Weekly Internet Poll #343
Q. Will the Maoists join the interim government in the next couple of weeks?
Total votes: 2,673
- Yes: 618
- No: 2,055
- Vote still open

Weekly Internet Poll #344
Q. What should be the top priority of the interim government?

BHARAT JHARGAMAGAR/ KANTIPUR
KUNDA DIXIT

HIGHWAY INFERNO: Seventeen parked buses were torched in Lahan on 18 January this year by madhesi activists. The same spot on Thursday afternoon (below).

The smoke has cleared in Lahan, but many things will never be the same again
Lessons for the Future

The biggest indicator of how far we’ve come in the last 18 months is that there is no longer a peace talks team. The mainstreaming of the CPI-M, Maoists began with the 12-point agreement with the seven-party alliance in November 2005, hoping to create the conditions for the April Uprising. The second test of their commitment to making the transition was the comprehensive peace agreement and cantonment of combatants. Then came promulgation of the interim constitution and formation of an interim parliament which included the Maoists. Now, at the end of the fourth phase of this ongoing peace process, the former rebels are in the interim government.

It’s been a long journey over the last 12 years for the Maoist leadership, from parliament to the countryside and then the jungles, from exile back to where they started—Singha Darbar. The Nepali people will be waiting for signs that the comrades-in-government have learned some lessons along the way and know they, like the other parties, are here to govern.

The CPN-M cannot now revert to their old dismissal of parliamentary democracy as bourgeois gaming. Instead, the Maoist ministers must learn how to use the tactics of democracy for their own purposes. They are no longer fighting against the state-based decision-making procedures favoured by revolutionaries. The machinery of the government here is hardly a model of institutional efficiency anyway, and the new ministers will have to find ways to inspire unemployed bureaucrats, not threaten them.

Individual corruption is bad enough, and parties often make it worse by institutionalising graft. The CPN-M will suffer a serious blow to its legitimacy if it makes decisions under the influence of voluntary contributors to the party. A wayward minister can be taken to task, but you can’t redeem a whole party involved in the favours billed to the exchequer. A wayward minister can be taken to task, but you can’t redeem a whole party involved in the favours billed to the exchequer.

They will have to find ways of calming disgruntled party members without pressuring favours billed to the exchequer. They will have to find ways of calming disgruntled party members without pressuring

All good ideas and important issues.
They need to watch out—if SAARC turns into an arena of contestation for spheres of influence, Kathmandu will have everything to lose and nothing to gain, just as it did with the 1988 referendum on nuclear disarmament. Creating emotional unity among South Asians is an important issue. It’s a historic process that can’t be turned back. It needs a different imagining of South Asia.

Knowledgeable sources say Gyawali’s positive contributions to the peace process must not be overlooked. More than anyone else, he was the one who longed hardest to finalise the comprehensive peace agreement, the interim constitution, and the tripartite arms monitoring agreement. While Home Minister Krishna Sitaula and Maoist negotiator Krishna Bahadur Mahara got all the credit, it was Gyawali’s patient predilection, pleading, and capable that delivered those agreements. His party may not acknowledge Gyawali’s contributions, but let us hope that historians some day will.

Gyawali’s talents will be missed in coming days because the peace process is not yet over. There are many key negotiations ahead, most importantly on how to reform and democratise the Nepali Army and how to integrate the Maoist armed forces into it. When those tough negotiations open, Gyawali will be sorely missed.

This brings us to a significant dynamic in the new cabinet: the retention of Sitaula’s home minister. With the dissolution of the previous talks committee, Sitaula will from now on focus solely on improving security. A good sign, since giving him the dual responsibilities—strengthening security and negotiating with the very people he’s already been negotiating with—was a bad idea from the start. But perhaps Sitaula should have been taken out of the Home Ministry and given Peace and Reconstruction instead. That way, he could have continued to be the point man of the seven-party alliance in talks with the Maoists, and someone else could have looked after security. This would have had the added advantage of keeping Sitaula in the government without seeming to be giving in to the demands of the Madhesi Janadikat Forum. But Prime Minister Koirala can always be counted on to be an astute diplomat.

With Sitaula’s wings clipped, the wily Ram Chanud Paudel has been thrust into centrestage as number two in the government reconstruction. In this capacity, he is likely to lead all government negotiations with the Maoists as well as with madhesi, janajati, and other agitating groups. It is worthy asking why a conservative, right-wing MP—who not only dislikes the Maoists but has also shown no willingness to learn what they stand for—is put in this position.

In his conservative ways and his lack of political acumen, he seem to be a factor precisely because he won’t be getting in as easily as Sitaula or Mahanta Thakur. Or is it the attraction of the reconstruction funds? Either way, Paudel’s new position strengthens his hand in succeeding the almighty Prime Minister, and weakens the Maoists, who are left under the scanner of the international community as well.

Of the other appointments, one wonders why the UML sent Sunara Pradhan to lead its constituent. She is immensely intelligent and talented, but lacks influence in her own party. It would have been a good idea to give the UML, if the other coalition partners were to take her lightly for the UML, if the other coalition partners were to take her lightly.

The Maoists’ Mahara is in a similar position. Though regarded as influential within the party, no one else in the government would_description

It’s possible to build a South Asian identity, we don’t happen at SAARC summits

Twenty years after their first summit in Dhaka, South Asia’s state and government are still debating how to turn the region’s largest regional grouping. The over 800 journalists who gathered in New Delhi to cover the 14th SAARC Summit had virtually nothing new to report on.

Kashmir continues to be the core issue for Pakistan. Multilateralism in its regional grouping. The over 800 journalists who gathered in New Delhi to cover the 14th SAARC Summit had virtually nothing new to report on.

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MISTAKE
The new interim government has made a mistake by keeping Krishna Prasad Sitaula on as home minister. He’s already had the position, and proved incapable of maintaining peace and security. It’s entirely probable that the Madhesi Janadakhik Forum will use his continued presence in the government as a reason to start their anti-peace activities again, and disrupt the upcoming election.

PAASANG
Your interview with Nanda Kishore Pun (‘Nepal is being Sikimised’, #342) was depressing. Pun may be articulate and relatively smart, but why does a teacher have to become a fighter?

A Adhikary, email

TWO MPS
Kudos to Mallika Aryal for her thoughtful, detailed comparison of the lives of Shanti Pakhrin and Devi Khadka (‘A tale of two MPs’, #342). Khadka is clearly in the wrong, but Aryal is correct to humanise her. We need to understand people like this and the things they do if we are to move on. As for Shanti Pakhrin, I suppose I will never understand whether it is nobility of spirit that keeps her from confronting Khadka, or a similar adherence to the party line. Of course it’s her tragedy and her choice, but I can’t help feeling that we need more individual cases to really comprehend the devastation of the last decade. We have one Maina Sunar. Why not also a Buddha Man Pakhrin?

Name withheld, email

I started reading ‘A tale of two MPs’ with scepticism, and came away with a deeper understanding of the human cost of the war. This is exactly the kind of journalism we need, parallel to hard news. Give Mallika Aryal a gold star or a silver one. This is exactly the kind of journalism we need, parallel to hard news. Give Mallika Aryal a gold star or a silver one.

A Adhikary, email

MISSING WOMEN
In his weekly columns Daniel Lak’s recurrent words of wisdom from Canada for both Nepalis and Westerners living in Nepal is very interesting and enjoyable. However in your last issue (‘Where are the women?’, Here #342) he mentions that Nepali women are so neglected that they work in the fields even with toxic shock syndrome (TSS) or chronic prolapse of the uterus. With TSS, unlike uterine prolapse, you are at death’s door and unlikely to make a full recovery. For most, Nepali women should be subservient, silent, and have few opinions. Nepal rails and strikes against every other problem, but there’s no voice calling to uproot the ancient patriarchal system that is so enwined with Hindu culture.

Monika Acharya, email

The lives of urban Nepali women are just as shocking as those of women in rural areas. A woman wakes up, rushes to the kitchen to prepare the morning meal, at the same time helps her children get ready for school, and then goes to work. Meanwhile, her husband spends hours chatting in the teashop. No matter how useless his conversation, the man has a platform to share his ideas and is allowed to express his opinion whether it comes from rational thought or baseless assumption. A woman would be excluded from the conversation, because “what does she know about things besides home and family”, and her thoughts are “superficial”. I also appreciate that Daniel Lak acknowledges how the media and NGOs usually glorify women from influential Kathmandu families, rather than the unsung heroes. A woman’s identity should not be influenced by her husband’s popularity.

Bobby Limbu, Hanoi

BUSINESS UNUSUAL
Ashish Ghimire is quite right in saying that we need to find comprehensive, multi-faceted ways to sell our country abroad (‘Presenting Nepal, Strictly Business’, #342). It would be good if people like him started to help out. The ideas are there, obviously. Why not put your money where your mouth is?

Bikesh Thapa, email

ALL A-TWITCHER
I see the Asia has a new name for the man variously known as Chhabilal, Pushpa Kamal, Prachanda, The Fierce One, The Awesome One, The Man with the Scary Moustachios etc (he’s beginning to sound like The Artist Formerly Known as the Artist Formerly Known as Prince), The Twilicho One indeed. It’s appropriate—in his years as a pseudo guerrilla, I’m sure Dahal learnt well the advantage of being a moving target.

AN, email

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

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6 - 12 APRIL 2007 #343
Three months later

In the eastern tarai, the ethnic divide and the upcoming elections could make some polarisations permanent

KUNDA DIXIT in SIRAHA

Early three months after they witnessed an unprecedented explosion of violence, the towns of the central and eastern tarai are limping back to normal. But the ethnic polarisation of Nepal’s plains may be an enduring legacy.

Here in Lahan where it all started in mid-January, many hill residents who fled back then have returned. Protests by the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum (MJF) do not seem to have the same energy these days, especially after the Tharus refused to join, following the massacre of Maoists in Gaur three weeks ago. The sekuwa shops are open, and night buses roar through town all night.

But the atmosphere is still charged, cross-border crime is widespread and there is a general sense of lawlessness. Kidnappings for ransom, mainly of hill people by one of the tarai militant groups, are a daily occurrence. Attacks and death threats against journalists have forced many to move out. Few think proper elections can be held in June.

“Things will never be the same again,” says one Lahan resident, “Nepal is now divided and the border is the east-west highway.”

Meeting madhesi demands for re-demarcation of constituencies by plains people will short-change hill dwellers, and vice-versa. Highway towns like Lahan are where these interests intersect, and delineating voting units north-south will favour madhesi while hill ethnics living here will benefit from an east-west arrangement. All this is made much more complicated by past gerrymandering.

The most direct impact of the last three months is that the Maoists are now ‘internally displaced people’ from the eastern tarai, and everyone who didn’t like them (from royalist landowners to local political party cadre) are happy with that. Nearly everyone here agrees that it was the Maoists who sparked off the protests with the killing of a madhesi activist on 18 January, and then made matters worse by spiriting away his body.

One thing the hill and plains dwellers of the tarai are in agreement about is that the eight parties goofed again by not transferring Home Minister Krishna Sitaula to another ministry in last week’s reshuffle. “It was an opportunity missed,” said one activist here, “it proved to us that Kathmandu is still not listening.”

Now, with elections in the air, the MJF is fading away just as suddenly as it appeared, and madhesi leaders of the political parties who took up the Forum’s slogans during the agitation are back in their parties.

Militant madhesi groups like the two factions of the JTMM are at the forefront again. Besides kidnappings and bombings, one of them has called for a tarai shutdown on 9 April, demanding an end to Kathmandu’s ‘colonial rule’ of the plains.

Unlike the rest of Nepal which has experienced a year of ceasefire, the war never ended here. With the new ethnic rift and an unstable election up ahead, it doesn’t look like the eastern tarai will see real peace anytime soon.
Paper, paper on the table

The Common Minimum Program can't become like another election manifesto

While the CMP does emphasise economic growth and development, it does not address the critical issues of job creation, revenue building, and enterprise creation in the Nepal’s remote, rural corners. It also assumes that resources are unlimited and that it is not essential to look at issues relating to their sustainable use. This plan does not have a strategy on how to discipline the plethora of donors and INGOs that will come to prey on the rebuilding business. In the 1990s, these agencies helped produce some great report writers. Hopefully, this time around, they’ll drop the lessons on unaccountable spending. The onus also lies on such agencies to ensure that the CMP is followed through.

It’s been a long year. Hopefully by next April, things will look less like an April Fool’s joke.

The business environment in Nepal is pathetic

What’s your assessment of the state of banking in Nepal?

On the one hand there is congestion in the banking sector but on the other, you see that about 85 percent of Nepals don’t have access to banking. There are a lot of players, but there is a huge market yet to be penetrated. Due to instability over the past few years, the investment climate has not been good, which led to a stagnation of the private sector. That was when banks entered retail, but retail is also getting crowded, which is why the banking sector needs to move on identifying different opportunities. Banks will have to be really competitive and try to create a niche market, or they’ll have to start consolidating through mergers and acquisitions in order to become a cool player. There are a lot of things we can do in the New Nepal and we’re looking forward to those opportunities. But in the current situation, international and domestic investors are still apprehensive about investments in Nepal, and not much is coming in.

What’s the state of the state banking in Nepal?

The first challenge for banks and the state is to be able to attract investment in the country. Second, in banking, new products have to be introduced. The bank industry cannot sustain itself just with deposits and credits. We need expertise in investment banking, analysing projects, raising capital, new financing techniques. We need to focus on some core sectors—hydropower, infrastructure, tourism, horticulture—to understand and analyse the financing of those sectors. And finally, I believe that we need to play a major role in providing access to finance in rural Nepal.

And what about the business environment?

It’s quite pathetic. Look at the last two months, especially in the tarai, where businesses have come to a complete halt. The numerous problems with security and labour are not good for business.

What does the future look like for BoK?

We want to grow in a sustainable manner. We’re planning three more branches this fiscal year, and will venture into small-medium enterprises and rural and micro finance. BoK already has 150 odd agents connected throughout the country by ‘BoK Money Transfer’—an in-house product—for inward money remittance. We want to build on that, and grow the remittance we receive from abroad by deploying resources.

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‘The business environment in Nepal is pathetic’

Nepali Times: What does Bank of Kathmandu (BoK) consider its unique qualities?

Radhesh Pant: Bank of Kathmandu was established 13 years ago and is wholly owned by Nepals. We rank fifth in Nepal in terms of revenue and profitability. (A little more space)

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No revenge

A week after the Gaur massacre in which 28 Nepalis were killed, the investigation committee is mired in controversy. The longer the delay, the bigger the danger that its fallout will be nationwide.

It is clear that the massacre happened because of the intense rivalry between the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum (MJF) with its ex-Maoist leader Upen德拉 Yadav, and the Maoists themselves. Both sides want to wipe each other out—there is no immediate chance of the two burying the hatchet anytime soon.

But this doesn’t mean that inhumane atrocities like Gaur should be allowed to happen again. The truth will come out about what happened that day. It is clear that unarmed members of the Young Communist League were hunted down and ruthlessly beaten to death with sharp bamboo sticks. Those who ran and hid inside houses were dragged out and butchered. This massacre was pre-mediated. Chasing and killing unarmed people and perpetrating atrocities on women are heinous crimes. The criminals must be brought to justice.

For this, we first need a credible investigation committee that can go through all the evidence with a fine-tooth comb. After that we need swift justice for the guilty and compensation for the victims. Otherwise outside forces and those with revenge on their minds can create further havoc.

If it wants to be seen as a political force, the MJF must also take responsibility for the massacre and hand over the guilty. The Gaur massacre should be an exception, not the rule.
Ram Krishna Yadav, president of the NC in Dhanusa, says he knows that there is a serious lack of awareness and that political education is a top priority for his party. “We have to conduct the elections at any cost. If that means devising a program for political training, we are ready to do that as well.”

Takashi Miyahara has lived in Nepal for the past 41 years. He is a Nepali citizen of Japanese origin and has opened his own ‘Nepal National Development Party’. An engineer and tourism entrepreneur, Miyahara says he became a Nepali citizen precisely so he could launch his party.

Himal Khabarpatrika: So, what’s with this party?
Takashi Miyahara: This is a party not for politics but for development.

How so?
My plan is to build an east-west railway track, other underground trains, north-south trains to link with Indian towns and highways joining Birgunj-Kathmandu, Narayanghat-Kathmandu, Narayanghat-Pokhara through tunnels. I would shift the capital to Narayanghat, joining Birganj-Kathmandu, Narayanghat-Kathmandu, Narayanghat-Pokhara as a high-speed railway track, north-south trains to link with Indian towns and highways.

When did you set up the party?
14/15 months ago.

How large is the party?
Not too big. But after our press conference last month 30/40 youngsters came up and said they’d join.

But you need 10,000 members to register a party. We’ll get there. But that rule should also apply to the other eight parties.

Are you also going to contest the elections?
I am planning to stand for elections from Lalitpur No. 2. If I don’t stand myself, I’ll get the youngsters to do so.
Swap your social drink for a coffee

Saturday Café, Boudha:
This tranquil café, located in the shadow of the Boudha stupa, is the perfect place to de-stress and get away from it all. You don’t even have to bring your own diversions—the second floor is stocked with novels, travel books and, given the location, the inevitable self-help books. The terrace is great for people- and stupa-watching over a cup of rich, freshly ground and brewed coffee. The tall glasses of iced coffee go down a treat on a summer’s day.

Banana Cat Café, Pulchok:
The owners roast the coffee beans themselves at this café housed in an old mud building. The sandpit, swing, and resident cat make it perfect for an afternoon out with kids, while the other half of the languid garden is a good escape from said children. The two rooms are great for a quiet chat or read, or examining the jewellery, fabric, and pottery on sale. Don’t be surprised if the names of the coffees don’t quite match up to what you expect—a café au lait tastes just as good if called a latte. The desserts are unique, and the miles crepes and anmitsu with ice-cream are much-loved.

La Dolce Vita, Thamel:
A great spot for discreet people-watching at Thamel’s busiest intersection fuelled by what might be the most consistent coffee in town. Your macchiato or cappuccino will always taste the same at La Dolce Vita’s low-key second floor lounge or lush rooftop. Other amusements include good tiramisu and watching the staff control their giggles when you order the ‘chocolate mouse’.

Singma Food Court, Pulchok:
There’s more than just delicious Malaysian and Singaporean food at this spacious restaurant. Singma has recently expanded its coffee menu to include cappuccino, espresso, latte and mocha made with top quality Nepali-grown coffee beans or, for a higher price, Starbucks. There’s always a wide selection of excellent desserts such as baked cheesecakes and a delicious old-fashioned trifle. The ambience may somewhat functional, but Singma’s free wifi internet access more than makes up for it.

Café Mitra, Thamel:
Sometimes you just want to be left alone. Or you’d just rather no one saw you having coffee with a Certain Person. Café Mitra, which is packed to its little gills most evenings, is surprisingly quiet in the late afternoons, and the espresso here is excellent, hot, and strong. It’s also a good cure for an attack of the mopes, with its stack of trashy, gossipy magazines in the funky loos.

La’Soon, Pulchok:
This is an elegant choice for a late-afternoon espresso. Consistency is never a problem, because La’Soon serves excellent Nespresso coffees that come in pre-tamped pods for use in the special machine. The garden is quiet and the interiors smart-casual (the looming boiler is an oddly soothing sight). The waitstaff are among the best in town, remembering your preferences without ever being intrusive.

Himalayan Java, Thamel:
You can get solitude amid the crowds at the always-packed Java. The intensity of the American-style acidic, bitter roast might take some getting used to (it holds up well in the flat white), but that doesn’t really matter when you’re mixing everything from peanut butter to raspberry syrup into your iced double mocha. The desserts are good for a sugar high—oversize cookies, brownies, and things best described with words like ‘triple’ and ‘fudge’, and the wireless internet is good, though not free.

In this town, most social events are lubricated with alcohol. And we use the word ‘event’ broadly: everything from “but it’s Wednesday” to “meet the head of a very large and important organisation”, “let’s brainstorm for this serious report” to “maybe this is a date or maybe I’m going to ditch you”.

Nepal Times is calling for restraint. Because we’re cunning and because we’re familiar with the howls of protest (“what else is there to do”), we’re giving you an alternative. No, not forming a book club, pressing flowers, or digitising your collection of 80s tapes, but the art of the coffee hour. Most of us are regular people who work six days a week, unlike the handful of habitués of the city coffeehouses, and cappuccino and cake is a ritual that too often falls by the wayside. Get back into the habit at any of these cafes, all staff favourites. All but one serve proper espresso-based coffee drinks and desserts; some have excellent lunch and dinner menus too.
Roadhouse Cafés in Thamel, Pulchowk, Bhatbhateni:
The two newer branches of this favourite pizzeria are almost better coffeeshops than the original in Thamel. The earth tones and the shards of mirror and river stones embedded in the walls consciously transport you away from the bustle of the city. The friendly, efficient waitstaff are a bonus.

Dhokaima Café, Patan Dhoka:
The only coffee here comes in a French press, but since we find that infinitely preferable to drip coffee, Dhokaima’s cozy bar and leafy, paved alfresco seating make the list. The bakery counter offers a selection of desserts including a popular rendition of black forest cake.

New Orleans in Thamel, Boudha:
It might not always be service with a smile at New Orleans, but the lattes are decent and the cake is served in very large portions. The wireless internet access is free in Thamel and costs Rs 200 a day in Boudha.

Illy Café, Thamel:
It’s exciting to have a local franchise of Illy, the Italian coffee purveyor that is opening up new markets around the world by offering high quality, affordable shade-grown coffee. The café above Java in Thamel is a bit of a puzzle, though. It shares space with a Bose and Apple showroom and Photo Concern, and often directs customers to order from the Java menu. “But I want Illy coffee,” you say. Sometimes you can get it.
Those who think that it’s possible to win a “war on terror” tend to believe that it’s justified to single out Muslims for special attention, that followers of Islam are more likely to turn to terror to assert their radical agendas. I beg to differ. But I do think a form of “identity profiling” is justified in trying to keep people safe from militant attacks, whether in Afghanistan or Canada, Nepal or Sri Lanka.

Unstable elements

Quite simply, I think we all need to keep a close eye on young men, whether Muslim or atheist, liberal democrat or Maoist. Overwhelmingly, around the world, most violent activity is carried out by males between the ages of 15 and 35. Old and middle-aged men may lead Al Qaeda, other militant groups, and various mafias but the shock troops are young, and they probably enjoy their work.

The French scholar Olivier Roy describes these 20- and 30-somethings as a ‘lost generation’, an aimless, testosterone-charged seething mass of frustrated men. It was not necessarily political Islam or the glories of a restored Caliphate that drove 19 Arab hijackers to commit the horrendous crimes of 11 September, Roy speculates, but youthful angst magnified by the bewitching messages of Osama bin Laden and his ilk. All of history’s revolutions, insurgencies, and militant movements have at their core a critical mass of young men who are willing to take great physical risks to themselves and others. Often, they are ready to die or kill. Why? Because they are young and have not been tempered by time. They don’t know that extremes flare and fade, that moderation predominates, and that old men are the only ones who benefit from their youthful risk taking. Often they benefit monetarily as well as politically.

Young men need to be given productive outlets for their volatile energy

There’s an upside to this youthful energy and dynamic willingness to push physical boundaries. It can be directed into the police or the armed forces to at least serve the consensual cause of the nation. Sport needs young men to funnel their competitiveness into teamwork and victory for the side. Even the arts and pop culture benefit from the same testosterone which fuels bar fights and warrior culture.

Young male rock guitar heroes are gunmen wielding a musical instrument rather than a Kalashnikov.

But how do we keep an eye on young men? Do we need to license them? Make them carry ID and report to the police regularly? Should they be sent off to boot camp and kept calm, or given injections to calm those raging hormones?

No, they should be given jobs and a meaningful role in the social forces that matter. In Nepal, that means political parties and democracy. First, get the economy moving, so the vast crowds of young men that burn tires and show up for every riot or protest will be too busy earning money to gherao or march in torchlight processions. Then give them a role in a meaningful process of nation building.

Direct that useful energy or feel its wrath. It’s that simple.

Young men need to be given productive outlets for their volatile energy
Nepali Times: What impression will you take away from Sankhuwasabha?

Gareth Thomas: ‘You really see Nepal only when you go out of Kathmandu. We spoke with people in the districts about their priorities and hopes for development. The most positive aspect of the trip was that the political parties were united and presented a single joint agreement to us. Our impression is that the people in the villages, the chief district officer, the political leadership in the villages, the entrepreneurs all want better roads, irrigation facilities, electricity, good education, and health services.

Do you think British aid has been put to good use here?

One can’t generalise, but in Sankhuwasabha’s Dhungedhara community forest, the user groups have made wood available to local schools, some schools are running scholarship programs, others have brought in teachers. There are more options to earn income in the region, and the community-centred program has helped improve living conditions of the local people considerably. These are all positive signs.

Some British-assisted projects, such as the Chainpur-Nunkhadi road, have been stop-and-go. Where do you see British aid going now?

During the conflict we cut back on the number of assistance programs. The road was supposed to be 20km long and 40 percent of the work had already been completed when work on it stopped, because our focus was narrowed to education and health. Programs will resume when the elections take place and there is agreement from all sides.

The most important thing is good governance. Political parties should let the people lead—their demands have to be met. The sphere of elections take place and there is agreement from all sides.

The time for real leadership by parties starts now. Donors can only walk behind the programs, goals, and plans that the political parties and government have made. While the government needs to understand what the Nepali people want, the people should also be patient with the political parties. It is important to see how the interim government will address the priorities, like those set by people in Dhungedhara.

The interim government now includes the Maoists, what’s your reading? To have the Maoists in the interim government is historic, and very encouraging. This government is only the beginning of a stable and strong peace process. The government should immediately start making policies on issues that will be important during the constituent assembly elections.

Will Britain’s assistance to Nepal increase?

Assistance will increase considerably. This year British assistance to Nepal was Rs 5.2 billion, which will go up next fiscal year to Rs 5.8 billion. In addition, Rs 438 million has been allocated under the Global Conflict Prevention Pool, and an extra Rs 5 billion will be provided for the peace process and for debt relief. Now, people can question the government if the work being done does not match with the money donors are giving.

Tarai oil, redux

MARK WILLIAMSON
in EDINBURGH

Cairn Energy is back. This week Cairn announced plans to restart its hunt for oil in the tarai and increased its investment in Nepal. The Edinburgh-based Cairn Energy said assuming a ‘continued improvement in the political climate’ in Nepal it expected to be able to start seismic studies on its exploration licences in the country early next year, 2008.

The announcements bring the prospect of a project that has been stalled for two years, since the Scottish firm halted its hunt for black gold in the tarai after King Gyanendra’s takeover. The company was awarded rights to explore five blocks covering 35,000 sq km in the tarai in 2004.

Last week, Cairn said it would negotiate with the government in Kathmandu to restart activity under the 2004 contracts. The company signalled its continued confidence in the prospect of Nepal containing meaningful reserves of oil and gas by acquiring rights to two more blocks from US corporation Texana. Cairn chief executive Sir Bill Gammell said the company had also reached an agreement to acquire control over more exploration acreage.

However, even if the political situation remains favourable, Cairn could not expect to start drilling for oil in Nepal for years. Seismic studies would be used to identify which areas, if any, might contain hydrocarbons. The company would then complete costly exploration drilling to pin down deposits and try to estimate whether they are big enough to develop commercially. Installing equipment to pump oil and gas out of the ground, process the output and ship it to market would add months or years to the process.

Cairn hit the big time in the oil business in 2004, when it found billions of barrels of oil in Rajasthan, India.
six months into his premiership, Shinzo Abe is provoking anger across Asia and mixed feelings in Japan’s key ally, the United States. Abe’s predecessor, the mould-breaking Junichiro Koizumi, revived Japan’s economy, reformed the postal savings system, and smashed the long-ruling Liberal Democratic Party’s faction system. But he also legitimised a new Japanese nationalism and antagonised China and South Korea by annual visits to the Yasukuni shrine. Abe is even firmer on building an assertive, unapologetic Japan.

The Yasukuni controversy is not some obscure historical matter China and Korea use to badger Japan for political advantage. The real problem is not the 12 Class-A war criminals interred at the shrine, but the Yushukan military museum next door. After the Mitsubishi Zero, tanks, and machine guns, on display is a history of the Pacific War that restores the ‘Truth of Modern Japanese History’—Japan, a victim of European colonial powers, protected the rest of Asia. Its colonial occupation of Korea was a ‘partnership’. The victims of Japanese militarism in Nanjing or Manila are invisible. No museum in Japan presents an alternative view of its 20th century history, so Yushukan is not one viewpoint among many in a pluralist democracy. Successive governments have hidden behind the Yushukan museum’s operation by a private religious organisation to deny responsibility for the views expressed there.

Japan has never come to terms with its role in the Pacific War. Socialist Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama apologised to China in 1995, but there has never been genuine debate in Japan over its degree of responsibility, and no attempt to propagate an alternative account to that of Yushukan.

Francis Fukuyama is dean of the School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, and chair of The American Interest.
Interview with a comet-hunter

Alan Hale, PhD, achieved worldwide recognition when Comet Hale-Bopp whooshed through the skies in the early months of 1997. But Hale's contributions are not limited to the co-discovery of the most widely viewed comet in history. He has studied extensively the threat posed by near-Earth asteroids and the detecting of planets around other stars. Hale is an outspoken advocate of improved science education and is pushing for an expanded human presence in space. Hale, who was born in Tachikawa, Japan in 1958, is the author of the acclaimed book Everybody's Comet. Nepali Times spoke with Hale about his wide-ranging career and how Nepal could develop astronomy education.

Nepali Times: How did you get into the field of astronomy? What inspired you to become an astronomer?

Alan Hale: I first became interested in astronomy when I was about six years old. My father checked out some books on astronomy from the library and handed them to me, to see if I might be interested. Turned out, I was. This was in the mid-1960s, during the Apollo ‘rush to the moon’, and I became inspired to study astronomy and space. Later I had the opportunity to work at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory as a contractor for the Voyager 2 encounter with Uranus. This reawakened my long-time desire to pursue a career as a scientist.

What was your most exciting moment in stargazing?

This would have to be discovering Comet Hale-Bopp in 1995 and then seeing it. Some other spectacular, memorable-sights I've seen include other Great Comets—Bennet, West, and Hyakutake—and seeing Comet McNaught last month in the daytime was quite a treat. The six total solar eclipses I've seen, and the January 1992 annular eclipse that happened at sunset, rank high on my list of favourite sights. I witnessed the great Leonid meteor shower in 1966, and the 1998 Leonid shower, with its many bright fireballs, was also quite impressive.

What key issues in astronomy are you now engaged in?

Some of the things I'm interested in include the hunt for objects that might threaten Earth (i.e., comets and asteroids), and also the role these objects may have in the formation of the planets—and what resources they might contain for future human use. I'm also rather interested in the 'transition' between comets and asteroids, and the relationship between these two types of objects.

The search for planets around other stars is now a heavy observational field. I haven't done too much work in this field in recent years, but hope to get back to it soon. I'm especially interested in planetary systems that might have habitable planets like Earth, and the conditions that might be necessary for life to develop on these worlds. I'm also interested in spaceflight, particularly in advancing commercial human spaceflight and eventually creating a spacefaring future for humanity. The hunt for Earth-threatening objects, and the search for planets around other stars, are 'hot' items right now in astronomy. Other areas include the age and evolution of the universe, the nature of 'dark matter' and 'dark energy,' and the nature of gamma-ray bursts. There is also a lot of interest in spacecraft missions to the planets and other bodies of the solar system.

How can countries like Nepal get ahead in astronomy?

One doesn't need much in the way of expensive equipment to study the night time sky. If schools could be provided with binoculars and/or small telescopes, that would greatly help science education, and create interest in science amongst some of the students.

Science education would be greatly facilitated by access to remote telescopes and government investment in computers and internet technology so this equipment is available to as many students as is practical. Locating one or more such telescopes in Nepal (for example, working with private groups that are building networks of them) would further help.

Can astronomy be used to promote peace?

We all see the same sky at night, regardless of where we are on Earth, and this connects us all. Realising this, together with other things astronomy teaches us (like how small Earth actually is compared to the universe as a whole, and images of Earth taken from space is a great tool) I'm understanding that we're all in this together.

International collaboration, such as via the telescope networks, can help enormously to create environments where students from various nations can work together. Participating in international conferences and travelling to watch events like solar eclipses allows students to interact with people from other countries, and creates a solid foundation for communication and understanding.

STAR GAZING

Kedar S Badu

the Deep Space Network [until 1990], and was involved in several space projects including the Voyager 2 encounter with Uranus. This reawakened my long-time desire to pursue a career as a scientist.

MARK TURIN

I hope members of different language groups may attend such a workshop and produce a book in their mother tongue. That way they motivate others to learn to read and to keep reading”, says Noriko Matsuura, in the gentle but animated manner that is her trademark.

Norko, or Nori for short, first came to Nepal in May 1996 as a member of SIL International. She first worked with the Research Centre for Education Innovation and Development at Tribhuvan University (CERID) and the Department of Education, and presently runs Mother Tongue Pipal Pustak. Matsuura is also a visiting scholar from Sophia University in Tokyo, attached to the Linguistic Institute for International Communication.

In 1997, when Matsuura was working on one of the Rai languages spoken in eastern Nepal, members of the community became interested in having translations of the Nepali language Pipal Pustak books in their own language. Pipal Books was developed by the non-formal education support office of the United Mission to Nepal to support literacy by easing the transition from oral communication to the conventions of print. Starting with only four titles, by 2002 Matsuura had already organised for sixteen different story books to be translated into eight of Nepal's ethnic mother tongues.

The next step was to provide a structured framework for people to write narratives in their mother tongues rather than simply translating stories from Nepali. With this in mind, the first Mother Tongue Pipal Pustak workshop was held in 2005, at which members of four language communities were given two weeks in which to write a book in their mother tongue based on their own life experiences.

Some basic agreement about orthography must already exist for the production of a story book to be worthwhile, limiting participation to speakers of languages with a written form already under development. However, we should not forget that most written systems are standardised by and through use, and not by committee, so having a diverse set of printed materials in circulation is an important first step in the often long process of standardisation.

In the yearly January workshop (planned at a quiet time in the agricultural cycle), the fledgling authors formulate written texts from oral narratives drawn from their own lives under the supervision of trainers. With an artist, a graphic designer and computer staff on hand, each participant creates a dummy book for field-testing. After revisions and edits, 500 copies of each book are produced and sold to the author at a reduced rate, which they are then able to sell on for a few extra rupees. Alongside the mother tongue story, each book also contains summaries in Nepali and English, and a short author's biography. To date, thirty Mother Tongue Pipal Pustak books have been produced in nine different languages. Deeply committed to mother tongue education and to the sustainability of Nepal’s endangered speech forms, Matsuura would like to train more Nepali facilitators so that they can run workshops in villages, and not require participants to come all the way to Kathmandu.

MARK TURIN

A mother of mother tongue education

“...
In Shakalaka Boom Boom, Bobby Deol and Open Patle play two rival music stars AJ and Reggie. AJ is a musical icon while Reggie is a gifted musical genius but is also brash, arrogant, and rude by nature. Reggie not only threatens AJ’s position in the music industry but also tries to woo Ruk, the girl AJ loves. What follows is a series of events that will lead to the downfall of one of these superstars.

Call 444220 for show timings at Jali Nepal.

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EXHIBITIONS
- Exhibition of photographs by Dhurba Ale, NayanTara Gurung, Kaka uphe, Om Prakash Yadav, and Sagar Shrestha, 7 April, 9.30 AM–12 noon at the Sundhara Bakery Café.
- Flowers in the Garden of Dreams: an exhibition of photos by Leonhard Stramitz at Kaiser Mahal, 10AM–6PM, except Mondays, from 6-20 April.
- Bells poetry by Megha Raj Manju Sharma, photographs by Herbert Grammapavousoultis, and mixed media art by Manish Lal Shrestha, at the Gallery 32 at Dent Inn, the Dental Clinic, until 14 April.
IS ANYBODY LISTENING?: Widows of policemen killed in the conflict stage a sit in at the Malligah mandala on Tuesday demanding that their husbands be declared martyrs for their ‘selfless sacrifice’.

VICTIMISERS TURN VICTIM: Members of the Young Communist League stage a rally at Tundikhel on Tuesday demanding that the guilty of the Gaur killings be punished.

WARRIORS AND TRADERS: Eric Valli, director of Caravan, watches the first show of the travelling exhibition ‘People in war’, with images from A People War in Jiri on Friday.

FILM SCHOOL: Tek Bahadur Jirel, principal of the Jiri Higher Secondary School receives a gift of documentaries about Nepal at the Jiri Film Festival on Friday. Next to him in the brown jacket is filmmaker Kesang Tseten, director of Hami Kunako Manchhe and We Homes Chapas.

JEWEL-SEEKERS: Devotees submerge the chariot of the goddess Vaishno Devi at the annual Gahanapokhari jatra on Tuesday.
first of all, the Ass would like to take this opportunity to lay out the Red Carpet and give a hearty Lal Salam to our new Comrade Minister of Miscommunications and Disinformation.

Mr Mahara’s new office at Singha Darbar still has a portrait of His Majesty Prithibi Narayan Shah the Great hanging on one wall and it is great to see that the good minister has hit the ground running by weighing in on the Miss Nepal Beauty Pageant from being broadcast on state television.

Bravo, it shows the ‘Badis have their priorities right. Of all the problems that beset this country that needed urgent attention, of course it was Miss Nepal. That was what was holding us back from ensuring peace, development, and democracy. And now that we’ve banned it everything will be hunky-dory.

The Ass’s mole in the ministry tells him that given the times we live in, the minister may be considering holding a Miss New Nepal pageant instead that will celebrate the revolutionary spirit of Nepali womanhood in all her comradely glory. That contest will do things differently: the Interview Round will be replaced by a Revolutionary Speech Round, the Swimsuit Round with the Sub-machinegun Round and the Miss Photogenic Smile with the Miss Red Salute.

At this rate and given the historical Maoist penchant to manage media, it will be only a question of time before they also suffer from the ‘Aishwarya Effect’. Remember how under the Panchayat NTV was turned into a home movie broadcasting service of the royal family and ultimately made Queen Aish as unpopular as she was? Comrade Mahan, a word of advice: Maoism has been tried on humans before, and it doesn’t work.

As the Maoists’ Kathmandu in-charge Comrade Hit Man (yes, that’s a real name) looked on during the memorial at the Khula Munch for 18 of the Maoists killed in Gaur, Awesome surprised Laldhoj by telling him at the last moment to give a speech. Baburam looked visibly surprised. That wasn’t part of the plan, but Hit Man seemed to know. Anyway, the Maoist ideologue-in-chief went ahead and delivered the usual tirade against America and then blamed the media for being critical of the Maoists. Exact quote: “Musa mare pani hulla garne haru.”

Across the street at the Ministry of Works and Bhautik Karbahi, Baburam’s better half Comrade Hasiya Yami is settling down nicely and bringing a breath of fresh air to a government department in charge of Melamchi and other works-in-making. One of the most tangible differences after the Maoists were inducted into government is that the inductees have replaced their Boleros with Pajeros. Just hope we’re not headed in the direction of what the Mitsubishi SUVs have come to connote in Nepali politics.

Nepal’s brain drain was bad enough before, now it is getting worse. Just about everyone in the army is angling for a UN peacekeeping job somewhere, including those involved in some pretty nasty tricks. On the week that two Nepali experts left Kathmandu to join peace monitoring in southern Sudan, the UN brought two Sudanese for peace monitoring in Nepal.

The Ass tried to figure that one out, and has a simple question: why can’t the UN keep the Nepalis in Nepal and the Sudanis in Sudan and pay them UN salaries? After all, they know their own countries better than anyone else.

OK, time to call a truce in the media’s ongoing battle with UNMIN. We give up, you win. If you stop poaching our journalists we will stop trying to sneak into cantonments to take pictures of the insides of containers.

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