2006, perhaps the most historic year in our history

A headline year

JANUARY

FEBRUARY

MARCH

APRIL

MAY

JUNE

JULY

AUGUST

SEPTEMBER

OCTOBER

NOVEMBER

DECEMBER

Sword into ploughshare

For well to wear!

LeCro 12 DC/W 185 Ones with Lightdrome

Landing

Great Expectation

What we think

Void

Light of Peace

Now Available at Bookstands

Editorial

CK Lal

Toons 2006

Backside
The most-used word in Nepali newspaper headlines in 2006 was the adjective ‘historic’. It was a historic Jana Andolan, a historic eightpoint 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 Pritibi Narayan Shah set out in 1770 on his conquests, our nation this year prepared to seek links with its founding dynasty. This chapter in our history isn’t over yet but there is a real danger that 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 Gyanendra’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 failed to miscalculate 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.

There has been never been one-way migration. Proof is in the rise of the Nepali-speaking community in Darjeeling, Uttarakhand, and the tarai. Our ruling classes have never minded marching across the border. If we really want to talk about migration, let’s open the discussion up. The migration of hillpeople down to the tarai was state-instigated and supported. As for current migration from across the border into the tarai, if it is really happening on the scale that some people worry 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 hill people.

The history of modern Nepal, the tarai has been an asset, but its residents have historically been used to moving across a certain area. Crowds of over 200,000 people started marching up on the Ring Road. Nepal had never seen people power on this scale. As the situation grew untenable, Indira Gandhi 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 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, but the protests soon spread nationwide. Doctors, journalists, lawyers, ordinary citizens and even civil servants joined in. This chapter in our history isn't over yet. 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 mistreatment of the government. The Maoists, ending a ceasefire, blocked highways, raided Tansen and Thankot. On the streets, the slogans of the seven-party alliance changed from “democracy” to “people” the people started to spill out into the streets spontaneously. A war-party nation had rejected the king’s strategy to rule with an iron fist. The municipal polls in February turned out to be a show, not just because of the boycott by the parties. King Gyanendra went on a series of televised walkabouts and started issuing press proclamations, mistaking public cynicism for support. He tried to convert orthodox Hindu reverence for monarchy into victory, but a year later even his advisers admitted the king had failed to miscalculate the domestic and international reaction.

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In 2006, we learnt to test hypotheses rather than assert labour militancy. It may take time for the comrades to give up the old ways. The interim constitution, though flawed and contradictory, has made an allling prime minister more powerful than even an absolute monarch. His to-do list for 2007 includes ensuring that units of government dismantled by the Maoists are restored so the constituent assembly can be held in a defined schedule. The interim parliament can sit within a month, but the Maoists will find it difficult to convince the international community to join the government without renouncing violence. This is not to say the Maoists are in jungles, but Nepal is not yet out of the woods. As this week’s riots in Nepalgunj 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 tari separatists to force shutdowns in such a volatile climate. The country is tinder-dry and hotheads on the royal right would be 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.

The people of Nepal are eventful in a year that has seen more violence than any other, and 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.

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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

"आइनेउनी उल्लेखनी नवीन नवीन नवीन नवीन। जानियो दिनबारा पतल जाती तिनो अनी दानियोकर्ता दानियो राजा फस्टाफ्सडरवाले राजियो हुदू दिनेयो।"
- नमस्ते र यातायात सुखद, समय अभिमन

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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.
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 the 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 ambrosy 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 powers. 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, newspapers and talking, I found myself saying “no, can’t happen, 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 caretakers 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 failure of old politics.

So, as a remarkable year in Nepal’s history comes to a close, I choose uncertainty over instant political analysis. I hedge my bets about the 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.

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 madhesi 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 NSF deserves sharp criticism for the violence its banda unleashed. Nepal shouldn’t be smouldering with communal
NICE GESTURE, BUT NOT NEARLY ENOUGH: Peace rallies and marches, such as this one in Nepalgunj on Wednesday, do not address the root causes of madhesi grievances.

The vicious Maoist conflict is winding down, but a new one is beginning, rooted in the exclusion and alienation of madhesis. There is a new, legitimate madhesi nationalism taking shape. If it can find proper expression and is engaged with, it will solve nothing. It’s hypocritical to appeal for social harmony without addressing the reasons for the grievances.

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 madhesis—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 hijacked 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 the people’s struggle, they’re mis-stepping in a big way. Jana Andolan II revived the people’s struggle, they’re mis-stepping in a big way. Jana Andolan II revived the people’s struggle, they’re mis-stepping in a big way. Jana Andolan II revived the people’s struggle, they’re mis-stepping in a big way. Jana Andolan II revived the people’s struggle, they’re mis-stepping in a big way.

We better listen up. The Lord Pashupatinath help this stereotyping and ignorance, then Nepal will only become stronger.

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TOON 2006

‘Congress reunification’
Robin Sayami in Himal Khabarpatrika, March

Crown Prince Paras donates rhino to Vienna Zoo
Robin Sayami in Himal Khabarpatrika, March

Jana Andolan
Robin Sayami in Himal Khabarpatrika, June

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

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.”
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 ordered 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 technological breakthrough we need in Nepal!

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, keeping 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!

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 uphills, 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.

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 Nepal 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? Posh, 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 deadmained, not being thick on the ground up there.
epalis 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 Knotted 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)
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 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 Birishni Poudel, assistant project officer for 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 smallpox, 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 people know, the more careful they are,” says Parsuram Shrestha, Bara’s public health administrator, adding that local government health offices in the districts are using their limited resources for this purpose too.

“Shot at a new life
For mothers and newborns, tetanus is a silent killer”

NARESH NEWAR in BARA

Girl students vaccinated for lifetime immunity against tetanus
Parents of new underage recruits anxiously await the return of their children.

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, Malamani, Dhanepai, Gumi, Dalchaur, Lekhara, Dasratpur, Neta, Glaumahadevi, Ramgath, and Kalyan are still in the Dasratpur cantonment site, undergoing hard training.

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 5,000 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. 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?”

bring our boys home

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

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, Malamani, Dhanepai, Gumi, Dalchaur, Lekhara, Dasratpur, Neta, Glaumahadevi, Ramgath, and Kalyan are still in the Dasratpur cantonment site, undergoing hard training.

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 5,000 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. 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?”

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

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 material 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, savannahs, 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.

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

( () Project Syndicate)
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 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 tragedy 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 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.

Unrestrained government spending further buoyed the economy during the Bush years, with fiscal deficits reaching new highs, 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.

Economic home truths could hit hard in 2007, unless the US changes its habits. Did your paper arrive on time this morning? If not, call our

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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 Helio-physical Year (IHY). The term ‘helio-physical’ is an extension of ‘geophysical’, and denotes that the Earth, Sun, and Solar System are to be studied not as separate domains but as 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 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.
- Saturn, in Leo, rises early in the evening, shortly before 6pm 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
W

The Swiss geologist Traci Hagen travelled across Nepal as the prototypical United Nations consultant in 1992, 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 Bhairab clinging to the tumbled steel ropes of a bridge that was bombed last year.

The documentary gets its name from the way the Tamangs 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.

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. Tucker 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 Buddhist- hinduists. 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 Tetanghe and Simbu.

As the film closes with an exquisitely simple shot of children playing on the bridge, their lingering song of the words and actions of the protagonists themselves.

Kesang Tseten went to one of the remotest parts of Nepal, the village of Tetanghe 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.

...
NEW YEAR

- New Year live music at Absolute Bar. Pulchowk by Rashmi Singh and group, 7PM onwards on 31 December. 5521408
- New Year’s Eve at Shangri-la Hotel’s Khele Garden from 7PM onwards with Stupa and the Soul Sisters, DJ Madox, and Super Dancers, as well as attractive prizes, dinner, and free Royal Stag. Rs 1,800 per person, Rs 3,000 for couples.
- Triple S Under the Chandelier New Year’s Eve from 7PM onwards at Hotel Himalaya, Kopundole. Rs 2,999 per person or Rs 4,000 for couples for live music, buffet dinner, door prizes, and free flowing drinks until 1AM. 5523529
- Earth, Air, Fire, and Water New Year’s Eve with the elements. 8PM onwards at Soobee Crown Plaza’s Megha Mahan Garden Terrace. 4273999
- New Years Eve Family dance party at Revolving Cocktail Bar, 9PM onwards. Entry free.
- Dinner and Dance Party Latin music, dinner specials, and a variety of drinks on New Year’s Eve at New Orleans Cafe, Thamel. 4700736
- New Year’s Eve at Dwarka’s. Welcome to a fusion of music, followed by live music by Anil Shahi and Side B, with dinner at the Toran Restaurant for Rs 3,000 per person. New Year’s getaway packages also available. 4479488
- Bollywood Temptations for the New Year at Box Bar, Hyatt Regency Kathmandu, with Ronica Jacob’s dance troupe and DJ Jimmy Tangree. 4491234
- New Year with unlimited drinks, buffet dinner, and live music for Rs 699 at Dolma Cafe, Thamel on 1 January. 4215069

EXHIBITIONS

- Festive Mood Paintings at Park Gallery, Lazimpat until 31 December. 4419353
- The Primitive Touch Solo exhibition of ceramics and pottery by Rekha Singh at Hotel Ambassador until 31 December. 9811050209
- 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 Kathmandhapad Art Studio, Kopundole. 5011573

EVENTS

- Season of Bells at Bluebird Mall. Food festival, fashion shows, free mehendi, astrology, auctions, lucky draw, wine tasting, carols, and more until 31 December. 4228823
- 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
- Hata Yoga classes, 7.30-8.30 AM and 5-6PM, Sunday to Friday, 40 percent discount at The Self Awakening Centre, Baber Mahal Revisited. 4256618

MUSIC

- Moksh Live with Stupa and 1974AD. 8.30 PM onwards on 29 December for Rs 200, 552621
- Open Mic Night at VoVa Cafe. Thamel every Friday, 8PM
- Classical fusion music at Java, every Saturday, 7PM onwards
- Gaine (Gandarbhas) perform at every lunch and dinner, Club Himalaya Nagarkot. 4700736

DINING

- Walk and Lunch every Saturday until 27 January at Shivapuri Heights Cottage. 9841371027
- Farmhouse Cafe 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
- Calculita’s famous rilay, briyani, kebabs, and Indian cuisine at Bawarchi, Bluebird Mall Food Court. 974100735
- Authentic Japanese cuisine daily from 12 noon to 3PM, Rs 500 at Hotel Shangri-la. 4412999
- Pizza straight from the woodfired oven at Java, Thamel. 4422519
- Cocktails and Mocktails happy hour every day 4-7PM at Kathmandu Revolving Restaurant, Rainbow Plaza, New Road
- Some Like It Hot Cozy winter cocktails with live music from Side B every Wednesday at Fusion-the bar at Dwarka’s.
- Woodfired Pizzas at Roadhouse Cafe, Thamel. 426768 and Pulchowk. 5521755
- AKA Pizza at Moksh, delivery available. 5526212
- Momo and Sekuwa Revolution every Saturday at the Tea House Inn, Nagarkot. 668008

GETAWAYS

- Experience the jungle at Rhino Resort in Mehgainha, Chitwan National Park. 2482544
- Winter Package Three days and two nights at Shangri-La Village Resort. Pokhara. Rs 7,499. 4412999
- Harmony of the min, body, and soul at Club Oasis, Hyatt Regency Kathmandu. 4491234

For inclusion in the listing send information to editors@nepalitimes.com
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.
In a lot of ways, Nepal seems to be back to Sit Sit 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 authoritative ness? 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 are 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 henchies also enjoy freshies 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 Makune jetted off on an O’sie junket, Oli was left to fend off stiff opposition from acting gen-sec Amrit Bohara, shadowy foreign minister Balaram Thapa and home minister-in-waiting Lusek 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.