King Gyanendra’s whirlwind monsoon tour of far and mid-western Nepal brought thousands of people to the streets of towns across the region. Two years ago when the king visited these areas he was felicitated as a new king, this time he came as a political leader.

Besides just the curiosity to see the king, many who lined up here said they believed he was their best chance for peace. There was spontaneous applause as the king walked, greeting people, chatting and touching them lightly.

So far this week, the king has gone walkabout in Dhangadi, Kailali, Jumla and Dang and everywhere his message has been: “There is no need to fear the terrorists, we can defeat them if we unite.” The message of peace is one that will resonate strongly in a desperately war-weary region but some here saw the royal tour more as a “barrack visit.”

Indeed, one of the king’s concerns seemed to be to boost the morale of the security forces after the worst-ever loss for the army at Kalikot two weeks ago in which 55 soldiers were killed and another 60 captured. He also summoned zonal and district administrators to heavily-guarded army bases to instruct them to efficiently deliver services to the people. His message to them was to coordinate development projects with the military.

Seventy-year-old Sukundebi Chaudhari, a freed kamaiya who is among those who occupied government land near here after waiting in vain for promised farms, managed to slip a petition to the king. But even though her family had cleaned up their temporary camp, the king had no time to visit them. People also waited at the Seti Zonal Hospital for a visit that never happened, and in Dadeleghum thousands waited all day for the king but that visit was scrubbed because of bad weather.

Meanwhile, back in Kathmandu student unions affiliated to political parties continued to battle police on the streets defying a ban on protests near the palace. The king’s tour came amid speculation that he would announce rapprochement with the parties before his planned visit to New York in mid-September to attend a summit of world leaders at the UN.

NC leader Girija Prasad Koirala met UML’s Madhab Kumar Nepal on Wednesday and insiders said they discussed a proposal for possible reinstatement of parliament and formation of an all-party government. Such an agreement would legitimise the king’s proposed UN visit next month.

The Maoist online mouthpiece Janadesh warned the parties not to be hoodwinked by the king’s effort to sow division by his ploy to reconstitute parliament.

Editorial p2
Rollback now
MADHWA PAREKH
T he Indonesian Government and the Free Army Movement prevailed over deep-rooted distrust to sign a peace MoU in Helsinki on 15 August. Brokersed by the Crisis Management Initiative headed by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, the shaky truce could smooth the way for $5 billion in aid for reconstruction of this war and tsunami ravaged eastern tip of Sumatra. The Helsinki accord is still fraught with pitfalls, but a wake-up call for the warring sides in Nepal. However, the same week the pact was signed a Nepali journalist had said there wouldn't be an end to the Maoist war. For, “In our internal affairs”, said in Beijing, Foreign Minister Ramesh Pandey, “we have to end the war?”

The international community can be a part of the solution, not part of the problem. If we had our house in order and we could forge a political consensus to end the war as desired by a majority of our population. It is up to Nepali political forces to choose a mediator to lead us to a ceasefire and a peace process.

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ROLLBACK NOW

Do the king and his praetorian guard realise they have gone too far in alienating the people and smothering their voices at the international community? There are hints they have.

Many went along with 4 October 2002, escapees may have even felt it was February First was necessary, but few in their right minds. But making that hard-won democracy work means that it values democracy. This is a useful photo-op to cancel out the monarchy’s tarnished image. But although the palace’s spin doctors may try to portray the crowds as a sign of support for February First, almost everyone knows it is just people desperate for peace clutching at straws.

The king has even been shown on candid camera calling for a “tremendous victory” in the country, and may get a reprieve this week with a US walker on non-lethal arms supplies, but the spotlight is now on the act and not the act. High level emissaries have said they now want to see “action, not more words”.

The bottom line is that King Gyanendra has been convinced even friendly world leaders that he needed to demonstrate democracy to defeat Maoism. In fact, they appear more convinced than ever that they have the opposite effect.

Time is running out, and there will be to have some dramatic and drastic rollbacks before 16 September if our head of state is to be believed like a pariah in the corridors of the UN General Assembly hall.

The
cradle of
capitalism

The Koiralas can’t keep the country from a theory of free market economics. But the NC members don’t know what market forces are doing. Ahtisaari, the shaky truce could forge a political consensus to end the war as desired by a majority of our population. It is up to Nepali political forces to choose a mediator to lead us to a ceasefire and a peace process.

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Fidel's Cuba

C K Lal's analysis is sharp, his attacks are as ruthless as the armour of a revolution and his suggestions are profoundly pragmatic. However, I disagree with his view in 'Revolution, regression and reformation' (#261) that Cuba is like North Korea. Cuba, like North Korea, is the only socialist country where education and health facilities are not only free but parallel to standards. Cubans enjoy free medical check-ups with free medicines and free surgical operations. They have better health and education facilities than the majority of Americans. No doubt Castro is a dictator but he is a benevolent one. He could not endure the injustice the neighbouring superpower was inflicting on Cubans. What the Americans did to Cuba was similar to what India is doing to Nepal. Like Castro we need a socialist revolutionary who will wipe away again this imperialist and brainchild, the Maoists. Fidel Castro isn't Mao, Stalin or Pol Pot, so don't insult him. He is a true socialist revolutionary, not a political radical, not a socialistic, not a political radical. He took Cuba to a new level from where democracy can grow. If a future democratic Cuba remembers Fidel, it will remember him not as a tyrant but as a man who made Cuban society fit to approach the 21st century. I agree with Mr Lal that communism all around the world has been used to construct the most rigid form of social inequality in the last century, creating a classless society. But Cuba is different.

Annabel Rana, Sanepa

People Power

After reading 'People power' (#261) I wondered if any of the political forces in the country actually care what the Nepali people want? We've had 14 governments in 126 months and the number of我自己 and countless bandas in the 12 glorious years of democracy. Dirty political games like trading of MPs and minister dissolving the parliament if a no-confidence motion passed, followed by Supreme Court's appeals were more entertaining than the best soap operas most of the time. The second force in this triangular battle, the Maoists, sounded very appealing initially. Here was a political party that was standing for a just society. It didn't take long for us to see the ugly side of their face. Maoists definitely become a force to reckon with but a despised one.

Then there is the monarchy. Despite all the negative comments of foreign diplomats, political parties and the Maoists after 1 February I was optimistic. These political parties had failed and the Maoists had proved their unworthiness. Most Nepalis just wanted peace and stability. Six months down the line, all my hopes have gone down the drain. So, what is this 'people power' supposed to deliver?

Sanfosh Khamal, Kathmandu

Vigilantes

The Guest Column by Hemlata Rai (‘A peace vigil’ #261) is ideological rhetoric strongly lacking pragmatism. Unfortunately most anti-Maoist groups are causing violence but I don't see any alternative. The security forces are very thinly spread and can't be everywhere. How are we supposed to protect themselves? Three years ago a man was buried alive in Parbat, a member of the RPP was abducted and both his eyes were gouged out. A man was crucified and nailed to a tree. Faced with such brutality, what are the people to do? If the government can't protect the people, the people will protect themselves. It is really easy for urban intellectuals like Hemlata Rai to write about vigilantes but if she had seen the Maoist mutilation of a fellow-farmer, or Maoists force-marching villagers to be used as human shields she would also support vigilantism. Nepal's villagers see the Maoists first hand, they don't see them on tv or read about them. When Maoist assassins come to them don't come with human rights people or NGOs! They are terrorists. Someone writing an article in Kathmandu is not going to protect them. Rai argues that vigilantism will lead to anarchy, but most villages are already facing anarchy due to the rebel violence. I am not a rightwing nut, but I do believe desperate people need self-protection.

A Thapa, email

Karnali

Don't kill the Karnali with your aid! Jivan Bahadur Shahi (#260) is perhaps the most encouraging piece I have read in Nepal Times recently. Finally somebody has voiced my exact opinion. Nepal needs infrastructure not charity. I hope Mr Shahi’s words will be heard by the powers that be in Kathmandu, most of them busy doing studies and collecting statistics and seldom considering how they can empower the people. The people of Karnali and many other remote parts of Nepal deserve a chance to sustain their own lifestyle.

Shalini Tater, email

- Jivan Bahadur Shahi has brought out the bitter and true feelings of rural Nepal in ‘Don't kill the Karnali with your aid’. I agree with his analysis that Kathmandu’s disinterest is responsible for the Karnali’s backwardness. Flying in food, piecemeal projects and ad-hoc responses are not going to meet the real basic needs of the Karnalibasis. But as Mr Shahi argues, besides the government, the NGOs are also responsible for this dependence. Let the civil servants in the Karnali be from the Karnali, allow them to prepare their own programs, let the people of the Karnali think for themselves. However, I do have my reservations about Mr Shahi’s misgivings about importing ideological rhetoric strongly lacking pragmatism. However, I do have my reservations about Mr Shahi’s misgivings about importing ideological rhetoric strongly lacking pragmatism. However, I do have my reservations about Mr Shahi’s misgivings about importing ideological rhetoric strongly lacking pragmatism.

Thebehang Thakur Subba, Taplejung

Retort to Retort

Re: Bihari K Shrestha’s reply (Letters, #260) to my letter (#260) on his write-up (‘Support by default’, #258). Politicians are corrupt even in mature democracies, ours was only 12 years old before the king decided to play the messiah by blatantly breaching the constitution. Democracy has a self-cleansing, in-built system to flush out undesirables. In an autocracy, we see the corrupt and ex-convicts feted upon us. True, elections are the real barometer of knowing public opinion but the king is bent on interpreting the public opinion in a manner that suits him. Elections under this royal government can never be free and fair. Crooks and ex-military officers (there is an ex-general in the Election Commission) overseeing polls is a nightmare. The king wants three years to put the panchayati set-up in place, and the six months since his coup leaves no doubt about his real intentions. As for president’s rule (there is such a system in federal India), it can be done only on the recommendation of the elected head, to be duly ratified by Parliament. Here the king retorts to Article 127 of the Constitution whenever it suits him. While ‘proving’ of India is undesirable so is accepting the king’s ambition to rule above the law.

Sambhav Sharma, New Banewor

- Re: ‘NGOs next’ (#260). After 1990, economic and political liberalisation led to the mushrooming of NGOs in Nepal. On the positive side some of the best hospitals and elite schools were set up but the NGOs also had a negative impact. Fore one, they made society ever more dependent on the mercy of foreigners. Another result was increased corruption and corruption śmèansion in the name of poverty-alleviation. Some of them were Christians proselytising on the side. Unfortunately, the Nepal media and intellectuals have failed to realise that no society has achieved prosperity with the help of NGOs. In fact what you need is effective state action. Now that the government finally comes up with rules to regulate this sector, NGOs will stand up against Indian imperialism and its nepotism.

Dr Chandra Bhushan Subba, Tea and Coffee Global Development Alliance

GTZ and Tea

Thank you very much for Mallika Aryal’s report on Nepal’s tea (#258). However, kindly note that GTZ’s leading role in promoting Nepali tea at the World Tea and Coffee World 2005 to be held in Hambur 11-13 September is missing. The German aid group has been actively involved in tea sector development in Nepal since 1998. In partnership with our alliance, GTZ has also been involved in the development and promotion of the Nepal logo, codes of conduct, PR materials and trade shows.

B Raj Giri, email

Corrections

‘A new leaf’ (#261) gave the erroneous impression that Jang Bahadur Rai visited China. He didn’t, and the tea was sent to him as a souvenir by the Chinese emperor. Due to a proof-reading error, the actual altitude of the Gurung State was wrong. It should have been ‘up to 2,000m’.

Editor

Correction
The art of diplomacy
It's simpler than some make it look

I hope the kind editors called Ambassador Keith Bloomfield and yelled "TNNONCMMWNNNGGG Your Excellence" prior to the submission of letters via email responding to the attempts at defining terrorism. The fact that Tony Blair was announcing that very moment that human rights laws might be changed in the United Kingdom must not have helped. This wasn't just your run-of-the-mill bent-out-of-shape reader or two sending in letters to Nepal Times. This was a multifaceted, multinational, coalition-style assault that must have had him reaching for the Guinness.

His Excellence evidently forgot—IJBTSTHUST. No, it's not Russian for 'Come hither my burly babushka' but the first rule of diplomacy and stands for It's Just Better To Shut The Hell Up away with all those pesky consonants) and stands for Just Because You’re Ambassador You Ain’t King In My Kingdom. Failure to follow above rules has caused many a diplomat unnecessary grief.

So the INSAS rifle controversy is now out in public and it took the loss of so many brave and under appreciated soldiers of the RANA for this to become an issue. What do these fine soldiers have to do to get credit? When you’re taking a rest in the war remote part of the country you’re not doing it for the ‘Royal Government’ or the ‘Imperial White Army’ or violating human rights, you’re doing this for the country. When you ambush and kill these fine people you’re not liberating anyone or getting rid of feudalism, you’re wiping out skilled workers and soldiers and stoking your own creepy pathologies.

Actually, the INSAS assault rifle is really a cool-looking assault rifle. The weapon is what is known in stodgy military parlance as, well, sexy. Its transparent plastic ammo clip is particularly attractive: a quick look lets you see if you have enough bullets left without actually having to keep count. A very handy feature in battle, I am told.

On the other hand, even for casual students of firearms like myself, transparent plastic clips have, ahem, a clear disadvantage to them. It could also have been an effort to deflect widespread coverage of the alleged link between restriction on mobiles imposed after the royal move on February First on security grounds and favouritism towards Nepal’s first private mobile operator in which King Gyanendra’s son-in-law has a share.

Of the 173,000 mobile phone lines that were cut off on 1 February, only 40,000 post paid lines in Kathmandu, Pokhara and Biratnagar have been reconnected. Some 111,000 pre-paid mobiles were out of action for more than six months and Nepal Telecom has started activating about 12,000 of them per day in Kathmandu this week. Other 20,000 post-paid lines in Kathmandu and other metros are still out. Nepal Telecom has been allowed to introduce only a limited number of new mobiles, and it has been forced to delay its plans to launch a CDMA wireless phone network in the Valley.

To be sure, as a government monopoly Nepal Telecom always treated its customers shabbily. Its technology was behind demand leading to poor service, high cost and lack of innovation. But employees of the company are convinced that post-February First the government was delaying full resumption of Nepal Telecom’s services in order to favour Spice Nepal Pvt Ltd (SNPL) in which King Gyanendra’s son-in-law Raj Bahadur Singh owns a stake. Spice Cell which is a joint venture with Kanik and Cyprian-based companies with links to Russia-based Nepali billionaire, Upendra Malhotra.

Spice was supposed to begin operations from July, but that deadline has been extended by three months. Its director, Ajeya Raj Samanty, in an interview denied it is being favoured and in turn accused Nepal Telecom of not responding to customer demand (see p3). The Ministry of Information and Communications told us: ‘Spice was obviously worried that Nepal Telecom would have captured 90 percent of the market with its new mobiles and CDMA even before it launched its service, and it used all its political clout to delay Nepal Telecom’s plans.’ He admitted Nepal Telecom’s monopoly had resulted in poor service to customers, but added competition must be clean and fair.

Nepal Telecom has always been a source of national pride for the nation. It has been one of the highest revenue earners for the state. It earned Rs 4.8 billion last year and pays Rs 2.2 billion in customs.

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Fuel for fear
As global oil price rise where does Nepal stand?

Here in the United States, where the Beed is busy mixing business with pleasure this week, the average price of retail gasoline is poised to cross $3.41 a gallon, nearly double the bill just one year ago. The government is cautiously watching for inflation to set in while economists argue that when that happens, petrol prices will still be lower than in the early 1980s in real terms. The message is: price hikes happen and little can be done about it.

Soaring oil prices have become a global issue far beyond its tyre-buring-stone-peddling manifestation we see in Nepal. Neither elected nor unelected governments like to be seen to be responsible for hiking prices as this has a cascading and direct effect on an army of consumer prices. In India, the government has lost $1 billion in the first eight months of this year subsidising petro products. In India, a left-right coalition struggling to find a middle path has made oil taxation a raging issue. The government has lowered rates and the five-tier Magical Maze. Children can be safely left to play while parents do their own thing. The cost is Rs 175 per hour.

Works has announced the launch of the Yamaha G5. The new motorcycle comes with improved styling and upgraded technology that suits both rough and city roads of Nepal. The G5 is available in four colour combinations and also promises unmatchable mileage—85 kmps per litre. The price is Rs 106, 750.

ECONOMIC SENSE
Artha Beed

Spice Nepal (SNPL) has been embroiled in controversy ever before it launches its service. The director of this joint venture foreign direct investment company, Ajeya Raj Sumargi, spoke to us about his company’s plans and addressed allegations the firm is being favoured.

Nepal Times: The restrictions on Nepal Telecom resuming its services since February First and starting new ones gives reason to believe allegations that you are being favoured in a certain power center.

Ajeya Raj Sumargi: We are on track to start our services, and those who make these allegations are on their own path. Nepal Telecom and us, we are two Nepali companies; we are willing to extend any cooperation necessary. We have come to Nepal at a time when most foreign investors have been scared off. I am confident the Nepali people and consumers will understand this.

But the controversy doesn’t die down. You have to remember we acquired SNPL only two years ago. This tender was awarded in 2000 and it went to the Supreme Court. We actually resurrected a dormant company, paid royalty to the state and brought it to this stage. Many couldn’t believe it. True, there may be some people who mistakenly think their interests will be affected by our presence. But we are bringing telephone service to a country where consumers have to wait hours to make a call. There are many troubles on the streets, we don’t have to answer each and every one of them just because they are controversial.

But Nepal Telecom says it has suffered a lot because of you.

SNPL came into existence after laws were changed and free competition was allowed. Nepal Telecom was not in the dark about this and they should have apprised their clients and employees about it and told them, ‘look we no longer have a monopoly we have to upgrade our services’. Instead, they went for the blame game. And I don’t understand why they have to suffer a loss just because we come in …There are 170,000 subscribers, they have only provided service to 50,000—which are they in a hurry to expand? You can’t blame others if you are being irresponsible yourself.

When do you plan to start?

Before Dasain. We are busy setting up base stations, streamlining our billing system and testing our electronic equipment with a soft launch from 7 August. We have permission to provide the service nationwide in a phase-wise manner. We have an initial investment of Rs 2 billion and will start with Kathmandu, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur, then Pokhara. After that we will expand nationwide.

Who are the main investors?

This is a joint venture with 25 percent of the shares held by Nepalis and the rest by non-resident Nepalis, foreign direct investment, and financing from with foreign banks and loans. The foreign investors are Reynold Holding of Kazakhstan and Delta Trade of Cyprus. The local partner is Raj Group, which I represent, and I am also in the board.

What is the involvement of overseas Nepalis in this venture?

We have to thank Dr Upendra Mahato—he is someone Spice Nepal salutes for having convinced foreign investors to come in. He used his influence to coordinate the investors although he is not directly involved in SNPL. Internationally, the telecom sector is seen to have potential and if the state responds by creating the conditions, foreign investors will come in.
The two of us could travel along the Karanli Highway to Pili from Manma only six days after the attack. Previously the army had stopped us thrice saying that there were mines and it was a war zone. But after hearing that colleagues from Jumla had reached the site human rights activist Kali Bahadur Malla and I decided to go. Manna was armed with rumours and none of them could be confirmed.

We set off at 6:30 AM passing workers who were digging sections of the highway. We reached Birhan Khola by 9 AM and there were people crowding around the teashop. At Bahubhar Shali we saw and complained about reporters in Nepalganj, Mamma and Sunkhel saying that villagers had assisted the Maoists. The soldiers who had escaped were hungry and naked. We gave them food, clothes, shoes, ‘he said, and ‘I accused us of helping Maoists. Why don’t those reporters come here and see for themselves?‘

One elderly man told us about road labourers 20-year-old Nandan Chakal and 22-year-old Sarpe Kami who were going to Manma to fetch rice but were beaten up by soldiers on the way. We pressed on ahead and by 11 AM reached Simlagoon Khola where the army had accused the Maoists of executing 15 soldiers. There was a bad smell—it was a corpse that had been rotting there for six days and soldiers again walking along the side of a cliff. One of them was caught in the crossfire.

Many villagers had benefited also because they could sell their fields. ‘They dug these while the army base was being constructed,‘ he said. ‘I think they had plans for a foundation stone saying ceremony and official opening of the camp. But within two minutes of the helicopter taking off, the attack started. Some 20-30 soldiers who were carrying the unloaded material were captured. Others (including Debkota) successfully escaped. The Maoists killed a local firewood and vegetable supplier, Shakti Malla, accusing him of being a spy. Some 13-14 children who had gathered at the helipad to watch the helicopter ran away as soon as the firing started and reached their homes safely. The villagers suspect the Maoists had wanted to capture the helicopter too but it had taken off by the time they got there. At the Kalika Primary School near the helipad there were still bloodstains and the doors of the school had been blown out. The Maoists had buried two of their dead in the school playground. Principle Hansa Bahadur Shali still tells his children to school every day but there are no students.

As we asked to the villagers who were busy cutting wood and hid in the cowsheds. The women still had shocked and fear on their faces. Villagers we knew drew us aside and wanted to tell us what happened on that fearful night. At about 7 AM, helicopters with nightvision hovered overhead and fired, damaging Jana Malla’s house and setting it on fire. A cowshed was also damaged after being hit by the helicopter. Villagers were complaning all their crops were damaged by Maoists trampling all over them.

Most said the army had treated them well after arriving to help build the helipad. Many villagers had benefited also because they could sell milk, vegetables and firewood. But after the battle, many felt they can’t live here anymore because they fear being caught in the crossfire.

The two of us were hungry and grabbed some biscuits as we headed back to Manma. At 3 PM we passed the soldiers again walking along the side of a cliff. One of them said, ‘It’s us, the journalists.‘ He asked us, ‘How far is Pili?‘

In two hours, I told him, ‘but you look tired. I’ll take you three.‘
Power leakage

Kantipur, 21 August

The Nepal Electricity Authority, already under severe budgetary pressure due to bills yet to be paid for power purchases from private producers, has seen an eight percent increase in ‘leakage’. The leakage has now reached 24.6 percent, which equals the power generated by the country’s biggest producer, the 144 MW Kali Gandaki project. Half the leakage is in stolen power while the rest is due to loss from the system during transmission. This costs the NEA 650 million units (653 Gwh) annually, with a price-tag per unit of Rs 6.81. The Electricity Price Commission last year instructed NEA to reduce its leakage by three percent. Instead it has increased. NEA’s distribution and customer service office says that’s because electricity meters can’t be monitored and billed in that’s because electricity meters can’t be monitored and billed in.

Despondent Koirala

Kantipur, 23 August

Girija Prasad Koirala created quite a national controversy by blurting out in his hometown Biratnagar that Narhari Acharya and Gagan Thapa were royalists. Now that the Nepali Congress chief is back in the capital, he denies saying anything so stupid and is blaming the media for spreading false rumours, suggesting a conspiracy. But his party workers say otherwise. According to them GP said the same sorts of things about late UML leader Madan Bhandari as well. In this view the palace was the brains behind the fast rise in popularity of Bhandari, Acharya and Thapa. The leader also reportedly criticised civil society for ridiculing party politicians in public gatherings. Koirala is all set to turn back national politics by assassinating the aspirations of youth leaders and the republican movement. It seems apparent that he is quite exhausted with the popularity gained by his younger cadre, especially the respect and attention given by party workers. His displeasure was very visible during the mass welcome given to Thapa at Pokhara airport, which Koirala witnessed.

NC workers now believe the leader is worried about the majority of party support going towards Thapa, who is actively advocating a republican system.

Foreign mobiles

Nepal Samacharpatra, 20 August and Kantipur, 21 August

The installation of base stations in Khasa has allowed Nepalis to use Chinese mobile phones in the border area near the Friendship Bridge. Living in a place that is out of reach of mobile network signals, many Nepalis are using Chinese sim cards. Similarly, Nepalis in the western tarai regions of Bhairawa, Taulihawa, Krishna Nagar and Butwal are using Indian mobile systems. Many hundreds of thousands of rupees are flooding to India as Nepali customers switch to Indian telephony because of the delay in Nepal Telecom’s resumption of services. There are an estimated 5,000 Nepali subscribers of the Indian private operator Hutch. In the Universal College and Teaching Hospital in Bhairawa alone, there are said to be more than 200 Hutch phones in use. Instead of cracking down on this illegal use, Nepali security forces reportedly make up the majority of Indian mobile users.

Tortured women

DAILEKH—After the women of Salleri and Nyauli in Dailekh rose up against the Maoists last November many from those villages fled to the district headquarters fearing rebel reprisals. Six Maoists had been killed in the resistance. Tulsi Singh and Jamuna Bhattarai of Nyauli had returned to their villages. The Maoists abducted Tulsi and Jamuna last month and despite Tulsi being pregnant, they beat her up and forced her to carry heavy loads of weapons. Jamuna was accused of leading the anti-Maoist resistance and was also beaten up and tortured after her abduction. Jamuna’s five-year-old son and three-year-old daughter want to know when their mother is coming back. Relatives say eye witnesses told them the two were being tortured in detention.

No regrets

Former COAS Sachit Shumsher Rana in Jana Aasta, 24 August

I have heard there are people who claim that I offered wrong advice to the king. I would like to know what that was. It was my suggestion that the parties should be labelled anti-national, then I can justify my argument. The leaders of these parties went to New Delhi to meet Baburam Bhutya and it was afterwards that we heard they would be joining hands.

I had said that the parties are dancing to a foreign tune. I said so because the parties were meeting the same persons they had once termed terrorists. If they can stoop so low just for state power then we shouldn’t hesitate to call them anti-national. I spoke the truth, and I stick to my position.

When the present Constitution was being prepared we lobbied for certain provisions: the state should be secular and the king should be given the authority of a head of the state. I think the power that the king used by invoking Article 127 was a result of that suggestion.

The other suggestion was that the RNA should be kept under the supreme command of the king. If our suggestion was heeded the army would have been politicised and the Maoists would have occupied the country by now. The army would have suffered the fate of the Bhadra and the Maoists would have occupied the country by now. The army would have suffered the fate of the biomedical scientist. I had said that the parties are dancing to a foreign tune. I said so because the parties were meeting the same persons they had once termed terrorists. If they can stoop so low just for state power then we shouldn’t hesitate to call them anti-national. I spoke the truth, and I stick to my position.
PHOTOGRAPHY

Matthieu Ricard on
New York’s new Himalayan art museum features

Most New Yorkers know the address 17th St and Seventh Avenue as the venue of the former Barney’s, once the city’s most famous men’s store. But its present occupant is the Rubin Museum of Art. Barely a year old, New York’s newest museum housing Asian art, primarily from the Himalaya, spent over $60 million reincarnating this space. Arriving visitors are invited to impress their hand or footprints in a sandbox set up at the museum’s entrance to promote one of its current exhibitions, ‘Handprints and Footprints in Buddhist Art’. The impressions are then recorded on a digital camera with one’s name and entered in the museum’s website, by date. An album in the same gallery displays thangkas with handprints and footprints of Karmapas, and one can find an eclectic display of handprints from other cultural references, including Hollywood. Last week the Rubin was screening ‘Shortcut to Nirvana’, a documentary on the Kumbh Mela, and also featured a dance performance of the Drepung monks from a Tibetan opera. The museum has the mandatory gift shop, which even sells Himalayan red salt. Available in Assam for about Rs 10 a package, it sells here for $7.50. For $14 we bought a non-toxic, vinyl Lotus Bud made in China by Bodhi Toys for dharmic dogs to chew on. Exhibitions also include “Female Buddhists: Women of Enlightenment in Himalayan Art”, displaying depictions of goddesses such as Tara in her different manifestations. Another showcases photos by Kathmandu’s own Matthieu Ricard, the French-born author-monk residing at Boudhanath’s Shechen monastery and who, it turns out, is an accomplished lensman.
on the plateau

... the works of a Boudha-based lensman monk

‘Matthieu Ricard: The Compassionate Eye’ is a welcome change from all the museum’s serious iconography. Here was an eclectic mix of landscapes (mostly Tibetan but with some Nepali images as well) and human figures—from monks leaping in the air at beholding the sea to an elaborately coiffed and bejewelled young girl from Kham, where Ricard spends much of his time, and the Shechen Clinic in Boudhnath, which he oversees. There is also a remarkable portrait of the late Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and another of the current reincarnation, a small boy nuzzled by the Dalai Lama. Ricard is the well-known author and photographer of Journey to Enlightenment and Monk Dances of Tibet, as well as The Quantum and the Lotus, about science and Buddhism. He collaborated with Olivier and Danielle Follmi on Buddhist Himalayas, and was cinematographer and writer of the video, Spirit of Tibet. After the Rubin, he hopes to bring the exhibition of his pictures to Kathmandu.

The Rubin Museum of Art, 150 West 17th Street, New York +1 212 620 5000 www.rmanyc.org

The Monk and the Philosopher: A Father and Son Discuss the Meaning of Life by Jean Francois Revel and Matthieu Ricard Schocken Book, February 1999 336 pages.

A MONASTERY COURTYARD (left)
At the end of an afternoon, the monks of Dzongsar Monastery in eastern Tibet meet to discuss questions they have studied during the day. This monastery was levelled during the Cultural Revolution and has now been partially rebuilt by the local community.

MONK JUMPING IN DEBATE (above)
At Dzongsar Monastery the monks of the philosophical college (shedra) engage in lively and animated debates. Here, a monk putting forth his arguments punctuates each one with a leap in the air and a powerful clap of his hands, as he tries to lead the seated monk to contradict himself through faulty logic.
Indian tourists are returning in droves, bookings for September and October are looking good, and flights in and out of Kathmandu are full.

But Nepal’s travel traders have been let down so badly so often that they aren’t jumping with joy yet. In fact, they’ve all got their fingers crossed that the post-monsoon will mark an end to the years of downturn in arrivals.

Hoteliers, travel agencies and airlines have all learnt that in Nepal, Murphy’s Law applies: anything that can go wrong will. Last year, just as the travel industry was gearing up for a turnaround, 12 Nepali hostages were killed in Iraq and riots hit Kathmandu on 1 September. There were mass cancellations. Although no tourists have been deliberately hurt by Maoist violence, news of the conflict and embassy advisories have kept western arrivals low.

“The bookings look good but the problem is that they are just bookings,” says Ashok Pokhrel at the Nepal Association of Tour Operators. “The political developments in February wiped out all bookings overnight, remember?”

But the fact that international tour operators have started selling Nepal again seems to reflect a renewed confidence in the destination. Nandini Thapa at the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) says, “The last few months have seen an improvement, international tour operators have come to terms with the situation in Nepal. We are hopeful but realistic.”

A number of factors seem to be working in Nepal’s favour. Natural disasters, epidemics and a spate of terrorist attacks worldwide have, ironically, sent the message that nowhere is safe and at least in Nepal the violence is not random. But more importantly, the new budget airlines flying from Nepal have brought airline prices down and this in turn has expanded the market. Prices to Indian destinations have dropped by more than half, pushing up Indian arrivals.

“Air accessibility is the major factor and competition has made Nepal a viable choice as it’s cheaper now for Indians to visit Nepal compared to southeast Asian destinations,” says the NTB’s Thapa.

Subodh Rana at Marco Polo Travels agrees: “Tourism from the region is certainly looking better, flights by Air Nepal have added connections to Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur and with their partner airline they are also looking at connecting Beijing. These are very positive developments.”

Air Nepal could not have come at a better time because Qatar Airways had pulled out its four-weekly Kuala Lumpur flights in June. “We can now revive tours and the Malaysian market looks good,” says Rana. “Air Nepal has also broken the monopoly long held by Thai Airways and competitive fares will further benefit the destination.”

However, long-haul markets, especially Europe and the US, don’t look too promising. Since Holland’s Martinair stopped seasonal flights to Amsterdam west-bound flights via the Gulf are going to be packed this autumn, travel agencies predict.

For its part the NTB is urging Kathmandu-based embassies to tone down their travel advisories and has launched a campaign to enlist Nepali missions abroad to get the word out that tourists have nothing to fear in Nepal. “Ambassadors and consulates are being briefed on how to refute misleading information and provide exact information on Nepal,” says Thapa.

Despite this message, the insurgency and threat of violence still loom large. For now, just to prove a point, tourism entrepreneurs are telling the world that Nepal is as safe, or as vulnerable, as London or any other place in the world.

Tying up with Tibet

If the coming tourist season is looking good, it is in part because Nepal serves as a transit hub for travellers going to Tibet, Bhutan and other neighbouring destinations. “The total number of annual visitors to Tibet is officially around 800,000 of which around 500,000 are foreigners and it would be safe to say that at least 30,000 go via Nepal,” says Ashok Pokharel of the Nepal Association of Travel Agents. “In fact, almost every tour or trek in Tibet involves a Nepali operator because we have the edge over the Tibetans in experience and professionalism.”

In fact it is the Tibet traffic that kept Nepal afloat this monsoon season. But after September, Tibet traffic falls off and Nepal has to pull on its own.
Palpa’s radio classrooms

Madanpokhara’s FM station mixes education with information and entertainment

GUNAKAR ARYAL in PALPA

mong the districts in the midhills of central Nepal, Palpa has a special place. It has high literacy, better living standards because of remittances and an outward-looking politically alert population which is open to new ideas.

But it was in grassroots communications that Palpa emerged in the mid-1990s as a model, first using a public address system. Alone with roads and infrastructure as politically-aware locals demanded services from their representatives.

Elected village and district leaders launched affirmative action programs, involving health and sanitation initiatives. Among the most successful was the Hamro Pathshala program for radio classrooms which was built on radio tuition classes during the SLC exams.

Gunakar Aryal is an economics teacher who has converted part of his house into a community radio station Radio Madanpokhara of which he is station manager.

EDUTAINMENT: The FM station at Madanpokhara (left) with Dinesh Basyal teaching math by radio and a student following the instructions on the radio at home.

February hit Palpa badly. Telephone lines here were cut even as King Gyanendra was announcing his takeover in Kathmandu. The army marched into radio stations, two publications and cable networks and shut them down. The radio stations couldn’t broadcast anything other than music which had advertising for democracy.

All this coincided with the Maoists shutting down private schools in Palpa, and a ban on using government funds for development work. It was a double whammy for a district that placed a premium on education. As the blockade closed highways and farmers suffered, students appearing for SLC had to walk all the way to the district headquarters every day for their exams. Palpa’s SLC results this year were the worst in history, falling even below the national average.

But every crisis throws up opportunities. Some of us at Radio Madanpokhara, frequency 106.9, came up with a cunning plan: why not use radio for distance education? That way you didn’t violate the government’s ban on news, while using the medium to compensate for the closure of schools. We launched programs on health, agriculture, gender issues and education. Among the most

Media watch

Refusing to let go

A week after the Supreme Court ordered the government not to take any legal or administrative moves against Nepal FM 91.8, and radio stations across the country resumed broadcasting news and current affairs, the government has taken the unprecedented step of appealing to the apex court.

The petition by MOIC secretary Lok Man Singh Karki on behalf of the government argues that it has the right to curb news broadcasts under ‘natural law’ and makes the controversial claim that press freedom pertains only to print media and not to broadcasters. Press freedom is a right that the state dispenses, Karki argues.

Legal experts are astounded the government is behaving like an ordinary litigant and appealing to the court to overturn its previous verdict. The court has summoned Nepal FM to discuss the issue next week.

Meanwhile, an international advocacy mission made up of press freedom organisations worldwide has issued its findings in which it comes down heavily on the government and the Maoists for threatening press freedom in Nepal and especially on the six-month ban on news on FM.

“Despite claims by government officials to the contrary, FM and community radio stations in many countries around the world broadcast news. This ban in Nepal is discriminatory, the petition said, urging the apex court to release the radio journalists and broadcasters,” the report adds.

Global support

The International Federation of Journalists is launching the Global Day of Action for Press Freedom in Nepal on 30 August. It includes the Nepal Crisis Signature Campaign with an online petition at http://www.thepetitionsite.com/signatures/622930457

Signatures collected will be submitted to the UN General Assembly scheduled to meet in New York from 14-17 September, which will be attended by King Gyanendra. There is an urgent need for increased international pressure on the Nepal government to restore democracy and press freedom and stop the torture, abduction and harassment of media personnel and other forms of censorship,” IFJ said in a release.

EU human rights award

The delegation of the European Commission to Nepal and the Federation of Nepali Journalists have announced the opening for entries of the 2006 EU/Los Angeles International Media Award for journalists reporting on human rights and democracy. It is an annual global competition receive prizes worth from Rs 127,000 to Rs 850,000.

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Kadirgamar’s passing

Muted coverage of the assassination shows how far we have yet to go to attain true regionalism

The minimlist manner in which Southasia as a whole greeted the assassination of Lakshman Kadirgamar at age 73 indicates the failure of regionalism. The Sri Lankan foreign minister, killed by a sniper close to midnight on 12 August, was a towering regional figure whether you liked his politics or not. A Tamil Christian from Jaffna who actively sought to discredit the Tamil Tigers and thereby earned the undying enemity of one of the most vicious militancies in the world, Kadirgamar was courageous and steadfast in his chosen mission. He represented the old-world colonial-era graciousness that Sri Lanka retains more than any other.

The muted response to the assassination is evident from the newspaper headlines. Granted, editors all over were caught unawares because the killing happened when most of them were closing their pages. By the time news arrived from the wire services, it was too late to give a banner headline for the papers of the 13th. Nevertheless, one could have used bold black headlines instead of the small items tucked on the side, if at all. By the 14th, the story was too old in the front of 24-hour television news to make the front page leader. The only exception was The Hindu of Madras, the Indian newspaper that is most interested in what is happening across the Palk Strait. For most papers in the rest of India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan, follow-up on the Kadirgamar assassination joined the inside ‘international’ section.

The media indifference seemed to go beyond the press and television editorial sections. One really had to look around for discussions organised in the wake of an event which threatened to take Sri Lanka back to the edge of societal disaster. What impact would the assassination have on the fragile ceasefire between the government and the LTTE? Who killed the foreign minister and for what purpose? Was it the LTTE or some of its rogue cadres? Was it disgruntled elements within the Sri Lankan Army? Was it the JVP? Not enough people in Southasia outside Sri Lanka cared to seek answers and interest was limited to signatures on forlorn condolence books kept at the Sri Lankan embassies. Kadirgamar was a key player in the Sri Lankan conflict, principal aide to President Chandrika Kumaratunga and controversial, as anyone in his position would be. Sri Lanka has seen two decades of continuous violence that has pushed itself into the headlines and newscasts year after year after year. If there is one conflict that Southasians know beyond Kashmir due to continuous coverage of carnage it is this conflict.

The passing of Kadirgamar might as well have been an assassination of an obscure politician in a faraway African or Latin American country for the kind of international efforts to stem the spread of terrorism.

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Pakistan hopes cricket will keep them in school

LAHORE—The United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) and the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) have launched a groundbreaking campaign using cricket to focus on girls’ right to education and sports.

UNICEF representative in Pakistan, Omar Ahmed Abdi and PCB Chairman Shaharyar Muhammad Khan signed the agreement on Thursday in the eastern Pakistani city of Lahore, as part of the regional Fair Play for Girls initiative.

“The campaign across South Asia is a creative response to one of the biggest development challenges facing the region. The focus is on how to get more girls into schools and keep them there while they receive quality education,” said Abdi in his speech.

The program in Pakistan is aimed at helping young women to start playing cricket, in the context of school sports, Cartoon film character Meena, who is already familiar to the Pakistani audience as a role model for girls, will lead the campaign. She will be seen playing cricket in videos, on posters and in leaflets, all reaching out to the young audience.

PCB’s Shaharyar Khan told reporters that the board had joined hands with UNICEF to help young Pakistani women to participate in the sport, which is very popular amongst men and boys across the region. Cricket is an enabling sport and can help bring about great change. It transcends the barriers of difference and the division of culture, language and race.

Cricket buttresses fraternity, fair play and equality,” he said.

Women’s cricket was first introduced to Pakistan in 1996 by Saina Khan and Sharmeen Khan, two women who studied in England and had played for Middlesex women’s team. They were amongst the first female members of the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) in 2000, when the club allowed women to join for the first time in its 212 year history.

The PCB organised its first National Women’s Cricket Championship earlier this year. Teams from Lahore, Kame h, Rawalpindi, Multan, Quetta, Hyderabad, Peshawar and Faisalabad took part. The tournament was seen as a key development in female participation in sport, as women from even the most conservative parts of the country took part and displayed their skills on the field.

Under the UNICEF-PCB campaign, two women’s teams will play an exhibition match on 14 September. An invited crowd of 20,000 youth and family members will watch the 30-over match.

The event is designed to explore the potential of girls and promote girls’ education and the right to play women’s cricket. “Our main focus is on two things. First the game is being played in every part of the country today in which it has become an obsession. We need to channel it and secondly we need to make women’s cricket a success,” said Shaharyar Khan.

The PCB formed a women’s section chairperson, Mina Phailias, said she saw the event as promoting girls’ participation in education and sports. “(IRIN)

Girls at the bat

Pakistan hopes cricket will keep them in school

What’s the cure? From my experience most amateurs take practice swings without any aim in mind. Just an air shot. These swings are great for loosening up the muscles but they’re no good when it comes to hitting a ball. The proper way to take a practice swing is to aim at something, such as a blade of grass, with the leading edge of the club. Having a target will help you learn to square the clubface at impact or hitting fat don’t enter the mind. The swing is freer. However, when the ball has to be hit, the subconscious is aware that the clubface must be square and proper contact made. Tension sets in causing all sorts of faults and often results in a terrible shot.

Regroove your game

Take aim with those practice swings

That swing feels so good. It even looks great. It’s going to produce a fantastic shot. Day after day we watch players taking those lovely practice swings as they wait their turns on the first tee. Then the moment of truth arrives. A few days back one of my students summed it up when he asked, “Why can’t I repeat my practice swing while actually hitting the ball?” If I could repeat that during the swing that counts I think I would be a better player.

He couldn’t be more right. Stand witness to just about any average golfer taking two or three beautiful practice swings and then, as they approach the ball for their shot, they uncannily conjure up some strange motions that produce a distorted result.

So why that sudden mess up when it matters? While making a practice swing a player is not under the same pressure as they are while making the actual shot. Thus, thoughts like squaring the clubface at impact or hitting fat don’t enter the mind. The swing is freer. However, when the ball has to be hit, the subconscious is aware that the clubface must be square and proper contact made. Tension sets in causing all sorts of faults and often results in a terrible shot.

So please, do take a practice swing before every shot and try to brush the target spot on the ground. Beware though not to damage the course by taking big divots and don’t take too many of those warm up swings as it unnecessarily delays the game.

Practice your practice swings the proper way and re-groove your game. ●

Deepak Acharya is a golf instructor and Golf Director at Gokarna Forest Golf Resort & Spa, Kathmandu. prodeepak@hotmail.com
KATHMANDU AIR QUALITY

This week’s precipitation was expected but it more than made up for the August deficit. Taken as a whole the monsoon is now catching up and the weather models will have to change to take into account what looks like a trend towards later monsoons. This week’s rain was a result of a twin system of troughs that grazed the southern flanks of the Himalaya bringing copious rains to central Nepal and the Gangetic plains of India. This satellite picture taken on Thursday morning shows the systems have now merged and are washing up along the Himalayan foothills, so expect a wet weekend with gradual clearing early next week. The cloud cover has sent the temperature plunging but it will rise again next week to more normal levels.

KATHMANDU VALLEY

NEPALI WEATHER by MAUSAM BEED

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This week’s precipitation was expected but it more than made up for the August deficit. Taken as a whole the monsoon is now catching up and the weather models will have to change to take into account what looks like a trend towards later monsoons. This week’s rain was a result of a twin system of troughs that grazed the southern flanks of the Himalaya bringing copious rains to central Nepal and the Gangetic plains of India. This satellite picture taken on Thursday morning shows the systems have now merged and are washing up along the Himalayan foothills, so expect a wet weekend with gradual clearing early next week. The cloud cover has sent the temperature plunging but it will rise again next week to more normal levels.
Two years ago, a group of positive-minded Nepali luminaries including banker Himalaya Rana, former TU vice-chancellor Kedar Bhakta Mathema, ex-ambassador Dungesh Man Singh, geographer Harka Gurung and NC politician Narayan Khadka among others got together to lament the fact that Kathmandu didn’t have a public library.

Suddenly it dawned on them that they were indulging in the favourite Nepali past-time of complaining and complaining, but not doing anything. “So we decided then and there that we’d set up a world class library,” Narayan Khadka recalls. It took time for things to get underway, but the library took off. The Society for the Kathmandu Valley Public Library got a Rs 1 million budget allocation last year under Finance Minister Bharat Mohan Adhikari and used it to renovate and rent premises at Bhrikuti Mandap.

Already it is hard to keep up with the response from the public. Just a month after it opened the library has already seen 4,000 visitors. Children have to be literally dragged out by parents when the library closes at five, and there has been an over-whelming response from Nepalis and expats alike with book donations.

“I just can’t believe it–we have got 10,000 books in one month,” says Khadka, who was busy showing around Bernadete Vasseux from the French Embassy when we were there (above). The response from other Kathmandu-based embassies have been great, with the Indian, Chinese, Pakistan, Australian and American missions contributing books, as well as the British School and Lincoln School. Ultimately the library will be an archive for rare and valuable books from Nepal that are now in libraries in London and elsewhere, as well as for books in other languages about Nepal. But more than anything else, Kathmandu needs a world-class public place for reading.

Khadka’s committee has written to King Gyanendra asking for a piece of land near the Health Ministry to build a permanent library and a response is awaited.

Hooked to books

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It's Party time at Bowling Boulevard

Gay Jatra: More than 5,000 people took part in the annual Gay Pride parade for Gay Jatra on 20 September organized by the Blue Diamond Society. Traditionally used to remember the deceased, Gai Jatra has become an important occasion for Kathmandu’s lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered communities.

Ambiyan means business: Suresh Acharya, editor of the new Nepali language business weekly Aajako Abhiyaan, at the newspaper’s launch at the Soaltee Crown Plaza on Sunday.

Hit by both sides: Students of Patan Campus vandalising the Lalitpur District Post Office on Sunday to protest fuel price hikes. On Wednesday suspected Maoists placed a pressure cooker bomb in the post office, which the army’s bomb squad needed three hours to defuse.

Dust to dust: A sidewalk roast-corn seller douses a fire set by students protesting the fuel price hike at Putali Sadak on Wednesday so she can use the charcoal for her work.

That’s me up there: Rajesh Hamal, the brand ambassador for Samsung’s new Samurai television set, speaking at the launch ceremony in the Radisson Hotel last week.
Under My Hat
Kunda Dixit

It is both a pleasure and a pain in the butt to be invited here once again to the Repeater’s Club for the Faces to Faces Program today to speak to you about how well the country has been doing after February First. Since I am among fellow-oxymorons here I don’t need to belabor the obvious and waste your and my time speaking about how the country is doing very well, thank you. Actually, if I don’t need to tell you, then why on earth am I doing exactly that? This is a question that has bedeviled me, and I often ask myself the same question every time I am invited to speak at fora like these, but my speechwriter hasn’t yet come up with a satisfactory answer.

That is why today I am departing from my prepared text to speak frankly and to toot my own trumpet here, if I may. It must be clear to all you political observers, anonymous analysts and western diplomatic sources who don’t want to be quoted by name that despite some impedimentations and difficultivities we are well on track to normalitude in this country.

In fact, just this morning while attending to a call from Nature I was temporarily disconnected because Nature as usual wasn’t calling me on my landline, but when we lost contact again I was naturally delighted. It was proof that things in Nepal are rapidly returning to normalness.

Nepal Telecom needs to be commended for reconnecting our pre-paid, post-paid, and un-paid mobiles after a six month hiatus. And the fact that because of network congestion the phones don’t work anymore again is the surest indication so far that things are back to the pre-February First situation of business as usual. Even if the rollback of the royal takeover may take some more time because of delays in the demolishment of the Democracy Wall, we are already rolling back on the telecommunications front. And thank Lord Vishnu for that.

The other sign of normalment is that bricks are flying again at Ghanta Ghar, the aroma of burning tyres and tear gas once more assail our nostrils outside campuses, the gridlocks are back on Tundikhel. It’s a riot out there, and this is a sure sign that the days of autocratesque abnormalesence are over.

We promised to bring democracy back on track in three years, and it is my pleasure to inform you today that we are way ahead of schedule. I admit, the level of anarchy hasn’t reached last year’s intensificacy, we are still behind our objectivity in the arson attacks and bandas department, but we’re getting there. Government cars are being set on fire outside Ascol just like in the good old days. And yesterday we had our first attempted bombard of a post-office. OK, the pressure cooker didn’t go off, but the message was loud and clear: we are returning this country to normalification with a vengeance.

At the pace we are going we should restore full-blown demagogy by mid-September. Not that it would make any difference to most of you here who are fast asleep. Hey, wake up, the specification is over.