Alok Tumbahangpey

It is Saturday night on one a Thamel side-street. Five young men walking along are suddenly confronted by 50 Maoists in five vehicles. “We are Maoists,” they say, “we are patrolling the streets for your protection.”

Earlier that evening, Kumar Lama of Swoyambhu was taken into Maoist custody for drinking and starting a fight. His captors took him to the Maoist trade union office in Balaju where, according to the union’s district chief Hom Bahadur Acharya, Lama was made to “understand and repent his action”.

Lama returned home after three days badly bruised and unable to walk. “I had a little too much to drink and got into an argument with a taxi driver, that’s why they took me,” he recalled, “there were others there too, some of them were blindfolded.”

Even as the peace talks were going on in Baluwatar, Maoists had begun patrolling the capital’s increasingly crime-ridden streets. It may be against the 25-point ceasefire code of conduct, but that doesn’t deter the Maoists from what they say is an effort to curb the crime surge.

The Maoist leaders want to keep their cadre busy, or it may be part of the party’s hearts-and-minds campaign. But the end result is that the Maoists are meting out summary justice to anyone behaving in a rowdy manner on the streets.

The Maoists are also said to have taken some leaders of the Valley’s criminal gangs into custody, although the rebels did not confirm it.

“We have been conducting patrols for the last three weeks and have taken some people into custody for action,” said Pawan Man Shrestha of the Maoist-aligned Newar front, “those found guilty will be handed over to the police after investigations.”

At the Maoist trade union office in Balaju we were told that the office was only a shelter for union members and that they were not holding any detainees. But this is little consolation for Renuka Shrestha, whose contractor husband Rajesh and four friends were taken in by Maoists on the Ring Road on Wednesday morning. She asked around and was told to go to the Balaju office, where we met her. “His father and mother are worried sick,” said Renuka in tears after recognising her husband’s motorcycle in the union’s premises, “if he has done anything wrong take action, but at least let me meet him and see if he is all right.” Union leader Acharya flatly denied knowledge of Rajesh’s whereabouts.

Ceasefire monitoring committee member Taranath Dahal told us: “We have heard rumours that the Maoists are arresting people and holding their people’s courts in the Valley. We are investigating, but it true it is a violation of the code of conduct and a breach of Prachanda’s public commitment to not hold people’s courts in cities.”
PUBLIC INTELLECTUALISM

Kathmandu’s well-read keep quiet during intense political crises, or mutter politically correct nothings. Their simplistic explanation of the ‘People’s War’—that it was the result of poverty—is injustice to the complexities of the rebellion’s bases. When King Gyanendra took over in his creeping coup after October 2002, the intelligentsia left leadership against the palace’s dictatorial bent to others.

Today, the issue is Maoist arms and again, the intelligentsia is cowering behind populist slogans and uncritical verbiage. Maoist arms are a threat to people, at a time when the Nepal Army is in the barracks, yet there are attempts to bring a balance into the discussion.

The talks have been extended, yet they are publicised as having failed. The Maoists want time to consult their commanders, and we hear that the seven parties backtracked. The SPA provides the rebels with a roadmap to consider, propaganda says the Maoists are the best prepared for the discussions.

Civil societies frighten the public about the talks failing, but can’t pinpoint the cause. At the very least both the SPA and the CPN (Maoists) are responsible for the delays. How is it that the CPN-M (Maoists) are the best prepared for the talks, when the Maoists want time to consult their commanders? How is it that holding the Maoists accountable for anything is considered anti-peace?

The answer lies in the inability or unwillingness or lack of courage of scholars and civil society leaders to be public intellectuals, analysing events and speaking out about what they see, even if it goes against received politically correct wisdom. Here, now, there is no public intellectualism worth the name.

All the public has are reams of comments in the newspapers bereft of analysis, perspective, and candour. So they take on the analysis, which is why, over the last few days, despite the scaremongering, the public has refused to believe that the talks have failed. The public understands the complexities of bringing in an 11-year-old insurgency to open politics, and that is why it is not engaged in the blame game. We continue to believe the country is on the mend. That the talks have not failed. That the Maoists need space, but not so much that they compromise pluralism and democracy in the set-up that evolves with their participation. This understanding will evolve, no thanks to the group we’re not even sure exists: the intelligentsia.

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STATE OF THE STATE

and long-term investments are an anomaly. Almost all big businesses are family-owned, clan-run, and conservative to the core. The defenders’ list of public sector banks read like a who’s who of Nepali business.

The top layer of business have flirted and celebrated the rise of Chairman Gyanendra, and is now trying to divert a possible SPA-Maoist rapprochement. What other explanation is there for their pro-thesis behaviour? The business community has no right to resort to forced closure, wildcat strikes and tactics of intimidation.

Nepal’s entrenched business elite has never developed in a vacuum. Government policies regard profit as the primary motive of business, and job creation as an outcome, not driver, of growth. This must change if business is to contribute to national integration and economic development. The economic agenda of the mainstream parties is hopelessly donor-driven, based upon long-discredited jobless growth models from the IMF and World Bank. The Maoists seem to not know how they want the economy to grow. Soft-spoken commissioner Deb Gurung’s business bubble about the primacy of domestic trade and industry doesn’t make much sense in a country self-sufficient only in the production of franchised soda-water, licensed alcoholic drinks, monopolised tobacco, and localised junk food. We need instead to democratise business through the promotion of micro and small enterprises.

The Grammeen experiment and microfinance in Nepal both began in the early eighties. Comparing the two can offer useful lessons to economists entrusted with charting a new economic course for the country. The former flourished in a country not entirely controlled by elitist business, the latter floundered under the weight of factors promoting shady foreign banks.

Grammeen Bank and its founder Muhammad Yunus have been awarded the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize for the grassroot work they did to help lift millions out of poverty. The similar Small Farmer Development Project (SFDP) here operated under the Agricultural Development Bank continues to falter.

In the court of history, the Maoists will also be held responsible for the havoc their misguided ideology has wrought on fledging microfinance and small businesses. This impoverished the poor and helped the parasitical rich prosper. Had microcredit schemes benefited from the lucrative money transfer business of the remittance boom, we would have maybe fewer ATMs in cities, but more banking facilities in small towns and rural areas.

The fundamental premise of the Grammeen model is also important—belief in the ability of the individual to lift herself out of poverty. Professor Yunus concluded that the future of small businesses in developing countries will have to be led by women, if the poor are to be empowered and get out of the poverty trap. Almost four-fifth of Grammeen stakeholders are women.

Like the deities of two other forms of power celebrated this festive season—Kali of coercion, and Saraswati of wisdom—the goddess of wealth is a woman. It’s impossible to break the vicious circle of poverty, ignorance, and timidity without empowering women. May this bless those who worship all her earthly forms.

Minding business

We need business, and women in business

WE worship wealth in Nepal, but when it comes to generating it, we are laggards.

The business class here lives off rent from fixed assets and connections with the ruling clique. Cartels and exploitation of labour are the norms. Get-rich-quick methods are the way to go and long-term investments are an anomaly. Almost all big businesses are family-owned, clan-run, and conservative to the core. The defenders’ list of public sector banks read like a who’s who of Nepali business.

The top layer of business have flirted and celebrated the rise of Chairman Gyanendra, and is now trying to divert a possible SPA-Maoist rapprochement. What other explanation is there for their pro-thesis behaviour? The business community has no right to resort to forced closure, wildcat strikes and tactics of intimidation.

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ETHERN AUTONOMY

JB Pun has rightly pointed out (‘Race for identity’ #316) that ethnic autonomy, if taken seriously, would only sow the seeds of future conflict by creating new exclusions. Due to centuries of east-bound migration, most individuals living in the hills, the magnitude of the caste-Nepalis who also comprise a vast proportion of the poor and deprived. The new constitution (including the proposed interim) should, instead, provide for a highly decentralised system of governance under which individual Nepalis, irrespective of their caste, ethnic, or gender status, would be inalienably and substantively empowered to participate in making decisions for their own socio-economic advancement. The success of community forestry in Nepal provides a good indication as to what all is attainable through devolution.

Bhikhu Krishna Shrestha, Chakupat

NAIVE

The editorial ‘The EPA’ (#318) is either overly optimistic or plain naive. The open-mindedness, ‘Nepal is on the mend’, borders on the delusional. The Maoist leaders’ statements and behaviour show that they consider themselves victors, not that they have ‘achieved failure’. They also deny that they were looking for a ‘soft landing’. Having conquered the countryside, they are in the cities, without having fired a shot.

Suman Pradhan

THE HUMAN FACTOR

Suman Pradhan is right to be careful about monsoon flights (‘No-fly season’, #318). But in remote areas there is no other option and people, usually in need of urgent medical attention, have to fly despite the risk and expense. As a former aircraft crew member, I know you can have your pick of who to blame for crashes: bad weather, old aircraft, the marketing or engineering department, crew, passengers.

Passengers refuse to believe the weather at their destination is bad if it is okay in Kathmandu, and start fisticuffs when they hear about cancellations. So-called educated passengers do this as much as anyone else.

Aircraft are often poorly maintained because delays caused by procedure—even when there is a technical problem—are unacceptable to passengers who pressure marketing personnel. Pilots fly in bad weather because of ego problems. If they hear of a junior captain who flew safely in bad conditions, they blame for crashes: bad weather, old aircraft, the marketing or engineering department, crew, passengers.

Once airborne, passengers refuse to fasten their seatbelts, saying expansively that they ‘fly regularly’. In bad weather, their heads hit the roof and they even fall to the floor, but they continue to believe that seatbelts are restraints, not safety measures.

Suman Pradhan

OLD PROBLEMS, NEW PEOPLE

Sadhu Khakurel’s poem (‘A dalit is born’, From the Nepali press’, #318) is being talked about because the author is from the dominant group that controls media and other sectors in Nepal.

The poem lists handicaps that have been associated with being a dalit or a castee, for the last 238 years. Yet they were the concern of the Nepali state or of the socially dominant groups. Suddenly they become the talk of the town because one person from the dominant group writes about them as his or her problems. Twenty percent of the population is dalit and owns less than one percent of land in Nepal.

The human error factor in Nepal is much higher than the world average. Aircraft operate without airworthiness certification, pilots with dubious qualifications from fly-by-night schools get licenses, and operators compromise on maintenance to meet all the competition and cost cutting.

Subodh S. Pal, Lagankhel

TASTELESS BUT FUNNY

At first, I was disturbed by the appearance of words like ‘backside’ and ‘ass’ in Nepali Times, as we have always considered it a family newspaper. But, having read the last two or three instalments I can forgive the breach of taste. It is almost funnier than the old Under my Hat, and after all, we laughed like teenagers through that too, despite its propensity for making jokes about wolves, animal mating season, scratching, and the poetic efforts of young Nepalis. There must be some outlet for these feelings, or they could fester and cause serious lapses of taste and behaviour. Just don’t go too far.

Grace Chamling, email

LETTERS

Aditya Gopaldass welcomes feedback. Letters should be brief and may be edited for space. While pseudonyms can be accepted, writers should provide their real names and contact details will be given preference. Email letters should be in text format without attachments with ‘letter to the editor’ in the subject line.

Email: letters@nepaltimes.com Fax: 977-1-552103 Mail: Letters, Nepali Times, GPO Box 725, Kathmandu, Nepal.
Making light work

Rural electrification works best when managed by local communities

MALLIKA ARYAL in MUGLING

Until four months ago, Phulmaya Praja’s family lived 200 metres off the Prithibi Highway (pictured) in complete darkness. They saw the lights of the trucks and buses on the road, but inside the home there was only the feeble light of kerosene lamps.

“We had to cook and eat before sunset, feel our way around the house at night in the dark, sleep early and our children had to study under a oil,” says Phulmaya.

Today, the Praja family is among the 90,000 households that the government and Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) plan to electrify by July next year under a community rural electrification development program. Since 2003, community electrification has extended to 37 districts. NEA sells electricity in bulk to user groups at a substantially discounted rate of Rs 3.60 per unit, and they in turn sell it at a retail rate of up to Rs 4.50 per unit.

That is a lot less than what normal users pay and NEA doesn’t have to be involved in distribution and fee collection-areas where its record is not so good.

“By distributing electricity via communities, NEA is saving on what they would have had to spend an operating costs,” says Dilli Ghimire, chairman of the National Association of Community Electricity Users. At present there are over 107 user groups distributing electricity which are registered either as a cooperative, under the company act as a private limited company, under the social welfare act, or as non-profits.

“It reduced non-technical loss,” explains energy economist Ratna Sansar Shrestha, “it’s not NEA but the communities that monitor leakage, theft, so the management cost decreases, thereby also reducing distribution costs.”

The program also facilitates a cost-effective rural electricity scheme by attracting private investments. A fund is set up in which the government contributes 80 percent and the community chips in its 20 percent in cash or kind. “Word is spreading about the 80:20 program, people feel that they can also bring electricity to their communities,” says Ghimire.

As with community radio or local management of forests, or irrigation, the decentralisation is the best management option for Nepal. “Electricity generation can be private or public, its transmission has to be nationally managed like a highway, but distribution works well—and loss, especially theft, decreases dramatically—only when organised village groups and municipalities manage it,” says former Water Resource Minister Dipak Gyawali who initiated this program in 2003 to ‘communityise’ electricity in Nepal.

Electricity lines may have reached rural areas, but there are still those families who live in total darkness because they cannot afford to pay the initial cost. To help such households organisations like Winrock International Nepal and local communities have set up a revolving fund in two pilot projects in south Lalitpur and Mugling, thereby helping to electrify over one hundred households in less than a year.

“The family takes a loan of Rs 1,500-2,000 to electrify its house, or use the money to start income generating activities, and eventually pays the loan in instalments over a period of time,” says Bharat Raj Poudel of Winrock, which works on productive use of energy.

Communities that are adopting the electrification model are increasing but there are challenges ahead, mainly to do with tariffs, “it may be appropriate to sell electricity to some communities at Rs 3.50, but the same rate cannot be applied across the board,” says Poudel.

Even with the 80:20 model, the 80 percent is actually not a grant to the community but goes to NEA, which doesn’t start the project until the community also puts in its 20 percent share. The NEA treats the government’s share as a loan or equity and thus ends up owning the system.

NEA’s annual loss of Rs 2.5 billion can be cut by half if distribution of electricity is managed better. One way to fix this is to unbundle generation, transmission and distribution which NEA has been doing by itself since the 1980s. Says economist Shrestha: “We can follow the same model in the cities, let neighborhood councils feel the ownership, the losses are cut, the process of unbundling begins, and everyone wins.”

Asian Development Bank (ADB) estimates it will cost them $300 to take electricity to every home in Nepal. The NEA and Butwal Power Company’s community model shows that it will only cost $100 per home. It is clear Nepal needs a cheaper indigenous model for distribution.

Back in Mugling a community is ready to start a lift irrigation project. “Every member of the community has brought in a tool from home and we are all working hard to install a water tank,” says Rama Bahadur Magar. His village is right above the Trisuli river but due to lack of irrigation Magar used to get only one crop a year. Now, using electricity to lift water from the river, the villagers hope to grow cauliflower, cabbage and other vegetables to sell in Mugling.

“A few years ago we were living in darkness,” Magar tells visitor, “who would have thought that today we would be using electricity not only to light our homes but also to irrigate our fields?”
**Visionary**

As part of Standard Chartered’s global Seeing Is Believing program to help 10 million people with visual impairments by 2010, Standard Chartered Nepal signed an agreement with Tilganga Eye Centre (TEC) on 12 October, World Sight Day. TEC will conduct screening camps between October 2006 and July 2007 in Kathmandu and neighbouring districts, and the bank will sponsor cataract surgeries for 500 patients with funds raised from walkathons.

**Money home**

Everest Bank’s new online service offers a safe, efficient way for Nepalis in the Middle East to send savings home at a nominal cost and attractive exchange rate. Everest Bank is working through Thomas Cook Al Rastamani Exchange and Asia Exchange Centre in Dubai and Trust Exchange, Doha, and has also entered into an arrangement with Agricultural Development Bank to broaden its coverage.

**New for old**

If your home appliances are looking a little worse for wear, take advantage of Sagtani’s special festival offer—any domestic device, regardless of condition, swapped in part for IFB Home Appliances’ new set of wheels. NabilBachat account holders can swap a little that has happened in the world of Nepali microfinance. Perhaps it is because of our own half-hearted Nepali way of doing things or the plethora of aid agencies that try to tweak the strategies, which is why we have yet to see any comparable revolutions. We do have a bunch of Grameen banks that love to draw parallels with the Bangladeshi institution, but have never been able to reach and penetrate the most rural parts of Nepal where the money lender still takes a goodly pound of flesh. When cooperative financial institutions opened up in our country, they could have taken the initiative to be a good tool for providing the poor with access to finance. However, they have basically become unregulated financial service institutions that compete with commercial banks without the banking industry’s stringent regulations. Promoters of these cooperatives have gotten rich without having to deal with regulations or providing real access to finance to the marginalised.

For Nepal, there are multiple lessons in Yuma’s endeavours. First is that the transformation of any sector that has national impact depends on homegrown agents of change who can provide the leadership to challenge conventional practices. Efforts for change have to be relentless; there is no shortcut to success. This Bank has remarked that we Nepalis tend to be happy with quick, if temporary, popularity, rather than reinforcing long-term successes.

Secondly, the Grameen movement was homegrown. Yuma received a lot of impetus from his latitudes and multilat...
Interview with Home Minister Krishna Prasad Sitaula in Himal Khabarpatrika, 18 October-1 November

Have the talks stalled?
There are so many issues to resolve, it is only normal that the talks are taking this long. The interim constitution drafting committee left a lot of things open, like the king’s role in the interim constitution, constituent assembly (CA) elections, setting up the interim parliament and council of ministers, the correct way to set up an interim constitution, arms management and how to canton the Maoist army, etc.

The Maoists say the latest talks ended inconclusively due to disagreement on arms management. Both sides agree to the policy issues related to it. The five-point agreement says it is imperative to discuss the procedure of army and arms management with the UN, and that is what we are doing.

The Maoists say that the seven parties didn’t agree to any of the three alternative solutions they put forward. The government has one alternative—build a consensus, form an interim government with the Maoists and conduct the CA polls. Both sides agree that the priority is to manage the army and weapons and form an interim government simultaneously. Things must be finalised by November for next June’s elections.

How will arms management happen?
The procedure for weapons management has already been agreed upon. Maoists will remain in cantonment with arms and the Nepal Army will move to the barracks.

Did Prime Minister Koirala backtrack during Sunday’s talks?
He remains committed to peace talks and is in fact moving ahead paying attention to the changing situation. The prime minister’s main concern is how to conduct the CA polls soon.

Interview with Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai in Himal Khabarpatrika, 18 October-1 November

Are the talks interrupted or stalled?
Just interrupted. The prime minister has been under pressure after the king’s principal secretary Pashupati Bhakta Mahajan talked with Chief of Army Staff Rukmangat Katuwal. Apparently he and the NC were pressured by royalists within the party, the palace, and international powers. The parliamentary powers also do not have a strong stance on monarchy and military transformation. We had agreed on the UN monitoring both armies, and were near a bigger agreement, but then Koirala came under pressure from an invisible source to disagree with us on monarchy and arms management.

What do you mean by arms management?
Moving our army to camps and the Nepal Army to barracks before constituent assembly elections, and monitor them under UN supervision. Those generals who oppose loktantra need to be sacked. The new, integrated national army should be 30-40,000 strong.

You have some new proposals?
If the NC is ready to go for a republic, we agreed to lock away our weapons. If not, we call for a referendum to end the monarchy, nationalise the king’s property, and lock up both the army’s weapons. If a deal is still difficult, we agree to participate peacefully in CA elections, but won’t join the government.

So you want to join the interim government with weapons?
The royal army’s weapons have been used repeatedly against loktantra. That’s why we proposed transforming the royal army and managing its arms first, after that we’ll agree to the same. We don’t want two armies in Nepal either, that is why we want a loktantra military. If talks fail, we will go for an urban uprising.
Open letter

Yubaraj Ghimire, Samaya, 19 October
Prachandaji,

Since you’ve openly entered politics, some diplomats and others who have met you see the possibility of your being a ‘statesman’. But I believe you must first prove yourself as a politician with a difference. While doing so, if your judgment, not the arms you carry that will affect the people. King Gyanendra didn’t have a shortage of people who called him a ‘statesman’; either, and perhaps he even believed that.

The challenge now is to sincerely prepare for progress and long-term peace, and to do so democratically. People’s participation, inclusion, and transparency are the pillars of a democratic state. Your holding on to arms has alienated the people from you, begging the question whether you are a people’s leader. You have to be a leader of the people before you can become a statesman. Maybe you are as sensitive as you claim, perhaps you haven’t murdered a single person with your own two hands, but that does not absolve you from being accountable for the crimes of violence. And unless you admit responsibility, you cannot be included in a democracy.

The ongoing peace talks can be an encouraging milestone if you enter competitive politics peacefully instead of complicating the new constitution and the journey up the road ahead is still rocky.

If you really want the peace process to succeed, then hand over clear instructions to the UN team that is here. If you are not prepared for arms management now, the credit will go to Ian Martin in the end. Do you really want that? If you don’t want bombs to go off, why do you remain armed?

If your sentimentalism transforms your image into something akin to that of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, or Nelson Mandela, as opposed to the image you’ve created over the past 12 years—of egomism, bitterness, and revolution—will that do injustice to your revolutionary politics? Or the interim constitution and the journey up to the constituent assembly your only goals?

Your well-wisher,

Yubaraj Ghimire, Journalist

Bhaktapur Guest House, which has become a favourite among the Maoist leaders, was packed on Monday. It was the first time that Ian Martin, the UN Secretary General’s personal representative, and members of the government and Maoist talks teams met together along with other leaders.

Sources say the Maoists looked more enthusiastic than the government leaders when UN officials talked about conflict resolution experiences in other countries. The UN officials made three suggestions. First, solve the political issues fast. Second, every country has its own model for weapons management. In some countries both armies are trusted equally, in others not. A model used in one country may not work for another and you should decide on the method together. We will not make suggestions. Third, start working on confidence-building measures.

Baburam Bhattarai suggested that the weapons of the state and the Maoists could be locked up in a barracks and the UN could monitor the situation. The government team had no suggestions.

The Maoists don’t have to work, they can just demand that things be done. But the government actually does work. There’s a big difference between talking the talk and walking the walk.”

Deputy Prime Minister Krishna P Oli in an Interview with Dristi, 17 October. 

quote of the week
Nepal is at the threshold of a documentary film revolution. In 2003 Bheda Ko Oon Jasto ran to full houses for four days at Jai Nepal Cinema. Earlier this month, Sa Karnali Through the Road with the Red God: Dolpo opened at Kumari Cinema. Documentaries screen regularly on local TV channels, and Nepali documentaries open to enthusiastic crowds all over the world, from Amsterdam to Ghazipur.

When the Himalayan Film Festival opened in 1994, few would have thought that 12 years later, like Nepal’s FM radio success, there would be a boom in documentary filmmaking here too. New technology, political changes, freer media, and exposure to international films have made amateur and professional documentary filmmakers out of many Nepalis. In the past documentaries were considered ‘funded’ projects, designed to fulfil NGOs’ development propaganda, but now local documentaries are made on subjects ranging from the conflict, cultural phenomena, individual portraits, and entertainment.

“Documentaries did become a tool for development propaganda, but the interest of development organisations in films also brought in new technology,” says Mohan Mainali, director of The Living of Jogimara. “Liberal media and digital technology gave the necessary impetus to an already brewing documentary revolution.”

The audience for these films is unique in Nepal—the same crowd that enjoys mainstream, commercial films also watches documentary and independent films. The films have local content that is relevant or amusingly offbeat, and generally manage to transcend language barriers. Young viewers in particular are enthusiastic attendees at Kathmandu film festivals. With increased exposure to documentaries, viewers are better able to understand the grammar of the genre, and now watch more critically and demand better films.

The rise of the Nepali documentary is interesting to track. When Ankhijhyal, a fortnightly television magazine made by Nepal Forum of Environment Journalists started airing on Nepal Television in the 1990s, it was the only mainstream outlet for issue-based and in-depth stories. When the Maoists started their ‘People’s War’, few Nepalis in the urban areas or abroad knew what was going on because news coverage was limited to printed media and sporadic images on TV. Dhubra Basnet’s 2001 The Killing Terraces brought the graphic images of war closer to home. Then came a number of war films like Schools in the Crossfire, The Living of Jogimara, and Six Kassing (both also available in Nepali).

Parallel to these, numerous cultural documentaries, travelogues, climbing films, and films with social messages were released to sold out shows at festivals and in theatres, and sparked off discussions about the issues they addressed in them and about filmmaking in general. The best known of these are Kesang Tsering’s On the Road with the Red God: Machhendranath and We Homes Chaps, Pranay Limbu’s History for Winners, Ramyata Limbu and Sapan Singh’s Daughters of Everest, Alex Gabbay and Subina Shrestha’s Kathmandu, Untold Stories, Dinesh Deckota’s A Rough Cut on the Life and Times of Lachman Magar. Openness means more and better documentaries.

Festivals here, and mountain or Himalayan film festivals abroad are getting a lot more films about Nepal and Nepali subjects, made by Nepalis. This just goes to show that more people here are aware of the scope of films,” says Ramyata Limbu, who is also director of Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival (KIMFF). “In 2000, at the first KIMFF, there were hardly one or two entries from Nepal, but this year we’ve received over a dozen Nepali entries.”

The increase in numbers is exciting, but documentary filmmaking here is still young and full of challenges. “We have a long way to go in terms of quality,” adds Limbu.

Subina Shrestha, writer of Kathmandu: Untold Stories, says we lag behind in terms of conceptual creativity, adding, “A good film also has to be flawless, but we are yet to master that.” The cost of making a documentary has dropped dramatically with digital technology, but it still costs to make quality films. Funding is hard to come by, and often filmmakers don’t even know how to tap into existing sources.

Nepali documentaries so far generally fall into two extreme categories, war films and cultural films. But with the new openness, access to areas previously restricted to filmmakers, and a recharged economy, we can expect the space between films like History for Winners and The Killing Terraces to slowly be filled with stories and images we didn’t even know existed, told in innovative ways.
They are among the last of Asia’s hunter-gatherer nomads. The Rautes of west Nepal’s inner tarai have long fought a hard battle to save their traditional way of life against the advances of time and technology.

The last census says there are about 2,000 Rautes, but unofficial estimates say they are far fewer. The community traditionally lives in the forests and avoids contact with outsiders. They’ve refused offers of permanent settlement, even from the king. As awareness of indigenous rights grows, the Rautes too are increasingly vocal about their choice to stay true to their values.

Now modern technology—digital video—might just be what helps the Rautes keep their old ways.

ALOK TUMBAN HANGPHIE

From the wood of the same trees and exchange this for rice and grain in villages, Rautes only eat this grain, roots and fruit they gather in the forest, and monkeys. They burn their settlements when they leave. “Their way of life is such a brilliant indigenous survival strategy, that it sometimes seems almost too naive,” says Thapa.

But Raute lives are intertwined with those of people in nearby villages. As one side changes, so does the other. Traditional wood pots and leaf plates are giving way to plastic and metal utensils. There is less forested area than the community is used to, and there are more roads. It takes time to get used to traffic—and footwear, a lesson learnt the hard way when long treks along paved roads caused blisters and bleeding feet. The video contains rare footage, but is low on technique and image quality, in part because it was the result of a reconnaissance trip rather than a full-fledged documentary shoot-up. Thapa will present it as a proposal, for “conservation of endangered human species,” to the Global Environment Facility Small Grants Program to fund a two-year-long project. They aim to develop traditional Raute occupations and support Raute rights advocacy.

Thapa says he is struck by how little is known about Rautes and how little sympathy there is for the community’s choices. “They don’t want much, not to be settled, be farmers, or be educated. They want to be allowed to live in the forests and use the few resources they use,” says the soft-spoken Thapa, who hopes to start the project early next year.

Dor Bahadur Bista, one of the first non-Rautes to get close to the community, wrote in his book People of Nepal that they would not survive for long due to the rapid growth of population and settlements, deforestation, changing landscape, and rise in human traffic.

But the community has survived and this short film shows a vibrant culture with passionate adherents. There will be much discussion about whether the Rautes are right to keep their children away from the benefits of modernity, such as improved health care, but they at least need to be heard.

A former Raute clan head, septuagenarian Min Bahadur Shahi, speaks for his community when he declares with pride and humility, “You are the world, we are the Raute. You are kings of your palaces, we of the jungle.” And if it takes video to hold firm to their ground, well, the Raute community seems ready to adopt some modern things in the name of tradition.

BE TOGETHER, BE PREPARED

Issued in public interest by:

EUROPEAN COMMISSION
Direct aid
Community Preparedness for Disaster Risk Reduction in Central and Eastern Nepal (DG1 in cooperation with UNF Nepal)

Times 20 - 26 OCTOBER 2006 #319

A survival video

Modern technology might just be what helps the Rautes keep their old ways
UNICEF last month celebrated Nepal’s progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goal of reducing child mortality by two-thirds by 2015. However, the goal of cutting malnutrition from around 50 percent to 25 percent remains a daunting one.

These photos from Humla and Mugu are a reminder that all is not well.

Taken by an independent photographer documenting the work of French NGO Action Against Hunger (ACF) in August, they show that last winter’s drought is having a major impact in some areas.

ACF started a therapeutic feeding program for children in 10 VDCs of the two districts in June and then had to include 30 percent more severely malnourished children than planned, “indicating a real deterioration in the situation” since its first assessment in February, says ACF’s Mireille Seneclauze.

The UN World Food Programme is now delivering emergency rice to Mugu but it won’t reach all affected VDCs, and plans to fly in rations to Humla, Jumla, and Dolpa will have to be put on hold this week if donors do not make up a $3.7 million shortfall.

In July and August, WFP and local NGOs distributed food to neighbouring Bajura. A district-wide survey conducted afterward by various agencies found an alarming rate of malnutrition. Seventy percent of children were underweight and 12 percent wasted—the indicator for acute malnutrition. More than 40 percent of kids under two years of age had diarrhoea, fever, or a cough.

Supplying food relief and essential medicines is the immediate need in addressing the crisis in the Karnali, one nutritionist told us, but it’s important to remember that 50 percent of children throughout Nepal are malnourished. “Unless underlying causes—including good feeding and hygiene practices, psycho-social support and care for mothers—are addressed, the situation will not improve,” he said.

Giving communities the tools to assess the well-being of their children and collectively take action to reduce malnutrition is essential, he added.

Mary Logan
Kul Chandra Gautam returns to his village for a long-overdue visit

NARESH NEWAR in BUTWAL

K ul Chandra Gautam went home to Amarpur to a hero’s welcome. The UN Assistant Secretary-General had not been back to his Gumi village for almost six years. His village is proud of him, and he of it. Gautam says that despite the turmoil of recent years, many changes he sees are positive. We accompanied Gautam in his talk with him at a relative’s house in Butwal. He was emotional as he told us that everyone he met had the same courteous, kind, loveable and neighbourly qualities he grew accustomed to as a child, over 55 years ago. “It’s amazing how people continue to be warm, caring and cordial after all these years of hard life and living in conflict,” said Gautam, perch atop a modest wooden chair. His legs comfortably crossed.

He’s sanguine about the passing of time, but will admit to some nostalgia and a sense of loss. “So many people I knew have died or left the village,” he says. But Gautam also sees real progress. There is now a water supply near the village, a telephone line, a motorable road, schools, a post office, a health post, Nepal’s Ministry of Reconstruction and development, which was undeclared when he was younger. There’s still no electricity, though, and Gautam laughs. “My god, I never realised how pitch dark it gets, like in the ancient times.”

Still, comparisons with his childhood aside, Gautam knows that though the changes seem big, there remains much to be done in his village, as in most of rural Nepal. He noted that the VDC office was still not functional and that rural development activities were still in slowdown mode.

People are still extinct and live in fear of the local Maoist cadres. Good and bad, it’s all a far cry from his childhood. Gautam remembers the slow, bucolic life that was gently interrupted when he was seven and, obeying his grandfather’s wishes, left home for a village across the river to study Hindu scriptures and Sanskrit to become a priest. The young Gautam’s life would have taken a different direction if his uncle had not persuaded him that a modern education in Kathmandu, and not a theological one in Banaras, was the way ahead. Poor health made that difficult, so he studied instead at Janata Vidyalaya High School in Tansen.

The young scholar used his time in Tansen well, getting through the canons of Nepali literature by 15, being appointed Palpa’s poet laureate, and only then going to Kathmandu to pursue a passport—his Peace Corps friends had encouraged Gautam to go to study in the US. The passport was some time coming, and in the meantime he turned a scholarship to Dartmouth to study at Tri-Chandra College from where, not surprisingly, he topped the national ID examination. Two years later, he got his passport and the rest is relatively well-known—a master’s in public affairs from Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson School, and a career that started in war-torn Cambodia, followed by a memorable stint in Laos as the youngest UNICEF country representative, a tour of duty in ravaged Haiti, and enlisting the 1990 UNICEF Declaration and Plan of Action, one of the most effective instruments for international advocacy and action for children’s well being.

Kul Chandra Gautama is something of a role model for Nepal, but he just says modestly, “Sometimes, I pinch myself, because I can’t believe what people say about me.” He honestly believes that anyone can reach to the top. “I see the silver lining in the most pitch dark,” smiles Gautam.

Back home too, he sees the upside, but is realistic about the future of the country. While in his village, naturally Gautam’s opinions on the conflict and on politics was canvassed constantly. As a senior UN official Gautam may not speak much about the conflict here, and he was at pains to emphasise that anything he said was his own personal view, and not that of his organisation.

As a citizen, he said he felt strongly that the Maoists should stop taking arms and supporting them by the parties and the international community being part of a conspiracy against them. “It can tell you after being in the villages that arms management is a real issue from the perspectives of ordinary Nepal,” he says passionately.

We accompanied Gautam from UN next year, after 33 years and is enthusiastic to return to Nepal and help in the reconstruction process. Will he join a party or accept a post in government? Emphatically not, says Gautam—he wants to work in his personal capacity and in voluntary endeavours. He tells us clearly that he is also exasperated about coming back and returning to his lifelong passion, Nepal. “You see, at my age, I still call myself a village boy from Gumi. ‘That’s the only way to keep your humility and remain realistic. Those are the things that count women too, not just guns

Women are often excluded from post-conflict plans in ways big and small

MARTY LOGAN

N epali women’s needs are apt to be forgotten when peace returns if women were not previously involved in post-conflict societies in Africa, warned women activists here for an international refugee conference. “The whole preoccupation with reconstruction takes centre stage and doesn’t take into account the needs of female ex-combatants or even the needs of ordinary women,” Betty Kamr Murungi, director of the Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights (UAF) Africa told us.

One humorous but telling example is a disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) pack given to ex-combatants in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). It included $100, toilets and underwear—men’s only. “That follows the gender norms but given to the demobilisation of women,” declared Murungi during a break in UAF-Africa’s board meeting in Kathmandu over this week.

UAF-Africa was spun off from the original Urgent Action Fund in 2001, an organisation formed by women activists with small grants that could be awarded quickly (see box). Nepali activist Rita Thapa is vice-chair of the UAF board and mobilised and helped bring both organisations here for the meetings.

When war ended in Zimbabwe “the men who went back to their villages called the women prostitutes because they said they only did know what they had been doing while they were away. They abandoned their children. A lot of women had nervous breakdowns,” said UAF-Africa’s chair Hope Chiagadu. Because women don’t have a place in the structures set up to deal with many nations’ transitions from war to peace, such problems are rarely officially noticed, she added. “Lasting peace will never be achieved unless these problems are addressed.”

Gautam couldn’t afford to buy electricity, though, and Gautam would sometimes walk everyday to read the newspapers pasted on the wall. He’d do it again if he had to. “Never forget where you come from and don’t let success go to your head.”

For Balkan activists, that remains a hard lesson. “They’re taught values of reconciliation and how to exorcise the genocide ideology. We learned that arms management is a real issue from the perspectives of ordinary Nepal,” he says passionately.

We accompanied Gautam from UN next year, after 33 years and is enthusiastic to return to Nepal and help in the reconstruction process. Will he join a party or accept a post in government? Emphatically not, says Gautam—he wants to work in his personal capacity and in voluntary endeavours. He tells us clearly that he is also exasperated about coming back and returning to his lifelong passion, Nepal. “You see, at my age, I still call myself a village boy from Gumi. ‘That’s the only way to keep your humility and remain realistic. Those are the things that

Fast action for women

Members of the Organisation of Women’s Freedom in Iraq in 2003, now how to defend themselves against physical attacks, as if their vehicles have been tampered with and plan safer travel routes, thanks to an Urgent Action Fund ‘rapid response grant’ that enabled them to get security training.

A similar story in 1997 by US activists who glimpsed a need for small grants that would be available much faster than traditional donor agencies could provide. The group was an international organisation that provides about 100 grants of up to $5,000 annually—most international organisations could provide. They were a small group, but the organisation that provided about 100 grants of up to $5,000 annually, most international organisations could provide. They were a small group, but they have learned that arms management is a real issue from the perspectives of ordinary Nepal,” he says passionately.

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Commune concerns

Alternative Maoist communities live on hope—and the party

Most of us plan carefully for our futures. How to earn for our families, what to do for our kids, how to make a more comfortable life for ourselves. But consider this alternative: a life with nothing personal, no private property, no individual desires, no personal decisions, not even your own dreams. You work for your community, share and share alike, and live under its gaze. You and your fellow commune-members are fully accountable to each other.

It’s been done before, from California to China, and now our very own CPN-Maoist is promoting communes in its heartland of Rolpa. On a recent visit we were taken around the model Ajambari Jana Commune in Thabang.
Timeless trader
A Lhasa Newar family memoir documents the rise of two remarkable individuals

Writing an honest autobiography is hard, but nothing compared to the difficulty of compiling an accurate biography of one’s parents and grandparents. Autobiographies are merely hagiographies, after all, at least not good autobiographies, while biographies are harder to pull off, particularly if one is keen to portray one’s own family in a positive light.

Syamukapu: The Lhasa Newars of Kalimpong and Kathmandu is written by Deb Shova Kansakar Hilker, daughter of Gyan Jyoti and granddaughter of Bhajuratna Kansakar, a renowned Lhasa sahu. Gyan Jyoti and Bhajuratna are also the two protagonists in this book, with the narrative framed around their family's history, but they are not good autobiographies, while biographies are rarely compelling enough for the subject matter is not a bad thing.

The book makes an important start at exploring the involvement of a remarkable family in trans-Himalayan trade. It should also serve as a reminder that not all aspects of a family archive warrant public dissemination, and that a little distance from the subject matter is not a bad thing.

Mark Turin, PhD, is a linguistic anthropologist and director of the Digital Himalaya Project (www.digitalhimalaya.com). He has conducted preliminary research on the contemporary Nepal community in Lhasa.

FROM AROUND THE WORLD: 18-year-old Israeli guitarist Orr Didi performs at Gokarna Jazz Bazaar on 13 October; Canadian artist François Carrier learns about wind instruments, Nepali-style, during the Jazzmandu Peace Parade on Lazimpat on 14 October; local folk sensation Kutumba take the stage during Gokarna Jazz Bazaar.

BOOK REVIEW
Mark Turin
Syamukapu: The Lhasa Newars of Kalimpong and Kathmandu is written by Deb Shova Kansakar Hilker, daughter of Gyan Jyoti and granddaughter of Bhajuratna Kansakar, a renowned Lhasa sahu. Gyan Jyoti and Bhajuratna are also the two protagonists in this book, with the narrative framed around their family’s history. The book is enlivened by a reflection of a single-minded business acumen on the part of Bhajuratna and Gyan Jyoti, who carried on trading through thick and thin, or is it the author’s desire to idealise her subjects and somehow deflect them from the flow of history? Strangely, we don’t even learn how Bhajuratna came by the name Syamukapu (from Tibetan zhwa mo ‘hat’ and dkar po ‘white’). Was he in mourning when he was named? Did he have the habit of always wearing a cap? At very few points in the narrative does the author actually delve into the motivations, feelings, and doubts of her grandfather and father, so the narrative remains on a fairly superficial level. She alludes a few times to a family feud between Gyan Jyoti and his brothers Maniharsha Jyoti and Dev Jyoti, which one would expect to be addressed in more detail, but no explanation of their estrangement is provided. As religion becomes more important to both men in the latter part of their lives, the narrative gives way to a somewhat dry list of lamas met and rituals performed, and in the case of Gyan Jyoti, a catalogue of his travels to Europe. Such quotidian accounts are an important component of any family’s history, but they are merely compelling enough for others to be drawn in.

At times, Syamukapu has an unclear voice. It alternates between narrative from the first person perspective of Bhajuratna and Gyan Jyoti to Hilker’s own interpretations and contextualisations. So when we read that the “thugs were a hardy, tough race of Tibetans, honest and very reliable” (page 41), or that “Tibetans smelled different” (page 130), we are unsure who is speaking, the author or the protagonist, and therefore unsure of how to interpret and make sense of these comments. The book is enlivened by some lovely hand-drawn maps and a wonderful collection of carefully captioned family photos. The latter will certainly serve as a useful archive for those interested in the Newar business concerns in Lhasa. In all, this book makes an important start at exploring the involvement of a remarkable family in trans-Himalayan trade. It should also serve as a reminder that not all aspects of a family archive warrant public dissemination, and that a little distance from the subject matter is not a bad thing.

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As the final strains fade away, glimpses of Surya Classic Jazzmandu 2006

Jazz echoes

As the final strains fade away, glimpses of Surya Classic Jazzmandu 2006

Jazz echoes
ABOUT TOWN

EXHIBITIONS
- Trees and Voyeurism paintings by Sarita Dongol at The Art Shop, 10AM-6PM till 4 November. 4267063
- Figures in Paint by Chirag Bangdel at Imao Dei Calfe Gallery, 9AM-9PM. 4442464
- Exhibition at Tarnta Restaurant, Thamel featuring Juju Kaji Maharjan, Ami Maharjan, Uday Karmacharya and more. 4218550

EVENTS
- German with Germans at KC’s Restaurant, Thamel. 5.15 PM on 20 October, 4700835
- Art of Loving class and dialogue on love, 1PM on 21 October at The Quest, Tripureswvar. 4279712
- Laxmi Puja 21 October
- Bhai Tika 24 October
- Mind Body Library at the Self Awakening Centre, Saber Mahal Revisited, call to sign up. 4255618

MUSIC
- Gladiator Strings Concert popular Pakistani band The Strings perform at Engineering College, Pulchok. 2.30 PM on 20 October, ticket Rs 300 for one, Rs 500 for two.
- Aavaas performs at Garden of Dreams, Kaiser Mahal on 20 October at 6.30 PM. Rs 5552809
- Mega Jam Session with various artists at Mohak, Pulchok on 20 October, 8.30 PM till late. 5526612
- Rashmi Singh performs at Absolute Bar on 20 October, 7PM onwards. 5521408
- Open Mic Night at ViaVia Café, Thamel every Friday. 8PM

DINING
- Deepawali at Delma Café Cocktail. 3 November, Thamel. 4215969
- Full Moon BBQ at Shivapuri Heights Cottage, 4 November. 9841371927
- Mediterranean Seafood at Dwarika’s on 27 October. Rs 1099 per person, including a BBQ dinner and a drink. 4479488
- Shaken Not Stirred Martinis 007 style, tapas platters and live music for Rs 555. Wednesdays at Fusion, the bar at Dwarika.
- Saturday Barbeque Special at Le Meridien Golf Resort and Spa, Rs 1200 for adults, Rs 600 for children. 5506675
- Seven Sensations at Hotel Yak & Yeti, cocktails and snacks. 4248999
- Woodfired Pizzas at Roadhouse Cafe, Thamel 4282768 and Pulchok 5521755
- A Sweet Taste of Life Italian cuisine at La Dole Vita. 4706812
- Seafood of Freshness at Shambala Garden Cafe, Shangri-La hotel, happy hours 12-7PM. 4412499
- Creations from the Clay Oven at Supa View Restaurant, Boudha Supa. 4490602
- Monsoon Madness Wine Festival enjoy wines from four continents at Klinyo’s of Kathmandu. 4250440
- Wet & Wild Summer Splash swimming and lunch, or overnight stay with breakfast. Godavari Village Resort. 5560675
- Weekend Brunch at Hyatt Regency, Kathmandu. 4491243

GETAWAYS
- Yoga Camp at Shivapuri Heights Cottage, 20-22 October. 9841371927
- Tihar Package three nights and four days at Le Meridien Golf Resort and Spa, inclusive of meals and spa facilities. Rs 15,000 for single, Rs 18,000 for couple. 5560675
- Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge special offers for Tihar. 4361020
- Walk and Lunch at Shivapuri Heights Cottage, Saturdays between 29 October and 25 November. 9841371927
- Nature Retreat at Park Village Resort & Spa. 4275930
- Escape Kathmandu at Shivapuri Heights Cottage. 9841371927
- Escape to Godavari Village Resort, an overnight stay package with breakfast & swimming. 5506675

For inclusion in the listing send information to editors@nepalitimes.com

KATHMANDU VALLEY

NEPALI WEATHER

by NGAMINDRA DAHAL

We’re sailing into calm, clear, chilly weather in the coming week. Thursday morning’s satellite pictures show no major cloud formations that might ruin Tihar. The westerlies are moving into the skies over Nepal, and there’s a high pressure ridge building up in the west of the country. This means colder mornings, though the days continue to be balmy. It’s autumn, but it feels a mite closer to winter than usual.

BBC nepali
Daily
20.45-21.15 on 102.4

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KATHMANDU

Francois Swiller
by MIKU

This in modern remake of 1978’s Don, Shah Rukh Khan takes over from Amitabh Bachchan as the notorious underworld lord who enjoys his life of crime, murder and mayhem until he is killed in a police chase… or is he? This rollercoaster ride of action, twists and suspense also features Priyanka Chopra, Arjun Rampal and Kareena Kapoor.

We areInverse

To see all the shows for Timelapse visits:
www.jainepal.com

To order show timings at Jai Nepal:
Call 4442220 for show timings at Jai Nepal

Arjun Rampal, and Kareena Kapoor.

suspense also features Priyanka Chopra,
rollercoaster ride of action, twists and
murder and mayhem until he is killed in a
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NEPALGANJ – At an NC political leadership workshop two conspicuous old men sit squeezed into a corner. They look terribly frail. One intuitively feels there’s more to them than meets the eye.

Slowly, their story unfolds. Prem Bahadur Hamal, 65, and Laxmi Prasad Acharya, 64, are both from Sinja village in Jumla. Once seasoned, influential Nepali Congress leaders, they were abducted, beaten and had their property confiscated seven years ago when they refused to join the Maoists. Since then, they have lived in Nepalganj’s camps for the displaced.

Prem Bahadur (below, left) joined the NC in the late 1950s, and remembers being jailed for reading Tarun. He rose to be the NC district president, and has never given in to his democracy activism, including during the recent Jana Andolan. Of his 1998 brush with the Maoists, he says, “2,000 Maoists surrounded my house and nearly beat me to death.” He was shot twice, and his life savings of Rs 97,000 was taken. Today, he’s in a camp in Jumle Tole with his family of 11.

Laxmi Prasad joined the NC about a year after Prem Bahadur, inspired by BP Koirala. “People have minted money misusing BP’s name but hardly any stand by his ideology,” he says. He left home after the Maoists threatened to kill him if he didn’t join them. With 13 family members, he ekes out just enough to live.

Both men remain devoted to the party that symbolises their fight for a democratic Nepal. “I was invited to a program to learn about democracy and leadership from youngsters who weren’t even born when I joined,” says Laxmi Prasad wryly.

Neither man is looking outward for support. Laxmi Prasad believes human rights organisations only favour leftist party workers, and Prem Bahadur asks what the government can do “when there are thousands like me wounded or dying in Kathmandu hospitals.”

Still, they seem surprisingly optimistic and determined. They won’t endorse the Maoists, though it would mean a safe return home. Their wishes for the future are simple. Prem Bahadur says his only goal is to pay off his debts before he dies, and Laxmi Prasad wants to go home to the village he spent sixty years in and pray at the local temple.

The men refuse an offer of help with the bus fare back to the camps. Laxmi Prasad says, “All we Nepalis have is our dignity.”

MIN BAJRACHARYA

SCOFFLAW STOPPAGE: FNCCI members and entrepreneurs block the Machhindra bahr during a rally on Tuesday, when they also called a nationwide banda to protest the insecure business environment. The banda was ruled illegal and the body faces a contempt of court case.

I DO: Girls, some as young as eight, raise their hands when asked ‘who among you is married’ in Baskhora, Kapilvastu on Tuesday.

STINKY BUSINESS: A week’s worth of garbage is collected from steaming heaps around town on Wednesday. Locals around the Okharpauwa-Sisdole landfill site have given the government 15 days to build a drainage reservoir for liquid that leaks from the site.

NEVER TOO OLD TO PLAY ACT: Fifty-first anniversary celebrations at the Nepal Police Headquarters in Naxal on Tuesday included floats, displays, and a ceremony to honour policemen for outstanding service.

SHEEPISH: Sheep had free passage during Tuesday’s ‘illegal’ strike.
Dynamite between two boulders

So Nepal's bid for a seat in the UN Security Council was a fiasco. Surprise, surprise.

But look at it this way: we got 28 votes! So what if they were from countries like Tonga, Tuvalu, Sao Principe and Tome, Laos, North Korea, and Burkina Faso? OK, maybe some of them ticked the wrong box in the ballot by mistake, but nevertheless it shows these countries are not just Nepal's fair-weather friends. We can rely on them through thick and thin.

Just in case, however, we should follow the example set by The Dear Leader Kim who has forced the world to take his country more seriously by setting off a couple of nukes underneath his own territory. Our own Comrade Awesome had the right idea when he described Nepal as dynamite between two boulders. Now, we need to work on packing the dynamite with nuclear tips so we don't get kicked around anymore by uppstart foreign ambassadors.

Someone who must be kicking himself is Comrade CP Gajurel in his jail cell in Kolkata after hearing Comrades Ale Magar, Sharma & Co have packed off on European tours. Gajurel tried to fly to Frankfurt two years ago on a forged Indian passport and was arrested in Madras. Sureshi and Dinanath left on Royal Orchid Class on Sunday with legit Nepali passports that had genuine Schengen visas. Guess who was on the front of the plane with them: Lokendra Bahadur Chand. Let's see, if it's Tuesday, they must be in Belgium.

Meanwhile Comrade CP Mainali is just back from Havana after attending the Summit of Bashbashers with Hugo Chavez and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

With all this junketeering going on, wonder who's going to be around to conduct peace negotiations. But one thing is for sure: if there are no talks, they can't fail.

Talking of talks, given the number of cigarette breaks Sher Bahadur Deuba was taking at Baluwatar last week, the whole thing must have been pretty stressful for our four-time prime minister. But we hear the Sher wasn’t just taking nicotine fixes on the balcony, he was also making quick phone calls on his cell to you-know-who.

The Ass has learnt from reliable sources that Girija Babu had a hard time keeping awake during the proceedings, giving new meaning to Martin Luther King's famous line: "I have a dream." But even as the talks got underway Girija Babu seems to have lived up to his reputation for being the Sly Old Fox that he is by putting a couple of last ones. After getting everyone to agree to let him speak first, he apparently said: "You've all agreed to let me speak first, but I want Pushpa Kamalji to go first." Clever.

And then, after agreeing with Comrade Tremendous in a private pre-summit chat to accept the infamous double-key formula on arms management, Girija Babu unilaterally backtracked during the negotiations. Now, who was he talking to on the phone during the breaks?

In the midst of all this, the baddies gave themselves a dasain present by buying a six-storey building in Kopundole for Rs 2.5 million that used to be occupied (at different times) by Comrade Bam Dev (his name means: ‘left-wing god’) and by the RPP. The Maoists didn’t pull any strings for the transfer of deeds, and now have their people's court and liaison office in the buildings. The Maoists have also taken up cleaning up Kathmandu's underworld and are said to have abducted a couple of notorious Valley goonads.

Hmm. Going for hearts and minds, buying houses, going on European junkets. These guys are definitely don't have any intention of going back to the jungle.