“Maybe I will still find him,” Ram Krishni Chaudhary says, but from the tone of her voice one can tell she has very little hope.

It has been nearly four years since her 25-year-old son, Bhaban, left for work in India. He was picked up by soldiers from the Chisapani Barracks along with seven other young men and never seen again.

One of the seven was later released because he was related to a soldier. According to his testimony, they were made to lie down in the back of a military truck underneath sacks on top of which the soldiers sat. They were severely tortured.

Under pressure from the National Human Rights Commission, the army finally disclosed in 2004 that three of the detained had been killed in an “encounter.” The army said it didn’t know about the other three.

“There is now an interim government, maybe someone will tell me where my son is,” Ram Krishni said recently in Nepalganj where she inaugurated the nepa-laya exhibition by unveiling her own portrait.

One year after the ceasefire, Bhaban is among 937 people still officially listed as missing by the International Committee of the Red Cross. Unlike other countries, the number of disappeareds in Nepal’s conflict is rising as families overcome fear and report missing relatives. Most were taken by the army, while the Maoists usually owned up to those they killed to terrorise others.

Army sources say personnel at Chisapani Barracks directly involved in disappearances in western Nepal in 2003-4 are now retired and one of them is working for a private security firm in Afghanistan.

Ram Krishni says Bhaban was a quiet man who worked hard in the fields to take care of his family, and brought back earnings from India. Bhaban’s young son died soon after he disappeared, and his wife has taken his daughter to live with her mother.

“It has been very difficult to survive without him, he was our life,” Ram Krishni says. Then she tells us to take this message to Kathmandu: “If he is alive give him back to us, if he is dead tell us.”

Kunda Dixit in Nepalganj
For a country and its once-opposed groups, a peace process is about many things. There are accords, weapons lockdowns and cantonments, struggles to carve out and maintain political power and new identities. But there must also be a peace process for individuals. Those who have lost loved ones, those who have, and those who live with the anguish of not knowing whether their relatives are dead or alive deserve closure. Healing is as important as the right to vote in constituent assembly elections. A society cannot move towards a lasting peace if it does not acknowledge personal losses, and a state cannot regain its credibility until it is open about past. A people denied answers and explanations by the state will not engage productively with its processes.

Politically, a powerful commission on the disappeared is a minefield. Most parties are willing to tacitly collude against it. Some because they are sweet-talking the army for support now. Others because they themselves live in glass houses, and still others who are willing to turn a blind eye for tactical gains. So, Girija Prasad Koirala and Pushpa Kamal Dahal doesn’t want a commission on the disappeared because it will unearth skeletons in his own closet. And therein no point in the army getting defensive and saying they started it. After all, it is the responsibility of the state to protect its citizens. Even as a military strategy, victimising civilians was completely counter-productive. As a matter of principle no one should ever be disappeared, and if they are, those responsible need to be accountable.

The National Human Rights Commission remains rudderless and toothless. This is ironic, given how much we love the idea of our homegrown peace process. The support of the International Committee of the Red Cross and the UNHCR Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has been essential in keeping records of the disappeared and of systematic, institutionalized disappearances, but the moral onus to do it all together so our past does not burden our future.

Let us not be cynical or depressed by the day to day manoeuvres and perceived failures of parties and players in the constitutional process. Let us decently address the involvement, and commit and let time be applied realistically to a complex process that can finally banish the paradigm that has paralysed this country for so long. Restoring realism to politics and peoples’ expectations is the place to start. Just admit that it won’t happen overnight, or perhaps even this year. Neither Rome, nor Nepal was built in a day.

The buck stops at Bawutwar
Our judges are perceived to be even more inept than the police.

L et’s start with a monosulphide. We in the media don’t put much effort in digging for the roots of what makes news. We are too busy following those who are following those who are following those who are, rather than as they are. This saves time, effort and money. Whether it informs us or enlightens our audience is a different matter.

STATE OF THE STATE
C K Lal

A senior journalist is fond of saying that media are living in a heatwave only by being suppressed by news agents. Cynical the old warhorse may be, but there is no denying that the Nepali media is only saving grace by simply covering political struggle for freedom in the past five years.

Take the floodlight of recent coverage of sandalwood smuggling from India, via Nepal to China. The journey between Sunauli and Kodari may take 15 hours, but it is the most minutely policed bit of highway in the country. OK, the sandalwood has to pass through several Indian states before it gets here from Karnataka, and what happens to corrupt cops along the way is their business. But it looks like kickbacks from transiting sandalwood is a huge business here, too, lining pockets of cops all along the line. One can bet that as the flash-in-the-pan coverage wanes sandalwood trafficking will resume.

The latest Corruption Perception Index of Transparency International shows Nepal’s judges have an even worse reputation than cops. That is an unexaggerated view. The Judicial Council didn’t ask people to tick boxes for wilful defaulters masquerading as industrials. But it does say something about our judicial system where government attorneys of two opposing parties have taken decades to gel and thrive. Nepal thought they’d been robbed of their rightful heritage in a matter of a few years by political corruption and venal elites. In part, they were right, but it was ever thus. The democrats of the pre-War 1990s are guilty of mishandling expectations, and stealing somewhat from the trough, but they had good teachers—the royal, Rana, and Panchayat eras produced far worse outcomes. The 2006 war opened up new events and darkened expectations further. Now that former guerrillas would strike almost anywhere. When screaming men and women with rifles and khukuris poured from the jungle around isolated police and army posts, of what use was a calendar or a farmer’s knowledge of growing seasons. The downward spiral of our own national soul, and ineptet monarchical meddling turned the nation away from time to time altogether. Things always get worse. At some point, we measure the passage of entropy?

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Once again we have a prime example of how until our new leaders are to rule this country (ëTroubled watersí, #350). However, if seen from the catís perspective, it does matter if itís the white cat that gets the mice, the black one goes hungry, and vice versa.

A B Nepal, Australia

It may not matter to the cat owner whether the cat is black or white as long as it catches mice (ëNat a drop to drinkí, #350). However, if seen from the catís perspective, it does matter if itís the white cat that gets the mice, the black one goes hungry, and vice versa.

S Pal, email

Most state-owned corporations are running up huge losses due to lack of new investments. The closure of such institutions is inevitable because the government does not have the money or the desire to keep them running. We can prolong the process and incur endless losses or privatise it for the greater good. NWSC is a living example. It comes down to: what is in it for me.

Dibesh Shrestha, email

Navin Singh Khadka (ëTroubled watersí, #350) and Ratna Sansar Shrestha (ëNat a drop to drinkí, #350) are both realistic. Preserving traditional taps, rainwater harvesting, and underground water generation are good options but will not cater to the massive and exponentially growing demand. The groundwater level of deep tubewells within the valley is decreasing rapidly every year and recharging them may take more than 10 years. Similarly, traditional taps cannot be revived in most cases as their channels have been destroyed by urbanisation. So the ultimate crux of the problem lies with the uprooting of existing distribution system network. With the lack of political will, is this possible? Perhaps we do need a non-Nepali boss.

Name withheld, email

NO LOGIC

Because Iím a foreigner with only a conversational knowledge of Nepali and 20 years of residence here, Iím not getting either the economics or the social logic of the situation (ëBankruptí, #348). NOC pays rates for petroleum products set by IOC which are higher than what NOC is mandated to sell them for and incurs a monthly loss of Rs 250 million and has a debt worth Rs 65 billion to settle with IOC.

PM Brandt, Hattisar

A tourism entrepreneur, Kathmandu

And Rs 4 billion to the local banks. Meanwhile people queue up for 8-10 hours to get a petrol ration amounting to between Rs 500-700 (This figures to around Rs 7 per hour making the minimum wage loss for queuing up about Rs 56 per day). However, Commerce Minister Rajendra Mahatoís solution is to extend fresh loans to NOC. NOC Chief BN Goyalís solution is to sell most of the petroleum back to the Indian consumers just over the border at prices Indians pay at their pumps and thereby reduce NOCís losses.

Ramesh Lama, email

We wish Minister Pritihi Subba (ëThey have sucked NAC dryí, #350) a successful tenure at a time when NAC has the reputation of being hopeless, corrupt, and erratic. I agree that politicians are responsible to an extent, but not all the time. Ninety-nine percent of flights to Mumbai were either delayed, cancelled, or suspended in the last three years. There have been no flights from Mumbai for the past year, but NACí Mumbai branch has renovated its rented office at Nariman Point and still maintains expensive flats at the staff. In the meantime, NAC aircraft have old napkins and faded seat covers. If Nepal Airlines wants to revive its reputation, urgent changes are needed. We hope Subba and his party will positively look into this matter.

A tourism entrepreneur, Kathmandu

CHRISTIANIA

Obviously we in Christiania have a lot more to learn from Nepal about how to unleash anarchy (ëChristianiaí, #350). But we have made a start. For example, we still donít close down all schools all over Denmark because our Maoist party (yes, we have one) wants to put pressure on the government. We donít yet prevent parliament from having a session for over a month. We donít let a minor traffic accident shut down the whole town. And we didnít declare a snap two-hour banda when police charged us in Christiania. But we are learning.

Marta Andersen, Copenhagen

ëRunning riot in Christiania was devolution pleasing and very true to our psyche. As the popular Nepali saying goes, ëMero aang ko dhaisi nai/ehe, ankako aang ko jumai pani dikteí which translates as, ëCarrot spot a buffalo on your own back but can clearly see a louse on someone elsesí.í

Swagat Raj Pakyare, email

Kunda Dixitís ëRunning riot in Christianiaí is an absolute joke. Is he trying to preach to us that if tyres are burst in Denmark then itís perfectly fine to do the same in Nepal as well? Is he supporting the mockery the Maoists and political parties have let loose in Nepal? Or is he trying to brag that he has actually been to Denmark?

Name withheld, email

LETTERS

Nepal 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 cc:letter to the editor in the subject line.

Email: letters@nepaltimes.com
Fax: 977-1-5520113
Mail: Letters, Nepal Times, GPO Box 7251, Kathmandu, Nepal.
Looking around the country you wouldn’t be able to tell, but Nepal is awash in cash. One year after the return of democracy, investment is down, there is an oil shortage, water shortage, electricity shortage. District hospitals are still waiting for doctors, schools still don’t have roofs, infrastructure damaged during the conflict still hasn’t been repaired. Yet, paradoxically, the country’s macroeconomic situation has never been better.

The treasury has Rs 15 billion in cash. The Rastra Bank has $2.5 billion worth of foreign currency reserves, enough to pay for more than a year of imports. The dollar has fallen by Rs 9 making imports even cheaper. Inflation is down and the balance of payments is looking good.

The internal borrowings target was Rs 18 billion, but there is so much liquidity that the government hasn’t borrowed more than Rs 10 billion. In fact, in the past month the Rastra Bank has paid back Rs 9.3 billion worth of past treasury bills. On 22 May alone, Rs 2.9 billion was paid out. All this has increased liquidity in the financial market and put a downward pressure on interest rates.

Ideally, there should now be enough liquidity in the money market for new domestic investments so new jobs are created. But this is not happening because of continued political instability. Rastra Bank director Nara Bahadur Thapa says if only the constituent assembly election dates were to be fixed it would firm up the economy. “Because we don’t have dates, there is less certainty all around,” he says.

Other economists agree: having lots of cash in the bank is not necessarily a sign of good health. “There is so much to be done, but no plans. There is local demand for development but no mechanism to implement projects. There is money but no policy about priorities on spending,” explains one Finance Ministry official.

Although there is now an interim government that includes the Maoists, Nepalis are still waiting for the peace dividend. “This is shameful, says the official, “it’s like my pockets are stuffed with cash but my family is going hungry.”

There was nearly Rs 45 billion set aside for development in the current fiscal year alone. But till mid-May not even Rs 14 billion of it had been spent.

And despite this there are long lines at gas stations. Nepal Oil Corporation is bankrupt because it has to subsidise fuel and the government refuses to lend it the Rs 6.5 billion it owes Indian Oil. The eight parties act as if they know nothing because they think raising fuel prices would be politically suicidal.

A senior Rastra Bank executive has an easy solution to the stalemate: “If raising fuel prices is politically not feasible, the government could extend a soft loan to NOC to pay up its debts. It’s a win-win: oil supplies will resume, we won’t be beholden to India and there won’t be a political risk.” But there seems to be no one willing to bell the cat.

Another reason for the pileup of cash in the treasury is that imports are falling. Last fiscal year, imports increased by 6.6 percent compared to the previous year and this year there has been a 1.1 percent decrease. All this points to stagnant production and it will have a negative impact on economic growth.

Kiran Nepal

Who says Nepal is poor?

The state treasury has a stash of Rs 15 billion in cash, enough to pay for half the cost of the Melamchi project.

Nepal Rastra Bank has Rs 177 billion in foreign currency reserves, enough far more than a year of imports.

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Water soluble
Show us the solutions, not the problems

Last week there was a showdown on the future of Melamchi between the CPN-M and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Yet another setback to a large scale infrastructure project. The Beed can’t really figure out where the government stands. While Hilsia

Yami demonstrated her position very clearly, she still does not have any solutions. So we can just expect more of the same for the next six months. Melamchi has been a bone of contention for many years. The NGOs that helped real Arun III nearly 15 years ago have managed to now stall Melamchi helped by a populist wannabe minister.

There is a lot of self-righteous talk against the private sector getting involved in hydropower. Globe trotting activists against the private sector development of hydropower earn hefty consulting dollars. But what do they have to say when we have 12-hour power cuts everyday? What do the anti-Melamchi types have to say about what we’ll drink in the Valley? Self-styled economists go blue in the face debating about whether water should be developed by the public or private sector. The Beed thinks that if you can sell water in bottles and in tankers and, as a government agency charged for overhead tanks. We have to wake up in the wee hours of the morning to check on the water, spend hours queuing at local stone spouts, and wait further countless hours for tankers to arrive. And this is only about quantity. There are equally dire problems with quality, water-borne diseases being a major health hazard.

On Melamchi, after World Bank withdrew from the process, it was for the ADB to take it up. The Beed is not sure whether these multilaterals have been terribly successful in implementing water projects of this magnitude successfully anywhere in the world. Further, the involvement of more than one donor just delays the process, as the priorities of the different agencies are, apart from imposing donor-country equipment and services, diverse and sometimes completely divergent.

So here’s a solution: If we agree that Nepali people need to pay a commercial price for water, then let us have the private companies bid for these projects, based on public-private partnerships (PPP). Let us create a regulatory environment where the private provider is penalised for not delivering quality or quantity. Let us not foster an environment where they can get away with providing less than they promise.

The electricity business should be looked at as having three distinct parts. First is the source of supply, like electricity generation that could be from the private sector on a build, operate, and transfer model. The pipe network, like the transmission towers, is owned by another PPP company that for a certain charge allows the suppliers to sell to the distribution companies. Finally, distribution PPPs could be formed with VOIs and municipalities to ensure better service to the end consumer. This could perhaps provide sustainable solutions in the long run for all scales of water projects.

Xing TV
Hyundai Santro Xing cars now come with a free LCD TV from Samsung. The compact car comes with a three-year or a 36,000km warranty and also three years of free servicing. Avto International is the sole distributor of Hyundai vehicles in Nepal and Deep Laxmi Intercontinental is the authorised dealer for Xing cars in Kathmandu.

Real estate online
Gharhaderi.com is the latest real estate venture to be launched in Kathmandu. The portal offers platforms for buying, selling, leasing, and renting of property, as well as legal and financial consulting services. It boasts the largest network of professionals and consulting service providers.

Nokia
Nokia has announced the appointment of Neoteric and Paramount Electronics as official distributors of Nokia phones in Nepal. Nokia phones range from the entry-level Nokia 1110i to feature-filled models like the Nseries, Eseries, and the 8800 Sirocco Edition. Nokia was ranked number one by Salesmate in 2000’s Asia’s Top 1,000 Brands.

"We understand the needs of foreign labourers"

Laxmi Bank has tied up with Merchandize Asia, a Malaysian calling card and PCO company. Ramasamy Veeran, managing director of Merchandize, was in Kathmandu last week and spoke with Nepal Times about their plans in Nepal and a new remittance service.

Nepal Times: You’re entering the remittance business, which already has a number of old players. What was the draw?
Ramasamy Veeran: We may have entered late, but we have done all our homework. There are many players in the market, but we have been working with the labourers who work abroad for a long time. Our network is the biggest in Malaysia when it comes to providing calling cards and PCO services. These are the services that labourers who work abroad use the most. We understand the needs of the remittance service market and know how to attract our target group.

Aren’t calling cards and phone booths, and remittance different businesses?
They are different but if you look at them from our perspective, these services are essential for labourers working in a foreign country. In the past we could fulfill only some of their demands, now we can do more.

When did you start offering the remittance service?
We started this year, and Nepal is our first foreign venture. Nepali labourers contribute a lot in Malaysia and we are happy to be providing them this service. In addition, we are also in the final stages of launching our services in Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Vietnam.

Why pick Nepal for your first venture?
In the Malaysian labour market Indonesian labourers occupy over 60 percent, yet we chose Nepal as our first venture. This is because of the efficiency of our Nepali partner Laxmi Bank. We have to give them credit for bringing us here.

How is your remittance service unique?
Big companies like IME and Parbhu Money Transfer are already in this business. We are unique because we understand the need of labourers working in a foreign country. We provide remittance service, but we also understand their other needs, so we tie them together while providing services. This means, they come to us if they want their other demands fulfilled as well. We want to combine communication with remittance, for example if a Nepali labourer wants to call his home, they can use our calling card. Eventually we want to tie up all our businesses like this.

What are your future plans?
Right now we have between 50-60,000 business transactions in Nepal. Our aim is to occupy 30 percent of the market in the first year. We will do so by combining remittance with communication, strong brand positioning, and easy access.
Editorial in Kantipur, 31 May

Seventeen years ago Bhutan carried out an ethnic cleansing of its Nepali speaking population. The refugees travelled across Indian territory to arrive in Nepal. India, which facilitated the movement of Bhutanis to Nepal can’t now stop them from going back. Even legally India can’t do it since Nepal and Bhutanis are allowed to move across the Indian border freely. India’s actions support the Bhutani dictatorship and it bolsters the argument of those who are discriminating against the refugees. India has tried to say this is a bilateral matter between Bhutan and Nepal and remain neutral, but it can’t when it allowed a neighbouring country to evict nearly one fourth of its population through its territory to another neighbouring country. Bhutan has for the past 17 years played for time, hoping that the refugees would assimilate. Nepal’s policy of keeping Bhutan engaged while internationalising the issue has worked. The Americans and Europeans now recognise this as a gross violation of human rights. Still, Bhutan is getting away with it despite international shaming and pressure. It is inhuman to keep any people in a camp for nearly two decades, and if there is no other alternative, third country resettlement is an option. Refugee groups know that unless they launch an even stronger movement, diplomacy alone is not going to get them back to their homeland. The US, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Australia have all said they are willing to take the refugees. The Americans alone are taking more than half. It is natural for some refugee leaders to be despondent about third country resettlement. But the question is: how long can more than 100,000 people remain in camps? There is now donor fatigue, and food aid is running out. Everyone should help find a pragmatic solution. Refugees should be free to choose whether to go to a third country or return to Bhutan. And it is in India that should put the pressure on Bhutan.

India’s role

Editorial in Naya Patrika, 30 May

On Tuesday the Indian police indiscriminately fired at Bhutani refugees trying to return to their homeland. The cold-blooded shooting left one dead and dozens injured, and only went to show India’s oppressive and hypocritical nature. India has neither the legal nor the moral right to stop the refugees from returning to Bhutan. India itself created the situation where they were forced to choose its soil as a pathway to Bhutan. Nepali-speaking Bhutanis were the victims of the violent ethnic cleansing mounted by the Bhutan government in the early 1990s. Many strayed into India seeking refuge, but the Indian government shepherded them into Nepal. Those same refugees now want to return to their homeland but India bars the way. It magnanimously allowed them to leave Bhutan, but now refuses them passage back. India calls itself the world’s largest democracy but there is nothing democratic about blindly accepting the actions of the racist Bhutan government. King Jigme’s ethnic cleansing could never have worked without India’s support that Jigme could ignore international pressure. Seventeen years have passed since the refugees first came to Nepal, their children have already grown into young men. Inside the refugee camps, the humiliation of having to live off charity and fear of an uncertain future lead to sadness, depression, and anger. Various nations including the United States have offered to absorb the refugees, but this has only stoked the fire. Perhaps third country resettlement will mean a better life for the refugees but to do so is a slap in the face of human rights and would be like giving the Bhutan government permission to chase out the remaining Nepali-speakers from Bhutan. It is the right of any refugee to be resettled in a third country if they want to. But it is undeniable that this option is a conspiracy to keep the racist Bhutan government in power.

Refugee crisis

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How Krishna Sen was killed  
Naya Patrika, 27 May

After five days of isolation and torture Krishna Sen died, the blows, boot and lathis of the men in uniform raining down upon him. He was kept captive in the highest building in Mahendra Police Club, next to its Judo Hall. His hands were bound behind his back, and he was repeatedly asked to say “This country belongs to the king.”

Sen had been caught in Naya Baneswor on 20 May 2002 and been in captivity in the Police Club since, journalist Sangeeta Khadka, who saw Sen at 2 AM on 21 May, said, “After some hours of torture, Sen was vomiting, his arms and legs were broken.” Khadka says two policemen were propping Sen up against a wall as a jackbooted DSP Bikram Thapa kicked him repeatedly.

Bharat Sigdel, then a correspondent for Janadish was also at the police club at that time. He says policemen taunted Sen, and assistant inspector general Amarsingh told him, “This country loves only Gyanendra.”

Yet, the government put out the news that Sen had been killed in an encounter in the Gokarna forest. The announcement didn’t even include his name, just a description.

The government under which Sen was killed made no comment. There has never been an investigation. The people involved in his murder are high-ranking police officers.

Shah denies being involved. “Such work was the domain of the unified command (the army).” He added. “No one is accounting for all the policemen killed,” he added. “No one is investigating incidents like Nepalganj or Naumule.”

The government under which Sen was killed made no comment. There has never been an investigation. The people involved in his murder are high-ranking police officers.

Sen’s body was bundled into a sack and tossed into a Hilux that had its government number plates roughly coloured over red. The same night, Sen was secretly cremated at Aryaghat. DIG Shah said to his collaborators: “we were just joking, but Sen was already dead.”

On 25 May, women, children and Social Welfare Minister Khadga Bahadur Bairuwakama reached the village of Lui in Mugu by helicopter to inaugurate a higher secondary school. No sooner had the minister launched into his speech about building a New Nepal that the villagers started their own chant: “First food then elections.”

The people of Mugu view themselves as “citizens without a country”. The average lifespan of Mugu people is 36, there are no roads, agricultural production is enough for barely three months, and communicable diseases are endemic. The lack of jobs means most of Mugu’s young abandon all hope and seek their fortunes as labourers in India. There is no higher education campus and only 18 percent of the men and nine percent of the women are literate.

The people in Lai had walked for two days to see the minister on 25 May. The crowd included women balancing babies on their hips and many elderly people. All had come to tell of their sorrows and pain. And when the minister started throwing around political verbage like constituent assembly and republicanism, the Mugulis were enraged. Their demands were simple: first feed our hunger and then we talk about politics.
A staggering number of people have already climbed Chomolongma this year.

BILLI BIERLING

A pa Sherpa’s 17th ascent of Everest was deservedly all over the national and international media. But another remarkable feat went under the radar—Chhiring Dorje Sherpa climbed to the top of the world three times in two weeks.

The 32-year-old from Rolwaling first reached the top on 2 May and planted a statue of the Buddha in honour of his birthday. “As a devout Buddhist it was important to me. I did not mind carrying the 12kg statue,” he said.

Chhiring Dorje then reached the summit of Everest two more times, on 15 and 16 May, both with an Indian Army expedition.

This year also gave some western mountain guides the opportunity to show their strength. Two Brits, Kenton Cool and Rob Caserley, and American Willy Benegas all managed to top out twice in one week.

Another British climber, David Tait, with Phurba Tashi Sherpa pulled off a traverse from the Tibetan side of Everest into Nepal on 15 May. This was the first north-south traverse by a western climber. “I was planning to go back to the north side again but I was too tired. I am not really a mountain climber, but it was good to see that Phurba Tashi was also exhausted on the way down,” Tait said upon his return to Kathmandu.

Other firsts this year include 18-year-old Samantha Larson from the US becoming the youngest person to have climbed the highest summits on all seven continents, and 71-year-old Katsusuke Yanagisawa from Japan becoming the oldest person to summit Everest. Another record might have been set at 8,848m. British climber Rob Barber claims to have phoned his wife and kids from a standard mobile phone from the summit.

The weather has been extremely kind on Everest this year, facilitating an enormous number of summits—over 500 so far. But Chomolungma has also claimed seven lives. And nearby Lhotse, the world’s fourth highest peak, took the life of one of the county’s most accomplished female climbers, Pemba Doma Sherpa. 36, fell to her death after having successfully climbed the 8,516-metre high mountain.

The notoriously avalanche-prone Annapurna (8,091m) saw three successful ascents with Andrew Lock becoming the first Australian to scale the tenth highest mountain in the world. Lock, who has now scaled 12 of the 14 eight-thousanders, was climbing with Ivan Vallejo from Ecuador and Fernando Gonzalez Rubio from Colombia.

The solo expedition on the south side of Annapurna I turned out to be less successful. Swiss climber Ueli Steck, who was attempting to open a new route on the sheer south face of the mountain (‘South face solo’, #547), was forced to abandon his climb. During his attempt to finish the route first attempted by two French climbers in 1992, Steck was hit by a rock and took a 300m fall.

“In spite of commotion [sic] and bruises I made it back to Base Camp under my own power. I am well so far,” he said.

Another potential new record could also not be completed. The Dutchman, who had intended to climb Everest in shorts, failed to reach the world’s highest peak. However, Wim Hof did manage to reach an impressive altitude of 7,400m, and vows to have another crack at the mountain next year.

However, Himalayan mountaineering is not only about high altitudes. Swiss climbers Hans Kammerlander and Karl Unterkircher have finally summited the 7,780m-tall Jasemba. This was Kammerlander’s third attempt on the unclimbed mountain and this year’s expedition was in memory of Luis Brugger, his fellow Italian who fell to his death on the mountain last year.

“It was the most difficult but most beautiful expedition in my life,” the 50-year-old wrote on his return to Kathmandu. Italian climbers Hans Kammerlander and Karl Unterkircher have finally summited the 7,780m-tall Jasemba. This was Kammerlander’s third attempt on the unclimbed mountain and this year’s expedition was in memory of Luis Brugger, his fellow Italian who fell to his death on the mountain last year.

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Having finished 13 of the 14 eight-thousanders Kammerlander has vowed to dedicate his climbing career to unclimbed and technical difficult mountains.
limbers often get a lot of bad press for being selfish. Last year’s David Sharp incident was especially damning. As the British climber lay dying under an overhang beside the main climbing trail about 450m below the summit, some 40 people passed him, and few bothered to help.

Despite the good weather this year, a total of 12 people have died on Everest, Dhaulagiri, Kanchenjunga, and Lhotse. And some of those who got back down safe and sound may not have done so without the help of high-altitude sherpas and fellow climbers.

One example is the epic rescue of climber Usha Bista from the Nepali Democratic Team who fell ill at 8,300m. Canadian climber Meagan McGrath was on her way down from the summit on 21 May when she came across Bista. “I saw her bending over forwards. Her mask was askew, she seemed a complete mess and was completely alone,” the 29-year-old aerospace engineer told Nepali Times.

McGrath, another western climber and a sherpa started to help the 22-year-old Bista to descend, which proved rather hard. “We moved her about 30m down but I noticed very quickly that I had no experience or strength to do a rescue so I was glad when Dave Hahn, an experienced mountaineer, came to help,” said McGrath.

Three other climbers then pulled Bista down to Camp 4, where they built a stretcher. It was a long, slow, and treacherous undertaking to descend the Lhotse Face and then lower Bista down the Yellow Band to Camp 3 at 7,500m, where doctors of the Extreme Everest research team looked after her.

“They gave me a second life,” Bista said. “I can’t believe the love and concern they showed to rescue me in spite of such a difficult situation.”

Another amazing rescue at 8,300m happened when Munro Epis was helped down to safety by a Russian mountain guide Boris Kordunov. The 72-year-old Russian space engineer had been caught in the night alone and without a tent at 7,300m. Denis helped the veteran climber to safety, and then turned back up. He reached the top the next morning in an amazing 4.5 hours.

A Kazakh climber Denis Urubko aborted his speed ascent of Dhaulagiri I in order to help down mountain guide Boris Kordunov. The 72-year-old Russian space engineer had been caught in the night alone and without a tent at 7,300m. Denis helped the veteran climber to safety, and then turned back up. He reached the top the next morning in an amazing 4.5 hours.

Together with her husband Ralf Dujmovits, Kaltenbrunner is now off to Pakistan to attempt the world’s second highest mountain, K2 (8,611m).

Life and Death on Dhaulagiri: The northeast ridge of Dhaulagiri is treacherous in itself and made more dangerous by avalanches.
O n 15 February Gorkhapatra carried four pages of names in fine print. They were a list of Nepalis disappeared in the conflict compiled by the International Committee Red Cross (ICRC). The families of the 812 people on that list had no idea about the fate of their relatives. Since then, more families have come forward, and ICRC’s disappeared count stands at 937 now.

A new bill on disappearance aims to criminalise the act, but activists say it fails to address past crimes, is not in line with international norms and doesn’t treat enforced disappearance as a very serious crime. (The bill effectively lets perpetrators of disappearance during the war off the hook), says human rights lawyer Govinda Sharma, who until recently sat on a supreme court panel to investigate four cases of disappearance.

In its current form, the bill will not be effective retroactively and has a six-month statute of limitations which, says the UNios Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Nepal, doesn’t reflect the extreme seriousness of the crime or that it is continuous (ongoing until the fate of the disappeared person is known).

The bill also does not demand institutional accountability and holds only people immediately involved in an act of enforced disappearance liable. Both OHCHR and the International Commission for Jurists (ICJ) suggest that it explicitly address the responsibility of superiors for crimes committed by subordinates and prohibit just following orders as justification.

Hari Phuyal, a legal consultant with ICJ-Nepal says the bill is framed as an amendment to an outdated civil code that lacks the modern structure and procedural provisions that comprehensive and independent legislation on enforced disappearance needs. Phuyal says it also fails to address multiple offences involved in disappearance, such as deprivation of liberty, ill treatment, torture, right to life, fair trial, and other fundamental rights.

Nepal Army personnel alleged to have committed enforced disappearance and torture are subject only to military court jurisdiction and the bill does not require that they be tried in civilian court.

Who, how many?

The ICRC and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) maintain detailed dossiers on the missing. The ICRC only adds a name when approached by family members who have no news of their relatives. Their figures show the people still missing are overwhelmingly male, and close to a third of them are between 18-24. Kathmandu has the most missing (119) followed by Bardiya which has close to 100.

The number of disappearances increased sharply after the army entered the conflict in November 2001 and during the state of emergency in 2002, and declined with the setting up of the OHCHR office here.

The NHRC divides its list into those disappeared by the state and those abducted by the Maoists. The commission registered 2,105 cases of disappearance, and the status of 653 people remains unknown. Of the 814 people documented as abducted by Maoists, 158 remain missing.

The words ‘missing’ and ‘disappeared’ are used interchangeably, refer to the same thing, though activists say the latter conveys a greater sense of agency. Now, enforced disappearance is considered the most accurate description.

What would be the mandate of such a commission?

Mary Wernzt, head of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) delegation to Nepal, spoke with Nepali Times about helping families find missing members and the need for a separate, independent commission on the disappeared.

Mary Wernzt: The biggest challenge is to not allow this issue and the suffering of families to be totally drawn into a political issue. It is about a basic human right. Also, unless you deal with the issue of the missing, you cannot move forward to a lasting peace.

The agreement on 8 November between the seven parties and the GNW-M creates a high-level body to address this issue is extremely positive. In some countries it takes 10 years to get to that point. I’ve been told by the Ministry for Peace and Reconstruction that the high-level commission on the disappeared will go forward. They are very optimistic. It is essential that the commission is given the proper legal basis and is formed and function in an independent fashion. Parallel with this the need to put into place measures to prevent further cases of disappearance.

Mary Wernzt: Is there the political will to address the issue of disappearance? Mary Wernzt: The commission’s mandate should be independent and humanitarian, focusing on the provision of remedies and information. It should be in contact and approachable by family members, and they should be seeking to clarify the status of the missing. It should answer the question of whether someone is dead or alive, if dead the circumstances of the death and the location of the human remains. It should as well work on proper exhumation of the human remains and on identification of the deceased. Additionally and very importantly, it should answer to the needs of the families (material support, psychological support, etc) to help them in their mourning process. The commission will need to collect, centralise, and process all the information with regard to the missing. This takes time. We’ve been working here for lasting peace,

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KUNDA DIXIT

Every day, tens of thousands of commuters, civil servants, diplomats travel up and down Maharajgunj. The Foreign Ministry and Teaching Hospital are across the street.

Yet, just over the wall inside Mohan Shamsher’s former palace at Lauri Nivas, which served as the headquarters of the Bhaicharanath Battalion, thousands of prisoners were detained, tortured, and executed between 2003-2005.

This was a concentration in the heart of the city. Bhaicharanath showed how easily human rights groups, activists, and even international humanitarian organisations could be kept in the dark about the military’s dirty secret.

Two years after their release, former inmates of Bhaicharanath have defied threats to tell the tale. Lawyer and journalist Jitman Banat, 32, is one of them. He was picked up on 4 February 2004 and released in 18 October 2005. Banat endured 258 days of torture and detention with blindfold and hands tied behind him. His hair-existing story as told in the book ‘Andhyara 258 Days / 258 Days of Darkness’ is a vivid account of what thousands went through at Bhaicharanath and one of very few testimonies of those disappeared during the conflict.

Mary at Bhaicharanath were civilians in the wrong place at the wrong time, others were caught when friends broke under torture and gave random names. (Prison
we must deal with the missing"

diary, #290). Basnet was himself a victim of Mauist torture in his native Solu, but was taken in for his journalistic work. There were Mauist inside, too: Krishna KC, who has also written a book on Bhairabnath, Hiral Sharma, and many others. The army had penetrated the Mauist Kathmandu task force and used information from torture for further arrests. But torture was notoriously unreliable and thousands of innocent people across Nepal were made to suffer and die.

With the mind of a lawyer and the observational skills of a journalist, Basnet tells us in stark and simple words what he and fellow prisoners went through. His story needs no literary embellishments, his independence gives the book authenticity that other accounts of Bhairabnath detainees lack. His book reads like classic Solzhenitsyn: “The strange thing about torture is that after relentless beatings night and day, you don’t feel the pain anymore. You go into a kind of trance. Or: ‘They told me to take my shirt off, but I couldn’t because it was stuck to the wounds from the previous night’s beatings... so the soldier just ripped it off.”

Basnet writes about being able to see the red neon sign of Himalayan Bank from across the road through a gap in his blindfold and hearing traffic moine. Amidst all the cruelty he was baffled to see his torturers lovingly fondle a puppy, or hearing bells ringing at the barracks temple: “How can people like these be religious,” he asks himself.

There were an estimated ten camps inside Bhairabnath, each housing up to 80 inmates, and two camps were for women. Basnet was kept in the Squash Court and later the Commando Chok, and before every ICRC inspection the prisoners would be moved to tents inside wide bunkers.

Basnet tried to find out as much as he could about his torturers and meticulously lists their names in his book. Some have gone on UN peacekeeping duties, some are still in the army and others are retired.

“Many of them took a great deal of pleasure in inflicting pain on us,” recalled Basnet, his eyes glistening, “but those whose sons have died grieve once.” Basnet told us, his eyes misting, “but those whose sons have disappeared grieve a thousand times.”

Surviving inmates of Bhairabnath and the families of those who died or are still missing want justice. And they say the Mauists in government and ministers sympathetic to the army don’t want unpleasant truths from the past to come out.

“Those who tortured us are walking around openly and threatening us, while we have to hide and still be scared,” says Basnet, who has sued King Gyanendra as supreme commander of the army. He gets death threats, but says: “They can kill me, but they can’t kill my book.”

Passing Bhairabnath as the glowing sun illuminated its gates, Basnet told us “It was beautiful palace and they turned it into a burial ground... I can’t bear to remember what went on behind those walls.”

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**TESTIMONY OF TORTURE: Jitman Basnet reading passages from the book that documents his nine-month torture and incarceration at Bhairabnath in which he names all names. A Google Earth view of barracks showing the key areas (left).**
“The agony of families is being prolonged”

Nepali Times: What message does the Disappearance Bill send out about institutional accountability and impunity?

Lena Sundh: Under international human rights standards, states have a clear obligation to investigate and prosecute persons allegedly responsible for serious human rights violations, such as enforced disappearances. The bill reflects the government’s recognition that enforced disappearance is not only a serious human rights violation, but also that it must be made a criminal offence under Nepali law. OHCHR welcomes the bill as a step towards ensuring such accountability. But we are very concerned that the bill does not fully meet international human rights standards. One concern is that the bill is not intended to apply to acts of disappearance which were committed in the past. Also, crimes of disappearance are considered to continue until the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person are clarified. So most disappearances in Nepal would not be considered past crimes, but ongoing crimes.

Another concern is that it does not address the fact that military courts have jurisdiction over Nepal Army personnel accused of disappearance under the existing Army Act. This is contrary to international human rights principles which allow only ordinary civilian courts to exercise jurisdiction over persons accused of serious human rights violations.

There are other problems. The definition of disappearance in the bill does not include all the elements of the internationally-accepted definition of enforced disappearance—for example, by ensuring not only that government officials, but also any person acting with the support or acquiescence of the government, may be held responsible. The penalty the bill provides (up to five years of imprisonment and a fine of up to Rs 50,000) is not at all reflective of the very serious nature of the crime of disappearance.

The bill in its current form is limited to individual criminal accountability. According to international human rights standards, states also have the responsibility to undertake a range of institutional and other measures to prevent, terminate, investigate, and punish acts of enforced disappearances. OHCHR recommends that a more comprehensive law on disappearance be adopted in Nepal in the near future.

Lena Sundh, representative in Nepal of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, spoke with Nepali Times about the new Disappearance Bill and the stalling on an independent investigation into Bhairabnath.

What else needs to happen to address the issue of disappearance and the needs of the families?

Since the office in Nepal was established in 2005, OHCHR has been gathering information on the disappeared and has maintained contact with relatives of the disappeared and organizations working on their behalf. We have presented information on cases to the authorities and to the Working Group on Involuntary and Enforced Disappearances. We have also carried out an in-depth investigation into allegations of disappearances from the Bhaijnath Battalion and published a report in May 2006. Many times we have called on the authorities to carry out independent investigations into the disappeared, but so far there has been little response. At times we have been given inaccurate and misleading information by the Nepal Army, which also never provided us with a copy of its report on investigations into our May 2006 report. We have also raised cases of those abducted by the CPN-M and whose whereabouts are also unknown.

Then, in November 2006, agreement between the SPA and the CPN-M committed them to setting up a high level commission of inquiry on disappearances. Unfortunately, nothing appears to have been done so far to set up such a commission. OHCHR believes that such a commission must be independent, credible, and competent, and only established after broad consultations with civil society and other stakeholders, including relatives of the disappeared. The delay in setting up proper, independent inquiries to clarify the fate of all the disappeared in prolonging the agony of families waiting to know the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones, and denying them the right to justice and reparations.

Should disappearance be part of the mandate of the truth and reconciliation commission (TRC) decided upon in the comprehensive peace agreement?

In addition to the truth and reconciliation commission in the CPA, there is also a commitment to create a commission of inquiry on disappearances. The establishment of such a commission would not substitute for an eventual TRC, which would look into a broad range of human rights violations, including disappearances. Effective investigations into individual cases of disappearances by a commission of inquiry would allow a TRC to focus on broader issues related to disappearances, such as the general pattern of disappearances, institutional and political responsibility, and effective measures to prevent disappearances in the future. It would also allow the TRC to focus on supporting processes for reconciliation and healing the wounds.

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It is now a quarter of a century since the acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) was recognised. The knowledge that has been amassed since then has been translated into lifesaving treatments is unprecedented.

The discovery of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) as the cause of AIDS was followed by elucidation of its pathogenesis, natural history, and epidemiology, the creation of a diagnostic blood test, and the development of antiretroviral (ARV) drugs. In 1996, the approval of the first drug of a class called protease inhibitors (PIs) marked a new era in AIDS treatment and care. Since then, the Drug Regimen Known as ART has extended the quality of life and extended the life expectancy of HIV-infected individuals.

Moreover, ARVs given to pregnant HIV-infected women and newborns have proven remarkably successful in preventing the onward transmission of HIV. Since these combinations of drugs were introduced, at least three million years of life have been saved in the United States alone. We have over 25 approved anti-HIV drugs and drug combinations, and a robust pipeline of next-generation drugs in various stages of development and clinical testing.

Now our task is to apply these scientific and technological advances to delivering treatment and prevention strategies around the world, especially to people in resource-poor nations. It is clear that efforts to combat the pandemic must be scaled up in Africa, Asia, and other parts of the world where HIV/AIDS is at its greatest toll. There are an estimated 40 million HIV-infected people in the world, nearly three million died of AIDS in 2006 alone.

Programs such as the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria, and philanthropies like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Clinton Foundation have all played a major role in helping drugs available to treat two million people infected with HIV in lower- and middle-income countries. But fewer than 25 percent of people in these countries who need ARVs are accessing them.

With 4.3 million new HIV infections each year, we face an untenable situation, as new infections far outstrip our ability to treat all those infected. We desperately need to improve our ability to prevent infections.

A wide array of prevention strategies, including behavioral modification, condom distribution, and the provision of clean needles and syringes to IV drug users have seen some recent success. Studies suggest projects have been successful.

But the greatest scientific and public health achievement in HIV/AIDS research, developing an effective vaccine, still eludes us. It is particularly difficult because of the nature of the virus. It has particular difficulty in integrating itself into the genome of host cells, to readily mutate, and prevent that part of its outer coat that would induce protective antibodies.

We also know that the body’s natural immune pathways are inadequate in controlling the virus. Since the discovery of HIV, there has been no documented case of an infectious disease system completely eradicting the virus following established inoculation.

Many current studies focus on developing vaccines that may at least slow the progression of HIV or make a person less likely to pass the virus on to others. To develop a vaccine that can prevent HIV infection, we need to discover how to induce the human body to produce a protective immune response.

Despite these extraordinary scientific and medical accomplishments in the battle against HIV/AIDS so far, history will judge us by what we accomplish in the next 25 years, and how we deliver the fruits of our research efforts to those who need them most.

Anthony Fauci is director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. He also advises the White House on global AIDS issues and initiatives to bolster medical and public health preparedness against emerging infectious diseases such as pandemic influenza.

China needs a bigger international role and a change in its system of governance

The whole world, it seems, views China as the next great power. A trip to Beijing does little to dispel that impression. Out of the welter of dust, noise, wending spots, footprints of cement mixers and construction cranes, the setting for the 2008 Summer Olympics is taking shape.

But looking down on the scene from the half-finished Olympic Centre, the luxury apartment complex, and seven-star hotel that is arising beside the Olympic site, one is struck not only by the projects grandeur, but by its design daring. Below, like some lattice popover, is the Herzog & de Meuron-designed Bird’s Nest Olympic Stadium. Beside it is the stunning Water Cube, or Aquatics Centre, of Chinese/ Australian design.

Feeling the Promethean energy unleashed in Beijing, it is easy to believe in China’s aspirations to restore itself to a position of global wealth and power. Over the past half-century, when the Chinese have put their minds to it, they have always demonstrated extraordinary fortitude and resolution, whether in embracing Mao’s revolution or in realising the economic counter-revolution unleashed by Deng Xiaoping.

But to become a truly great nation, China must make two great leaps. First, it must become more comfortable playing an active and constructive international role. China is now deeply involved in the world because of trade. But it maintains a nineteenth-century notion of sovereignty, namely, that its leaders have an absolute right to do whatever they want without outside interference.

China’s leaders fear that if they begin to pronounce on the domestic record of other nations, much less join in sanctions or United Nations peacekeeping missions, they will have a precedent that would allow others to intrude on domestic Chinese affairs. But the Chinese government has just had a wake-up call in Sudan, from which China imports 50 percent of its oil. After doing little to pressure Sudanese strongman Omar al-Bashir into admitting UN peacekeepers to stem the killing in Darfur, China suddenly found the promise of an unsullied Olympics at risk. It was only after actress Mia Farrow suggested that the 2008 Olympics might be remembered as the genocide games that the Chinese government’s policy was not a total disaster.

China’s second challenge concerns its hybrid capitalist/Leninist system of government, which may not function well enough without democratic feedback and the rule of law. Although hardly democrats, President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao already are expending large amounts of time and resources on divisive social problems in the countryside where income growth has lagged. They have cancelled national agricultural taxes, made rural schooling free, launched a new rural medical insurance plan, and guaranteed that, since there is still no title for holding private agricultural land, peasants are entitled to renew their time and resources on divisive social problems in the countryside where income growth has lagged. They have cancelled national agricultural taxes, made rural schooling free, launched a new rural medical insurance plan, and guaranteed that, since there is still no title for holding private agricultural land, peasants are entitled to renew their

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Orville Schell is a renowned expert on China and Dean of the School of Journalism at the University of California-Berkeley.
MUSIC
- Soul of Raga: live classical and fusion music, every Friday night at Nitsuheici Kitchen, The Organic Bistro. 4429903.
- Open mic night at Via Via Café, every Friday. 8PM.
- Live music at the Red Onion Bar, Wednesdays from 8PM with Yanki and Zigme Lepcha. 4416071.
- Soul of Raga live at the Rox Bar, every Saturday at the Shivapuri Heights Hotel. 4419353.
- DJ Raja and the Cloudwalkers live at the Rax Bar, Hyatt Regency, every Friday and Saturday. 4491234.

DINING
- Friday evening BBQ with live music, at the Hotel Himalaya, 7PM. 9741371927.
- Walk and lunch every Saturday at the Shivapuri Heights Cottage. 9841371927.
- Kebabs and curries at the Ohba, Thapathali. 9841229619.
- Krishnarpan Nepali specialty restaurant at Dwarika’s Hotel, six to 22 course ceremonial lunch and dinner. 4417070.
- Mongolian BBQ Wednesdays and Fridays, 6.30 PM on at the Splash Bar and Grill, Radisson Hotel. Rs 1,000 for unlimited barbeque and beer. 4422828.
- Flavours of the Middle East every Friday and the taste of Thailand every Wednesday at The Café, Hyatt Regency, Boudha. 4491234.
- Light nouvelle snacks and elaborate cordon bleu meals at LaíSoon, Pulchok, behind the Egyptian embassy. 5537166.
- Continental cuisine and wine by the fire place at Kifioys, Thamel. 4254404.
- Smorgasbord Lunch at Park Village Resort, every Saturday. 4437369.
- Gyakok at the Shambala Garden Café, Hotel Shangri-La, from the woodfired oven at Java, Thamel. 4422519.
- Retro brunch barbecue with Crossfire Band at Le Meridien, Gokarna from 12-4PM. 4451212.
- Calculutta rolls, biryani, kebabs Indian cuisine at Bawarchi, Bluebird Mall Food Court. 974100735.
- Woodfired pizzas at the Roadhouse Café, Thamel 4262768, Brushtones 4452857 and Pulchok 5921755.
- Pizza from the woodfired oven at Java, Thamel. 4422519.
- Jazzeball Café enjoy great food, exotic cocktails and music, Chakupat, Patan. 2114075.

GETWAYS
- Weekend package at Le Meridien Kathmandu Gokarna Forest Golf Resort and Spa, two nights three days at Rs 8,888 and one night two days at Rs 4,444. 4421312.
- Wet and wild package at Godavari Village Resort, every Saturday and Sunday, unlimited swimming, buffet lunch with a bottle of beer for a softdrink, Rs 690. 5560675.

For inclusion in the listing send information to editors@nepalitimes.com.

BURNING ISSUE: Bhutan protesters burn a portrait of the Indian prime minister at the Indian Embassy in Kathmandu on Tuesday as other refugees began their ‘Long March’ back to Bhutan. The march was stopped at a border bridge in Jhapa and Indian police shot dead one protester and injured several others. After talks, the march has been put off for 15 days.

RUNNING BLIND: Blind marathoner Mark Pollock (left) and John Regan his guide, after completing the world’s highest run from 5,356m Chomolungma Base Camp and ending at the 3,446m at Namche Bajar in 16h 27m 39s on Monday night.

THE ART OF TREKKING: Artists Sagar Manandhar, Prasant Gurung, Bidhata KC, Bhawana Manandhar, Erina Dongol, Sunil Ranjit, and LK Lama during an artistic trek ‘Inspiration of Manaslu’ at Sama Gaun (3,360m) last week organised by Manang Youth Society which will use the paintings produced to promote treks in Manang and Manaslu.
Fridayendra Sarkar coming down with the chickenpox has the palace all aflutter. The little prince was rushed back from Gokarna to Nirmal Nihas this week where he is recuperating under the close supervision of great step-grandmother Ratna. All this wouldn't have made headlines in the tabloids had the Nabayubaraj not been proposed as a compromise candidate to save the monarchy. Now it looks like even that won't do the trick.

So the Indo-Nepal medical diplomacy is in full swing again: Ram Baran, Shekhar, and Sushil all trooped off to Apollo Hospital to meet a slew of Indian leaders and take the opportunity to have their heads examined. Ram Baran needs to treat his tari schizophrinia. First Nephew Shekhar has to sort out his dysfunctional relationship with First Daughter Sujata and First Cousin Sushil badly needs a face-lift. Now that Nona is no more, the Sujata-Sushil rift has put the decision-making in the Koirala kitchen cabinet. With the two pulling a hapless Girija in diametrically opposite directions the centre-right party establishment even lost control of the NSU leadership in Chitwan because the Sujata and Shekhar lobbies cancelled each other out. The Ass’s advice to the prime minister is to forget about unification of the Nepali Congress for now, just unite the Koilala family first. Next week exclusive on Ass: UML medical diplomacy in Delhi.

Comrade Deb Gurung (army security code name: “Zulu 21”) goes down in history this week as the first minister to call for a bund. As head of the Ethnic Federal Republican Front, the minister of local development wants the Supreme Court to overturn its decision on Nepali language, and since there is no likelihood of that happening we’ll all be forcibly bunned again on Friday as you read this at home. During the most unstable coalition governments of the post-1990 democracy era we used to have three bunds a week on average, but even during those dark and uncertain days we never had a government minister calling a shutdown, for fakir’s sake. Deb Babu is ably assisted in this endeavour by our very own valley commissar Comrade Hitman whose work on behalf of self-described “backward” groups is well known.

The behaviour of the formerly-subterranean comrades in government is beginning to arouse suspicions that the Maoists may move from their strategic offensive phase into a strategic withdrawal and pull out of the eight-party alliance ahead of elections. Being in the opposition can give them an anti-incumbent advantage, the freedom to unleash the YCL, stone ambassdoricial cars without triggering a diplomatic incident, and call any number of bunds they want.

But it will be difficult to convince the comrade ministers who have been getting fairly comfortable in their jobs. Comrade Hasiya (code name: “Zulu 26”) has got so hooked to the limelight thanks to Melamchi she now wants to have the project no matter what. Maham Babu (code: “Zula 21”) has three cell phones (Mero Mobile, Tero Mobile and Hamara CDMA) and none of them work properly. Getting a call during a press meet at Singha Darbar recently he was shouting “Hello! Hello!” and when it turned out to be a wrong number he yelled into the phone: “Don’t you know you’re talking to a minister?”

It’s not a coincidence that Nepal is flooded with sandalwood en route from Karnataka to Lhasa. They hunted down Comrade Veerapan, so the business just moved north to Nepal which is why it is called ‘red’ sandalwood here. The Ass can’t figure out what the fuss is about anyway. It’s not our sandalwood forests that are being chopped down, they are not selling it in Nepal so we’re not breaking any international treaties. We are just facilitating trade between our two neighbours and everybod gets his share. Nepal is benefiting from being a transit point between India and China, and wasn’t that supposed to make us really rich?

So, instead of working up all this self-righteous outrage let’s allow the sandalwood trade to flourish, collect our freight fees, and if any sandalwood is apprehended by chance, we can always send it back to India and barter it for diesel.