year-old Ram Pratap Tamang and his grandmother Malati, nine, are from Banchare and have just arrived in Jiri to flee the fighting. “What a tragedy I have to see in my old age,” says Aarie. Last year, a plate of rice that they call cattle-shed, took away his bull and slaughtered it. Last week, his pregnant water buffalo was grazing in the forest when it was killed in a stray by an army helicopter.

Aarie wants to take Malati far away from the sound of gunfire and for her safety from the Ministry of Health. He went to the bus park to buy tickets for Kathmandu, “for tomorrow,” the ticket seller tells him. “Nakabandhi chha, bus chhaina.”

Babita BK knows she will be thrown out from school if the teachers find out that her father died of AIDS. Since his death last year, the entire community in Saugan VDC of Banke began harassing 13-year-old Babita and her family. Even close relatives disowned them. Babita and her 15-year-old brother are unable to continue schooling because their mother cannot afford to pay the fees. “We lost all our savings on the treatment for my husband,” says Babita’s mother. “I don’t know how long we will survive, we can’t even afford to buy food any more.”

In Banke district, there are many like Babita who have lost one or both parents to AIDS. The local community regards people infected with HIV as criminals whose children have to suffer after their parents. “They recevie no support from the government and must depend on charity groups for food and shelter.” No one has any interest in helping the orphans, says AIDS specialist R.J. Sikayi from Nepal HIV/AIDS Care and Education Centre which has established a rehabilitation shelter for orphans here. About 20 children are receiving support for their education, food and clothing with plans to house 50 more orphans.

Life or death

Time is running out for people living with HIV and AIDS but Nepali activists say donates have not shown much interest in starting care and support programs that could prolong their lives.

The only hope is the $11 million granted to Nepal by the Global Fund to fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. Sources say the first instalment of $4 million has arrived and is stuck in UN bureaucracy. “I am dying and too tired to knock on donor doors,” says activist Rajb Kafle.

The Global Fund agreed to release funds to Nepal on condition that an independent institution manages it and not the government. (See: ‘Aiding AIDS’, #214). The UN system was selected as the contracting agency months ago but agreement papers between the government and the Global Fund is said to be pending at the Ministry of Health. The file is not moving because the government has not been able to reach a decision at the cabinet,” an activist told us. Sources say that the UN is reluctant about acting as the authoritative body to manage the funds and distribute it among Nepali activists. Nepal receives one of the largest funds for HIV/AIDS in Asia but they say the biggest chunk is controlled by donor agencies and channelled to partner NGOs and NGOs. Some donors are said to be willing to increase the aid substantially as long as the government is not involved in disbursement.

Meanwhile, the country and people with AIDS are losing time. The $4.6 million was to be used within the first two years of the grant period, failing which the rest of the $11 million will be cancelled.

The main concern is not who controls the funds as long as care and support systems are put in place. The government is actually doing a better job, it has already allocated the ARV (anti-retroviral) treatment program with its own resources,” says Kafle.

Despite objections and lack of support for the government, National Centre for HIV/AIDS and STD Control (NCASC) began ARV therapy for 25 patients. Once the increased it to 75 patients. The centre plans to set up an ARV treatment facility in Nepalgunj. “It would be better for organisations not to go for the same funding mechanisms. I would rely more on local resources,” adds Kafle.

The situation of people living with HIV and AIDS is getting worse. Most NGOs have withdrawn from outlying villages due to the conflict. “The conflict has a double impact,” explains Biram Pokhrel at Save the Children. “Even if the rate of infection is growing, response has decreased.”

Nawal Naresh

Ostracised

Babita’s mother. “I don’t know how long we will survive, we can’t even afford to buy food anymore.”

In Banke district, there are many like Babita who have lost one or both parents to AIDS. The local community regards people infected with HIV as criminals whose children have to suffer after their parents. “They receive no support from the government and must depend on charity groups for food and shelter.” No one has any interest in helping the orphans, says AIDS specialist R.J. Sikayi from Nepal HIV/AIDS Care and Education Centre which has established a rehabilitation shelter for orphans here. About 20 children are receiving support for their education, food and clothing with plans to house 50 more orphans.

Ranjana KC looks blankly at the floor, more in fear than remorse. Three years ago she lost her parents in Achham, first her father and then mother. She was only six when her uncle and aunt made her a servant in her own house. The villagers taunted her with “AIDS girl” or “She also has HIV,” even though she was not infected with the virus.

Like so many other Achhamis, her father had been a drug addict in Mumbai who returned home ill. Everyone knew the cause of his death. Today, nine-year-old Ranjana, brought to Kathmandu by social workers, is living with strangers in a shelter in Lalitpur. Afraid of the stigma that pursued her in her village, she hasn’t revealed her true story on real place of birth to anyone in her school, fearing she will be kicked out and lose her friends. “It’s very difficult without my parents,” she tells us.

Ranjana is just one among tens of thousands of Nepali children orphaned after their parents died of HIV/AIDS.

There are no accurate figures on the number of AIDS orphans. The only data available is a 2001 UNICEF survey which showed that about 13,000 children under 14 years were orphaned. About 56,000 Nepalis were estimated to be living with HIV/AIDS, and 13,000 of them are women between 15-49 years. By 2004, UNAIDS estimated that about 60,000 people were infected and in the absence of effective care or treatment, about 10,000 to 15,000 are expected to die every year.

Since 1988, the HIV/AIDS movement in Nepal has focused mainly on the prevention and awareness about the disease. Yet, the disease is turning from a concentrated to a generalised epidemic and spreading out of control.

Little attention has been given to care and support, rehabilitation and anti-retroviral treatment. Children orphaned by AIDS are left to fend for themselves, stigmatised and victimised by ignorant family members or the community. The orphans don’t even appear in the list of many donor agencies and NGOs: the reason why there is not even one survey on the extent of the problem and condition of the children.

“The issue of orphans should not be isolated from HIV/AIDS policies and other health and follow-up programs. Their numbers are growing, and all the donors talk about how to carry out large impact programs like prevention and awareness,” explains Bishwes Khaskha of Maiti Nepal, one of the few NGOs that takes care of AIDS orphans.

“Orphans number is growing and the kind of support we give is just a drop in the ocean.”

Among international NGOs, Save the Children (Norway) has started an orphan care and support with community-based programs for orphans who are provided with free schooling, books and clothes with the help of the local community and the District Education office.

“Children who lost their parents to AIDS become traumatized at many levels,” says Kali Singh Karki of SCI (Norway). The organisation works through volunteers to reduce stigma against people living with HIV/AIDS and mobilizes communities to support orphans. There are about 223 orphans in 12 VDCs in Achham.

But this is just one of those few examples where the local government administration and community make the effort to help such children. “Unless there is a national level policy and advocacy on this issue, such support will only be temporary,” says Karki.

Close relatives often claim the parental property of orphaned children and force them to rear animals, till the farms and perform household chores. Teachers often ask such children to leave school in fear that they might infect other children. Karki adds that sometimes becomes worse for the children when they are brought to Kathmandu for rehabilitation.

“Even in Kathmandu, when you tell the truth about the child expecting sympathy, they are accepted,” says Heera Thapa from House of Rest, a centre for women and children. “We have to hire a teacher and educate the children in our centre instead.”

UNICEF’s State of Children 2005 estimates that there are about 1 million orphans under 17 in Nepal, who have lost their parents mainly due to poor health conditions, accidents and various other causes.

“The number of children who have lost one or both parents has grown since the conflict began nine years ago. There are no figures but activists maintain that more children have been orphaned by HIV than by the conflict. It is also rare for both parents to have died in the conflict, whereas it is much more common for both the father and mother to die of AIDS.”

“Our responsibility does not finish with just talking about combating the disease. We need to seriously think about the future and situation of children orphaned due to AIDS as it gets worse, especially in the remote areas,” says Tarak Dhital of the group Child Workers in Nepal.

On a global scale, there is an estimated 15 million children under 18 who have lost their mother or both parents to HIV/AIDS. 
Not if, but when

We can’t prevent a Sumatra-type earthquake, but we can be prepared for it

NAVIN SINGH KHADKA

The fact that the 9.0 Richter Sumatra earthquake on the morning of 26 December was felt 4,000 km away in Nepal was an indication of just how powerful it was.

Like the devastating tidal waves it set off in the Indian Ocean, Nepalis living along the banks of the Kulekhani Reservoir and Mai Pokhara in eastern Nepal noticed unusual waves on Sunday morning. But the real aftershock in Nepal came with the realisation that the epicentre could easily have been in the Himalaya and if that was the case, how ill-prepared we are to cope with a disaster of such magnitude. The Sumatra earthquake occurred under the ocean at the tri-junction of the Australian, Eurasian and Indian Plates. We are located at the other end of this tectonic suture in the Himalaya.

The Indian Ocean disaster happened almost exactly 70 years after the last big earthquake to hit Kathmandu, an 8.0 Richter tremor that killed 17,000 people in Kathmandu Valley and other parts of Nepal on 13 January 1934.

Fault lines along the Himalayas snap every 75 years or so on average to release the tectonic energy building up along the Eurasian and Indian plates. This means that the next big one could happen, literally, any day now. But even more worrisome for seismologists is the fact that a whole section of the western Himalaya from Pokhara in Nepal to Dehradun in India has a seismic gap where tectonic energy has been building up because there hasn’t been a major earthquake there for over 200 years. A 9.0 magnitude earthquake in western Nepal could devastate north India and Kathmandu Valley.

In this week’s Indian Ocean disaster, relatively few people died from the earthquake itself—many times more died in the tidal waves that it triggered. Similarly, a major earthquake west of Pokhara could set off glacial lake outbursts all along the Himalaya sending down walls of water, bulldozers and mud along Nepal’s snowed rivers.

“IT is a question of whether it will happen. It is when,” warns Amad M Bish of the National Society for Earthquake Technology, which is working with the government to build a national earthquake-preparedness plan as well as promote quake-resistant housing.

“We have to get used to thinking the unthinkable and planning for it.”

While forecasting an earthquake is imprecise and nothing can stop geological upheavals, experts are concerned by the lack of disaster preparedness here. Given rampant urban growth and flimsy housing in Kathmandu, Pokhara and other towns, the next big one will kill at least 100,000 people in the Valley alone.

Out of the 21 cities around the world that lie in seismic zones, Kathmandu is considered at the highest risk of death, destruction, and unpredictedness.

“A massive awareness program is needed as our goal is to turn Nepal into a totally earthquake-safe community by 2020,” says Ramesh Guragain, a structural engineer. Indeed, a partnership between Nepali quake safety groups, the government and international organisations has resulted in a higher level of awareness about the dangers, now all that needs to be done is implement the plans.

Disaster preparedness specialists say it is better to worry now and be prepared, than to wait for the quake to strike and then panic. “We need to spread the message across the country starting right now,” says Ramesh Aryal, chief of the Earthquake Division at the Department of Mines and Geology. “This is where the government should also work actively to try to form disaster committees in every ward.”

Worst case scenario

If Kathmandu is hit by a 9.0 Richter earthquake:

- Between 100,000 to 200,000 will be killed in the Valley and its outskirts mainly because of unsafe construction practices
- More than half the bridges along the highways will be destroyed and damage to the runway will make it impossible to bring in relief
- The hospitals that remain standing will be overwhelmed
- Electricity will be out, overhead transformers at roadides will fall off the poles because they are neither bolted nor strapped
- Electric sparks and bursting gas cylinders could set off huge fires that could spread across the city if it is a breezy winter afternoon
- Land lines and mobiles will stop working because of damage to base stations
- Drinking water supply, such as it is, will stop completely
- Since there is no government disaster preparedness plan people and communities will be left to fend for themselves
- After the initial rescue, disposing of rotting bodies and preventing the spread of disease will be a major challenge
Other disasters

Mannmade disasters are worse, nature is actually kinder

I
t is a civilizational event when tragedy strikes on such a massive scale as it did this week. A time to tally and consider the origins and fruitaly of all life. There are those who cherish the era of suicide, and a larger majority that is saved. When the giant tsunami radiated out from the sea floor early on Sunday morning, parts of the Malay Peninsula not shielded by the northern tip of Sumatra suffered terrible fate. But nature’s real wrath was reserved for Southasia’s poor ocean-front dwellers as the wall of water charged across the Indian Ocean to engulf the eastern reaches of Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu. The tens of thousands who died were fisherfolk, as the ocean that provided their livelihood became their doom. Tourists and urban dwellers on morning walks were not spared either.

If you were not protected by distance or by an intervening landmass, there was little to be done. The angle of India’s east coast from Kanyakumari to West Bengal was pre-designed to take the brunt of the tidal waves travelling west and northwest. The Arabian Sea was protected by the subcontinental mass. Southasia is no stranger to disasters both natural and manmade. More and more people are vulnerable because more of them live along dangerous coastlines or river banks. More die here for any event than elsewhere. Droughts are a scourge even when granaries are full. Floods bring routine catastrophe to the Ganga-Brahmaputra delta, particularly if the two great rivers peak simultaneously half way through the monsoon season.

Cyclones hit the east coast of India with regularity and thousands die every time they tear at Orissa or Andhra. After past disasters, Bangladesh has now developed an efficient cyclone early warning system that saves lives. A tsunami-warning system could have saved lives across Asia last Sunday. Bangladesh proves it can work.

When the sea decides to enshrine itself, a coastline which has functioned with clockwork and controlled predictability for centuries suddenly goes berserk. There is no fighting the wall of water that shreds the shoreline and grabs all living things.

When it comes to disasters that come up from the deep, one can only pick up the pieces and care for survivors. What Southasians have to worry about and can do something about are the manmade disasters we create. Even amidst this tragedy we must remember that the miseries created by man are worse. Nature, actually, is kinder.

Global warming created by emissions of the affluent is now almost certainly significantly proven and receding Himalayan glaciers are a reality. Malleable, as we were tragically reminded this week, is most prone to rising sea levels. With global warming, the ocean will invade the Bangla delta, uprooting tens of millions. Where will they go?

Modern governments are prone to think grandiose projects. There are the technocrats and politicians amongst us who have not learned from river diversions that led to the drying up of the Aral Sea, the biggest ecological disaster of our time. And yet, India’s ‘visionary’ politicians and technocrats push a River Linking Project.

The Asian brown cloud ‘soars over our hemisphere, a product of industrialisation that prevents the sun from warming the land. The Indus and Ganga plains are suffering increased winter fog that stretches from Uttar to Guwahati. Embankments, canals, irrigation and waterlogging seem to be the culprits. Elsewhere, we are depleting ground water, polluting rivers, spreading pesticide and taking water off rivers as people downstream are left in despair.

Traumatised as we are by nature’s wrath this week, we need to try to comprehend the immensity of the devastation that humans unleash. Since we cannot teach nature to behave, it is best to see how humans should. In manmade disasters, the drama is missing, the disaster creeps in and the devastation is many times worse.
Economic blockage

The Maoists may have lifted their blockade of highways leading to Kathmandu but the week-long stoppage caused losses of Rs 20 billion in business and some Rs 140 million in loss of revenue to the state.

According to FNCCI, retailers cumulatively lost an estimated Rs 2 billion every day in business. The revenue loss to the state was to the tune of Rs 20 million a day. “The losses we have calculated do not include the loss of salaries and labour of individuals,” says FNCCI vice president, Chandi Raj Dhakal. “If we calculate their wages and productivity, the loss would be much higher.”

The loss from one week of closed highways is estimated at Rs 20 billion or more if the closure of factories and the fall in transactions nationwide are included. “Till Wednesday, we were using stock raw material for production but now we have none. Our machines have come to a halt,” said Dhakal.

With the factories shut, industrialists had even considered temporarily laying off workers. “Or else the workers will have the choice of remaining on the job on a no-work-no-pay basis,” Dhakal said. The losses of the industries do not include farmers who have invested in cash crops and dairies. Millions of lipus worth of vegetable, fruit and milk have been thrown away in Sindhupalchok, Dolakha, Dhading, Chitwan and other tarai districts.

Flying royal

The Bhutan airline, Druk Air, has responded to the fare war on the New Delhi sector by introducing a special promotional fare for passengers from Kathmandu-Delhi and back. The offer is available for Rs 4,300 for one-way and Rs 9,000 for two-way. A 25 percent discount is available for children under the age of 12.

At the AGM

Laxmi Bank Ltd recently concluded its 4th Annual General Meeting and elected two directors representing public shareholders and appointed a representative of Citizen Investment Trust as a board director. The bank now has four points of representation: Birganj, Pohlara, Banepa and Kathmandu and plans to open another branch in Biratnagar.

Boroplus cycling

Emami has launched its latest advertising campaign featuring Amtish Bachchan for Boroplus, one of its power brands. It has also introduced Boroplus Light Cream and Lotion. A three-day Boroplus Bicycle Rally was organised to promote cycling and raise environmental awareness.

NEW PRODUCTS

SING GIN DUET: McDowell Nepal Ltd has introduced a new gin, Blue Riband Duet, following the success of Blue Riband Gin. The new Duet is a pre-mixed gin, containing gin and lime priced at Rs 415 for 750 ml.

XDA MODELS: Ocean Computer is introducing a new range of handheld devices—the XDA II, XDA II S and the XDA II mini. The XDA II is a PDA with a GPRS mobile. Functions include a camera, MMS, Bluetooth capability, PDF viewer, Internet access and projection support.

What’s in store?

If you think 2005 will be any better, think again

We began 2004 with a government that had stopped functioning, an economy that had started crumbling and a population that was in deep depression. There was an omnipresent desire for peace.

ECONOMIC SENSE

Artha Beed

A year later, nothing has improved. Economic growth and the revenue indicators are stagnant. So, in a sense, the good news is that things haven’t grown much worse than they were in January 2004.

We have a new government that has nothing new to offer, we have two armies eyeball-to-eyeball who seem perfectly happy with the status quo as the business of war seems to be more lucrative than the business of peace. The political parties, of course have lost more than they had at the beginning of 2004.

In 2005, remittances from the increasing numbers of the overseas Nepali labour force will continue to lubricate the $6 billion economy. Donors will continue to pour in more money as funding a conflict-ridden country is both fashionable and moral. We will surely see a slew of more conflict management workshops and junkets to former conflict zones for our activists and experts. The business community will wake up to the WTO, too late as usual. They will try to find novel methods of protectionism while still getting away from not paying taxes or loans.

If the ready made garment industry is the trailer of the movie screening next year, other exporters better watch out. No one knows what is in store in a world where trade regimes have become more liberal. The government will have to enact more ordinances even if it is to bring domestic legislation in line with global rules.

The service sector be prepared for foreign competition. Watch out: consultancies and travel agencies. State-owned enterprises will keep haemorrhaging the government. There will be no capital injection, better management or privatisation. The way successive governments handled businesses will never return again.

Drive daggars at wilful defaulters. Perhaps this will be the only sector that will end in a different note than in 2004.

The Beed will of course continue to write in this space every fortnight through 2005. Hardcore fans can read it in hardcopy, follow it on the Nepal Times website (www.nepaltimessite.com) or on yours truly’s very own www.arthabeed.com. Comments and reax welcome.

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It’s all in the mind

Stressed by daily news of violence, Nepalis are taking to yoga in a big way

SHREYA MUKHERJEE

Yoga has always been a popular form of exercise for those wanting to stay in shape but its ability to calm the mind and filter thought processes is what beats a workout at the gym any day. Endless bandas, staunch smell of burnt rubber after riots, road blockades when least expected and bumper-to-bumper traffic jams are all in a day’s work in Kathmandu. So the denizens of the capital don’t just need to limber up their limbs but also relieve stress.

“Yoga teaches you to be masters of the mind so it doesn’t master you,” says Sangteeha Raghavan, a scholar of yogic studies and spiritual philosophy. “It lets your conscious state, the most superior, escape all involvement with your material surroundings.”

Life goes on but the imperceptible anxiety caused by the sight of guns, security checks and traffic, all add up. Cumulatively, it can affect a person’s physical health, unless you decide to do something about it and take up yoga. It works. After all, in the last decade, hundreds have turned to yoga as a way of strengthening their inner selves, clearing their conscious state of all worries and giving thoughts a healthier direction.

The principles of yoga are deep-rooted. Based on scriptures of Hindu philosophy, they remain exactly the same thousands of years later. Krishna says: “The mind is restless and hard to control. But it can be trained by constant practice (abhyasas) and by freedom from desire (vairagya).” This dialogue between Arjun and Krishna in the battlefield of Kurukshetra is remarkably relevant in exploring why yoga has become the most popular forms of mental therapy, especially in countries caught in political crises.

“I treat many young patients nowadays and most require a combination of breathing exercises and meditation to relieve stress,” says Laxminarayan Pandey of the Yoga and Nature Care Research Centre in Lajimpat. Contrary to the idea of modernising yoga to make it fashionable, this age-old form of relaxing and controlling the human mind and body has come to its own in Kathmandu. For a vigorous calorie-killing workout, most fitness freaks would prefer two hours of pumping weights but many are now trooping to yoga centres that are mushrooming in every gulli in town.

Just like running a marathon causes exhaustion, a strained thought process can cause mental fatigue. The only way to relax is to reach a level of concentration that allows your inner self to transcend reality and set your mind free,” says Satyam Singh, a part-time yoga instructor offering classes in the basement of his home in New Baneswor. Other yoga centres in the area, including the Satyamanda Yoga Centre, the Divine Yoga Institute and the Royal College of Lifestyle Medicine and Hospital, are all doing brisk business.

Some take yoga classes and meditate in their own bedrooms by switching on the tv and flipping to the Astha Channel. “It has become very popular in Kathmandu,” says Rita Thapa, who used to work for the World Health Organisation. “I met a friend who is usually depressed but seemed very happy for a change and the first reason I thought of was he’d been watching a lot of Astha.”

Some of the 80 overseas Indians trapped in the World Trade Centre as it was engulfed in overpowering heat on 11 September 2001 turned to yoga as their last resort. So there must be something to the philosophy that binds yoga: ‘there is no power greater than that of the mind.’

Yoga has even tamed the hearts of hundreds of prisoners in Kathmandu. Inspired by the miracles Kiran Bedi spun after teaching meditation techniques and breathing exercises to some of India’s most hardcore criminals in New Delhi’s Tihar Jail, Acharya Shree Dhruv began the same in Nepal in 1997 to cleanse their minds and souls.

“I teach them how to reach a state of self-satisfaction through various meditative exercises.”

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making them believe that all wrong doings stem from an illusion of a thwarted state of mind," says Dhruv who has taught yoga at prisons in Biratnagar, Birgunj, Dhusikhel, Sindulpulchok and the Central Jail. "We've healed prisoners of stomach and digestive disorders through regular practice of yoga techniques. Some criminals were even suicidal but we brought them from that stage safely."

Yoga has become a haven for peace-lovers and troublemakers alike. Perhaps one answer to a healthier, happier and peaceful society would be to make yoga mandatory to all those who have taken the path of violence.

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Another high-wire act

Rescuing minors from Indian circuses is fraught with danger, even in Nepal

SIX months after the dramatic rescue of Nepali girls from an Indian circus in Lucknow, more minors have been rescued from another Indian circus — this time in Nepal.

However, activists who took part in the rescue last week in Bara discovered to their dismay that it is as difficult to free the girls in their own home country as it is in India. In Lucknow, in June, the activists managed to rescue a dozen girls used as sex slaves by the circus owner who threatened to kill the rescuers. ["Take us home", #202]

The Nepal Child Welfare Society, which took part in the Lucknow rescue, came to know that the Calcutta-based Western Circus had minor Nepali girls working for it. They decided to carry out the rescue while the circus was at the five-year Gurudwara Festival in Bara last week thinking it would be easier if the circus was in Nepal. Little did they know that the circus owners had powerful protectors here, too.

On 26 December, Khetraj Mainali of the society made his move on the circus with the help of local police, women volunteers and human rights activists and rescued a dozen young girls. But after that things did not go exactly as planned.

Some of the girls were too frightened. They refused to reveal their identities to the rescuers since the circus owner and his henchmen were standing around. Mona Lamichhane and Renu Bharat of the Rural Development Centre persuaded the girls that they were being taken back home to their families and didn’t have to work for the circus anymore.

After almost four hours, 15 girls agreed to go with the rescue party to Kailaiya. They were given shelter at Debaki Lanna Dhamashala but were forced to return to the circus at around 5.30 PM when goons allegedly hired by the circus employer, Akbar Hussain, threatened to break into the shelter.

The rescue plan was botched from the start. Information about the raid had leaked out and the circus managed to hide around 18 other girls. The District Police Office in Bara and human rights activists were threatened and persuaded to back out.

“But we refused to be intimidated,” says Mainali who recalls that a large group of student union leaders and hoodlums on the payroll of the circus owner threatened to shoot them. “The circus must have paid them a lot of money to come after us,” says Debendra Girl, president of the Rural Development Centre.

After the activists defied the strongmen and went ahead with the rescue, the circus management spread rumours that the rescuers were animal rights activists trying to stop the mass sacrifices at the mela. This rattled even the CDO, Madhab Prasad Regmi, who started having second thoughts about supporting the rescue.

In the end, the team decided to allow the girls to decide for themselves whether or not they wanted to be rescued. “We were owed a lot of money by the circus, so we decided to go back,” Rita Bhawakarma, one of the girls told us. She and two other teenage girls decided to go back.

Others were minors and slowly opened up to the rescuers, complaining of exploitation, being overworked and underpaid, and having to wait many years before being allowed to visit their families in Nepal.

The Indian circus owner, Akbar Hussain, had his own tale of woe. He claimed to have a five-year agreement with the parents at the end of which he had to return the girls to their parents. But one of the parents, Gobinda Karki Chhetri, complained that the circus hired goons to chase him away every time he approached them for his daughter’s salary.

Ten of the girls are now under protection of the Nepal Child Welfare Organisation in Hetauda where they will be rehabilitated and returned to their families.
In principle, we aren’t against talks,” Maoist leader Prachanda said as far back as 1997. Since then, the Maoists have sat down to talk three times and yet they are refusing to negotiate with the Deuba coalition. Why? Why are they refusing to consider the 13 January ultimatum?

The Maoists earlier used ceasefires as golden opportunities for launching campaigns to expand their military by at least two or three battalions and spread political presence in the countryside. If they accepted the present government’s olive branch, they could have another opportunity to bolster their strength. Yet they have ignored the peace offers. They have said this is because the Deuba government is a “servant” of the king and they will negotiate only with the “master”. Yet, the Chand and Thapa governments that preceded Deuba were also royal nominated under Article 127 and yet the Maoists had no qualms about negotiating with them.

The real reason for not negotiating with the Deuba government is because the UML is part of the coalition. The Maoists believe that a country can have only one Communist Party: theirs. According to the Maoist viewpoint, the UML is a reformist and reactionary party and they are unwilling to accept them as communists, let alone talk with them. For its part, even though the UML regards the Maoists as extremist and anarchic, it says it is willing to negotiate with them.

The Maoists believe that you need a diamond to cut diamond and the UML is just being used as an imperialist pawn against them. And vice-versa, the UML regards the Maoists as a nail in its heart. Especially since the Maoists are busy demolishing the UML’s party network across Nepal and replacing it with their own. Ex-UML cadre from the districts have risen up the Maoist ranks to become senior leaders.

The UML needs peace talks for legitimacy and the Maoists are not about to do them the favour. That is why there won’t be talks as long as the UML is in government. There could be other reasons why the Maoists don’t want to talk: the desire of international comrades in RIM that the Nepali Maoists keep fighting, the fear articulated by Deb Gurung recently that if they do sit for talks this time India and the Americans are going to get the Royal Nepali Army to round up senior rebel leaders. (Hence the insistence on UN mediation.) And the last reason: for lack of progress in talks could be that the hardliners are calling the shots and that Baburam Bhattarai and even Prachanda may have been sidelined.

Without the prospect of peace, this government will have to go. Then it will be just the king versus the Maoists which is probably the kind of polarisation the Maoists have wanted all along. They also realise that unless they deliver a few more major military blows against the government forces, it will not agree to the constituent assembly. On the other hand, the government thinks that the only way it can bring the rebels to the table is by giving them a bloody nose.

By insisting on talking to the king through international mediation, the Maoists are just trying to raise their international legitimacy and equate themselves in strength with the army and monarchy. They don’t really want to talk. And there are even fewer indications that they want to join the political mainstream.

Now our war will be a success, just look up there. Entrance: Blockade

**QUOTES OF THE WEEK**

We will agree for talks immediately if the old regime agrees on international mediation.

Krishna Bahadur Mahara, Maoist spokesperson in Janadharana, 30 December
A road to the future

The Outer Ring Road can be a sustainable and visionary plan for the future development of Kathmandu Valley

KISHORE THAPA

There has been a lot of media coverage on the proposed Outer Ring Road in Kathmandu Valley, including this paper (‘Road to nowhere’, #233). Real estate speculators seem most excited and land prices in the Valley have soared ever since an MoU was signed in July during Crown Prince Paras’ visit to Beijing.

Studies have shown that the Valley’s population will grow from its present 1.6 million to 2.5 million by 2020, although this figure may have to be revised upwards due to internal displacement by the insurgency. Although 300,000 people can be accommodated by densification in the core urban areas within the existing Ring Road, some farmland has to be encroached upon to settle an additional 600,000 people. Although media often portrays Kathmandu as a ‘crowded’ city, its density of 100 people per hectare is worryingly low. The optimum density of a medium-size city like Kathmandu should be at least double that. Low density means a city tends to spread uncontrollably outwards before the city core is properly developed. Streamlining urban management would discourage haphazard growth of radial roads which would be environmentally destructive and enhance the vitality of the Kathmandu Valley: its heritage, scenic location, salubrious climate and tourist attractions.

The government has endorsed a Long Term Development Plan after hearings involving politicians, planners, business and professional organisations which will develop the Valley as a National Capital Region based on self-governance by local authorities under an apex body called the Kathmandu Valley Urban Development Council. A draft bill has been prepared to provide legal backing to the Council which will be made up of the chiefs of local authorities and representatives of line ministries.

The Plan has proposed that green and built-up areas be maintained at a 60:40 ratio by the densification of existing municipal areas, planned urban expansion beyond the municipal boundary and development of traditional compact settlements like Khokana, Bungmati, Lubhu, Sankhu, Bode and Tokila. It envisages the delineation of a rural-urban boundary and conservation of rivers and watershed areas.

Many ask: is an Outer Ring Road a priority? Improvement of existing city streets, 14 radial roads and the completion of the Inner Ring Road including the Bisanmati, Bagmati and Dhekkhola corridors are more urgent because they would reduce traffic congestion in Kathmandu and Lalitpur. True, and these activities should also be implemented. But there is a rationale for the Outer Ring Road which has more to do with integrating infrastructure development than just building a road. The Melamchi water supply project will bring snowmelt to Sundarli through a 27 km tunnel which needs to be distributed to different areas of the Valley. It would be cheaper to construct a road and lay pipes along its alignment. The road will also help in the construction of the large reservoirs to be built in eight locations of the Valley.

High voltage transmission lines also follow the road, as can other utilities like telephone and telecommunication. The Outer Ring Road could also serve as a bypass highway for Greater Kathmandu once the Bardibas-Basundhara highway is completed. The Outer Ring Road would also help in delineating the rural-urban boundary as envisaged by the Long Term Plan and open up new areas for planned development.

The Department of Roads has done a feasibility study of the alignment of the Outer Ring Road, taking into account topography, geology, heritage sites, urban planning and future infrastructure such as Melamchi and electric transmission lines. Since the resources are very limited, rational judgment should override populist decisions. If the proposed alignment does not incorporate future infrastructure and utilities, it will be very costly. utmost care shall be taken to conserve fertile agricultural land and environmentally sensitive areas.

Politics will inevitably become a factor and there is already a move to expand the alignment so it will go through the ecologically sensitive foothills which are the Valley’s watershed. We should be very clear: the Outer Ring Road is for planned urban expansion of the city rather than rural development. The settlements in the foothills will benefit from improvements in the existing radial roads rather than the Outer Ring Road.

The Outer Ring Road should not be used. If it is conceptualised as an infrastructure development project, it will kill the planned urban development of Kathmandu Valley and benefit the present family generation. The DoR alignment is a road 66 km long, 50m wide for a six-lane highway with a bicycle track and sidewalk. Sufficient landscaping will be done to maintain greenery within the right of way. There will be 22 bridges with a 1.20 m span across the Bagmati at Chabahar.

Chinese assistance will be available for road construction with the government responsible for the estimated Rs 3 billion land acquisition. But if the concept of ‘land pooling’ is used, this cost could come down 50%. Land pooling will be compensated for land lost by the value-added to existing property by the road. Land pooling will lead to an infrastructure development of 250m on either side of the road. Buildings falling on the right of way will be compensated according to the current market rate. Special resettlement policies will be formulated to address the issue of socially disadvantaged people affected by the project. Land pooling is not a new concept and despite being time-consuming, has worked well wherever it was implemented in the Valley.

National-level politics may dominate the discourse in Kathmandu, but it has never been elected on the basis of its influence in the city’s outskirts. As long as we keep politics out of it and alignment and other decisions are taken rationally, there is no reason why the Outer Ring Road can’t be a political visionary, socially and environmentally sustainable and technically sound project for the future development of Kathmandu Valley.

Kishore Thapa is the Director of Outer Ring Road Land Development Project.

Greener than we thought

Despite rapid urbanisation and population growth, the Valley is still predominantly green and rural. A 2001 study showed that 32 percent of the Valley is covered with forest, 40 percent is farmland, 17 percent is rural settlement and 11 percent is built-up municipal areas. Since the existing planning doesn’t recognise the Kathmandu Valley as a single ecological entity, it is virtually impossible to trade development tools that address conflicting urban and rural issues.

Kathmandu Valley is divided into five municipalities and 95 VDCs but it is a single natural region and its 1.6 million inhabitants share the same watershed, drainage channels, forest, soil and water.

WIN BAJRACHARYA

18 FEEDBACK

31 DECEMBER 2004 - 6 JANUARY 2005 #228
2004 highlights

Portugal hosts Euro
Euro 2004, the second biggest football championship in the world, was hosted by Portugal. This provided Portugal with their much needed chance to step out of Spain’s shadow and strengthen their position as a tourist destination. Portugal shone in their role as the host country and progressed on to the finals where they were beaten by Greece.

Athens Olympics
The Olympics returned to Athens this year, in between drug scandals and controversies. USA managed to come away again with the most number of medals. Greece had a tough time quelling the drug scandals and deaths of their star athletes. Few world records were broken at this year’s Olympics as drug testing was intensified and many were barred from competing.

Cycling for non-violence
Eleven members of the Sri Lankan Global Peace Secretariat cycled across South Asia, including all the SAARC countries on their tour to promote non-violence throughout the region. Though on a tight budget of Rs 1,000 a day for the whole team, they managed to spread the word on peace and harmony.

Running with Rajendra
Rajendra Bhanjali, after breaking his own national record at the Athens Olympics, went on to win a gold in the 5,000m race at the Asian All-star Athletics Championship in Malaysia. It was the first time that Nepal won a gold at the Asian level athletic event in which more than seven Asia-Pacific countries participated.

Sangina’s Olympics
Sangina Baidhya became the first South Asian woman to qualify for taekwondo in this year’s Olympics. Even though she lost out 4-0 to Heon Chen Shih of Chinese Taipei, she went to Athens amid wild support from Nepal. Baidhya, who won the gold in the SAF games in Islamabad against India, lost out in the prelims of the Women’s Under 45kg.

Golling glory for India
Surya Nepal Masters concluded on 14 December with Shiv Kapur from India walking away with the trophy at the Gokarna Golf Resort. Nepal’s annual international golf tournament brought out many golfers but Kapur sank a 35-foot birdie putt to pull off the victory.

Indo-Pak showdown
In a deciding match, India beat Pakistan on 24 March for a victory in the series of five one-day matches. The first series that was played in Pakistan brought mutual goodwill between the two nations. Pakistan played their role as hosts marvellously and took their defeat like true sportsmen even from the hands of their archrivals, India. The series was seen as a new start of friendly relationships between India and Pakistan.

Swinging it in ’05

A beginner’s guide to getting started with golf
If your New Year’s resolution is to learn a new sport, golf is just about as good as it gets. It is relaxing, focused and challenging. And it’s not just for refined international civil servants, ex-generals and ambassadors either. More and more young people have been bitten by the golf bug. Many think that it is an elitist game and therefore steer clear of the greens believing it will cost a lot. Not so.

Over the two decades I’ve been golfing, I’ve noticed that most golfers begin showing an interest through friends or relatives who golf. Rarely will you meet someone who began on their own initiative. This could be attributed to the lack of awareness about what the game is really about and also, how to get started. Where are the clubs and facilities?

Golf, like any other sport, can be fun. Anybody, old or young can enjoy golfing. Though it is not as fast-paced and sudden like some sports, it still requires a degree of fitness to play the game socially.

Where are the clubs and facilities?
In Nepal, there are nine facilities in four cities: four in Kathmandu, three in Pokhara, and one each in Bharatpur and Nawalparasi. Golf can be learnt in all these places. The two driving ranges (one in Pokhara and the other in Kathmandu) are built to help those already playing to improve, and encourage newcomers to start the game. The golf courses all have their own driving or practice facilities with dedicated golf professionals teaching the game.

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

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

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

No more reasons for procrastinating. Get out into the bright sunshine, clean air and take up a sport that brings you in touch with nature and yourself. 2005 might just be your golfing year! •
FESTIVAL AND EVENTS

Emerging Voices
Prints by three young artists at Siddhartha Art Gallery, Birat Mani Revisited. Until 3 January. 4218149

Life through the Lens
Photographs by Kalhor Kayastha at Indigo Gallery, Vill 15, January. 443138, indigo@elk.com.np

Freedom Zone
New year’s eve with Partyropol.com, 31 December at Himalayan Java, J-Bear and Desecrating. BMP onwards. Rs 1,650 per person including dinner, snacks and welcome drinks. www.partyropol.com, 9861708677

Rumble in the Jungle
On New Year’s Eve at Le Meridien Gokarna Forest Golf Resort and Spa for Rs 1,700, 1PM onwards. 4454550

New Year’s Eve Celebration
at Hotel Regency Kathmandu. 4491234

Haute Couture, Sinners and Saints
Celebrated New Year’s Eve at Hotel Vajra. 4277851

New Year’s Eve at Dwarka’s with Abhaya and the Steam Injuns. Rs 3,500 per couple. Rs 2,000 per person. 4479489

Movie screening of Caravan and Darsha Rastra Dohi Katha Pratigya at Hotel Radisson on 2 January. Tickets for Rs 200. Rs 300 available at Siwal and Hotel Continental. A fundraiser for Kent Children’s Hospital.

Winter Day Camp
for school students of grades 9-13 from 8-13 January. Last date for registration is 3 January. 5553870, 5550402, 5524183


The God Dance of Kathmandu Valley
Every Tuesday at Hotel Vaja. 4271545

MUSIC

Classical vocals and instrumental music
7PM onwards, every Friday at Hotel Vaja. 4271545

Jatra Saturday nights with Looza, 6.30 PM onwards. 4256622

Jukebox experience with Posha Gurung and The Cloud Walkers every Wednesday, Friday and Saturday at Roxy Bar. 4491234

Happening live jazz in town at Upstairs Jazz Bar, Lajpat. Every Wednesday and Saturday. 7.45 PM onwards.

Jazz Dinner with McTwisters for Rs 1,200 at 1905 Kantipur, 6PM 8PM.

Cafe Mitra and Lounge Bar presents a special a la carte Festive Session Venue. Until 31 December.

New delicacies Introducing pastas and snacks at Roadhouse Cafe, Nawalparasi. 5527755

ホームページ新開abilities at Soaltee Courtyard, next to the Egyptian Embassy. Pulchowk. 5573166

Sizzling Weekend Trios live music, dance, barbeque and karaoke at Garden Terrace, Soaltee Courtyard Plaza. 4279999

Genuine Thai cuisine at Royal Lotus, Bakhtapur. 5522131

Delicious barbecue dinner Fridays at Summit Hotel. 5521810

Farm House Cafe Unlimited dinner with delicious meals at Park Village Hotel. 4270700

Cafe Bahal Newari and continental cuisine under the giant Cinnamon tree at Kathmandu Guest House. Thamel. 4700632

The Beer Garden at Gayapuri, Godavari Village Resort. 5560675

Vegetarian Creations at Sipita View Restaurant. 4490282

Splash Spring BBQ Wednesday and Friday evenings. 6PM onwards. Radisson Hotel, Kathmandu. 4279999

Executive Lunch at Tarant Restaurant, Dwarka’s. 4479489

The Beer Garden at Gayapuri, Godavari Village Resort. 5560675

Dwarka’s Thai Lunch at the Heritage courtyard. 4479489

The Tharu Kitchen at Jungle Base Camp, Junglebasecamp@yahoo.com

GETAWAYS

Dream Holiday Package tour to Malaysia for Christmas and New Year. Marco Polo Travels and Qatar Airways, 2012340, malaysiadays@yahoo.com, marco polo.com

Getaway package Night’s stay at Godavari Village Resort, includes dinner per couple. Rs 1,400.

AAA Organic Farm and Guesthouse Rs 90 with three meals. 6631734

Tiger Mountain Lodge Attractive New Year offers for expats only. 4361500

Tiger Tops Two night package for Rs 250 at Chilren, Tharu Safari Lodge for Rs 220 per night, expats only. 4361500

New Year by the jungle Special package and prices at Jungle Base Camp Lodge, Bards: junglebasecamp@yahoo.com

Tample Tiger Dine package Rs 250. 4263489

Mecon Wildlife Jungle Resort Special packages available. 4225001

Weekend Special at Park Village Resort, Budhanilkantha. 4375280

Jomson Mountain Resort Two nights three days at Rs 5,599 for Nepalis, Rs 1,999 for expats including airfare and food. 4491010, salesjom@mail.com.np

Club Himalaya invites you to celebrate the sunset of 2005 at their windy hills of Nagarkot on 1 January.

KATHMANDU VALLEY

With temperatures in Kathmandu dipping down to its lowest in the past decade, the air pollution level went up. Even with two days of Nepal bandas, last week’s average PM10 (particle matter less than 10 microns) concentration in Kathmandu was up by more than 11 percent compared to the previous week. In residential areas such as Thamel, the PM10 was almost two times higher than national standards.

For young Nikhil, Samarpur was everything he could ask for and at school, the game he loved. When his beloved Neha becomes ambitious and takes off from Samarpur to pursue her dreams, Nikhil can’t help following her to Mumba. But fate has something else in store for him—an, unrelenting Neha, a petty workplace Sara and an income yet petits-neighbours Shagun. His romantic roof caves in burying him in a rubble of hilarious situations. Who then amongst Neha, Sara and Shagun is finally destined for Nikhil?

Dil Maange More is Anand Mahadevan’s second film, starring amongst Neha, Sara and Shagun is finally destined for Nikhil?

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Esha Manandhar, 18, is one of the promising young Nepali singers. Her scintillating performance at the Wave Music Utsav catapulted her to fame among Kathmandu’s music aficionados. Before that, she had just learned to strum and hum during her SLC break and performed at school functions and at the Alliance Française.

Esha’s real foray into music came after she began singing for Hits FM and was noticed. She wrote to the station about her passion and asked if she could sing for them, they got in touch with her and soon she was singing for the Hits show, Mega Tops. Since then she has performed at various events such as Wave events, Moksh Bar and Himalalite Cafe. Esha began professional voice training at the age of 10 when during her winter holidays, her mother, tired of seeing her at home doing nothing, sent her to an aunt’s to learn Indian classical vocals. Esha has been singing and singing ever since.

The daughter of a journalist, Esha is torn between her desire to be a writer and a singer. Until she decides, she is doing both: writing music as a composer and lyricist. She has six original English songs that are slightly autobiographical and she hopes to put in an album soon.

“They are mostly about teenage angst, love and life,” she says, quickly adding, “I think it is time I moved beyond that because all my songs are starting to sound the same.” Esha’s songs are surprisingly mature and sound somewhere between Alanis Morissette and Sheryl Crow. Were they her inspiration? “I was the one inspiring me,” she replies, but laughingly admits that Morissette is one of her favourite singers. She wants to continue with classical vocals training because it helps her with her compositions.

Shalini Manandhar, 18, is one of the promising young Nepali singers. Her scintillating performance at the Wave Music Utsav catapulted her to fame among Kathmandu’s music aficionados. Before that, she had just learned to strum and hum during her SLC break and performed at school functions and at the Alliance Française.

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Here are the chronic pessimists among us who look forward to the new year, see the glass as half-empty and complain about it. Then there are compulsive optimists like me who go over to the bar and get myself a refill.

Given the way things are going in this country and in our immediate vicinity, I have made a new year resolution to get myself a life membership of the Nepal Bar Association Pvt Ltd and that is probably where you’ll find me during the course of the year nursing a large Famous Grouch on rocks. Which should be a fairly easy resolution to fulfill, considering that one of my 40-point resolution last year (stop making an ass of myself every week) never made it to the implementation phase.

Like it or not, the new year is upon us and, like it or not, tradition demands that we all come up with new year resolutions which is a non-binding Memorandum of Understanding one signs with oneself to make every effort to be a much nicer person in the forthcoming fiscal year. Having already made my resolution, I have been going around asking what other people’s resolutions are. Here is a representative sample (for security reasons, some names have been changed to protect the identities of resolution-holders):

Comrade Awesome: “In 2005, our brave and courageous fighters will set fire to more milk trucks and Maruti taxis, stop all ambulances and school buses and ruin vegetable farmers by preventing them from taking their produce to market. Onward with the great proletarian liberation, long live the strategic counter-retaliation offensive tunnel campaign against running dog imperialists and their blood-thirsty hegemonistic expansionist reactionary fascist mongrels.”

Comrade UML General Secretary: “This government is hopeless and inept, it is a royal puppet, the minister has completely bungled the Korean labour issue, the country is a bloody mess, the ministers are in cahoots with the sugar barons. In 2005, we will support this government to the hilt.”

The Kanchi Shankaracharya: “In the new year I’ll seek political asylum in Nepal.”

Haku, the sleepy household Lab: “Being a son of a bitch, I guess I’ll strive to be an even greater son of a bitch in the new year. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I go back to sleep?”

Neighbourhood petrol station wallah: “It’s been a good year for us, with blockades, the kerosene price differential and artificial shortages. I’m sure that in 2005 things will get better before they get worse.”

Middle Marsyangdi Contractor: “We are looking forward to doing even less work in the new year than we did in 2004.”

Defaults Anonymous: “So the #$@%&** want to stop us from attending royal palace parties. Big deal. In 2005, I think I’ll buy myself a Mazda 6 and invest in another apartment complex in Gurgaon.”

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