Weekly Internet Poll  # 332. To vote go to: www.nepalitimes.com

Q. Were protesters right to disrupt the Prithbi Jayanti celebrations on Thursday?

Weekly Internet Poll  # 331

Q. Is the government addressing basic madhesi grievances?

Total votes: 2,339

#331                           12 - 18 January 2007                          16 pages                          Rs 30

Full story  p4

Full story  p2

Into the fray

ANAGHA NEELAKANTAN

There's a name for it now: UNMIN, the United Nations Mission to Nepal. The mandate: monitoring 'arms management' and elections to the constituent assembly.

The proposal for UNMIN was presented to the Security Council on Thursday for budgetary approval and comes as the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour prepares to visit Nepal this weekend. The UN under a new secretary general in 2007 needs a success story after Rwanda and East Timor, and Nepal may just be it.

But if the mission is to help restore lasting peace it will now have to be asked to focus on four issues: fighters, not just weapons, the terms of an acceptable constituent assembly election, potential spoilers such as the situation in the tarai, and pending human rights issues.

Ian Martin and his tiny team kept arms management in the spotlight throughout negotiations in 2006 until the signing of the peace accord and the tripartite agreement. But the new mission's mandate will be restricted by what the seven parties, the Maoists, and Nepal's neighbours want: the almost obsessive focus on cantonments and containers.

Partly it is theatrics. The UN will be here to add credibility to a dramatic homegrown process that is acceptable to the parties and puts the Maoists in the best possible light. But it is also a formula that had to be acceptable to India, which didn't want a precedent for UN peacekeeping so close to home.
Rethinking growth

An aid splurge by itself can’t propel economic growth

Charting the course of economic and social transformation during the most violent period in Nepal’s modern history is no small feat. But the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) has done just that by showing credibility in these uncertain times.

A testament to the document’s technical durability is the fact that successive governments, starting with pre-regional (Deuba), regional (Chaudhary and Thapa), partially-confederal (Deuba), deep-confederal (Gyanendra) to post-regional (Koirala), have drawn their economic and social policies entirely from it. These governments may have been preoccupied with politics to worry about where the economy was headed. But at least two of them could have declared the document void, their inaction can be interpreted as approval.

Now in its final year of usable life, the PRSP will feed into a three-year medium-term development plan. Despite continued friction over power-sharing in Kathmandu, the political climate over the past couple of years is likely to provide a far more benign context for economic development.

The state, which has been effectively restricted to district capitals during the conflict, can now assert a deeper presence. With the new government agencies already consultatively and extending their networks. If the post-1990 donor behaviour is any indication, this energy is likely to be matched by a commensurate inflow of aid money.

However, experience has shown that while an aid splurge which follows public euphoria over peace can stoke the egos of politicians and give them confidence and a sense of international validation, it cannot in itself, propel economic growth. This is why the PRSP’s biggest shortcomings was that it placed inordinate faith in the ability of aid-led public investment to generate growth.

For a projected annual growth target of 6.2 per cent over five years from 2004-05, it specified an investment requirement of Rs 600 billion. National savings, including remittances, could only cover Rs 90 billion. Planners intended to source the remaining from foreign grants and loans. At the macro level, the economics of motivating this ‘financing gap’ approach to development planning is the belief that public funds will lead to a proportionate growth in domestic income.

However, this aid investment growth strategy is generally weaker than believed and its theoretical foundation was abandoned by academics a decade ago. Yet it continues to remain the primary framework of analysis for policymakers in Nepal.

How much would Nepal’s per capita income be today if all of the Rs 260 billion Nepal has received in aid since 1975 had translated, rupee-for-rupee, into public investment? The historical path that Nepal’s incoherent development strategy and uncoordinated resource allocation (red line on graph) can be compared with how it would have evolved if aid had translated fully into public investment and the investment rate dictated growth as predicted by theory (blue line).

One per capita GFP would be roughly five times what it is now if all the aid we have received had gone into investment which in turn had spurred growth.

There is nothing wrong with subscribing to a particular theory or ideology, however flawed. But the misplaced confidence can’t come at the cost of attention to the real drivers of economic growth. It is widely accepted, for example, that the 1980s saw the best growth performance in Nepal’s recent macroeconomic history: when the private sector capitalised on a liberal trade regime. Yet, the government still holds on to the sticks of its private sector portfolio as its primary growth strategy.

Nepal’s decade-long conflict held back both the state and the private sector. Now that dumpy peace appears a real possibility, the private sector is eager to rebound. The upcoming development plan would spur greater growth if it focused on realising the policy and institutional constraints which shake the private sector, than by changing the public sector with more than just paper.

The effect of aid on growth also needs to be recalibrated if the aim is to reap the peace dividend.

Sailesh Tiwari is pursuing a PhD in economics at Cornell University in the United States and previously worked for the World Bank in Nepal.

Putting off the future

Dismissing the provisional constitution as merely a political text is hypocrisy

Nepal intellectualis is too preoccupied with the challenges of the present. Like most societies in a similar situation, we want to swiftly bury history and put off the future for as long as possible.

The battle at the Nepal Bar Association (NBA) and the honourable judges at the Supreme Court have minutely analysed the provisions of the interim constitution while it is being fine-tuned. The NBA says the proposed draft squeezes out loyalty to royalty.

The irony was lost on most who were at the Nepal Army base at Panchkhal on Wednesday. At a time when Nepal is readying to welcome the full strength of a United Nations monitoring mission, there was the chief of army staff inspecting Nepali soldiers readying to leave for UN peacekeeping duties in Congo and Haiti.

No one should have any illusions about the involvement of the United Nations in arms management in Nepal’s peace process. The UN’s role was the face-saving way to get the Maoists and the army to agree to stop fighting. For the guarantors it offered an opportunity to lay down arms without making it appear like it was a surrender. And for an army dragged into a dirty and unovable war, it was a neat way to come out smelling like roses and at the same time save its own lucrative UN peacekeeping contract.

It took a lot of shuttle diplomacy and behind-the-scenes effort to get the Indians to overcome their hang-ups about letting the UN in. Delhi finally agreed as long the UN was not a ‘peacekeeper’, but a ‘monitor’. Ian Martin’s team is hobbled with a limited mandate: both for arms management as well as to prevent new conflicts from igniting, for example, in the volatile tara.

The UN is a popular institution in Nepal. The state has a flag that has a good reputation and people have high expectations about its role. But this is a conflict we got ourselves into and we must solve it ourselves. The UN does not have, can’t force us to shake hands. Even so, the UN must be allowed to tackle potential spoilers to the peace process. After all the bad press it’s got in Rwanda and elsewhere, the UN needs Nepal as much as Nepal needs the UN. Here is one place where the world body has arrived before things have completely fallen apart.

There is a lot of cynicism about the UN, especially among the Kathmandus well-heeled who like to poke fun about how slow it is here to help. Even so, the UN must be allowed to tackle potential spoilers to the peace process.

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SLOW DOWN
Your editorial last week (ëBorn-again democracyí, #330) and Sheetal Kumariís column (ëDraw the lineí, Eyes wide shut, #330) might be alarmist, but you have a point. Whatís the hurry for elections when people are legitimately questioning the very composition of who is voting and for what. The least these jokers in government and the scary clowns who gave us this érevolutioní can do is, have the courtesy to listen to doubts. If they werenít too busy feathering their own nests high above the ground, maybe they would see that though we Nepalis passively paid the price for what they did, it is still our country and our right to decide how we rule it.

Ujjwala, email

It would be fatal for the parties to form a government with Maoists without convincingly solving the issue of weapons. Party cadres will bear the brunt of the Maoistsí ire if arms management is not pursued as the topmost priority. What catastrophe will occur if the constitutional assembly elections are postponed by a month? Most Nepalis donít underestimate the power of the Maoistsí underhand tactics and organisational skills. In history, rogue forces have never been reliable, especially not in coalition governments.

PB Rana, email

Why wonít people just accept that elections held in June will be a farce. The April movement has come and gone. Maybe ten more such movements will come and go. But as long as we make choices and decisions that in some way connect to corruption, short-sightedness, and laziness, the TIA symptom will be seen in all facets of the Nepali economy.

KIM Shakyas, email

RED ìREVOLUTIONí
On a recent visit to Nepal, I was confused about the achievement of Jana Andolan II. I didnít get why people were calling it éloktantraí and when I asked a taxi driver to explain it to me and he called it éimanpali tántarí, which I understood to mean anarchy. So where is the revolution? Everyone must say that it was a revolution, or risk being branded a royalist. In response to my question about what he was, the cabbie answered that he liked the king better than loktantra but he could not say that openly. I think loktantra and the revolution must be like the emperorsí new clothes. No one dares say anything. Only a child can come out and say that this was a paid-for, forced revolution. When will this child emerge from the crowd?

Dev, Hannover

UP IN THE AIR
I ìguess the airport just reflects the general state of the country.î The pilot could not explain it to me and he called it ìmanparií, #330). The April movement has come and gone. Maybe ten more such movements will come and go. But as long as we make choices and decisions that in some way connect to corruption, short-sightedness, and laziness, the TIA symptom will be seen in all facets of the Nepali economy.

Niraj Ojha, Marquette University

íIt is time to privatise Tribhuvan International Airport and have able hands manage and expand it. Through I am glad to be returning home after ten long years, I am not looking forward to the harassment at the airport and the hassles of travelling to and from TIAí.

R Paudel, email

NYANOPAN
Captain Vijay Lamsai éam a Nepali firstí (Nepal Pari, #328) was a great tribute to nationalism and patriotism. It will help us overcome the vested interests that are dividing us in the name of ethnicity and vested interest. Captain Sahib, I agree we are Nepali and letís also learn the principle of 3D: we must perform our Duty with Discipline then Democracy will automatically prevail.

Indra Kasatriy, University of Texas, USA

íI was so moved by éI am a Nepali firstí that I forwarded the article to all my friends at home and abroad, we would all like to help the Captainís Nyanopan initiative wherever we are.í

Manju Uprety, Vientiane

ENVY ENVY
The Nepali embassy in London reflects the dire state of our public services. Visitors have worryingly bad experiences with embassy personnel. The few times I have rung the embassy, the person who answers canít mange a full sentence in English. How do these people field calls from non-Nepalis?

SK Shrestha, email

SAD ASS
Sad to see that the Ass at Backside has become so wary of everything he (she?) sees (ëAnimal Farm in 1984). Read the situation, my friend, not the tea leaves. Itís not as bad or complicated or misleading as it looks.

JF, email

Letters
Nepali Times welcomes feedback. Letters should be brief and may be edited for space. While pseudonyms can be accepted, writers who provide their real names and contact details will be given preference. Email letters should be in text format without attachments with életter to the editorí in the subject line.

Email: letters@nepalitimes.com Fax: 977-1-5521013 Mail: Letters, Nepali Times, GPO Box 7251, Kathmandu, Nepal.
Kofi Annan passed, with 2006, into the realm of abstract and quasi-UN secretary-general—two years ago. We now have Ban Ki-Moon, a Korean, ruling from the 38th floor of the UN headquarters in New York. As is customary, many articles have appeared here and abroad detailing Annan’s 10-year-long stint as the top UN official.

Almost all have praised him for his robust leadership of the UN, though there has also been occasional criticism, as for the oil-for-food scandal and sexual abuse by UN peacekeepers. In Nepal, the coverage of Annan’s tenure has focussed almost entirely on how his personal interest got the world body involved in resolving the conflict.

All true but, as he departs the world stage, Annan’s career graph, particularly in the latter years, has lessons for Nepali peace process.

Annan was the UN under-secretary general for peacekeeping when the Rwanda genocide exploded in 1994. The record shows that if he, and the UN, had acted with sanity then, rather than with their deadly bureaucratic mindset, the genocide could have been averted.

In 1994, General Romeo Dallaire, a Canadian general in command of the UN’s puny peacekeeping force in Kigali, was informed by a government source that Hutu extremists, backed by the Hutu government, intended to murder thousands of Tutsis in the coming months. This was an intelligence scoop of the first magnitude. The source offered to tell the UN where the arms caches were hidden. All he wanted in exchange was safe passage for him and his family.

The general (who later went crazy because of his inability to stem the genocide), immediately faxed the information to the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, headed at the time by Annan. He urged safe passage for the source and appealed for authorisation to take out the arms caches. What did Annan’s department say in return?

“I can’t tell you. You have no business, General, interfering in the internal affairs of a member state. We advise you to relay whatever information you have to the Rwandan government.”

Then UN secretary-general Boutros Boutros Ghali could have overruled his subordinate, but he signed off on the cable prepared by Mr Annan’s department.

What happened next needn’t be recounted in detail. With the UN taking a hands-off approach, extremist Hutus did exactly what the source had warned they would. From 6 April to mid-July 1994, Rwanda was hell, as hordes of Hutu extremists, egged on by the government, slaughtered 800,000 unarmed Tutsi and moderate Hutu civilians. The arms cache sure came in handy, as did the communiqué FM stations that spread communal hatred in realtime.

General Dallaire was reduced to defending his UN compound, in which he managed to give refuge to 20,000 Tutsis. Unable to reconcile himself to what had happened in Rwanda under his watch, he took to drinking heavily. He was later found a broken man, drunk and sprawled on a park bench in Quebec.

This dark episode in mankind’s history did not stop Annan’s progress. Two years later, all was forgotten and he was chosen to lead the UN as its new secretary-general. The man certainly learned on the job though. In the later years of his tenure, he pushed hard to avert genocide.

In 2006, into the realm of ‘soft’ peacekeeping proposed by the Kofi Annan, it is not the mother-of-all-solutions. Its intentions are almost always noble, but it is not what we want it to be, when we want it to be. It cannot perform miracles when miracles are not wanted.

There is a lesson in this for others. When Nepal manages the future will ultimately depend on how we Nepalis behave, not on what the UN does.

The drama is necessary. UN involvement in other world hotspots shows that a UN-led peace process is sometimes the only way to provide a face-saving way for warring sides to reconcile. The UN’s mission in Guatemala is probably closest to the Nepal situation—the UN directed a peace process after the conflict had wound down, so the country could recover from decades of war.

But Guatemala also provides a cautionary tale of the public security fallout in the long-term when a UN- administered demilitarisation and demobilisation is not accompanied by an overhaul of the security establishment. When they are flushed worldwide next week, Maoist weapons being packed into white containers will be an impressive public relations image. But the fighters will remain.

Those in camps have been told by commanders they will be integrated into the Nepal Army. The party has not said anything on this and no one is talking to the generals anymore. Security reform could therefore have long-term implications to the peace process, but it isn’t part of the UN’s mandate to address it.

Neither is defining the parameters of an acceptable election. Secretary-general Ban Ki-Moon’s proposal includes technical assistance for the electoral process, but like the arms management, clause this could remain a cosmetic role.

Maoists’ concerns are still being framed by the government and Maoists as law-and-order issues, rather than calls for inclusion. Even if tarai violence flares threatening a return to conflict, the UN mission’s current terms of reference will not allow it to do much. The situation in Nepal may be different than Sudan, but there are complexities here that could catch all sides off guard.

In the current situation, the mandate of the UN can only be enlarged if the seven parties and the Maoists want it. What they appear to have settled for is a set of conditions that will see Nepal go through this transition rather than guide long-term change. Civil society, which is now vocal on issues such as impunity and the interim constitution, could be the factor that swings public debate.

Fears that the changeover from Kofi Annan to Ban Ki-Moon will reduce UN engagement here might be unfounded. A letter presented to the Security Council Thursday will be subject to the usual tensions between the interests of India, the US, and China and the attention the Council is willing to give Nepal between bigger wars elsewhere.

The UN might be in a ‘monitoring’, rather than a ‘peacekeeping’ mode here, but its commitment to ensure due process in elections takes the mission into the realm of ‘soft’ peacekeeping proposed by the landmark 2000 Brahimi Report on UN peacekeeping. That report also proposed intelligence and the use of ‘necessary force’ as acceptable strategies. The first might come in handy here, especially in preventing a different conflict.
Dabur Nepal has re-opened its greenhouse for rare and endangered plants in Banepa. The greenhouse was shut down on 21 December after the Maoist-affiliated All Nepal Trade Union threatened employees and made repeated demands that its members be given employment. Dabur says the issue was resolved through the mediation of Barapac VDC representatives. The greenhouse creates thousands of jobs and helps preserve 12 endangered species of rare herbs, through over 40 satellite farms and cooperatives in 22 districts.

Fortune cookie

Fortune Cookie Ventures was launched this week at CAN Info Tech 2007. The company is an international joint venture set up by successful ICT entrepreneurs in Nepal and Intelligent Capital LLC, a US-based international venture capital firm. Fortune Cookie plans to both provide venture capital to deserving innovators and work as an incubator for start-ups in the ICT sector. Fortune Cookie intends to invest up to Rs 100 million in Nepalis ICT sector over the next two years, and hopes that by creating successful ventures, it can attract much-needed foreign investment in ICT.

PREETI: Asian Thai Noodles has launched its 12 outlets around Kathmandu. The bank plans to open a new branch in Itahari.

The real test of democracy for the eight parties getting into the new government—and the plethora of political forces that will still stay outside—is to see how they can bring discipline and governance within their own parties. Democracy thrives best when parties are subject to strict internal governance, and this is replicated at the nation level of government. Student and trade unions are the arms of their political masters and the leaders should know how and when to rein them. Destroying government property is not acceptable in any country where political sanity prevails. When people supposedly part of the government torch vehicles and vandalise buildings regularly as a matter of course, what can one do but think that they are destroying public property so they can make some money in the next purchases or construction. Law and order is deteriorating and the cop don’t give us enough of a sense of security. Where’s the sense in not re-installing police posts, when citizens can only be protected by their security apparatus?

The perception of the state of security, and the publicity one gets in the international press, determine the country’s image, and that’s what tourism and investments flows depend on. That’s clearly not the message conveyed by pictures of torchcd vehicles and student protests in the dailies. Perhaps peace is back, but who will come, hearing of strikes at hotels in Pokhara at the beginning of a global holiday week and a possible potential strike on New Year’s Day. Many countries and cities in the world are peaceful, but are still perceived as cities of disruption. Kolkata may have managed to redefine its image as an investment-friendly destination, but it’s still seen as a city under siege and so, despite being a very friendly city, is hardly perceived as a destination.

In a country where over half the population is under 25, youth force counts for something, and the Maoists have demonstrated how this power can be harnessed. But our youth leadership in the unions and parties hardly demonstrates its genuine commitment to doing something for the youth. Remaining a union leader by studying at the same campus, doing the same course for over a decade hardly makes one an iconic figure for youth who believe in education. A curious parallel is in political parties that are driven by age and provide a platform for young people to take leadership positions.

Yes, there is a visible peace dividend—the smile back on the faces of Nepalis around the country. But the perceived peace dividend gives one the right to take away that smile. Leadership is not only demonstrated by knowing how to manage parliament and getting a plebem of legislation passed. It is also about managing ones cache and having the power to restrain them. Without this, we can look forward to an extended fight for the ownership of the dividends of democracy.

You CAN tech too

Information, communication, and entertainment at CAN Info Tech 2007
Slack Sitaula

Samruk, 9 January

Home Minister Krishna Prasad Sitaula seems to come a close second after the king on the list of people busy fiddling with their flute while the nation burns. The man responsible for ensuring the safety of citizens and their property has failed to organise any meeting of the National Security Council since 21 November. Many have attributed the current chaos in the country to this negligence. A Nepalgunj SSP, Rajendra Singh Bhandari has been found to have instigated the riots recently, and proves Sitaula and the Home Ministry’s incompetence. The Security Committee established under the chairmanship of the Home Minister is now nearly defunct. A committee member claims that the turmoil in the country could be minimised to a great extent if it could discuss the security situation and the role of the security forces. Members say that the home minister’s late arrivals and early exits from the meetings have largely contributed to his inability to address law and order. What is the point having a security committee that has no role in ensuring national security?

Premier offices

Deshantar, 7 January

Looks like the structure/organisation of the Prime Minister’s Office is to be changed, and a team has been set up to re-organise the space. In the past the responsibilities of different ministries inside the office had not been clearly defined. Now each ministry will have a desk from where the ministries will be advised and monitored. There used to be no restrictions on the number of advisors the prime minister could have—in 2001, when Sher Bahadur Deuba was in office, he had 48 advisors, most designated as special first class officers with concomitant salary and allowances. Now there will be only five. A new department will be set up to invite intellectuals on a regular basis to advise the government on policy-related issues. Experts say that such a set-up will reduce the costs of running the office.

The eight parties are exhibiting a dangerous trend, neglecting the society that lies outside their alliance. They have been vehemently dismissing suggestions made to them by aware citizens, professional groups, the judiciary, and ordinary people who have been cautiously watching the decisions the alliance has made. The manner in which the eight parties have been making binding decisions, without paying heed to other peoplesí proposals is a sign that the democratic political process is shaping up in a dictatorial manner.

There arenít only eight parties in this country. The alliance canít afford to reject other parties in the democratic process merely on the grounds that they didnít participate in the Peopleís Movement. The essence of democracy is not to accept full support, but also to expect opposition. Yet, the parties have made no effort to hear the concerns of indigenous groups, madhesis or dalit communities. At a time when the interim constitution is laid to take a strong position on the rights of these very groups, it is nothing but arrogance on the part of the alliance not to respect their suggestions and comments.

The parties have been also disregarding the judiciary. They totally ignored the recommendations that the Nepal Bar Association made at national assembly. Even worse, they protested the recommendations by the Supreme Court justices, whose sole aim in suggesting some amendments was to help shape a well-written constitution. The parties have not based their arguments on the Supreme Court justicesí suggestion that the recommendations should be accepted in a democratic society of an independent judiciary. They are all set to establish a democratic Nepal, and yet they act no different than the royal regime.

Prime Minister Girija Koirala even refused to receive the recommendations that the justices prepared after intensive discussions. Surely it is inappropriate for the prime minister to not even give them time of day. Will the judiciary enjoy the independence it should in the future?
deputy prime minister, his office will no longer be in the PMO or even Singha Darbar, but in the ministry for which he is responsible. The National Planning Commission, which is organised under the chairmanship of the prime minister, has also been asked to leave the premises to make more space for the PMO.

Vehicles driving to the PMO must execute seven difficult turns along the way. In 1995 plans were made—but never implemented—to construct a direct route from Singha Darbar’s northwest corner to the office. The new team is now all set to build this new road and implement the 20-year-old plan. It is understood that the building which houses Nepal Army’s 3rd Jung Battalion (and is the crown prince’s favourite hangout), will have to be destroyed to make way.

**Tarai violence**

Chudamani Wagle, 10 January

A videotape of the incidents in Nepalgunj on 20 December in the possession of Jana Aastha shows police involved in the violence. They are seen destroying shops and throwing furniture onto fires. In the clash between pahadis and madhesis, the Nepal Police is siding with pahadis and throwing furniture onto fires. They are seen destroying shops and homes, and SSP Rajendra Singh Bhandari inscribed madhesi protesters, telling them to “go to India to protest.”

Many argue that the violence intensified because the Home Ministry is not strong enough. The ministry should pay very careful attention while selecting regional and district administrators. Rumour has it that the Ministry has become the dumping ground for retiring officers, who are being sent out as chief district officers.

Regional administrators are to play a big role in the elections to the constituent assembly, yet the administrator sent to the eastern region in Shankar Chaudhary from the Ministry of Agriculture. Similarly the mid-west got Shankar Pandey, who has never been in the Home Ministry.

Before him it was Anand Prasad Shrestha, Joint Secretary from the Finance Ministry. There are many government officials who have worked with the Home Ministry and are capable of being CDOs.

The government should be busy ranking ministerial cabinet-level decisions and transferring officers to districts to hold things together until the elections. Instead, it is transferring people who have no credentials. Recently the Home Ministry transferred Tilakram Desjo, Land Revenue Chief, to Makwanpur. Meanwhile CDOs accused by the Rayamajhi Commission of being involved in the suppression of Jana Andolan II are yet to be recalled.

**Who he?**

Ghanta Ra Bichar, 10 January

Everyone is curious about a new face that is being seen regularly at high-level meetings. First seen at the meeting to sign the 12-point agreement between the Maoist and the seven parties in 2005, he has been present at all historic meetings since. He was included in a group picture taken after the historic peace agreement in November 2006, and since then more and more people have been asking about him. Our investigation has concluded that this new face is Animesh Kumar Singh (circled in yellow), a former professor of chemistry at Amrit Science Campus.

In the last few months Singh has successfully maintained a low profile, but is said to exert influence in high places. He played an important role in bringing together the Maoists and the parties, and we understand that he has the trust of both Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Girija Prasad Koirala. In fact, heis become so close to Koirala that people in the Nepal Congress who used to try to influence Koirala are starting to be jealous of this new friendship.

Singh talked to Ghanta Ra Bichar about his commitment to the peace process and the making of a new Nepal.

**What is your role in the many high-level political meetings at which you’ve been spotted?**

I want the world to know Nepal as a peaceful, developed, democratic country. After 1 February, I could not remain in Nepal, so I moved to India and started working actively to strengthen the loktantrik movement. The political leadership was impressed by my sincerity and commitment, which is perhaps why the leadership trusts me. I used to be involved with the Nepal Congress and in 1997 was appointed a board member of Gorkhapatra. I was in constant touch with Baburam Bhattarai during the second round of talks circa 2002. I firmly believe the Maoists and political parties should work together. I also believe monarchy has to be abolished if we want a truly loktantrik and peaceful Nepal.

You have been linked with the Indian intelligence service (RAW) and New Delhi’s South Block. If a madhesi is politically active, they are automatically linked to either South Block or RAW. There is no truth in these accusations. I am a student of international relations, and my training teaches that a democratic country should have good relations with all the countries, especially with its neighbours. If people misinterpret my beliefs, it is their problem.

If Nepal were divided according to caste, ethnicity, language, how would that affect our future? Those who have been oppressed and left behind need to play an active role in the state structure. Those living in tarai are also Nepalis, and need to be treated like they belong. Ignoring the tarai, or failing to address tarai-related issues will only push this country towards more conflict. All Nepalis should be able to proudly say that they are Nepali.
The British Film Festival is on its sixth outing in Kathmandu from 15-19 January at Gopi Krishna cinema. The festival, organised by the British Council, showcases a diverse selection of contemporary British cinema. All films start at 6.30 PM, and tickets are available free of cost and in advance from the reception at the British Council, Lainchaur. Any remaining tickets will be available the day of the film, from 6.10 PM at the theatre. The festival will travel to Pokhara where The Mistress of Spices, Nanny McPhee and Hotel Rwanda will be screened at Shree Krishna cinema hall from 26-28 January. The festival is supported and sponsored by the British Embassy Kathmandu, Gopi Krishna, Standard Chartered Bank, Water Communication, and Radisson Hotel.

**The Mistress of Spices**, dir: Paul Mayeda Berges, 16 January. Tilo (Aishwarya Rai), an outsider from India, runs a spice store in San Francisco. She has the gift to see into her customers’ lives and desires, and give them spices to help them get what they want. But when he sees the world will not intervene in the massacre of minority Tutsis, he finds the courage to open his hotel to 1,200 refugees. With a rabidly violent militia at the gates, he has only his wits and words to help keep them alive for another hour, another day. Co-starring Sophie Okonedo, Nick Nolte and Joaquin Phoenix, Hotel Rwanda is the kind of film that can change the world.

**Hotel Rwanda**, dir: Terry George, 15 January. This film is the true story of one man’s brave stance against savagery during the 1994 Rwandan conflict. As his country descends into madness, five-star hotel manager Paul Rusesabagina (O’Neill) sells out to save his family. But when the world will not intervene in the massacre of minority Tutsis, he finds the courage to open his hotel to 1,200 refugees. With a rabidly violent militia at the gates, he has only his wits and words to help keep them alive for another hour, another day. Co-starring Sophie Okonedo, Nick Nolte and Joaquin Phoenix, Hotel Rwanda is the kind of film that can change the world.
Joyeux Noel, dir: Christian Carion, 19 January. It’s Christmas 1914. When a conscripted opera singer in the German army (Benno Furmann) displays his vocal skills during a Yuletide visit from his soprano girlfriend (Diane Kruger), his rendition of Silent Night is soon accompanied by the pipes of a Scottish padre (Gary Lewis) and his regiment occupying the opposing trenches with their French allies. A brief truce is agreed upon by officers of both sides, who discover they have unexpected connections. Officers and soldiers both discover a surprisingly strong kinship with their fellow combatants. This wonderful European film is a sobering tribute to the spirit of humanitarianism in dark days of conflict.

Nanny McPhee, dir: Kirk Jones, 17 January. In this wickedly charming tale, Emma Thompson portrays a mysterious woman with special powers who enters the household of the recently widowed Mr Brown (Colin Firth) and attempts to tame his seven very naughty children. The children have managed to drive away 17 previous nannies but, as Nanny McPhee takes control, they begin to notice the misbehaving with magical and startling consequences.

Vera Drake, dir: Mike Leigh, 18 January. Vera Drake (Imelda Staunton) features a working class heroine who harbours a deep personal secret, and explores the dramatic fallout after that secret is revealed. Mike Leigh painstakingly recreates postwar London and its atmosphere of austerity, and highlights its social divisions, double standards, and the moral controversies connected with Vera’s charitable pursuit. But it is a pursuit that unites her and makes of her a victim or, some would say, a martyr.

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ENTRANCE FREE
Nepal needs to get out and see the world for lessons on inclusiveness

One thing constantly lacking in Nepal is context beyond the country’s borders. To understand a development today, people reach back into local history, to 1990 or 1856, but never to other lands, other experiences, or other periods in history. This is unhelpful, dangerous even.

Take the explosion of grievances at the moment. Madhesis finally asserting their feelings about loss of influence in the tarai, and no influence in Kathmandu. Dalits fighting Brahminical casteism; women fighting for a fraction of what they deserve in this hugely discriminatory society. Janajatis airing long-felt frustrations at being left out of the mainstream.

All these are part of the process of historical natural justice. You simply cannot, in the absence of effective authoritarianism (and not the tinpot variety that has been practiced here) bend people to the will of an inept ruling elite. Bahun-Chhetri domination is over in Nepal. Period. No arguments. But how to turn the unravelling of a bad consensus into a thousand flowers blooming, how to harness the honest energy of good people looking for a place in a more equitable dispensation—that isn’t yet on offer.

Well it may rankle—and it shouldn’t—but it is worth looking towards India’s experiences. At independence in 1947, India was a strong, unitary state with power concentrated in New Delhi, mostly in the hands of an anglophile, westernised elite that was far from the concerns of the poor, heterogeneous populace. Dalits, women, non-Hindus, south Indians, all were rare in the circles of power, and numerous among the disadvantaged. There were epic struggles to correct this imbalance, and they continue. A few measures have hugely relieved the most dangerous stresses and strains of inequity, and Nepal would do well to begin studying them.

In the 1950s, India began reorganising its states on the basis of language. Thus were born Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra, Gujarat, and others. Local grievances based on ethnicity were salved with a degree of political power that has only grown since then. It’s a no-brainer: Nepal must consider federalism, and quickly.

Communities that are small on a national scale will have real influence in their own state or province, but will also have to work with minorities themselves, learning the ropes of compromise and handling power. Federations are the most advanced form of government because they are more democratic and allow people of various backgrounds and ethnicities a voice through different outlets of government.

Consider the USA, Canada, and Germany, where components of the federation have powers of taxation and domestic policy, while the national capital retains defence, macro-finance, foreign affairs, and a broad leadership role on large, national issues. India is moving in this direction too, as it soars economically.

As for inclusion, we don’t need to reinvent the wheel here. We need a national debate on reservations and quotas for the excluded, as in India from independence onward. A few groups have held far too much clout in this country for far too long, and affirmative action is the only way to jumpstart the process of inclusion. In India, they drew up sweeping schedules of backward castes and tribes and added them to the constitution. They passed amendments requiring women to be part of the legislative process. There were imperfections, but it was historically necessary, and such steps have forced Indians of all degrees of inclusion to debate, compromise, and find ways to work together. It worked, however tentatively at times.

Beyond India, we have many other examples of attempts at inclusion succeeding and failing. Think Sri Lanka, South Africa and yes, the USA. Let’s open our minds and start looking outwards. Most of the ideas that have brought lasting change in Nepal have come from outside, from Maoism to market economics. Let there be no nonsense about India and its nefarious designs. The world works by learning from the strengths and weaknesses of others. Let’s join the process and set aside the uniqueness of exclusion and political stasis once and for all.
C

cesefire or not, Nepal’s countryside is still dangerous. Last year, 146 Nepalis died in explosions of socket, shrapnel, and cylinder bombs, and landmines stockpiled or planted by both the Maoists and the security forces. The 86 explosions were either triggered by ‘natural’ causes, such as heat or lightning, or were ‘victim-activated’. January 2006 was the worst month, according to research by UNICEF, with nearly one explosion that injured civilians every three days.

‘A ceasefire and peace process do not mean that there is safety,’ says UNICEF mine and bomb risk expert Hugues Laurenge. He explains that the danger from what are collectively called ‘ improvised explosive devices’ is greater now, because civilians have greater freedom and flexibility of movement. Also, although the military positions of the Maoists and the security forces are being dismantled, not all explosive devices are being removed or defused.

Rough estimates say there are anything from 100,000-500,000 such devices waiting to go off. The estimates vary vastly, because no one is really sure how many explosives are in storage, and the Maoists aren’t saying where their caches are.

As part of the arms management deal, both the Maoists and the Nepal Army have agreed to deposit all IEDs in planned storage areas about 800m outside each cantonment site around the country. The plan is to store 5,000 in each area, but military experts say unstable devices such as commercial devices with detonators, simply need to be destroyed. It is more safe to store rifles than IEDs, warns Laurenge, explaining that one bomb being triggered in a storage would set off thousands of others.

Maoist soldiers will be the most at risk if they smuggle bombs into the camps in violation of the agreement. In December, four Maoist combatants were seriously injured in the Chitwan cantonment and had to be airlifted to Kathmandu for emergency medical treatment. Three weeks ago, an explosion near the IED storage house in the Surkhet cantonment injured nine Maoists.

The arms management agreement states that bombs and landmines are to be removed from civilian areas and taken out of barracks and PLA camps to storage facilities within 60 days of the signing of the deal. That would make the cut-off date 27 January, which we are now told is ‘ not technically possible’.

The Maoists say they have begun the process of finding and storing their bombs, while the Nepal Army have begun assessing their minefields. The NA, which uses both anti-personnel and command-detonated mines, has 49 minefields all over the country. These are now being fenced off, but local communities continue to be in danger, especially from anti-personnel mines, which are hidden and, because they are more sensitive, take more time to clear. The NA’s 15 teams, which consist of 100 personnel with de-mining expertise, can only clear command-detonated devices. Clearing the deadly anti-personnel mines will need international experts.

Many IEDs are said to be planted in civilian areas near households, posing an especially huge risk to children, who are likely to come across the devices and try to play with them. In many districts, the bombs, like the mines, are still under the ground.

For over six months last year, heavy traffic was regularly passing over a 56kg cylinder bomb planted by the Maoists under a section of Rautahat’s Gaur-Chandranighapur road, which had since been sealed. Proposed solutions included digging it up with a bulldozer, which would not just have killed the driver, but potentially spread shrapnel over a radius of a few kilometres (‘Beneath the surface’, #324).

There have been other incidents, such as where socket bombs have heated up and exploded, killing children playing nearby, and landmines have been set off by lightning. These all underscore the need for a risk awareness program like the one UNICEF runs until the explosives are destroyed. ‘We will be organising a massive campaign starting at the end of this month to teach civilians, who are most at risk, about explosive devices,’ says Laurenge.

BOMB EDUCATION: This brochure, distributed by the UNICEF and Nepal Army, educates civilians about the risks of bomb and mine explosions.

Ticking away
Peace doesn’t always mean safety

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NATION
Cruise control

A single rat provoked panic on the island of Santa Fe in the isolated Galápagos archipelago, where conservationists now strive to keep foreign wildlife at bay as effectively as hundreds of miles of open ocean did for millions of years.

The rat, alleged to have arrived on the MV Discovery, a giant British cruise liner that visited the islands in April, this weekend, the ship returns to the Galápagos, and arriving with it are 460 paying passengers, protestors and a campaign to protect the islands from mass tourism.

Conservationists on the Galápagos have also found swarms of foreign insects on the islands since the liner’s last visit and fear its return today could introduce more alien species that might further disrupt the sensitive eco-systems.

The Discovery, the first large cruise ship to have visited the islands, is scheduled to return twice each year. Permits recently granted by the Ecuadorian government could see one cruise ship stop there a month.

Leonor Stjepic, director of the Galápagos Conservation Trust, warned that such an acceleration in visitor numbers could overwhelm, they said, elderly cruise passengers.

Infrastructure was expected to cope with the foreign visitors, but tourism experts were concerned.

“Infrastructure has improved, the local businesses increased by 5 percent, a third of what was expected. Infrastructure was overwhelmed, they said, and local tour operators, who take visitors around the different islands, were forced to land large boats on fragile shorelines because elderly cruise passengers were unable to scramble in and out of rubber dinghies.

(The Guardian)
The year in pictures (#329) brought back a flood of memories, most of them disturbing. My personal favourite features a stage littered with old leftist battleaxes looking equally concerned for the proletariat and their own self-importance. In the foreground are the once-revered icons of world communism: Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao.

Slander the Hand at will, but never accuse him of being a ‘morning person’. When first laying eyes on this picture some months ago I furtively checked the date, anxious I’d woken up in a time warp. Latent hangovers made their presence felt as I recalled that the last time I’d seen this gang of five was on a CPN-Maoist receipt for ‘donations’ paid under death-threat. (Did the lightbulb just go on for readers who still wonder why Foreign Hand needs an alias?)

That fateful morning my lurking suspicions were confirmed: the ancient gods had forsaken us and fled, no longer willing to intervene and save us from ourselves. Who could blame them for being fed-up, as the country teetered on the edge of an abyss, with violent crime, extortion and kidnapping spiralling out of control.

Two revelations came to me on a wave of nausea: we have the dubious honour of living in the only country on earth where such a parade of reprobates isn’t laughed off the stage, and I was staring at the wannabe New Gods of the New Nepal.

The transformation of the political landscape had mutated into a clash of belief systems. Like high priests of any faith, the politburo demands blind loyalty. Traditional religious practices are considered direct competition, to be brutally uprooted and eliminated. But thousands of years of culture cannot be wiped out overnight, and the human mind is bound to draw parallels between the old and the new. The Hand wondered what comparisons the masses would make when faced with these forbidding, alien images.

Karl Marx, who wrote the book that started all this, would surely be perceived as the new Brahma. His long hair and voluminous beard are reminiscent of the creator deity, while his stern expression makes us feel guilty for being born non-proletariat. The legend of Brahma growing four heads to keep his eye on a beautiful goddess dovetails perfectly with the spy-ridden police states created in the name of Marxism.

Next is Frederic Engels, who looks like Karl’s better-groomed brother. The tiny minority in the know would recognise him as a Baan, the god’s faithful helper. As Ganesh has his shrew offering sweets, Marx had Engels, offering financial support when the Bhagavad Gita of communism, Das Kapital, was penned.

Vladimir Lenin glares smugly from centrestage. The man who overthrew the tsars and created the USSR from the ashes would be the one to oust Shiva from heaven, as destroyer, regenerator, and destroyer.

Josef Stalin’s picture looks to the future, perhaps to a time when people have forgotten the 20 million deaths he caused. The audience would likely assign him the role of Bhairab, terrible defender of the faith. Recognised the world over as one of the 20th century’s worst criminals, the fact that Stalin was being honoured downtown led me to despair. There was no denying it any longer: wilful ignorance and denial of history had triumphed.

To complete the line-up, we have Mao Zedong, in whose name our civil war was launched forty years too late. An element of Kali is detected in that inscrutable visage; try to imagine a necklace of 100 million skulls sacrificed to his purges, famines, and Cultural Revolution.

Downsizing 33 crore gods to a mere half-dozen (no doubt Prachanda, already a legend in his own mind; covets a spot beside Mao) requires ruthless eradicating.

Down with Vishnu the Stabiliser, the greatest counterrevolutionary ever, pack Lord Krishna off to re-education camp for his errant ways onto time to frolic with maidens in the workers’ paradise. Once praying for good luck is a crime against scientific socialism, exile Ganeshe to Siberia, and while you’re at it put the Buddha to work in a munitions factory (that’ll teach him).

Sophisticated philosophy and belief, conceived over thousands of years to cope with the complexities of the human condition, is reduced to a few simple exhortations and rigid adherence to ideology. The Hand knows a bad deal when he sees one. Trading a rich heritage of diversity and spirituality for a tawdry gang of has-beens in outdated suits is a losing proposition, big time. Jai Nepal!
MUSIC
- Inner Groove at Moik Live, 12 January for Rs 150. 5526212
- Open Mic Night at Vivela Cafe, Thamel every Friday, 8PM
- Classical fusion music at Jatra, every Saturday, 7PM onwards
- Gaïne (Gandharbas) perform at every lunch and dinner. Club Himalaya, Nagarkot. 6680000

DINING
- Walk and Lunch every Saturday until 27 January at Shivapuri Heights Cottage. 9841271927
- International Brunch weekends, 11AM-3PM for Rs 499 per person (Rs 299 for children) at Hotel Himalaya. 5523900
- Light nouvelle snacks and elaborate cordon bleu meals at La'Soon, Pulchok. 5521755
- Light fare at Village Resort. Dine alfresco with the birds and butterflies. 4375280
- Te savour Tibetan delicacies at the new Tibetan restaurant and Nepal’s first noodle bar, Bluebird Mall Food Court. 5011573
- Calcutta’s famous rolls, briyani, kebabs, and Indian cuisine at Bawarchi, Bluebird Mall Food Court. 9741000735
- Japanese Food at the Coffee Shop at Hotel Shangri-la, 12 noon till 3PM, Rs 499 per person. 4142299
- Woodfired Pizzas at Roadhouse Cafe, Thamel. 4262768, Bhat Bhateni, delivery available. 4262587 and Pulchok. 5521755
- AKK Pizza at Moksh, delivery available. 5526212
- Momo and Sekuwa Revolution every Saturday at the Tea House Inn, Nagarkot. 6680048
- Happy Hours at the Lost Horizon Bar, Hotel Shangri-la, from 5-7PM.
- Cocktails and Mocktails happy hour every day 4-7PM at Kathmandu Revolving Restaurant, Ratna Plaza, New Road
- Some Like It Hot: Cory winter cocktails with live music from Side B every Wednesday at Fusion’lithe bar at Dwarika’s.
- Drinks and Dancing Theme Saturday nights at Jbar. 4418209

For inclusion in the listing send information to editors@nepalitimes.com
RIOT CONTROL: A contingent of the Nepal Army going on UN peacekeeping duty to Haiti and Congo is trained in crowd control at Panchkhal on Wednesday.

LOTTERY LOSERS: Demonstrators calling themselves “victims” of the American government’s diversity visa lottery protest outside the US embassy on Wednesday, saying they have been unfairly refused visas.

BERRY HOT: Himalayan raspberries ripening three months ahead of schedule in Godavari this week. Experts see this as a sign of climate change.

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With the Security Council meeting on Friday to formally allocate a hefty budget for the expanded Monitoring Mission here and the arrival of five MI-8s from the Congo, Kathmandu is bracing itself for the Blue Team. Hotels in Kupandole are full, the bars in Thamel are filling up and the BICC has been requisitioned by monitors clad in flakjackets.

The Ass did a quick calculation in the back of a napkin the other evening and concluded that Nepal’s GDP growth rate will have to be revised upwards by one percentage point in fiscal 2007-8 due to heightened economic activity triggered by the beefed up UN presence. At last a UN endeavour that is actually going to contribute to economic growth in this country.

Having noticed the other day the number of large white vehicles with UN painted on the side all stuck in traffic at Thapathali because of some julus or other, your pet donkey got wondering about the rules governing who actually is allowed to fly the UN flag in this country. According to the UN’s own in-house rules, it should only be the head honcho. That used to be the Resident Coordinator. But it never stopped the local head of every specialised UN agency from proudly flying their own flags as they sat in traffic at the Bridge. The Ass counted a dozen different flags of UN bodies in the parking lot during a recent national day reception: UNDP, UNICEF (both the South Asia office and the Nepal office), UNFPA (ditto), UNESCO, FAO, WFP, WHO, WHAT, WHERE and WHEN. And now we hear ICAO is opening a Nepal office. Enough already.

It’s when the comings and goings become frantic that we in Nepal have learnt the hard way that something scary is brewing behind the scenes. So Karan (‘The Jwaisah’b’) Singh is headed back, a BJP delegation is in town, James Moriarty returned from holidays in Honolulu and immediately flew off again to DC and His Fierceness is busy touring the hill stations in his SUV.

While the Ex-Monarch of Kashmirin probably wants to prevent a similar unceremonious fate from befalling his royal in-law in Nepal we understand the Americans are spooked about the Maoist gameplan in the runup to elections. But given that desertions from the People’s Liberation Army is now inversely proportional to the fall in minimum temperature in the cantonments, we think self-generated commie phobia may be a bit misplaced.

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