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Weekly Internet Poll # 327

Q. How is the country doing today compared with before 24 April 2006?

Total votes: 4,605

Very well	9.8%
Well	16.5%
Okay	25.8%
The same	18.8%
Don't know/can't say	4.1%

Weekly Internet Poll # 328. To vote go to: www.nepalimes.com

Q. Do you think the interim constitution will be finalised before year-end?

Makeshift peace



EMPTY HUTS: Everyday a new camp to house 10 fighters is built at the Dasratpur cantonment site. The camps, which number nearly 100, are empty.

NARESH NEWAR

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NARESH NEWAR in SURKHET

It is the price the Nepali people have come to pay for peace: a messy, 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 Barlami Magar, even though there are armed Maoists within earshot.

Editorial p2
House trained

It seems that the 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.

Full story p4

SUCCESS KEEPS YOU ON YOUR TOES

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Debunking myths

...of the constituent assembly versus the status quo

HOUSE TRAINED

No need to be overly distraught 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 civil society, the 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 Aryal did.

The draft interim constitution has to be promulgated by the sitting parliament, a good decision for which Speaker Subhas Nembang is at least partly responsible. This may mean discussion on the draft articles, and that the final document which emerges will have the imprimatur of the most representative body in the land and peopled by legislators who were actually elected, even if long ago.

As we bid goodbye to the third parliament which put the stamp of legitimacy on the achievements of the 'People's Movement' and channeled its energy in a positive direction, we can only hope that the successor legislature with 75 unelected 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 draft a new, lengthy constitution if it was a transitional statute to serve the polity till elections in the spring.

It's possible the shrill Maoist demands that the constituent assembly elections must be held as scheduled will dissipate as soon as the interim constitution is adopted and the comrades become 'house-trained'. The Maoist leaders will have 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 see the state returning to the districts. There can be no derailment of the pluralistic process, however long the interregnum.

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

Wrong. In 1950, 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 Tribhuban agreed and then backtracked. His son and

The main stumbling blocks in drafting a peoples' constitution have always been the palace and the NC. The palace's resistance is understandable because a new constitution could abolish the monarchy. But why should the NC be against it? Because even today its leadership remains a party of narrow and vested interests dominated by eastern bahans.

the 204 seats, it will be the political parties who will distribute those seats to communities based on their share of the national population. In short, 409 of the 425 members of the assembly will be party cadre. 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?

GUEST COLUMN Sheetal Kumar

grandsons, who would directly rule Nepal for another 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 after Jana Andolan I. But the idea was slapped down by the NC 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 1990 without any broad-based people's consultation.

The Maoists' contribution has been to force a conservative NC leadership to accept a constituent assembly by sacrificing 13,000 lives.

The saving grace about the NC today is that its leaders 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 to this ranks as one of the most astute bargains 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 monarchy facilitated this process.

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

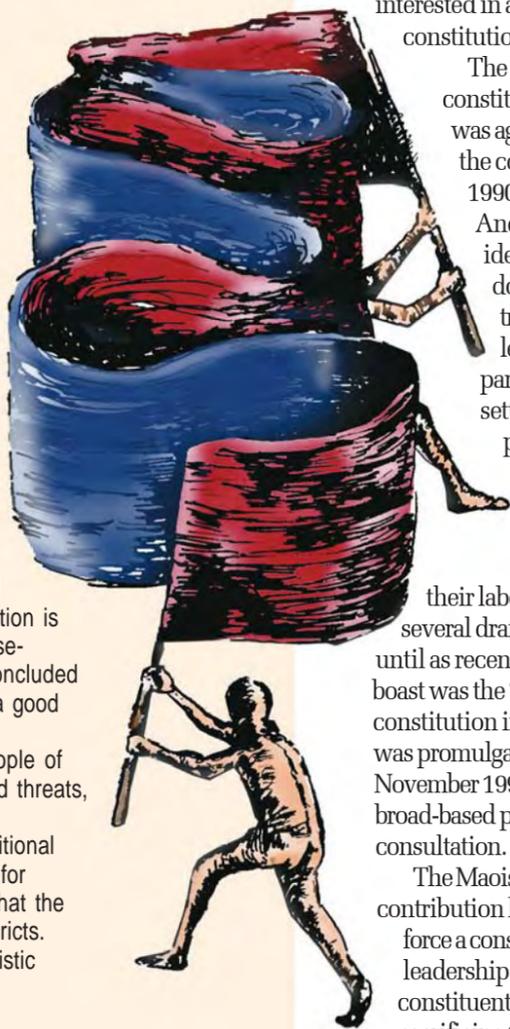
A careful reading of the 8 November agreement between the seven parties and the Maoists shows that the constituent assembly will be held according to a mixed electoral system: 205 elected from current constituencies on a first-past-the-post basis, and another 204 on a proportional basis. The agreement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

And although there will be 'proportional representation' in

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 identity: communal, regional and, eventually, national.

The Madhesi and Janajati activism we see today is intertwined with the identity question. Why would these groups now trust the very parties who have ignored their aspirations for so long? For the Madhesi in particular, electing assemblymen and women from the same constituencies originally drawn up in 1990 is meaningless because it fails to reflect the demography of the tarai. Unless the constituencies are scientifically delineated again, no CA is going to be proportional in their eyes.

Rushing headlong into polls without addressing these issues raises the risk of igniting other conflicts. It took nearly 60 years and more than 13,000 lives to accept the assembly demand first raised in 1950. If we don't do it right this time, who knows how many more lives will be lost before there is another truly proportional and inclusive constituent assembly? ●



War of nerves

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

The guns may be silent in the countryside, but other excesses by the Maoist cadre continue apace. The presence of the state is minimal in large parts of the country and where they are present, government officers are at best 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.



STATE OF THE STATE C K Lal

Small incidents often represent ground realities better than learned analyses. Not long ago, a senior manager of a multinational in a tarai town was roughed up by cadres on vague charges of exploiting factory labour. He fled to Kathmandu and his firm, which has Indian connections, raised the issue through its diplomatic mission. The result: the prime minister himself talked to Pushpa Kamal Dahal. Conscious of his industry-friendly

image in the wake of his attendance at last month's *Hindustan Times* jamboree, Dahal immediately issued directives that no MNC executives should be harassed. The matter should have been settled, but the local commander was heard grumbling that he knew what was best for his district, and not Comrade Chairman. The executive heard this and is still camping in Kathmandu.

If this incident is symptomatic of the internal dynamics of the Maoists—and there is reason to believe that it is—the government needs to urgently help restore the credibility of the guerrilla leadership. It is easier to deal with educated apparatchiks in Kathmandu than with school dropouts used to bossing around in the countryside. Pushing the peace process forward, by agreeing on the interim constitution soon, will help.

Unfortunately, the seven party leadership has other plans. Ever since they signed the peace deal, they have done the asking, and the Maoists, the complying on most issues from arms management to cantoning the guerrillas. The party leaders demanded free access

to areas under Maoist control and got that too. They declared that internally displaced people must be allowed to return home, and the process immediately began. The government can now rehabilitate and re-establish police posts as fast as it wants to.

In return, the party leadership have been astonishingly ungrateful. Many of their words and deeds seem aimed at damaging, if not actually wrecking the peace process. Girija Prasad Koirala's latest salvo—that the interim constitution can't be promulgated before arms are locked up—is in line with the government's delaying tactics that are meant to obstruct the mainstreaming of the Maoists for as long as possible.

The longer this goes on, the more it puts the whole process in jeopardy. The guerrillas are quiet but, living like prisoners in hastily-built camps, they are no doubt keeping a keen eye on developments in distant Kathmandu. Conditions in most encampments are rudimentary due to insufficient funds for construction and maintenance. Shelters are flimsy, the water supply is inadequate

and polluted, sanitation is poor, and access to sites difficult. There's no electricity and communications, no health check-up facilities, nothing for treatment and convalescence. The battle-hardened guerrillas are bearing it all because they've been promised a future. But when they realise their leaders can't deliver, they will easily become outlaws all over again.

For reasons they know best, the Americans worry about Maoist weapons. "You don't walk into parliament with a gun in your pocket," Richard Boucher, US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, said when he was here. When Ambassador Moriarty met Speaker Subhas Nembang this week, he made the same point. The Indian government's concerns are similar, their prompt supply of containers to lock up arms is one of very few assistance programs to be completed in time.

Koirala should know better than to parrot them. With every passing day that there is no universally-accepted supreme law in the country, he loses legitimacy. And the risk of lawlessness increases with unnecessary bickering in Kathmandu. ●

LETTERS

SPAM

Every Nepali should think about why the Seven-Party Alliance Movement (SPAM) leaders are afraid to go to the people for major decisions. They simply declared Nepal a secular nation and are speaking of doing away with the monarchy through the constituent assembly. The skewed resurrected 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 SPAM 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 down the royal government through a non-violent pro-democracy movement. You refuse, I assume deliberately, to give credit to our Great Neighbour to the South for masterminding it, and thereby nudging the Maoists into the mainstream. The Awesome One's recent utterances in New Delhi and those of his sidekicks are telling.

What does this mean for Nepal? At what price has the SPA achieved its goal? These are questions to raise in your editorial, not relegate to the Ass or the Foreign Hand.

Leaders with vision, as you call them, have been playing with fire. Will you consider them visionary if Nepal loses its economic or political sovereignty, as is very likely?

Samjhana, Nairorbi

PUPIL'S WAR

'The Great Hysterical Pupil's War' (Foreign Hand, Opinion, #326) rightly drew attention to one of the most crucial themes in modern Nepali history: the use and abuse of education for narrow political ends.

Yet, that pessimistic column failed to recognise how the recent peace accords represent a unique historical chance for Nepal to break from this tragic past. For the first time, the country has the opportunity to de-politicise education and take a confident, assertive step in the direction of brighter, more secure future for all Nepalis.

By way of comparison, consider Rwanda, whose entire social structure was shattered by civil war-cum-genocide 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 harnessed the optimism of peace and created consensus around the issue of education, decisively severing the links 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 similar.

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 vitriol against the army ('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 funds etc and, as he calls it, the blue helmets (peacekeeping). As far as I know every Nepali soldier or officer going on these missions knows exactly how much he or she gets. Why does that give CK Lal a headache? As to how the funds are used, it may not be much in the limelight, but Chhauni Hospital is one of the busiest in the Valley. The fund also takes care of the medical needs of ex-servicemen and their families, free of cost. The army has some good points too, Mr Lal.

Amrit KC, Bishalnagar

• Count me in among those frustrated readers who find the substance of CK Lal's rants tiresome, if politically well-taken, and his style kind of overblown. But this time around, he actually found a balance. Kudos on a sensitive, 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 Ashutosh Tiwari 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 jobs for those who would otherwise leave Nepal to find work abroad (as Tiwari himself mentions), rather than creating jobs for foreign experts.

I am averse to the idea that we cannot develop without foreign help. I think the best policies for growth would promote private enterprise. We can only really 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

• Ashutosh Tiwari 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 "[N]ot 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 academic 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 Nepalis will continue to have to go to India, the Gulf countries, Malaysia and the like.

Birendra Bikram KC, email

• Together with Ashutosh Tiwari'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

• Thanks to Ashutosh Tiwari for citing the example of a German carpenter who came here in 2002 to share his experience and skills with the woodcarving industries in

Patan. Over 30 such experts have now come here from Germany, and beneficiaries are no longer limited to wood carving businesses. Industries like dairy, brick, plastic, pharmaceutical, and hydropower have benefited considerably from the program. Other beneficiaries include charities, handicraft producers, self-help groups, educational institutions, NGOs, and the chambers of commerce. The German government-supported Senior Experten Service has been very active in this field. More information is available at www.ses-bonn.de.

Harihar Subedi, Representative, SES/GTZ

HORRIFYING

Your translation of Ghanesh Dhakal's 'Memories of torture' (From the Nepali Press, #326) was horrifying. What is being done to these criminals? Will the peace agreement simply wash out such incidents? Now is the time to use the power of journalism, and to educate the Nepal Army and police about human rights.

K Baraili, email

FIRST

I can't believe *The Vagina Monologues* actually reached Kathmandu. I attended the play during my first year of college in the US and people who knew I was going to watch it gave me some nasty looks. Although my virgin mind was corrupted (for lack of a better term) by the end of the show, I found the play cleverly composed, funny, intelligent, and sad at the same time. I've tried talking to a lot of people about the play to convince them to go watch it, but I find that the very idea of a woman talking aloud about her sexual freedom and sexuality makes people uncomfortable. I'd love to know how the audience felt about the show, even if it was watered down and lost in translation.

Loyal Nepali, email

LETTERS

Nepali 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 without attachments with 'letter to the editor' in the subject line.

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The International Dutch Beer

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

from p1

The Dasratpur cantonment is spread across 19 hectares and the 1,500 guerrillas inside now outnumber the village population. The Maoist division commanders are worried about how long fighters under their command can endure the hardship.

"We're not really getting as much support as we had expected and the real problems haven't even started yet. There aren't even enough beds and blankets," says Comrade Dipak (pictured, right). Some of his fighters are still convalescing from past fighting.

They lack medical care, winter clothing, shelter, and sanitation. The Maoists have some health workers with basic training, but the nearest hospital is 25km away in Surkhet.

Among the most neglected are the female soldiers and their children, ranging from one month to two years of age. There seems to have been a baby boom among the Maoists after nine months of ceasefire. Up to 100 women soldiers from five brigades in the area have given birth in the past two months and were brought into the camp.

"The babies would have died

of the cold if they had stayed here," explains a female Maoist who has been living in a nearby village with her relative. Most other mothers have moved out to families in surrounding districts.

The camp consists of thatched huts with walls made of twigs and covered with leaves. The wet muddy floor is too cold even in the day. None of the Maoists spend the night at the camp and sleep in houses in nearby villages. The site was originally proposed in this village by the Maoists themselves and approved by the UN team and government without even considering the impact of a

military cantonment on nearby civilians.

Uniformed Maoists spend most of their time outside the cantonment and walk around in their uniforms. There is a sentry post near the entrance to the village and young Maoist guards decide who can go in or out of the village.

"Just because we are not carrying guns doesn't mean we are not unarmed, we still have our uniforms," says young Comrade Chetan, who interrogated visiting media for half-an-hour before letting them in.

Local villagers are convinced that nearly half of the 1,500 Maoists inside the camp are recent recruits from surrounding villages in Surkhet. Many are visibly underage. It will be a challenge for UN monitors when they arrive to verify who is a real Maoist and who is a new recruit.

"Many of my friends joined the PLA nearly a month and a half ago, but I managed to flee," says a 17-year-old schoolboy from Kunathari, where nearly 70 young boys and girls were lured away to join the Maoist army after promises that the UN would pay them \$75 a month. "We were trained with wooden guns but many of us ran away," the boy continued, "it was a lot of hard work, and nothing to show for it."

More than 70 boys and girls between 15 and 17 years of age were also taken away from Kicha



in October for military training with similar promises of a dollar salary. But half of them escaped, a local teacher told us. "Where are the rest of the children? Where is the monitoring that the UN has promised?" the teacher asked, not really expecting an answer.

Interviewed in the vicinity of the camps, villagers spoke openly about the recruitment and said everyone knew the rebels were trying to show that they have more fighters than they really do. "We saw them taking away the boys and girls right in front of our eyes. I don't understand why the Maoists always deny the truth," says local journalist Laxman Bhandari.

Comrade Dipak denies this as he leads us into the camp. "These are false accusations, you can check for yourselves in the camp," he says. But he stops suddenly and says nervously that the rest of the cantonment is off limits. ●



LIFE AFTER WAR: Young comrades now have more time to enjoy each other's company

PICS: NARESH NEWAR

The rest of Nepal

Tensions remain taut, and democracy a distant memory

As a journalist, I was always told, should afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. In these heady days of new national anthems and interim-constitutions-to-be, it might behoove the comfortable of Kathmandu to pay attention to the afflicted, those who live beyond the valley rim. The Rest of Nepal. I'm just back from the first of several visits to listen to their woes.



HERE AND THERE
Daniel Lak

True, the fighting has stopped between Maoists and security forces. The army and police no longer haul innocent boys and girls off to torture and worse. Guerrillas no longer storm garrisons in the night, screaming and beating drums. But fear and loathing persist and there is much to be afraid of.

Regional party leaders for UML, NC and others tell you of extortion and intimidation by local Maoists, who remain paramount in many communities, and don't want to surrender political space. Democratic parties were a primary Maoist target and their activists still don't believe it's safe to re-establish bombed out offices and hold rallies, beyond the heavily

fortified confines of district headquarters.

Nor are village and district councils being restored in any viable form. These were perhaps the most remarkable achievements of democratic devolution in the 1990s and as such, they too were targeted by rebel squadrons and bombers. VDC and DDC buildings lie in ruins, staff cower in district headquarters with the political operatives, still fearful of Maoist wrath in their home villages.

There is so much hard work ahead, just to restore governance and the most basic sense of normalcy. The gains of the 1990s, when local MPs raised hell in parliament and won funds for roads and health posts in their constituencies, have all vanished in the long night of war. During this time, few districts knew sufficient peace for government workers and programs to go beyond main towns and highways. Most international agencies withdrew from the war zones. A spiralling civil conflict rarely, if at all, had much material impact on the capital, save as woeful chatter at cocktail parties. It's bad out there. Very bad. Yes please, another scotch.

Even now, Kathmandu's cloistered elite is refusing to face up to tough questions. A peace agreement, however flawed and uncertain, should at very least

flag off a race to rebuild a ravaged land, to restore roads, communications and services blown apart or allowed to deteriorate. Fingers of blame can be pointed later, the fate of a wounded monarchy debated once people have food, shelter, health posts and schools back in their communities. Arguments over the details of inclusion can wait while the most excluded in the land, the poor, get some quick relief for years and years and years of suffering. Constitutional niceties, important as they are, don't fill bellies or alleviate want.

As I travelled through the far-west of Nepal, I saw no evidence that Kathmandu's celebratory mood had seeped beyond Thankot. In Kailali, I asked a Maoist commander if war had been worth it and he told me, "everything has changed", pointing to the flinty hillside where his troops were camped, awaiting a final settlement in the capital and some UN blue helmets to check their bona fides. "The people," he said, "have asked for peace so we chose peace. If they choose, we'll return to war."

A CDO told me that those who had plunged the country into anarchy and disrepair had to take the lead in fixing it. "They need to make up their minds," he said of the political parties and former

rebels in Kathmandu, "then tell us what to do. If they give us the means, we'll do it. But we can't solve their political differences for them." Outside his office door, a growing queue of people who'd been waiting too long for compensation for lost homes and loved ones, some of the untold numbers of war victims in this country.

Political activists of all parties expressed dissatisfaction with the shape of things in Kathmandu. To a Nepali Congress leader, too much power was concentrated in the hands of a much-discredited prime minister and a Maoist supremo with bloody hands. "It's only when GP and Prachanda talk that anything gets done," he grumbled, "no one asks us what we need or want." A UML worker wondered "where is my party" in the political drama of the capital.

Human rights workers and local journalists said too much attention was being paid to politics and not enough to redress and reclamation of democratic space. Nor was economics a factor in Kathmandu's endless deliberations about cows, coats-of-arms and managing Maoist weapons. "What are they doing?" asked a man who's spent the civil war comforting those afflicted by violence, "what the hell are they up to, the UN, the parties, the Maoists? Don't they realise the level of distress out here?" ●

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 encouraged Nepal 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 sales and marketing in Kathmandu. In a grand opening offer, the new Hyundai showroom in New Baneswor is giving customers special cash discounts and the chance to avail of IFB washing machines and microwave ovens.

Laxmi for Laxmi

At Laxmi Bank's sixth annual general meeting in Birganj, 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

Owning a range of 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, Kumari Saving and Credit, and Systematic Saving and Credit.

Big exchanges

Hansaraj Hulaschand, 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 on-the-spot service from ten finance companies. An added attraction is the launch of the newly revamped Bajaj Pulsar DTSi UG III, with upgrades including a new graphic fuel indicator, low-maintenance battery, 'over rev' indicating lights, and LCD tachometer. There are also cosmetic changes such as new side panels, which the company describes as being "designed to give it a sharp, sculpted, lean but muscular look, while a new headlamp with a 'Black Mask' creates the illusion of bright eyes staring out from the cowl, much like a wild beast." The bike is available in an 180cc version for Rs 154,900 or a 150cc version for Rs 146,900.



KIRAN PANDAY

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.

Nepali Times: What have the last 12 years been like for Everest Bank?

Jaspal Singh Jass: EBL has been awarded the Bank of the Year award for Nepal by London's eminent The Banker periodical. Our performance has improved in all parameters besides quality of assets. The bank recorded 39 percent growth in net profit, 37 percent in deposits, 28 percent in advances, and 21 percent in gross profit during the current

Rotten apples

We don't need bureaucracy in industry, but we do need solid regulators

Just a few days ago, the Finance Minister remarked that financial institutions such as the Employee Provident Fund (EPF) should come under the purview of the Nepal Rastra Bank. However, the Beed is unsure precisely how the good minister plans to ensure this. It's a sign of the plethora of often toothless commitments and statements he makes.



ECONOMIC SENSE
Artha Beed

Now dislike for supervision is widespread in the financial sector around the world, not just in Nepal. The EPF or institutions like the Citizen Investment Trust, which both have billions of rupees of employee savings, make investment decisions not based on conventional diligence. The problem is their unconventional decisions are not always based on solid credit analysis to determine which investments are good and which are duds. 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 hydropower plants.

In the early nineties, lending to hotels became a 'must do' in the financing community, and everyone including multilaterals 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 hydropower today. Imagine the size of bad loans that could result. This is a country obsessed with discussing hydropower and a capital in which a stone tossed randomly would probably hit a hydro-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 the country is not what is being risked.

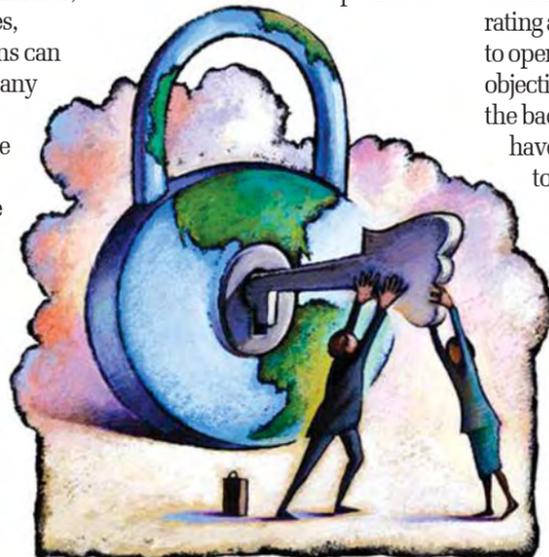
And regulators must be self-regulated before they begin to regulate others. Here's a well-known conflict of interest: the spouses of

some key people working at the regulators are employed at near-failing banks. If financial 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 panic at bay. If we want to increase growth we first need well-developed financial markets for debt, equity and other creative instruments.

With our limited competencies, we must promote technology transfer through foreign investment, and open up all sectors. The Beed's favourite example is how allowing 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. A 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 less and less excuse then to fund high-risk projects.

There's one surefire way the so-called New Nepal can avoid 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. ●

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fiscal year. Our ratio of non-performing assets (NPA) to total capital is 1.27 percent, one of the lowest in the private financial sector here. This is a measure of the confidence expressed by our stakeholders, clients, and customers.

How is the remittance sector, a cornerstone of the economy, doing?

It's progressing substantially. We've tied up with seven agencies for our product Everest Remit, which facilitates remittances, including online transfers for Nepalis in the Gulf countries. In India we are taking advantage of the over 2,000 banking institutions and their branches using Core Banking Solutions, which makes it possible to transfer money between Nepal and India on the same day.

What changes in regulations do you think would help ensure that cases like the recent one of Nepal Bangladesh Bank are not repeated?

We need closer monitoring from corporate-level executives. In this particular case there seems to have been a crisis of confidence among the public at large. Asset quality was a major factor. Thus financing decisions need to be weighed carefully, and when giving concessions the profitability angle needs to be a priority. At EBL we are better placed, as our NPA level is one of the lowest. For the current year we are targeting 45 percent growth.

Is the banking sector overcrowded?

Since the major market players here are private sector 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 challenges 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 whereby their ATM cardholders can use EBL's outlets in Nepal and our cards can be used in the more than 600 of PNB's 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 signing 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.

War-footing

Interview with Chief Election Commissioner Bhojraj Pokhrel in *Samaya*, 14 December

समया

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.

Will the citizenship issue create problems for the assembly?

Voters must be 18 or above, and we will have to close the voter list for the election at a certain

time. 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 working 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 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.



KIRAN PANDAY

Mangalsen today

Lilanath Ghimire in *Kantipur*, 12 December

कान्तिपुर

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 16 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 ruins 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 Biwo 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.

Default mode

Editorial in *Abhiyan*, 11-17 December

अभियान

There is clear evidence of who the wilful defaulters are. An unholy alliance between some bank officials, political leaders, and members of the business community is making banks and financial institutions go bankrupt. Now that the list has been made public, it is our responsibility to take action. First, the political parties have to ensure that they are neither supported nor influenced by these defaulters. And they need to start pressurising the government to take action. Without the parties, nothing will happen.

Meanwhile, the business community also needs to take a clear stance. A handful of corrupt individuals in influential positions are giving the entire business community a bad name. Letting them get away will only encourage them. A few wilful defaulters does not make the entire system corrupt.

If an organisation continues to support those whose names have been blacklisted, it shows that they are not committed to fighting wilful defaulters. The business community has always been nervous about lists revealing these defaulters, but why would a sincere businessperson be scared of exposing some bad people in the community?



के तपाईंले आज अन्नपूर्ण पोष्ट पढ्नु भयो ?

S. Thapa
सपना थापा
पूर्व-प्राथमिक शिक्षिका



अन्नपूर्ण पोष्ट
प्रतिनिधिसभा पुनर्स्थापनाको प्रस्ताव पारित

सम्पूर्ण पत्रिका

व्यक्ति अनेक, विचार अनेक, क्षेत्र अनेक तर पत्रिका मात्र एक... **अन्नपूर्ण पोष्ट**

अन्नपूर्ण पोष्टमा प्रकाशित सामग्री सम्बन्धी विविध प्रश्न लिएर हामी तपाईंको घर आँगनमा आउँदै छौं। तपाईंको सही जवाफले आकर्षक उपहार पाउने छ।

ANSAP05

"We can ask the UN to leave."

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.



KIRAN PANDAY

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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समय Abin Shrestha in Samaya, 14 December

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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ALL PICS: RUPA JOSHI

Sarita's family

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



RUPA JOSHI in UDAYPUR

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 blues 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 spoiled as the sisters let him be. He seems to sense that he is special and is already learning to bully his sisters.



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.



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." ●

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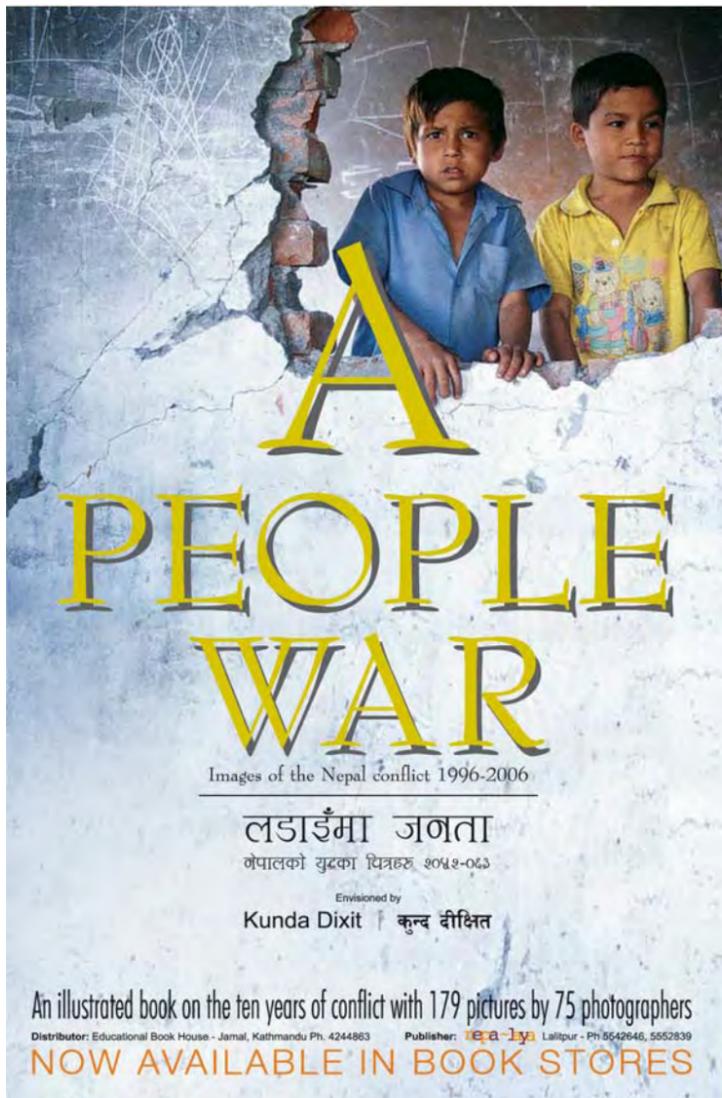


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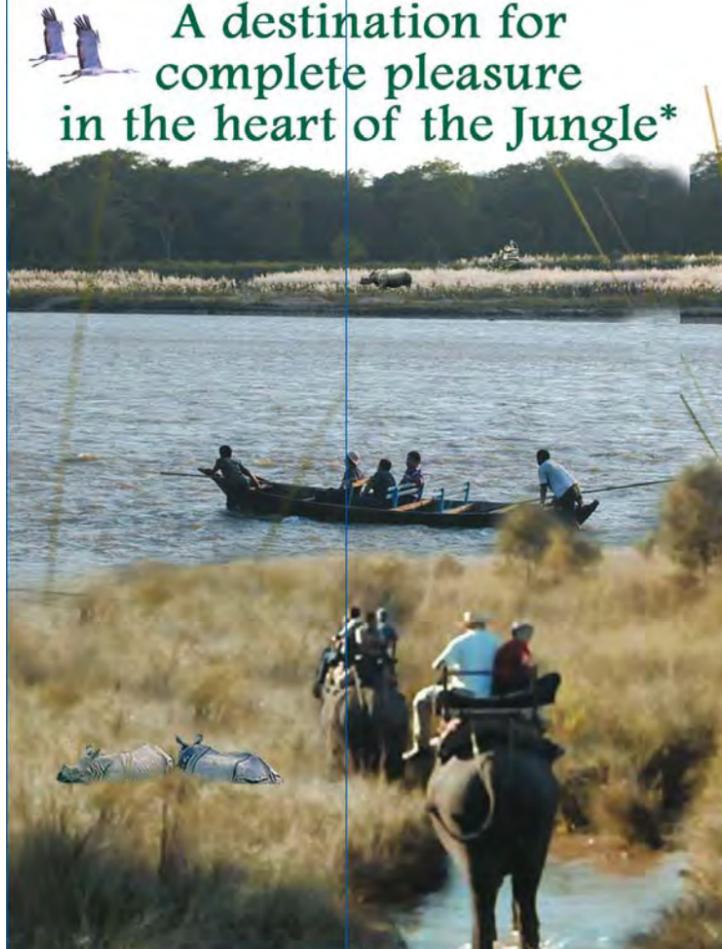


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Rights back to

MARTY LOGAN

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."

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.

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

Towels, towels, towels, towels, strong navy blue towels, posh purple towels, soft lime green towels,

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constituent assembly, outreach to long-marginalised groups which quickly need to be empowered [and] pressure for accountability for past human rights abuses," Sundh warned in a speech.

An organisation linked to the OHCHR 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 in consultation with civil society. Nembang agreed that the post of chief commissioner "should be 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 Chief Justice, is operating on the latter 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 required by law are too many. "We want to make it inclusive but it is very large. It could be five or seven commissioners maybe," said the Speaker. ●

Speaking for those who can't



MARTY LOGAN

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 Tek 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 focussed on IDP issues would be useful at the moment, adds Tamrakar, a human rights lawyer who joined the project in early November from Pro-Public.

"I've been doing my best to ensure the rights of dalits, janjatis, women and other disadvantaged groups through litigation in the courts," he told us in his new office. "When I heard about this position, I thought that this was the main institution that can ensure the rights of the people."

A gold medal winner in the Master's program at Kathmandu School of Law, where 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 dalits."

Health at home

DADELDHURA— Over 200 women waited patiently in line on the first day of a two-day reproductive health camp held on 8-9 December, one of 84 scheduled in six districts. Many, like 65-year-old Bhakti Oli, a mother of eight from Ganeshpur village, suffered from uterine prolapse. A recent study estimates that ten percent of Nepali women suffer from pelvic organ prolapse, many at a much younger age than the



MARTY LOGAN

TO YOUR HEALTH: Over 1,200 women received general reproductive health check-ups during 10 days of camps in Dadeldhura 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.

worldwide average due to early marriage and childbirth, heavy work during pregnancy and immediately after delivery, and poor pre- and post-natal care. The situation has worsened over the last decade as the conflict prevented staff and patients from going to health posts. The camps are a prime example of collaborative efforts between organisations, funded by the EC's humanitarian aid office (ECHO) and conducted by the UNFPA, the Ministry for Health, the Public Health Concern Trust, and the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA). The year-long project will provide health services to over 14,000 Nepalis and training for over 600 health workers. "It hurts a bit, but overall feels good," said Oli, as she recovered from the simple 10-minute procedure of having a pessary ring inserted. Marty Logan

Disruptive dancers

Dance bar operators are in trouble with the Maoists again—and it might mean more chakka jams for the rest of us. In August this year, facing threats from the Maoist-affiliated All Nepal Women's Organisation—Revolutionary (ANWO-R) for showing "vulgar and obscene dances" and "exploiting women", the owners agreed to self-enforce a no-nudity code of conduct ('Go, go dancers', #310). The union followed with more demands, including that all women dancers be covered from neck to knee, and told operators they'd "go to any length" to impose their moral code. Operators, who are also under pressure from local politicians to shorten their working hours, say they will take to the streets. "We are only showing what films show," says Sameer Gurung, president of the Nepal Restaurant and Dance Bar Association, which claims to employ over 150,000 people in Kathmandu alone. The association and the union now meet in the presence of representatives of the Nepal Police met already and the three sides are to meet at the CDO office on Sunday.

Alok Tumbahangphe



NAREN

Blame it on the war

Bad habits are hard to kick

The impact of that old Chinese curse about living in Interesting Times is one of the many things this war has taught us that we never wanted to learn. Another bit of wisdom lamentably gained is that such nasty conflicts lead to bad habits that can soon spin out of control. A country in freefall creates anxiety for its denizens, and many resorted to obsessive-compulsive behaviour hazardous to their health.

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 incarnate, betting the keys 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 wretched parade of minority governments, their farcical coalitions mutating and collapsing 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 Singha Darbar's revolving door spat out party worthies with distressing regularity, the absurd practice of calling Nepal bandas and chakka jams became the ruling class's National Bad Habit. When your cabbie 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?), is an atrocious depravity unto itself, permanently sully 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 combatant.

Talk of bad habits inevitably leads us to the CPN (Maoist), who taught thousands of their cadre wicked behaviour like coercion, extortion, and terrorism. When they began destroying bridges, government offices, and other hard-won infrastructure, we realised these people were junkies of a new, singular sort.

Serious opportunism is another vice that has taken root since the war began, best exemplified by the menacing behaviour of Khaobadi gangsters, riding the wave of fear conveniently created by the Maobadi Mafia.

That leaves the hoi polloi. 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 afoot in a world gone mad.

Yet others took to spirits of the bottled sort, with a side order of cheroots and endless debate over where the hell the country is going. Rarely averse to a tumbler or two at the best of times, escalating tensions flung Foreign Hand headlong into this faction.

Since we're likely to find ourselves in re-education camps soon enough, make it a double and let's drown our sorrows while we can. As the situation deteriorated, sobriety became a luxury many could no longer afford.

As bad habits increase, good habits fall by the wayside in direct proportion. When "I plot, therefore I am" became parliament's only rationale, promises of roads, clinics, and schools were soon forgotten. The ashtray 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 days?" Are you mad? Can't you see I'm busy reading between the lines of the morning edition?! Manic over-analysis of fools and their motives, I now realise with chagrin, is another bad habit I wish I'd never picked up.

Looking back over the past decade, one sees a blur of short-sighted scheming and reckless adventurism, as the country binged on self-destruction. My hands may be undeniably Foreign, but my heart is largely Nepali by now, which must explain my binging along with the worst of them.

The Hand is presently hedging his bets, cautiously cutting down on bad habits in sync with the other offenders. Now that peace is supposedly upon us and we have no more war to blame, my liver cries out for opportunism, extortion, and depredations to cease and desist forever. Now, there's an idea worth raising a glass to. ●



OPINION
Foreign Hand

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Cries for help

Newborn death rates are startlingly high, and go unaddressed

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.



ANALYSIS
Joy Lawn

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 developing 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 \$4.1 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. ● (Project Syndicate)

Joy Lawn is Senior Research and Policy Adviser, Saving Newborn Lives/ Save the Children-USA, South Africa.

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A fine balance

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



REVIEW
Shradha Ghale

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 ascertains 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. ●

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- Maintain the Embassy's contacts to relevant partners in Nepal (ministries, other donors, NGOs, etc.).
- Maintain the Embassy's web page.
- Occasionally assist in other administrative matters of the Embassy.

Qualification/Requirements:

- BA or Master's Degree within an area relevant to the development field.
- Minimum 2 years of relevant working experience.
- Strong command of oral and written English and Nepali.
- Proficiency in the use of IT applications.
- Solid coordination and communication skills.
- Ability to handle multiple tasks and to work under time pressure.
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Written application should reach the Embassy of Denmark - P.O. Box 6332 no later than 29th December 2006 and must include CV, education certificates and references. Only short listed applicants will be contacted for the selection process. Telephone enquires will not be entertained.



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ABOUT TOWN

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, Pulchok. 20-22 December, 5522307
- ❖ **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. 4267063
- ❖ **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, Bhrikuti Mandap. Entrance free. 4241163
- ❖ **Season of Bells** at Bluebird Mall. Food festivals, fashion shows, free mehendi, astrology, auctions, lucky draw, wine tasting, carols and more. Until 31 December, 4228833
- ❖ **Transcendental Meditation** at Self Awakening Centre for a 25 percent discount during December. 4256618
- ❖ **British Film Festival 2007** 15-19 January in Kathmandu, 26-28 January in Pokhara.



MUSIC

- ❖ **Paleti** with Hiranya Bhojore, 15 December. 5PM onwards, including drinks and snacks. 5542646
- ❖ **Ramailo Saanjh** with Anil Shahi 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, Pulchok. 5521408
- ❖ **Eighth Yala Maya Classic** 5PM onwards on 17 December at Yala Maya Kendra, Patan Dhoka. 5553767

DINING

- ❖ **Shaam-E-Avadh** lunch and dinner for Nawabs at Bukhara, Soaltee Crowne Plaza. 15-17 December, 4273999
- ❖ **Walk and Lunch** at Shivapuri Heights Cottage, 16 and 23 December. 9841371927
- ❖ **Traditional Turkey Dinner** 24 December to 1 January at Kilroys, 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 alfresco with the birds and the butterflies. 4375280
- ❖ **Te savour** Tibetan delicacies at the new Tibetan restaurant and Nepal's first noodle bar, Bluebird Mall Food Court
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- ❖ **Authentic Japanese cuisine** daily from 12 noon to 3PM, Rs 500 at the Coffee Shop, Hotel Shangri-la
- ❖ **Pizza** straight from the woodfired oven at Java, Thamel. 4422519
- ❖ **Cocktails and Mocktails** happy hour every day 4-7PM at Kathmandu Revolving Restaurant, Ratna Plaza, New Road
- ❖ **Some Like It Hot** Cozy winter cocktails with live music from Side B every Wednesday at Fusion – the bar at Dwarika's
- ❖ **Woodfired Pizzas** at Roadhouse Cafe, Thamel, 4262768 and Pulchok. 5521755
- ❖ **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. 4412999
- ❖ **Xmas by the Jungle** with elephant safaris, dolphins, rafting and more at Base Camp Lodge, Bardia. 061-550398
- ❖ **Chiso Chiso Hawama Package** overnight stay with breakfast, dinner, and shuttle. Rs 1,700 for twin-share. 6680080
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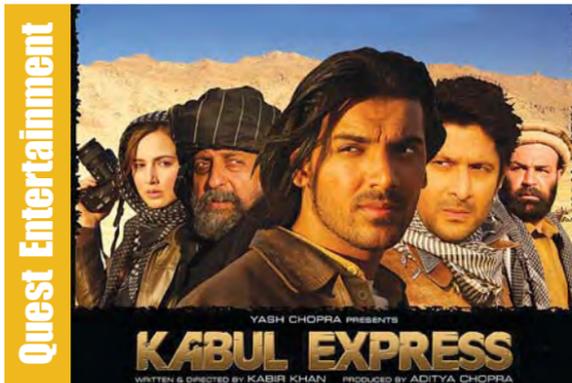
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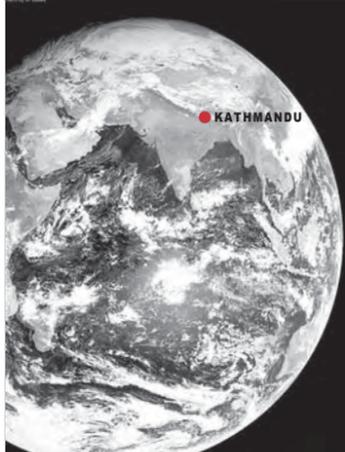


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NEPALI WEATHER

by NGAMINDRA DAHAL



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 westerly front brought heavy snowfall to the higher Himalaya, and resulted in the snowline 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.

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SAGAR SHRESTHA

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



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.



KIRAN PANDAY

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.



SAGAR SHRESTHA

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.



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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 it lavishes 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, Tribhuban 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.

With the return of loktantra, it was only a question of time before TIA reclaimed its position as the most corrupt place in Nepal. Sure enough, smuggling is now back to pre-2002 levels. It's never been easier to sneak things in and out of Nepal as long as you pay the price. The notable exception is Prince Paras who had to wait two months and pay the full Rs 135,650 royalty to claim his hunting trophy. By the way, did anyone check what the Viennese taxidermist stuffed inside the **gnu**?



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 was 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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