All in a day's work

Not much has changed for Nepali overseas labour since 1 September 2004

DAMBAR K SHRESTHA

On the evening of 31 August 2004, news broke of the murder of 12 Nepalis held hostage in Iraq by the terrorist group Ansar-al-Sunna. Normally, rioting stops when night falls. But the vandalism and attacks went on late that night and resumed early the next morning.

By the time curfew was imposed at 2PM, 286 of Kathmandu’s 485 overseas employment agencies were destroyed and suffered Rs750 million in damages. Although only one person was reportedly killed, 355 offices, airlines, businesses and media houses had been vandalized. The Jame Masjid was ransacked, and smoke rose from burning tyres all across the city.

Although outrage at the murders and vendetta against recruiters was blamed, it is now clear that all kinds of political forces including the parties, the Maoists, and the royalists were blamed for the organised rioting.

But an underlying reason continues to be ignored: two years after the mayhem, no government body is still actually responsible for the hundreds of thousands of Nepalis who work overseas and prop up the economy.

No one even knows for sure exactly how many Nepalis work abroad, or how much money they send back. There is only piecemeal legislation regulating foreign employment. As the recent crisis in Lebanon showed again, there is no backup for Nepali workers overseas.

Manpower agencies often make dodgy deals with foreign employers, or fleece aspiring workers before they even leave the country.

Many are dumped at Doha or Kuala Lumpur airport when they get there.
October revolutions
Parallels between Russia 1917 and Nepal 2006

The striking resemblance of contemporary Nepal to the October 1917 coup in Russia offers insight into Comrade Prakash Kamal Dahal’s talk of a “October Revolution”. Just like the Maoists, civil society and the seven-party alliance, the main demand of Russian political parties was intelligentia and Bolsheviks ever since World War I started in 1914 was for a constituent assembly. King Nicholas II was unpopular in a country where “God, Tsar and Fatherland” had been the time-honoured formula of statecraft. However, preventing the country from sliding towards anarchy after the Tsar’s abdication was difficult. Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, social democrats, and former loyalists intensified their struggle for power tangentially constituent assembly election scheduled for November the same year. The Bolsheviks had a strategic advantage as the workers and soldiers’ councils had the local governments under control. The central government was weak, local governance lay in tatters. On the eve of the October coup, an earnest Lenin asked his comrades to recognise that “an armed people’s struggle is the only remaining option left to our party and the only channel for political action to be improved, and a suture-less procedure that made surgery and recovery quicker. Tilganga has become the primary eye-care facility in Nepal, managing six centres across the country. In Kathmandu, Tilganga treats 3,000 patients a week for surgery fees and acquired recognition for placing Nepal at the forefront of developing safe, effective, and economical procedures for cataract surgery, enabling the needlessly blind in even the poorest countries to see.

Meanwhile, there are many Sanduk Ruits in Nepal, and we often feature them in these pages: people who work quietly and selflessly with their own reward being a sense of inner fulfillment that their work has improved the lives of others.

If sometimes we feel hopeless about our country’s future, we just need to look at the work of visionary Nepalis like Ruit. They didn’t sit around and complain about getting no help from government, or just talk about injustice, order political parties and the NC must strive for lasting change. Unfortunately, they too seem to have their priorities mixed up. Fortunately, Mr. Jan Martin knows the limitations of outsiders in armed conflicts as entrenched as the Nepalese. Short-term consultants on lucrative assignments will only be making his job difficult by dropping another acronym heard commonly these days during break at Baber Mahal, jugal@yahoo.com
BAD GAMBLE

CK Lal (This way or that?, #312) wrongly implies that King Gyanendra decided to seize power on February 1, 2005 because he ‘‘was tired and bled’’ and ‘‘desperate for [my] support.’’ This interpretation stands the facts on their head. ‘‘Long before 1 February, 2005, I told the King that any attempt by him to seize power would be a serious mistake and would do great damage to Nepal.’’ I further told him ‘‘that my government would not support, and instead would condemn, any such move on his part. The King ignored this advice.’’

‘‘On the day he seized power, the United States declared it was ‘‘deeply troubled’’ by the King’s move, and ‘‘declared it was ‘‘deeply concerned about the consequences of this action on democracy.î’’ Two weeks later, the State Department recalled me to the United States to show our government’s displeasure. The King’s action was indeed a bad gamble, but neither my government nor I ever encouraged it.

James F Moriarty, US Ambassador

WERE YOU CORRECTLY SUPPORTING THE GOVERNMENT?

You have either woken up ‘‘a little too late’’ (Editorial, #312) wrongly implies that ‘‘I failed to do so for the wrong reasons’’ (as if my government would not support, and instead would condemn, any such move on the King’s part). The King ignored this advice.

‘‘By the way, have you kept quiet, and now you say‘‘things need to follow process and policy’’? The present democratic government is a result of street power, not by ballot or due process. If I remember correctly, it was fully supported by the media. Were you placing your bet on the very short memory of us Nepalis?’’

Rahul Shrestha, email

YOU ARE RIGHT

You are right. If you remember correctly, it was fully supported by the media. Were you placing your bet on the very short memory of us Nepalis?

Rupesh Jaiswal, email

THE PROBLEMS OF THE INTERNATIONAL PETROLEUM PRODUCTS

The profits of the international petroleum products price hike goes directly to the Arab world and the US multinational companies. The government should heavily tax imported petroleum products and then spend the income for developing indigenous alternative power resources.

Shree Om Prakash, Hetauda

THE NAPALI DOCTOR

Baburam Bhattarai in the interview you translated from a TV show says he never killed anyone (Evolution from cities, #312), but perhaps the guruji would like to explain how he is guilty of exploiting the frustrations of the young who, having grown up with a series of governments that squabbled instead of planning for the young job market, were quite willing, and angry enough, to take up arms. All they needed was a Brahmin to tell them who was to blame and where to point the gun.

K A Tamang

Middlesborough

THE NAPALI DOCTOR

There goes Baburam Bhattarai again justifying his part. The King ignored this advice. ‘‘The King is callous and insensitive. ‘‘People would have died anyway’’ (Bahas show #311) seems to be offended by the comments in the article you translated from Kenjiro. He says ‘‘the crimes and atrocities committed by the army is plentyí. Why does Mr Roka not mention the crimes of the Maoists for decades. and up to now there are no Swiss living conditions, full employment, equal rights, freedom of speech or other democratic fundamental rights. Instead there is widespread poverty, oppression, contempt of human rights, and torture. So Baburam, do your country and millions of ignorant Nepalis a favour: start telling them the truth.’’

B Mueller, Germany

WHOSE ATROCITIES?

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Three-way trust

resolving intractable conflict boils down to one simple term: trust-building. Building trust between the various sides is what Ian Martin’s new UN mission will be doing for the foreseeable future. The task ahead is difficult for many reasons. The Maoist militia is one. The intent of the palace and army intervention is another. Do-good but ignorant donors could also add to the complexities involved. But spoilers can emerge from among us too. Unintended consequences of good intentions (partisan pressure from civil society, for example) and ignorance among the seven parties of the mechanics of negotiations could be just as destructive. The history of conflict resolution is littered with examples of innocent players unknowingly derailing the process. The immediate difficulties through the twin key areas: trust in the government negotiating team, and almost non-existent civil-military relations.

Situations failing tightrope:
The first difficulty is right near the top, in home minister and chief government negotiator Krishna Prasad Sitaula. His job requires good personal relations with his Maoist counterpart Krishna Bahadur Mahara. The two Krishnas have, by all accounts, developed a good partnership. But this is also eroding Sitaula’s base within his own party and the alliance. More importantly, he has alienated powerful members of Prime Minister Koirala’s inner circle. Many see him as giving away too much to the Maoists without proper discussion. He has a hard job to begin with. It’s even harder now because Maoist militia are intent on wrecking the notion of law and order, his primary task as Home Minister. He seems a nice person but lacks the maturity to walk this tightrope walk,” says an experienced peace adviser, “he is losing his base.”

This perception is undercutting Sitaula’s authority with the Maoists, who have gained concessions at his expense. A recent example, critics say, is the UN-brokered agreement which gave the Maoists what they wanted: confinement of the Nepali Army within barracks and no separation of their PLA. It won’t be surprising if Sitaula ends up as the fall guy in the near future.

Maols will take the government seriously only if it is backed by a strong army

Civil-military relations:
All sides dread negotiating from a position of weakness. For the simplest reason is that the end result already suffer from being perceived as lacking full control over the Nepali Army. Worse, many politicians also lack knowledge of the mechanics of conflict resolution, particularly the fact that arms and weapons do have a role in defining a political settlement.

Despite repeated army proclamations of loyalty to the civilian government, the alliances hold is still tenuous. Nothing has changed as far as the army is concerned,” says a foreign conflict resolution expert. “But the politicians will be playing with fire if they try to leave for a better life overseas end up losing their land, home, and life savings to agency fees.” People take loans with up to 37 percent interest rate to leave the country, when they start working abroad they are not paid enough so they end up with debt,” says Sagar Nepal, vice president of Non Resident Nepali Association (NRNA). There is no follow-up from any side about the living conditions of overseas workers. Says Hafiz Khan of Prima Employment Overseas, “The government is too busy sending Nepalis abroad and labour ministry is too busy collecting remittances.

The foreign employment industry, in ruins after the riots, is limping back to life. But overseas labour will remain a potential flashpoint, until the contribution of foreign employment to the Nepali economy is not institutionalised.

MEANWHILE
Suman Pradhan

Morality outrages the Nepali workers at Bahrain airport

The Labour Ministry says that the real percentage point drop in poverty, World Bank figures show a 10 billion to Nepal every year, but no one knows for sure. They send back up to $1 billion to Nepal every year, but no one has an exact count. Every day of this week, 500 Nepalis left for jobs overseas.

If it kept Nepali economy, from 42 to 32 percent, despite the conflict, and the decline, is attributed to remittances.

But the government treats overseas employment as a safety valve and seems only too glad to the workers go. There is little effort to encourage before leaving training, to regulate the industry and to stop exploitation by unscrupulous recruiters here and abroad.

The government’s apathy is seen in the woeful lack of statistics. Although there are

employment Overseas, “The

when the war between Israel and Lebanon started, the government called on manpower agencies to see how many Nepalis were in the region, but could not get the numbers. Much later our estimates were around over 5,000 Nepalis living and working there,” says Gurung. But the industry is vulnerable to instability in West Asia, on suddenly policy changes of foreign government. An attack on overseas workers causes fear and insecurity among those who aspire to work abroad and those who live off family members’ remittances.

The standard response to the killing of 12 Nepali workers in the September 2004 or the exploitation of female domestic workers is a blanket ban. But this doesn’t stop the workers from taking the India route.

Saru Joshi, UNIFEM’s South Asia Program coordinator, says, “If you close the door, they will leave through the window,” says the real figure is over three million.

“Whatever the politicians do, they must not make the army feel touched,” says an current Home Minister. “He seems a nice person but lacks the maturity to walk this tightrope walk,” says an experienced peace adviser, “he is losing his base.”

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The government and agents need to jointly initiate programs on overseas employment and understand the framework in which the labour market operates, she says.

Even problems right in Nepal are not being fixed. Manpower agencies continue to take advantage of the loopholes in Nepal’s laws, and many who try to leave for a better life overseas end up losing their land, home, and life savings to agency fees. “People take loans with up to 37 percent interest rate to leave the country, when they start working abroad they are not paid enough so they end up with debt,” says Sagar Nepal, vice president of Non Resident Nepali Association (NRNA). There is no follow-up from any side about the living conditions of overseas workers. Says Hafiz Khan of Prima Employment Overseas, “The government is too busy sending Nepalis abroad and labour ministry is too busy collecting remittances.

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Hague unlikely for Maoists

On 25 July, parliament directed the government to ratify the Rome Statute that created the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2002. Representatives of NGOs forming the Asian Delegation for the ICC were here 25-27 August to lobby the government to take that next step. We spoke with Ahmed Ziauddin of the Asian Network for the International Criminal Court.

Maoist leaders are unlikely to be before the International Criminal Court (ICC). The NGO Delegation has kept prodding on this issue (‘Oil yo-yo’ in #139, ‘Mixing oil and money’ in #18, and ‘Fuel for four’ in #20). The media is focusing entirely on how the poor will suffer from a price hike and the vandalism that followed the sudden increment. But there’s more to this particular price hike.

First, oil like vegetables or fruits is a commodity in the market. Global prices are swayed by demand and supply and geopolitics. For Nepal our fixed currency exchange rate with India means our prices fluctuate with the Indian market, and prices are hardly ever declining. See page 6/7. By selling oil here at lower prices than in India, we are giving our business people an opportunity to bring in vacant tankers into Nepal while the previous oil is already emptied in India. This has opened up the joker economy where people load fuel products into jerry cans and peddle them across the border. The primary objective should be price parity both in Nepal and India rather than the cost of product or taxation.

Second, an oil price hike is seen as a political issue and not an economic one. How can we believe that a government unable to stand by a decision on a simple oil price hike to handle critical issues like arms management, monetary policy and fiscal discipline? The government itself has given petrol mafia the freedom to hoard and this raises doubts about the government either in government and in the corporation.

Third, oil dealers are the least trusted. The consumer believes and prefers the government run gas stations. This is because dealers make money by hoarding supplies and adulterating fuel rather than providing good customer service.

Further, the entire business works like a cartel, defeating the whole concept of market, consumer choice and pricing. We need to open up the sector to global companies who believe in serving the consumer.

Finally, the government mustn’t has to be disbanded. While some of the losses of NOC (No Oil Corporation) are actually due to taxes levied on the petroleum products, it is an institution that constantly survives on the taxpayers’ money and loans. The government needs to disclose all the properties pledged to NOC to keep the company afloat. NOC and manager a management contract can remain custodian of the storage facilities and leave everything to credible private players.

Have you been approached about taking particular cases to the Court? No, not at all. In the last couple of days no one has talked about it (revenging). The prime minister didn’t say a word about the king. Even the former prime minister (Sher Bahadur Deuba) didn’t say anything about him until one of our NGO friends mentioned that he had been jailed by the king.

Will the treaty be ratified retroactively? If it chooses, the government can eradicate its ratification to 2002 or possibly earlier. That doesn’t mean the court would entertain an application—it has stringent standards. From the discussions we had, the government has no intention to predicate it.

What are you especially concerned about? What are you especially concerned about? What are you especially concerned about? The people of Nepal and the government must decide on how to deal with the past. I understand there will be a major legal system. Our mission is to help strengthen Nepal’s legal system.

What about the past? We have to guard against an impunity gap. The ICC will be dealing with only a few cases; 99.9 percent of cases are dealt with in national courts. If governments don’t have proper laws and the intention to prosecute, criminals could commit major crimes and afterwards face no consequences. Our mission is to help strengthen Nepal’s legal system.

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How Maina was killed

Kantipur, 30 August

The army's verdict [on the Maina Sunuwar case] is one of the many incidents of violence and killings disguised as ‘encounters’ by the security forces mobilised against the Maoists. The board of the Court of Inquiry set up by the Military Court has concluded that the army killed young Maina Sunuwar of Kabhre by subjecting her to severe torture, despite the availability of dispassionate measures of interrogation. Maina was arrested on the morning of 17 February 2005 by a covert team despatched by the Birintra Peace Operations Training Centre, Panchkhal. She died while being tortured, but the army's story was that she was killed while trying to escape, in the Hokse area.

The verdict states that the local army leadership tried to keep even the Military Court in the dark. The Board comprises Colonel Mohan Bahadur Basnet, Lieutenant Rajna Prakash Thapa, and Major Bharat Kumar Khadka.

According to evidence collected by the Board, the army went to the village acting on information provided by Maoist cadre Simala BK who was arrested by police in the Palanchkhal area and told the army in course of interrogation that Debi Sunuwar, the officiating chief of the training centre, sent a 12-member team commanded by Boby Khatri, the officiating chief of the training centre, to the Palanchkhal barracks. We’ll interrogate her and send her back. Nothing untoward happened on the trip to the training centre.

Maina's interrogation began in the presence of seven persons, including Khatri, Basnet, and Adhikari, Captain Amit Pun, Sergeant Major Khadka Bahadur Khati, Dil Bahadur Basnet (a runner in the officers' mess) and Shikshirna Thapa. Captains Sunil [Adhikari] and Amit [Pun], acting on Khatri’s orders, asked Dil Bahadur and Shikshirna Thapa to bring in a large container of water. Then the task of torturing Maina began, and the armymen in attendance shoved her repeatedly into the water. It has been learnt that she was drenched, and that she choked time and again due to [being held under] the water. The verdict states. After they failed to make her speak [by repeatedly holding her under water], Captains Sunil and Amit, under the orders of Boby Khatri, decided that Maina would be subjected to electric shocks. They ordered Shikshirna Thapa to do the job and he pulled a live wire out from a geyser line. When he asked which part of Maina's body [he] should electrocute, he was told the soles of her feet and her hands. Captains Sunil and Amit ordered Sergent Maj Khadka Bahadur to electrocute her on her feet and hands, which were still wet. According to the verdict, Maina’s wrists started to bleed. Shikshirna Thapa slowly stepped back in fear and stopped electrocuting her. By then Maina was very weak and admitted that she had been involved in Maoist activity for a couple of months. After Shikshirna left, Captains Sunil and Amit ordered Sergeant Maj Khadka Bahadur Khati to continue the interrogation by administering more shocks, and Maina was again electrocut. After severe torture lasting one-and-a-half hours, Maina had still said nothing remarkable.

She was then taken to a dhawai ghar near a temple and it was agreed that the interrogation would continue after they had eaten.

Maina was blindfolded, her hands were tied behind her back, and there was a sentry guarding her. Shikshirna Thapa and Khadka Bahadur were also there. At around 11AM, Bobby Khatri informed that Maina was vomiting and foaming at the mouth and in serious condition. When a medical orderly came over to check on her, she was already dead. The verdict further says. After Maina Sunuwar died, Bobby Khatri ordered a cover-up of the incident. A plan was worked out to bury the body secretly. [Bobby] Khatri ordered Amit Pun to do so, and ordered Niranjan Basnet to bring police over from the Panchkhal Police Post to prepare a report of the incident.

Pun called JCO Surendra, informed him of the incident and instructed him to dig a pit in a spot northeast of the officers' mess, 50-60 meters outside the concertina wire. A little later, soldiers Dil Bahadur Basnet and Shikshirna Thapa were asked to bring over a sack each. The two sacks were slipped over Mainaís head and feet, before her body was put into the vehicle. Amit [Pun] had driven the vehicle to where the body was.

Captain Amit ordered soldier Dil Bahadur Basnet to fire a shot into back of the deceased with a Colt command weapon, telling him to also remove the sacks after placing her beside the pit. The soldier misfired, and then Amit himself fired two shots from the same weapon. Only one hit Mainaís body in the back. The report states. After shooting her body, Amil photographed it and buried it, with the help of those present.

Meanwhile, Captain Basnet reported the incident to a sub-inspector, an assistant sub-inspector, and a police jawan at the Panchkhal Police Office. Colonel Bobby Khatri asked the police to ‘make-up’ a story about the body. The story stated that Maina was arrested, tried to break the security cordon in Hokse and jump out of the vehicle. She was shot by the security forces while doing so, and died.

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PRICE DISPARITY ALONG NEPAL-INDIA BORDER

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<th>Petroleum products</th>
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<td>55 (Kathmandu)</td>
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The Maoists and the seven parties are yet to agree on the role of the monarchy vs republic. We have to start working on a framework now. Those in power want the king to leave the throne and the Maoists to give up arms. But what about them? What will they give up? The future of the monarchy is yet a small issue in the interim constitution, which was solved when everyone agreed to a referendum. To achieve peace all of us have to give up something. We can start by giving up our traditional mimisbons.

Clashing the king out of the palace or snatching guns away from the Maoists are not the only ways to peace. An all-inclusive political reform is not possible until we realise our share in the conflict.

Ministers in the formal royal cabinet have alleged that the cabinet chair played the main role in suppressing the people’s movement. This means that the high-level Rayamajhi investigation commission now faces the challenge of getting a statement from the king.

While some members of the commission have proposed sending a written questionnaire to the king, others say that he would not be answering those questions. A few of the members of the commission say that the king who came down to Narayanhiti Palace from the Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi to address the issue of property, citizenship, language, caste and ethnicity.

The Maoists and the seven parties are yet to agree on the role of the monarchy. On the other hand, it looks like the conflict over monarchy is the most important. We are caught up in this king thing that we can’t see a future conflict over caste and ethnicity simmering away underneath. They declare that the real test is not to be limited to monarchy vs republic. If we are really serious about a republic, we have to start working on a framework now. Those in power want the king to leave the throne and the Maoists to give up arms. But what about them? What will they give up? The future of the monarchy is yet a small issue in the interim constitution, which was solved when everyone agreed to a referendum. To achieve peace all of us have to give up something. We can start by giving up our traditional mimisbons.

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In summary, third-country resettlement will:

- Take only the best and brightest to third countries and leave the rest high and dry in Nepal
- Split the refugee community and deepen their sense of injustice, which is neither in the interest of the Nepal government nor that of the refugees.
Why isn’t the government promoting electric cars by giving them tax breaks?

In an ideal world, we would have a smart government. It would recognise our growing dependence on expensive imported fuel and give tax breaks for electric vehicles.

Nepal is going bankrupt subsidising fossil fuels, but still it tries its best not to allow vehicles that run on electricity. Fossil fuels don’t just harm the ecology, they ruin the economy. The spectacularly mismanaged Nepal Oil Corporation (NOC) already owes Indian Oil Rs 10 billion, and this is growing at Rs 300 million a month. How on earth are we going to pay up? After last weekend’s riots, this government just doesn’t have the stomach to push through another necessary price increase. So, the only sensible thing to do is look for urgent alternatives:

- Announce tax breaks to domestic manufacturers of electric vehicles
- Cut import duty on electric cars
- In the long term restart trolleys, cargo ropeways and trains

Successive governments in Singha Durbar have been too beholden to the fossil mafia to push electric. Officials are concerned that giving tax breaks to electric vehicles will cut government revenue from petrol and diesel cars. But calculations show that instead of losing money, the government could actually save in the long term though tax rebates on electric vehicles like the Reva, MiniEV and ElectroBus. Sale of hydroelectricity that would otherwise be wasted and savings on fuel subsidies alone would cover up the revenue loss over a car’s ten-year lifespan (see box).

Running costs of electric vehicles like the Reva are so low that even including battery replacement every three years, the total saving to a customer over a petrol car is a staggering Rs 1,012,000 over ten years. That is when petrol prices are at the present Rs 67.25 per litre, so the savings would be even higher as petrol prices go up to Rs 80 per litre or more.

Win-win-win

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<th>Reva cost</th>
<th>Landed cost (includes 80 percent duty, 5 percent special tax, 13 percent VAT and 32 percent excise)</th>
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<td>Rs 37,858</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dealer margin, VAT and excise TOTAL PRESENT COST</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Rs 100,000</td>
<td>Rs 1,437,858</td>
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<td>TOTAL COST if 1997 rebate is applied</td>
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<td>Rs 817,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Savings to government over 10-year lifecycle of car from losses to NOC and income to NEA from electricity sales (not including savings from reduction in health problems and losses to tourism caused by pollution):</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Rs 800,000</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Savings to customer in running costs of Reva over 10 years compared to Maruti:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Rs 1,012,120</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

KUNDA DIXIT

I

Dream Safari in the Heart of the Jungle.

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Megen Twari of the Kathmandu Electric Vehicle Alliance (KEVA), which worked with Hulas on the MiniEV.

So what is Hulas waiting for? Customers. It just hasn't sunk in into the minds of vehicle owners in Nepal that the age of fossil fuel dinosaurs is over. Even if they don't become extinct very soon, they will be too expensive to run. Safa tempos have shown that electric transport makes economic and environmental sense. Yet, even transport entrepreneurs already using electric vehicles are unwilling to make the jump from three wheels to four wheels. It's time they did.

Hulas Motors, Akash Golchha (01)4442454

Safas have a solution staring at us right in the face: says Goff. "People should be burning tyres on the streets to demand a change that mindset," says Bibek Chapagain of KEVA, which is working with Surendra Golchha at Hulas to promote the MiniEV.

Safas have a solution staring at us right in the face: says Goff. "People should be burning tyres on the streets to demand a change that mindset," says Bibek Chapagain of KEVA, which is working with Surendra Golchha at Hulas to promote the MiniEV.

The Reva saga

In 2002, the Kathmandu-based company Eco-visions took advantage of a government decision to reduce taxes on electric vehicles by importing five Reva from Bangalore. Bharat Basnet is an environmental activist and a tourism entrepreneur.

Says Goff: "People should be burning tyres on the streets to demand a reduction in the tax of electric vehicles."

My 10-point transport agenda

Bharat Basnet

Nepal has nearly 18,000km roads, but every year new roads are being built. The percentage of Nepal's 26 million people living in urban areas has crossed the 25 percent mark. We have to import all of our fuel, and international fuel prices have doubled in five years. So we have two options: find alternatives or go under.

Nepal Oil Corporation is one of the most mismanaged and corruption-ridden parasitical parasites in this country. It has to buy expensive oil and subsidise it to sell cheap. So what do we do?

Here is my own 10-point agenda that will reduce oil consumption:

1. The prime minister downwards in government set a proper example by riding smaller cars and reducing the size of their security convoys.
2. Same for donors. They should switch to smaller, fuel-efficient or electric cars for city travel.
3. All government offices auction off their Prados, Pajeros, Landcruisers and start using smaller cars.
4. All civil servants start using public transport whenever possible to commute to work.
5. Citizens start commuting by bicycle whenever possible (that's me in the picture).
6. Since the army will be confined to barracks soon, its fuel consumption will automatically go down. But can we put a cap on all non-essential travel by security personnel?
7. College students, instead of burning tyres can start employing novel means of protest, boycotting all diesel and petrol cars, riding only on safas tempos or bicycling to class.
8. Mini-vans and microbuses on long-distance routes consume much more fuel per passenger km. Let's change them to bigger buses which are more efficient.
9. And let's have a national policy to encourage electric vehicles, trolley buses, trams, safe buses, electric trains, and raipways. It is the height of stupidity to import expensive and dirty fossil fuels when we sit on a goldmine of renewable energy in this country.
10. And last but not least, let's register our protest by not going anywhere unless we have to. Let's use the time to clean our surroundings, plant trees on sidewalks or set up neighbourhood parks. Let's stop talking, and start doing something. The world will change only if we change.

Bharat Basnet is an environmental activist and a tourism entrepreneur.
The last decade has been exciting for planetary astronomy, in large part because there are powerful new telescopes positioned on the ground and in space. For thousands of years, very little was known about the planets, other than that they were objects which moved in the sky against a background of fixed stars. The very word ‘planet’ comes from the Greek word for ‘wanderer’.

But today, hosts of newly discovered large objects in the outer regions of our solar system are presenting a challenge to our historical definition of a planet.

The International Astronomical Union, at its conference in Prague in August, decided that Pluto is no longer a planet, downsizing the solar system from nine planets to eight. When Pluto was discovered in 1930, there were controversies about whether it should be considered a planet or an asteroid captured by the Sun.

Pluto hasn’t changed now, but the definition of a planet has, after rigorous debate among astronomers. A planet is now ‘a celestial body that is in orbit around the Sun, and has sufficient mass for its self-gravity to overcome rigid body forces so that it assumes a nearly round shape, and has cleared the neighbourhood around its orbit’.

Much-maligned Pluto is automatically disqualified under the new criteria because its oblong orbit overlaps with that of the eighth planet, Neptune. Instead, Pluto along with Xena (2003 UB 313) and Ceres (an asteroid between Mars and Jupiter)† will be reclassified in a new category of ‘dwarf planets’, similar to what have long been termed ‘minor planets’. These are a third class of lesser objects that orbit the Sun, itself a solar system body, a term that will apply to asteroids, comets, and other natural satellites. School and college textbooks around the world will have to be changed.

Interesting celestial events for September are a partial eclipse of the Moon and an annular eclipse of the Sun. During the Full Moon on Thursday, 7 September, the Moon will be almost exactly in line with the Sun and Earth, so there will be a partial eclipse of the Moon. The eclipse will start at 22:27 and will end at 02:45 AM. The maximum eclipse will be at half past midnight (00:36 AM). During the 22 September New Moon, the Sun, Earth and Moon will again be in a perfect straight line causing an annular eclipse of the Sun. This particular eclipse is NOT visible from Asia.

The Sun is in the constellation of Leo at the start of September, moving into Virgo on the 16th. The Autumn Equinox occurs on Saturday, 23 September, when the Sun crosses the celestial equator, making the day equal to the night.

Mercury goes through a superior conjunction on 1 September to become an evening object. We won’t be able to see this elusive little planet this month.

Venus is still playing the role of Morning Star, but it’s getting harder to see. At the start of September, Venus rises in the east an hour-and-a-half before the Sun.

Mars sets only a few minutes after sunset, so we won’t be able to see the Red Planet this month or indeed probably for the rest of this year.

Jupiter in Libra, is the only planet we can hope to see in the evening sky this month. It’s low in the southwest at sunset, and sets about two hours after the Sun.

Saturn is coming up in the east in the early hours of the morning, and should be visible in the east before dawn. If you can recognise the Twin Stars of Gemini, high in the east, look for Saturn well below them.

† kedarbadu@yahoo.com
On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Nepal and Japan on 1 September 1956, Japanese ambassador to Nepal, Tsutomu Hiraoka, spoke to Nepali Times about the history of bilateral cooperation as well as Japan’s assessment of Nepal’s peace process.

Nepali Times: Today is the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Japan and Nepal. What is your assessment about the way bilateral ties have progressed?

Ambassador Tsutomu Hiraoka: Japan and Nepal established diplomatic relations on 1 September, 1956. Since then our relations have grown to become very cordial and friendly. I can say we enjoy excellent and unblemished bilateral ties today. Fifty years of friendship is indeed an epoch-making achievement and we are determined to build a new chapter of friendship for another 50 years and beyond. Our friendship has been well-preserved and today we are enjoying unblemished friendship. It is my hope to work together with people of both countries to make the ties and friendship between Japan and Nepal ever stronger and pass it on to the future generations. I am very optimistic about it.

What are the areas in which you think Japanese economic cooperation has concretely helped raise living standards in Nepal?

Japan’s economic assistance to Nepal began with the acceptance of several Nepali trainees under the Colombo Plan in 1954. Grant and loan aid started in 1969 soon after the Embassy opened in Kathmandu. Since then, Japan has been continuously extending economic and technical cooperation to Nepal. The cooperation covers areas such as health, education, energy, transport, drinking water, environmental conservation as well as other fields requiring development. Especially in the health sector, Kanti Children’s Hospital, TU Teaching Hospital, and National Tuberculosis Centre are the most famous. With regard to the energy sector, about 40 percent of electric power generation capacity was built through Japanese cooperation. In Kathmandu, the Bagmati Bridge was built by Japanese grant. Japan also provided most of the traffic signal lights in Kathmandu. As for ongoing projects, the construction of the 158km-Sindhuli Road connecting Duhlikhel, Sindhuli Bazar to Barabise is expected to greatly uplift the Nepal economy, especially adjoining areas along the road.

Nepalis working in Japan are a source of valuable remittance, what can be done to enhance prospects for more Nepalis to work there?

Many Nepalis work in Japan. In order for more Nepalis to work in Japan there should be more qualified Nepali workers, which means training and education. In this respect AOTS (The Association for Overseas Technical Scholarship) is providing Nepalis with training opportunities in Japan. There is also the job training in Japan under a JITCO (Japan International Training Cooperation Organisation) scheme as well.

How does your government assess developments in Nepal after the restoration of parliament in April?

After restoration of parliament in April, the Government of Japan dispatched Mr Yasuhisa Shiozaki, Senior Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs, to Nepal in July 2006. The purpose of the envoy was to express Japan’s support to the Government of Nepal in its efforts to push forward the peace process in order to consolidate democracy. My country shares the values of democracy, fundamental human rights, peace and prosperity with Nepal. We sincerely hope Nepal attains its final goal.

And how do you view the prospects of the peace process and arms management?

Everybody in Nepal yearns for peace. Therefore, I think peace will be eventually established. Arms management is the most vital issue at present and should be solved immediately. Needless to say, ownership of peace of Nepal belongs to Nepali people, so it should be resolved by the Nepali people. However, in Japan, as there is no way of thinking as joining a democratic government or going to an election without arms management. Holding arms that could influence the political decision making process, leave alone if the intent to use them is not yet abandoned, is completely against the principles and norms of democracy.

What future course is economic cooperation between Japan and Nepal going to take?

When peace is restored, Japan would like to cooperate with Nepal for its nation-building. Nepal is an Asian country and economically she falls in the category of LDC. I am sure Japan will not forget Nepal. We have cooperated for past 50 years. We will do so in the next 50 years.
KIRAN PANDAY

Masala Beads
Eriko Yoshida came to Nepal as a student in the 90s. In love with a local and chose to settle down in Nepal. Ten years ago, she along with her husband Pemba Gurung opened up Masala Beads, a popular bric-a-brac shop in Thamel. Today, the shop is popular among teenagers and also exports locally made accessories abroad. A mother of a two-year-old daughter, Eriko feels very much at home in Nepal. "For me, there is no difference between Nepal and Japan. I love Nepal with my heart." She says in fluent Nepali.

Pabuha painter
The first time Kazuko Asano watched a documentary on Nepali thangka paintings she knew she had to learn the ancient art. She came to Nepal to find a teacher and learn the techniques of paubha painting, which was called thangka after the art form was taken to Tibet from Kathmandu. After more than five years and hundreds of patient hours under the tutelage of one of the most renowned masters of paubha art, Luk Chitrakar, she is now an accomplished artist.

Shangrila Tours, Himalayan Journeys, Rum Doodle
For over 35 years Shangrila Tours and Himalayan Journeys, run by Ranji and Yukiyo Okawara, has been bringing Japanese tourists to Nepal. The two companies together employ more than 80 people and has been hailed as one of the most professional in the line. However it's the 40,000 G T Rum Doodle Restaurant and Bar in Thamel which the couple established in 1979 that has gained international reputation. It's the only bar in the world where you'll find the signatures of every Everest summiteer since Tenzing and Hillary. The Okawaras have long considered Nepal their second home and say, "Our people share the same mind and heart."

U Café
Ayami Matsuda runs U Café in Sanepe with her family. She and her husband followed her sister, who is married to a Japanese, four years ago and decided to stay on. The café, which opened about three years ago offers organic food and Japanese home cooking. Matsuda, her husband and Ayas their 18-month-old baby, are well settled and happy. "Business is doing so well and this is a great place to raise kids. We are in no hurry to leave Nepal," says Matsuda.

José Walsh

Sindhu bau, Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCVs) are also a notable presence. There have been other influences too (see sidebar).

The 50th anniversary celebrations are in full swing, events earlier this year included an essay competition and a film exchange. In Kathmandu, September will see cultural performances, and a concert, and will be followed with programs including a speech competition, a student exchange and an education fair.

Jemma Sherpa

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Jemma Sherpa
Surya Classic Encounters is back with their series of concerts. This time, they will focus on jazz as a build up to Jazzmandu. The first group to start in this season’s Surya Classic Encounters is 1974 AD, the popular Nepali band that started more than ten years ago and have consistently produced one hit album after the other ever since.

1974 AD has Adrian Pradhan on the vocals, drums, and blues harp, Manoj Kumar KC as the lead guitarist and on the keyboard, Nikkar Yuddhumbha on the bass guitar, Phurci Syangden on vocals and guitar and Sanjay Shrestha on percussion. The band plays a fusion of traditional Nepali folk music, jazz, blues, and western rock using a combination of native and western instruments.

Surya Classic Encounters started in May with a series of jazz, blues and fusion concerts where Looza, Stupa, Anil Shahi and the now world-famous jazz ensemble Cadenza performed at happening venues such as Upstairs, J-Bar, Moksh, Liquid Lounge and Absolute Bar. Music lovers stayed up late as Looza and Stupa belted out originals and covers at Moksh bar.

This time, at the Surya Classic Encounters 1974 AD is going unplugged and will be performing their instrumental, jazz, blues, funk tracks like Timro Maya, Irish Coffee, P Funk, and Crossing, evergreen melody numbers such as Samjhi Baschhu and their new song Madhu Masta from their upcoming album. With their unique blend of music, the band has been able to attract young and old, Nepalis and non-Nepali fans.

This season’s Surya Classic Encounters to kick off with 1974 AD

In the second part of the series in June, classical fusion guitarist Anil Shahi and jazz virtuoso Cadenza rocked Kathmandu with their east-west fusion performance. Anil Shahi, along with flutist Binod Katwal and percussionist Pritam Rai on tabla, performed original instrumental fusion and revamped traditional and Arabic tunes on the banjo. Cadenza returned home to Upstairs with Bhanut Rai, saxophonist Mariano, bassist Roshan Gurung, percussionist Samir Chettri and drummer/vocalist Nabin Chettri.

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GETAWAYS

Breakfast

Weekend Brunch

Wet & Wild Summer Splash†

Traditional Cuisine

Grand Dosa Fest

Monsoon Madness Wine Festival

Authentic Thai Food

Nhucheeís Kitchen

Thakali Lunch

Saffron

Mezza and Margarita

Heartbreakers

Open Mic Night

Oktober Fest

Ramailo Saanj

Take 5 Jazz Night

Live Music

Music and Food

Stupa and Jerry Explosion

MUSIC

Courses on participatory peace-conflict assessment and human rights/rights based approach, 13-15 September.

Dinner Spectacle†with†Odissi Dance

International Literacy Day

Blood Donation Program

Civic Concerns

Sinners in Heaven

Udaaya Handicraft Exhibition

Promoting Nepali Goods and Services

EVENTS

CSGN Talk by Sunil Pant of the Blue Diamond Society at Shankar Hotel. 8:30 AM. 1 September.

Promoting Nepali Goods and Services discussion with Magesh Lal Shrestha, Ajay Pradhanang and Shaurav Jyoti at Martin Chautal. 1-3 September.

Udaya Handicraft Exhibition products manufactured largely by Udaya community at Chamber Building, Kantipath, 1-3 September. 2421511

Sinners in Heaven with DJ Jazzy Joe at Hotel Yak & Yeti, 1 September. Rs 1299

Civic Concerns workshop, 2 September, Heritage Plaza. 4107959

Civil Society discussion with Chandra Dev Bhatta at Martin Chautal, 2 September, 4:30 PM.

Hogaku Japanese traditional music at Soaltee Crowne Plaza, 3 September, 5:30 PM

Blood Donation Program, 3 September, 7:30 AM at Narayan Gopal Choki

Australian Embassy Roadshow at Russian Cultural Centre, 2-7 September. 4417978

Kathmandu Chorale rehearsals for winter concert starts at 7PM on 4 September at the British School

Indra Jatra 6 September

International Literacy Day 8 September

Carnival to celebrate world literacy day at Hyatt Regency, 10AM on 9 September.

Dinner Spectacle with Odissi Dance performances by Diya Sen at Baber Mahal Revisited, 10 September. 6:30 PM. 4263070

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NOT A STREET PROTEST: The central pole for this year’s Indra Jatra chariot reaches Mallighar as it is pulled from Bhaktapur to Hanuman Dhoka, signalling the beginning of the street festival on Tuesday.

THEY CAME, THEY SAW, THEY CONCURRED: US ambassador James F Moriarty looks on as visiting American congressmen Jim Kolbe (centre) and Brian Baird (right) wrap up their four-day visit with a press conference on Monday, where they endorsed the prime minister’s position that the Maoists disarm before joining the interim government.

PEACETIME DUTY: An army MI-17 helicopter delivers emergency supplies to Khaptad VDC in Accham on Wednesday, where 90 houses were washed away by a landslide. The exact number of dead is not yet known, although nine bodies have so far been found.

RAIN-CATCHERS: An urban rainwater harvesting project at Trichandra College, started by NGO Forum, is inaugurated on Thursday. The tank can collect and store up to 1.6 million litres of monsoon runoff each year.

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His (pretend) Majesty and real royals

S

atirist Manoj Gajurel has been a hit this Gai Jatra season with his accurate impersonations of a pot-bellied Pushpa Kamal Dahal and a jowly King Gyanendra in shades. Manoj doesn’t look as awesome as Prachanda, it has to be said, and his rendition of the Supreme’s interviews lack a certain gravitas. But the Sri Punch comes across ditto. So much so, and we’re not making this up, that a policeman on security duty backstage at the auditorium in Pokhara this week gave His (pretend) Majesty a snappy salute. Everyone thought the policeman was a part of the act until it turned out the poor cop actually thought Manoj was the real McCoy.

The king is in the news a lot these days. He must love it. Not a day goes by without some paper or other writing about his assets, bank accounts and property and who is one day going to inherit it all.

Meanwhile, His ( erstwhile) Majesty is sitting out the monsoon at his Nagarjun getaway and keeping a certain distance from it all. After his motorcade got stuck in traffic in the Lajimpat while driving down to receive credentials from the Turkish ambassador, these days the king tries to avoid rush hour. If he must get to the city on an errand, he hops on his Super Puma (newly-refurbished after routine maintenance in Singapore) as he did when roads were blocked during fuel riots last weekend.

The Rayamajhi Commission wants to summon the king to ask him a few questions about his alleged role in suppressing the pro-democracy movement in April. The rate at which the police chief, the army chief, the intelligence chief, and the deputy-chairmen of the royal regime have all passed the buck to their boss, it does look like the king has some explaining to do.

But the members of the Commission are reportedly torn between whether to issue written summons to the king to appear in Lalitpur (and risk having him get stuck in traffic again at Bagmati Pool due to some julus or the other) or Commission members all fly out to Nagarjun in the royal chopper to take king’s deposition. It’s a toughie.

But trust the journalist member of the commission, Harihar Birahi, to come up with the most pragmatic solution. He told the BBC Nepali Service that the Commission could shoot the king some questions by email, and the king could answer by just pressing the reply button.

But word has just come from former royal sources that King Gyanendra may actually agree to go up to Pulchok to answer questions after all. He is apparently banking on running that high-profile media gauntlet at Harihar Bhaban looking very wronged and all, and hoping that it will help restore his image. It may actually work because Nepalis love underdogs.

On Friday the Commission asked the chief royal palace secretary Pashupati Bhakta Maharjan to drop by for a prelim chat to suss out the king’s frame of mind. Depending on what Maharjan said, members will decide on when, how and wherefore to go about sending for the king. The commission is also reportedly looking at fall-back options in case the king decides not to come. Idea: how about video conferencing?

All this while the Maoists are holed up in Kamidanda in Kabhre, having their central committee meeting with 35 of their 37 members attending. The missing two (Rabindra Shrestha and Mani Thapa) were expelled from the party. Our sources tell us on the satphone of a lot of bloodshed going on because the comrades are being eaten alive by leeches. This is making them see red and the plenum is reportedly tilting towards the Oktober Kranti option.

Far away from the bloodsuckers in Uppsala in Sweden, Suresh Ale Magar and five comrades were lucky enough to be attending a peace seminar. Government delegates included Arjun Narsingh KC, Chitrakeha Yadav, Sarita Giri and Prakash Mahat got to replenish their Star Alliance Gold Cards. Even the new UN special rep for Nepal, Ian Martin, stopped by on his way back from New York. The organisers, an alluringly named Silk Road Studies Project, thought a change of scenery would make both sides feel at ease in the tranquil Swedish university town, but it seems the positions of the government and the Maoists were as intractable as ever. Next time try Urlabari, not Uppsala.

Just as a Technical Team from the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives arrived in Banke to do an on-site assessment and decide whether to declare the far-west a Drought Affected Zone the entire western tarai was submerged in floods. For once, it wasn’t the fault of the seven-party alliance government. Drought- and flood-affected Nepalis should gherao Pashupati and stage a sit-in until God meets their demand to start being a little more considerate.