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2006

PEACE



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Weekly Internet Poll # 279

Q. What do you think 2006 has in store for Nepal?

Total votes: 3,986

Back to war 52.9%

Peace process 40.7%

Ceasefire extension 5.4%

Weekly Internet Poll # 280. To vote go to: www.nepalitimes.com
Q. Who stands to benefit the most if the conflict resumes?



Shikhar

We need to talk





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Looking back on 2005

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Shikhar

TORRENT





While the rest of the region looks back on 2005 as a year of natural disasters, Nepal's disasters were entirely manmade. The Indian Ocean tsunami and the Kashmir earthquake devastated Asia but Nepal was thrown into turmoil within a month of the last new year with the royal takeover on 1 February. The rest of 2005 was a political see saw as the political parties protested on the streets, the media struggled against efforts to control it, the Maoists launched their bloodiest attacks ever and then announced a truce for Dasain that has lasted till this week. Front pages of the *Nepali Times* in the past year summarise the tumultuous year.

Our new year resolution: to live in less interesting times.

And ahead to 2006:

Editorial: Let's not go there
Guest Column: A ceaseless ceasefire
State of the State: The year of the hawks
Economic Sense: More of the same
Star Gazing: Year of the eclipse
Under My Hat: 2005 headline grabbers

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Shikhar

Meanwhile...







Shikhar

People power







Shikhar

It's a sign







Shikhar

Extend the ceasefire!







Shikhar

Press under pressure







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LET'S NOT GO BACK THERE

Nepal waits with a deep sense of foreboding for the unilateral Maoist ceasefire to end next week. Nepalis are also bracing themselves for a conjunction of anniversaries that portend an ominous start to the new year.

On 1 February it will be one year since the royal takeover turned the country topsy-turvy and made it an international pariah. There will be many occasions to post mortem the royal coup in the month ahead, but for now suffice it to say that it failed in the king's avowed goal to restore democracy and peace. The regime can't even take credit for the relative calm of the past four months. Instead of working to restore democracy it has systematically taken it apart and tried to gag media, especially citizens' radio.

Then on 8 February is the municipal election that will invite direct confrontation between the government, parties and rebels. On 15 February it will be the tenth anniversary of the 'people's war' which the Maoists are preparing to mark with fireworks. Rebel commanders have made no secret of their intention to foment an urban uprising in Kathmandu (see *op-ed piece*).

Instead of marking the tenth anniversary with more bloodshed, the comrades would do well to use it to enter the political arena. They are much more likely to catapult themselves to state power that way, and what's more they don't have to wreck the country in the process. Besides, without an enemy to fight the king can't use the insurgency as an excuse to return to autocratic monarchy.

The Maoists must know by now that all the conflict has done in the last ten years is make the king more powerful, increase foreign interference, debilitate the nation, sideline moderates, introduce a culture of settling scores through violence and bring untold misery to the Nepali people.

The past four months has also proved that just because

fighters on two sides aren't killing each other, it doesn't mean there isn't violence. In Gulmi, Agrakhanchi and across the country families with brothers and fathers in the Gulf or Malaysia are being forced by Maoists to pay a flat Rs 30,000 tax per year. This is violence—not against class enemies but the very people the revolution was supposed to liberate.

Not extending the ceasefire will only benefit those in charge of the unaffordable and immoral militarisation of this country. Comrades, if you want to make up for the destruction of the past ten years and win back free and genuine support of the Nepali people you will not be provoked into going back to war.



A ceaseless ceasefire

The goal is not just to stop this drift towards dictatorship but to steer the Maoists back to pluralism and non-violence

There are rampant rumours that the king is contemplating finishing off on 1 February 2006 what he started out a year before. Two weeks later, on 14 February the Maoists are expected to commemorate the tenth anniversary of their war with a big bang, possibly in Kathmandu. As we go into a new year, Nepal's three political corners are making their own calculations.

GUEST COLUMN
Puskar Gautam



The king doesn't really want municipal elections slated for 7 February: it's just a sop for foreigners who keep pressuring him to restore democracy. But if there is violence, he can use it to keep the war going and remain at the helm.

The seven-party alliance is hoping low turnout in municipal elections will be a referendum against active monarchy, it will fire up their street agitation and

entrench the king's international isolation.

The Maoists have vowed not to let the elections happen and threatened anyone supporting it. Since the polls are mostly in urban areas, the rebels want to use it to launch the next phase of their revolution which is to 'rise up from the villages to enter the cities'.

The municipal polls will also be an important test of the 12-point agreement and whether the parties and the Maoists really mean it. If they do, they will use it to create the atmosphere for an urban uprising that both hope will put pressure on the king.

There is intense debate within the Maoists and outside about whether or not to extend the four-month unilateral ceasefire. Radical republicans are trying to instigate the Maoists not to extend the ceasefire so it will be easier to prevent municipal polls, a move that ironically sections of the army that want the war also want.

If the ceasefire is not extended, the biggest beneficiaries will be the king and army who can turn around and tell the Americans, Indians and the British: "We told you so." This will help hawks in those countries who want to lift the arms embargo. A return to war will also allow the army to lump the political parties in the same 'terrorist' category as the Maoists. The rebels may then be pushed to protect party cadre from being targeted by the army. But the Maoists also stand to lose the limited political recognition they got during the ceasefire from the international community. The comrades have replied to Ian Martin's query clarifying that 'people's action should by no means imply that our cadres have been instructed to abduct or kill those participating in elections'.

The Maoist leaders openly

admit that the revolution has alienated the people. Unless there is better political indoctrination, it will be difficult for the Maoists to ensure that the rank and file abide by the MoU with the parties. To bring the people to their side and to strengthen their alliance with the parties, the Maoists need to prolong the ceasefire. The Maoist-party front then has a tight-rope walk: it must prevent a return to war at all cost while also keeping up the pressure on the king.

But reports that the Maoists have adopted the doctrine of 'climbing on the shoulder to hit the head' has shaken the political parties and raised doubts about whether the Maoists are really committed to a peaceful struggle. The parties are also worried about the Maoists increasing the number of military divisions to seven from three, and implying that they will kill anyone who supports municipal polls.

The Maoists can't regard the 12-point agreement just as a tactic, its aim is to forge a common people's movement as an alternative to violence. The Maoists themselves call it 'Fusion'—the transformation of their armed struggle into a peaceful urban-based people's movement. The seven-party alliance is not a tool the Maoists can use and discard when they don't have use for it. After all, the goal is not just to end this drift towards dictatorship it is also to help steer the Maoists back to pluralism.

To stay on that peaceful path is a long, hard struggle towards a people's movement. If the king is thinking of another February First, it will be people's non-violent power that will inevitably counter it. ●

Translated from a longer article in this fortnight's *Himal Khabarpatrika*.

The year of the hawks

Could this just be the storm before the calm?

As we say good bye to 2005, it is hard to be optimistic about the new year. Sometimes, a single event is a pointer to the future. King Gyanendra this week appointed Laxmi Bahadur Nirala as the new Attorney General. Earlier, he accepted the resignation of Pawan Kumar Ojha, reportedly tipped for justice in the Supreme Court.

Both were lacklustre lawyers picked

from obscurity solely on the basis of

unflinching loyalty to absolute monarchy. Their last contribution to the cause of rule of law has been defending the constitutionality of the RCCC—perhaps the only body in the free world empowered to probe, prosecute, and punish just about anyone it deems guilty.

Nepal may have the best constitution in the world as Chief Election Commissioner Keshab Raj Rajbhandari continues to insist, but we are unlikely to see it

functioning properly even in 2006. In fact there is more confrontation around the corner as the country lurches along the path of 'monarchical democracy', a Panchayat-era notion propounded recently by one of its last surviving dinosaurs, Tulsi Giri.

Leaving aside the question of political, constitutional, socio-cultural legitimacy of the current regime, 2005 saw its dismal failure in even the fundamental test of any authoritarian regime: maintaining law and order. By refusing to even respond to the unilateral ceasefire declared and extended by the insurgents, let alone take proactive measures to initiate a peace process, it proved that its priorities are different from those of the people.

One can make a fairly educated guess what those priorities are. It's clear that addressing the concerns of the Maoists or mainstream parties is still not in the agenda of his government. The regime is engaged in establishing the unquestioned authority of the palace with single-mindedness that defies logic.

A quick review of 2005 is also a checklist of February First and its aftermath. A whole new superstructure has been created to restore the Panchayat with handpicked sycophants in every branch of government. Continuity in such a system requires that their legitimacy is never questioned.

The past year has been a period of lost hope and missed opportunities squandered away in a spiral of self-destructive confrontation between the palace and the people. December 2004 had ended in confusion. By January 2005 rumours were rife that Sher Bahadur Deuba had opened informal channels of communication with the Maoists to hold long overdue parliamentary elections. King Gyanendra

reacted on 1 February, 2005 by dismissing the prime minister, put political leaders under house arrest, severed telephone lines, cut the internet, sent soldiers into newsrooms, imposed a state of emergency and assumed all state powers on the strength of a single royal proclamation. That he had the full backing of the Royal Nepali Army was abundantly clear. The year of the hawks had begun.

In retrospect, the First February takeover was perhaps necessary to complete the process that was set in motion with the dissolution of parliament on 22 May, 2002. King Gyanendra needed to test his hypothesis that in his kingdom all state power emanated from the institution of monarchy. Few bought this logic, but who were we to question it? The problem with military-backed coups is that the engine doesn't come with a reverse gear.

The Nepali Times office is shifting in the new year. Pointing out the chaos around his desk, a perceptive colleague remarked optimistically: "This is the storm before the calm." ●



STATE OF THE STATE
CK Lal



LETTERS

BAFFLED

I have been reading *Nepali Times* and have a pretty good impression of your team's in-depth independent analysis of news and events. But one thing that baffles me is your continuous pursuit of the idealistic viewpoint that somehow the palace and the parties will come together and find a peaceful solution to the Maoist problem. This may be the first item on the wishlist of every Nepali this new year but the ground reality is so completely different. This is the same regime that wants to piggy-back on the war on terror to legitimise its rule. The moment a credible peaceful solution to the Maoist problem appears focus would shift to the restoration of democracy, meaning the current regime would have to relinquish power and act as second fiddle to the elected government. So let's face it, a negotiated solution is not in the interest of the active king and his cronies. It would be political suicide for them. L Ron Hubbard's merchant of chaos theory holds that society is in the hand of merchants who thrive on chaos. We don't have to go far to find its application in Nepal. Maybe after they crush NTC, destroy NEA and establish themselves as unshakeable arms merchants for both sides, they might forgo their grip on power. By now it must be clear to all why every royal speech ends with "Pashupatinath le hami sabai ko raksha garun". There is really no one else. Let it be said as a post script that this letter is not in support of the corrupt, immoral, useless and utterly disgusting so-called 'political leaders' of Nepal either.

Binod KC, email

● Shiva Gaunle ('To Kathmandu', #278) quotes Comrade Biplab as saying "Feudalism cannot be abolished by attacking small security posts in the villages..." So, can it be uprooted by killing more people than they have already and implementing a totalitarian regime? Sounds like they are desperate. Whatever force they have managed to gather so far will get destroyed by the RNA machine once it gets going. If the Maoist plan is to put political pressure through the parties and armed pressure through the 'people's army' then they are pretty naïve. First, the Maoists have a limited supply of arms coming in, especially in the aftermath of Indian crackdowns along the border. If there is a prolonged engagement, which is very likely, how will they sustain their force? Second, dwindling support and credibility from sympathisers will undermine their 'peaceful' campaign for a 'democratic republic'. An armed struggle against the RNA is a bad idea, both as a strategy and general policy. Rather, the Maoists should make an attempt to deal with the king directly or through a third-party if it comes to that. Or they can go for peaceful civil disobedience with the parties because only they can legitimise the Maoists.

'Pradip', email

● Bihari Krishna Shrestha has been writing in *Nepali Times* without any novelty or substance. The rhetoric in his latest guest column ('Rebuilding democracy', #277) is no different: political parties are bad, it is good for them to be kept out of the political mainstream and King Gyanendra's February First move was a brave attempt in the interest of the nation. He touches on fragmented bits and pieces and never forgets to make a illogical link with community forestry. His arguments mix up right issues with wrong ones to justify a biased conclusion. Perhaps there would have been some people at some point of time who agree with Bihariji's attempts to portray the essence of the February First coup as good. However, it did not take long for their 'euphoria' to turn out to be an illusion after they saw the February First move was not invented for peace making, good governance and consolidation of democracy. It was all about reinventing the panchayat autocracy, if not a *mandale* Raj. I do not believe that Bihariji lacks the knowledge that permitting people to govern their destiny through their representatives can help rebuild democracy. What all this sycophancy is about is difficult to tell.

Krishna Adhikari, Reading, UK



● Every political force in this country should read '100 nonviolent ways' (#278) if they haven't already. It should be amply clear to the Maoists that armed struggle has taken them into a dead-end street. The king should realise that his army is not going to protect him forever. He must have the foresight and statesmanship to devolve power so it doesn't have to be wrested from him. And the political parties can't say bandas are non-violent because they are enforced with the threat of violence.

Jaya Gauchan, email

● The Maoists may have charted out a new strategy as Shiva Gaunle mentions in his report from Rukumkot but have they thought about what this will do to their pact with the parties? The ceasefire and the agreement with the parties gave the Maoists unprecedented public relations mileage within the country and with the international community. True, the king has not responded to their ceasefire. But the answer to that should be to reinforce the commitment to join mainstream politics, not revert to violence. Otherwise they will find that violence is a genie they can't control.

Name withheld, email

NOT PIRATES

Great article by Vibek Raj Maurya ('Windows of opportunity for Nepali computing', #278). But as an ex-software giant employee

and a firm believer in technology for all, I think the entry of NepLinux will do little to 'set off a debate in Nepal about licensing and pirated software'. What's there to debate after all? We have well respected Pvt Ltd dealers who sell Windows XP for Rs 125 (I got a Rs 25 coupon with mine) or deliver new PCs with OS and tons of applications, all of which is fondly termed 'New Road Software' and free of charge. Can anything be called 'pirated', ie stolen when, a licensed business in Nepal sells it? And can one pick on software when the majority of Chinese hardware sold in the kingdom also contains so called 'pirated' firmware? Can a working family of four living in Nepal ever think of affording an educational Windows application if the price tag is \$ 50 instead of the customary Rs 50? So the debate comes down to something simpler and one that has been waged for decades: should computing be affordable for all, or just a select few in society? Linux and the concept of Open Source software is the alternative but unfortunately, these models are decades behind the commercial offerings as far as ease of use and device-independence. Educational discounts for software licenses offer 30-40 percent of the full retail price: for example that reduces the price tag of Microsoft Office to Rs 10,000, which is more than Pop makes in monthly salary. Sounds crazy but this scenario can be seen in all venues of life where people of limited means can benefit from new technologies. So if we are to debate 'piracy' let's first examine just what is being stolen from whom and who needs *what* the most.

Jigme Gaton, Kathmandu

● Thank you for the article on Nepali computing. Although it was more concerned about the technical details and operating system philosophies, it is clear that NepaLinux has a difficult road ahead and its penetration will depend on how well Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya can target users in Nepal who have never used computers before. A first time user of computers may be more amenable to Nepalinux and remain loyal. We must not forget the structure and dynamics of the Nepali computer market and NepaLinux must have a targeted and strategic plan to move ahead. I request all computer users to try and make it a success.

Rajani Swar, email

CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE

Typos are one thing but for such a snafu to pass through the editorial desk tells me that someone needs to brush up on their business grammar. A 'debtor' is someone who owes you money and a creditor is somebody you owe money to which in this case of Cosmic Air is a tiny bit of relief at best ('Pull up...Pull up...', #278). I am sure that the creditors of Cosmic were not amused. Naresh Newar's article reversed the books for Cosmic with one simple word. Now if only the poor CFO at Cosmic Air could figure out a piece of such magic to keep his airline flying!

Tsedo Sherpa, email

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Thoughts escape

Moving to New Zealand last year, my personal reality warped and shifted. I functioned efficiently enough, cleverly masking my unfamiliarity with everything from push-button pedestrian crossings to obscure Kiwi slang.

If nothing else, growing up in a bi-cultural, trans-national family in Kathmandu—with its own heady mix of ethnicities, histories, religions, languages, classes and realities—teaches you how to adjust and cope. Inwardly, however, I longed for *my* home. I still find myself biting my tongue when tempted by comparisons and fear boring people with the never-ending commentary on life here that runs through my head.

More complex still is coming up with suitable responses to the questions people ask about Nepal. Of course, I'd expected it to be obscure, a bit of a novelty, but nothing prepared me for the fact that for many people here, where I come from—and every other country like it—simply doesn't exist. "Kathmandu" is an adventure brand, Asian means Chinese, Nepal could be somewhere in the Middle East and Everest is a mountain that a New Zealander climbed.

There are no comparisons, no points of reference. Every comment, explanation or anecdote I tried only made me feel worse,

NEPALI PAN

Jemima Sherpa



knowing how completely misinterpreted it would be. How do you explain, in what is an essentially a middle-class, developed, easygoing island,

another country that has a 45.2 percent literacy rate and over 40 percent of its 27 million people living under the poverty line in a landlocked area smaller than the South Island alone?

Statistics like these mean nothing in the 'Pavlova Paradise' but neither do my bumbling attempts to sketch a true sense of my life at home. Here the concept of having household workers equates with being filthy rich. 'Poor' means a broken down car, the unemployment benefit, beer bought with student loan money and clothes from The Warehouse.

Kathmandu, with its bowl of old carved wood and new plastic waste, its hordes of people at rush hour and the eerily empty streets during violence-tinged political strikes is far away. I find myself unable to even explain pollution here, where the famous wind blows

air so bracingly clean that my lungs feel scrubbed raw.

Equally alien is the concept of a place with old social traditions still dictating arranged marriages, taboos, beliefs and superstitions around every conceivable issue and yet no drinking age, no smoke detectors and future elections that are 'not applicable'.

A story about a bomb scare at my former workplace is too dramatic, implying an all-out war zone. My friend's traditional parents sound too repressive, echoing Saudi-style restrictions,

Friends in cyberspace united only by our alienation

my work in the local media too impressive connoting levels of celebrity and pay that simply don't exist in Nepal.

I have found it easier to revert to a simple, "Well. It's certainly different..." and try to leave it at that. Still, everyone needs their fix of home and Wellington's miniscule Nepali population has caused me to seek communities and connections of a different sort. Like many young educated Nepalis abroad, I find myself escaping regularly into cyberspace to ease bouts of homesickness and reassure myself of Nepal's existence.

Most days I ritually check the local news sites and then scour BBC and CNN for mentions, before logging on to the various forums and chat programs where others like me seek common refuge from all over the world.

Here I keep old friends and sometimes make new ones, most of us united only by our alienation. Against a backdrop of bytes and pixels, I trace people's lives as they crisscross the globe. Linked in a common beginning, I hear impressions of places I will probably never see.

Bangkok, Delhi, London, LA, Utah, Chile, New York, Sydney, Canada... and still we talk, of life and love and losses, in a strange new language of Nepali words typed in English and interspersed with the instant messenger smiles and frowns and tears. For now, I suppose, that's as close to reality, and home, that we're going to get. ●



Indian sinophobia

But there are limitations on Nepal's use of the China card

KUNDA DIXIT
in NEW DELHI

A week before King Gyanendra took over on 1 February last year, he got Sher Bahadur Deuba to close down the Dalai Lama's office in Kathmandu.

Ever since, the royal regime has been bending over backwards to lean on China. The king himself traveled to the Boao Summit in April, Foreign Minister Ramesh Nath Pandey has been commuting to Beijing, COAS Pyar Jung Thapa was there in November. And there has been a procession of Chinese delegations in Kathmandu, including a high-level Tibetan visit and one by senior PLA officials this month.

By trying to ingratiate itself to Beijing, King Gyaenendra is using his father's policy of playing India off against China. Critics point out that policy was made at a time after Nepal's two giant neighbours had just fought a bruising war in 1962. Today, they add, China and India are bhai-bhai again this strategy is hopelessly outdated.

Is it? Going by the shrill sinophobia in sections of the New Delhi chatterati, military, business and political establishment it looks like the king's effort to use residual Indian paranoia about China as leverage to build support for himself is working. The benefit may be short-term, but that is all the king needs to ride it out. This 'inside track' into Indian policy-making circles is probably why the monarch exudes so much confidence despite his international isolation and unpopularity at home.

Last week, the New Delhi papers prominently extolled the virtues of Bhutan's King Jigme's announcement that he was stepping down in 2008. Every Indian paper made unfavourable comparisons with King Gyanendra. 'There are kings and there are kings,' said the *Times of India*. The general refrain: here is Bhutan's king taking his country towards democracy while Nepal's king is taking his country away from it.

This week, the papers are full of \$25 million unpaid RNA arrears to various Indian companies for military hardware. The underlying message is: we could overlook it but not if you keep taunting us.

But the divergence of Indian policy towards Nepal is often played out in the media with the pro-democracy line espoused by the Ministry of External Affairs and leftist politicians and the counter opinion pieces that portray the king and the army as bulwarks against a Maoist takeover of Nepal.

India's lingering memory of being 'stabbed in the back' in 1962 is so strong there is growing alarm that South Block's diplomacy towards Nepal is

'pushing Kathmandu into the Chinese fold'. There is worry this would 'diminish India's standing in the region'.

One retired Indian official summed it up: "To counter American policy of containing China, Beijing is containing India." He is convinced China engineered the Nepali veto at SAARC in Dhaka.

Till recently, conventional wisdom was that rapprochement between China and India and closer economic ties meant the two weren't competing with each other in Nepal or elsewhere.

ed piece recently in the *Indian Express* characterised the sentiment among a segment of the establishment New Delhi thus: 'This too-clever-by-half king has to be taught a lesson he won't forget in a hurry.'

The sinophobia here is also restricted to a relatively small section of the military-intelligence establishment and the political opposition. Political and business opinion in favour of increasing trade and other links with China is much bigger. This section is more worried about how India can



While many still adhere to this view, some aren't so sure any more. In fact, those who talk about a benign China are now often labeled in the Indian press as 'Beijing apologists' and part of a 'pro-China lobby'.

King Gyanendra's strategy of obtaining military aid and buying arms and ammunition from China and Pakistan has worked brilliantly to stoke fears in New Delhi about Nepal going over to the other side. Sections of the Indian military establishment who have all along been against the arms embargo take this as proof the MEA's policy is pushing Nepal to China. Even though the recent \$1 million military grant and the 18 trucks of grenades and bullets last month may not have been substantial, its prominent coverage in the Indian media stoked suspicions again.

Nepal's strategy of needling India by brandishing the China stick, however, is fraught with dangers and is already triggering a backlash here. Even some hawks now think King Gyanendra has gone too far.

"He's pulled a fast one, and we mustn't allow him to get away with it," a policy adviser usually sympathetic to the monarchy told us. Indeed, an op-

keep pace with China's blistering economic growth and emulate its success in wooing foreign direct investment

China is already India's second-largest trading partner and it is unlikely that New Delhi will want to jeopardise its future relations with Beijing by quibbling over Nepal. Neither side would benefit if Nepal's conflict raged out of control. Besides, New Delhi and Beijing demarcated their spheres of influence long ago. One former official in Kathmandu told us senior Chinese have been telling Nepali officials for the past 25 years to "sort it out with India". The only issue that could worry the Chinese now is persistent talk among American hawks about 'containing China' and how the Indo-US strategic alliance will pan out in the future.

The royal regime thinks it can stoke this primordial distrust to its advantage. It must see Burma's junta as a role model: getting away with crushing democracy for 35 years despite international outrage and western sanctions. And the fact that New Delhi tolerates and does business with Burma's junta is probably not lost on Nepal's ruler. ●

John Players Collection

John Players has released its Fall Winter Collection 2005. Focusing on youth, it includes options for work and party wear—Structures@Work and Cosmopolis. The former offers premium textures such as jacquards, dobbies, chevrons and herringbones, in vibrant colours. The bottoms come in regular fits with earthy tones of beige, charcoal, greens, browns and greys. Cosmopolis features trim fits and soft fabrics, with prints, motifs and paisleys on corduroys. The Fall Winter Collection 2005 will also see the introduction of casual jackets in polyviscos Lycra, corduroys and 100 percent wool fabrics. Its subtle colours will contrast with the cold winter world.



Domestic quarrel

Royal Nepal Airlines pilots flying domestic routes have given an ultimatum to management till 31 December to meet pay, progression and benefit demands. Salaries and allowances in the state-owned airline are much lower than in private airlines even within Nepal and the carrier has seen a haemorrhage of pilots to the private sector. Nepali private airlines, on the other hand, have suffered an exodus to private carriers in India where there is a severe shortage of flight crew. Eight Nepali pilots currently fly with Air Deccan and others with Air Phuket in Thailand. Sources said Royal Nepal Airlines' domestic flights may come to a grinding halt in the new year if negotiations with management are not fruitful.

New Pokhara bank

Pokhara entrepreneurs have established the Himchuli Development Bank in the resort town. The bank was inaugurated last week by Nepal Rastra Bank Deputy Governor Krishna Bahadur Manandhar. Customers can open an account at the new bank with as little as Rs 1,000 while the interest rate for a daily savings account is 5.5 percent.

High five for Laxmi

Laxmi Bank recorded 150 percent growth in net profit in 2004-2005 compared to the previous year, it announced at its 5th AGM in Birganj on Monday. It was the first annual meeting since the bank obtained approval to operate as a full-fledged branch in Kathmandu. Other results announced included deposit and lending growth of 53 percent and 56 percent respectively during the same period. Total paid up capital stood at Rs 609.84 million.

NEW PRODUCTS

HAIR STUDIO: the reputed beauty parlour in Bhat Bhateni Department Store, has shifted to another location within the Department Store itself. The new premises, in the same modern and comfortable style, are much bigger for the convenience of customers and finally also include a Gents section.

More of the same

Indications are that the new year will be no different than the old one

When the streets of Kathmandu became cleaner and garbage heaps disappeared after February First, people said; “Wow, things are working.” A year later the streets are back to the way they were, garbage is a familiar sight. Walk around the streets of New Road on a Saturday afternoon and you will find that vendors have taken over sidewalks, makeshift stalls selling momos and other finger food. Traffic discipline is non-existent. In India in 1975 when



ECONOMIC SENSE
Artha Beed



Indira Gandhi declared an emergency, the trains ran on time for a while and people celebrated. However, things went back to normal pretty soon. Same here.

Most economists would agree that autocracies can make reform difficult, especially in this era of pressure for free market changes. When parliamentary democracy is suspended, the mood turns anti-establishment and everyone blames the government for everything that goes wrong. Similarly when vibrant opposition exits, self-regulation emerges. Governments in Japan, India, Philippines and Indonesia have changed on many pertinent economic issues.

Democracy ensures that the Laludom can't go on and on. A system without accountability breeds shady backroom power

brokers who can provide or deny, favours at will. Someone must be providing protection for the proliferating stalls around Dharmapath—just as someone must be steering the much, much bigger usurpation by cronies of state-owned utilities.

In the current system where many business people are holding important offices, it becomes even more important that such regulation is taken seriously. How can office holders ensure that they draw a line between the business they conduct as individuals and their new responsibilities as officials? How to be sure that they are not profiting from the knowledge they have about laws to be amended or policies the government is planning? How not to be swayed by personal interests and stall important regulatory bills? How to implement new policies without bias?

Business people by and large are politically conservative. Democracies are just too messy and one has to keep too many sets

of people happy. But in the current system one just needs to be cosy with a few political masters and some of them may even belong to one's fraternity.

One issue haunting the current administration is that despite the end of corrupt democracy, things are still as corrupt as before. In the absence of an opposition watchdog, errors and omissions in anti-corruption campaigns are overlooked. Unfortunately, with the absence of parliament, state finances do not become an issue of public debate. Similarly, the role of the Auditor General's office becomes fuzzy as its employees are uncertain if their objective should be to act as strong auditing or to keep their jobs.

Domestic and foreign investors are encouraged by strong regulation, the absence of conflicts of interest and a government focused on economic growth. In 2006 we will see how highly placed individuals balance their political ambitions with the country's economic needs. ●

“Prospects for Nepali tea really good”



NARESH NEWAR

Germany's Wolfgang Heilman has worked as an expert in raw tea and coffee processing and production for the last 30 years, specialising in mechanical and thermal process engineering, food packaging technology and quality assurance. He spoke to *Nepali Times* last week during his visit here to address a seminar on Nepal's tea industry.

Nepali Times: How do you rate Nepal's tea quality?

Wolfgang Heilman: Nepal's tea is of really high quality, especially that from east Nepal, which has a better taste than Darjeeling tea. The prospects for exporting Nepali tea are really good.

Most tea-producing countries are focussing on instant and organic tea products. Should Nepal also look that way?

I believe that instant tea production is possible in Nepal. You have 6 million kg of tea available for such production and on top of that, Nepal can afford to sell at a lower price than other countries. Most importantly, Nepal's tea quality is so high that even if you sell instant tea at market price you can still compete with others.

Can we compete with China and India?

The main difference between China, India and European companies is the labour cost, which is very low in Nepal. So this is where the competition ends.

Where are the best markets for Nepal's tea?

Europe especially. If you start producing organic tea, then there will be more opportunity. Europeans are becoming more interested in organic products.

You visited manufacturing plants in Nepal. What was your impression?

Some of the machines have been running for many years and should be replaced. I was however impressed with a green tea factory that has expensive Japanese equipment. You have to keep in mind that the market for green tea is increasing a lot while that for black tea is declining.

But can Nepal afford to upgrade those machines?

In principle, it is a huge investment. For the time being, all

the machines are being supplied by India, even though they are very expensive.

Your organisation, Senior Expert Services, has provided technical advice and training to a number of tea and coffee producing countries. Any concrete results?

Our purpose is to transfer the knowledge of retired managers to the firms because after working for 30 years you are able to share that knowledge easily....We helped Ethiopia build a coffee factory, which has been very successful at exporting. We also played a role in the decaffeination of tea, just starting in China and Guatemala's industry, which is building a factory on roasting and packaging.

What should Nepal do to improve exports?

Nepal should focus on two things. First, it needs good functioning industries free from bureaucracy and corruption. Second, you need good international marketing. Germany's famous mountaineer Reinhold Messner has been taking the initiative to tell German people that Nepal is not only about the Himalaya but also about high-quality tea and agro-food products...Nepal is a well-known in Germany, so in principle, Germany should be a good market. The only thing this country should manage is its political situation and things will be easy.

But isn't it difficult to establish a market in Europe?

Absolutely not. We are a very free and open market, as long as you follow quality and legal restrictions. We don't like pesticides in tea and coffee. There's also a market for low-cost tea products because there are also poor people in Germany who are interested in cheaper tea.

The king goes east, the army goes west

Jana Aastha, 28 December

आस्था

Call it a coincidence or a calculated move, the king is starting his visit to the eastern region just when the Maoists' extended unilateral ceasefire is set to end.

The trip, from 1-22 January, is aimed at bolstering the morale of security personnel and royalists. Another coincidence is that on the same day last week when the Maoist leaders announced that the ceasefire would be ending, the army launched its biggest operation so far in the Maoist heartland of Rolpa being coordinated by the RNA's mid-western headquarters, which has been relocated to Surkhet from Nepalganj.

Since 22 December, thousands of soldiers from Dang, Salyan, Rukum and even Kathmandu have been deployed. On the fifth day of the army's advance towards Rolpa, there was a fierce battle between soldiers and Maoists in Dumlachaur of Gairigaun. At least one soldier and two rebels were confirmed dead. However, the battle looks like it was more serious than that, 15 soldiers have been admitted to the military hospital in Chhauni.

Reportedly, the army did not have much difficulty overcoming the rebels near Holeri but the real fight began after about 3,000 soldiers reached Gairigaun on Monday. The rebels tried to pin them down by firing mortars from nearby hills. The army retaliated with long-range weapons and by evening the two sides were involved in close combat. Perhaps anticipating more such clashes, the army is keeping half-a-dozen helicopters on stand-by in Rukum's headquarters Libang, at an army base in Dang and at mid-western headquarters in Surkhet.

For this biggest-ever offensive against the Maoists, the army has deployed 25 companies, one from each battalion in the country. The operation is being led by the chief of the army's training directorate, Brig Gen Sharad Neupane, who previously led the No 4 Brigade in Surkhet at the time also responsible for Rolpa and Rukum districts. This is the army's fourth offensive in Rolpa with Thawang as the target. Officials claim this effort is different because it is more result-oriented while past actions focussed on propaganda.

Indeed, details of the operation have been kept tightly guarded and first reports came out only three weeks after it began. If the army had publicised the move beforehand, it could have created a PR nightmare because the Maoists' ceasefire was still in place. That could explain why

the Maoists, who used to vacate even their strongholds as soon as the army arrived, chose to attack this time—to expose the army offensive during the ceasefire. The clash also demonstrates that the rebels have decided to counter-attack all army operations. This week we may hear of more clashes, and more casualties particularly in Rolpa because Gairigaun marks the gateway to the Maoist heartland.



MIN BAJRACHARYA

Have faith

Rajparishad lifetime member
Bhadrakumari Ghale in
Gorkhapatra, 26 December

गोरखापत्र

History has shown that bad days do not last forever. The night may be long but daylight will certainly break. All we need now is patience, everything will be fine when the day dawns. Truth will prevail and those who will be judged right by the people will remain and those who will not shall no longer exist. Elusive, incorrect and anti-people activities will not be sustainable. Ours is a culture that has witnessed practices like self-immolation and compared to such incidents what is happening in the country now is nothing. Our past has taught us to be patient and hopeful for the future. We are of the society that sees god even inside rocks. That is why we need not panic. Whatever problems we have now will gradually be solved. No one should doubt that. Peace is what everyone wants today. National agencies have been mobilised to restore peace permanently. Now is the time for everyone to help re-establish peace by actively taking part in elections. This is something the political parties should understand. The Maoists should stop being adamant and join peaceful mainstream politics. There is space for every Nepali when there is a king. That space is constitutional monarchy and multiparty democracy.

Capital plans

Dristi, 27 December

दृष्टि

In a bid to help the seven-party alliance end autocratic monarchy, the Maoists have selected new commanders for the Kathmandu Valley and made their third division responsible for military activities in the valley. Its commander is Bibidh and co-commander is Sanjiv. Previously, Bibidh was co-commander of the western division and Sanjiv was commander of the eastern command's Mechi-Koshi seventh brigade. Maoist sources say the two men will now lead the 13th and 15th battalions in Kathmandu and that they were chosen because they are unknown to security forces in the valley. The Maoists also now have a special command for the valley and surrounding areas. Last year, the central committee had annexed the capital to the eastern command. Maoist sources claim they have made 'all necessary arrangements' to enter Kathmandu, including 'learning from past mistakes'. The idea this time seems to be to deploy forces in adjoining districts and bring them in when required.

Kicked out

Jana Bhabana, 26 December

जाना बहवना

The quarrel within the Nepali Students Union (NSU), sister organisation of the NC, has peaked. After NC Vice Chairman

Sushil Koirala disbanded the NSU leadership and named his own man, Mahendra Sharma, as chairman, the dispute has spilled out into the streets. The NC working committee is planning to take action against student groups protesting the new leadership. If that happens, leaders such as Gagan Thapa and Pradeep Poudyal will also be prosecuted. Both were accused by the NC working committee, led by Girija Prasad Koirala's daughter Sujata Koirala and vice-chairman Sushil Koirala, of being 'royalists'. In an interaction program organised a few days ago by the Reporter's Club, Sujata Koirala clearly stated that all who chanted slogans and raised black flags of protest against the party chairman were royalists. Thapa and Poudyal are popular leaders within the NSU and have direct influence within the NC as well. The party's Narhari Acharya, Ram Chandra Poudyal and Arjun Narsingh have shown their solidarity with Thapa. But the Koirala family shows no sign of relenting. This fight is not new. The process of staging coups and bringing in new leaders is starting to become a trend within the NSU.

Encroachment

Sanghu, 26 December

सोघु

India's encroachment into Nepali territory has been occurring for some time now, and this week there was another violation of the border in eastern Kailali. Indian security forces personnel recently ploughed land and encroached nine metres beyond the border pillar. Confronted with evidence the Indian side responded by saying they were making roads for SSB security forces that patrol the area. Locals complain that when the border area was ploughed, crops including potatoes, mustard and sugarcane were destroyed. Ram Prasad Sharma, chief district administrator of Kailali, says he knows nothing about the encroachment. we shall also ignore the borders and encroach upon their lands," they warn.

Wilful defaulter

Ghatana Ra Bichaar, 28 December

घटना र बिचार

The Indian government has asked Nepal to pay unpaid bills for military assistance it supplied to the Royal Nepali Army since 2002. Sources in New Delhi say the palace has not responded to repeated requests. The equipment included vehicles, helicopters, machineguns, motors, Insas rifles, ambulances and bulletproof jackets worth IRs 5 billion and was provided on condition that Nepal pay 30 percent of the cost while the Indian government bore 70 percent. The unpaid bills amount to over \$26 million, according to reports. But it appears that the government is



ह्याँ प्रजातन्त्र छैन भन्ने एउटै उदाहरण दिनुस् मलाई ।

दया हेरौं न, उदाहरण !

Tulsi Giri: "Give me one example to prove there is no democracy here."
"Let me hear you give one example..."

नेपाल Nepal , 1 January

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

“(Planned disruptions to municipal polls) should by no means imply that our cadres have been instructed to abduct or kill those participating in the elections.”

- Maoist leadership in a letter to UN human rights chief in Nepal, Ian Martin

simply not interested in paying the bill. While New Delhi has not heard from the Nepali government, private Indian companies that sold the hardware are now preparing to drag the Indian government to court because they have not been paid. The firms include Ashok Leyland, Tata Motors, Hindustan Aeronautics and Bharat Electronics, among others. In contrast, the Nepali government has paid Rs 70 billion to the Chinese government for military assistance received a few months ago, according to Nepal Rastra Bank records. The equipment includes 18,000 grenades, arms and ammunition.

Royal airline

.....
Samaya, 29 December

Royal Nepal Airlines Corporation put one of its Boeing 757s at the disposal of King Gyanendra's recent 21-day tour but it looks like it will get paid only for 48 flying hours. Already on the verge of

bankruptcy, the national flag carrier is sure to plunge deeper into crisis thanks to the state's abuse of authority. According to RNAC officials, the 757 was chartered at the rate of Rs 770,000 per hour. During the 21-day tour, the king used the plane to attend the SAARC summit in Dhaka and then the information summit in Tunisia. He then travelled on to Burundi, South Africa, Tanzania and Egypt. The government is paying the airline only for the hours it was in the air, which totals Rs 37 million. If the plane had flown its scheduled flights during those weeks, RNAC would have earned more than Rs 93 million, according to a senior pilot. This doesn't even count the ground handling charges, landing and parking fees at various African airports and the airline's losses for rerouting and cancellation of booked passengers. So the king's visit cost the airline and ultimately the Nepali people, Rs 56 million. And that is only the airline's losses.



MIN BAJRACHARYA

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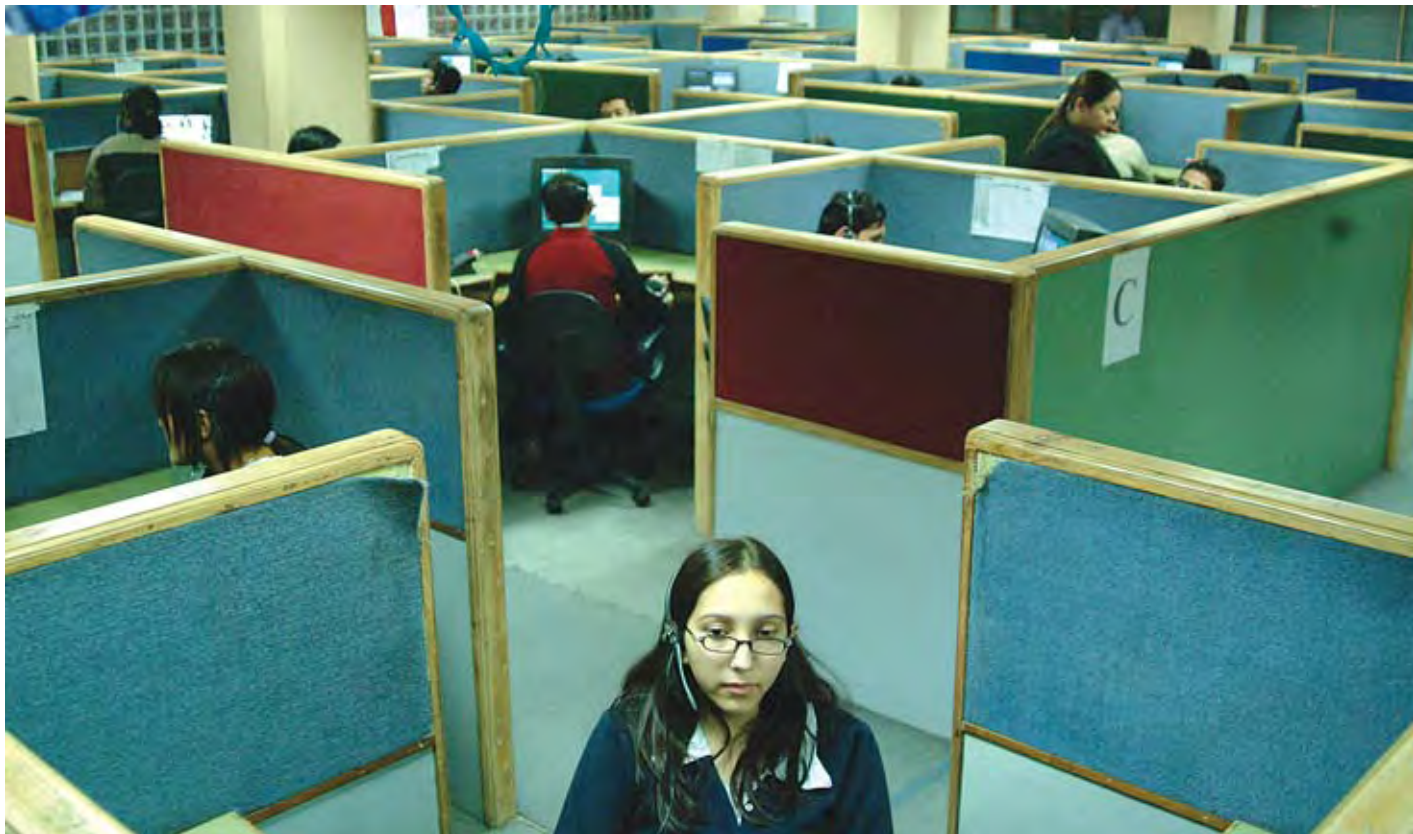
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PICS: ANUP PRAKASH

Nepal calling

AARTI BASNYAT

"Hello, may I speak to the business owner please? This is Sarah," says a sales agent using one of the many pseudonyms she uses to talk to clients halfway across the world. Sarah is among 200 young Nepali men and women at Serving Minds, one of the country's biggest call centres.

Re-launched in 2003, Serving Minds was Nepal's pioneering call centre and has become proof that Nepalis can compete with better-known businesses in other countries that serve clients in the globalised economy.

"We are more than a call centre," explains Serving Minds president, Ashish Kapoor. "We also serve all other needs of clients like customer acquisition, book-

keeping, software development, maintenance and filing tax returns."

In fact, call centres aren't called call centres anymore. The preferred name is business process outsourcing (BPO) and because of the Information Technology revolution it can be located anywhere in the world where there is trained manpower. Serving Minds helps clients grow and expand their home markets anywhere in the world with most of their workforce located in Kathmandu.

Serving Minds has now become one of the largest employers of Nepali graduates. Starting with only six employees in 2003 Kapoor says it hopes to have 500 staff by next year and eventually about 1,000 people working in the soon to be completed premises near Soaltee Hotel.

Kathmandu's call centres finally put Nepal on the world's outsourcing map

That facility will include a gym, recreation centre, 24-hour cafeteria and feature state-of-the-art technology.

"Nepal has the demographics of a mini-metro in India but with a higher unemployment rate among graduates," says Kapoor, "The level of English literacy is also the same if not better, so why not Nepal?"

Though one hears stories of sales agents being put through rigorous accent training to make them sound more 'American', this is not the case at Serving Minds. The accent is hardly important but confidence is considered an essential asset, says the company's human resources and administration manager, Chetna Shrestha. "Some of them acquire accents with the work they do, so it is not really a requirement," she says.

Staff are constantly evaluated to determine the promotions and benefits that each employee receives. But doesn't this produce a high-stress environment, with conditions in many BPOs in India and the Philippines now being described as "sweatshops"?

Kapoor responds with another question: "Which job is not stressful? And where do you not have to work hard to earn promotions? We have incentives and a work culture completely geared towards better performance."

So we asked one of Serving Minds' management trainees, Suran KC if he found it stressful. "There is a healthy competitive environment which makes us want to do better," he replied, "The pressure to improve performance is there but when you see your colleagues doing well you feel you can do better."

The BPO market in India is now a \$5 billion a year annual industry with 2.5 million young college graduates employed in the sector. Boosting the purchasing power of millions of young people has actually transformed India's economy with a boom in sales of consumer goods and a whole new mall culture among Indian youth.

Kapoor thinks Nepal could easily cash in on the BPO boom just as India has. He adds, "I don't understand why people say Nepal can't compete in the global market. Our workforce here has been as competitive and competent as anywhere else in the world. It's all about the ability to serve efficiently and scale up to meet customer needs. The question: 'why Nepal?' shouldn't arise." ●

Suran KC, management trainee

Suran KC, 23, is a management trainee for customer care in Serving Minds. A graduate from Nepal College of Travel and Tourism, she earns Rs 15,000 a month. "A friend of mine was working here. I saw an opportunity and took it. When I first joined, there were only about 40 people but now there are more



than 200," says Suran. Her parents were concerned that she would be working late at night but once they saw the potential for career growth and the working environment, they got comfortable with the idea. Asked about the work environment, Suran says, "there is a lot of pressure working as an agent but I guess I did quite well as in about six months I was promoted to a sales supervisor". The best part of the job is the work environment, where everyone has become friends, she adds. "You come to office to meet friends and have a lot of fun while you work."

Shrijan Khadka, agent

Shrijan Khadka, 21, joined as an agent after getting a BBA from Kathmandu University and earns around Rs 7,500 a month. "I wanted to join earlier but due to the late-night shifts, I wasn't able to arrange time as it would have hampered my college work," he says. What drew



him to Serving Minds is the chance to talk to people from other countries, which he feels will help to build up his confidence and communication skills. His family completely supported his decision. Shrijan is sold on the performance-geared work environment but says it's not easy. "It gets harder as you start becoming better at the job. If you want to work you need to have the courage to succeed as it is so competitive." Asked if he plans to stay at the job, Shrijan replies: "I haven't decided as yet. For now the work circle and environment is really good and you get to meet a lot of people."

Reshma Gurung, assistant sales manager

A BBS graduate from Shanker Dev Campus, Reshma Gurung, 26, earns Rs 15,000 a month as an assistant sales manager at Serving Minds. She has been with the firm for about two years and before that worked in medical



transcribing businesses in Nepal and India. After realising that she was tired of working in India, Reshma saw the perfect opportunity at Serving Minds. "It's fun and I don't remember the work pressure so much. The people are just so friendly and helpful," she says. Asked if it is different than her work experience in Delhi, she replies, "I think in terms of salary and work environment and professionalism, it is exactly the same if not better than the workplaces in Delhi."

"Nepalis have excellent work ethics"



Ashish Kapoor, president of Serving Minds, on some key issues facing this new industry in Nepal:

On bandas

We have excelled in being able to work during bandas and other political upheavals. We have our own communications links, backup power and even our own water. We have few touch points with infrastructure in Nepal so we have been able to continue business without any hiccups. Also, our staff is very dedicated.

Employee turnover

Almost 70-75 percent of people do not stick to their first jobs for longer than a year. There are two reasons for this— one, you've never worked before and are still trying to find out what you want to do and two, you take a quick promotion and jump jobs. Most of our employees are first time jobholders and because we have a heavily geared performance oriented environment, for some it is a culture shock to work in such a demanding job.

Competing with Indian firms

We benchmark our standard with Indian business process outsourcers (BPOs). Our salary and working conditions are at par with them—it is only a short distance from Kathmandu to Delhi and we definitely don't want to lose our employees to better prospects there. So we have been able to maintain salary and career growth opportunities to match theirs.

Recruiting

Our recruitment processes are thorough. We have telephone interviews and discussion groups. We then have a final one-on-one interview. The candidates selected have to have important speaking and communication skills but we also look at EQ and IQ levels. The candidates selected are mostly graduates and we only take intermediate students if we find them to be exceptionally talented.

Nepali work ethics

The workforce here competes internationally. I don't understand when people say that the Nepali market can't compete worldwide. We are doing it and have very motivated and dedicated employees who have excellent work ethics.

Glacial research frozen

Another government squabble stalls study of melting Himalayan glaciers

NAVIN SINGH KHADKA

Hot on the heels of the Conservation International research fiasco in the Barun Valley in November comes another government turf tussle that is endangering an important research station on Nepal's longest glacier.

A weather station on the Nzugumpa Glacier below Cho Oyu has been buried not by an avalanche but by Kathmandu's bureaucracy, whose right hand seems unaware of what the left hand is doing. The unmanned station designed to measure the glacier's retreat due to global warming is state of the art, but it is in a state of limbo as bureaucrats in Kathmandu fight over control.

As usual, the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation and the Department of National Parks and Wildlife (DNPWC) are involved. The two also clashed in the Barun episode, but this time another government agency that has appeared at odds with the ministry is the Department of Hydrology and Metrology (DHM) that installed the weather station provided by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

The ministry says the glacier monitoring station was installed without its permission while the DHM says it did receive a nod.

"We got verbal permission from DNPWC to go ahead," says DHM Director General Madan Lal Shrestha, "we have learnt that the process is being followed up at the Forest Ministry and that it would be sorted out because we are mandated to install such weather stations." There are already six other weather stations operating in the Makalu, Lantang, Simikot and Dingboche regions.

By the time the Forest Ministry learned of the plan, however, the weather station had



already reached the Nzugumpa glacier and was being installed. "The hydrology department had no patience to wait until we received the go-ahead from the Forest Ministry—that is why the project is in trouble now," a DNPWC official told us privately.

WWF's Nepal Country Director Chandra Prakash Gurung believes the weather station is of immense importance in terms of examining the impact of global warming. "We provided the weather station to the Department of Hydrology and Metrology because it is the right government agency that has the authority and the necessary

expertise," he told us. "It has already installed a number of weather stations in different high altitude places in the country."

Sources at the DHM said they applied to National Parks for permission in November but heard nothing. "Since the equipment had to be installed before winter sets in, we decided to go ahead while the permission was being processed," one official told us.

The buck now stops at the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation. Despite an appointment, Minister for Forest Salim Miya Ansari refused to speak to us on this issue saying it was "too technical". ●

Why measure glacial retreat?

The earth's poles and mountain regions are where the first indications of the effects of climate change are most clearly seen.

Higher concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere caused by fossil fuel burning is raising average annual temperatures by 0.06 Celsius a year in the Himalaya. That may not seem like much but for people living on the borderlines of permafrost in the mountains and the poles the effects are seen within their lifetimes. For example, Sherpas in the Khumbu have noticed receding snowlines and in Manang farmers are growing vegetables they couldn't before.

More ominously, glaciers in the eastern Himalaya are growing dangerous because of snow melt and new lakes are popping up where none existed. Scientists say the frequency of glacial lake outbursts is increasing in Bhutan and Nepal where there are 44 glacial lakes that could burst at any time.

However there has been little field research on the threats, which is why glacial monitoring is important. "We urgently need to update our glaciological data with field studies, otherwise we won't have any warning when disaster strikes," says a glaciologist with the Department of Hydrology and Meteorology.

Scientists have chosen the Nguzumpa Glacier because at 36 km it is the longest glacier in the Himalaya and studying it will yield better understanding of the dynamics of glacial melting in the Himalaya. One part of the station will be installed on the glacier to record data like solar radiation, relative humidity, air and soil temperature, wind speed and direction, radiant heat and precipitation. The other other part will be kept in the river directly fed by the Nguzumpa glacier to measure changes in the flow of glacial melt. (See satellite picture)

Long-term computer simulations show that global warming will affect the flow of Himalayan rivers in this century itself. Spring flow will increase over the next 50 years, but after that there will be so little snow in the mountains that the rivers will run dry in the hot season. This will affect not only people living in the Himalaya but also hundreds of millions of people downstream.



Wishing you all
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&
Prosperity
in 2006

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God isn't big enough for some people

Human beings are religious animals. It is psychologically very hard to go through life without the justification and the hope provided by religion. You can see this in the positivist scientists of the 19th century.

They insisted that they were describing the universe in rigorously materialistic terms: yet at night they attended seances

and tried to summon up the spirits

of the dead. Even today, I frequently meet scientists who, outside their own narrow discipline, are superstitious: to such an extent that it sometimes seems to me that to be a rigorous unbeliever today, you have to be a philosopher. Or perhaps a priest.

We need to justify our lives to ourselves and to other people. Money is an instrument. It is not a value but we need values as well as instruments, ends as well as means. The great problem faced by human beings is finding a way to accept the fact that each of us will die.

Money can do a lot of things but it cannot help reconcile your own death. It can sometimes help you postpone your own death: a man who can spend a million pounds on personal physicians will usually live longer than someone who cannot. However, he can't make himself live much longer than the average life-span of affluent people in the developed world.

If you believe in money alone, then sooner or later, you discover money's great limitation: it is unable to justify the fact that you are a mortal animal. Indeed, the more you try to escape that fact, the

"I don't believe in God. I believe in something greater"



more you are forced to realise that your possessions can't make sense of your death.

It is the role of religion to provide that justification. Religions are systems of belief that enable human beings to justify their existence and which reconcile us to death. Ideologies such as communism that promised to supplant religion have failed in spectacular and very public fashion. So we're all still looking for something that will reconcile each of us to the inevitability of our own death.

G K Chesterton is often credited with observing: "When a man ceases to believe in God, he doesn't believe in nothing. He believes in anything." Whoever said it, he was right. We are supposed to live in a sceptical age. In fact, we live in an age of outrageous credulity.

The 'death of God', or at least the dying

of the Christian God, has been accompanied by the birth of a plethora of new idols. The pianist Arthur Rubinstein was once asked if he believed in God. He said: "No. I don't believe in God. I believe in something greater." Our culture suffers from the same inflationary tendency. The existing religions just aren't big enough: we demand something more from God than the existing depictions in the Christian faith can provide. So we revert to the occult. The so-called occult sciences do not ever reveal any genuine secret: they only promise that there is something secret that explains and justifies everything. The great advantage of this is that it allows each person to fill up the empty secret 'container' with his or her own fears and hopes.

As a child of the Enlightenment and a believer in the values of truth, open

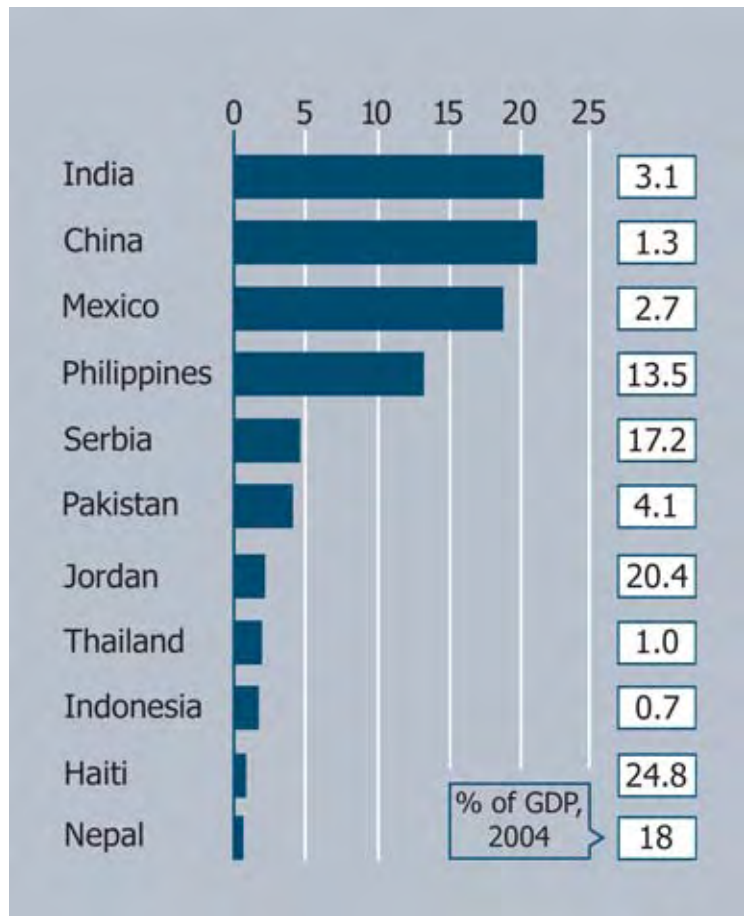
inquiry, and freedom, I am depressed by that tendency. This is not just because of the association between the occult and fascism and Nazism, although that association was very strong. Himmler and many of Hitler's henchmen were devotees of the most infantile occult fantasies.

The same was true of some of the fascist gurus in Italy (Julius Evola is one example) who continue to fascinate the neo-fascists in my country. Today, if you browse the shelves of any bookshop specialising in the occult, you will find not only the usual tomes on the Templars, Rosicrucians, pseudo-Kabbalists, *The Da Vinci Code*, but also anti-semitic tracts such as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

I was raised as a Catholic and although I have abandoned the Church, last week as usual I put together a Christmas crib for my grandson. We constructed it together, as my father did with me when I was a boy. I have a profound respect for the Christian traditions, which, as rituals for coping with death, still make more sense than their purely commercial alternatives.

I think I agree with Joyce's lapsed Catholic hero in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "What kind of liberation would that be to forsake an absurdity which is logical and coherent and to embrace one which is illogical and incoherent?" The religious celebration of Christmas is at least a clear and coherent absurdity. The commercial celebration is not even that. ●

Umberto Eco's latest book is *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* Secker & Warburg £17.99



PHILIP BOWRING
in HONG KONG

There are many non-combatant casualties of the War on Terror. Not just victims of mistaken identity stuck at Guantánamo Bay but migrant workers and their families, whose global remittances now run at over \$200 billion a year or three times official aid budgets.

Even for a higher-income individual with a long-established banking relationship in a developed country, the bureaucracy now involved in

cross-border remittances can be mind-boggling. This regulation does almost nothing to stop either terrorism or drug dealing. Most terrorist acts have required no more funds than needed to buy a second-hand car.

The losers are not terrorists or drug dealers but Nigerians in Belgium, Indians in Britain, Senegalese in Germany, Colombians in the United States and Nepalis in Gulf states who send home perhaps \$200 a month to their families. Costs for the small amounts of remittances typical of unskilled migrant workers are also a deterrent.

Robbing the poor

Banks are using 'anti-terror' rules to suck up more of workers' remittances

Studies have shown that remittances could rise by an average of 50 percent overall if costs were cut significantly.

The war on terror is only one part of that cost but it is a significant one at a time when charges should have been falling. The sheer scale of migration and remittance has been increasing fast and communication costs have been dramatically reduced by the internet and the collapse of international call charges. For example, in Nepal, remittances accounted for 11.7 percent of GDP in 2004, according to a recent World Bank report, *Global Economic Prospects 2006*. In the first four months of the current fiscal year the number of people leaving Nepal for jobs soared 51 percent over the same period last year.

The report draws attention to the high costs of remittances resulting from regulation and lack of competition, some of that attributable to anti-terror measures. The bank uses cautious language but it notes that the cost of post-9/11 regulations has been passed on to users and that 'know your client' requirements are a hazard for workers who may have no bank account.

Regulations have also benefited large money-transfer organisations and banks at the

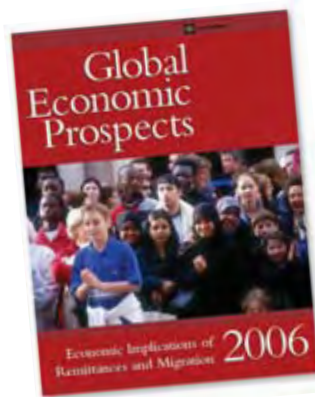
expense of smaller, cheaper channels. The report notes: 'Hundreds of money service businesses in the US have been closed by banks for fear that they may be targeted by authorities for servicing customers regarded as high risk.'

The report shows just how high costs can be. For a \$200 remittance through a major money-transfer organisation, the cost ranges from 12 percent from Belgium to Nigeria, to 11 percent from Britain to India and 4.5 percent from Hong Kong to the Philippines. Banks mostly charge somewhat less but are more difficult to access. Smaller money-transfer firms are also cheaper—but they are the ones that have been squeezed hardest by regulation.

By far the cheapest remittance method is the hawala system used in India and the Middle

East and its Chinese and other equivalents—informal systems based on trust. Their charge for a \$200 remittance is from one to two percent. Fraud is very rare but these systems are just the ones regarded with most suspicion by regulators who put their trust in form-filling and big institutions as the barrier to illicit transfers. Big transfers, say from Myanmar drug dealers to businesses run in Singapore or Hong Kong, go through the more formal routes. But regulators in developed countries find it easier to focus on the mysterious than on the obvious.

The Philippines, where migrant workers have political clout, has shown how addressing those issues cuts costs and leads to a significant increase in remittances. But over all, migrant workers could be losing between \$5 billion and \$10 billion a year because of high profits made by banks and transfer organisations. Potential remittances frustrated because of costs and difficulties could be \$50 billion a year. ●



Global Economic Prospects 2006: Economic Implications of Migration and Remittances World Bank Group November 2005 ISBN: 0-8213-6344-1 SKU: 16344 180 pages



20/20 VISION: A patient emerges from the operating theatre after a successful cataract surgery.

MALLIKA ARYAL

Long-term vision

One of the world’s largest eye hospitals is in the middle of nowhere in Lahan

MALLIKA ARYAL
in LAHAN

Baleswor Sharma, 73, of Barauni in Bihar gave up on ever being able to see again. He suffers from cataract and has been blind for the last two years. He went to doctors in India but they made him run around in circles taking expensive tests. “Then I heard about this eye hospital in Nepal so that is why I am here,” says the frail-looking man who travelled for a week to cross the border and reach Lahan. “They say if I can’t see after being operated here, I will never see again.”

In the early 1980s, the UN’s World Health Organisation in Nepal (after a survey) decided that the tarai was the region most in need of an eye hospital. In 1982, Sagarmatha Choudhary Eye Hospital (SCEH) was set up in Lahan with the support of Germany’s Christoffel Blindenmission (CBM) and Nepal Netra Jyoti Sangh.

It had only 12 beds then but today it is the second largest eye hospital in the world. It spreads across 7.4 hectares has 550 beds, five operating theatres with a total of 20 tables and its doctors perform 55,000 operations annually. SCEH has also established a reputation for affordable and high quality service.

Early in the morning, hundreds of patients line up with family members at their sides to register. In the afternoon, their vision and blood pressure are checked, sugar level tested and the doctors determine if they need surgery. The majority of operations here are cataract surgeries, performed in simple operating theatres furnished with what looks like basic equipment. At the same time, the patient spends no more than 10 minutes in the theatre.

“It is a hospital for the poor, everyone is treated equally and we never turn anyone away,” says administrator Bindeswor Mahato. A cataract surgery including medicine, lens and bed costs Rs 900. Patients can pay more for a better ward but the medical costs don’t change. There are no nurses at SCEH because family members take care of patients. Last year the hospital performed 2,550 surgeries that were subsidised or free. The hospital also has facilities of counselling for those who are incurably blind.

About 90 percent of patients come from northern India, most of them after the Chhat festival in November or in February. The hospital is easily accessible to 82 million people who live in neighbouring Bihar where word of mouth has made it more well known than in parts of Nepal. On a busy day in peak season,



Australians, too

Suman Thapa, a Nepali eye specialist, has got together with Australian Kae Walls to treat glaucoma patients in Nepal. Glaucoma is a condition where the pressure within the eyeball exceeds the level that can be normally tolerated by the eye and can result in blindness. “It is the second largest cause of blindness in Nepal,” says Thapa.

With a small support team in Melbourne, Kae Walls has raised \$ 50,000 to begin construction on a glaucoma clinic at Tilganga in Kathmandu. Nepal Glaucoma Eye Clinic Association (NGEC), based in Melbourne, is raising the money which will be directly used to build the clinic and to hold various eye camps around the country. This new glaucoma clinic will be an addition to other services at Tilganga, a world-renowned centre of excellence in eye surgery.

Walls, a glaucoma patient herself, says her personal understanding of the disease prompted her to establish the clinic in Nepal.

Suvecha Pant in Sydney

ophthalmologists perform up to 250 surgeries.”People say that we are only providing service to non-Nepalis,” admits manager Kristina Hennig, “but we are also operating on a large number of Nepalis.”

SCEH doctors also travel across Nepal to hold cataract-screening camps and bring them to Lahan or a satellite hospital in Malangwa if they need surgery. The paediatric department examines children at the hospital and the camps. Unlike other hospitals, SCEH also has a lodge where family members of patients can stay and cook. Travel agents in Bihar now have fixed-rate cataract package tours for Indian patients to Lahan, which include cataract screening, transportation and food and the surgery fee. This little known start to Nepal’s medical tourism brought in 7,000 patients last year.

Baleswor Sharma emerges from surgery and the doctors say he will see when his bandages come off. “it was surprisingly quick, I will recommend this hospital to my villagers.” ●

Wanted: Nepalis

It’s not just Indian patients that outnumber Nepalis in Lahan, it is also the doctors. Of the 10 ophthalmologists now working at SCEH, eight are from India. Like Debajit Ray, a young ophthalmologist from Kolkata. “Operating on so many people every day is challenging and unique and it is also what I appreciate most about the place,” says Ray.

In fact, the biggest challenge is attracting Nepali ophthalmologists to train and getting them to stay in Lahan. “It is so difficult to get Nepali ophthalmologists who want to work for us long-term because we are literally in the middle of nowhere and lack many facilities that cities offer,” says Program Director Albrecht Hennig.

SCEH is now planning a 50-bed branch hospital in Biratnagar which should take some of the load off Lahan, encourage more Nepali doctors to work, and treat more Nepali patients.



END OF A LONG DAY: Doctors at SCEH relax after a full day of operations.

Year of the eclipse

2006 will see four eclipses and spaceships to distant planets

On the eve of the New Year, amateur astronomers worldwide are busy preparing observation calendars for 2006. However, such research will not take place in Nepal, where practical astronomy has not reached this level of development. We have our own traditional (astrological) calendar—the Patro, which gives positions of the planets, the Sun and the Moon.

In 2006, many space missions will be launched. On 11 January, NASA will send off the New Horizons Mission to Pluto, which is scheduled to reach the distant planet in 2015 and to explore the outer regions of the solar system as well. Four days later, NASA’s STARDUST Mission will return to Earth with this world’s first sample of comet dust. Astronomers believe the dust, collected from a comet, will

provide clues to the solar system’s history and structure.

With two solar and two lunar eclipses on the way, astronomers are calling 2006 the year of the eclipse. On 29 March, a total eclipse of the Sun will be visible from within a narrow corridor that traverses half the Earth, from Brazil to Mongolia. A partial eclipse will be seen from Nepal. The next annual solar eclipse will occur on 22 September but will not be visible here. A penumbral Lunar eclipse will be seen on 14 March, again partially visible from Nepal. Another partial Lunar eclipse will occur on 7 September as well. We shall talk more about these celestial events in the coming months.

In January, watch for the following:

The Sun
The Sun is in the constellation of Sagittarius (*Dhanu*) and crosses the border into Capricornus (*Makar*) on the 19. As the sun is ‘climbing’ northwards, can spring be far behind?

The Moon
The first quarter moon is on 6 January (18.56), the full moon on the 14 (09.47), last quarter on the 22 (15.12) and the new moon on 29 January (14.15). The Moon is at perigee (closest to Earth) on 1 January and at apogee (farthest from Earth) on 18 January.

The Earth
Earth is at perihelion (closest to the sun) on 4 January at 21.14, at a distance of 0.9833 AU (147 million km).

Mercury
Mercury rises at 05.36 at the start of the month and will be at superior conjunction on 27 January. That is the date when Earth and Mercury will be on opposite sides of the Sun.

Venus
The first evening of the year will find the crescent Moon to the left of brilliant, retrograding Venus. Look fast—Venus is visible in the evening sky for just one week. After an inferior conjunction with the Sun on 14 January, it quickly becomes a predawn morning star visible after the 20.

Mars
Mars, in the east at nightfall, is at its most brilliant now. NASA’s two robot explorers, Spirit and Opportunity, have successfully completed a year of exploration on the surface of the red planet.

Jupiter
Jupiter, in Libra (*Tula*), rises at 2.36 on 1 January. With a 100mm telescope, you will be able to see the planet’s equatorial cloud bands.

Saturn
Saturn, in Cancer (*Karkat*), is also at its brightest this month and reaches opposition on the 28. It rises by 7 and is out the rest of the night. NASA’s Cassini spacecraft has been exploring this distant world for a year, sending home incredible pictures of the planet and its moons.

Meteor showers
The Quadrantids meteor shower will peak on 3-4 January. Typically, 40 or so bright, blue and fast (40 km a second) meteors will radiate from the constellation Bootes, some blazing more than halfway across the sky. A small percentage of them leave persistent dust trains. This shower usually has a very sharp peak, lasting only about an hour.



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Elections are not enough

Democracies must not tolerate those who set out to destroy the system

There can be no liberal order without political democracy but today we are frequently reminded that political democracy alone does not guarantee a liberal order.

Free and fair elections may lead to the ascendancy of a president of Iran who wants to 'wipe Israel off the map of the Middle East'. Or to a president of Venezuela whose intolerance of the business class causes jubilation in the streets but emigration by those whose initiative is crucial for the welfare of the people.

Less damaging, yet problematic, is the election in Poland of a minority government that ruthlessly pursues its members' personal interests and breaks all promises of cooperation made before the polls.

In other words, elections are not enough if one wants to bring democracy to the world. Elections can lead to illiberal democracies and worse. They must be

embedded in a more complex institutional framework, which I would describe as the liberal order.

The first feature of the liberal order is that democracies must not tolerate those who set out to destroy democracy. Some countries, like Germany, have laws that make it possible to ban political parties whose programs are recognisably anti-democratic. In the past, the law has been used to curb parties of both the extreme left and the extreme right. This has clearly contributed to preventing any sign of a possible return to the totalitarian ways of the twentieth century.

However, it is not always evident when people and parties stand for election what they are going to do if they win. This is where rules that impose term limits on officeholders, such as the 22nd Amendment of the United States constitution, have their place. Elsewhere, notably in many of the Soviet Union's other successor states and in Latin America, those in power have often simply changed the constitution, including rules on term limits, to their advantage. This is where the second pillar of a liberal order comes into play: the rule of law.

It cannot be said too often that democracy and the rule of law are not the same thing. There are lawless democracies and undemocratic 'states of law' (*Rechtsstaat*). The constitution of liberty requires both and the rule of law is the more difficult of the two to establish and maintain, for it requires not just a constitution but, almost more importantly, an independent judiciary that is sensitive to violations of constitutional and other legitimate rules.

We know from history that it takes but one Enabling Law to unhinge the rule of law and replace it by an ideological tyranny, as happened when Hitler came to power in Germany.

This is where the third element of a liberal order comes into play: civil society. A plurality of civic associations and activities, regulated but not controlled by the state and free to express its views and even to demonstrate its (diverse) sentiments publicly, is the most powerful pillar of a liberal order. A vibrant civil society will mobilise when the rule of law is violated and it can also check the illiberal inclinations of democratic majorities.

The near-universal availability of information makes it much easier than it was in earlier times for the voluntary non-governmental organisations that form civil society to emerge. However, there is no ultimate guarantee against the abuse of power, especially if that power is democratically gained. The international community must therefore recognise that it is not enough to promote, organise, or monitor elections in hitherto undemocratic countries.

The program of spreading the liberal order requires a much more sophisticated approach. Above all, it requires international agencies and groupings that remain alert to the risks of illiberal democracies. ●
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Ralf Dahrendorf, author of numerous acclaimed books and a former European Commissioner from Germany, is a member of the British House of Lords.



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Hoop hoop hurrah

Basketball is finally a spectator sport as the national tournament takes off

ANOOP PANDEY

The indoor basketball hall at Dasrath Stadium was unusually packed for the launch game of this year's Samsung National Basketball Championship organised by the Nepal Basketball Association. (NeBA).

Spectators participation was intense as fans sang their team songs and booed referee decisions, music blared from speakers during the half-time break, dancers from Learning Realm International School performed traditional dances and music icon Niraya NSK made an appearance to sing live.

In fact it looked more like a rock concert than a basketball game but it was proof sports in Nepal has now become a spectator sport. Six years in the running, the NeBA's national tournament just keeps getting bigger and better. This year 16 male teams and six female teams are battling it out.

"The most amazing thing is the spontaneous participation of women's teams from all over the country," says Mahendra Shakya of NeBA. "we are really encouraged by the enthusiasm."

Opening day saw defending men's champs Himalayan White House College drubbing Public Youth Campus 52-28 while women's number 1 Rato Bangala Club edged Holy Garden 23-18.

The tournament is a club event open to all players but teams are limited to three national players per roster. It is also a chance for players from around the country to get to know each other and to play under international basketball federation rules. The tournament is becoming more of a national affair as the years pass with the introduction of men's teams from Chitwan, Rupandehi, Kaski, Parsa and Sunsari. Says Shakya: "This championship will help spread basketball to the other urban areas outside Kathmandu."

It now also includes a three day training camp for referees from around the country at a basketball clinic organised by the NeBA. Krishna Maharjan, coach of Rato Bangala's women's team and a tournament official, says, "The tournament is a great way to develop the sport in Nepal, gain publicity and discover new talent. Nepali basketball needs events like these." ●

Samsung National Basketball Tournament Finals: 3 January 2006



KIRAN PANDAY

Leaving home

It was great to meet so many Nepalis on my recent visit who are genuinely concerned about the future of tennis in this country. Everywhere I went, in meetings, at clinics or just walking in Kathmandu's familiar streets, I came across old friends and colleagues who wanted to talk tennis and were genuinely interested in battling around ideas for advancing this wonderful game.

Their interest being so clearly demonstrated, I believe now is the time for all of us to look forward and begin some serious

GAME POINT
Sujay Lama



brainstorming on practical ways to put the bounce back into Nepali tennis. We should also mull over some ways to involve our youth in this process, for


they are the ones who will be leading our efforts in coming years.

I was impressed and encouraged particularly by the young people who participated in the clinics that I held in Kathmandu. (Pictures above are ones I took at the Nepali Times tennis clinic on 17 December--thanks everyone for coming!)

The young Nepalis were energetic, positive young people who were eager to learn. Some of them had that burning passion for the sport that could take them to impressive heights of accomplishment in competitive tennis. Others have an interest for the game that will allow them to enjoy it as they grow older.


I pledge to do my utmost in coming years to help them to get all they can from the game. I encourage all our upcoming stars and all Nepali tennis players, fans and officials to send their thoughts to me directly at this email address: lama@ad.uiuc.edu

Happy hitting!



wishes you a

Merry Christmas

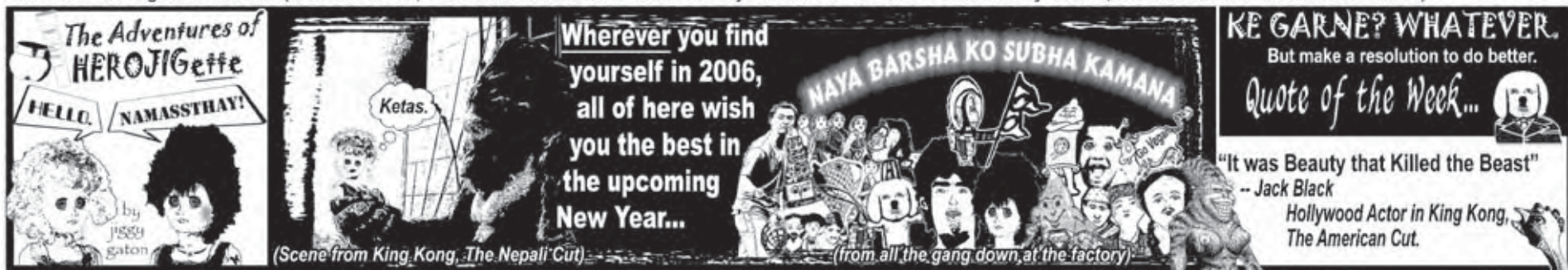


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All the Adventures can be seen at www.extreme-nepal.com

Strip #97 2062 by jigme gatton - read. love. write.

ABOUT TOWN

EXHIBITIONS

- ❖ **Contemporary Paintings from Tibet** at Siddhartha Art Gallery, till 11 January.

FESTIVALS AND EVENTS

- ❖ **Clean Up Valley Week** workshops at school, essay and poetry competition, 24-31 December. www.thequest.org.np
- ❖ **New Years** 1 January.
- ❖ **Worship Program** at Assumption Catholic Church, Dhobighat, 31 December and 1 January.
- ❖ **Kids Art Camp** 2-15 January, 9-14 years age group at Park Gallery. 4419353

MUSIC AND PERFORMANCES

- ❖ **1974 AD** live and loud at Moksh, 30 December. 5526212
- ❖ **Bari Lai** a play directed by Birendra Hamal, 21-31 December, 4.30 PM, Gurukul. 4466956.
- ❖ **Paleti 12** bid farewell to Aavaas, 30 December. 5.30 PM, Rs 500 at Nepalaya-R-sala. 5552839
- ❖ **Sur Saptak** band at The Organic Village, Baluwatar, 6PM, 31 December, student discount. 4414383
- ❖ **Cadenza Collective** live every 31 December, (Afro-funk and Latin) 8PM at Upstairs, Lajimpat.
- ❖ **Pulse** plays at Jatra on 31 December, Rs 300. 4256622
- ❖ **Eternity** plays at Himalatte Cafe, 31 December. 4256738
- ❖ **Live Music** every Friday 7PM at Rum Doodle. 4701107
- ❖ **JCS Quintet** at Moksh every Tuesday. 5526212
- ❖ **Unplugged** with Strings, Jatra Saturday nights. 4256622
- ❖ **Live Music** at Juneli Bar, Hotel de l'Annapurna. 4221711
- ❖ **Live Jazz** by the pond at 1905, Kantipath. 4225272

FOOD AND PARTIES

- ❖ **New Years at Dwarika's** with welcome drink, live music, special menu and door prizes. 31 December.
- ❖ **New Year's Eve** at Garden Terrace, dinner, drinks and live music, 31 December, 8:30 PM onwards. 4273999
- ❖ **Shakin' All Over** salsa, tango, flamenco and belly dancing at Megha Malhar Hall, 31 December, 8:30 PM onwards.
- ❖ **New Years with Samba dancers** from Brazil at Hyatt Regency, 31 December. 8PM onwards, Rs 1499. 4491234
- ❖ **Special Dinner** and New Year's Brunch with Summit Hotel.
- ❖ **New Years Eve at K-too!** Party Hats, Balloons, Turkey dinner and a free Irish Coffee, 31 December. 4700043
- ❖ **Catch 22** a rock band at Rum Doodle, 31 December. 4701107
- ❖ **Celebrate New Years** with Rosemary Café, Baneshwor. 4781591
- ❖ **1905 Offers** three course meals and Sunday brunch. 4225272
- ❖ **Great Dining** options at Al Fresco, Bukhara, China Garden and Garden Terrace restaurants, Soaltee Crowne Plaza. 4273999
- ❖ **Barbeque** at Le Meridien, Kathmandu. 4451212.
- ❖ **Plat du Jour** at the Shambala Garden, Shangri-La. 4412999
- ❖ **Wonderful Wednesdays** at Fusion, happy hour 5-9PM.
- ❖ **The Sidewalk BBQ** with Shades of Blue, Shangri-La. 4412999
- ❖ **The Chimney Restaurant** at Hotel Yak and Yeti. 4248999
- ❖ **Jazz Gourmet** fine dining at Hotel Shangri-La. 4412999

GETAWAYS

- ❖ **Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge**, Christmas and New Year offers. 4361500 **Christmas and New Years** getaway package with Dwarika's, 20 December – 5 January. 4479488
- ❖ **Bed and Breakfast** at La'soon. 5537166
- ❖ **Junglewalks**, rafting, elephant rides all at Jungle Base Camp Lodge, Bardia. junglebasecamp@yahoo.com
- ❖ **Escape Kathmandu** at Shivapuri Heights Cottage. 9851012245
- ❖ **Conferences** at Godavari Village Resort. 5560675

Quest Entertainment

Flamboyant filmmaker, Carl Denham, sails off to remote Skull Island to film his latest epic with leading lady, Ann Darrow and script writer Jack Driscoll. Natives kidnap Ann to use as a sacrifice for 'Kong'. But instead of devouring Ann, Kong saves her from the wild creatures. Ultimately, it is the attention of a beautiful human woman that soothes Kong long enough for him to be subdued by the explorers and shipped back to New York, where his bleak future involves being put on display in front of humans... but how long can even the mightiest shackles of man hold back an ape 25 feet tall?

Call 4442220 for show timings

www.jainepal.com



Wish you a Very Happy, Healthy, Prosperous & Peaceful New Year 2006

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NEPALI WEATHER

by MAUSAM BEED



Still waiting for that westerly front that stood us up. December has been the second consecutive dry month this winter. Western Nepal got freak blizzards and it looks like all the moistures headed our way precipitated out over there. This satellite picture taken on Thursday morning shows high altitude cirrus riding the jet stream and headed our way but these are not moisture-bearing. All they will do is block off the sunlight keeping the day temperatures lower than usual. So, for the Valley expect foggy patches into the new year with mild afternoons, chilly nights and morning frost.

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JUMPING THE GUN: This display by the RNA of its recently acquired Chinese armoured vehicles at Ratna Park was billed as a Shiva Ratri rehearsal but that festival is still two months away.



TEARS FOR THE DISAPPEARED: Family members of disappeared Nepalis wept at a program in Kathmandu on Wednesday organised by the Association of Families of People Disappeared by the State. They demanded the government immediately reveal where their relatives are.



ROSY-CHEEKED FANS: Children enjoy Nepathya's fundraising concert at Maiti Nepal shelter on Friday.

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A yearning for learning

For a Magar woman from the eastern hills, Menuka has covered more territory than most more-privileged Nepali women. The first of 11 children in her family to pass SLC, she wanted to study nursing but was one of three girls from Terathum to receive a scholarship to study Forestry Science. She set off to Pokhara's Forest Science Research Centre to graduate in 1995 and landed a job as temporary forest ranger in Dhankuta and later in Sankhuwasabha. But that was not the end of her trail. She next applied to work as a forestry technician for the Nepal Centre for Agro Forestry. She got the job and moved to Siraha and Saptari. There, Menuka not only worked with women in community forestry projects but also learned to speak Maithili fluently. That success only whetted her appetite for learning and travel. Her next job in the Forestry Partnership Project of CARE Nepal took her to Banke-Bardia and then to Rukum. While others with contacts got scholarships and moved abroad, she enrolled in Patan Campus where she got a BA majoring in population studies. After donning another graduation gown, she again went west, this time to Kailali, where she worked for the next two years and met her husband-to-be. At this point, many Nepali

women would have settled down. But not Menuka. She decided to push on and did her Masters in Sociology at Tri Chandra Campus. After that, it was back to the field with a DfID-funded Livelihoods Forestry Program in Pyuthan. What next? You guessed it—

MPhil. What sets Menuka apart is her commitment and drive to push herself to the limit, not letting others set it for her. As a woman from an indigenous community, the odds were stacked against her but Menuka credits her father who encouraged her to study. "I had to balance my household chores," she recalls, "it was difficult to find time but I worked hard." It's paid off. At 29, Menuka is paying for her brother's education in Kathmandu urging him to concentrate on his books and not worry about money. That is because Menuka has something money can't buy: a yearning to do something with her life and help her community and country.

ALOK TUMBAHANGPHEY

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2005 headlines

It is that time of year again when it is mandatory for every respectable newspaper worth its salt in a civilized country like ours to take a retrospective of the year gone by and say: "Glad that one's over. Gimme another one."

This year we have taken the novel approach of inviting nominations for Best Headlines of the Year 2005 and have begun short-listing the well-deserved finalists. Readers will later be asked to vote on the basis of adults franchise for the best headlines, unless of course you decide to boycott the poll (naughty, naughty) in which case we have to think of something else to keep you busy over the holidays.

So, ladies and gentlemen, without further ado let's run down the headline-grabbing finalists and a round of applause for these actual news stories in actual hardcopy newspapers that shall remain nameless for the duration of this column. (Disclaimer: None of these headlines are from this newspaper which takes

absolutely no responsibility for the veracity, if any, of the information contained therein in case feathers are ruffled as readers go on a wild goose chase, or if alleged feelings are inadvertently hurt. Conditions apply.)

These headlines are brought to you by Nepal Engineers' Wives Society (NEWS).



Vegetable Farming Yields Fruit
Dhading—Farmers in Dhading have been astounded this week by the fact that their tomato fields have yielded a bumper harvest of oranges. "I think this proves once and for all that the tomato is actually a fruit," stated one farmer.

Flesh Trade Mushrooming
Kalanki—As the living standard of the Valley's middle class rises, so has demand on the flesh trade, according to Hoof and Mouth Pvt Ltd, meat packing wholesaler at Kalanki. The same, however, couldn't be said of the mushroom industry which according to latest figures has not been mushrooming at all.

Koirala Smells Rat on Thapa Stance
Biratnagar—President of the Nepali Congress, Girija Koirala, has once more sniffed out rodent activity in the vicinity of his ancestral home here, and has credited a keen olfactory sense bequeathed him by his forebears. "I can smell a rat even before it appears," Koirala boasted, "and I know Surya Bahadur is up to no good."

Cannabis Farming in Parsa Reaches All-time High
Simara—Excuse me, oijdf if I can't seem dkjf to type this jdf in straight.[? , but it gives me great pleasure to ;lklkjoi report that ganja harvests kdjf this year in Parsa was goooood, yar. "Yup, this is good sh%& and there's lots more where that came from," said a notoriously reliable source who was also stoned out of his %\$#@ mind and didn't want his name disclosed. Roger, Foxtrot Tango Two, over 'n' out.

Headlines that made it to the Runner's Up List:
Man Renews Passport Before Expiry
Wild Elephant Injures Farmer with Axe
Two Trucks Collide, One Hurt

And Consolation Prizes to:
Nepal Goes to India
Nepal Goes to India Again
Nepal Still in India

Editors who recognise their headlines are requested to come and collect their prizes with me personally. Anonymity guaranteed.



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PRATEEK RAJBHANDARI

PAX VOBISCUM 2006

The ***Nepali Times*** guide
to where to go, what to
drink and how to write new
headlines for the New Year

MALLIKA ARYAL

It's that time again. The last days of the year, when many of us begin setting positive goals for the coming 365 days, things like taking up yoga, eating right, quitting smoking and reading at least one book a week. Others among us have been planning New Year's Eve celebrations since Dasain and Tihar came to an end.

We at *Nepali Times* have also been bitten by the New Year's bug and are discussing our various plans. Some of us are planning a wild time party hopping, enjoying loud music and dancing the night away. Others will escape to warm tropical places and return with enviable tans. There are still others who plan to order in pizza and enjoy a movie marathon, while some of us are just glad to be away from the billboards, lights and loud music.

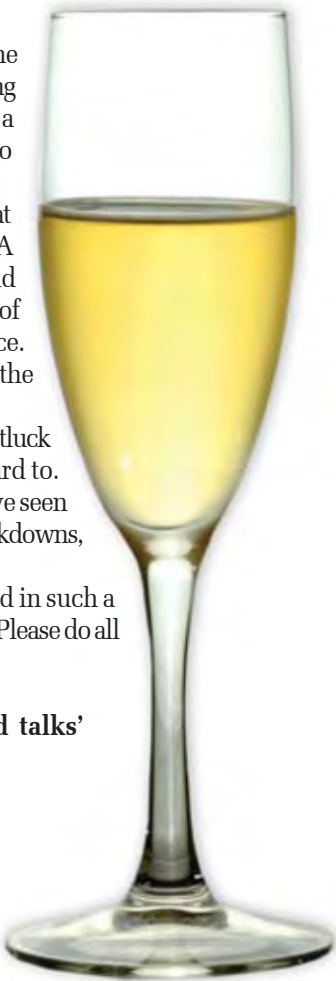
You'll even find some people so sick of everyone turning the day into such an event that they are going to sit back in a reclining chair at home, in front of a kerosene heater, wearing mittens and ear plugs, to read a good book and drink lots of hot chocolate.

If some of you get new clothes for New Year, we at *Nepali Times* are getting a new office at Hattiban. A whole year of planning and anticipation is over and the moving process has begun. Issue 280, the first of 2006, will be put together at our new sunny office. Our team is keenly looking forward to spending the cold winter working under the sun—

with plenty of breaks for football matches and potluck lunches. But that is not all we are looking forward to. Throughout 2005 the pages of this newspaper have seen many gruesome and disturbing headlines about crackdowns, clampdowns and shutdowns.

So in 2006, we would like the world to unfold in such a way that we can write headlines like the following. Please do all you can to help.

'King Gyanendra, parties and Maoists hold talks'
'Peace breaks out'
'Nepal U-19 win ICC World Cup'
'Nepal voted the best travel destination'
'Miss Nepal crowned Miss World 2006'
'Traffic flows smoothly, no accidents reported'
'New species of fish discovered in Bagmati River'



New Year Festivities at Soaltee Crowne Plaza

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Food & fanfare

Fanfare of food and New Year's Eve celebration at Al Fresco, Bukhara, China Garden. Lucky draws and loads of prizes to be won. A perfect occasion to rejoice with families and friends. Head for delicious and blissful celebration.

Venue: Al Fresco, Bukhara, China Garden
Date : 31st Dec. 2005
Time : 1930 hrs onwards
Rate : 2000/- Minimum Spend plus taxes extra
Date : 1st Jan, 2006
Lunch : 700/- Minimum Spend plus taxes extra
Dinner: 1000/- minimum spend plus taxes extra

New Year's Eve at Garden Terrace

The stirring ambience, sumptuous buffet dinner, complimentary house drink*, live band and Dj Jimmy's blistering mix of songs. Get ready to delight in abundance and rock the house all night long.

Date : 31 Dec, 2005
Venue: Garden Terrace
Time : 2030 hrs onwards
Rate : 2499/- nett per person

Childrens' New Year Eve

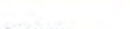
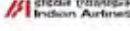
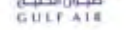
Entertainment unlimited for kids on New Year's Eve - cartoon movies on large screen, magic show, special buffet, games, dance floor, recorded music, baby sitter etc.

Date : 31st Dec. 2005
Venue: Malshree
Time : 2030 hrs onwards
Rate : 800/- nett per kid

Shakin' All Over!

Witness boot-licious belly dancing at **Megha Malhar** this New Year's Eve with "Latino," a versatile troupe featuring **three stunning dancers**. Add to that a rip-roaring DJ PR, Heart Breakers the band, captivating ambience, a bottle of sparkling wine and the and biggest buffet spread in town will ensure you rock-a-licious ride into 2006.

Date : 31st Dec. 2005
Venue: Megha Malhar
Time : 2030 hrs onwards
Rate : 4,999/- nett per person



* 3 pegs Royal Stag 20% discount for Priority Privilege members, if tickets bought by 30th Dec, 1300 hrs. Maximum of two tickets per PP Member and non-transferable.

For reservations & details
Call 4273999 Ext. 6777

Where do you want to be on New



ANUP PRAKASH

The New Year may not live up to the high expectations we are placing on it with the wild parties slated for the weekend. But, hey, maybe that is precisely why all you midnight children need to hit the dance floor. Here is the exhaustive (we were exhausted preparing it) list of places to go. If you aren't the partying type, there are tasty dinner deals and if you are a true party hopper, with the finances to back up your claim, we suggest you mix and match according to your preferences.

Night in Gokarna Kajra Nite at Le Meridian

An exclusive party organised by the Le Meridian on 31 December. This theme party is based on the streets of Mumbai and will even have young boys trying to hustle the guests into buying knick-knacks. The party will include free food being cooked before your eyes, though the drinks will have to be purchased

A 10-party alliance is gearing up to swing to welcome the new year on Sa

at the cash bar. There will be a dance troupe performing and later Dj Raju will be taking over in typical Indian fashion by playing only Hindi remixes. Book your tickets before they are all gone. 8PM onwards, Rs 5,000 per couple. Attractive door prizes.

No Hangover Soaltee Crown Plaza

Most people really want to party hop but because of long distances and the dangers of drinking and driving, they restrain themselves. This year, Soaltee Crown Plaza has solved all your problems by organising four different events.

- Food and Fanfare—Al Fresco, Bukhara and China Garden, Soaltee's three restaurants, come together to offer you incredible food along with a lucky draw and incredible prizes. 7.30 PM onwards, Minimum cost Rs 2,000 31 December 1 January Rs 700 for lunch and Rs 1,000 for dinner.

- New Year's Eve at Garden Terrace—if more than food is on your menu this is definitely the place to dance and listen to good music. With a live band and Dj

Jimmy, you will welcome 2006 in full party style. 8.30 PM onwards, Rs 2,499 per person.

- Children's New Year's Eve—why should parents be the only ones who have fun? Let the kids welcome the New Year with cartoons on a large screen, a special buffet, games. 8.30 PM onwards, Rs 800 per child.

- Shakin' All Over—this party is all about dancing, led by belly dancers from the dance troupe 'Latino' at the Malhar. The package also includes a bottle of sparkling wine and a huge buffet dinner. 8.30 PM onwards, Rs 4,999 per person.

High Energy Himalaya Hotel

You will definitely need a surplus of the renewables if you plan to party the night away at Himalaya's Chalet and Rato Baithak. With free imported drinks, snacks and a sumptuous dinner. To work off the calories there will be live music by Buzz and DJ Asha will take over the dance floor. 7PM onwards, Rs 1,999 per person and Rs 3,499 per couple.



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आफु र आफ्नो परिवार को लागि



Year's Eve?

to be in full
aturday night

Nites of Passage Rhythm Nites and Just Divine Nite'6

What is PartyNepal doing this year, you're wondering? The Surya Lights Rhythm Nites is all set to rock with three simultaneous parties at the Liquid Lounge. Afro Dj Neblu will be poolside and Dj Sakar at the consoles in the lounge. Take a warm and cosy break with a bonfire at the Mezzanine. 8PM onwards, Rs 800 per person with two free drinks.

PartyNepal's second treat for the capital is the Just Divine Nite'6 at Latin Quarter. Jack Daniels Just Divine Nites are already popular in Kathmandu and this New Year's edition features Dj Vibe. 8PM onwards. Rs 1,500 with a free drink per person.

1905-2006

Fiesta New Year's Blast

Billed as the Hottest New Year's Eve Party, Get Ready For It. 31 December, 6.30 PM onwards, 1905 Kantipath, Rs 600 with unlimited drinks.

Have a Ball Hyatt Regency

The Hyatt Ballroom is all about dancing this New Year's as Bollywood sensation Shubangi drops into Kathmandu to burn up the dance floor. 8PM onwards, Rs 3,000 per person, Rs 5,000 per couple.

Trauma-free

Kura Thai

Thai food lovers—here's an opportunity to savour your favourite tastes at discounted prices. With live music by the Trauma band and free cocktails.

In Style Dwarika's Hotel

If you're looking to welcome the New Year in style, Dwarika's offers the entire package. The party starts with a drink at the Fusion bar next to an open fire, with live classical music by Anil Shahi. Next, enjoy a 5-star dinner in the Toran restaurant. Then Ciney & Par-e-jat will get you swinging on the dance floor. Rs 3,000 per person.

Stay Over Godavari Village Resort

Want to escape the city's chaos? Godavari offers the perfect retreat. The package includes a night stay with an opulent gala dinner and breakfast, door prizes and a complimentary glass of wine. A live band with Deepak Bajracharya will sing you into the New Year. Rs 5,555 per person.

Hangover cures

Here are a few tips to avoid that painful banging in your head on 1 January

1. Do not drink alcohol, try fruit juices or other non-alcoholic drinks. (mocktails like Virgin Mary)
2. If you do, avoid the temptation to go from tipsy to tipsy turvy.
3. Down a glass of water or fruit juice after every drink to rehydrate.
4. Eat a proper meal before you start drinking or while imbibing.
5. After you wake up, drink lots of water or fresh lemon soda.
6. The traditional Nepali hangover cure is a small shot of aila. Unless you're planning a long weekend we suggest you apply all the former steps before you try this one.



Forget all the fancy beverages this New Year's Eve. If you want to savour all those sweet n' sour memories of the past year and imagine the next round of ups and downs of life in Nepal, there is no better way than by slowly sipping on some of our local spirits. Here's our guide to Made in Nepal drinks.

Aila

Newari firewater is distilled from rice and is an important part of all festive affairs. *Aila* is poured as a long stream into a small clay dish called *pyala* from a bronze/brass vessel called *aanti*. Most connoisseurs of this Nepali spirit (and there are many who prefer *aila* to scotch) prefer a plain *aila* to the flavoured ones because the quality of flavoured *aila*, made by spiking it with spices like cinnamon or

C₂H₅OH

cloves, can't be guaranteed.

Restaurants and hotels in Kathmandu still refrain from serving *aila*, which is technically illegal believe it or not. So you'd be breaking the law if you are partaking of it in the three places that serve it: Dhokaima Café's Rukhmuni Bar in Patan Dhoka, Jatra in Thamel and Krishnaarpan t Dwarika's Hotel.

Dhokaima also serves an interesting Aila Mary made with tomato juice. Jatra, in Thamel, has the most innovative *aila* mix ever produced. For Rs 140 you get a 60 ml shot of flavoured *aila* with Yarchagumba, which will definitely get your motor running.

Marpha Brandy

The best local brandy in the market comes from the two Thakali villages of Tukche and Marpha in Mustang. Distilled from the tastiest apples, apricots, carrots and naked barley, Tukche and Marpha are both name brands even though you buy them in beer bottles. Tukche Brandy however is available only in a few select locations, one being Tukche Kitchen in Darbar Marg. While there try *Jwhai Khatte*, a local Thakali spirit spiked with butter.

Khukri Rum


Considered Nepal's finest, the Khukri XXX Rum has a lingering aroma and a smooth, balanced flavour with a hint of oak. Produced since 1959, Khukri XXX is comparable to other world-class rums and is used in most of the rum-based cocktails served here because of the heady punch it produces and its after-taste. Some of our favourite Khukri cocktails are Rum Punch, Cuba Libre and Khukri Knock Out, available at most watering holes in Thamel.

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Date: 31 Dec'05
Venue: Shambala Garden
Time: 20:00 hrs onwards
Queries: 4412999
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Bollywood Sensation



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Cocktail reception by the poolside with LIVE classical music by **"ANIL SHAHI"**

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Countdown with the band... to bid farewell to 2005 and welcome 2006!!!

The Bar is open until 1 am to keep the good spirits flowing

Time: 8:00pm Onwards
Price: Rs.3000.00 per person
Includes:

- Welcome Drink
- New Years Eve Dinner
- Countdown with the Band
- Dancing and Music with the Band inside Toran
- A glass of champagne to toast 2006

Reservations Recommended

Special Christmas & NewYear package also available for Local residents.

WIN !!
Attractive door prizes including KTM - LONDON return air fare with Gulf Air

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Tel: 4479488, Email: info@dwarikas.com, Website: www.dwarikas.com

Nepali films in UK

After the British film festival in Nepal organised by the British Council there is now a Nepali film festival in Britain organised by the group, London Chhalphal.

The 'Kingdom in Motion' film festival 13-14 January will raise understanding about Nepal's conflict and the situation facing Bhutani refugees here, according to the organisers. They hope the knowledge will result in greater international pressure on parties involved to work towards lasting peace. 'Kingdom in Motion' will also raise donations for internally displaced people in Nepal. The featured films include:



Mukundo

This is a tragic story of a young working class Kathmandu family and the influence of culture, religion, desire and shamanistic ritual on their lives.

Schools in the Crossfire

The Maoists have increasingly targetted schools. Pupils and teachers find themselves caught between the government, which accuses them of being Maoist sympathisers and the insurgents, who accuse them of spying for the state.



Numafung

Set in eastern Nepal, the film depicts the life of Numafung and her experience with Limbu rituals, death, family life, marriage and happiness.

Spirit Does Not Come Anymore

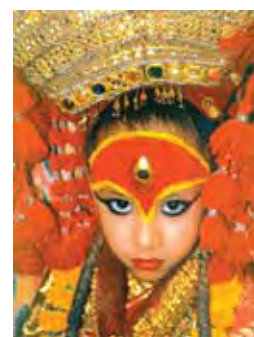
This film explores the Tibetan belief in invoking spirits to cure family ills and disease. It narrates the conflict between a father and his son who wants to break away from family traditions.

On the Road with the Red God

This month-long celebration of colour, sacrifice and devotional worship is held every 12 years and was filmed in 2003.

Kumari, the Living Goddess of Nepal

A documentary on the stories of three former Kumaris, including their 'lost childhoods' and lives after they are retired.



Kingdom in Motion
13-14 January, 2006
International Student House
Great Portland Street
Regents Park, London

<http://www.london-chhalphal.org>

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