Farewell to arms?

Time for the Maoists to decide: house or jungle

KUNDAN ARYAL

O

n the week that the winter session of parliament was getting ready to meet again after a ten day recess, the Maoists celebrated PLA Day at the UN-supervised cantonment in Shaktikhor in Chitwan.

There was an armed marchpast and a seven-gun volley from automatic weapons—all in the presence of the UNMIN adviser on arms management, Brigadier General Jan Erik Wilhelmsen, who listened as Pushpa Kamal Dahal warned that his force could “go back to the jungle”.

Whether the cantonment salute on 25 November fell within the parameters of the comprehensive peace agreement is moot because the UN was there. But it underlined the fact that the Maoists are still openly on the dual track of using the threat of violence while ostensibly in the parliamentary process.

By late Thursday, as this edition went to press, there were indications the seven parties were nearing an agreement. But one party leader cautioned the Maoists could still come up with new conditions.

UML leader KP Oli says it is clear why: “The Maoist strategy is to foil elections at all costs.” But other UML and NC figures believe the Maoists can be brought around. “We mustn’t give them the excuse to go back to war,” the NC’s Mahesh Acharya told us.

Prime Minister Koirala met Baburam Bhattarai and Pushpa Kamal Dahal on Monday and Koirala came out of that meeting saying he was optimistic the Maoists were not against elections per se. But his problem remained convincing his party’s rightwing to opt for a republic.

The compromise hammered out on Thursday was to have 60-40 proportional representation in elections, but for a 600-member house in which 240 members would still be elected directly.

There was also agreement on having a commitment for republic in the interim constitution to be ratified by the elected assembly.

The UML leader regarded as being closest to the Maoists, Bamdev Gautam, told Nepali Times: “The two parliamentary directives must be set in motion, if the Maoists don’t go for elections even after that then they’ll be wiped out.”

The NC’s Narhari Acharya summed it up: “The Maoists are running out of options, they can either go back to the jungle or compromise.”

Editorial

Sink or Swim                        p2
State of the State                  CK Lal
Don’t be mean to UNMIN               p2
Mission impossible?                 p4
**Promises unkept**

Continued pahadi chauvinism is churning madhesi cauldron

A woman complains about frequent rapes in her village and the private initiative to assure her law and order will be improved after elections. Girija Prasad Koirala's responses revealed a distinct empathy and sensitivity to people's concerns.

Koirala was on the carnage on the tarai which were most striking. Close to a year after a powerful assertion of madhesis identity, the PM is still refusing to recognize or accept that the madhesis exists. It is true that there is heterogeneity within 'Natan' and groups which reside there claim a distinct identity for themselves. And 'madhes' is now a distinct political term preferred by madhesi activists for mobilization. Yet, it is an insult to the movement and a politically unwise move for the PM to say in an accusatory tone: "I am a resident of the tarai, too, although you have separated us by calling yourselves Madhesis." This attitude not only refuses to recognize that 33 percent of the country's population constitutes a separate group but also the fact that they have genuine grievances related to identity and representation.

Couple this with the PM's other statement that the problem can be addressed in a tripartite dialogue with India and Nepal cooperate, and is it any wonder that the madhesis is still burning? Despite seeing the writing on the wall, Kathmandu has not changed one bit. Yes, there are major distortions in the movement, there is no leadership, and the issue is not even a neat political crust to settle personal scores or engage in crises. Yet, at its core, the anger in madhesis still rums deep for people who run this country, like Koirala, are not only oblivious to small chauvinism. No promises implemented, no increase in madhesis representation, no swift and consistent bid to reach out to a alienated population, no provision of security to disturbed areas, and now, the outright refusal to admit that there is anything that can be legitimately called madhesis and nepali.

The Kathmandu establishment is complacent about the tarai because Koirala's rivals in his own party are splitting an already divided madhesi leadership and blunting the blame for all the time. By passing the buck to India, he was obviously trying to escape his own responsibility. The solution to this crisis lies in addressing systemic issues at home, and being sensitive to the angst of madhesis.

But it is also true that India needs to do its share. No socio-economic development is possible without international assistance, and the UN will be the least unproductive rather miss the point. The UN has enormous leverage with the international community, and the UN can be helpful to address systemic issues.

There is no reason to take offence if anyone offers his or her assistance in countering existing or incipient threats to peace. All that a UN officer did by meeting a madhesi insurgent in Bihar was to expose the duplicity of the Indian establishment which denies the presence of insurgency leaders in their territory. Nepal and India need to cooperate, and is it any wonder that the Indian government should have allowed the UN to handle the situation themselves. Nepal needs the goodwill, expertise and assistance of international organisations to facilitate the demobilisation of the movement, and the issue is used as a neat political crust to settle personal scores.

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**STATE OF THE STATE**

**C K Lal**

Quoting Ram Bahadur Thapa's planted interview with a BBC reporter, the editor of Nepal's Communist Party, Pratap Mahato, has suggested that 'human rights are being violated in Nepal, Xinjua reported with uncenounced gluee: 'the mainstay [sic] behind the present situation was the Maoists that gave the task to split us and create a building of people's Liberration Army continue with their fight going against my mandate by behaving like dictators and journalists.' Apparently, UNMIN has succeeded in annoying both UNMIN and its own failures. Had there been international community and has accepted the participation of the Maoists in the interim government without his personal guarantee. Dahal, for his part, likes to point out to his senior partner in reality, has been more than willing to forego an opportunity to wash away their past sins. Dahal is often impatient with Koirala's obtundence. He ridicules the prime minister's infirmity and supposed senility. He keeps threatening to look for an alternative to Koirala. That is unlikely to happen anytime soon. Dahal, along with all other leftwing parties in the interim parliament, the Maoists do not have the numbers tooust NC from government. Whether they like it or not, Koirala and Dahal are cursed to swim or sink together. What they need is a strategy for mutual survival and save the country from further ruin.

Koirala must convince right-wingers in his party that the days of constitutional monarchy are coming to an end and the declaration of a republic isn't tantamount to a Maoist takeover. The Maoists are terrified of the eomissions of elections. All the more reason not to give them any excuse to run away from the ballot.

The Fierce One has by now realised the futility of insisting upon a fully proportional election system but has to harp on it to keep ethnic pressure groups within his party in good humour. Jimmy Carter has offered a face-saving formula. Dahal needs to sell it to the Maoists.

The national army has to appear in the absence of his personal guarantee. Taming the Maoists he considers his natural and UNMIN could be helpful.

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POSTPONED PEACE
After reading Kunda Dixit’s ‘Peace postponed’ (#375), I felt depressed and even more so when he predicts that Jimmy Carter will see the same lack of movement in his next visit to Nepal. The excitement of the polls have faded but what is clear is that it is all due to these unaccountable and irresponsible politicians. The Maoists, who should have been different, are not faithful to the people. It is a shame to hear politicians like CP Gajurel say that they won’t let the elections happen if they are to lose.

Samyam Wagle, Australia

- The return of internally displaced people, security and a suitable proportional electoral system are prerequisites for elections. I think the dates to election by a neutral civil government are necessary as no one has the right to keep the people in a state of uncertainty for such a long time.

Name withheld, email

- You are confused. On one hand you say [Editorial, ‘Conceptual continuity’, #375] the ruling bloc should immediately announce elections but on the other hand declare that the Maoists don’t want it and would do everything to spoil it. You exhibit the dilemma as the UML and other political parties: hoping against hope to blame the Maoists. Their strategy is: the other parties want elections, not us. When nobody wanted elections, it was our agenda but when everyone wants it, it is no longer our agenda. Now we want a republic to be declared and once you agree to that, we will promulgate the constitution. In their vocabulary, there is no responsibility, commitment or ideology. Prachanda is the supreme leader of the world. Whatever he says, you have to accept. There is no alternative.

Kishor Kamal, email

SUPERFRUIT
Thank you very much for bringing the sea-buckthorn into the limelight (‘Sagarmatha superfruit’, #374). We really need to push and popularise such unexplored and underestimated treasures of Nepal. Back in 2004 when I first tasted sea-buckthorn in Sing Gompa, it has long been prepared and processed in Tibet as a medicinal drink, Kudus to the Khumbu Alpine Conservation Council for teaching villagers the technical know-how and encouraging its preparation in the Khumbu region. With more refinement and research for its nutritious value, this could be the next big health drink. Seeing it being packed and labeled in bottles is a good start.

Matiram Pun, Institute of Medicine, Maharajgunj

ELEPHANT POLO
Frank de Lange (Letters, #375) has concluded that by the act of translating a literary novel, one can become the ‘embodiment of de-contextualised peace industry’. He also questions my motives in translating Elephant Polo and presumes the book is destined for a ‘happy few’.

I doubt that he would have written his letter if he had taken the trouble of actually reading the book, rather than drawing far-flung conclusions from a short description of the book’s launch (‘Dutch elephant’, #373).

I much prefer, but not necessarily agree with, the straightforward argument made by S Ranjit in the same page to the effect that ‘the top-down approach for development never worked’. The book makes exactly the same point. I quote the main protagonist of Elephant Polo, Oscar, who states in a speech: ‘Ladies and gentleman, although traditional development assistance is characterised by a selfish, paternalistic and shortsighted approach, it remains one of many possible models for development. But, in my eyes, it is barely productive. Moreover, it costs tax payers handfuls of money without any accountability whatsoever for results—at least, if you do not wish to use sentimentality or self-gratification as a yardstick.’ Incidentally, readers will find that Oscar’s own model of development does not survive the confrontation with the rather grim realities of Nepal today. It goes under in a finale that is as spectacular as it is moving.

So what was my motive in translating the book? Simple: I discovered an entertaining and well-written novel that provides a sharp insight into Nepal and opens a window into the soul of a foreigner who loves Nepal and struggles to understand it. Often complex realities are much better explained through literary expression rather than in thick consultants’ reports full of jargon. Problem was, this novel was written in inaccessible Dutch. I felt it deserved a wider audience, certainly not a happy few.

Adriaan Verheul, email

CORRECTIONS
- The fifth paragraph in the editorial ‘Conceptual continuity’ (#375) should have read: ‘The upshot if that even if the winter session of parliament next week agrees on declaring Nepal a republic and on full proportional elections we will be no closer to election.’ The word ‘no’ was inadvertently dropped.

- The aircraft depicted in ‘Sky-high with Buddha’ (#375) should have been Raytheon Beechcraft 1900C, and not 1900D as erroneously reported.

30 NOVEMBER - 6 DECEMBER 2007 #376
ow that its term is set to be extended by only another six months, UNMIN is putting on a brave face and saying this is not unusual. The UN’s missions elsewhere have also been similarly extended. But the way Nepal’s internal and external actors limited the term to six months and refused to widen its mandate signals that the mission will not have an easy time.

Earlier, the government was willing to go along with UNMIN’s preference for a one-year extension. But indications from New York that India and China would not be happy with that forced it to be scaled back to six months and no widening of mandate.

“We are sending a request for a six month extension to New York this week,” a close aide to prime minister Koirala told Nepali Times. He confirmed that the decision was shaped by Indian and Chinese sensitivity to the issue and their concern expressed at a Security Council meeting.

At debates in New York last month the Indian and Chinese positions were in sharp contrast to the Europeans who wanted both a longer extension as well as widening of the scope of UNMIN’s presence in Nepal, diplomats said.

UNMIN chief Dan Martin had himself earlier hinted at his mission taking on additional responsibilities like peace process implementation, security sector reform and supporting security. But he is fully aware of the sensitivities of Nepal’s neighbours.

“When I have discussions with representatives of member states, its not a discussion in which there are deep disagreements,” he said recently.

The Maoists have always been critical of UNMIN’s role in the verification process, and they have lately tried to ingratiate themselves with India and China by stepping up their anti-UNMIN rhetoric.

“China and India have become suspicious over UNMIN’s long-term plans,” Maoist leader Ram Bahadur Thapa said. “They have brought in thousands of vehicles and even helicopters and aircraft while our army has only 57 vehicles, this has raised questions within the Nepali people and our neighbouring countries whether any foreign power is trying to make Nepal a failed state and establish its base here under UN cover.”

This is clear reference to favourite Maoist bogey, the United States. A US embassy official in Kathmandu confirmed that Washington is for an extension of UNMIN’s presence in Nepal. “We believe it is necessary to extend UNMIN’s mandate for a short period in order to see how the political situation is going to play out here,” said the official. But the official dismissed the theory that India is concerned over the possible extension and expansion of the UN’s mandate because that could pave way for a greater US role.

“There’s (India’s) judgment of UNMIN or its extension is not based primarily on the US, it’s based on their own interest in terms of the wider region. They have traditionally been hesitant to involve the UN as you know in Kashmir,” the official explained.

The Indian Embassy in Kathmandu refused to officially comment on the issue of extending the UNMIN mandate. All that an embassy spokesman in Kathmandu would say was: “Such speculation is normal in any democracy.”

India has been disappointed by the postponement of elections, and has publicly urged an early election. But UNMIN wants to see conditions right before elections are held, and hence its offer to do more.

Martin said as much at a recent press meet: “Nepalis are very concerned about the peace process that they see faltering in a number of ways and they assume that it should be the role of the United Nations to help keep that process on track. Naturally many ordinary Nepalese who do not understand the limitations of the UNMIN mandate expect that we should in some way be able to support the process more broadly.”

UNMIN may be calling it like it is and reflecting ground realities and challenges, but its signals haven’t gone down well with Nepal’s neighbours who want it to do what it can and leave.

UNMIN will now have to work with limited time and scope
NAVIN SINGH KHADKA

Mission impossible?
**Himalayan at Teku**

Himalayan Bank has a new branch in Teku. This is the bank’s sixteenth branch. All banking facilities are available at the branch including an ATM machine has also been installed.

**Bakery Café Pulchok**

The Bakery Café’s eighth outlet opened in Hanchar Bhawan, Pulchok. The chain employs 48 special staff who are hearing-impaired and who constitute over 50 percent of the overall dining staff.

**Two more for Honda**

Honda has two new showrooms in Pulchok and Budhabhan. Teku. These Honda showrooms will provide sales, services and spare parts, and have ample room for more than 30 motorcycles. Syakar Company is the sole authorized dealer of Honda in Nepal.

**Winter Peter**

Peter England has launched its winter wear range, comprising of sweaters, jackets, caps and mufflers. Peter England aims to provide quality clothing at affordable prices. It has more than 25 different styles and over 75 colour combinations.

**NEW PRODUCTS**

SLUM: Heroplus has introduced 3D Slimming, a gel-based dreking product. The gel comes in a raspberry flavour and is based on all natural plant extracts. 3D Slimming is marketed by Robeus International.

FASTRACK: Nepal International Business has launched the Fastrack range of sunglasses. Fastrack is manufactured by Titan, India’s largest watch and accessory brand. The sunglasses provide glare protection, distortion free vision and 100 percent UV protection.

Fastrack is available in a price range of Rs 1,200-3,000.

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**Sandalwoodonomics**

Nepal has developed some key competencies in smuggling.

**What lessons has Nepal learnt, or not learnt, about hydropower in the last 17 years?**

We have learnt that hydropower development takes time, but also requires a lot of investment. It takes realistic planning, and big projects are simply unrealistic. Our philosophy has been to start small and grow over time. The introduction of small hydropower schemes has proved that this is one way in which hydropower can be developed in Nepal. If you add up all the microplants, there is quite a lot of capacity even with all of them.

There was a time when people used to think only foreign investors and foreign experts could develop hydropower in Nepal. We know that is no longer true because Nepal now has the capability and resources to become internationally competitive. Nepal has developed some key competencies in smuggling.

**Is the Indian market a blessing or a curse?**

It can be both. One must look 20 years ahead to make something like that work. The potential is tremendous. In Nepal, big hydropower projects are much talked about, but no one is even thinking about transmission lines across the border or within the country. It is difficult for private parties to run the grid. India is in desperate need of clean energy and Nepal can provide it. That said, just because there is demand in India, doesn’t mean Nepal should rush into big projects. In some places the small hydro concept is ideal. Ultimately, however, these small power plants need to be connected to the grid, which is why they are good for rural development. The big projects take a long time to start, and the rush upsets the local economy. Big projects should and must be undertaken, but that is only possible through export to India. However, there has to be a fair agreement and a balance of interest between the two nations for something like that to work.

**How would you advise the Norwegian government about investing in Nepal hydropower?**

We have hydropower in Nepal that has been developed, while in Nepal it is just starting. This is the time for Nepal to invest in India. There are many qualified and experienced Nepali people in the legal, financial and technical fields who can take care of Nepali interests. So Nepal would be an ideal partner for cooperation from the Norwegian side.
Pushpa Kamal Dahal answers questions from the public in Pokhara Sajha Sawal, BBC Nepal Service, 28 November (Extracts)

Nanu Sri Tamang: The elections were postponed from June to November. But why couldn’t you hold elections in November? Explain that to me.

Pushpa Kamal Dahal: The elections were to be held in June. But the cause of postponement in June wasn’t properly diagnosed and treated. The same reason caused the deferment of polls again in November.

Nanu Sri Tamang: You would only want your party to take part in the polls if you knew you could win?

Pushpa Kamal Dahal: That’s not right. We have never said that. All we are saying is that CA elections shouldn’t be like parliamentary or panchayati elections. It comes once in a lifetime, therefore it should represent all groups and people. We aren’t concerned about losing or winning.

Lekhnath Adhikari: I would like to ask the chairman, how are you going to ensure that elections are held?

Pushpa Kamal Dahal: Elections are an integral part of the peace process. Without addressing the problems of cantonments, the problems of those affected by the conflict, the elections will be incomplete. Of late, CP Maoists’ activities haven’t helped the peace process.

Sushil Sharma: A year ago you said you were willing to accept even absolute monarchy if that came from the people. We aren’t concerned about losing or winning. We have a lifetime, therefore it should represent all groups and people.

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lost, this is more than the capacity of the Rs 26 billion Kali Gandaki project that generates 144 megawatts. A new hydropower plant to generate the electricity lost would cost Rs 52 billion, if you take the cost of the Middle Marsyangdi as a benchmark. Loss can be caused by technical factors which the NEA argues is impossible to reduce. Better transmissions, transformers and maintenance could reduce this loss. If the NEA reduced system loss by one percent it would mean six megawatts of electricity could be saved as much as the capacity of the Puwa Khola which is costing Rs 2.5 billion to build. In a few days, consumers will be facing frequent blackouts. The NEA can’t control leakage or pilferage because of the unrest in the tarai. This is disingenuous. The highest rate of pilferage is not in the tarai, it is in Bhaktapur district. Controlling leakage and pilferage is important because NEA’s fortunes are tied to the country’s economy.

Abin Shrestha in Samaya, 29 November

Commenting on the media’s role these days is like stirring a hornet’s nest. For a political figure to do this is to risk his entire political career. That is because in the age of media empires, anyone who crosses the path of the press can’t be saved even by god. Democracy and press freedom are synonymous. Wherever there is more press freedom, democracy is stronger. Even so, press freedom doesn’t mean a free for all. Threats to press freedom come from media monopolies. That is why whereas feudal dictatorships openly suppress the media, monopoly capitalism does so indirectly by controlling ownership. In a society like ours democracy, journalists who opposed capitalism are all mixed up, there are direct and indirect threats to press freedom. It is becoming clear that the Nepali media is increasingly controlled by lackeys of capitalism. The print and electronic media are in the hands of a handful of big families and capitalist entities and it is a crucial fact that this monopoly is strangling the press. This spread of cronyism and control of the media by lackeys of capitalists is a serious challenge to our nascent democracy, journalists who courageously fought against a feudal dictatorship now need to recognize the threat to press freedom from a capitalist monopoly and be vigilant. No one should doubt the Maoist commitment to press freedom. But press freedom can also be misused by anti-democratic forces. For example, journalists are often used as spies by intelligence agencies. The FNJ team that investigated the abduction of Prakash Thakuri in Mahendranagar has shown that he was the commander of the militant royalist group, Nepal Janatantrik Morcha. Similarly, Lal Bahadur Chaulagain accused Birbhum Sah of repeatedly trying to set fire to his house and raping his daughter, but this didn’t get much attention in the press and needlessly dragged the entire Maoist party into the controversy.

Plug leaks

Editorial in Kantipur, 26 November

The annual report of the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) estimates that 24.94 percent of the electricity generated in this country is lost to leakage. This means 154 megawatts of electricity is being lost.
Elephants understand up to 40 different commands. But one thing you can’t order them to do is to respect you. To win their trust, you must prove yourself worthy. And that means getting up at 4 AM to clean the stables and feed them a breakfast of freshly cut grass.

“The elephant does not care for high rank or seniority,” Ram Singh Kumar explains with a smile. “It needs to see that you are willing to assist and nurse it—and bring out the dung for at least three weeks.”

Kumar has 14 years of experience working with elephants. As senior trainer or mahout at Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge in Chitwan he is responsible for the elephants’ health and well-being.

“It’s easy to see if the elephant has a sore stomach because it swells. It’s my job to prevent it from swelling in the first place,” he says.

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and we learn from the elephant itself how to treat illnesses,” he says. “The elephant knows what to eat in order to get better, so if an elephant looks unwell we let it wander and send a mahout after it to see what of nature’s medicine it eats.” A certain type of black berry is the cure for stomach aches.

The previous week, Kumar was busy caring for the 17 elephants taking part in the annual Nepal Elephant Polo Tournament. Half of them belong to the Nepal National Parks and half belong to Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge. They have been trained and cared for by skilled mahouts who often will stay with an elephant for many years. Kumar himself lives just opposite the elephant stables and can be with his elephants within a few moments if necessary.

His wife and three sons live in a village about an hour away and he gets to see them six days a month. Elephant polo has strict rules to protect the animals from harsh treatment by their drivers. The games end in the early afternoon so the elephants won’t get too tired and hot. No elephant is allowed to play two consecutive games. They have sugarcane snacks and water at half-time and then have an hour to rest.

Kumar says the elephants enjoy the break in routine and social opportunities that the polo offers them. For an elephant, much more important than food is the time off they can spend with friends. Elephants make friends much like humans—by spending time together, eating together, playing and trumpeting together. If two elephants don’t get along, the mahouts take great care to ensure they have time together to work things out. Fighting in an elephant stable is best avoided, so there is usually just one male elephant in residence.

At Tiger Tops, the current incumbent is 27-year-old Shumsher Gaj, who sports long tusks and is reckoned to be the largest domesticated elephant in South Asia. In the polo tournament he had the important job of carrying the umpire.

For Kumar, the most astonishing thing about elephants is their ability to protect the mahout from danger. If he falls off, the elephant will try to catch him with its trunk. And it will stand over him to protect him from dangers such as an attacking tiger. He has also noticed how the elephant can sense its surroundings and walk, in a way that protects its driver from low-hanging branches, even in the dark.

Ram Singh Kumar knows what it takes to keep an elephant happy and healthy

World Elephant Polo 2007

A total of 12 teams competed in this year’s World Elephant Polo Association Tournament in Nepal. The Chopard Team from Hong Kong won the final match against Chivas Regal Scotland. Three Nepal-based teams took part: National Parks, the British Gurkas and the Tiger Tops Tuskers. The World Elephant Polo Association (WEPA) was founded in 1982 and the tournament has been played annually in Nepal for the past 26 years.

www.elephantpolo.com
his is where the Kosi bursts out of the mountains into the plains, and its blue waters reflect the scenic mountains to the north. But the scenery is lost on the 150 people who have been living in makeshift tents by the banks of the river for the past week. They aren’t victims of a natural disaster, but have fled for their lives after threats from one of the militant groups active in the Eastern tarai.

The displaced are all from the village of Haripur, 30km to the south bordering the Kosi Tappu Wildlife Reserve, who collected all their belongings and fled their village on 24 November. Besides the 30 families here in Sunsari’s Jabdi, Haripur refugees have also fled to Morang and Jhapa.

They were masked and carried guns, they hit me on the chest with the back of a pistol,” recalls 20-year-old Asha Shrestha, who was dragged out of her house. Her husband, Som Bahadur was also roughed up and their mobiles taken.

Sixty-four year old Bhuban Singh Magar was attacked the previous day by five armed men in masks. They kicked him and set fire to his clothes and said if he didn’t give them Rs 10,000 within three days they’d kill him. They took away all his chicken, a radio and watch.

The Shrestha and Magar families are among hundreds who fled. They were not poor, many had two to four hectares of fertile land. Magar had his entire ripening paddy crop destroyed, and he has heard the attackers have sowed dal on his land.

But the threats are not new. Ever since the Armed Police Force killed a Madhesi tiger militant in July and the group retaliated by killing Haripur village elder Tek Bahadur Kunwar, the villagers have been terrorised by the militants.

It is clear that the extremists are using the madhesi cause to rob and loot, and that in essence this is all about land.

“I had three hectares of rice–they destroyed it all, I’m now a beggar,” says Om Bahadur Shrestha who owned three hectares.

When Nepali Times interviewed them on Wednesday, the families were sitting on the sun drying their damp clothes and looking completely lost. “We tried to stay for as long we could since it was our home. But we just couldn’t take the torture anymore, we fled for our lives,” says Harka Bahadur Rai. Most refugees say the gunmen are few and can be easily identified. What puzzles them is why they were allowed to terrorise them for so long using the madhesi issue as an excuse.

So far, the Red Cross and the local branch of the FNCCI has helped with tents and rice, but most families go to bed hungry every night. The cold is taking its toll on the 30 children who are here, many have lung infections and cough a lot.

The children had stopped going to school last year, while still in Haripur because they were harassed by the Tigers. “They used to abuse us and hit us so when we went to school, we just stopped going to class,” says seventh grader Anita Rai. Her father Harka Rai says the children just refused to go to school. “By now they have forgotten what they learnt.” In Jabdi, the children help with foraging for food and firewood. Sunsari CDO Chrianjibi Adhikari has promised shelter, and so has the local Maoist commander Tika Rai. But so far, the refugees are still in tents.

Chitra Bahadur Karki is a father of three, and says simply: “Wasn’t the war supposed to be over?”

“Wasn’t the war supposed to be over?”

GOPAL DAHAL IN SUNSARI

If Kathmandu doesn’t act, the madhes refugee crisis can spread

 GOPAL DAHAL IN SUNSARI

T

M A K I N G D O : ( l – r ) A s h a S h r e s t h a t r i e s t o p i c k u p t h e p i e c e s o f h e r s h a t t e r e d l i f e n e a r h e r t e n t a t J a b d i . B h u b a n S i n g h M a g a r w a s b o t t e n u n c o n s c i o u s a n d h i s c h o t e s a t o n f i r e . S e v e n t h – g r a d e r A n i t a R a i h a s s t o p p e d g o i n g t o s c h o o l f o r a y e r b e c a u s e o f h a r a s s m e n t . N o w s h e h a s f l e d w i t h h e r f a m i l y .
Nepal’s Maoist war started 13 years ago when the Maoists attacked Rolpa’s Holeri police station on 13 February 1996. It has been two years since the war ended and the Maoists have entered mainstream politics and even the governing alliance. But all over the country, Maoist cadres openly carry weapons, collect donations by force, beat and threaten people. Although the rest of the country is complaining about the unformed behaviour of the Maoists, here in their heartland the former armed rebels are on a public relations drive.

Political relations with other parties have improved. Local alterations have started to be resolved peacefully. Maoists have begun to abide by the laws of the state and to seek out the police when problems occur. If cadres do something illegal, swift action is taken by the leadership. Rolpa’s chairman Krishna Bahadur Lama. “If the cadres make any mistake, the Maoist leadership immediately takes action. That has made it very easy for us.”

A year ago, Rolpa was still a war zone despite the ceasefire. Even though the Maoists no longer carried guns, residents were no less frightened. But now former Maoist ministers attend functions hosted by other parties, proclaiming “it is time to work together”.

Hari Prasad Dharti of the UML confirms the Maoists have improved, and even Maoist district secretary Resham Pun agrees. “Yesterday, we were at loggerheads with the other party, but now there is much more friendship,” says Pun.

The Maoists have even helped to rebuild the police station they themselves destroyed during the war. In the past, they had said all police matters would be handled by the YCL, but recently when a cadre was beaten up in Khumjung the Maoists asked the police to help. “The same Maoists who would use any small mistake by the police to create a major fight are now working alongside us,” says Lama.

The word has spread to the internally displaced from Rolpa. On 5 November, 105 displaced families of 24 Rolpa villages returned home. Secretary Pun was heard directing his cadre on the phone: “Let there be no use of force from us. Even if the displaced express anger and violence, do not retaliate. If they don’t have food or shelter in their new home, then help them. If violence could solve everything, then we would have had our government a long time ago.”

When the war ended, Rolpa was entirely in Maoist hands. They blocked the security forces to starve them out. But while supplies were airlifted in for the security forces, locals suffered. Rolpa’s district capital of Libang was surrounded by three layers of barbed wire. A daily curfew started at five o’clock. Today, Libang is bustling and offered of Rs 30,000 to the victims. For the first time, not just in Rolpa but in all of Nepal, the Maoists had admitted they had made a mistake and actually paid compensation.

“Besides the usual small fracas, nothing major has happened since then,” says Rolpa police chief Banasta Lama. “If the cadres make any mistake, the Maoist leadership immediately takes action. That has made it very easy for us.”

A year ago, Rolpa was still a war zone despite the ceasefire. Even though the Maoists no longer carried guns, residents were no less frightened. But now former Maoist ministers attend functions hosted by other parties, proclaiming “it is time to work together”.

Change in Rolpa

The Maoist heartland should be a model district for the Maoists
Hate flying? You’re not alone. But often, it’s not the crowded, overly air-conditioned airplanes themselves that are the problem. Just getting on and off the plane is the real nightmare. Foreign Policy magazine looks at five airports around the world that make travelling hell. To which we add our own Tribhuvan International.

Leopold Sédar Senghor International Airport, Dakar
First-hand account: “There is only queuing, an unerring sense of confinement, and to some extent danger.” Patrick Smith, Salon.com

Why it’s so bad: Because it’s standing room only. As a regional hub, an orbital at Senghor is often surrounded by the throngs of travelers from West Africa. Once you’re in the terminal, don’t plan on relaxing. There are no seats, and guards will advise you to stop loitering if you hang around in one spot too long. Immigration lines can take up to three hours. And in any event, it’s best to keep moving since you can expect to be surrounded by vendors selling counterfeit goods and unofficial ‘porters’ who will pressure you into hiring their services if you happen to come to a standstill. But the good news is that help may be on the way. The Senegalese government has begun construction on a new airport set to open in 2010. No word yet on whether the new terminal will actually have chairs.

Mineralny Vody Airport, Russia
First-hand account: “Mineralny Vody airport is a lower circle of hell.” The Economist

Why it’s so bad: Because nobody told Mineralny Vody that the Soviet Union is no more. In a war-torn region of the Caucasus not far from the Chechen border, the airport seems to have earned a special place in the hearts of Russia’s foreign journalists, including the BBC’s Steve Rosenberg, who wrote in 2005, “Rather worryingly there’s a man selling Caucasian swords and daggers in the departure lounge and opposite him, over on the wall, is a list of local criminals wanted for murder.”

Baghdad International
Airport
First-hand account: “Before jumping out of your seat to complain to the pilot, consider the good news: You’ve just avoided being shot down by a missile.” Alan T. Duffin, Air & Space magazine

Why it’s so bad: Because it’s in a war zone. The Baghdad International experience begins before you even touch the runway. That’s when you’re treated to the stomach-churning effects of a landing technique known as the corkscrew, used to avoid projectiles like the shoulder-fired missile that took down a DHL Airbus cargo plane in November 2003. The corkscrew involves an abrupt roll during final approach that twists into a spiral, resulting in a slow descent until the plane flattens out and lands at what feels like the last possible moment before crash landing. The terminal itself is not that bad, having been refurbished after the war by USAID. But after leaving the airport, visitors have to brave the infamous “highway of death” between the airport and downtown Baghdad.

Tribhuvan International Airport, Kathmandu
First-hand account: “Long queues to pay your departure tax, long queues to check in, enormous security queues. One of my group was asked at baggage check to let her take toiletries on board. Uncomfortable seats and very smelly toilets. Fuzzy announcements so everyone was asking everyone else. Nepal is lovely but Kathmandu airport is hard work.” Melanie Ling in www.airlinequality.com

Why it’s so bad: Where do we start? Corruption in Nepal may be bad, but Kathmandu airport is where it is rampant. It’s a den of thieves. At security check, there is a sign in Japanese warning tourists to beware of guards asking for bribes. Handbags are searched after being scanned, and this is where security personnel extract money from passengers. Immigration is a minefield for Nepali passengers, mainly women, who are harassed until they pay up. The airport was designed for traffic 20 years ago and is hopelessly overcrowded. There is a parking problem and planes have to circle for hours waiting for a slot. X-ray machines and baggage scanners are often out of order and if you land at night it’s dark and dingy because half the lights in the terminal don’t work. And don’t get us going about the dilapidated airport taxis and the touts outside. NTB should forget about promoting Nepal abroad and clean up the airport first.

Charles de Gaulle International Airport
First-hand account: ‘Charles de Gaulle is a disgrace. It’s like a third-world airport.’ Michel-Yves Labbé, president of French travel company Directors

Why it’s so bad: Because a city this great with an airport this bad is just plain embarrassing. Charles de Gaulle’s most recent attempt at modernisation, the construction of futuristic terminal 2E led to tragedy when its roof collapsed in 2004, killing four people. In June, President Nicolas Sarkozy opened a new facility capable of handling up to six Airbus superjumbos at one time, or about 8.5 million passengers per year. Normally, such a move would be welcome, but CDG already boasts eight terminals and handled 73 million passengers in 2006. Making the airport bigger only makes the problem worse.

The world’s worst airports

Vacancy Announcement:
World Neighbors, South Asia Area Representative:

World Neighbors, an international development organization, seeks an Area Representative for South Asia. Position is located in the region. Responsibilities include program development, strategic planning, budgeting, evaluation, reporting, administration and fund-raising. Travel 50-60% of time. Requires 6-10 years experience direct field level program development within South Asia at least Master’s level education. Experience with integrated programs in two or more of the following areas essential: Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Livelihoods, Natural Resource Management, Reproductive and Community-based Health, Savings and Credit, Community Capacity building. Solid analytical, documentation and communication skills needed. Excellent English and fluency in a suitable local language (Nepali or Hindi required). Competitive salary commensurate with experience, plus benefits. Move information visit www.wn.org or request by e-mail. Send resume, references and cover letter to: iaskers@wn.org or World Neighbors, 4217 NW 122nd St, Oklahoma City, OK 73120, USA. attn: HR.

World Neighbors is an equal opportunity employer.
Mountain movies

Himal Association and will
Himalayas and Nepal’s wildlife.

global warming on the
slideshows about the effects of
building and reconciliation in
a photo competition on peace-
Himal’ quiz. There will also be
test audiences in a ‘Know Your
workshop and Kunda Dixit will
conduct a film making
voting.

For Those About to Rock, 8
December, 3.15 PM, Rastiya
Sabha Griha
Nepali amateur rock bands vie for
a spot in a competitive rock
competition. This film follows
the energetic teenagers and their
love and passion for the music:
they play. A reflection on young
urban Nepalis, the film also
pictures the ethics of the music:
scene and its place in Nepali
society.

Afghan Muscles, 8
December, 5.15 PM, Rastiya
Sabha Griha
Afghan men have discovered the
art of bodybuilding. This
documentary follows bodybuilder
Hamid’s heroic struggle to gather
food and protein in an effort to
win the championship and create
a better life for himself.

Blowing Up Paradise, 8
December, 5.15 PM, Nepal
Tourism Board
For 30 years, the dylibic Moruroa
toat in French Polynesia was
used as a site for France’s nuclear
tests. Blowing Up Paradise uses
archival footage to chronicle
France’s exploitation of various
nuclear devices, in violation of
the international test ban treaty,
from the first test in 1960 to the
last in 1996.

Rain in a Dry Land, 10
December, 3.45 PM, Nepal
Tourism Board
Rain in a Dry Land follows two
families in their transition from
Somalian refugees to underclass
Americans. The documentary
sheds light on a little-known
stratum of American society as
well as on the plight of the
African emigrant.

Siachen: A War for Ice, 10
December, 4.30 PM, Nepal
Tourism Board
A documentary about the
soldiers involved in the world’s
highest and most absurd war—a
20-year conflict for control over a
few hundred square kilometres
of glacier and frozen rock at the
extreme northern end of the
Indian-Pakistani border.

Angnima Sherpa: The
Icefall Doctor, 11 December,
11 AM, Nepal Tourism Board
This documentary explores the
life of Angnima Sherpa, who has
been working below the Khumbu
Icefall since 1975, providing
medical services to mountaineers
seeking to climb Everest from the
Nepali side. As always, Angnima
and his team are the first to reach
base camp each season and the
last to leave.

Not just mountains this year
Kimff 2007

There seems to be some confusion about the Kathmandu
International Mountain Film Festival. Why is the so-called
‘mountain’ film festival not ostensibly simply about mountains?
And there is the additional accusation that the desire to celebrate
mountains is merely a twisted indication of our North-centric nongenuineness, something that cannot be taken lightly in this
period of Southern dissent.

If you saw the films for this year’s edition of Kimff, though, you
would realise that mountains are just a pretext to explore human
diversity—a diversity that is characterised by the multiple
ways in which humans confront adversity and relate to their
world.

In Sasha Snow’s Conflict Tiger—shifting habitats for tigers
in eastern Russia and the desperate post-Soviet human economy have
forced these two predators into a deadly competition. In this snow-
covered Siberian landscape, unscrupulous contacts between the
beasts and the locals have increasingly resulted in gory, ill-fated
circumstances. The film revolves around the case of one notorious
man-eater. Snow uses vivid re-enactments, cautionary
tales of the locals and raw footage taken by tiger expert
Juri Trush to great effect. With the instincts of a horror
film, this documentary is perfectly suited to these
ecologically catastrophic times. The oft-simplified
debates of conservation and animal rights gets a more
nuanced treatment here.

Terror of another nature haunts Blowing Up Paradise, a
BBC-produced film by Ben Lewis about the French
nuclear testing in the Polynesian territories, particularly
Moruroa. In the 1960s, an irrepressible desire for nuclear
fame possessed France and compelled its authorities
into an over-stretched flirtation with radioactivity. Starting
from here, the director smartly probes the long history of France’s
relationship to a colonial possession that it
converted into a millarised zone, the peculiar
transformation of the archipelago into a nuclear
economy, and subsequently the stufted but vital anti-
nuclear independence movement of the region. The
documentary is a must-see for its absurdly beautiful
footage of the nuclear tests taken from maniacal
proximity, as well as those scenes of cringe-inducing
bursts of activism that played no small role in France’s
belated decision to end testing.

In a formula that is awfully familiar in the South Asian
context, Manel Mayol’s Switch Off documents the
displacement and the fiery indignation of the Mapuche
people whose land is flooded by the Spanish corporation
Enesda in its bid to build a dam in Chile. This indigenous
community has been forced to move higher up into
the Andes with insufficient recompense and unfufilled promises of free
electricity. The struggle against Chilean laws and bureaucracy
blends provocatively with the resistance to faceless global
capitalism, not to mention global warming (as Enesda is a major
contributor of greenhouse gases).

Afghan Muscles, by Danish filmmaker Andreas M. Dalsgaard,
does not deal with anything as desperate, although the characters in
the documentary would probably disagree. Living in an economically
stagnated nation, Hamid and Noor dream of fame and money
through the sport of competitive bodybuilding. They struggle to
have their nutritional requirements met and scrape together the cost
of participating in the international Mr Asia contest. In the context of a
prolonged conflict, these ambitions may seem trivial. But to these
Afghan men, such bodybuilding exploits come to symbolise national
pride.

The full schedule of 52 films at Kimff starting next Friday will,
like the films above: present diverse stories of human experience
and engagement with space. KimfF’s compendium of themes and
film genres is generally unmatched in Nepal.
ABOUT TOWN

EXHIBITIONS

- photo.circle.special.edition with Bangladeshi photographer Shehab Uddin, 6 December, 6.45 PM at The Sundhara Bakery Café, 8951014930
- Enchanting Life with Light photo show by Rocky Prajapati at The Bakery Café, Pulchowk until 10 January, 8951014930
- Foliation an exhibition of paintings by Bishuta KC at the Shambhala Garden Café, Shangri-la Hotel, until 1 December
- Second handicraft buyer and seller meeting and exhibition of Newari religious objects, organised by Scope Cooperative Society, at Patan Museum, 30 November 1 December, 10AM-5PM

EVENTS

- Innocent Voices a South American film about civil war seen through the eyes of a child, 30 November, 6.45 PM at the Lazzimat Gallery Café, 4428847
- Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival organized by Himal Association, 7-11 December at the Rashnya Sabha Ghina and the Nepal Tourism Board, 4268589
- Poetic Brunch at the Alliance Française, Tripureswar on 1 December, 9 AM to noon, 4477189
- AOWN Christmas bazaar at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, 1 December, 10AM-4.30 PM, Rs 100
- Dr Kanak staging by Aarohan-Gurukul, everyday except Mondays at 4.30 PM, at the Rital Theatre, Guruiki, until 8 November, 4468656
- Bingo Nights at the Welcome Food Plaza, Darbar Marg, starts 6PM every Monday, 2337201
- Play and Learn German at the German Info and Culture Centre, Thamel.
- Toastmasters a communication and leadership programme, organised by Kathmandu Toastmasters Club every Wednesday 6PM at Industrial Enterprise Development Institute (IEDI) building, Tripureswar, 4288847

MUSIC

- Paleti series with Sangenta Pradhan, 30 November, 6PM at Nepa~laya’s Fr-sala, Kalikasthan: 4442469
- Live Sufi music with Bella Italia on Monday, enchanting Asia on Wednesday and Mongolian BBQ on Friday at the Hotel Himalaya, 7PM onwards, Rs 499, 5522900
- Steak at the Olive Bar and Bistro, available for lunch and dinner at a-la- carte rates with live band in the evenings, Radisson Hotel, 4411818
- Vegetarian alternative at Supa View restaurant and café, Boudha Stupa, 4480289
- Enjoy the new menu at Roadhouse Café Pulchok, Bhadabati and Thamel, 5521755, 4426587, 4262768.
- Piano and pasta nights wood fire pizza and a variety of pastas at Ros-sala, Kalikasthan. 4412469
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DINING

- Weekend festivities with Bella Italia on Monday, enchanting Asia on Wednesday and Mongolian BBQ on Friday at the Hotel Himalaya, 7PM onwards, Rs 499, 5522900
- Dice-luscious Brunch at Kakori, Scalette Crowne Plaza, roll the dice to the number of the day and get 50% discount on an individual meal. Saturdays and Sundays, 12.30-3.30PM, 4272999
- Steak at the Olive Bar and Bistro, available for lunch and dinner at a-la- carte rates with live band in the evenings, Radisson Hotel, 4411818
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GETAWAYS

- The Great Escape two nights accommodation, with dinner, breakfast, picnic lunch and massage for a couple, at Dwarka’s Himalayan Shangri-La Village Resort, Ghudlina, 4474988
- Fulbari Resort and Spa, Pokhara Rs 10,999 for Nepal double, $219 for envoat double, two days and three nights package, including transportation from the airport, welcome drinks, tennis and swimming, discounts on food and beverages.
- Weekend Getaways at Le Meridian, Kathmandu, Resident Night Rs 444 and Two Nights Package Rs 888. Also includes, breakfast, lunch, dinner, spa facilities, swimming pool, steam sauna, Jacuzzi and gym facilities.
- Escape to Shivapuri Heights Cottage great view, bird watching and more, 9841371927

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In Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s new epic Saawariya, two star-crossed lovers are consumed by their desire for each other. An artist at heart, Raj, arrives at a quaint picturesque town only to meet Sakina, a shy enigmatic young woman one starry night. Raj wants to win Sakina’s heart but is unable to accept her haunting past and their friendship pulls him into a whirlwind of desire, madness and romance.

For inclusion in the listing send information to editors(at)nepalitimes.com
Kam reds

Two quotes of the week. The first one from Comrade God (alias Deb Gurung) who, when asked when YCL extortion will stop, replied: “We’re only doing what the other parties have always been doing.” Second quote from Comrade Awesome (aka Pushpa Kamal Dahal) in Pokhara: “We have disallowed forced donations. If it is happening I will look into the matter and urge my party people to stop it.”

Ever wondered how our seven-party leaders spent the last ten days during which they were supposed to come up with a consensus before the winter session of the interim parliament reconvenes? They were too busy dealing with the YCL who beat up the Nobel doctors in which Girjau’s daughter and cousin were on opposite sides of the dispute. The Maoists got dragged into it, and Comrade Ananta packed the docs off to Kami Danda for a good thrashing.

When the flit hit the san, Comrade Laldhoj got Comrade Sagar to be the fall guy so Ananta could get off the hook and then got the Nobel promoter to go live on Kantipur TV to deny he ever went to the YCL to ask for help. These were the grave matters of state that were being discussed at the top secret meetings in Baluwatar, and you thought they were trying to iron out their differences on electoral procedures and republic. Ha.

It’s not the seven party disunity that intrigues the Ass so much as the back-stabbing between First Daughter and First Cousin. The old man seems happy to use the two flesh-and-bloods for his two-track strategy to deal with everyone from the Indians to the Maoists. Comrade Shekhar got an earful in Delhi about GP’s obduracy and brought this message home to Uncle. But the old fox is sitting tight.

Now that Awesome has shown what an asspig he is by telling Girjau he is too old, Makunay just can’t wait to be PM and is hopping up and down in anticipation. If Awesome hands him Baluwatar on a platter Makunay won’t refuse. That will be the end of the UML. Poor Oliji has been trying to warn his party not to fall into the Maoist trap but to no avail. Finally it becomes clear why the Maoists resigned from government: with Comrade Sitaula and Comrade Bamdeb they have both bases covered.

The six parties just don’t get it. The Maoists’ main complaint is that the parties have stolen their slogans. We fought for a constituent assembly election, now everyone wants one, they say. We wanted a republic, now everyone wants to abolish the monarchy. The Maoists need to show they are different, so the UML’s slogans can’t sound more radical than theirs. If they want to end the deadlock, the six parties should respect the Maoists’ intellectual property right on the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal.

It isn’t just Comrade Ass, it seems, who found Jan Erik Wilhelmson’s salute from the podium and the six-gun salute at the Maoist army anniversary marchpast at Shaktikhor a bit incongruous. It raised not a few diplo eyebrows, too. Hey, aren’t those guns supposed to be inside the containers? So Comrade Jan Erik inspects the guard of honour and a six gun salute in the same week that the new Maoist demand of integration of the PLA with the NA comes up and just as UNMIN says it wants to be involved in SSR post-elections.

Two more Comrade Fearsome quotes from last week. “We may go back to the jungle.” (Thursday in Chitwan). “We will not abandon seven party unity.” (Friday in Pokhara).
STATUTORY DIRECTIVE: SMOKING IS INJURIOUS TO HEALTH