Weekly Internet Poll # 353
Q. Should bandas be banned?

Weekly Internet Poll # 354
Q. Growth is said to be over 8 percent and the stock market is bullish. How do you see the country’s economic situation?

The interim parliament is sitting regularly again. Electoral bills are being discussed. The government is talking to janajatis and madhesi activists and is nearing agreement on November polls.

After months of deadlock and delays, it looks like everyone is finally focused on ensuring that the constituent assembly doesn’t leave anyone out.

“Everyone agrees with the demand for fair representation in the assembly to draft the new constitution. We just have to find the right mechanism,” says Speaker Subhas Nembang, whose considerable negotiating skills in the past week have helped bring all sides together.

At the State Affairs Committee on Monday, Minendra Rijal of the NC-D looked tired but happy. Barely 100 m away at the Peace and Reconstruction Ministry, Ram Chandra Paudel was closeted in meetings with the Nepal Adibasi Janajati Federation to discuss proportional representation.

After a meeting with the MJF in Birganj last month, most of the 26 demands of the madhesi activists have been addressed, and MPs stopped obstructing the House after a commission was set up to investigate the tarai incidents and an agreement reached to review demarcation of constituencies.

Even Prime Minister Koirala was upbeat. “This is good,” he told janajati activists on Monday in Baluwatar. “If ethnic participation makes democracy stronger, let’s negotiate and make it happen.”

Janajati and dalit activists are sticking to their demand for full-proportional representation, but they too do not want to make this a reason for another postponement of polls. A constitutional provision to give women 50 percent of the seats under proportional voting and 33 percent in the first-past-the-post ballot is seen as a model. Dalits are generally satisfied with their 14 percent, but are angling for another six percent. If constituencies are delineated on the basis of population, madhesi activists say they will be satisfied.

The one-ethnicity-one seat demand of the janajatis and a plus-minus 10 percent leeway for parties in their closed lists are stumbling blocks. But both sides have decided to study the issue in detail and negotiate again. Says Rijal: “We have to find a middle ground between the needs of the parties and the demands of the ethnicities.”

In an ideal world, all elections should have proportional representation, and even the first-past-the-post voting lists should be proportional. Away out could be to get the parties to set aside seats for ethnicities just as they have agreed to have 33 percent women in the voting lists.

To be sure, negotiations are now getting to the core issues of representation that challenge the status quo. But if the past two weeks in the meeting rooms of parliament are anything to go by, there is now some political will to move forward.
**Footnotes to history**

**Opinion polls in Nepal are mostly harmless indulgences**

In an instance straight out of "This Happens," the recent release of the Dinakaran newspaper in Madurai were vandalised by arsonists who disagreed with the findings of an opinion poll they had published. Three employees were killed.

The political repercussions of the poll seem to be the least of its casualties. Successors to 82-year-old Tamil strongman Karunanidhi stand deep as the party parcel takes his choice, choosing an heir apparent.

*STATE OF THE STATE C K Lal*

In Uttar Pradesh, on the other hand, psychopaths have been disgraced because it didn’t foresee the Mayawati majority last month. Pollsters and pundits were completely wrong: the closest seat forecast for Bahujan Samaj Party was off the mark by 20 percent.

Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh perhaps have compelling reasons to conduct opinion surveys. But does Nepal really need more research to gauge political preferences of its electorate when it’s still going through the convulsions of transition? It seems to come from some of our influential donors think that we do. The Asia Foundation and IDEA International sponsored separate surveys to map the mind of the Nepali electorate. Their findings were released last week.

Unlike Madurai or Lucknow, Kathmandu greeted the forecasts with a wall of silence. Perhaps the Nepali public is really the politically most mature in South Asia. This is also proven in the findings of opinion polls. A majority of respondents in recent polls have decided to open up and commit themselves to any cause, party or leader (see "Undecided"), they may be undecided, or they may be refusing to take polls seriously. In all probability, enumerators got the answers that they were looking for, and not what the interviewees actually thought.

At best, opinion polls are like any other applied research, seeking to set a political agenda. This is why some analysts, particularly pollsters, are predicting political interventions rather than news stories.

Then we need to scrutinise poll methodology. What was the purpose of the poll? Who sponsored it? What is the background of the poll organisation? What kinds of questions were asked? What was the order of questions? Who reviewed the findings? Were the interviews conducted? What was the timing of the poll? Has statistical rigor been observed? Is the analysis contextualised? Are the conclusions substantiated? Are findings theoretically sound? The media often lacks the incentive to examine poll findings so minutely.

Unexamined reports fail to inspire confidence and is that why the two recent polls created hardly a ripple in Kathmandu, let alone the rest of the country. Despite this opinion surveys are popular for several reasons. Statistics give credence to the commonplace, provide respectability to bias and act as a useful tool to pollsters. Polls create short-term job opportunities for half-educated middle class youth. Examiners are paid well for traveling places in Nepal that they are unlikely to visit for any other reason. Poll analysts can also use their extra legal and financial resources. They are compensated for stating the obvious in pseudo-academic jargon. Opinion polls provide a veneer of respectability that desperate donors seek to keep HQ in good humour. The best part is that opinion polls in Nepal are mostly harmless indulgences. Journalists prepare the first draft of history. Scholars go through the rough copy for posterity. But in a strange reversal of roles, our academic research generates footnotes in the name of psychopaths. And this journalism serves up as science. Since most Nepalis don’t care much for the results, let’s have as many opinion polls as donors are willing to sponsor. The more the merrier. **Mikhail Gorbachev is chairman of the board of Green Cross International.**
LETTERS

DISAPPEARED
It was heart-rending to read the sad tale of the Chaudhary family from Bardiya (‘937, #351). Let us publicise cases of missing civilians like Bhaban Chaudhary and pressure for them to be addressed. The village of Badihi of Bardiya is still missing a large number of its young men. These stories of hidden pain must be remembered so the families can have justice.

Surendra Malla, Belawa, Bardiya

Jitman Basnet is a brave and selfless man. Thank you for bringing out his story (‘Disappeared, dead or alive’, #351). He suffered so much and survived, never buckling under severe torture. And then he found the courage to help fellow inmates and their families when he got out. Now, despite threats, he is continuing his struggle. Let’s hope Jitman Basnet and others like him finally get the justice they deserve.

Surendra Malla, Belawa, Bardiya

What about the hundreds of army and policemen slaughtered in cold blood by the Maoists? (‘How Krishna Sen was killed’, From the Nepali Press, #351). Your paper should give equal coverage to such criminal cold-blooded atrocities committed by the Maoists, who do not have the mandate to rule us Nepalis. Fear keeps the media and civilians quiet, lest the monster rear its ugly head again. Only free and fair elections can set us free.

Name withheld, email

ALL NEPALIS
Thank you for printing Daniel Lack’s ‘Stir it up’ (Here and there, #352). It was like a ray of sunshine amid those biased articles that lambaste Nepal’s horrible situation. Don’t Nepal-bashers realise that they are just feeding the fire? It wouldn’t be surprising to find out that most of the know-it-alls live outside Nepal. We all love Nepal. Let’s put all our energies together and push her in the right direction, instead of just skewering the Maoists, the Congress, etc. They are all Nepalis, after all.

Name withheld, email

DEAR ASS
The Backside piece on the US Embassy in Nepal’s travel advisory was excellent (‘From socket bombs to whips’, #349). Do consider expanding your recommendation to Kaiser Mahal to include not only all Nepalis in, or travelling to the USA, but also all US citizens. Unlike the Maoists, we Americans are in dire need of someone—anyone, whether citizens of our country or not—to talk sense to us on this matter. Thank you for your column, dear Ass. You have turned out to be a worthy replacement to, and of the same calibre as, Kunda Dixit and his Under My Hat. I benefit from and enjoy your writing weekly.

Charles Sydnor, Kathmandu

CLARIFICATION
The pottery workshop in ‘Get your hands dirty’ (#352) is organised by ArtworksCHK and is sponsored this month by the BP Koirala India-Nepal Foundation.

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The Long March planned by Bhutani refugees in camps in Jhapa has been postponed again. Refugee leaders, who had planned to resume their thwarted journey back to Bhutan through India today, appear temporarily mollified by the seeming softening in India’s position earlier this week.

The 10 June statement by India’s minister for external affairs, Pranab Mukherjee, that the Bhutani refugee issue is an international problem was, on the surface, a sharp departure from India’s previous position, that it was a bilateral problem between Nepal and Bhutan. Yet, in the same statement Mukherjee also said that “if these 100,000 people enter Bhutan it would create a demographic imbalance”—a line regularly taken by Bhutani authorities and apologists for the expulsion of Bhutanis of Nepali origin. It seems unlikely, therefore, that India’s new position includes being directly involved or mediating talks between Nepal and Bhutan.

In the camps here, such statements are taken as an indication that India will again look away as Thimphu prepares to disenfranchise and expel the over 80,000 Bhutanis of Nepali origin still in Bhutan (‘Replacement population’, #348). With the third-country resettlement option becoming a reality, the frame of reference of the repatriation argument has shifted from Bhutan’s evasive excuses to India’s refusal to accept responsibility for its role in the refugee crisis.

India, which shares a border with Bhutan, should have been the first country of exile for the refugees. Instead, “India loaded Bhutanese citizens onto trucks and buses and dropped them off in Kakarvitta,” says Vidhyapati Mishra, general secretary of Association of Press Freedom Activists-Bhutan (APFA-Bhutan).

Now, the refugees say, they want passage back home. “India should do the same now and drop us off in Bhutan,” argues Ratna Maya Giri, who lives in the Beldangi II camp.

Meanwhile, there is growing tension between those who want to return and those who want to move to third countries. Two refugees were killed last month in the Beldangi camp in riots over precisely this question. Many refugees insist that resettlement is capitulation to Bhutan’s tactics.

On 20 May, about 15,000 refugees—mostly women and teenagers—took to the Mechhi Bridge, in what they described as their ‘long march to Bhutan.’ The Indian Border Security Force baton-charged the crowd and then fired live bullets to stop the refugees from entering India. Saha Bahadur Dewan, a refugee from Pathari camp, died of bullet wounds, and over 100 were injured in the clash.

The temporary lull that followed after meetings between refugee leaders and Indian and Nepali officials continues, though the Long March was meant to resume today. Yesterday the National Front for Democracy, a coalition of Bhutani political parties working towards repatriation, announced that the march would be postponed by a month.

Refugee sources say that the deal will hold as long as India honours its promises to provide compensation for Dewan’s family and free treatment for those injured last month, and more important, convene four-way talks between refugee groups, and Indian, Nepali, and Bhutani authorities.

“India should prove that it really is a great democracy by respecting the right to return of every exiled Bhutani,” says APFA-Bhutan’s Mishra.
Banking for women

Clean Energy Development Bank has launched an innovative account for women that requires no minimum deposit, and offers a free debit card, free internet banking services, and a 50 percent discount on locker rental.

Banks everywhere

NBLE’s current Investment banking division has recently opened its 16th branch in Thamel. In addition to any branch banking, this branch will offer foreign exchange facilities, retail banking services, import and export letter of credit, and guarantees, hand negligence and credit facilities. Kumar’s eighth: Kumar Bank opened a new branch in Kumaripati, its eighth in the country. New branches are planned in Darbar Marg and Gongabu in Kathmandu, and in Nayapathar. BbK’s 4th: Bank of Kathmandu has now started operations in Gongabu in Kathmandu, and in Kehulpal in Banke. Its total number of branches in the country is 14.

The Rs 50 bike

The Rs 50 bike, with a four-speed 8 gears, can be purchased for a 30 percent down payment, zero percent interest, and monthly instalments of Rs 1,499, which works out to Rs 50 a day. The Patra has a two-year warranty. Hansraj Hulaschand is the sole authorised dealer for Bajaj in Nepal.

Plum finds

Plum, the fashion lingerie store, has opened its newest outlet in Hotel Woodland, Darbar Marg. Plum offers lingerie from brands such as Enamor, Jockey, and Victoria’s Secret. Prices range from Rs 400-2,000. Plum has another outlet in the Bluebird Mall.

ECONOMIC SENSE
Artha Beed

India, of course the media, Nepali domestic help are seen as a thriving lot. The image of the Nepali domestic help has taken quite a beating. Some argue that such incidents will naturally happen more often as a simple factor of increasing numbers of Nepali workers overseas. But the Beed doesn’t buy that. Those hands-up ke garne attitude. We need to take a hard look at our global pan-Nepali identity.

This has little to do with the new million-dollar industry devoted to examining Morality of Nepali identity, but it has still to do with money all right. We’ve often been established in this column that service sector jobs are only going to become more, not less. Important for individual Nepalis’ careers and for economic growth in general. Given that, it matters very much how our workers abroad behave.

Since 1996 when the current labour laws were promulgated, political leaders have used, abused, and misused the workforce for their own objectives. We all know the harm done by opportunistically radicalised pseudo-militant labour forces. Workforces now try to export-remittance. But the actions range from closing down factories, locking away managers, creating security hazards at the workplace, and straight out assaulting business owners. The objective is to destroy as much as possible of the institution that has given people employment.

The Doing Business Report dutifully spells out, year after year, how Nepal’s labour laws and labour force are the two biggest competitive disadvantages. We’re so happy to just be in the report, we don’t take on board the reasons for our inclusion—down business conditions. Then there’s the other paradox we have to contend with—our trade unions are often donor funded, and that is the support that makes their efforts to spread inefficiency all the more, more, efficient. Factory owners might be scared to ride around in SUVs, but unions here are happy to flaunt theirs.

It takes a long time to build a brand especially when the image in question is that of a country, and caring nature makes us good domestic workers. The politeness of Nepali waiters and hotel staff and their willingness to go the extra mile for customers means you find many of us in the hospitality industry around the world. It’s important to present these sides of our identity bright and visible. Stories of militancy, whether political or army, will do nothing for the tens of thousands of Nepalis who work overseas and keep this country alive with all their remittances.

We need a Young Constructive League to get our place in the world back on track.

“Mobile telecom revolution”

Nokia is entering the Nepali mobile phone market in a big way, hoping to cash in on the rapid growth of the mobile telecom market. Prem Prakash Chaudhary, general manager of Nokia’s Emerging Asia spoke with Nepali Times about combating smuggling and Nokia’s plans for the future in Nepal.

Nepali Times: What sort of mobile telecom potential do you see in Nepal?
Prem Prakash Chaudhary: At present there are two billion mobile subscribers globally. It took us over ten years to see in Nepal?

How do you see the market in Nepal evolving?
Nepal is where countries like Australia used to be ten years ago. The biggest advantage here is that these markets do not need to evolve. In countries like Australia, the market evolved from voice-centric devices to SMS, then MMS, and now they have web browsing and email. But Nepal can go straight through, because the technology is already there. Markets like Nepal will go through a revolution and not have to wait 10 years to get

What needs to put into place a system to assist in the acceleration of the industry. The government could start by reducing the heavy duties and taxes Nepali consumers have to pay on mobile services.

We are lobbying the government and in the process of setting ourselves up. We’ve just appointed two distributors—Nepali Times.

We need to make handsets more affordable and accessible to the consumers, and accessibility comes from distribution. One way to cut down on the number of grey market handsets is to have authorised distributors here. We hope to then embark on consumer education on mobility.

What are some of the products you are pushing in Nepal?

When you are looking at a country which has low affordability, you want products for a critical mass. We want to encourage a variety of entry-level phones like the Nokia 1110 that are easy to use, durable, and have a longer battery life. We will also offer feature-filled devices such as the Nokia Xpress, Xpress, and the X6800 Sirocco Edition, but our focus is on low-end devices.

What’s the long-term plan?

Nokia does not have very high fixed teledensity, so the demand and potential of mobile internet is going to be significant in the future. We see a revolution in mobile internet in Nepal soon—mobile devices used for entertainment, music, video clips, mobile TV, GPS for direction. What’s exciting is that for a lot of people in countries like Nepal, the first time they ever talk on the phone will be on a mobile device. Our vision is to be able to provide that experience.

Appearances count

Our global identity needs a good burningish

last week we heard a lot about the globalising Nepal workers facing jail sentences and deportation in Delhi. Now in Malaysia, Nepali migrant workers are occasionally in the news, for the wrong reasons. In
Interview with Baburam Bhattarai in Abhiyan, 11-17 June

Abhiyan: Has there been any change in your party’s economic policy now that you are in parliamentary politics?

Baburam Bhattarai: First of all your vocabulary is all wrong. We haven’t joined parliamentary politics, we are in a transition phase through an interim parliament. Our destination is a transformation of the state through the constituent assembly election. And just like we are in an interim government, we are also in an interim economy.

What is your party’s view on foreign direct investment? Our economy needs to be oriented towards self-sufficiency, self-respect, and industrial capitalism. For this we need to lay the foundation by mobilising national capital and using local labour and markets. We are not against FDI, it could complement our efforts. But FDI needs to be in the national interest. We don’t think Nepal’s economy can grow unless we can completely uproot feudalism and imperialism and replace it with national industrial capitalism.

You have put forward a populist land reform program but, instead of trying to get it through parliament, you are forcibly taking over private property. These are lies propagated by a class of well-heeled, feudal, service middlemen. If you look at world history a new foundation has never been possible without forcibly demolishing the old state structure. You can’t make minor repairs on a tottering old house and convert it into a skyscraper. Similarly, you can’t build a new economy without destroying an old one. We have been destroying for the past ten years, and done the right thing. But we aren’t finished yet. We are now protecting our achievements of the past through a peaceful campaign.

Hasn’t the violent enforcement of bandas, hartals and other disruptions by organisations affiliated with your party ruined the economy? It’s a mistake to say these measures are ruining the economy. Annual economic growth in the past 50 years has barely been more than two percent. You forget about the past 50 years and to hide that non-performance blame our movement?

What do you say about complaints from businesses that the YCL is creating a negative business climate? That’s completely wrong. The well-to-do who are being discarded by the people are spreading this disinformation to hide the real truth. The YCL is a political grouping that is doing some important work trying to help development and social service.

Like what? The YCL widened the Kalanki road, it demolished illegal construction on the Ring Road, it cleaned up the streets. It has caught smugglers. Isn’t this development work? The corrupt are panicking and blaming the YCL for high-handedness.

How about the YCL settling fire to government buildings, destroying government property, and beating up civil servants? If you don’t see the hundred good things we do and only highlight one weakness, I have nothing to say...

How are you managing your costs? How much are Maoist leaders paid and where do you get the money from? We have a regular levy, we do farming, we work. We have collectivised our personal property and we also request sympathetic businessmen to make political contributions.

Shouldn’t you be transparent about how these monies are raised and how they are spent? We don’t see the need to. If our main leaders have not kept any personal property and they live lives at the same level as the people, this issue of misuse doesn’t arise.

Apparently you haven’t yet accounted for money you got for cantonment management. That is disinformation propagated by corrupt people of the likes of Ram Sharan Mahat and those who remain in power by being middlemen for foreign forces. We have kept all the accounts and we will make them public when the time comes.

Foreign investment has dried up and everyone is in wait-and-see mode. They say they have to pay taxes not just to the government but also to the Maoists.

It is wrong to blame us for the lack of foreign investment. These are accusations made by a feudal smuggling class that doesn’t want domestic industrial capitalism to thrive.

You say you have to resolve politics before the economy can be mended. But what if it takes years? We are the only party that is convinced that there will be no political, economic, and social change without ending the 250 year-old feudal monarchy and bringing in a people’s republic. The monarchy hasn’t ended yet and palace forces still control the economy. It is 50 years too late to end the monarchy. But once that happens we can launch this country into long-term development and in the next 15-20 years we can transform this country into, I wouldn’t say Switzerland, but at least the most-developed in South Asia.

Even West Bengal has given up on communism and is welcoming foreign investment. Isn’t there a lesson there?

West Bengal is a part of a larger capitalist entity that is India. That is why West Bengal’s communists weren’t able to transform the state. There will never be peace or development until there is an end to feudalism and imperialism in the world. That is why the world needs to move towards socialism.
Tortured women

Matthew Banner in Dhurri, 12 June

Housewives Sarita Sharma and Tara Bhandari and student leader Bina Magar (from left to right in pictures, below) still bear the scars of army detention and torture. Many others with them in Bhairabnath have disappeared. The three live with the physical pain and memories of their incarceration.

On 20 October 2003, Bina was dropped off the back of a crowded truck because there was not enough room. She was lucky, till today no one knows where the other people were taken or what happened to them. Bina still suffers from the after-effects of the torture. She was repeatedly dunked in icy water in November and December and has severe sinus trouble. Doctors recommend surgery, but Bina is under heavy medication. She feels uneasy and becomes restless and anxious in the evenings.

Tara Bhandari, a native of Nagarkot, was arrested on 29 October 2003 from Kalimati. She still suffers severely from the torture. She keeps up a constant nervous chatter, her body swells up, her skin burns, and she is unable to hear properly. A wound on her elbow, the result of repeated electrocution hasn’t yet healed properly. "Anything I eat or drink, even water, makes my body swell up," says Tara. Doctors suspect she also has psoriasis. Bhandari has to take strong medications three times a day, and has severe sideeffects.

Sarita Sharma was in Bhairabnath for 21 months. The younger of her two sons was just two years old when Sarita, now a librarian at Universal College, was taken into custody. Doctors at Teaching Hospital suspect she has intestinal cancer. Meanwhile Sarita is still on medication to treat the physical and mental effects of her stay at Bhairabnath. But, she says, as much as the physical pain and discomfort, she feels the social stigma is attached to women like her. "Many people dismiss my views with a simple "why should I talk to someone who has spent so many years in army custody," explains Sarita.

These three are the tip of the iceberg, and the lucky ones, who survived Bhairabnath. The list of women tortured and still suffering is long.

Impatient PKD

Editorial in Naya Patrika, 12 June

When media reported Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh’s suggestion to Madhav Kumar Nepal in New Delhi last week to work with the NC, Maoist leader Prachanda went ballistic in Butwal and warned India not to interfere in internal affairs. Barely two days later, he backtracked and went into damage control, saying he’d spoken in a hurry.

Since he came aboveground in Kathmandu last year and made a controversial statement about the army, Prachanda has habitually said controversial things, and then retracted them. People almost expect him to regularly make selfcontradictory remarks.

Because they took the path of violence in the past, the Maoists perhaps can’t help appearing aggressive. It is a challenge for them to present an acceptable image to the public. They need to make their ideology and politics acceptable to the people. In the past Prachanda has successfully convinced his colleagues about his moderate stance. Now he needs to take the radicals with him. Any politician who likes to talk too much is sooner or later going to get into trouble over some controversial remark. Comrade Prachanda is now earning a reputation for talking too much and regretting it later.

If he wants to continue to be regarded as an alternative political leader, he needs to work on his credibility among the people and the international community. Only then can he stake his claim as a potential leader. Impulsiveness is not in his interest, nor is it in the national interest.

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

The Americans have set up an A-Level embassy in a small country like Kathmandu, the way the embassy is built, the status of the ambassador, the military presence in the embassy, it is easy to understand all this was to counter the Maoist People’s War and to encircle China.

Barsha Man Pun (Ananta) in Jana Astha, 13 June

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Interview with Zheng Xiaoting, the Chinese ambassador to Nepal in Nepal, 17 June

You presented your credentials to the prime minister instead of the king, does that mean that China accepts a republic in Nepal? Zheng Xiaoting: (Laughter) We cannot say, it just happened. When I was appointed ambassador to Nepal, we received notice from the Nepali government that the constitution had been changed. According to the interim constitution, the prime minister is the head of state, and ambassadors are supposed to present their credentials to him.

The US still sees the Maoists as terrorists, do you? The CPN-M are now part of the eight-party alliance. This alliance has been accepted by the people of Nepal. I think the US will also accept this coalition government. As far as the label of ‘terrorist’ goes, I think that different people assess things differently. American ambassador James Moriarty has told me too, would like to shake hands with Prachanda.

Are Free Tibet campaigners here a security concern for China? The Nepali government has committed to us not allow separatist forces from Tibet to use Nepal soil against China. We are a little worried about the activities of separatist forces in Nepal. We will work closely with the Nepali government on this issue and hope that Nepal will keep to its commitments. China cannot compromise on the Tibet issue as it is connected to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of our nation.

In 1962, then Deputy Prime Minister Marshall Chen Yi said ‘China will not tolerate foreign interference in Nepal.’ Has China’s policy changed?

No, no. There is no change in policy. The longstanding friendship between Nepal and China has lasted for a long, long time, and I am sure it will continue for generations to come.

Does that mean the Chinese government will treat the problems of Nepali citizens just like it does those of the Chinese? It means exactly that. Whenever the Nepali people face any problem or difficulty, China shall treat them as its own, especially when the problem pertains to sovereignty or territorial integrity. China will not tolerate any foreign intervention in Nepal.
We can all help protect and improve the few open public spaces in our congested city

Breathing Room

PRANAYA SJB RANA

At six every morning, Salil Kumar Thakur jogs slowly to Dhumbardandi’s Sankha Park from his home in Manikhalitar. In the park, he runs laps. Each circuit takes him past other runners, people practising karate, people stretching, and the occasional couple holding hands.

Salil is training for the British Army entrance test. Others come to catch some exercise before their stressful day begins, or to get some fresh air before the traffic starts up. Over a hundred people crowd into this small space every morning—it’s the only legroom and free space for socialising most city residents have. Part of the problem is that Kathmandu has never been a ‘green’ society—our traditional public spaces were typically stone choks and courtyards.

In recent years, some neighbourhoods have begun creating and maintaining small immaculate parks such as that in Guneworswo (see ‘Group effort’), or turn a kerchief-sized green patch with swings and benches in Maharajgunj and Ekantakuna.

Kathmandu’s most famous commons, Tundikhel, has seen a revival in the last year. The middle-aged exercise junkies out are out in the morning, running laps, doing yoga, practising breathing exercises as suggested by Guru Ramdev on the Astha Channel. After school there are cricket and football games and the evenings are for amour—the crowd ensues a kind of scouting. The municipality nixed what it said were illicit constructions and after it was given its current form, the mandala has become the site of often spontaneous gatherings of civic society and protest groups—not quite a park, but it is open. It’s too early to say what will happen to the swathe of land in Koteswor cleared of squatters earlier this week. The ruins look surreal now, but perhaps in time it will turn into another civic centre.

The city’s open spaces are always multipurpose. The grounds in Pulchok’s Engineering Campus often host casual football and cricket matches. Challenges are thrown down—the wager could be money or just plates of momos and cold coca cola—and accepted with alacrity by teams from as far afield as Bansbari, Baneshwor, Jawalakhel, and Boudha. Cricket enthusiast Bishal Adhikari says he plays at Pulchok, the grounds in front of the zoo, or even at a club grounds in Chhaptari.

Surprisingly few people know about the lovely Raniban in Lazimpat, where you can watch groups practising tai chi chuan, as you take your morning constitutional.

In a cramped city where real estate is scarce and expensive, it’s not surprising people want to use—or profit from—every available inch. This is why the so-called green belt around the Ring Road is largely a sad joke, in some places an overgrown tangle of weeds or a public toilet, in others a dumping ground or workshop area. Other public spaces are regularly commandeered for religious and political functions, or held tight by guthis that do not want to cede control. The appalling waste of space at Naalo’s Narayanchaur is a prime example of how a large open space can be wrecked. The guthi-sanstha that owns the large triangle won’t consider turning it into a park. It would rather lease out the empty space as a dumping ground or for ear-shatteringly loud religious ceremonies, while it waits for a lucrative mall deal.

“Often people want to use—or profit from—this urban jungle, the municipality must allocate specific public green spaces for each ward,” argues Thapa. “Local communities can manage them; that is the only way to go.”
when Prajwol Gurung was studying in Belgium, he was impressed by how people gathered in parks to talk, share, and just be neighbourly. Inspired, he decided to do something similar in his own tolle, Gyaneswor, when he returned.

He knew there was a big empty space there, in which he had played as a child. It was overrun with weeds, and was part-parking lot and part-junkie haven. Today it is home to a chautari for people to sit around, slides, swings, a funhouse for children, and a basketball court for the teenagers.

Gurung and a few others of Gyaneswor started a community drive to make something out of the space. Many residents were apprehensive but, once they saw the park take shape, jumped in eagerly to participate in the now-formal efforts of ngo, We Are The One (WATO).

Longtime Gyaneswor resident Bishnu Neupane, managing director of Jagadamba Cement, offered to take care of the parts that needed cementing over. Even the Ministry of Physical Planning and Works and the District Development Committee contributed some resources towards the construction. The rest of the money came from the residents of Gyaneswor, contributing whatever they could. The Rs 800,000 budget was made up, and the park was completed in 2004.

People feel invested in what they help build. Today, Gurung, says, the community takes care of everything in the park, the shopkeeper next door helps weed the park, and teenagers take care of everything from fundraising to opening and locking up the park. “People see the power to change things for the better is in their hands,” says Gurung of WATO’s efforts. “Only we can improve our own communities.”

For more information on WATO’s activities, www.watonepal.org.np
Global Jana Andolan
It’s time Americans and the rest of the world came together to stop the madness

We have suffered through nearly seven long years of the most venal and inept American government in history and in the world. I say “we” because the Bush administration has inadvertently achieved one thing—it has created a community of distress and fear that spreads from Wisconsin to Vladivostok. For make no mistake, more Americans despise their government and their president than ever before. That puts them in a global majority. The current inhabitant of the White House, with his inheritor’s lack of intellectual curiosity, desperate grin, and murderous, incompetent ways, evokes righteous anger in a truly ecumenical group of people—the real international community. Nearly 200 million of them are American and it’s time to come together and build upon Bush’s aversion base.

Let me say from the beginning that I am a huge fan of America. I think it is the only truly modern country, the only nation built on consensus and shared dreams that are constantly kept relevant by the state of the public discourse. I think the American people of whatever political stripe are among the most decent and well meaning anywhere. Most US citizens believe their country’s role is to do good in the world, and they are increasingly appalled at the evil their president and his appointees have wrought in their name.

I am confident that if you survey opinion around the world you will find much the same thing. People in Iran, India, South Africa, and Polynesia like and admire the USA and want to emulate its constitutionally binding commitment to freedom and democracy. They would like to have open economies and the rule of unbiased law, like America: they want to embark on joint projects with the US people for the greater good of the planet.

But in Washington for seven years now we have endured an anti-American government which spurns the founding values of the people that elected it, that recklessly embarks on military adventures and exploits tragedy to enhance its power, which sells off valuable public assets to its cronies, and enriches the richest while spurring the poor. Narrow religious values are shamelessly promoted for electoral gain, in defiance of the secular principles of the land. Science—America’s greatest gift to the planet—is demeaned and diminished while deserts spread and ice melts. As Al Gore, a real and quintessential American, describes it, there is an “assault on reason”.

So it’s time to come together, perhaps under the leadership of one such as Gore, or Jimmy Carter. Bill Clinton would be welcome to join, and decent Republicans like Thomas Keane, Senator Arlen Specter and Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York. There are millions of others and a great many will come from the military adventures and plundering of the public purse in the message to Bush and Cheney. That message is “stop now”. Stop from Europe, Africa, and Oceania and send a solid, unmistakable signal to America: the rest of the world cametogether to stop the madness.

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“They don’t get rich, they get HIV”

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Nearly 200 million of them are American and it’s time to come together, perhaps under of the leadership
Here’s lots of talk about dealing with HIV in Nepal. But that’s the problem. It’s a lot of talk. Awareness remains rudimentary and stigma, strong. For example, few people know about the factors involved in early onset and worsening of HIV symptoms. These are conditions common to the lives of most Nepalis—lifestyle factors like a heavy workload, poor living conditions and frequent infections, poor nutrition, and lack of access to good healthcare. Instead, reaction in remote communities remain at the level of blame and social ostracism.

Poor Nepalis need better treatment options and a whole lot more information if attitudes are to change. Money is a major problem. Not the lack of it, but how it is dispensed. Work in rural areas and you see how little money actually goes to local community organisations that have concrete knowledge of the social and working conditions that affect project work.

Small rural organisations working successfully to spread awareness and information don’t always know how to write slick pitches and don’t have Kathmandu connections. This means they lose out in the funding race. “People with good English come, take all the information we have, write proposals, and get money. They never show up after that. We’ve heard there’s a lot of money in HIV/AIDS. Funny we’ve never seen it,” a local coordinator told me on a recent trip to far-west Nepal.

Some local organisations such as Gangotri (see ‘They don’t get rich, they get HIV’) are trying to help AIDS orphans and widows in a number of ways including financially. “But,” says Rupa Austi of Gangotri, “as an organisation we are also poor and we have no idea how much longer we can help them.” To add insult to injury, community health workers in Achham say they are strongly encouraged to work on a volunteer basis—by experts from Kathmandu who themselves earn over $100 a day. “In what world is this fair?” asked a woman who has worked with AIDS widows for the last five years.

The double standards are pervasive. The Health Ministry wants female community health workers (FCHW) to be volunteers and boosts that its “48,000 FCHWs are the pillars of our health system.” Yet it withdrew even the token Rs 100 per month they were paid at the start of the program because “money kills the spirit of volunteerism. Meanwhile well-off people with enough time to actually volunteer their services get paid handsomely to go work in rural areas for short spells.

In Kathmandu there are donor-funded receptions, workshops, and seminars and feel-good banners and rallies on AIDS Day which the media duly covers. Out in the field health and community workers struggle to keep their initiatives afloat and little changes. “We sit helplessly watching people suffer and die,” says a doctor from the far-west. “Seminars and rallies do play an important role in lobbying the government. But there has to be money going to the real programs that make a difference in rural areas.”

The offence is partly financial and partly in the mistaken assumption that volunteers will take care of the community work so large organisations can devote their time to strategising and fundraising, instead of supporting and strengthening awareness and prevention programs on the ground.

HIV/AIDS largely affects young people, the economic backbone of the country. The epidemic and the response to it are worst in the far-west, but will destroy the rural communities around the country, particularly women and the disadvantaged.

There are people who need better care and counselling than they are getting now even in Kathmandu. And it helps no one, not individual patients and their families, and not development efforts, if doctors, and health and community service volunteers are underfunded and demoralised.

There’s funding to fight HIV in Nepal, just not where it should be

COMMENT
Aruna Upreti

AIDS money

PUT YOUR MONEY WHERE YOUR MOUTH IS: Rural areas need community workers and resources to run regular information programs and q-and-a’s such as this one in Dang last year, but there just isn’t enough funding.
The reasoning is peculiar, and seems to revive a 19th-century critique, usually associated with Nietzsche, that Christianity (and Islam) produces an acquiescent, even subservient, mentality, in contrast to the heroic virtues of classical antiquity or of warrior societies, such as the world of the Japanese samurai. Likewise, according to Fujimura, democracy overemphasises reason, another western construct. “We, the Japanese,” he writes, “don’t have a religion such as Christianity or Islam, so we need something else: deep emotion.”

Many non-Japanese Asians will dislike most or all of Fujimura’s message, for they will hear unpleasant historical echoes. After all, there is no reason to believe that Asians share a particular yearning for authoritarianism, say, or that Chinese pro-democracy movements are insincere stoges for western interests. But Fujimura’s book has also revived an old debate about capitalism and the values needed to sustain it. That debate stems from the fact that capitalism, or the market economy, cannot go on forever driven by an internal momentum and that the basic proclivities that drive it are destructive of long-term success.

While capitalism depends on investment and consumption, too much of the latter causes economies to overheat. Competition, another necessity, can also be brutal and destructive and elaborate legal systems are needed to ensure that it is open and fair and that monopolies and trusts do not destroy competition itself. But each legal reform is answered by entrepreneurial ingenuity from those who want to circumvent the new restraints.

Some thinkers, most notably Max Weber, have suggested that capitalism must be sustained by an outside value system. Weber’s argument was that religious values which emphasise restraint and a sense of duty may support dependability and reliability in business relations, especially vital in societies just opening up market relations. A legacy of violence and suspicion makes it hard for people to feel secure enough to enter into long-term contracts. They tend to look for short-term gains at the expense of others, reinforcing a general scepticism about the market.

Second, religious values that emphasise social solidarity help correct the market tendency to polarise society by rewarding those who want to circumvent the new restraints. "Good governance," and increase aid allocations, regardless of whether money goes to countries most in need or that can most effectively use aid.

Should corrupt countries be cut off from funding? If so, will you do so consistently? Will you support a comprehensive anti-corruption agenda, including closing down secret bank accounts?

One flaw of Wolfowitz’s anti-corruption agenda was that it expanded or continuation of aid for countries favoured by the Bush administration, like Pakistan, was pushed, regardless of how corrupt they were, while there was little tolerance elsewhere. Problems with Uzbekistan were overlooked until it fell out of favour with the US. The Bush administration also opposed the OECD initiative to restrict bank secrecy, until it realised that secret bank accounts help terrorism. Since then, it has closed secret bank accounts, but only for terrorists.

Should the World Bank encourage countries to adopt core labour standards? Not only has the bank not been active in promoting these globally agreed standards, there is a concern that the bank discourages collective bargaining and protections for workers in promoting the ‘rules of international order’. Critics of authoritarian regimes are tempted to argue that freedom is good because it promotes economic growth. But a degree of freedom regards it as having intrinsic value, as the work of Nobel laureate economists Friedrich Hayek and Amartya Sen shows.

"Asian" values

It’s simplistic to suggest that some religion- or culture-specific values best support capitalism. It’s simplistic to suggest that some religion- or culture-specific values best support capitalism. It’s simplistic to suggest that some religion- or culture-specific values best support capitalism. It’s simplistic to suggest that some religion- or culture-specific values best support capitalism. It’s simplistic to suggest that some religion- or culture-specific values best support capitalism. It’s simplistic to suggest that some religion- or culture-specific values best support capitalism. It’s simplistic to suggest that some religion- or culture-specific values best support capitalism. It’s simplistic to suggest that some religion- or culture-specific values best support capitalism. It’s simplistic to suggest that some religion- or culture-specific values best support capitalism. It’s simplistic to suggest that some religion- or culture-specific values best support capitalism. It’s simplistic to suggest that some religion- or culture-specific values best support capitalism. It’s simplistic to suggest that some religion- or culture-specific values best support capitalism. It’s simplistic to suggest that some religion- or culture-specific values best support capitalism. It’s simplistic to suggest that some religion- or culture-specific values best support capitalism. It’s simplistic to suggest that some religion- or culture-specific values best support capitalism.
New ways of seeing

Kalash Shrestha’s paintings are dark splashes of black and red, one bleeding into the other and producing constantly shifting shapes. Almost all of the 24 canvases Shrestha exhibited this week use what he calls the tantric colours—red, white, black, the colours that are supposed to be present in the eye. But the paintings are not dark or depressing, as the black and crimson usually give way to white, as if finding the light in darkness.

Shrestha’s solo show, A Shift of Vision, was the first in a series by final-year BFA students from KU’s Centre for Art and Design in Bhaktapur. The nine solo student shows run for four days each through June.

A Shift of Vision is a strong start to the festival. From Shrestha’s perspective, even mundane objects such as pots, windows, and poles become a whole lot more interesting. There are contrasts in his pictures that Shrestha says represent life and death—a closed window next to an open one, a dark splash merging with white.

The show is largely inspired by the artist’s native Bhaktapur, and here contrast is also a way to understand and culture. Red chillies hang out to dry, a sari draped in front of a house, and twin pots hanging on outside walls are recurring motifs. They are common enough images in Nepali art, but Shrestha makes them his own—the chillies explode upwards, the pots hang in thin air, the sari is a dark cloud with a red lining. This granular imagining of what may or may not be present is a major hook of Shrestha’s paintings. “Even a small object should tell a bigger story, a story of something more,” he says.

Pramya SJB Rana

For more information on the student shows ring Baryo Fiesta at 4414395 or Juju at 98510 50299.

Astronomers without borders

What strategy would work for practical astronomy in Nepal?

Sending a spacecraft to the Moon is really an engineering project, more than astronomy or another science. It’s very difficult and requires experienced and educated engineers and scientists. Nepali engineers and scientists will have to get the best education possible in order to prepare for such a huge endeavour.

How could Nepali and American astronomers collaborate?

Nepali astronomers can certainly come to the US to study and to participate in research programs here. There are ways for people to apply but for such top-flight programs the applicants have to be among the best to qualify.

How far is astronomy true from the scientific perspective?

The positions of the stars and planets have nothing to do with what happens to us on Earth. We need to move forward using our new knowledge to make decisions about what we should do and what we can and cannot do and forget the old false beliefs that we have learned. Only then can we move forward and control our own destinies rather than taking the path of the past.

June Highlights:

● Make plans to celebrate for the longest day of the year. The Sun is at solstice on 21 June, indicating the start of summer.

● After 2 June, when Mercury reached it greatest eastern elongation and its best position to be viewed, it started moving closer to the setting Sun and will go through inferior conjunction on the 28 June to become a morning object.

● Venus moved from Gemini to Cancer at the start of June and this fantastic “evening star” and will be close to Saturn by the end of the month.

● Mars moves from Pisces to Aries during June, rising three or four hours before the Sun.

● Saturn will be seen parked in western Leo throughout the month. On 30 June, Saturn and Venus will be very close to each other, so make a point to try to see them in the western horizon an hour after sunset.

Mike Simmons, founding president of Astronomers Without Borders (AWB), travels extensively to observe and study celestial events. He promotes astronomy by networking amateur astronomy groups throughout the world and is associated with the Mount Wilson Observatory in California. Nepal! Times spoke with Simmons about his experience in astronomy and how Nepal could benefit from astronomy education.

Nepali Times: What inspired you to start stargazing?

Mike Simmons: I was interested in astronomy at such an early age that I can’t remember when I first became interested or how. When I was old enough I bought books, used binoculars, and joined an astronomy club to learn more. I’ve stayed involved in astronomy through my entire life while working and raising a family.

What has been your most exciting moment in stargazing?

It’s such an exciting field and pursuit, how can someone choose one exciting moment? Whether using a small telescope or a huge one, it’s the idea that you’re seeing something so far away and so different than our own familiar world that makes it interesting and exciting.

What inspired you to establish AWB?

AWB has been established to connect people with an interest in astronomy and other fields all over the world. Many organisations have joined us in this effort and I expect to have over a thousand organisations affiliated with us eventually.

How could Nepali stargazers participate in AWB?

As we build the AWB network of affiliate organisations there are more and more groups in other countries to interact with. It will be some time before we grow to the point where we can accomplish all our goals, but eventually there will be forums and interactive events where Nepali stargazers can talk with and maybe observe with their colleagues anywhere in the world.

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**EXHIBITIONS**
- Saransha: an exhibition of paintings by BFA final year students from Kathmandu University, until 28 June at Baryo Fiesta, Naubat. 4414395
- Colors of the seapul and petals: an exhibition of paintings by Neera Joshi Pradhan, until mid June at Park Gallery, Lazimpat. 4415935

**EVENTS**
- **WAVE Mr and Ms University** 15 June, 3.30 PM at Birenda International Convention Centre.
- The Shawshank Redemption: a film by Frank Darabont, starring Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman, 6.45 PM on 15 June at Lazimpat Gallery Café. 4428549
- Yuva Chhaffal Shinrnhakah: on weapons management in the context of Nepal, 3-5PM, 15 June at Martin Chautari, 4107599
- Core Empowerment Training: by writer Paula Laxmi Horan, five day intensive retreat at the Farm House, Nagarkot, until 17 June. 9833936700
- Nepali cinema as world history: a lecture by Bernardo A Michael, 5.30 PM on 20 June, Yala Maya Kendra, Patan Dhoka. 5541842
- CSGN monthly lecture: Unequal Citizens by Lynn Bennett, 22 June, 9.30 AM at Shanker hotel. 9851046853
- Film South Asia 2007: Festival of South Asian documentaries, 11-14 October. Call for entries deadline 30 June. www.filmsouthasia.org
- School Bullying: a talk program by Niti Rana 30 June and 1 July at The New Era, Battisputal. 9851039958

**MUSIC**
- Sastika Sankranti: organised by Aarohan-Gurukul, with Milen Tandukar on bala and Milesh Tandukar on tabla, 5.30PM at the Sama Natakghar, Gurukul, Old Baneswor.
- Soul of Raga: live classical and fusion music, every Friday night at Chhuthe’s Kitchen, The Organic Bistro. 4429903.
- Open mic night: at Via Via Café, every Friday, 8PM onwards.
- Live music at the Red Onion Bar, Wednesdays from 8PM with Yarki and Zigma Lepcha. 4416071
- Cinere Gurung: every Wednesday and Rashmi Singh every Friday, live at the Absolute Bar, Hotel Narayani Complex, 7PM. 5521408
- DJ Raju and the Cloudwalkers: live at Le Meridien, Hyatt Regency, every Friday and Saturday. 4491234

**DINING**
- 5th Annual Monsoon Wine Festival: 16 wines at Rs 150 a glass and Rs 600 a bottle, at Kijro’s of Kathmandu, Thanle. 4250440
- Friday evening BBQ: with live music, at the Hotel Himalaya, 7PM, Rs 499 nett. 5523900
- Walk and lunch: every Saturday at the Shapouri Heights Cottage. 9841371927
- Kebabs and curries: at the Dhaba, Thapathali. 9841290619
- Krishnarpan Nepali specialize restaurant at Dwarika’s Hotel, six to 22 course ceremonial lunch and dinner. 4479488
- Weekend special: with sekua, bara, barbeque. Fridays at Ambassador Garden House, Lazimpat. 5.30 PM onwards. 4417067
- Mongolian BBQ: Wednesdays and Fridays, 6.30 PM on at the Splash Bar and Grill, Radisson Hotel. Rs1,000 for unlimited barbeque and beer. 4428288
- Flavours of the Middle East: every Friday and the taste of Thailand every Wednesday at The Cafe, Hyatt Regency, Boudha. 4491243
- Light nouvelle snacks and elaborate cordon bleu meals at Le Meridien, behind the Egyptian embassy. 5531766
- Continental cuisine and wine by the fire place at Kijro’s, Thanle. 4250440.
- Smorgasbard: lunch at Park Village Resort, every Saturday. 4375260
- Gyakok at the Shambala Garden Café, Hotel Shangri-La, minimum four diners at Rs 450 per person, two hours’ notice.
- Retro brunch barbecue with Crossfire Band at Le Meridien, Gokarna from 12-4PM, Rs 1,000 including swimming. 4481212
- Calcutta’s rolls, biiyani, kebabs: Indian cuisine at Bawarchi, Bluebird Mall Food Court. 9741007935
- Woodfired pizzas at the Roadhouse Café, Thanle 4267268, Bhabhatani 4428587 and Pulchok 5217545
- Pizza from the woodfired oven at Java, Thanle. 4425519
- Jazzaveli cafe: enjoy great food, exotic cocktails and music, Chulapur, Patan. 2114075

**GETAWAYS**
- 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. 4401213
- Wet and wild package at Godawari Village Resort, every Saturday and Sunday, unlimited swimming, buffet lunch with a bottle of beer or a softdrink, Rs 690 nett. 5560675

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

15 - 21 JUNE 2007

#353

HAPPENINGS

SMILEY JIMMY: Visiting former US president Jimmy Carter speaks to media after meeting Election Commissioner Bhojraj Pokhrel and his team in Kathmandu on Thursday morning. Carter will meet senior politicians, including Pushpa Kamal Dahal, and go bird-watching on Shivapuri in his three-day stay here.

PROMISE TO COMPROMISE: MPs Purna Bahadur Khadka and Minendra Rijal (at head of table) at a meeting of the parliament’s State Affairs Committee on Monday concentrated on making the election process more inclusive.

GETTING FUNDAS RIGHT: Hindu holy men and women march down to Maitighar on Wednesday chanting slogans demanding that Nepal revert back to a Hindu kingdom.

HAPPY AND THEY KNOW IT: Shortlisted contestants for the WAVE Mr and Miss University contest pose for a group picture after their Talent Round on Monday. The finalists will be chosen on Friday and will represent Nepal in Korea next month.

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Half-assed bund

The Ass has no idea how they did it, but reporters at the new newspaper Naya Patrika scored quite a scoop by translating a detailed itinerary of Jimmy Carter’s 96 hours in Kathmandu in the tabloid’s Thursday edition. Its a directory of the mobile numbers of Nepal’s movers and shakers. We now know the cell numbers of everyone from Carter Centre Field Director Darren Nance to COAS Gen Katuwal, from Ian Martin to Election Commissioner Bhoj Raj Pokhrel. From Chief of Protocol Gopal Thapa to Peter Burleigh.

This is an amazing treasure trove and the Ass is certain they and Suresh Chalise, Bhekh Thapa, Sapana Malla, Prachanda and our very own CK Lal will soon be changing their SIM cards. All thanks to Jimbo.

If any of you Nepali college students home on summer holidays is looking for a subject for a master’s project, the Ass has one for you: banda psychology. Tuesday’s non-bund was a case study on how rumours about an impending shutdown go viral and turn into mass hysteria. The Ass researched it and found rumours of a bund are first disseminated through an early warning network on the expat-NGO listservs and then move beyond that thorough SMS and word-of-mouth. That is why even if media doesn’t cover a bund call, everyone stays home.

Tuesday’s half-assed bund was called by squatters who had their houses bulldozed last week. They had a genuine cause, but the strike failed miserably because they didn’t follow the SOP for making a bund successful: rent the Thamel Gang to burn tyres at six strategic interlocutions on the Ring Road at about 7:00 AM. You see the same gang lead by a fat fellow who is always on a mobile phone at all bunds, no matter who calls them. To deter future forced bunds, never repeat a rumour either verbally, electronically or telepathically.

It’s boomtime for doomsdayers as Nepal’s astrologers fall over each other to predict various calamities in the coming weeks. The first date to watch out for is 22 June when the sky will reportedly fall. This forecast by Trisuli Baba has been hotly contested by the Astrologer General’s office, but that hasn’t deterred tens of thousands of Nepalis from deciding to stay indoors that day. Then there is 4 July when soothsayers say Great Floods will strike the region because it is Girijababu’s birthday (many happy re-runs!) as well as America’s Independence Day. After that we have 7 July, which is Kingji’s 61st birthday, and many are congregating at 7AM on the seventh day of the week on 07-07-07 at the palace despite predictions of an apocalypse.

Seven being a lucky number is probably why KingG has been looking bright and chirpy despite parliament passing a bill that makes it possible to impeach him through a two-thirds majority. Is there something the Majestic One knows that we don’t? Those who have met him recently say the sedentary lifestyle has made G slightly overweight. But reports of his poor health could be a palace leak to prod Baluwatar to give him the green light to go abroad to get a checkup. The Ass’s advice: Kingji and Pdji go for a checkup together to Bumrungrad.

The two items of news may not be related, but the government is about to lift a ban on textiles with camouflage prints on the same week that the UN is to begin its second phase of the process to verify if there are any Maoists in the contentions who are above 18 years of age. Now, if only CAAN can first finish its mysteriously extended safety inspection of the UN’s de Havilland Dash-7 turboprop that is still sitting on the tarmac.

There is one other complication: the ceasefire between the UN and the Nepali media has broken down because the peacekeepers have resumed poaching journalists. Gloves have come off as us hacks are no more bound by an earlier commitment not to verify verification in return for a moratorium on UNMIN stealing staff.

ass@nepalitimes.com