NARESH NEWAR in SURKHET

I

It is the price the Nepali people have come to pay for peace a money, undefined, under-funded, and half-hearted effort to confine the Maoists and their arms.

A visit to a Maoist cantonment at Dasratpur, north of Surkhet, showed how everyone is just going through the motions of arms management. Meanwhile, the Maoists have yet to release the young villagers forcibly recruited in recent months to bolster their numbers in the camps. Locals are still forced to support fighters with food and shelter, and the Maoists themselves are getting impatient with the lack of facilities.

When Pushpa Kamal Dahal tells the prime minister and the UN in Kathmandu to speed up arms management, he is responding to increasing pressure from cadre like those here in western Nepal who are getting frustrated with roughing it in the cold and damp of primitive camps such as in Dasratpur.

Dozens of female guerrillas who have recently given birth are worried about the health of their babies and have gone to their home villages in surrounding districts. After this week’s rains, even battle-hardened guerrillas found conditions too rough in the camp and moved to farmers’ homes in Dasratpur.

This is creating problems for villagers who have to house up to eight Maoists each. We asked Bir Bhusal, a local shopkeeper, how long he could go on like this. “What do you want us to say,” he retorted sarcastically, “what can you do about it anyway?”

The Maoist commanders have no idea how long they will have to be in camps. Their leaders have told them to endure hardship for some more time and that everything will be taken care of “once we are in government”. But for now, the commanders say they need better housing, health services, sanitation, and facilities for those with families.

It is clear that until the UN and the government get their act together it will be villagers living outside camps who will have to bear the burden of taking care of the Maoists. But most are philosophical about it. “We have fed them all these years, it is nothing new,” rues Dasratpur farmer Bishnu Baralami Magar, even though there are armed Maoists within earshot.

It seems that villagers are losing their earlier fear of the guerrillas. The Maoists no longer force villagers to feed them since they now have rations, but there is resentment about Maoist demands for firewood and water.

A group of frustrated villagers approached a visiting journalist and asked if it was possible to get word up to move the Maoist cantonment further from their village.
Debunking myths
...of the constituent assembly versus the status quo

House trained

No need to be overly distressed over the delay in the adoption of the interim constitution. It will happen, just as surely as the constituent assembly polls will be held. The question to ask is: will the final document reflect the values of pluralism we all expect it to?

The eight-point agreement fell victim to Maoist brinkmanship in a farcical constituent drafting exercise. Egged on by over-enthusiastic members of a socially-revived parliament was almost undone without a credible institution to take its place. After that experience the parties will be careful to ensure that the draft interim constitution will adhere to democratic tenets. The good news is that responsible and thoughtful second rank party leadership is involved in the process, and they will prevent it from meandering all over the map as the previous attempt by a committee led by former justice Laxman Ayal did.

The draft interim constitution has to be promulgated by the sitting parliament, a good decision for which Subhas Negori is at least partly responsible. This may mean discussion on the draft articles, and that the final document which emerges will have the imprint of the most representative body in the land and peopled by legislators who were actually elected, even if they no longer support the government.

As we bid goodbye to the third parliament which put the stamp of legitimacy on the achievements of the “People’s Movement” and channelled its energy in a positive direction, we can only hope that the successor government with 75 unexcelled Maoist members will continue the tradition.

Pushpa Kamal Dahal and his colleagues are pushing for the detailed interim constitution, but maybe there is no need to throw the baby out with the constitution if it was a transitional statute to serve the poll till elections in the spring. It’s possible the shrewl Maoist demands that the constituent assembly electorates be held as fast as possible will dissipate as soon as the interim constitution is adopted and the comrades become “house-trained.” The Maoist leadership has concluded in the past months that their chances of a good showing in the polls are, under current circumstances, slim. The reasonable people of Nepal did not appreciate the violence and threats, and they need time to heal.

The challenge in this extended transitional phase will be to maintain the momentum for social and political change, and ensure that the people are taken into the state return with a restored trust. There can be no derailment of the pluralist process, however long the interregnum.

Myth 1: The Maoists first raised the constituent assembly demand.

Wrong. In 1960, the new Nepali communists believed a constitution written by the people should form the basis of power-sharing. The NC supported it initially. The wily King Tribhuvan agreed and then backed down. His son and grandson, who would directly rule Nepal for 35 years after his death, were never interested in a people’s constitution.

The demand for a constituent assembly was again raised by the communists in 1990 under Jana Andolan I. But the idea was dropped by the NC, which troika leadership. The parties ultimately settled on a hand-picked constitution drafting committee.

The fruit of their labour (which several drafters would, until as recently as last year, boast was the “best constitution in the world”) was promulgated in November 1960 without any broad-based people’s consultations. The Maoists’ contribution has been to force a constituent assembly to accept a constituent assembly by sacrificing 13,000 lives.

The main stumbling blocks in drafting a peoples’ constitution have been the palace and the NC. The palace’s resistance is understandable because a new constitution could abolish the monarchy and thus end what they considered sound governance after the NC almost made it happen. Because even today its leadership remains a party of narrow and vested interests dominated by eastern bhaktaks.

The saving grace about the NC today is that its leadership finally recognised that times have changed. The Maoists used violence and clever politicking to make the constituent assembly not just their demand but the demand of all excluded communities. The NC’s response has been one of the most astute bagmans in modern Nepali history: it would agree to hold a constituent assembly election, but only if the Maoists gave up violence and participated in mainstream politics. Of course, an obstinate and dictatorial monarch facilitated this process.

Myth 2: The proposed constituent assembly will resolve all problems.

A careful reading of the 8 November agreement between the seven parties and the Maoists shows that the constituent assembly will be little different to the mixed electoral system: 205 elected from current constituencies on a first-past-the-post basis, and another 204 on a proportional basis. The agreement does not define constituencies, and it is assumed that the same 205 will be in constituencies which prefaces exclusions in the past will elect the new assembly.

And although there will be “proportional representation” in the 204 seats, it will be the political parties who will decide which candidates to put forward on the basis of their communities based on their share of the national population. In short, 409 of the 425 members of the constituent assembly will be party laden. The assembly will not be an assembly of the people, it will be an assembly of the parties. What change can we expect from such a body?

Questions of identity which lurk in the minds of all excluded communities could again be sidelined because parties, which see themselves as national, are unable to contemplate communal, cultural and regional identities. The coming constituent assembly poll is going to be about the constitution, communal and, eventually, national.

The Maoists and anti-Maoist activists we see today are intertwined with the identity question. Why would these groups support any parties who have ignored their aspirations for so long? For the Madhesis in particular, electing assemblymen and women from the same constituencies originally drawn up in 1990 is meaningless because it fails to reflect the demographic of the tarai. Unless the constituencies are scientifically delineated anew, the Madhesis, who have always been the palace and the NC’s pravakas in their own province, are going to be about identity: communal, regional, and, of course, status quo.

T

he guns may be silent in the countryside, but other excesses by the Maoist cadre continue apace. The presence of a million ex-militants in all parts of the country and where they are present is causing serious concern. Those hesitant to address the concerns of local people. The Maoists fill this vacuum, functioning as complainant, pleader, judge and the executioner. With no other option, most people comply with their directives.

Hope is all the Maoist cadre have, and the seven parties are taking it away.
SPAM

Every Nepali should think about why the Seven-Party Alliance (SPA) leaders are afraid to go to the people for major decisions. They simply declared Nepal a secular nation and are speaking about bringing down the monarchy through the constituent assembly. The skewed watershed parliament decided to pass the Citizenship Bill, which the Supreme Court rejected a few years ago, after days of debate. Such sensitive issues need to be decided through popular mandate to be sealed for good. No political party ever accepted the people’s mandate expressed in the 1980 referendum. Yet they talk about representing the masses. I wonder, does this mean that the SPA knows it doesn’t have the popular mandate?

Nepal Suputra, email

● You correctly give credit to the political parties for steadfastly defending the middle path (‘Birds on a wire,’ #326). But you are incorrect in giving them solely credit for bringing the country to the present. Nepal was recently placed at 110 in the global competitive index (GCI) by the World Economic Forum (WEF) because we are “[not] harnessing new technology for productivity improvement, and innovation is low in the country.” One recommendation was focusing more on higher education and training. Using foreign experts, whether in academical institutions, production companies, the banking and finance or hotel industries, or indigenous firms, will be favourable all right. But though that may spur industrial growth and help reduce unemployment, there are still unlikely to be enough jobs created for all Nepali youth. Young Nepals will continue to have to go to India, the Gulf countries, Malaysia and the like.

Birendra Bikram KC, email

By way of comparison, consider Rwanda, whose entire social structure was shattered by civil war-genocides just over a decade ago. Schooling in the few places it did exist, serviced the ideology of those in power. Sound familiar following the war. However, Rwanda harnesses the optimism of peace and created consensus around the issue of education. Politicians repeatedly the linking between education and politics and making it a centrepiece of reconciliation efforts. Today Rwanda scores a 61 on the UN’s Education Index and its gains continue to outpace most countries in the world (Nepal scores a 53). With courage and foresight, Nepal can do something similarly.

Nepal now stands at a crossroads. One path leads back to education as the means, politics the ends. That dark road is marked by further strife and loss for future generations. Another, brighter road makes politics the means, education the ends.

Be it short-term reconciliation or long-term concerns about Nepal’s place the world education is the key. Let us not forget, “Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed”. We must seize this historic opportunity to set education above politics, making it the cornerstone of lasting security, peace, and potential.

Jeremy Rappleye, Kathmandu

AT IT AGAIN

CK Lal is at it again, pouring his vitial views and new found critical mass in the general public forum (‘Change management’, State of the State, #326). Till date he has not written a single article praising the army. A lot of hue and cry is unnecessarily being created about the army and its families, free of cost. The army has many good points too, Mr Lal.

Amrit KC, Bishalnagar

● Count me in among those frustrated readers who find the substance of CK Lal’s rant’s tiring, vitriolic, politically well-taken, and his style kind of overblown. But this time around, he actually found a balance. Kudos on a sensible, informed article about the Nepal Army that took into account the need for serious change while not throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

James P, email

EXPERTS AND MARKETS

I commend Ashuhotsh Tiwar on his creative thinking about business and the Nepali economy, but I disagree with him that foreign volunteers can do much to boost growth in Nepal (‘Volunteering growth’, Strictly Business, #326). A better strategy for promoting growth would be to implement policies that create domestic demand for foreign volunteers who would otherwise leave Nepal to find work abroad (as Tiwar himself mentions), rather than creating jobs for foreign volunteers.

I am avise to the idea that we cannot develop without foreign help. I think the best policies for growth would promote private enterprise. We can only do this by making sure that the peace lasts, property rights are protected, contract laws are clear and enforced, and government corruption is kept low. Anything else would probably be futile.

Avidit Acharya, Washington DC

● Ashuhotsh Tiwar is right that short-term foreign experts will be good for industry. Nepal was recently placed at 110 in the global competitive index (GCI) by the World Economic Forum (WEF) because we are “[not] harnessing new technology for productivity improvement, and innovation is low in the country.” One recommendation was focusing more on higher education and training. Using foreign experts, whether in academical institutions, production companies, the banking and finance or hotel industries, or indigenous firms, will be favourable all right. But though that may spur industrial growth and help reduce unemployment, there are still unlikely to be enough jobs created for all Nepali youth. Young Nepals will continue to have to go to India, the Gulf countries, Malaysia and the like.

Birendra Bikram KC, email

Together with Ashuhotsh Tiwar’s thoughtful and innovative ideas we also need a mechanism that can analyse the surging Chinese consumption patterns to identify demand for uniquely Nepali products. Sending a core group of temporary experts to identify, understand, and capitalise on their existing market demand would be a way of entering into one of the world’s largest consumer markets.

A Poudel, email

LETTTERS

SPAM

Nepal Times welcomes feedback. Letters should be brief and may be edited for space. While pseudonyms can be accepted, writers who provide their real names and contact details will be given preference. Email letters should be in text format with attachments and use the subject line “letter to the editor”.

Email: letters@nepaltimes.com
Fax: 977-1-5522013
Mail: Letters, Nepal Times, GPO Box 7251, Kathmandu, Nepal.
Tensions remain taut, and democracy a distant memory

The rest of Nepal

The rest of Nepal

The rest of Nepal

The rest of Nepal

After nine months of ceasefire, there is a baby boom among the Maoists

The rest of Nepal

The rest of Nepal

The rest of Nepal

The rest of Nepal

The rest of Nepal

The rest of Nepal
Boosting Birganj

India has decided to help Nepal put in place an institutional mechanism to develop a special economic zone (SEZ) in Birganj. Developing a SEZ on the Nepal side of the border makes business sense, considering the many products that go to India through the border trade. As the government is currently in the process of framing enabling legislation regarding SEZs, there are no details about how much land will be allocated for the project. The idea was apparently discussed at an inter-governmental committee meeting in August, in which India also exchanged Nepal's offer to opt for a public-private partnership model rather than a fully state-owned model, and invited a Nepali team to come and study Indian SEZs.

Dealing Hyundai

Avco International, the sole distributor of Hyundai vehicles in Nepal, has added Deep Laxmi Intercontinental to its seven-dealer network for Hyundai marketing in Kathmandu. In a grand opening offer, the new Hyundai showroom in New Baneshwor is giving customers special cash discounts and the chance to avail of IFB washing machines and microwave ovens.

Laxmi for Laxmi

At Laxmi Banke’s sixth annual general meeting in Birgunj, reports and financial statements for 2005/2006 showed the bank had achieved sound growth and increased operating profits by over 50 percent from the previous year. The bank, which began operations in April 2002, also registered growth in lending and deposit volumes of 57 and 46 percent respectively. The AGM approved a proposal to increase the bank’s paid-up capital from Rs 610 million to Rs 800 million, and also re-appointed TR Upadhyay and Co as the statutory auditors for fiscal 2006/2007.

Easy come

Ownership of a Sony electronics has become a lot more affordable with the re-launch of Nepal Hima Trade Link’s 0 percent simple installment scheme. Products ranging from handycams and TVs to car audio systems are available with easy finance options from Himalayan Bank, Standard Chartered Bank, Guna Multipurpose Co-operative, Birganj Finance, Kurni Saving and Credit, and Systematic Saving and Credit.

Big exchanges

Hansraj Hulashand, the sole authorised dealer for Bajaj Motorcycles in Nepal, is offering to exchange old bikes for new at the Bajaj Maha Exchange Mela 2, on until 18 December at Bhrikuti Mandap. In addition to bargain exchange rates, the event also features a top-up service from ten finance companies. An added attraction is the launch of the newly revamped Bajaj Pulsar DTSi, which both have billions of rupees of employee savings, make investing in real estate not based on conventional diligence. The problem is that unconvincing decisions are not always based on solid analysis down to what investments are good and which are bad. Many businesses, especially state-owned ones, think that these institutions can provide them with money any time. In the past, savings funds such as the EPF have been leading lenders or financiers for non-recourse project finance deals such as hydro-power plants. In the early nineties, lending to hotels became a ‘must do’ in the financing community. Facts are including multilateral jumped into the fray. The result: many now struggle to recover bad loans. As business community associations fight tooth and nail to make non-repayment a fact of life, it will be interesting to watch whether banks actually have the nerve to foreclose on some of these hotels, or sell them. This is the spirit in which money is being thrown at hydro-power today. Imagine the size of bad loans that could result. This is a country obsessed with discussing hydro-power and a capital in which a stone tossed randomly would probably hit a hydropower project license holder. Project financing deserves to be taken seriously.

Enterprises need not bureaucratic control, but financial discipline. As more banks join an already crowded market, the temptation to build a high-risk portfolio is natural, but we need firm regulators to ensure that the fiscal health of our country is not at risk. And regulators must be self-regulated before they begin to regulate others. Here is the known conflict of interest: the spouses of some key people working at the regulators are employed at near-failing institutions. If these institutions are to be monitored, the regulators themselves need good governance, beginning with some cleansing and purging. In more developed stock markets, suspending trading of stocks of errant firms disciplines them to a large extent and also keeps投机 at bay. If we want to increase growth, we first need well-developed markets for debt, equity and other creative instruments. With our limited capital, we need promote technology transfer through foreign investment, and open up all sectors. The Beed’s favourite example is that of the foreign advertising firms to operate in Nepal changed the face of the advertising industry. Let ‘em all in: foreign banks, investment banking firms, merchant bankers, lawyers, accountants, and consultants. The portion of the regulatory work could also be sub-contracted to capable firms. Credit rating agencies must be permitted to operate so there can be an objective assessment of which are the bad apples. Institutions will have to work harder and faster to fund high-risk projects.

There’s one surefire way the so-called New Nepal can avoid even more conflict in the future. Make conditions optimal for economic growth.

This is in large measure done by regulating the financial sector and opening others.

www.arthbeed.com

“Private banks drive the economy.”

Ntepali Times: What have the last 12 years been like for Everest Bank’s Jaspal Singh Jass?

Jaspal Singh Jass: Everest Bank’s new Executive Director, spoke with Nepali Times about the changing role of banks here and the future of Nepal’s economy.

Since the major market players here are private banks—there are only two government banks—we naturally have a leading role in developing the economy as a whole. Tourism and trading are core sectors, as manufacturing has not reached core competency level yet. Hopefully the recent changes will boost this too.

Competition is likely to heat up, and of course there will be mergers and acquisitions. Banks with better policies and values and better technology, and those that are financially strong are likely to stay. We have to have suitable strategies to convert these changes into opportunities. It’s possible that some weaker banks will merge with stronger ones.

What are your plans for the future?

We are in the process of signing an ATM sharing agreement with Punjab National Bank which will help them to add an international dimension. We can use EBL’s outlets in Nepal and our cards can be used in the more than 600 of PMIs ATMs in India. We also plan to enter the insurance business as an agent to further strengthen our non-income base. Mutual funds and mobile banking are also on our agenda.

What are your expectations for the economy in light of the recent political changes?

The spirit of the peace accord is, of course, welcome, and all segments of the economy, not just core competency areas, will get a boost. FDI will grow considerably, especially in hydropower. Nepal can take advantage of its location between two large economies—India has a GDP of over eight percent and China’s is in the double digits. The banking sector has to play a proactive role.
Interview with Chief Election Commissioner Bhraj Pokhrel in Sanyaba, 14 December

Is the commission moving at the same speed as that at which it was appointed? For elections to be held within the law, the interim constitution needs to make the path to the constituent assembly clear. Then parliament can make laws and give the commission its mandate. Technicalities within the equal representation system need to be addressed by law. It's actually the lawmakers who have a bigger role now.

What is the minimum time needed for these elections to take place, and what happens if elections aren't held by June next year? The strategy needs to be prepared according to the time it will take to hold elections, and the process must be endorsed by the law. Elections can't be held on the basis of sentiment.

In the past it took almost four months just to get the voter list ready. It will take a minimum of three months to get voter registration centres and prepare the field. We need another two months to print the ballots and make other preparations. If we work on war-footing, a minimum of five months is required.

The commission's view is that the citizenship issue should not be a problem. The commission is supposed to make rules for the election. We're collecting information and have asked international experts for help. When defining equal representation we must also guarantee inclusiveness. We are on the list of candidates, how to monitor this, and finalise issues like how many stamps can be on the ballot paper.

The commission's priority right now is laying the foundations, and working on a draft proposal for the Act on voter lists and registration. In national interest, we are hoping that the interim constitution will assist, and the interims constitution will assist in fast tracking this.

How will the agreement not to deploy the army during the elections affect security? Security is the most important factor from the moment the name list is prepared. Looking at the size and responsibilities of the current Armed Police Force and the Nepal Police, managing this will be hard. The safest security measure would be if the top leadership of the prominent parties convince lower-level cadre of their political commitments and the need for a cordial environment. An all-party regulation system at the local level would ensure that the police and other security apparatus would only be necessary to show the state's presence.

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Mangalsen today

Lalnath Gaitmore in Kantipur, 12 December
Since the ceasefire after Jana Andolan II, Mangalsen’s residents no longer live in constant fear. Mangalsen used to be a ghost town after sunset. Now people walk alone confidently at night. But memories of the night of 10 February 2002 are still fresh, and the town is full of the ruins of government offices that the Maoists attacked that night.

In the five years that have passed, no one has shown an interest in reconstructing Mangalsen. The district administration office now rents a two-storey house. The prisoners' quarters in the district jail have been completely destroyed. Local reporter Laxmi Sob lives near what used to be the Nepal Telecommunications Office. Looking out of her window, all she sees are the remnants of the attack. “I want to forget that night, but the rains will never let me,” Sob says. She says if the government cared about Mangalsen, reconstruction work would have started by now and the town would look different.

Acting Chief District Officer Biru Prakash Neupane agrees, and has formed a committee and prepared plans for reconstruction. “Now that we have peace, I am hopeful that the government will pay serious attention,” he says.

War-footing

Bhraj Pokhrel in Sanyaba, 14 December

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**Quote of the Week**

"Not just once or twice, every time I met Girijababu he backed the idea of a ceremonial monarchy.

Prakash Koirala, former elected central committee member of Nepali Congress and son of BP Koirala, in Jana Aastha, 13 December

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**Interview with Baburam Bhattarai by Navin Singh Khadka of the BBC Nepali Service, 11 December**

So what have Prachanda and Prime Minister Koirala agreed on?

Baburam Bhattarai: During the meeting we made it clear that we cannot accept any pretext to delay the constituent assembly elections. The prime minister said he was committed to holding the elections. But his words don’t match his deeds. It has also been agreed that the next eight-party summit meetings will complete the interim constitution and promulgate it, followed by preparations for the CA elections. What we have been saying is that our armed combatants have already been confined to temporary camps. If the UN needs time to begin arms monitoring, we can begin that work and collection of arms records with help from civil society representatives. Why should we wait for all this to happen?

Why didn’t you bring this up before signing the arms management agreement? We have been doing many things on our own. Without foreign assistance, we (the Maoists and the government) spent the last six months preparing for the peace agreement and we have abided by it. It all depends on political will. We want the UN to work only as a witness. That is why you cannot use the UN as a pretext to delay the political process.

But the tripartite agreement you signed with the government and the UN recently spells out UN’s role. The idea is to get help from them. The fact that we wrote a letter to the UN does not mean we’ve handed the regime over to them. This is not like bringing in a UN peacekeeping force.

Didn’t the problems begin after your party and the government agreed on the timetable for the interim constitution and formation of the interim parliament and government without consulting the UN?

Let there be no illusions. We have invited the United Nations only to help. If the parties involved in this conflict agree, we can write another letter to the UN thanking it for its help and asking it to leave. The UN can do nothing here, this is a fact.

How can you say that now, when you have signed a tripartite agreement which seeks the UN’s lead role in arms and army management? That was only seeking their help. If they derail our entire political process by saying that they cannot arrive for one or two months, we cannot accept that. They are supposed to be here on our conditions. It’s okay if they work according to our schedule, but if not we can easily ask them to pack up.

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**Book:** Educational quality  
**Mouse:** Education bill

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**SELECTED MATERIAL TRANSLATED EVERY WEEK FROM THE NEPALI PRESS**
Sarita’s family

The hopes and struggles of this remarkable household represent Nepal in a microcosm.

Sarita Nepali and her seven children sleep without blankets on straw mats on the latticed bamboo floor of their small thatched house. All night, the Sun Kosi murmurs relentlessly nearby.

Through where the mud has peeled off from the bamboo slats of the wall, you can see the river as it makes an S-turn eastward between Khotang and Udaypur. I made the mistake of calling it a khola. A fifth grader at the Shree Jalpadevi Primary School reprimanded me: “Yo khola ho ta? Yo ta kosi ho!”

Dhaplang is on the bend of the Sun Kosi that borders Trijuga municipality and Gaighat. For the visitor, it is pleasantly remote. There is no electricity, no shops. Everything has to be walked down from the roadhead in Sauney, a steep hour-and-a-half away. In Dhaplang, close to trails that lead to Khotang and Okhaldhunga, portering is the main source of income.

Sarita’s husband used to carry loads when he was not working in the field. After he died nine months ago following a brief illness, Sarita’s family of six daughters and a son is struggling to survive. They grow just enough food for three months, the rest of the year they work. When Sarita is out carrying loads, the older girls do the tougher housework: fetching firewood and water, cooking and washing the dishes. The younger ones mind the youngest siblings and help with sanak sinik (tidying up the house). The older sisters are enrolled at the local school, but of late there has been no time to attend classes.

Kopila, 16, has joined the groups of youngsters who carry loads up to Diktel, a six-day walk north. Every kilo she carries up and down the mountains fetches just Rs 20. Kalpana, 13, has been accompanying her mother, carrying loads shorter distances.

To catch up with the workload Sarita and the older girls wake up as the roosters begin to go off at 4.30. The stars are still out and the Sun Kosi is veiled in mist. The younger ones get up at staggered intervals after that. The girls fetch fodder for cows and goats—but none of the animals belong to them. They feed the livestock and in return get to own the firstborn and use the milk until the cows and goats get pregnant again.

Food is scarce. The children cook and eat makai ko roti and tori ko saag. The meal is meagre, yet at mealtime passers-by are graciously offered some. Meat is a monthly delicacy and fruit is rare. Equally scarce is clothing. All the girls who are registered at school wear the uniform day and night. The seams are ripped, buttons have fallen off, and the blue is faded.

Little Muna, just two, tags on to her mother whenever she is around, suckling on the sagging, wasted breasts. Her older brother Milan, five, is as spoilt as the sisters let him be. He seems to sense that he is special and is already learning to bully his sisters.

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Kalpana, her sister Kopila, and their cousin Anjali are setting their sickles to work on the golden ripe paddy when other children clutching exercise books rush down to the school by the river. Kalpana’s glance flicks towards them as she quietly and methodically cuts the paddy and lays it out to dry in neat rows. The hard work is already taking a toll on Kalpana’s back. The fact that the daughters have to work worries Sarita.

“They keep complaining that they will be taken off the school register,” she says, “but what am I to do? There’s all this work. And going to school means money, a dot pen costs Rs 5 and does not even last a week.”

“I’ve told them: this is all I can offer you. Now grow up and carve out your own destinies.”

I ask Kalpana what she wants to grow up to be. She fiddles with her nails and looks away as if exasperated with the futility of the hypothetical exercise. When I persist, she answers softly: “I want to become a Miss.”

TO FEED A FAMILY: Sarita, pictured here with five of her seven children (facing page, top), has been a single mother since her husband died nine months ago. Life on the banks of the winding Sun Kosi looks beautiful, (facing page, bottom), but it is a struggle to come by even the simplest meals (above). Thirteen-year-old Kalpana (right), whose only clothes are her fading school uniform, spends more time working to provide for the family than studying.

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Prime Minister Koirala and Speaker Subhas Nembang have promised to name commissioners to the National Human Rights Commission this week. But filling the gap that opened when the former group resigned in July is just the first step in repairing the body that shouldered big hopes six years ago, say activists, UN officials, and donors.

Since the resignations, the NHRC has been unable to hire the staff urgently needed to tackle a backlog of thousands of cases, and has engaged lawyer ‘volunteers’ for investigations. Without commissioners it has also been unable to make recommendations to the government, a process all agree needs revising. “The perception is that the NHRC is just a recommendation body,” says Tek Tamrakar, new head of the UNDP support project Capacity Development of the NHRC (see box), adding. “It seems that if the government does not comply, there is nothing we can do; people can have no justice.”

Nembang agrees the commission should be strengthened. “We can make some sort of reference in the interim constitution to ensure that [implementing] the recommendations are mandatory,” he said. He also appeared sympathetic to demands made by civil society and reaffirmed last week by Lena Sundh, Nepal representative of the UN’s Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

“Unless an effective and independent NHRC is re-established soon, a gap will be felt in the monitoring of the peace agreement, preparation for free and fair elections to the

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**Rights back to**

**MARTY LOGAN**

Just appointing new human rights commissioners won’t do much

Former commissioner Kapil Shrestha agrees. “The law doesn’t say what happens if the government doesn’t comply with its recommendations,” he told us, adding that authorities only complied with two of the recommendations his group made in two years.

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**Towels, towels, towels, strong navy blue towels, posh purple towels, soft lime green towels, towels to pat dry your hands with, bath towels to wrap around, turban towels to wrap around your head, a towel for Monday, Tuesday or any day of the week. Does it really matter what you do with it? As long as it doesn’t remind you of those remnant strands of hair after a wash... well not if you’ve got the new Sunsilk Thick & Strong.**

Now get a FREE BATH TOWEL with every 400ml Sunsilk Thick & Strong.

No more hair fall, just a fresh towel.
square one

constituent assembly, outreach to long-marginalised groups which quickly needed to be empowered (and) pressure for accountability for past human rights abuses," Sundh said in a speech.

An organisation linked to the CNRP in October decided to postpone confirmation of the NHRC’s status as compliant with the Paris Principles. Officials must first submit a copy of the amended Human Rights Act to prove that the appointment of the secretary and commissioners was as per international norms, said the International Coordinating Committee of National Institutions for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights.

That means using a public, transparent selection process, and finding a law professor with civil society and independent agreed and that the 11 commissioners currently in place are not open for human rights activists who have worked for a long time in the field and not only to retired chief justices or Supreme Court judges. But the current selection committee of himself, the Prime Minister and the International Coordinating Committee on the latter’s rule, he added.

Nembang also supported the creation of a separate fund so the NHRC would be financially independent and agreed that the 11 commissioners currently in place are not open for human rights activists who have worked for a long time in the field and not only to retired chief justices or Supreme Court judges. But the current selection committee of himself, the Prime Minister and the International Coordinating Committee on the latter’s rule, he added.

The high and mighty acquired the most dangerous habits. Royals struck Machiavellian deals with those bent on their destruction, as if enacting a part of the Mahabharata still in the works. Lord Vishnu incarnation, getting the key to the kingdom on a throw of the dice, tries to buy off the devil with gold and secret concessions. High stakes gambling is a very bad vice. The political class of minority government, their falsified coalitions colluding and manipulating every few moons, led the politicians to steal faster and more brazenly than ever before.

Without the reassuring guarantee of five years tenure to loot at their leisure, ministers were hell-bent on recouping their investment and building several new houses in record time. As Singh Debi’s revolving door spout out party worthies with distressing regularity, the absurd practice of calling Nepali bandads and chakka jams became the national bad habit. When your job doesn’t have a clue which party is calling tomorrow’s strike or why, chances are nobody else does, and the game has gone too far. Twelve governments in fourteen years (or was it fourteen in twelve?), an atrocious depravity unto itself, permanently sullying the good name of democracy.

While the police acquired the habits of thieves, the military emulated the Mongol Hordes, ravaging the countryside like an invading army and treating every villager as an enemy coining in terror. For police offices, and other hard-won infrastructure, we realised these people were junkies of a new, singular sort. Serious opportunism is again upon us. When rotten root since the war began, best exemplified by the menacing behaviour of Khasi gangsters, riding the wave of fear conveniently created by the Maoist Mass. That leaves the holy popes. Many gradually fell to the quietly tragic habit of clinical depression. The practice of psychiatry, virtually unheard of in pre-conflict Nepal, is now one of the economy’s few growth sectors. Others turned to shamans, whose mantras and magic spells provide familiar sanctuary from the demons aloof in a world gone mad. Yet others took to spirits of the bottled sort, with a side order of rationale, promises of roads, clinics, and schools were soon forgotten. The ashy overflowed and the size of my evening pegs grew from two-fingers to four. My tennis game was the first casualty.

As bad habits increase, good habits fall by the wayside in direct proportion. When I ‘plotted, therefore I am’ became parliament’s only rational, promises of roads, clinics, and schools were soon forgotten. The ashy overflowed and the size of my evening pegs grew from two-fingers to four. My tennis game was the first casualty.

How about a little yoga and a brisk walk like in the good old lines of the morning edition?! Manic over-analysis of fools and their cries out for opportunism, extortion, and depredations to cease and seemingly upon us and we have no more war to blame, my liver must explain my binging along with the worst of them.

As the situation deteriorated, sobriety became a luxury many could not afford. As bad habits increase, good habits fall by the wayside in direct proportion. When ‘I plot, therefore I am’ became parliament’s only rational, promises of roads, clinics, and schools were soon forgotten. The ashy overflowed and the size of my evening pegs grew from two-fingers to four. My tennis game was the first casualty.

TO YOUR HEALTH: Over 1,200 women received general reproductive health check-ups during 10 day camps in Dadekotra in late November and early December. Reproductive ill health accounts for 23 percent of women’s disease burden, compared to 12 percent for males, according to WHO.

Once the NHRC gets stronger teeth, it should bite into deeply-rooted problems like discrimination, says the new chief of the UNDP project there. “The commission has focussed on civil and political rights because of the political situation but now that the state is in the process of restructuring, the commission should look at long-standing problems, like exclusion,” says Tik Tamrakar (pictured), national project manager of the UNDP project Capacity Development of the NHRC.

A first step would be to create a separate unit devoted to social inclusion, followed by other theme-based units to meet changing needs. One focused on IOP issues would be useful at the moment, Tamrakar, a human rights lawyer who joined the project in early November from Pro-Public.

In doing my best to ensure the rights of dals, janjatis, women and other disadvantaged groups through litigation in the court, I heard about this position, I thought that this was the main institution that can ensure the rights of Dalits. A gold medal winner in the Master’s program in Law from the University of Lancashire, UK, he is now adjunct professor. Tamrakar knows that he faces extra scrutiny because he is a dalit.”I wasn’t selected only because I’m a dalit—though I’m junior, I have experience in the human rights area. But [they] have a policy to support us and I agree with that.”

Tamrakar is careful to point to the Himalayan-sized backlog of thousands of cases the NHRC must tackle, and warns, “I was chosen at a time when this project was under transition. If I fail it won’t be completely my fault and shouldn’t be seen as the failure of all dals.

Worldwide average due to early marriage and childbirth, heavy work during pregnancy and immediate delivery with poor pre- and post-natal care. The situation has worsened over the last decade as the conflict prevented staff and patients from accessing health facilities.

The situation is grim. Once in the 4,000 health facilities, it’s hurts a bit, but overall feels good,” said Oli, as she recovered from the simple 10-minute procedure of having a pessary ring inserted.

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Disruptive dancers

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Each year, four million babies die in their first four weeks of life—over 10,000 a day. Most go unrecorded, and virtually all occur in low- and middle-income countries, but most research and funding focuses on high-tech care for the one percent of deaths in rich countries.

The greatest risk is at the beginning of life: three-quarters of all neonatal deaths occur within one week of birth, and at least one million babies die on their first day of life. Moreover, almost 40 percent of all child deaths occur in the neonatal period, with Africa and South Asia accounting for two-thirds of the total.

Unfortunately, child survival programs in the developed world have focused primarily on pneumonia, diarrhoea, malaria, and vaccine-preventable causes of deaths after the first month of life, while safe motherhood programs focus primarily on the mother. Prevention of newborn deaths has dropped between the cracks of programs focusing on mothers and on older children.

This tragedy is as avoidable as it is immense. Recently, British science journal Lancet estimated that between 41 and 72 percent of neonatal deaths could be prevented if simple interventions were provided effectively. In other words, up to three million babies die needlessly each year. There are well known, low-cost, low-tech interventions, like immunisation against tetanus, exclusive breastfeeding, simple care for low-weight babies, and antibiotics. These interventions are already cost-effective, and packaging them with other health programs reduces costs further.

Currently, only about half of all women worldwide deliver with a skilled attendant present. In sub-Saharan Africa, less than 40 percent deliver with skilled care; in South Asia, the figure is less than 30 percent. Latin America and Southeast Asia have rapidly increased coverage, but at the current rate of progress in Africa, 50 percent of women will still deliver without skilled care in the year 2015.

Low-income countries have demonstrated that rapid progress is possible. Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Peru, and Botswana all halved neonatal mortality during the 1990s. These countries’ success has depended on sustained high-level political commitment to providing high-quality maternal and newborn care.

Of course, there is no universal solution. The numbers and causes of neonatal deaths, the capacity of the health system, and the obstacles faced differ between and within countries, as does support from policymakers and the availability of resources. But the cost of maintaining essential newborn health interventions at 90 percent coverage in the 75 countries with the highest mortality is estimated to be a mere $1.1 billion per year. This would supplement current spending of $2 billion, only about 30 percent of which is specifically for newborns.

Even with a weak health system, it is possible to achieve measurable mortality reduction. But first political will and financial resources must be generated. To continue to fail the world’s at-risk children is to be party to an entirely preventable mass destruction of human life.

Joy Lawn is Senior Research and Policy Adviser, Saving Newborn Lives/ Save the Children-USA, South Africa.
Amber Gurung’s writing on making art from life is as sensitive and eloquent as his music

In these times when writers expend so much energy contradicting and striking at invisible opponents with wit and irony, Amber Gurung’s voice—calm, unassuming and earnest—rises as if from the wilderness. Kahan Gaye Ti Dinharu?, a collection of essays spanning four decades, offers insight into the life and work of a man who has served music as his only cause.

Gurung, who knows “no other trade besides music,” is apprehensive about the publication of the book. What if he’s driven by “the vain wish to appear multi-dimensional?” His readers, particularly those who have long admired his music, will think otherwise. Kahan Gaye Ti Dinharu? Where have those days gone? It’s a question every lover of Nepali adhunik music has asked over the last decade. Why is today’s music so remote from that of Narayan Gopal and Aruna Lama, Bhakta Raj and Fatte Man? Why do we still hanker after the compositions of Gopal Yonzon and Nati Kaji and, of course, Amber Gurung? The essays in this collection speak to our growing sense of loss.

Bhawana, or ‘feeling’, is a word that recurs throughout Gurung’s narratives. Apart from patient immersion in work and study, the musician must feel the music he makes. An old piece of advice, perhaps, but painfully absent in music being produced today. Gurung’s disappointment in the current musical trends, however, does not make him a cynic. “I feel deep sympathy for musicians who, in order to please their audience and preserve their popularity, sing and compose not for themselves, but for their audience,” he writes. “Here is the fundamental weakness—not of art, but of artists.” And here is why we return to Gurung’s music—it embodies the inner solitude essential for any creative act.

Gurung, who has never known financial stability in his long, distinguished career, writes: “To do music in Nepal is to struggle.” This is perhaps inevitable in a society, where, as Bhupi Serchan once wrote, “The great poet drowns in debt/ and meets untimely death/…and Saraswati’s only daughter/ shrivels in her youth, without treatment.” Nevertheless, Gurung refuses to see hardship as an excuse for compromise. Bartok and Chopin, Mozart and Handel also suffered in their own ways, he writes. “Fine, let’s suppose our lives are twice as difficult…but are we leaving behind anything that will ensure our place as true artists?”

Gurung’s portraits of Shankar Lamichhane and Agam Singh Giri reveal his profound admiration for the two gifted writers. He deeply empathises with their anguish and loneliness. One essay quotes a letter that Lamichhane wrote Gurung when the latter was verging on despair: “You know the greatest thing man does after he’s given life? He separates himself from the crowd. This is the meaning and struggle of human life…If you find inadequacies around you, that’s a good thing. It ascends your separation from the crowd.” Those inadequacies, adds Lamichhane, erect our walls and open our door. Our challenge is to find that door.

An incurable optimist, Gurung regards sorrow as “the rice on the plate” and happiness as “the curry in the little bowl”. “The small amount of curry inspires me to finish the whole plate of rice,” he writes. Thus his love for music endures time and circumstances. “From the moment I sang the first tune of my first song, I didn’t grow apart from music,” writes Gurung, now in his seventies. “Even today, as the sight of a rainbow and green mountains and flowers fills me with rapture, I feel this is my gift.” Anyone who draws sustenance from song has much to gain from Gurung’s essays, which affirm both life and art.
Art from Tibet – A World of Snow

Friendly Product

Exhibitions

Friendly Product contemporary Nepali home furnishings, 16-17 December, 3-7PM at Wild Art Gallery, Thamel.

35th Independence Day of Bangladesh art exhibition at Park Gallery, Pulchowk, 20-22 December. 5522007

Art from Tibet – A World of Snow Paintings and photographs at Siddhartha Art Gallery, 11AM-5PM until 25 December. 4218048

Tattva paintings by Chirag Bangdel at The Art Shop, Darbar Marg. Sunday to Friday, 10.30 AM-5PM until 29 December. 4267963

Heartbeat 2 Photographs at Tantra Pub, Thamel until 12 January

Events

Handicraft Buyers and Sellers Meet at Patan Museum, 15 and 16 December.

Globalisation(s) French documentary film festival, 18-22 December, 5PM daily at Nepal Tourism Board Hall, Shikhuli Mandap. Entrance free. 4241163

Season of Bells at Bluebird Mall. Food festivals, fashion shows, tree mehendi, astrology, auctions, lucky draw, wine tasting, carols and more. Until 31 December. 4228933

Transcendental Meditation at Self Awakening Centre for a 25 percent discount during December. 4256618


Music

Palei with Hiranya Bhagore, 15 December. 5PM onwards, including drinks and snacks. 5542846

Ramalo Saanjh with Anil Shah and groups. 6.30 PM, on 15 December at Dolma Café, Thamel.

Live Music by Rashmi Singh and group. 7PM onwards on 15 December at Absolute Bar, Pulchowk. 5521408

Eighth Yala Maya Classic 5PM onwards on 17 December at Yala Maya Kendra, Patan Dhoka. 5535767

Heartbeat 2 Photographs at Tantra Pub, Thamel until 12 January

About Town

Dining

Shaam-E-Avadh lunch and dinner for Nawabs at Bukhara, S Altın Crowne Plaza, 15-17 December. 4273999

Walk and Lunch at Shivpuri Heights Cottage, 16 and 23 December. 9841371927

Traditional Turkish Dinner 24 December to 1 January at Killroys, Thamel. 4250440

International Brunch every Saturday and Sunday, 11AM-3PM for Rs 499 per person (Rs 299 for children) at Hotel Himalaya

Farmhouse Café at Park Village Resort. Dine al fresco with the birds and the butterflies. 4375280

Te savour Tibetan delicacies at the new Tibetan restaurant and paintings by Chirag Bangdel at The Art Shop, Darbar Marg. 4412999

Calcutta’s famous rolls, briyani, kebabs and Indian cuisine at Bawarchi, Bluebird Mall Food Court

Woodfired Pizzas at Roadhouse Café, Thamel. 4262768 and Pulchowk. 5531765

Momo and Sekuwa Revolution every Saturday at the Tea House Inn, Nagarkot. 6680048

Getaways

Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge special Christmas and New Years reservations. 4361500

Winter Package three days and two nights at Shangri-La Village Resort, Pokhara. Rs 7,499. 4241299

Xmas by the Jungle with elephant safaris, dolphins, rafting and more at Base Camp Lodge, Bardia. 081-593298

Chhio Chhio Hawama Package overnight stay with breakfast, dinner, and shuttle. Rs 1,700 for twin-share. 6680080

Harmony of the mind, body, and soul at Club Oasis, Hyatt Regency Kathmandu. 4491234

Aesthetic Living in pure nature at Park Village. 4375279

Overnight Package a night of luxury at Dwarika’s Hotel, 4479488

NEWSLETTER ARCHIVES

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

DAILY

20.45-21.15 on 102.4

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KATHMANDU VALLEY

NEPALI WEATHER

The rainfall on Monday would not have surprised regular readers. Hill farmers welcome December rain as a good augur of prosperity, and we can expect excellent veggies in the coming weeks, since the Valley has already received its monthly quota of rainfall. The powerful western front brought heavy snowfall to the higher Himalaya, and resulted in the snowpack down to as low as 2.000m. The front has now been replaced by a strong high pressure over Tibet, so there won’t be that another round of bone-chilling rain for a while. However, the high pressure system will bring us windy afternoons and thick mist till late morning over the weekend.

ASTROLOGY

NGAMINDRA DAHAL

Call 4442220 for show timings at Jai Nepal www.jainepal.com
15 - 21 DECEMBER 2006 #327

HAPPPENINGS

KIRAN PANDAY

YOUNG VOICES: A group of children chat with Minister for Women, Children, and Social Welfare Urmila Aryal during the Far and Midwest Regional Children’s Participatory seminar on Tuesday in Nepalganj.

GIFTWRAPPED: The container to hold weapons collected during the planned arms management drive arrived at Birganj dry port on Sunday.

SAGAR SHRESTHA

ALL ACCESS: A lone construction worker builds a ramp for disabled access outside parliament on Sunday. works on a ramp for the disabled on Sunday.

SHIVER: A group of monkeys at Pashupati huddle to keep warm as a sudden winter rain on Monday caused temperatures to plummet to 3.4 degrees.

The Winter Collection

Exhibition cum Sale of a wide range of Handmade SHAWLS, PONCHOS & SWEATERS

Date: 15, 16 & 17 December 2006, 11am to 7 pm
Venue: Hotel Shankar-La, Lazimpat
Tel: 4419999, Extn. 101

Giftwrapped: The container to hold weapons collected during the planned arms management drive arrived at Birganj dry port on Sunday.

Shiver: A group of monkeys at Pashupati huddle to keep warm as a sudden winter rain on Monday caused temperatures to plummet to 3.4 degrees.

Times
Ass as National Animal

It is a matter of pride for those of us who belong to the Animal Kingdom that the drafting committee for the interim constitution spent three whole days deliberating on whether or not to keep the cow as the National Animal of the New Republic. This new loktantra must be truly inclusive if itlavishes so much time and energy on us animals. But having said that, the Ass detects specism creeping into the discourse. What’s with this holier-than-thou cow fixation? Aren’t we putting the cart before the ox?

The Ass would like to take this occasion to humbly stake his claim to the title of National Animule. Methinks I am eminently qualified for the post. Some people have put forward the candidacy of the Rhesus Monkey, but the fact that the buggers are emigrating to the US en masse for medical research means they are technically not Nepali citizens anymore.

Others think that given the Nepali fetish for *kukhura ko jhol*, the Chicken would be a popular Interim National Animal. But the comrades in the drafting committee have reportedly ruled out chicken because, and I quote, “Four legs good, two legs bad.” That leaves us with just yours truly as a compromise candidate.

There is a similar deadlock in the Interim Constitution Drafting Committee about who should be Head of State. So why not make the Ass both Head of State and National Animal and get two birds stoned? If it takes a donkey to bring peace to this land, so be it.

It took a 15-member delegation of Korean journalists on a fam tour three hours to make it through the visa on arrival queue at Kathmandu airport immigration after an eight hour flight from Seoul the other day. Bravissimo, Tribhuvan International Airport! Congratulations, Dept of Immigration and Irritation! Way to go, NTB! Imagine the publicity when all these tourists go back to Korea and write about their ordeal.

At this rate, full scale war is going to break out between Peru and Nepal. The Peruanos were already ticked off about the Fearsome One violating Comrade Gonzalo’s intellectual property rights by appropriating the Shining Path to the Himalaya and calling it Prachanda Path. Now, Nepal Airlines has stolen the image of Machha Pichhu for a poster and the Peruvians are preparing to send an armada. Nepal Airlines said it snitched the picture from Google Images during a misspelled search for what was intended to be ‘Machha Puchhre’. Yeah yeah yeah.

Wondered why the South Gate of Narayanhiti Palace has been shrouded in tarp for the past two weeks? It seems royal Vastu consultants have decreed ill winds could blow from the south and Lord Vishnu needs to protect itself from it. So, under the pretext of fixing the gate, there is some major exorcism taking place there. It is also astrologers (and not doctors) who advised the king to head down to Hetauda for the winter. Girijababu tried to talk the king out of it, but King G’s astrologers are apparently insistent.

It is a sign that things are changing irreversibly vis-à-vis the monarchy when the man at the post office counter first asks people if they’d be offended if he gives them postage stamps with pictures of Queen Mother to affix on envelopes. Apparently they have piles of unsold royal stamps.

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