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Q. Should the Maoists get an ambassadorship?

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Yes 34.4%
No 63.3%
Don't know/can't say 2.2%

Weekly Internet Poll # 330. To vote go to: www.nepalintimes.com

Q. How do you see Nepal's political and economic prospects in 2007?

2006, perhaps the most historic year in our history

A headline year

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JANUARY

Times

Bloody sunrise
The country is on red alert as the Maoists and the army go back to war

He's tough, yet gentle. Truly, he is my Special Editions Man!

FEBRUARY

Times

Which way?
After 10 years of death and destruction, there is only one road to take

MARCH

Times

"Hopeful"
Behind the gloom, a hint of hope

WORLD CUP 2006

APRIL

Times

Paper crown

MAY

Times

Magna Carta
A New Nepal to living norms

HHTs
Hurry, book early!

JUNE

Times

LANDING

Pack 2
Destinations

JULY

Times

Great expectation
Can next week's budget turn the years' dividend into development?

AUGUST

Times

Sword into ploughshare
Maoists are on a public relations offensive out west

Farewell to arms?

SEPTEMBER

Times

What we think
Nepalis are carefully upbeat about the future: poll

OCTOBER

Times

VOID
The chopper crash left a vacuum in Nepal's biosphere

NOVEMBER

Times

LIGHT OF PEACE
The long-awaited peace accord now needs specifics, trust, and vigilance

DECEMBER

Times

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STARTING OVER

The most-used word in Nepali newspaper headlines in 2006 was the adjective 'historic'. It was a historic Jana Andolan, a historic eight-point pact, parliament passed a slew of historic proclamations, then there was a historic comprehensive peace agreement and a historic interim constitution.

Indeed, the year 2006 was perhaps the most historic in our history. Never in Nepal's nearly 240-year existence has there been a year as momentous as this. Only 1816 came close, when the Gorkha Kingdom nearly lost its independence and had to cede over half its territory to the British after a bruising war.

For the first time since Prithvi Narayan Shah set out in 1770 on his conquests, our nation this year prepared to sever links with its founding dynasty. This chapter in our history isn't over yet but when it is, 2006 could possibly go down as the year the crown was knocked off. As it turned out, the person most responsible in helping bring down Nepal's monarchy was the monarch himself.

King Gyanendra never tried to hide his loathing for the leadership of the political parties and his allergy to the democratic process. His February 2005 takeover was an attempt to go it alone, but a year later even his advisers admitted the king had fatally miscalculated the domestic and international reaction.

January 2006 began with Gyanendra's regime internationally isolated. The US, UK, and India had stopped military aid and even China was advising the king to relent. The war wasn't going well, the army was in the crosshairs of human rights watchdogs, and the royal dictatorship had pushed the Maoists and the parties into an alliance.

The Maoists, ending a ceasefire, blockaded highways, raided Tansen and Thankot. On the streets, the slogans of the seven-party alliance changed from "democracy" to "peace" the people started to spill out into the streets spontaneously. A war-weary nation had rejected the king's strategy to rule with an iron fist.

The municipal polls in February turned out to be a farce, and not just because of the boycott by the parties. King Gyanendra went on a series of televised walkabouts and started believing his own propaganda, mistaking public curiosity for support. He tried to convert orthodox Hindu reverence for monarchy into political clout. But even as he flew by helicopter from Pokhara to Birganj for a VHP ceremony in early April, Kathmandu's streets were choked with burning tyres as pro-democracy protests closed the capital.

The rallies spread and got bigger, and the royal regime responded by declaring a curfew. Civil society activists, politicians and journalists who defied it were jailed. The media ignored censorship to report on the civil-disobedience and the protests soon spread nationwide. Doctors, journalists, lawyers, ordinary citizens and even civil servants joined in.

Crowds of up to 200,000 people started massing up on the Ring Road. Nepal had never seen people power on this scale. As the situation grew untenable, India dispatched royal in-law Karan Singh to convince the king to relent and on 21 April he went halfway. The parties initially accepted it, but soon realised they had misjudged the level of anger on the streets.

The protests that weekend were the biggest ever, and the army brass finally

mustered the courage to tell the king they couldn't hold off the crowd without a major bloodbath. King Gyanendra got the message and announced the restoration of parliament just before midnight on 24 April.

The reinstated parliament moved quickly to pass a slew of proclamations to clip the king's wings, although it wasn't radical enough for the more vocal republicans at the gates. The Maoists felt left out of the process and exerted pressure to expedite power-sharing. The government and Maoists signed the eight-point agreement at Baluwatar, and the rest of 2006 was taken up by step-by-step moves to sign the peace accord, ink a tripartite agreement with the UN on arms management, and finalise the interim constitution.

There has been a ceasefire for the most of 2006, bringing enormous respite to ordinary Nepalis. It is hard to believe that just a year ago, up to 40 Nepalis were dying every week in the conflict. Even so, there is still widespread fear of continued forced recruitment by the Maoists, extortion, and



LETTERS

TARAI TINDERBOX

Your editorial ('Put out this fire', #328) highlights the history of discrimination against the madhesi people and the need to redress this politically. Madhesi today have only six percent of civil service jobs because of a conspiracy by the ruling elite groups. This is why the madhesi people want electoral constituencies divided by population, and why the ruling elite doesn't want it, because it would mean madhesi would gain power. Why can't a son of a madhesi become prime minister? Inclusiveness also begins with NGOs that work in the tarai and don't employ madhesi. Just go through the staff structure of NGOs and INGOs working in the tarai. They advocate equity, rights, and social justice, but don't practice it in their own organisations.

Krishna Kumar Deo
Institute of Medicine, Kathmandu

● In response to your last editorial, the current concern about migration from 'across the border' into the tarai exposes a real double standard. The border between Nepal and India is a political one, and Nepal itself has seen real changes in size and shape in the last 260 years. A political border does not divide people who have historically been used to moving across a certain area.

There has never been one-way migration. Proof is in the rise of the Nepali-speaking community in Darjeeling, Uttaranchal, and the tarai. Our ruling classes have never minded marrying across the border. If we really want to talk about migration, let's open the discussion up. The migration of hillspeople down to the tarai was state-initiated and supported.

As for current migration from across the border into the tarai, if it really is happening on the scale that some people are worrying about, then the silence of tarai people on this is a sign that they are comfortable with it. This isn't just a matter of cross-border cultural similarities, but also about attitude, perhaps that of the 'new' migrants compares favourably with that of hills people.

In the history of modern Nepal, the tarai has been an asset, but its residents a liability, to the point that their loyalty to the nation and their very nationality is in question. The bar is set higher for them than for other groups, although loyalty and nationalism are always and everywhere functions of time, geographical location, people's origin, and state responsiveness.

For example, large portions of present-day Himachal, Uttaranchal, UP, and the Indian tarai were once part of Nepal. What tests of loyalty and nationality should we pose Nepalis from

these places? A large portion of the current Nepal ('naya mulk') was part of India before 1856. What about residents of these lands? Why were people from the tarai given the special title of 'madhesi' instead of just being Nepali? For almost 200 years now, Nepali soldiers have served in the British and Indian armies, where does their loyalty lie? Many rulers of modern Nepal have Indian maternal bloodlines. If tarai people have family and cultural relationships with India, surely Nepal can use this fact to strengthen bilateral relations. The people of the tarai feel there is a tacit double standard in what your editorial calls the state's 'hill-centred nationalism' in dealing with them. Unless this is changed, resentment will grow.

Name withheld, email

● The media seems to be lost in celebrating the victory (whose victory, I wonder?) and ignoring the ground reality of everyday life in Kathmandu which has become unimaginably fearful. I only hope this were a real victory for the Nepali people as whole, and not limited to high-ranking politicians of the seven parties and the Maoists.

Name withheld, email

SWITZERSTHAN

The way the anonymous author of 'Switzerland' compares my country to Prachandra's vision is not correct (Moving Target, #328). We too had civil wars etc, and were one of the poorest countries in

Europe, but our aristocrats were washed away in the French revolution and Napoleon gave us the first democratic constitution. It takes time and a new generation.

H Zollinger, Switzerland

● Who is Foreign Hand? I just hope he is not really a foreigner. His writings are fresh and deviate from *Nepali Times'* predictable template. Moving Target is ingenious and classy. Is it just me or has NT gone through a moulting process recently? Whatever is the case, you are better, bigger, and badder! And go knock 'em dead, Foreign Hand.

Shreeyana Budhathoki, email

REINVENTING BUSINESS

I hope our leaders, on both the left and the right, understand what Ashutosh Tiwari is saying in 'Love the neighbours' (Strictly Business, #328). It's time to face the reality that subsistence farming is not going to solve the problems of the country. Businessmen must be given a chance to create employment-generating opportunities. That's what India and China are doing. Netas must stop looking at businessmen as a source of income, and businessmen should stop paying off the netas to get things done. The result of this unholy alliance is that both sides come across as incompetent hacks. I hope with all the changes going on in the country, these two groups will learn from their

AGAIN

labour militancy. It may take time for the comrades to give up their old ways.

The interim constitution, though flawed and contradictory, has made an ailing prime minister more powerful than even an absolute monarch. His to-do list for 2007 includes ensuring that local units of government dismantled by the Maoists are restored so the constituent assembly polls can be held on schedule. The interim parliament can sit within a month, but the Maoists will find it difficult to convince the parties and the international community to join the government without renouncing violence.

The Maoists may be out of the jungles, but Nepal is not yet out of the woods. As this week's riots in Nepalganj showed, representation and identity politics are getting mixed up with militancy. It was a lesson to members of the seven-party government not to play with fire. They shouldn't be competing with militant tarai separatists to force shutdowns in such a volatile climate. The country is tinder-dry and hotheads on the royal right would be only too happy to light a spark.

The April Uprising this year proved that a non-violent pro-democracy movement could achieve in three weeks what the Maoists couldn't with ten years of war and nearly 15,000 deaths. The message of the Nepali people to extremists of both the left and right was: violence doesn't solve anything and don't you dare take away our democracy again.

The biggest challenge in 2007 will be to keep demands for fair representation from boiling over into ethnic, religious or separatist violence. The constituent assembly polls will be a referendum on the monarchy and will polarise the electorate. It will need unity, wisdom and vigilance among all political forces to thwart potential peace-wreckers.

KD

A year of living anxiously

In 2006, we learnt to trust our hopes rather than our fears

In the history of a country, some years become memorable on the strength of a single event, others are known for beginning processes with far-reaching consequences. Jang Bahadur Kunwar's bloody coup in 1846 heralded the rise of the Ranas. The Shah Restoration of 1950 ignited the process of democratisation.

1 June 2001 is unforgettable. 4 October 2004 will be remembered as the start of the creeping authoritarianism institutionalised on 1 February a year later.



STATE OF THE STATE
C K Lal

What will mark 2006 for future generations: the April Uprising or the Himalayan model of armed conflict resolution? Whatever the answer, this year will perhaps be notable for the spread of apprehension in Nepali society. We dedicated ourselves to solving the age-old *ke game* mystery and found that all possible answers are unsettling.

Every month in 2006 has been eventful in a year that began with a circus. Chairman Gyanendra, dressed in fatigues, dispensed assurances of peace and democracy to crowds who had been herded into secure enclosures by local administrations. Repeated again and again on Nepal TV, these scenes felt eerily like the last hurrah of a traditional monarchy.

The spectacle spilled over into February's farcical municipal elections held just to maintain the king's 'prestige'. The elections finally pushed the parliamentary parties over the edge.

Mainstreamers decided to make common cause with the Maoists to end what they called "dictatorial monarchy".

The Ides of March cast their shadow on the institution of monarchy, as proactive Indian politicians helped forge unity between the parties and the Maoists.

In April, not quite four years after Gyanendra dissolved the legislature with the loyal obeisance of Sher Bahadur Deuba, 19 days of uprising put paid to those ambitions. April will also be remembered for the phoenix-like rise of Girija Prasad Koirala. Lambasted in the past by the Maoists, lampooned by the UML and lacerated politically by all kinds of monarchists, Koirala today seems to be the best hope of royalists, Maoists, and UML alike.



On 18 May, the reinstated parliament passed the Nepali Magna Carta with a voice vote. The declaration transformed the king into one of the lesser deities of the Hindu pantheon with no role or responsibility. The Shah Dynasty paid a heavy price for the authoritarian ambitions of one of its accidental kings.

The utility of the restored legislature over, Koirala and Pushpa Kamal Dahal agreed to dissolve it in June. Mainstream parties spent July bickering over the appropriateness of that decision. In August, the seven-party alliance and Maoists agreed to confine and contain combatants to temporary camps.

October saw the dramatic momentum kept up by army chief Rukmangat Katuwal presenting himself to the king and queen for Dasain blessings. (Incidentally, ornate portraits of the royal couple and the crown prince still decorate the Nepal Army auditorium at Bhadrakali.)

After months of negotiations, on 20 November, Koirala and Dahal signed the peace deal that declared the armed insurgency and counter-insurgency over.

Almost a month later, the eight parties agreed on the terms of an interim constitution.

Events since then have been mundane in comparison: the nitty-gritty of translating commitments into action is time-consuming and complex. Despite temporary setbacks over ambassadorial appointments and promulgation of the interim constitution, the national commitment for constituent assembly elections hasn't wavered.

And therein, in the details of the terms of the election, lies the rub. If the year began with the farce of royal shenanigans, it's coming to an end with arson in Nepalganj, again a violent expression of the fear of the unknown.

That said, if there is one thing the last five years have taught us, it is to trust our hopes rather than fears. ●

contemporaries in the neighbourhood and excel in what they do, as opposed to scratching each other's backs.

Anup Pathak, email

NEPALIS FIRST

Really liked Captain Vijay Lama's essay ('I'm a Nepali first', Nepali Pan, #328). Being a Parsi resident in Nepal, I wholeheartedly concur with his sentiment "...instead of talking against other groups, we Tamangs must study and work harder to be as good as or better than them." This is exactly the philosophy that guided us Parsis in India. We make up less than 0.001 percent of the population, but we are leading personalities in every field of activity. We didn't do this by harping on our ethnicity or Persian heritage, we did it by integrating and ensuring that we excelled in our fields.

J Contractor, Kathmandu

I was touched by Vijay Lama's sentiments. 'Be a Nepali first' could be the mantra that will guide us all towards achieving everlasting harmony among our diverse ethnic groups and communities. For centuries, the crown was the symbol of unity. But the crown that Gyanendra wore divided Nepal. I now plead to Nepali leaders of all hues and shades who aspire to replace the king to steer this nation in the right direction by also adopting and advocating this simple idea of being Nepali First. As an aviator, Lama may spend most

of his time flying, but it is obvious that his heart and soul are embedded deep in the Nepali *mato*.

Deep Lamichhane, New Jersey, USA

I read Vijay Lama's article regarding the Tamang community and was impressed with what he is doing, to help spread the warmth in a tangible way. Also, about "This season, let's spread the warmth of tolerance", I think we should say "...let's spread warmth and acceptance".

Vinita L, San Fransisco

I too am a Nepali first. Vijay Lama deserves appreciation for sharing his thoughts. Yes, together we need to work to make this country an attractive garden with colourful flowers. I will help the Nyanopan project in anyway I can.

D Acharya, Okhaldhunga

I was deeply touched by Vijay Lama's comment. Indeed we are Nepalis first, and then whatever ethnicity we are. I am fascinated by the idea of making change through small steps, and I would like to help the captain's Nyanopan project. *Je gara jaso gara, yo man the Nepali ho!*

S Pande, email

I read with great interest Vijay Lama's piece and particularly liked his response to the chauvinistic, divisive, and ultimately self-defeating ethnicity-

mongering and jingoistic politicking from the so-called elites of these groups.

R Shrestha, Thailand

We were all deeply touched by the effort of Nepal's airline pilots to help fellow-Nepalis in the cold mountain regions, and their effort to 'keep Nepal alive'. We have started a clothing drive for the Nyanopan program.

Students of Humanities
Himalayan White House College,
Kathmandu

I wonder how well Vijay Lama is informed of Nepal's true political and ethno-sociocultural history. His opinions are straight out of Panchayat-era feudocracy. The people of indigenous ethnic groups were suppressed for hundreds of years by the feudal ruling class under a Hindu monarchy. Marginalised ethnicities were systematically cast out of the mainstream state apparatus. Socio-economic backwardness remained rampant among indigenous people despite their hard work and honesty. Speaking out against exclusion and the right to revive one's identity, religion, culture, language and customs is neither bigoted nor chauvinistic. The ruling feudal class always misinterpreted it as divisiveness, and that is just a ploy to protect their monopoly. Tamangs, who have been hit hard for the last 300 years, are justly trying to make their voice heard. It is not self-righteous

anger and fiery rhetoric against other communities. Tamangs are no less Nepali, but they are Tamangs with distinct proud identities. No doubt, Nepal is a beautiful garden with many flowers but every flower should be given its due honour and a just space. Even so, I really appreciate Lama's effort to spread warmth by flying clothes to the needy in remote areas.

Tilak Lama, Basundhara

UNDER HIS HAT

It is a good thing Kunda Dixit has taken a well-deserved hiatus from the last page, but I would like to see his Under My Hat column back at the earliest. I have been a reader of your weekly since its inception, which entitles me to make this valid request.

S Sanjay, email

I had to re-read your columnists' offerings last week, just to make sure I understood what they were getting at. It seems Messrs Lal and Lak had missed the excitement and column fodder of regular bandas since the peace deal. What other explanation is there for the way they nearly fell over themselves to condone—with plenty of lip service to non-violence of course—the Maoist strike following the ambassadorial announcements? Thank goodness for the Honest Ass that keeps everything in perspective.

Anar Lama-Aryal, Kuleshwor



GOVINDA LUITEL



The year in

Counter-clockwise from left:

- The historic Tansen Darbar that housed the Palpa district administration burns after a Maoist attack in February.
- Police charge demonstrators at Kalanki on the 15th day of pro-democracy protests in April.
- "Asia's greatest statesman" is how Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh described Girija Koirala during a visit to New Delhi in June.
- Pushpa Kamal Dahal and his wife Sita make their first official appearance in Kathmandu in June, as they drive in with Home Minister



KIRAN PANDAY



‘अहिलेको सबैभन्दा राम्रो कुरा बन्द, हडतालहरू रोकिएका छन् । आगामी दिनमा पनि यस्तै भयो भने हामीजस्ता दैनिक काम गरिखानेहरूलाई सजिलो हुने थियो ।’

- मालती र यश्लाल सुवेदी, साना उद्यमी

अन्नपूर्ण पोष्ट



राष्ट्रव्यापी मत सर्वेक्षण

जनसरोकारका विषयमा समाजका प्रत्येक व्यक्तिहरूका आ-आफ्नै विचार हुनसक्छन् र ती विचारहरू कुनै नेता, पार्टी वा संघसंस्थाहरूको भन्दा फरक हुन सक्छन् । के तपाईंलाई लाग्दैन कि देशको नागरिकको हैसियतले आफ्नो विचारको पनि उचित सम्मान र कदर होस्? अन्नपूर्ण पोष्ट राष्ट्रिय दैनिकले इतिहासकै सबभन्दा ठूलो राष्ट्रव्यापी मत सर्वेक्षण गर्दैछ । हाम्रा प्रतिनिधिहरू तपाईंकै घरदैलोमा आउँदैछन्, उनीहरूसमक्ष तपाईं कुनै पनि विषयमा निर्धक्क भएर आफ्नो विचार राख्न सक्नुहुनेछ ।

pictures

Krishna Sitaula from the airport to Baluwatar for talks.

- Maoist women leaders share the stage with Indian comrades at a rally in Khula Manch in July.
- In May, for the first time, the prime minister, and not the king, swears in the new cabinet.
- Stripped of his powers, King Gyanendra arrives at Krishna Mandir in August to be saluted by girl scouts.
- This picture of Nepal's most famous conservationists, donor officials, and diplomats was taken in Taplejung a day before they were killed in a helicopter crash in Ghunsa in September.



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Yes. Or no.

Sometimes, the best a journalist can do is hedge his bets

The questions the "old" Nepal hand is asked these days. Here for a month or two, and everyone wants to know: can the constituent assembly elections take place in June? Instant political analyses. Add journalist and stir. Well, here's a mea culpa from my past and a promise to be more thoughtful about such questions from now on.

Nearly nine years ago, I was in Mumbai meeting interesting people in culture, local government, and journalism. My employers had sent me to see what made India's liveliest city thrum, and it was a welcome interlude from Delhi's constant politics. It was also the early days of the Atal Behari Vajpayee-led coalition government.

Part of the deal was a BBC radio talk show with listeners asking questions to a correspondent, in this case, me, BBC's South Asia reporter. I had just covered India's second election in three years and reported the historic ascent of Vajpayee, as well as ministers and hardliners from his Bharatiya Janata Party.

Most questions were about this. Would the BJP launch pogroms against Muslims, try to change to Indian culture and history books, would they start a war with Pakistan, and so on. I tried to be thoughtful

and balanced and often found cause to praise Vajpayee's credentials as a popular, moderate consensus-seeking leader.

In this spirit, I addressed a question about his government's nuclear weapons intentions. Would the BJP test India's atomic arsenal, as promised in their campaign? Would years of ambiguity end in a flash of light in the Rajasthan desert? On live radio, I considered the costs of international outrage, the new government's political instability, the mood of the people, and concluded: no.

It was 10 May 1998. The next day, as my Jet Airways flight bore me back to Delhi, India crossed the nuclear rubicon and became an overt atomic weapons power. Weeks of relentless, near-hysterical media coverage ensued. I was probably the only person who remembered how I'd got it wrong the night before the tests. In good faith perhaps, but wrong as can be nonetheless.

Now in Nepal I find myself asked to pronounce on whether elections can possibly take place in June. At first, reading newspapers and talking, I found myself saying "no, can't happen, mayhem in the countryside, insincerity in Kathmandu, SPA too smug, incompetent, Maoists not ready for democracy, UN monitors late, VDCs not back, etc etc".

It's a tempting enough analysis. And I have yet to find anyone involved in pushing the election process who can truly explain to me how it's going to happen, freely, fairly, and peacefully in June. That may be because some of them—in the UN, diplomatic, and NGO sectors—are too busy to talk, or because they simply can't at this point admit the possibility of failure.

So, as a remarkable year in Nepal's history comes to a close, I choose uncertainty over instant political analysis. I hedge my bets and talk of trends and possibilities. I admit that I don't know everything. The most honest thing I can say about elections in June is this: I don't see how they can happen.

The key words are "I" and "see". They could happen. They could be fair and efficiently run. They could set the stage for the true transformation of Nepal. I don't see this yet. But nor do I have a crystal ball which tells me the process is doomed, that politics will fail, and conflict return. I honestly do not know what will happen over the coming months in this bloodied, deserving land.

I even worry a little about jinxing the process with a prediction either way. Look at my record on Indian nuclear weapons. ●



HERE AND THERE
Daniel Lak



RAMESWOR BOHARA

Open your eyes

We can choose to fight with words in the constituent assembly, or guns on the streets

The largest Nepali-language newspaper in this country recently criticised the Nepal Sadbhavana Party (Anandi) for its 'dual' characteristics. The paper alleged that the NSP was resorting to agitation even as it enjoyed the fruits of government. The 25 December Madhes banda

EYES WIDE SHUT
Sheetal Kumar

called by the NSP, and the riots that followed in Nepalganj have raised the hackles of mainstream media, and civil society organisations have also been quoted expressing similar sentiments.

Nepal's senior editors and civil society leaders noticed what the NSP was up to only when the party called a banda. No one has thought it necessary to ask what their demands are and why they are being raised. Who even realises that the NSP isn't isolated in wanting constituencies delineated differently—the entire madhesi community wants that. There's been little written about fully proportionate, representative elections, and no informed analysis of why madhesis feel the interim constitution gives them a raw deal. There is instead verbiage and venom against 'disruption of normal life' in the tarai.

This myopia is scary.

Nepal's mainstream press and civil society regularly fail to report and analyse madhesi grievances. What reports exist are alarmist and ill-informed. In part, this is because these groups are pahadi-owned and led, and pahadis have a narrow, uni-dimensional conception of who madhesis are.

Such journalism and civil society activism is a disservice to the country. As members of a society we all need our grievances listened to. How else can we confront, conquer—and then transcend—what are called 'divisive' tendencies.

Yes, the NSP deserves sharp criticism for the violence its banda unleashed. Nepalganj was smouldering with communal

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NICE GESTURE, BUT NOT NEARLY ENOUGH: Peace rallies and marches, such as this one in Nepalganj on Wednesday, do not address the root causes of madhesi grievances.

strife days after it ended, and the hills-plains divide was strongly reinforced—madhesi and pahadi groups alike lamented that their businesses, shops, and vehicles had been vandalised by the other side. Such actions should be condemned strongly.

But forming a probe commission, as the government has announced it will do, or appealing for communal harmony, as almost all politicians are doing, will solve nothing. It's hypocritical to appeal for social harmony without addressing the reasons for the grievances.

The vicious Maoist conflict is winding down, but a new one is beginning, rooted in the exclusion and alienation of madhesi. There is a new, legitimate madhesi nationalism taking shape. If it can find proper expression and is engaged with, Nepal will only become stronger. But if it is met with knee-jerk stereotypes and ignorance, then Lord Pashupatinath help this country.

We Nepalis have shown that we can deal with seriously divisive issues in a mature manner—the current peace process is a prime example. Since

the mid-1990s, we've managed to put aside our knee-jerk response to janajati identity politics. We desperately need to engage similarly with the Madhes. The first step is listening to why madhesi—and members of every other excluded group—feel the way they do.

The proper place to do that is the forthcoming Constituent Assembly. But the eight political parties have written the rules of the game so lopsidedly, madhesi participation will be limited. Maybe you didn't notice, but the NSP wrote a Note of Dissent precisely about this when the interim constitution was signed. Janajati groups have similar reservations and burnt copies of the interim constitution this week. Add these two populations and it's a real majority. Doesn't look as if the parties are listening.

With all due respect to the parties for their long democratic struggle, they're mis-stepping in a big way. Jana Andolan II revived an exclusionist parliament elected in 1999, and still the members behave as if the constituent assembly is their own, and not the people's. This is why janajati and madhesi groups are so riled.

We better listen up. The choice is fighting with words in the constituent assembly, or taking it to the streets, as happened this week in the tarai. ●

Evening MBAs

Apex College is now offering a 60-credit, two-and-a-half year MBA evening Program, which allows professionals to earn the advanced degree without giving up their day job. Aimed at working executives, technical graduates and new students, the program will take in 30 students each year and allow them to choose courses and class timings. Areas of specialisation include commercial bank management, management of technology, and marketing and finance. It also supports a six-week internship program.

Cosmic displays

Cosmic Motorcycle's new showroom in Baradghat, Nawalparasi was inaugurated with celebrity guests 1974AD. Besides Cosmic's Nepali motorcycles, including the new CY125-20 model, the showroom will provide spare parts and after-sales service. The showroom is offering heavy discounts and gift hampers to customers from Nawalparasi. Cosmic's manufacturing plant, which produced its first batch of bikes in December 2003, is also in Bardaghat.

More ATMs

A new agreement allows over 260,000 customers with an Everest Bank debit card to withdraw money at 870 Punjab National Bank ATMs across India for a nominal charge. Similarly, PNB debit card holders will be able to withdraw money from any EBL ATM in Nepal. The deal, signed with Smart Choice Technology, adds to the 56 SCT cash machines that already accept Everest cards.

Looking sanguine

United Telecom Limited, with support from Nepal Red Cross Society, hosted a blood donation camp on its premises in Hattisar. UTL staff, associates, and customers lined up to participate. The camp

aimed to help boost scarce blood supplies, and the company hopes to hold similar camps in the future.

Gulp and golf

The third annual McDowell's Signature Swig and Swing golf tournament on 30 December will be played over 18 holes with each golfer having to consume a beverage before teeing off on the back nine. Over 60 members of the Royal Nepal Golf club are expected to participate.

NEW PRODUCTS

BLAZING TRAILS: The 165cc Kinetic Blaze, the first of seven Italjet scooters Kinetic plans to launch, features a powerful four-stroke engine, a mileage of 45 km/l, front telescopic shocks, 12 inch tyres, a protective front shield, disc brake options, and extensive storage space.

IT ADDS UP: IT Nepal has launched a Nepali version of the popular Indian Tally Accounting Package, which is compatible with the Nepali language, date, and VAT. IT Nepal is offering free upgrades to Version 9 with Payroll and POS for customers who buy Tally's latest version (8.1) from the company and authorised distributors.

PHOTO FINISH: Canon's new EOS 400D is a compact, lightweight 10.1 megapixel DSLR camera which upgrades the 350D, and includes an integrated cleaning system, over 60 interchangeable lenses, and a 2.5 inch LCD display.

FRESHLY MINTED: Fresho, the new mint-flavoured menthol candy from Crave is aimed at the teenage market, and priced at Rs 1.

ELECTRIFIED: TVS has launched an electric start version of their TVS Star City, making it the first 100cc motorcycle in the country with this feature. It also has new graphics, including an 'econometer' for better mileage control, and ride switch shocks. The TVS Star City ES is priced at Rs 105,994.

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TOON 2006



'Congress reunification'

हिमाल Robin Sayami in *Himal Khabarpatrika*, March



Crown Prince Paras donates rhino to Vienna Zoo

हिमाल Robin Sayami in *Himal Khabarpatrika*, March



Jana Andolan

हिमाल Robin Sayami in *Himal Khabarpatrika*, June



कम्रेड, खवै चकलेट ऐलेसम्म 'नि किन आइनुपुग्या भन्थ्या ? यस्तो तालले कसरी छापामार'रुको संख्या बढ्ला ?

Comrade, we're running out of chocolates. How can we increase the number of guerrillas at this rate?

समय Abin Shrestha in *Samaya*, December




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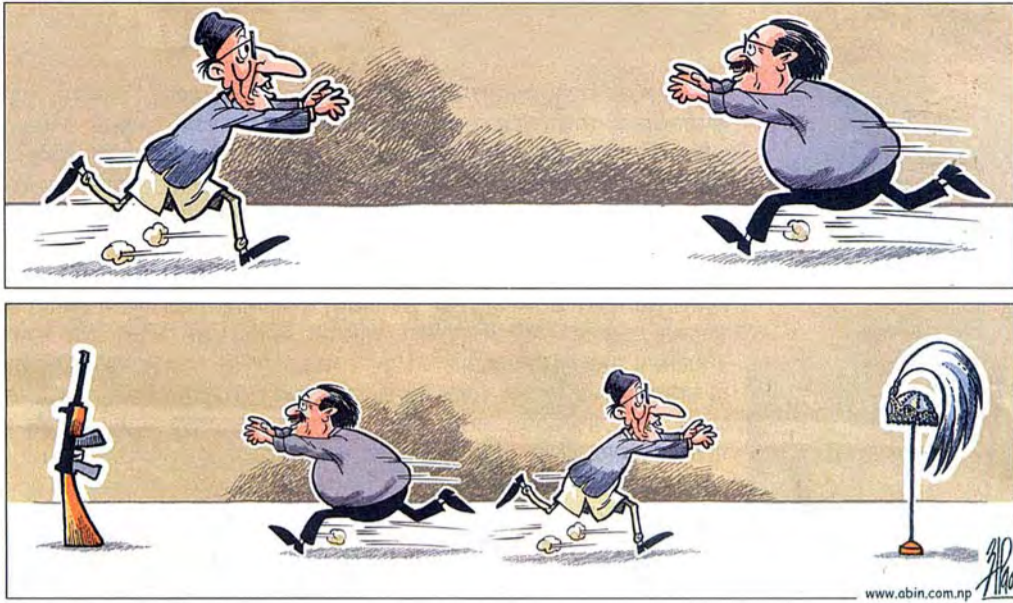
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समय Abin Shrestha in Samaya, November



We need peace, Your Majesty. We need food, Your Majesty. I'm sick, Your Majesty. We need schools, Your Majesty. We need roads, Your Majesty. And that is the end of the news, Your Majesty.

हिमाल Robin Sayami in Himal Khabarpatrika, January

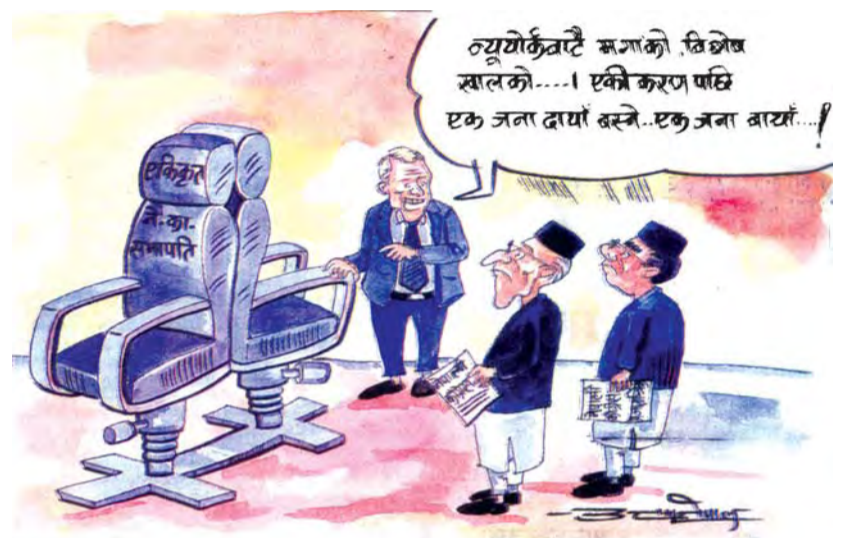


Elections Candidate



Voter

हिमाल Robin Sayami in Himal Khabarpatrika, January



James Moriarty: "This is a designer chair imported from New York...after party reunification one of you sits on the left and the other on the right."

राजधानी Rajdhani, March

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Play the winter away

Toys to brighten up foggy days

For most normal people, once the oblivion induced by festive season-partying clears, the dull dread of winter sets in. Traditionally, this is when resolutions are broken, relationships walk a knife-edge, and life seems to lose its shine. It's probably just the sudden absence of fairy lights and tinsel, but it feels authentically horrible.

There are the usual ways to counter this excess of melatonin and melancholy—cosy evenings with a heater, warm food, good music, DVDs, intimate gatherings of friends, etc. But most of us still feel mildly psychotic. A *Nepali Times* straw poll found that the people who get through winter without committing crimes (actual, emotional, or substance abuse-related) usually tinker. Some fly airplanes on their computers, others knit with a steely glint in their eye, still others undertake DIY projects involving power tools. At least one person in the Valley, on the loser end of the scale, has downloaded book cataloguing software and entered titles they don't yet own to create My Dream Library

One of the best ways to pass the time is to put to good use new, slightly unusual gadgets. We've put together the cream of the crop for readers to hunt down and buy, or at least dream about.



Future sounds

Ipods, mp3 players, and your cheapo FM radio aren't the only sources of sound on the go. Shortwave remains one of the best ways to source foreign news and entertainment. It also has a certain retro cache, kind of like travelling by steamship in the jet age. You cast your net wide, and so can catch everything from genre-bending jazz on the Brazilian Radio Zamba to impassioned dissident propaganda on clandestine radio stations such as Voice of Khmer Kampuchea-Krom, to the now-legendary spy stations on which the streams of related numbers, letters, and words in a jumble of languages make for fascinating bedtime listening.

Unless you go for Grunding's Porsche-designed radio (which has a real problem with drift), the Sony ICF-SW7600GR AM/FM Shortwave World Band Receiver with Single Side Band Reception is your best bet for tuning into all the strange sounds the world has to offer, for about \$200.

Sunny side up

Stay plugged in when on the go. You can, for \$300-500, buy portable solar systems such as CT Solar's Backpack Solar Power Solutions which can be charged as you walk along the trails, being affixed to your rucksack, or on the highway, attached to the roof of a vehicle. A 32-watt four-part panel that weighs just a kilo can charge laptops, mp3 players, satellite phones, video recorders, and similar electronic devices, taking the hassle out of keeping in touch with the office while trekking, or conducting research in remote areas. Even better is the \$230 solar bag from Voltaic Systems, which appears to be a regular high-end rucksack—until you notice the solar panels embedded in the fabric. Voltaic bags cannot charge laptops, unfortunately, but perhaps this is the kind of technological breakthrough we need in Nepal!



Tooling around

A Swiss Army Knife may not be a beauty—functional is the word that springs to mind—but it can be a joy forever. The knives are a standard part of NASA astronauts' kits, and a resourceful *Nepali Times* staffer especially recommends the serrated knife attachment to saw through net doors if you need to break into your flat late in an inebriated night. What mobile phones and pocket PCs are to geeks, Swiss Army Knives are to fussy people of a more recondite order, perhaps the kind who also own portable martini bars. Yours has a wire cutter? Pooh, how about the cap lifter on mine! The ultimate in Swiss Army weaponry is the new Giant Swiss Army Knife which, weighing in at a kilogram, is perhaps not the most portable model around, even if it does feature 85 attachments—virtually every single one the Wenger company has ever made, from the mineral crystal magnifying glass to the 300 m-range laser pointer, golf-club face cleaner, cigar cutter, 12/20 gauge choke tube tool, and 'special key'. On his 1970 expedition on the South Face of Annapurna, Chris Bonnington reportedly used every single blade in his Swiss Army knife, except the fish scaler, fish, as he deadpanned, not being thick on the ground up there.

Green wheels

For readers who drive around in very large automobiles, getting the evil eye from pedestrians must get old, as must the endless waits in traffic jams. Yes, one could bicycle, but that entails fitness and a certain foolhardiness. Electric bikes are a superb way out. At 20-30kg, they weigh in at less than half of the lightest scooter and they're narrower, which is good for manoeuvring through traffic. You never need to run around for fuel—just plug them into any outlet (or into your solar-charged batteries). Electric bikes offer top speeds of 30-50km on uphill, depending on the model, and up to four hours of driving. You can even carry an extra battery around, if you want to do a day-long trip round the Valley. Keep an eye out for the few Chinese- and US-made electric bikes in town. They aren't as powerful or attractive—or expensive—as Electricmoto's Blade bike, but they do the job for \$300-\$600.





Friendly living

Nepalis have a predilection for overstuffed velvet sofas, underwhelming formica tables, and mirrored display cabinets of crystal animal figurines. A tasteful riposte comes in the form of Friendly Product, a line of functional, eco-friendly, well-designed, and distinctly Nepali home furnishings.

The range, which will be marketed nationally and internationally, is the result of a collaboration led by L. Environmental Arts and Design's Leo and Lisu Rodriguez, and Nepali companies including Dhaka Weaves, L., Nepal Knotcraft Centre, The Organic Village, and Wild Fibers, and is supported by GTZ and the Bamboo and Rattan Society of Nepal. The line's recent launch at Wild Fibers in Thamel was well received, and the displays of products made from sustainable local resources are likely to be replicated in homes around the Valley.

The show will travel to Los Angeles for a trade exhibition in January. Lisu from L., which has been creating custom-made bamboo and wood furniture and flooring for the last three years, says the group will produce seasonal lines every six months and promote a 'complete lifestyle approach' to designing home furnishings that are completely Nepali but modern. While some prices are high by local standards, L. hopes to counter the idea that well-made Nepali products are only for expats, green freaks, and Nepalis educated abroad. The Rodriguez's eventual aim is to simply be able to produce more, and also provide some much-needed design training in Nepal. ●

(Jemima Sherpa)

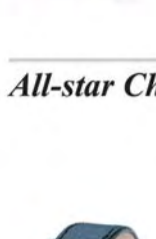


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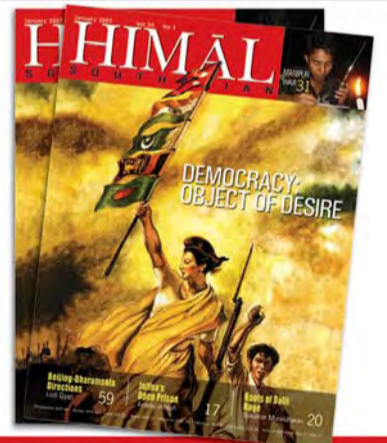
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Shot at a new life

For mothers and newborns, tetanus is a silent killer

NARESH NEWAR in BARA

Young Dolmaya Gurung laughs as she gets an anti-tetanus vaccination shot. "It just tickles," says the eight-year-old at the head of a line of some 200 other girls from her Nepal Rastriya Secondary School, shirt sleeves rolled up and arms at the ready.

"Even children now know that vaccinations help prevent infections, especially tetanus," says Dolmaya's teacher Sabita Adhikari.

On Christmas Eve, the Ministry of Health and UNICEF concluded a three-week-long school vaccination programme that supplemented the national immunisation campaign and aimed to reach over a million children, especially girls between six and eight.

Tetanus isn't just something you can get by cutting yourself on a rusty strip of metal or a bad fall on a dirty street. In Nepal, this ordinary and curable disease remains an enormous problem, especially for new mothers and their babies. A large part of this is because there are simply not enough trained birth delivery attendants in most rural areas who can maintain the basic level of hygiene that rules out tetanus. The other part of the equation that can help reduce maternal mortality, says the Department of Health, is immunising the mothers.

There is no reliable data about how many children and mothers die every year



Girl students vaccinated for lifetime immunity against tetanus

NARESH NEWAR

from tetanus-related complications, so the true magnitude of the problem is unknown. But rural health experts call it a silent killer, which takes lives even before the infection can be identified.

Close to 30,000 Nepali children die each year in the first month of their life, two-thirds of them in their first week. Neonatal tetanus is a major factor, since about 88 percent of babies are delivered at home without help from trained birth attendants, says the government's Demographic Health Survey (DHS). A 2001

report by the national Health Management Information System, estimated the mortality rate from tetanus to be 2.3 per 1,000 live births, based on a study of 327 neonatal tetanus cases. Tetanus is one of the most under-reported health problems, so all figures are estimates only.

The realisation of the impact of tetanus on women and newborn health came late here, when Nepal was determined by international agencies including the WHO to be one of the 60 high-risk countries for maternal and neonatal tetanus.

"The only way to protect mothers through their childbearing years, and their newborns, is an aggressive immunisation drive that gives women five doses of tetanus toxoid in less than three years," says Bishnu Poudel, assistant project officer for immunisation programme of UNICEF. This is all it takes for a lifetime of protection against tetanus.

The current drive, which began in 2005, is one of the few in the world that targets school-age girls so they are immune to tetanus before they even reach reproductive age. The pilot project covered eight districts last year, and reached nearly 92 percent of students.

In 2005, maternal and neonatal tetanus (MNT) was declared 'eliminated' from Nepal by WHO. But that's not the same thing as eradication. MNT elimination is defined as the achievement of less than one MNT case for 1,000 live births in every district.

Unlike polio and small pox, tetanus can never be eradicated, as the spores are present in the environment.

The innovative program is already in trouble though. The planned expansion reached only three of the 16 districts planned for, due to delays in the Department of Health's procurement process for syringes.

A DoH source told us on condition of anonymity that the delay resulted from graft and disagreement about who to award the contract for medical supplies.

"As with all such problems, things like delays at the DoH can be counter-balanced by awareness programs too. The more the people know, the more careful they are," says Parsuram Shrestha, Bara's public health administrator, adding that local government health offices in the district are using their limited resources for this purpose too. ●

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Bring our boys home

Parents of new underage recruits anxiously await the return of their children



AGE NO BAR: Two weeks ago these Maoist 'fighters' in the Dasratpur cantonment, though clearly underage, claimed to be over 18.

NARESH NEWAR

LAXMAN BHANDARI
in SURKHET

"I want my son back, I don't care how much the Maoists pay him," says a desperate Lila Wali, whose 17-year-old son Mohan joined the Maoists' Sixth Division at Dasratpur for a regular salary of Rs 5,000.

Last month, the eighth grader was in his classroom when

uniformed Maoist soldiers entered the premises of Janjyoti Secondary School in Jhingani village, Surkhet, to talk about bright career prospects in the 'People's Liberation Army'. In a short time, 65 students had lined up to follow them to their camps. The students' parents, who were not consulted, were frantic with worry.

In the nearby village of

Jareghat, teachers watched helplessly as young students walked out of their classes with the Maoists. "We even had to close the school once, because the students were not here," says school teacher Jhak Bahadur GC.

Some of the students have returned, but villagers in the district say many of the 400 children recruited aggressively from the VDCs of Mehalkuna,

Saharey, Malarani, Dharapai, Gumi, Dahachaur, Lekfarsa, Dasratpur, Neta, Ghumkhaharey, Ramghat, and Kalyan are still in the Dasratpur cantonment site, undergoing hard training.

Teachers like Tilak Tiruwa of Nera Secondary School say, "parents are now scared to send their children to school."

The Maoist commanders vehemently deny allegations that they are recruiting underage 'fighters'. "Many children were interested, but we turned them away," says Tej Bahadur Wali, aka Pratik, commander of the Sixth Division.

Pratik, who commands nearly 5,500 PLA personnel, explains that if there were any proof that there are children in his division, they would be 'removed' immediately. "The only children in the camps are relatives or children of PLA members. Others are artists working with Maoist cultural groups," he explained.

Young uniformed and armed soldiers walk with their weapons both inside and outside the camp areas. Each one says that they are 18 or above. "I'm an adult, I only look young," says a female soldier who appears to be around 15.

"Most soldiers look young," Risi Gautam, secretary of the district's Maoist party, said

disingenuously, "but they are all over 18." Gautam flatly denies that students were recruited by force or tempted with promises of money, and suggests that teachers and villagers are perhaps being economical with the truth.

None of the families we spoke to are buying that. "I know my son is in Dasratpur, and I'm going to keep going there until I see him," says a defiant Narbahadur BK of Saharey VDC, whose 16-year-old son Karna Bahadur recently joined the PLA. Hundreds of parents have visited the Dasratpur cantonment in the last two months, but none have returned with their children.

Pratik says that his party will agree to independent verification of cantoned soldiers' ages. But there are well-documented problems with that, including the fact that not many recruits carry—or even have—citizenship or birth certificates. The commanders say this is because local government offices have not functioned for many years in some areas.

"He was my only son," weeps Tulsi Chunara from Mainatada VDC as she stands outside the cantonment where she believes her son Laxman is. "Who will listen to me, who will help me?" ●

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Biomass and biofuel could meet most of our energy needs

From climate changes to volatile oil prices, all signs point to a looming global energy crisis. This means we can no longer afford to ignore the inexhaustible resource that the sun provides each day through photosynthesis. Solar energy enables plants to absorb carbon gas and produce both oxygen, and matter that the animal kingdom uses for food—and that our machines can use for energy.



OPINION
Jean-Michel Severino

Since the Stone Age period, humans have been cultivating this "biomass" to feed themselves. Yet, in today's world, its energy potential is ignored. Since the industrial revolution, humans have sought energy from coal, and then from oil and natural gas, but these resources are exhaustible.

Existing alternatives for diversifying energy production are limited. Nuclear energy presents concerns about safety and disposal of radioactive waste. Hydroelectric power is already widely used, while wind and solar energy are structurally sporadic and disparately available.

Biomass supplies are large and available everywhere. The technology necessary to convert it into energy—including high-yield burning, gas conversion, and liquefaction into synthetic

fuel—has advanced considerably since it was used during World War II.

However, biomass energy is the victim of unfair competition from oil. Oil's price reflects its extraction, refining, and distribution costs, but not that of creating the raw material. 200 tons of plant matter produces a litre of oil, but just 15kg are required for one litre of synthetic fuel.

When oil dropped to below \$20 a barrel, interest in developing biomass energy was attractive only to "green" militants and those interested in fundamental science. Yet the planet's biomass—forests, pastureland, savannas, crops—make up productive capital, generating a 10 percent "return" every year. The annual return on this capital is estimated at 60 billion tons, yet only two billion is consumed as food and 10 billion tons used for energy.

Using biomass responsibly would contribute to the fight against climate change by reducing carbon in the atmosphere and diminishing the amount of fossil fuel required to produce energy. Its abundance in southern countries can facilitate economic development. "Energy crops" could be developed to produce biofuel. Residue from forest, agricultural, and agro-industrial activities could be collected and converted. The six million tons of waste produced annually by Niger could be used to meet its entire energy needs.

Of course, in many places, energy cropping would compete with food crops. Estimates project that 50 years down the line, most of the planet's arable land would have to be used to feed the world. Thus, areas dedicated to energy production may not reach the level societies wish. While such competition would reveal new global scarcities, it would also bring higher prices, encouraging producers to increase yields and productivity.

Cultivating energy would open new possibilities for many economic actors: the farmer and the forest worker could become more involved in the market, the mine engineer in crop fields, and the banker in plant shares. For this, we'd need new policies in northern and southern countries, on agriculture, land, and water management, protection of biodiversity, fuel taxes, and awareness-raising.

The ancient Egyptians and Incas worshipped the sun, believing it to be the beginning of all life. This has since been proven true. Now, when it has become more important than ever that we embrace renewable resources, we must use the sun for our energy, like our ancestors used it to cultivate food. ●

(Project Syndicate)

Jean-Michel Severino, a former vice-president of the World Bank, is director general of the Agence Française de Développement.

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FREEDOM OF LIGHTS

A risky year

Economic home truths could hit hard in 2007, unless the US changes its habits

The world survived 2006 without a major economic catastrophe, despite sky-high oil prices and a Middle East spiralling out of control. But the year produced abundant lessons for the global economy, and warning signs concerning its future performance.

Unsurprisingly, 2006 brought another resounding rejection of fundamentalist neo-liberal policies, this time by voters in Nicaragua and Ecuador. Meanwhile, in



ANALYSIS
Joseph Stiglitz

neighbouring Venezuela, Hugo Chávez won overwhelmingly—at least he had brought education and healthcare to the poor barrios, which had previously received little of the benefits of the country's enormous oil wealth.

Perhaps most importantly, voters in the US gave a vote of no confidence to George W Bush, who will now be held in check by a Democratic Congress.

Never has America's standing in the world's eyes been lower. Values Americans regard as central to their identity have been subverted. An American president has defended the use of torture and used technicalities to interpret the Geneva Conventions, ignoring the Convention on Torture, which forbids it expressly. Bush—the first “MBA president”—has had an administration defined by corruption and incompetence, from the botched response to Hurricane Katrina to the wars in



Afghanistan and Iraq.

Americans do not like being on the losing side of any war, and this failure, and the quagmire into which America had again stepped, led voters to reject Bush in 2006. But the Middle East chaos wrought by the Bush years also represents a central risk to the global economy. Since the Iraq war began in the 2003, oil output from the Middle East has not grown as expected. Forecasts suggest oil prices will remain at or slightly below their current level, largely due to a perceived moderation of growth in demand, led by a slowing US economy.

Which constitutes another major global risk. At the root of America's economic problem are measures adopted in Bush's first term. The administration pushed through a tax cut that failed to stimulate the economy, because it was designed to benefit mainly the wealthiest taxpayers. The burden of stimulation was placed on the Fed, which lowered interest rates

dramatically. Cheap money fuelled a real estate bubble, which is now bursting, jeopardising households that borrowed against rising home values to sustain consumption.

Household savings became negative for the first time since the Depression, with the country borrowing \$3 billion a day from foreigners. But households could continue to take money out of their houses only as long as prices continued to rise and interest rates remained low. Thus, higher interest rates and falling house prices do not bode well for the American economy. According to some estimates, about 80 percent of the increase in employment and almost two-thirds of the increase in GDP in recent years stemmed from real estate.

Unrestrained government spending further buoyed the economy during the Bush years, with fiscal deficits reaching new heights, making it difficult for the

government to step in now to shore up economic growth as households curtail consumption. Many Democrats, campaigning on a promise to return to fiscal sanity, are likely to demand a reduction in the deficit, further dampening growth.

America's inability to live within its means is the major cause of global imbalances. Unless that changes, these imbalances will continue to be a source of global instability, regardless of what China or Europe do.

Despite these uncertainties, the mystery is that risk premiums remain low, especially with the dramatic reduction in the growth of global liquidity. As central banks raised interest rates, the prospect of risk premiums returning to more normal levels is itself one of the major risks the world faces today. ● (Project Syndicate)

Joseph Stiglitz is a Nobel laureate in economics. His latest book is Making Globalisation Work.

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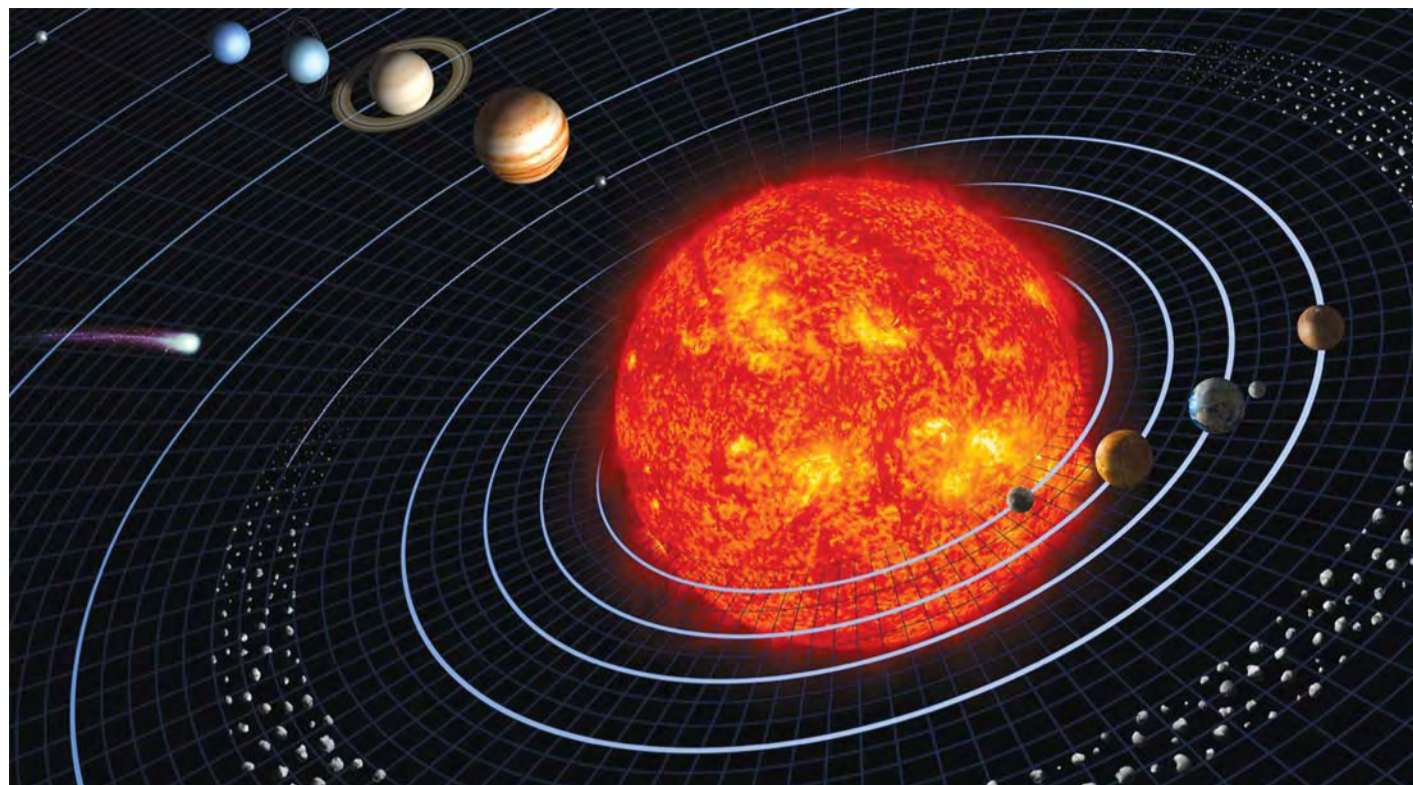
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publishing a free electronic newsletter *The Astral Journal* (TAJ). For more information, visit www.kosmandu.org.

In 2007, Nepalis will get a chance to observe a Solar eclipse and two Lunar eclipses. On 19 March, a partial solar eclipse will be visible, in which the disc of the Sun will be half covered by the Moon's shadow. Total Lunar eclipses will be seen on 4 March and 28 August.

Comet-watchers will be pleased to know that there are two comets passing close by this coming year, Encke on 17 May, and NEAT on 14 July.

Highlights in January include:

- The Sun is in the constellation of Sagittarius at the start of January, moving into Capricorn on 20 January. The Earth is at perihelion (its closest point to the Sun) on 3 January at a distance of 0.983 AU. It's always surprising to realise that our world is closest to the Sun in mid-winter.
- Mercury is in superior conjunction (behind the Sun) on 7 January, but by the end of the month, expect to see this planet low in the west, just after the Sun sets.
- Venus starts the year as a brilliant Evening Star, low in the west at sunset, and setting a couple of hours after the Sun. At the end of January, Mercury and Venus will be fairly close.
- Mars rises in the south-east an hour or two before the Sun. Try looking for it low in the east at dawn, just below bright Jupiter.
- Jupiter rises about three hours before the Sun, and is well up in the east at dawn. Day by day it is moving slowly south-eastwards against the stars of Ophiuchus.
- Saturn, in Leo, rises early in the evening, shortly before 8pm at the start of January and every night draws closer to Regulus, the brightest star in Leo.
- Meteor showers: The Quadrantid meteor shower should produce a good display on 3 January, and you could hope to see one Quadrantid every minute or two. The radiant point is between the bright star Vega (*Abhijit*) and the 'handle' of the Plough (*Saptarshi*).

kedarbadu@yahoo.com

Clear skies, fresh start

It's looking like a good year for amateur astronomy in Nepal

The last days of 2006 saw the blasting off into space of a telescope to probe for extra-terrestrial life. 2007 marks half-a-century of space exploration, an event astronomers around the world will celebrate as International Heliophysical

universal processes governing the human realm of space. The world scientific community has planned an international program of scientific collaboration, and other activities (www.ihy2007.org).

Astronomers in the USA recently decided to establish a private voluntary organisation called Astronomers Without Borders, to use astronomy as an international language through which people of different nations and cultures can come together, thus fostering goodwill, understanding and peace.

NASA has planned an eventful 2007. In addition to its usual shuttle programme,

in June, the agency will also launch the Dawn mission, the first spacecraft to orbit two planetary bodies (Ceres and Vesta) on a single voyage, the Phoenix mission in August to uncover clues in Mars's arctic soil about the history of water on the red planet, and the Glast mission in October to study energetic objects and phenomena in the universe.

Closer home, there is brilliant news from Gaighat, Udayapur. The Kosmandu Astronomical Society has started organising planetary observations for schoolchildren using a small telescope provided by the Permission to Dream program. The society has also started



STAR GAZING
Kedar S Badu

Year (IHY). The term 'heliophysical' is an extension of 'geophysical', and denotes that the Earth, Sun, and Solar System are to be studied not as separate domains but as

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Mega music
MAKE it LARGE

Karma of a corner people



An exquisitely simple film documents the life of a remote Himalayan village

When the Swiss geologist Toni Hagen travelled across Nepal as the prototypical United Nations consultant in 1952, he would ask villagers what they wanted. Most said they wanted a bridge.

Nepal then, and largely even today, is an archipelago of villages separated by rivers. Without a bridge, people have to make arduous and dangerous days-long detours to get from one place to another. A bridge can make the difference between life and death if the sick can't get to hospital.

In the past ten years, the Maoists destroyed many strategic bridges. In Dailekh people have to make a risky crossing of the Bheri clinging to the tilted steel ropes of a bridge that was bombed last year. A vital bridge across the Karnali at Rangeli near Kalikot was destroyed by the Maoists in 2003, making a remote area even more inaccessible.

Kesang Tseten went to one of the remotest parts of Nepal, the villages of Tetangche and Simbu in northern Rasuwa near the Tibetan border, to tell the tale of a single bridge. It should be a relatively simple story: a young woman is washed away in a

flashflood and villagers get the Swiss agency Helvetas to build a bridge for them.

But this straightforward tale turns into a narrative of present-day Nepal itself. In *We Corner People*, Kesang Tseten has distilled the country's realities into the life of one village, bringing everything into the microcosm: poverty, underdevelopment, Maoism, evangelists, migrant labour, marriage, life and death. Like all great stories, it is told simply in the words and actions of the protagonists themselves.

Village volunteers carry steel ropes up and down the mountains in a perilous group effort, symbolising the hardships caused by Nepal's perpendicular terrain which also exacerbates natural calamities like landslides and flash-floods.

The documentary gets its name from the way the Tamangs of upper Rasuwa describe themselves. "My father and grandfather chose this corner to live in," says an elderly farmer. Tucked away in a dead-end valley, they are the most ignored people of one of the most ignored districts.

But even here, the outside world is creeping in. The activity of evangelical groups means Christians outnumber Buddhists. A farmer says he converted because he couldn't afford any more to feed the shaman when a family member was sick. "After I became Christian, I haven't had to give food to the spirits," he says. Villagers tell of the harassment they get from both the Maoists and the army when they go down the Valley in search of work or to buy essentials. A village family gets a letter from a daughter in Kuwait, who writes movingly of not being able to phone home a message as she hasn't been paid by her employer. "It's hard being poor," she writes.

The camera catches the subtle mixture of shyness, sadness, and open optimism in the faces of the people of Tetangche and Simbu. And as the film closes with an exquisite shot of children playing on the bridge, their lingering song resonates. The refined editing enhances the storytelling and the viewer comes away with admiration and respect for the extraordinary lives of these ordinary people. ●

Kunda Dixit

You owe me

A brief discourse on Maoist Economic Policy

The term 'Maoist Economic Policy' does not easily trip off the tongue. There is something ungainly or farcical about the phrase that suggests a lurking oxymoron (or some kind of moron). Is this a trick question, or maybe another joke about the shortest book in the world?

Considering such policies have the potential to make our lives miserable, the Hand finds it curious that few are well-versed in the subject. Since the comrades aren't volunteering any information and nobody's asking the right questions, perhaps history can lend some insight.

MOVING TARGET
Foreign Hand

In Mao Zedong's China, all economic interests were seized and nationalised, property became theft, and even thinking about making an extra yuan or two on the side was tantamount to treason and a ticket for a one-way trip to the re-education camp.

Democratic Kampuchea, Cambodia's misnomer under the Maoist Khmer Rouge, abolished currency in its deluded goal of returning to a utopian, pre-capitalist 'golden age'. The borders were sealed, cities emptied, and economic activity arrested, as citizens of all ages were put to work in the rice fields. The purges and starvation resulting from Maoist Economics killed over 1.5 million Cambodians—a third of the population—in a Five Year Plan gone terribly wrong.

With such sobering precedents, one wonders what to expect from our Maoists. Despite their claim—and our burning desire to believe it—that they are 'different' from previous communists, students of history will find their methodology eerily familiar. In the districts, a form of nationalisation has already taken place, with land owners murdered or forced to flee and their holdings seized by the Party. Currency has clearly not been abolished (only cash, please, if you're extorted), but the gun has replaced banknotes as the more common medium of exchange.



Relations between the CPN (Maoist) and commerce have been defined by extortion under threat, strikes and forced closures. The Party has poisoned relations further by forcibly placing its cadre as union leaders in all kinds of businesses. To gain worker support, Maoist-affiliated unions adopt a 'more radical than thou' approach featuring escalating demands and aggressive confrontation with management. Most companies have been forced to hire loyal underlings who spy on the commercial activities and report back to their Party bosses. The workers set their own wages and, if positions are unavailable, company owners must nonetheless pay salaries.

Maoist relations with the business community appear to be governed by jealousy and revenge, echoing the Khmer Rouge hatred of bourgeois city dwellers. Despite the collapsing economy due to their war, the ideologues imagine huge profits are constantly accumulated at the workers' expense.

When extortion is termed 'voluntary donation' on Maoist Party receipts, we can assume reality and truth play minimal roles in their economic strategy. (Incidentally, the Party has stopped issuing proof of payment now that they have promised to stop doing what they continue to do.)

The explicit clause in the recent Peace Agreement stating that commercial activity is free to function without harassment and arbitrary 'taxes' has not changed the parasitical attitude to extracting 'donations'. The proviso allowing displaced persons to re-occupy their property and homes is ignored by district commanders, while Deb Gurung, central politburo member and Maoist 'financial advisor', recently declared that much of the seized land would never be returned. The xenophobia so typical of Mao Zedong's China and Pol Pot's Kampuchea manifests itself in threats and agitations directed against Indian companies, despite declarations by Maoist luminaries that foreign investment is welcome.

The business community of Nepal, barely hanging on as it is, desperately hopes for a peace dividend. God knows they deserve it, but whether the gods are still paying attention remains to be seen. Should the Maoists wrest control of the Finance Ministry in the scuffle for interim government posts, the governing slogan of the New Nepal could be 'You Owe Me', and Maoist Economic Policy will be an oxymoron with a future.... Jai Nepal. ●

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- ❖ **The Primitive Touch** Solo exhibition of ceramics and pottery by Rekha Singh at Hotel Ambassador until 31 December. 9851050299
- ❖ **Heartbeat 2** Photographs at Tantra Pub, Thamel until 12 January.
- ❖ **Modern Art in Nepal** Must-see work of seven contemporary painters from Kathmandu, 10AM-6PM Sunday-Friday, 9AM-11AM on Saturdays at Kasthamandap Art Studio, Kopundole. 5011573

EVENTS

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- ❖ **Civic Concerns** One-day workshop with Youth Initiative, 10.30 AM-5.30 PM, 6 January at PIC, Kamladi. Registration Rs 100 by 2 January. 4107599
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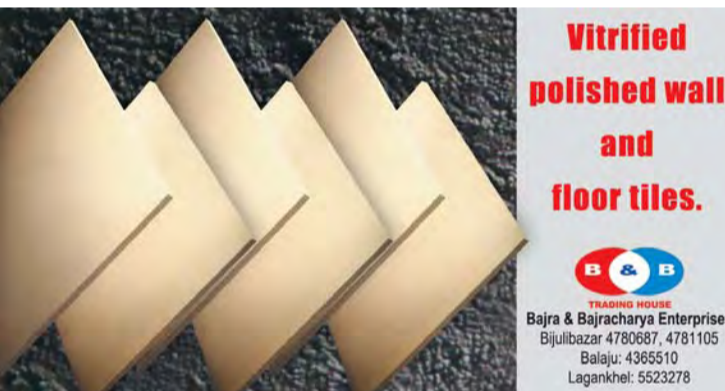
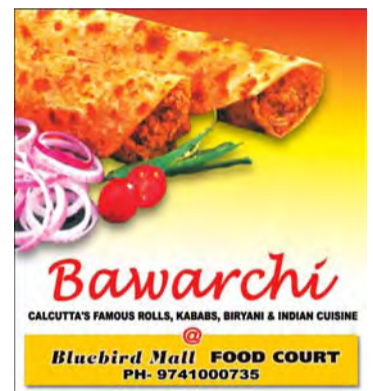
YAK YETI YAK

by MIKU



Paresh Rawal, Akshay Kumar, and Govinda star in this side-splitting comedy about a theatre troupe from India who are offered a chance to perform in England. On the day of their departure, the female lead opts out. A convoluted chase gets them involved in a massive conspiracy with a taxi driver, a drug baron, and a woman suffering from amnesia.

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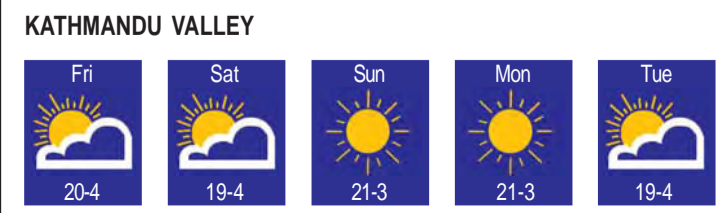
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NEPALI WEATHER by NGAMINDRA DAHAL



As a tumultuous year comes to an end, it's a relief to know that at least the winter looks set to be just as it always is. Coming to the end of December, we've received our usual quota of precipitation for the month, 17mm, though it did all come pouring down in one day. Temperatures will continue to fall at the rate of about a degree per week until the end of next month. Thursday afternoon's satellite picture shows pretty good conditions for New Year's Eve parties—as long as you have them in the evening. The Valley floor and low-lying riversides will continue to be swathed in fog through till almost lunchtime most days. It's a good time to go hiking up to the higher reaches if you need more sunshine in your life.



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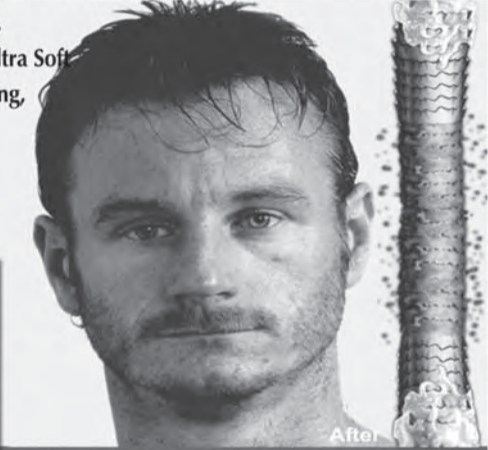


KIRAN PANDAY

FISHING FOR NEWS: A man uses a bamboo pole and a wire as a makeshift extension for his radio antenna on Saturday in Rangeli, Morang.

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Back to 2007

In a lot of ways, Nepal seems to be back to **Sat Sal** when the country got rid of its Rana Yoke and replaced it with a Shah Yoke. In 2007 BS there was jubilation about democracy and the country was headed towards a constituent assembly election, ditto in 2007 AD. We never did get a constituent assembly 55 years ago and the donkey's sixth sense tells him it will be the same in 2007 Anno Domini.



So Mr G has nixed King G's plans to head south for the winter exactly as the Ass predicted three weeks ago. Just as well, because someone may need to babysit the CP during his **birthday bash** on Saturday. Known for his wild ways, the prince has been behaving himself either at the golf course in Gokarna or in Nagarjun before both royal properties are nationalised.



What is the reason for Girijababu's renewed authoritativeness? On Monday, Girijaji was overheard raising his voice in his meeting with Pushpa Kamalji in Baluwatar, which surprised even the prime minister's personal physician, Dr Madhuji. After all, this is the first person in the world to become head of state **and** government with the help of supplementary oxygen. (Although Fidel Castro comes a close second.)



In his summit with **Prachandababu**, the prime minister is reported to have put his foot down on the police and VDC secretaries going back to their posts. It seems His Fierceness had no answer for the prime minister's own version of the 'Back To the Village National Campaign'.



One FAQ to the Ass's inbox is: where are the Maoists getting all that money to travel business class, stay at five star hotels and zip around Kathmandu in gas-guzzling SUVs. Well, the Pajero in question belongs to a political chap from Budanilkantha who didn't have the Rs 10 million that the Maoists were demanding from

him as revolutionary tax so they took away his car instead. Party honchos also enjoy **freebies** at a nature resort in Budanilkantha among other fine hotels in the nation's capital.



The controversy that just won't go away is of ambassador appointments. Not only did it fray fragile relations between the seven **above-ground** parties and the Maoists, but it has also created a major rift between Foreign Minister KP Oli and his UML comrades. No sooner had Makumje jettied off on an Ozzie junket, Oli was left to fend off stiff opposition from acting gen-sec Amrit Bohara, shadowy foreign minister Jhalanath Khanal and home minister-in-waiting Iswor Pokhrel, who were rooting for their own candidate for ambassador to China. It isn't the Ass's business, but he wonders whether the fact that all three are married to Newari women has anything to do with it. The trio even went crying to complain about Oli to PKD.



Don't think the Fearsome One lent a sympathetic ear to these tattlers because his party has itself been gunning for its candidate to be ambassador to one of the Big Three: United States, India or China. It hasn't dawned on the comrades that none of the three countries will accept a Government of Nepal (GOON) agreement for a Maoist emissary, least of all China. So it looks like His Awesomeness will have to settle for second-echelon postings like Denmark, France and Korea.



Talking about goonlike behaviour, Nepal 1 Numero Uno, Nalini Singh, was literally at the receiving end of a backlash from a reporter after the reporter refused to eat Nalini's shoe when offered. Said reporter also landed an uppercut on N's jaw. Ok, girls, let's keep it in the newsroom. Don't want to spark off another street riot.



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