



GOING ACROSS: A woman prepares to take a sick relative across the Mugu Karnali. The Maoists blew up the bridge eight years ago, and it has never been rebuilt. The few remaining health workers north of the river left and haven't returned.

NICK MEYNER

Timesnepalitimes.com

Weekly Internet Poll # 381

Q. Will elections happen this time?

Total votes: 4,761

Yes 19%

Not sure 35.8%

No way 45.2%

Weekly Internet Poll # 382. To vote go to: www.nepalitimes.com
Q. Do you think 2008 will be better than 2007 for Nepal?

Dying to get better

The government has legislated free health care to the poor by next month. As with all previous promises, this is unlikely to be kept.

The last place it may happen is in Nepal's remote northwestern corner in the districts of Humla, Mugu and Dolpo. Every health indicator here is much worse than the rest

of the country. The child mortality rate is nearly four times the national average. Many more mothers and babies die at child-birth here than anywhere else. Vaccination programs don't get to remote areas and people can die of simple infections. Life-expectancy is 44, and many of the remote areas are even more cut off after Maoists bombed bridges during the conflict.

The health gap is being filled by well-meaning foreigners, but when they leave, the problem remains. A local Maoist leader in Dolpo, when asked why not a

single health post had been built in the areas they controlled, replied: "First comes destruction, then construction."

Complete story p10

ARROW

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THE POWER OF WATER

A lot of water has flowed down the Kosi, Gandaki and Karnali in the half-century that we have been talking about Nepal's infinite hydropower wealth.

We were caught up in our own national myth. Nepal's hydropower potential became something we could only brag about: like Mt Everest or Lumbini. We didn't have to struggle to get these icons of our fragile nationalism, they were bequeathed either by nature or by a fluke of history.

When will our adolescent patriotism transcend slogans and come up with a realistic strategy for water and power? While we pen these lines (on a laptop that is running on battery because of the six-hour-a-week power cut) we are surprised at the shamelessness of our leaders and the lack of outrage of the Nepali public about water and power shortages in a country that is rich in both.

Large projects like Arun III were the wrong dam in the wrong place at the wrong time, but with the road now complete and domestic demand soaring it is becoming feasible. Nearly all our power generation is on river diversion schemes. However much activists hate reservoirs, there is no way we can meet peak domestic demand anymore without storage.

But storage brings us in competition for water with downstream India. The fact that 70 percent of the water in the Ganges flows down from Nepal's rivers is not lost on Indian planners as they grapple with irrigation and domestic water projections for the teeming north-Indian plains. India has always looked at water geo-strategically. Have we?

River issues are tangled up with pseudo-nationalism in the Nepali psyche because past leaders sold us down the Kosi and Gandaki. Yet, we can choose our friends, not our neighbours. We have water and power, India needs both desperately. How can we come to a mutually beneficial arrangement?

Every country will try its best to strike home its advantage on natural resource deals by exploiting the weakness of the partner. In Nepal, there are a lot of weaknesses to exploit: incompetent officials, politicians ready to sell out, instability, economic dependence. Yet, Nepal's negotiating strategy has been to do nothing, just wait for things to happen.

But time is running out more for us in Nepal not just because we have a huge energy shortfall in the dry season, but because we need irrigation and income from power exports to drive growth at home. India can always meet its energy needs with nuclear power or work on inter-basin river transfers.

Eighty percent of our rain falls in the three monsoon months, storing this is the only sensible way for transboundary water management into the future. The only question is, will our politicians get us a fair deal for regulated water?

Even without exports, there are projects we can start right away like the expanded Melamchi ('Revisiting multi-purpose Melamchi', #379) which would be a neat way to spread the benefits of a water supply scheme out of the capital valley. Imaginative entrepreneurs in Sankhuwasabha don't just talk, they have built a scheme to sell power to the grid that pays to run higher education ('Hydropowered education', #377).

God gave us water, but not the pipes. Sharing Nepal's water with India needs pragmatism on both sides, not dogmatism.

Running out of time

The next fortnight is crunch time for the madhes

RAJBIRAJ—Elections are not possible in the eastern tarai under present conditions. They all agree: from a Biratnagar confidante of the PM to local police officials, from Congress and UML politicians in Janakpur to journalists in Lahan.

The three madhesi groups (led by Upendra Yadav, Rajendra Mahato and Mahant Thakur) are



TARAI EYE
Prashant Jha

preparing for agitation. Armed groups have sounded out a warning (see p 4) and all it will take is the killing of a few candidates, localised riots and blasts to derail polls. There is no administration, people are terrified, and alienation from the state is intense.

But madhesis want polls. An elderly man in Rupani near Rajbiraj put it bluntly: "Only elections can get us our rights and give us security." The problem is that people just don't trust the seven parties in Kathmandu and are sure they will put off polls again, using the madhes as an excuse.

All madhesi groups face a credibility crisis. Tarai people are sick of their infighting, inconsistency and tendency to strike deals with Kathmandu for personal benefit. The leaders are aware of this and realize their future lies in appearing distant from, and opposed to, the seven parties. They are trying to unite: the Mahato-Yadav front is talking to Mahant Thakur to set up a broader alliance.

None of the madhesi groups have a strong organisation.

This is why they have escalated the rhetoric. They hope frustration with Kathmandu can be channelised into street action, and help restore credibility. And they have begun coordinating with armed groups.

At the first mass meeting of the Yadav-Mahato front in Biratnagar, a host of speakers defined the agenda in different ways: full proportional representation, dissolution of the interim house, a caretaker government, a fresh census, implementation of promises, a commitment to autonomy. But leaders know they will need to come up with minimum reasonable demands.

Things have still not reached the tipping point. Girija Prasad Koirala and Pushpa Kamal Dahal need to decide whether they really want elections. There is reason to believe they are slightly more serious this time, but skepticism persists. The Maoists know they will lose out if there are more delays. Koirala has told aides the NC will be in real crisis if polls fail. Determination and visible commitment in Kathmandu is the first step to sending out a message of sincerity to madhesis, and putting pressure on madhesi groups.

Leaving out eastern tarai districts during elections is not an option because it will lead to even greater alienation. Instead, Kathmandu must begin back-

channel communication with mainstream and armed groups, and decide on a possible deal. Madhesi groups will go in for a movement for their survival. But this can be limited, with clear goals, if they know before hand that the government will agree on certain issues.

Symbolic steps are necessary. Koirala should visit Lahan on 19 January, the first anniversary of Ramesh Mahato's death. This would be a show of respect, he should apologise for the state's response, commit himself to inclusion and appeal for talks.

Substantively, there will have to be a fourth amendment of the interim constitution with a change in the electoral system. Madhesi leaders complain that if they put up more than 20 percent candidates in the proportional system, they will need to give representation to other communities.

"If we get 100 seats, based only on madhesi votes, we can only send 33 madhesis. This should be applicable to national parties, not regional groups. We should be allowed to put up 33 percent candidates, our population ratio, while being allowed to skip the obligation to be proportional," explains Mahato.

India has a central role. It wants elections, but the madhes is the biggest obstacle. New Delhi could pressure Kathmandu and madhesi leaders to compromise. If that happens, madhesi parties and civil society can use their leverage on armed groups to either come on board, or at least, not actively obstruct polls. In the process, money will exchange hands, there will have to be promises on post election prospects, and certain number of seats will need to be assured.

Unless the government is proactive in the next fortnight, expect an increase in violence, an agitation, and no situation for elections in the madhes. ●

LETTERS

PEACE TRAIN

Your editorial today ('Peace train', #380) says: 'Still, from now till April there are three spoilers. Monarchists will try their damndest to not allow elections to happen, an escalation in madhes violence would be a problem, and the wild followers of the Maoists will have to be defanged.'

Are you naively suggesting that the previous elections couldn't be held because the king conspired against them? If not, why would he do anything now, if he did not before? The fact is the seven plus Maoists is such a load of incompetents that even if the king does nothing, they will not be able to hold elections. As you say in your edit: 'The

government that can't ensure supply of essential commodities, arrange garbage disposal in the capital, guarantee freedom of movement and can't check crime is susceptible to sabotage by society's malcontents.'

Bhuwan Sharma, email

YETI

'Chemo' is a very bad phonetical equivalent for the Tibetan '*dred mo*', a Sherpa pronunciation would be '*temu*'. ('Chemo or yeti,' Nepali Pan, #380) I'm first surprised by the presence of a Tibetan collared bear in Pharak. I know the area since my wife is from there and brown bears are relatively common in the high lateral valleys. I agree that modern yeti lore is based on 'dremo' stories. Years back,

elder Khumbu Sherpas claimed that there were still some resident bears in Khumbu. The last one I heard about was in the beginning of the 1980's, when a dremo attacked horses and cattle in the Mingbo area and the next day seriously wounded a Pangboche villager. But definitely, yetis are not animals, but more supernatural beings associated with the great mountain gods of Khumbu. I also know well the area north of Jomolangma, local people consider dremos to be extinct there. But according to nomads of Northern Tibet, these animals (like all bears) can travel considerable distances at night.

Marceau Reda, Paris

DEVELOPMENT

In the past, most of the nation's

investment has been geared toward big cities like Kathmandu. But big cities have their own resources to be utilised wisely for their own development. The government needs to take care of us in the districts. We villagers are subsidising the fuel for SUVs, motorbikes, and cars that, rich people use in the cities. Nepal is a country where most people live in remote areas, and lack water supply, schools, and other basic infrastructure. The \$500 million for the Melamchi project ('Revisiting a multi-purpose Melamchi', #379) should be invested in remote areas. We can learn from the Adhikhola project about multi-purpose use of resources. The time has come to reframe development issues.

P Neupane, Syangja

TIA

Akiko Tanaka, what you went through was not at all acceptable ('Airport attack,' From the Nepali Press, #380). If you had been outside the airport other people might've seen and helped you. Even as a Nepali, I have been needlessly harassed by immigration officials who ask me for documents I don't need to produce. I believe that some customs officers at the TIA create unnecessary problems, especially for people who are leaving for overseas employment.

Shiv, email

● Tribhuban International airport is a den of *dakas*. What Akiko Tanaka went through is a shame and we must all apologise to her as a nation. But who will protect us



KIRAN PANDAY

Girija Koirala needs to act now on the tarai to save his legacy

From rust to dust

A year ago, the Maoists stood vulnerable and exposed with revelations about their successful association with King Birendra, failed negotiations with King Gyanendra and shelters in Siliguri.



STATE OF THE STATE

C K Lal

Sher Bahadur Deuba's NC-D and Madhab Nepal's UML had debased themselves by associating with the royals. Untainted with any accusation of compromising sovereignty of the people, the NC was riding high on the success of the April Uprising. Prime Minister Koirala was inches away from being the tallest statesman in Nepal's history.

He brought the marauding Maoists into the mainstream. The king was pensioned off into the palace. The extreme left and rabid right tightly reigned in, it appeared for a while that he would build on centrist politics. The international community was in awe of the octogenarian. President Jimmy Carter called him his "hero". Manmohan Singh pronounced him a South Asian stalwart.

The Koirala coterie at Baluwatar must miss those heady days. How things have changed in

a year. Ever since the Madhes Uprising last year, the NC's credibility has seriously eroded. When Mahantha Thakur walked out of interim parliament and the NC to float his own party, an unperturbed Koirala reportedly told his madhes flock that a "slight overflow from a full vessel didn't mean the pot was leaking". That would be true if the NC still had its traditional base in the tarai intact. But the ground has shifted.

Thakur's commitment to national integrity, republican democracy and probity in public life is quite well known. He was one of very few ministers who didn't need to cultivate a clean image and his honesty was beyond reproach. His uncanny ability to swim with the flow of power politics is less publicised. Thakur is street-savvy with a keen survival instinct. If a person like him deserted the NC, it probably means the party is a sinking ship in the tarai.

Had it not been for the rebellion of Thakur, Maoist footman Matrika Yadav wouldn't have gotten re-entry into Singha Darbar on his own terms. Remember, Koirala had gruffly told Yadav to go where he had come from. Since nobody loves a loser, Koirala better prepare for

his shine to wear off. The NC needs to act, and act immediately, if it is to be saved from electoral annihilation in the tarai.

Thakur's Tarai-Madhes Loktantrik Party isn't like Deuba's experiment of cohabiting with the army to seal lucrative defence deals. Everybody knew Deuba had no alternative vision for the Congress, it was all about power. The TMLP has begun its business by talking about self-respect and social justice. Whoever took the initiative to 'expel' Thakur from NC when he had already resigned on his own will probably escape lightly. But Koirala will have to pay the price of that political blunder. Playing with questions of identity and dignity is fraught with consequences of unimagined proportions.

These are the twilight years of Koirala's career, it is headed towards decline and demise. His daughter Sujata Koirala is positioning herself as heir apparent, but by waving the card of constitutional monarchy. Even she seems to have failed to gauge people's frustrations with politics of elite consensus.

Nepal may just be a paper republic now, but no other future is likely to meet the aspirations of a large section of Nepalis. ●

Nepalis from the rapacious police officers at security who want to take money out of our wallets, ask for bribes from tourists so they can retain the brass idols bought in Thamel, or refuse to allow us to board the plane because we don't have a 'sponsor letter'?

Gyan Subba, email

AAJA NACHLE

Who made you a film critic, Diwas Kc? There are many people who thought *Aaja Nachle* was fantastic, including me ('Outside the box', Critical Cinema, #380). The only problem is that it was released after *Om Shanti Om* and *Sawaariya*. Maybe if Madhuri had starred alongside bigger actors, she would've gotten a larger audience. Madhuriji, chin up.

Name withheld, email



In search of reconciliation

Peers to the highest summit
Dedicated to the fallen warriors

CORRECTIONS

- In 'Hydropowered education' (#377) the capacity of the Nigure hydropower plant should have been 250 kilowatt and not megawatt as erroneously reported.
- Due to an editing error, there was a mistake in the date of the Nepalgunj riots in Tarai Eye ('The year of the madhes', #380). The street unrest happened in December 2006.
- Due to a layout error, the captions for 'In search of reconciliation' (#380) got mixed up. The corrected captions can be seen on *Nepali Times eSpecial*, www.nepalitimes.com/issue/380/
- Om Rajbhandary in 'A real state developer' (#380) spells his surname with a 'y'.

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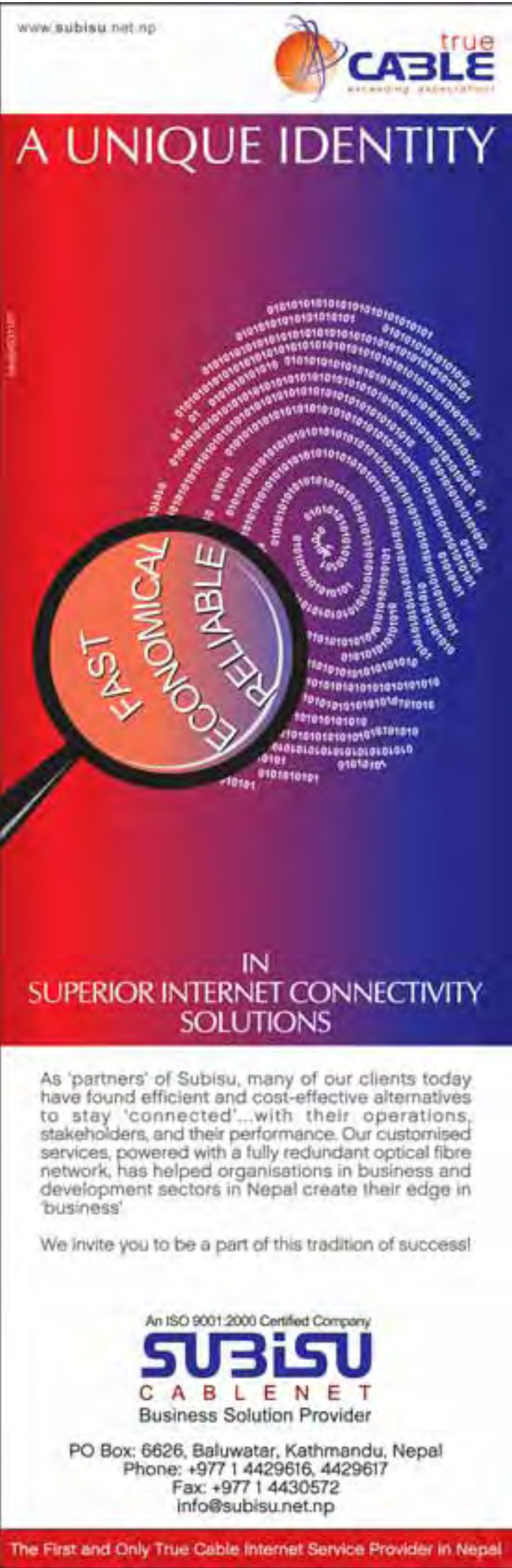
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MIRROR IMAGE: Balaram Poudel shaves one morning last week in Hetauda while his granddaughter looks on. His family was chased out of Bijayapur in Rautahat after receiving threats from JTMM activists last month. He and other internally displaced pahadis are now living with relatives in Hetauda.

KIRAN PANDAY

Tarai frontline

Madhesi militant groups are preparing for a showdown

PRASHANT JHA
in NORTH BIHAR

A madhesi insurrection is being discussed in a small hotel room in a town two hours from the Nepal border.

Chandrashekhar, the newly appointed head of Jwala Singh's intellectual front, Tarai Buddhijivi Mukti Morcha, and Arjun Singh, head of the student front, look thrilled. They have just got news from an FM station about the assassination of a political target in Parsa by their cadre. The two immediately call up their district chief to congratulate him. "Ek do aur patkaiye," one of them says.

Jwala Singh's JTMM has given its local units the authority to attack pahadis. Ask its leaders why they do not go after symbols of the state, and Chandrashekhar responds: "But the pahadi is the symbol of the state. We want madhesi self-rule."

It is clear extremists in the tarai want to deepen the

polarization, and believe that tit-for-tat attacks on madhesi or aggressive state security deployment would benefit them.

Jwala has emerged as the most powerful armed group in the tarai, claiming a strength of 25,000 which is clearly a gross exaggeration. But others say they do have about 500 people each in several of the sensitive districts as active cadres and part time sympathisers. "Kathmandu thinks these are rag tag groups of 20-25 people," complains a Janakpur police official, "but several villages are dominated by them."

Besides Jwala's JTMM, the other militant groups are Goit's JTMM, the Samyukta Janatantrik Mukti Morcha (SJMM) headed by Pawan aka Prahlad Giri, and the Madhesi Mukti Tigers of Praful Yadav. Bisfot Singh's group has merged with SJMM.

There is increasing collaboration between all of the armed groups. Chandrashekhar asked Manager, a SJMM leader, to

help him get an Indian SIM card and promised a Nepali SKY phone in return.

Jwala's activists say they want an autonomous single Madhes, and an election without such a commitment is meaningless. Chandrashekhar says, "It is their CDO, their SP, their election system. Only pahadis will win. Kathmandu doesn't want polls but if they go ahead, we will unleash a killing spree. It will be like Kashmir or Iraq."

The leadership of armed groups is based largely here in North Bihar, while district heads keep moving back and forth across the border. Jwala himself travels around the Indian towns of Darbanga, Muzaffarpur, Hajipur, Samastipur, Madhubani, and more recently, Gorakhpur.

JTMM activists say they are careful not to carry arms in India and face little problems here. "The local people and leaders are with us, and the SSB is neutral," said one. Local support for the JTMM is visible. A passenger on a

bus tells us: "We are fully with madhesi groups. We are the same and this is their fight against slavery."

It may not be accurate to dub the tarai armed groups as "criminal" since they have a symbiotic relationship with the politicians. Criminals are learning political nuances, and politicians accept crime for organisational benefit.

While the cadre largely comprises of young, ill-educated people, some politically committed activists have joined the armed movement. Chandrashekhar had an NGO in a Tarai town, and did relief work during the madhes movement. Student leader Arjun Singh, a graduate, is the son of a Kathmandu based madhesi professional. Rajan Mukti, a Saptari activist, is the son of a doctor who studied commerce in Kathmandu.

They all belonged to mainstream groups and now appear to have found a cause that gives them a sense of purpose, solidarity, and adventure. The caste mix of Jwala's JTMM is largely Dalit and non-Yadav upper and intermediate castes.

However, many are also using armed groups as a cover for criminal activities and personal benefit. Jwala Singh initially gave

permission to many activists, often within the same district, to carry out *arthik karabahi*. A spate of extortion and killings followed, often of madhesi, breeding resentment.

At a recent meeting of his district chiefs, Jwala Singh asked them not to harass madhesi anymore, reportedly saying: "Madhesi people will slap us if we don't change."

But it hasn't been easy because the command structure is hollow, leadership is inexperienced and the organisation needs money. There is no ideological program or a clear work plan and activists have gotten used to the easy route.

Toofan Singh Bidrohi, Siraha-in-charge of the JTMM, is despondent. Police action and infighting have caused losses. "We tried to control the abductions of madhesi. But several of our fighters ran off, taking the limited arms and money with them, and started working on their own." Leaders have now decided that they will blame the YCL when accused of crime.

As the fog thickens outside, Chandrashekhar takes a cigarette puff and sounds a warning: "Wait for the violence in the next two months. We are preparing for a decisive movement." ●



Travelling Laxmi

Laxmi Bank has launched its Travel Related Services, the first of its kind in Nepal. Everest Insurance is their travel insurance partner while Yeti Air, Buddha Air are domestic flight partners. Gandaki Travels, Everest Travels and Rainbow Travels are ticketing partners whereas Lalit Mandap Tours are package tour partners.

Himalayan profit

Himalayan Bank concluded its 15th annual general meeting in Kathmandu. The Bank's total deposits stand at Rs 30,048.4 million, an increase of 13.43 percent from last year. The bank has been able to earn a net profit of Rs 491.823 million and has declared a 25 percent bonus share and 15 percent cash dividend.

Asambhav winner

Saroj Thapa from Hetauda is the winner of the Yamaha Asambhav offer. Thapa won a house at Civil Homes Phase II worth Rs 5,500,000. Morang Auto Works, official dealers for Yamaha, had launched Asambhav offer as the Dasain-Tihar offer where customers of Yamaha bikes had a chance to win a house.



Plus Lounge

Global Bank has launched the Global Plus Lounge, a new banking facility. The lounge is targeted towards customers who are in a hurry or those with large transactions. The Plus Lounge is available at the bank's Kantipath and Birgunj branches. All normal banking facilities are available at the Lounge.

Another winner

Shreeya Rani Shrestha of Balaju is Dabur Nepal's Hajmola *Khane Bahana* contest winner. She won a cash prize of Rs 100,000. Contestants had to come up with creative excuses for Hajmola. The second, third and fourth prizes were a personal computer, LG microwave oven and LG mobile phone respectively.

Qatar's entertainment

Qatar Airways has a new next generation inflight entertainment system on its Boeing 777 aircraft. Rebranded Oryx Entertainment's Multiplex in the Sky offers more than 150 international movies, 150 hours of TV programming, over 50 games and 500 audio CDs for passengers to choose from. Qatar also has a special tie-up with the National Geographic Channel, History Channel and E! Entertainment and will also showcase the entire 21-film James Bond collection.

NEW PRODUCTS



HUNKY: The 150cc Hunk is the latest premium segment bike from Hero Honda. This ninth new model has a displacement of 149.2cc, 14.2bhp and Advanced Tumble Flow Induction helps the bike provide improved torque and higher fuel efficiency.

The Hunk is available for Rs 1,54,900 with a 3-year warranty. Syakar Company is the sole authorised dealer for Hero Honda in Nepal.

No jerks allowed

Is your workplace a jerk-free zone

Movies voted to be the best in their categories win Academy Awards every spring in Los Angeles. Similarly, books, voted to be the best in categories ranging from romance to science fiction by more than 6,000 booksellers and



STRICTLY BUSINESS
Ashutosh Tiwari

librarians, win Quill Awards every December in New York. The Quill Award winner in the category of Best Business Book for 2007 is Stanford University management professor Robert Sutton's colourfully titled bestseller: *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't*.

Available in Kathmandu's bookstores and written in clear prose, the book starts with an assertion: Jerks who mistreat colleagues and subordinates at workplace by persistently inflicting emotional, verbal or physical distress are ultimately bad for any company. It does not matter how brilliant or productive these jerks are. In the long run, Sutton argues, they are simply not worth the trouble for the company's goals for growth.

But how do you figure out who a jerk is? Sutton proposes two tests: First, after talking with the alleged jerk, do you always feel humiliated, de-energised or belittled? Second, does the alleged jerk always spew venom at people who are less powerful than s/he is? If the answer is 'yes' to both questions, the alleged jerk is likely to be a bone fide jerk.

Sutton lists some everyday actions that jerks use to bring down staff morale. These include

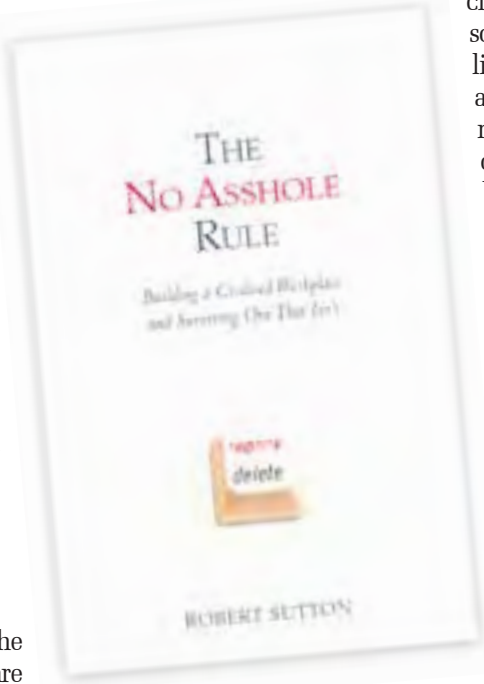
personal insults, rude interruptions, two-faced attacks, email flames, threats and intimidation, treating acquaintances as if they are invisible, and the like. Since research shows that negative interactions have a fivefold stronger effect on a person's mood than positive interactions, the jerk's actions add up to a huge cost for any company. Workers lose motivation to work. The best ones head for the door.

The remaining ones fall sick, and many

seemingly nice people into insufferable jerks in front of their peers, Sutton advises managers to remove many unnecessary status differences that dot today's corporate landscape. Besides, those leading an organisation must first agree on what the acceptable behaviours at their workplaces are, and then help everyone practise 'small decencies' that result in less stress for all, including clients.

Sutton is aware that even normally nice people act like jerks under certain circumstances. Such acting sometimes serves a purpose, like when you have to shout at a customer-service representative who gets busy on the phone with her boyfriend while repeatedly ignoring your request for help. Other 'temporary' jerks come to their senses soon after their episodes, and have the decency to apologise or try to make amends in some ways. The book's focus, however, is on habitual jerks, and it offers a 24-question test that you can truthfully administer to yourself to see whether you are one of them.

Not everyone has the option to leave a jerk-driven workplace. Sometimes, you are stuck in one. Sutton has a chapter on how to survive in nasty workplaces. Sutton advises reframing how you see things, developing indifference and detachment, and looking for small wins. It's hard to tell whether these tips will work for all. What one can tell is that Sutton has written a lively and useful book on one critical aspect of corporate behaviour that most victims talk about but feel helpless to do much against. ●



others become more tense, less creative and unproductive. The levels of company-wide trust go down and those of fear go up. Bad news gets neither shared nor solved promptly, and that leads to further problems. Organisational performance suffers. The result is that, over time, the jerk's actions become unaffordable for his or her company.

How can workplaces be jerk-free zones? Since power and pay structures tend to turn even

To cleanse your body of impurities spend a weekend at a spa in the Swiss Alps. Or spend next to nothing to do it at home. Every morning just add a dollop of honey to a glass of warm lemon juice and drink it. You will notice the difference. And so will hubby dearest. This is not a miracle cure. It's one little point from Dabur Honey.

HEALTH POINT

HEALTHY CHHA. TASTY CHHA.



Gorkhaland re-ignites

Dambar Krishna Shrestha in Darjeeling, *Himal Khabarpatrika*, 31 December-14 January

Gorkhaland is suddenly in the news again among India's close to 10 million Nepali-speakers. The new protests are against the Indian government's decision to introduce a bill giving the Subhas Ghising-led Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) rights to self-governance under India's sixth schedule. The 'Gorkhalis' who are protesting want to establish a separate Gorkhaland by 2010.

The people of Darjeeling asked for a separate state in 1907 from the British. But even after a hundred years, this demand has still not been met. The 1986 uprising led by Subhas Ghising and his GNU culminated in a tripartite agreement between the West Bengal government, the central government and Ghising. Twelve hundred people lost their lives and the Indian government quelled the uprising only by creating a Gorkha Darjeeling Hill Council (GDHC) and making the GNLF Subhas Ghising its head.

Ghising's term ended in 2004 but there has been no re-election and he shows no signs of letting the chair go. There was supposed to be an election on 25 March 2005 but on 1 January 2005, Ghising demanded the scrapping of the Hill Council and merger with the sixth schedule of India's constitution. He also



DAMBAR KRISHNA SHRESTHA

demand the resignations of the 28-member council. Ghising was also appointed acting administrator by the Bengal government. Since then, Ghising has become sole ruler of Darjeeling.

Those who trusted Ghising and hoped for a Gorkhaland have grown disillusioned and are the ones who are involved in the new uprising. The current movement is being championed by the newly formed Gorkha People's Liberation Front (GPLF) and its leader Bimal Gurung. The Revolutionary Communist Party, All India Gorkha League, GNLF 'C' and various other

parties oppose the sixth schedule. Other parties including the Gorkha National Congress and the Gorkha Democratic Front have made clear their desire for a Gorkhaland. Even the chief minister of Sikkim, Pawan Chamling has come out in support of Gorkhaland. According to Chamling, Darjeeling deserves to be a separate state because it doesn't have anything in common with the rest of West Bengal in terms of culture, finances or even environment.

Ghising's detractors claim that the sixth schedule will only create rifts within

the Gorkhali community and will make Darjeeling a slave to Kolkata while his supporters claim the sixth schedule is a door to Gorkhaland.

Bimal Gurung, a former member of the Hill Council, was a staunch Ghising supporter and his public acceptance is high. Analysts claim that out of Darjeeling's 1.6 million population, 75 percent of them support him. Gurung's popularity soared when he came out in full support of Indian Idol winner Prashant Tamang and even opened a fan club while rival Ghising kept mum.

Former chief minister of Sikkim Nar Bahadur Bhandari says that Ghising needs to properly understand what the sixth schedule means. "The schedule may mean citizen rights but it is not what the people of Darjeeling want. What they want, is Gorkhaland," says Bhandari. According to the *Saparivar* monthly magazine, Sikkim, with a population of 300,000 voters gets aid worth Rs 5,400 billion but Darjeeling, with more than 1.6 million voters, only gets around Rs 100 billion.

It is now coming down to a showdown between the pro-sixth schedule GNLF and the pro-Gorkhaland GPLF. Although the GPLF was only formed last October, it already holds a lot of support. It sent a representative body to Delhi to halt the schedule and even organised a gherao with over a thousand supports at Ghising's home. But the GNLF has also organised bandas and rallies in support of the schedule.

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Old wounds
Amrita Anamol in Nepal,
6 January

NAWALPARASI—Tijiya Yadav (below) of Bargadahawa cannot help crying and stuttering in front of anyone who visits the place. Her two sons were killed and her house was blown apart in a Maoist attack here. Gulichi Chaudhary, 80, has a similar story. She lost her son and grandson in the raid.

Even though a year-and-half has passed after the brutal killing of 10 people, the village is still drowned in sorrow. After the incident, 42 displaced families have migrated to India.

Amongst those who have lost their sons is Dhandhari Kahar, 73. She has been using the money provided by the government to buy food. She says: “The government tried to dull the pain with money but it hasn’t helped. If only money could bring my son back.”



The Maoists forced the villagers out of their homes, lined them up and shot them dead. The security forces set up a temporary camp at the local school. Although the government provided Rs 150,000 as compensation but it hasn’t paid any attention since then. The family of Kamal Kahar, who was killed in Lumbini Regional Hospital two days after the incident, did not even receive compensation. Kamal’s widow Batasha says, “I can’t take care of my family. I can do nothing but stare at the faces of the orphaned children.”



Our separate marchpasts
YCL towards Susta
Maoist leaders towards the embassy



Hungry children
Dhurba Kumar Rawal in
Naya Patrika, 1 January

NUWAKOT—The children standing on the roadside were shivering, they looked tried and hungry. They were carrying small bouquets of flowers in their hands. They were there to welcome a minister. “Our teacher brought us here,” said seven-year old Dilip Tamang who studies in the 2nd grade of Kalika Primary School adding, “I am hungry, cold, but the teacher won’t let us go.”

Finance Minister Ram Sharan Mahat was to inaugurate the rural road linking Deurali with Bungtang VDC. Twenty-four kids from grades two and three were pulled from their classrooms at 12PM to stand and wait for Mahat to arrive. All they were wearing was their school uniform and they were shivering. Sushil Tamang, who studies in the 3rd grade, says, “We have no idea why we were brought here.”

Mahat was supposed to arrive at 2PM but due to delays he got there only at 4.30 PM. There was so little time that he took the flowers from the kids and said a quick thank you. Teacher Sumitra Tamang says, “The organisers told us we were to bring school children, that is why I brought them here.”

Woman PM
Kantipur, 1 January

Prime Minister GP Koirala has assured female NC leaders that the country will soon have a woman prime minister. At a tea ceremony organised by the NC women’s wing at Dhapasi on Monday Koirala said: “The constitution has guaranteed 33 percent women participation in all the state bodies. Now there will be a separate woman prime minister. At that time the participation of women will reach 50 percent.”

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THAMEL'S LOSS

IRENE PERONI

On the day your plane lands at Kathmandu airport and an obnoxious taxi driver in an antique car charges you a fortune to dump you in the middle of its urban chaos, you quickly learn to navigate Thamel.

It's like snakes and ladders. Whatever your destination, and however close, a series of obstacles will hold you up. You have to walk very briskly, look down and skirt teeming humanity. There are the drug dealers offering you pot, fruit vendors with their one-dollar-a-piece apples, rickshaw drivers, touts who pretend you've met before and try to talk you into going on a trek with their agencies.

Each time you hesitate and stop, you slip back a few squares. Then there are the ragged ladies shaking empty baby bottles, the kids begging for biscuits, the guy with the mini-chess set, tiger balm, flutes, sarangis. If you are scared of reptiles, then you might also have to cross the road to avoid walking next to a snake charmer petting a two-metre python.

But all that is Thamel for beginners. Once you've learned a few tricks, dodging the hurdles are a piece of cake. That usually happens when you return to the capital from your trek in the mountains. First, you will be

able to wrench your eyes away from the potholes and multitude of wheels racing in all directions, threatening to amputate your feet. You will start noticing the souvenir shops, cafes and restaurants that you had previously ignored, choosing to dive into the closest bakery before rushing back to your guesthouse, all limbs intact. Finally slumped on a soft cushion in front of a sizzling steak with pommes frites, you'll observe the ecstatic, slightly daft smile on the faces of emaciated fellow trekkers returning from a three-week diet of muesli bars, instant noodles and dal bhat.

That's when Thamel becomes a culinary Shangri-La where you'll be flabbergasted to find apple strudel that challenges its Viennese counterpart, pizza that tastes exactly like in Rome and better hummus than in Casablanca. In your memories, Kathmandu is bound to become the place where you had the best food ever. As in Pavlov's experiment, the word Thamel will trigger a conditioned reflex that will make your mouth water.

But there is also an advanced Thamel, which needs to be read between the lines, examined against the light like a watermark. It's one the vast majority of tourists never get to see, even though they are walking in the midst of it every day. It's the Thamel of mushrooming massage parlours and dance clubs where



prostitution is rife, of street children sniffing glue out of small plastic bags, of young pimps in search of western customers for a snotty bunch, and of pre-teen boys wearily trotting along.

There's a few Nepali men staggering in the middle of the road, staring into the void, their bodies and minds devastated by brown sugar. And finally there are scores of kind-hearted travellers who, despite the clear directions given by the Lonely Planet, buy street kids and beggars something to eat or a little present, perhaps

ignoring that most of the time things will be returned to the shops or sold on to someone else to raise some cash.

If you observe people on the main Thamel road from a first-floor bar, you will see some of these happening at any given time. "Thamel is killing itself," says a long-time resident. "Will tourists really want to come to a place like this?"

Maybe they will. Two attractive young girls in bright saris get off a taxi on the street below. They walk quickly into a massage shop. ●

Kathmandu's
tourist
ghetto is a
snakes and
ladders
game



ALL PICS: SAM KANG LI

ST INNOCENCE



which sells handmade stationery goods, has seen business boom in the past year. "It seems that political instability creates more problems than traffic," says Bhupal Raj, who runs the store.

Businesses in Thamel took a dive after Nepal's tourism collapsed when the conflict intensified in 2001. But with things now on the rebound, Thamel is bustling again. And for many in Thamel the congestion itself is a sign that business is picking up.

But tourism officials and Thamel hotel owners realise that Kathmandu's tourist hub may be the victim of its own success. The Thamel Tourism Development Council is liaising with business owners and entrepreneurs to improve traffic and chase out touts.

Thamel's new traffic regulations include issuing special passes to vehicles, such as those belonging to hotels, which will allow them to enter areas cordoned off by security guards. This month, the council will be setting up roadblocks to test the feasibility of the plan.

"Traffic here is crazy, cars are bumper to bumper," says Korean backpacker Kim Seung Wook who has been grazed several times by side mirrors of whizzing motorcycles. Kim has even been spat upon by storeowners whom he rejects.

Other tourists buttonholed outside Kathmandu Guest House agreed. "It's not a relaxing place," says Sjors and Herman, both

from Holland, who have been in Nepal for two months. On one side of the road, drug dealers whisper their wares. On the other side, street children beg for money.

Most tourists interviewed said that they did not respond to the children's pleas. "We choose to ignore them because we are aware that there are shelters available, and these children had been given a choice for a better life," says Herman.

Storeowners in Thamel sympathise with the tourists and are determined to clean up the area's image. "The touts, beggars and children leave a bad impression on visitors," admits Richa Maharjan of Pilgrims Book House.

Once the Council's plans go

into effect, vehicles will not be the only ones experiencing limited access. Mobile fruit-sellers will be given passes and will only be allowed to sell at allocated places.

"We are also hoping to keep away the street children through these barriers," says Namgyal Lama, who heads the Council. Lama expects a more pleasant Thamel where pedestrians can walk without fear of being hit by motorcycles and harassed by beggars. The shops and cafes would benefit as more people are attracted by the ambience.

But when that happens, some say, the fun will be gone. Thamel just won't be Thamel without its chaotic streets. ●

Wong Shu Yun, Sheere Ng



Congestion in Thamel is a sign of a tourism rebound, but not everyone is happy

Touts and beggars, coupled with congested traffic make navigating in Thamel a challenge in itself. During peak hours, walking the 100m stretch into Thamel can take up to 10 minutes. Yet, businesses at Thamel go on as usual.

Prakash Karmacharya of Typical Handloom Weavers, a fabric exporter, says there hasn't been any noticeable change in his business in the past five years despite the worsening congestion.

Sales in some stores have even picked up. The Paper Park,



WHERE IS MY MEDICINE? Humla people throng a health post that was distributing free medicines during a health camp.

DAVID CITRIN

Sick system

NICK MEYNEN in HUMLA

Medical charities in remote parts of Nepal are trying to fill the vacuum left by the government, but this has brought a host of other problems.

Because the government has neglected health for so long, providing care is like buying political support: it brings the NGOs working on health in direct confrontation with the Maoists.

There are now about 130 NGOs based in Humla working for the development of Nepal's most remote district. Some work on health and it didn't take long before Maoists closed the first health post. Doctors, mainly western, used to fly into health camps by helicopter to distribute free medicines, like candies to begging kids.

David Citrin, who is working on a doctorate, is not impressed: "Due to a lack of research on what people really need, not enough awareness on how to use medicines and a complete lack of follow up, the camps are more like a medical circus."

People came on the second day, saying they didn't feel any better after swallowing all their medicines, meant to last for two weeks. Instead of treating 8,000 people, the same 2,000 people show up four times on average to stock up on as much free medicine as they can get. Villagers are disappointed when referred to an Indian doctor.

Shanti, a woman in Simkot, told us at least three people died last year, shortly after one of the health camps ended. Citrin says he saw children playing with used needles and later learned of people dying due to infections. "The concept of a *bidesi* doctor flying in by helicopter to give free medicine is just so powerful in an area where the government hardly bothers to do anything," he told *Nepali Times*. "Health camps obscure the real political and economic origins of sickness, they're a band-aid on a festering wound."

Nepal's poor can't depend on foreign well-wishers or profit-minded doctors in the cities for much longer

The government has promised free health services and free medicine for the poor from February. This sounds promising because 75 percent of the health care expenses of Nepalis are met by out-of-pocket payments, the highest percentage in Asia. As with everything else, the problem will be in making sure it works. When 97 villagers in rural Myagdi were asked recently what they really needed, the majority simply said: "An honest doctor who's here with us."

The government doctor at their health post came once a week, sometimes not at all. He sold medicines from his private clinic in Pokhara, claiming government medicines had run out. Village nurses who study in the city usually don't come back to work in the village.

Health care still hasn't recovered from the years of conflict. On a recent trip through Mugu, where the life-expectancy is 44, large parts of both districts are almost cut off from the world since Maoists bombed the only two bridges over the Karnali eight years ago.

There is only a fragile cable crossing in place. Medical personnel have left the area since, sick or elderly people can't cross the river anymore. Most people here don't beg for money, they beg for medicines, any medicines. A sick baby had only a plastic bag on his head. A dead dog lay next to the only tap in the village.

A woman asked us: "If you're not here to distribute medicines, then why are you here?" Locals in Mugu, Dolpo and Humla now perceive foreigners as doctors by definition. In Mugu, almost two out of ten babies die at birth, more than three times the rate for Nepal. In Dolpo the situation is not much better. When the local Maoist leader, who controlled most of the area for 10 years, was asked why not a single health post had been built in the areas they controlled, he just said: "First comes destruction, then construction".

In Nepal it is time somebody starts the construction. Not just of big hospital buildings, but of a functioning, visionary health care system. Health experts say that instead of a paternalistic top down-approach, Nepal needs to train local doctors and nurses and gear the health system towards creating wellness rather than treating illness.

Pictures from before-and-after facial surgeries on disabled Nepali children may be effective fund-raising visuals in Europe, but if the health of Nepal's poor is going to be dependent only on foreign well-wishers or profit-minded doctors in the cities, Nepal will remain a sick nation. In the absence of a functioning rural health care system, the people of west Nepal will have to do with foreign medicine band-aids. ●

nmeynen(at)hotmail.com

Saving a

Charismatic mammals get all the attention, but there is a separate thrill in finding rare plants below Kangchenjunga

SAMPREETHI AIPANJIGULY in PANCHTHAR

It was the 38th day of the nearly two months that researchers from the Ethnobotanical Society of Nepal (ESON) had spent in the remote areas of Ilam and Panchthar.

They were surveying plants in the lush foothills of the Kangchenjunga range, and had been working non-stop for five hours that day starting at 8AM.

Since a visit to the sacred pond at Timbu Pokhari was planned for the day, the devout surveyors were fasting. From their night's camp in Ghumne (4,100m), the pond was a couple of hours' walk away. A light rain was falling and the temperature had plummeted to 5°C.

They prayed at the pond and when returning switched to an alternative track leading to a fairly remote terrain of over 4,300m. "It was there that we saw, standing a metre high with its flower bracts already a dried bright orange, the *Rheum nobile*", recalls K K Shrestha, describing the moment when the team first saw the endangered plant species.

For Shrestha, a veteran

ethnobotanist, this was a joyous moment. He was seeing a plant, locally called *kenjo*, in the wild for the first time in 25 years. Later on they saw a few more plants scattered around, but that first sighting was unforgettable.

Planning a plant survey expedition is no easy task. The area where ESON was working is remote and takes about a week to get to. Plant collection expeditions are organised in the monsoon when the flowers are in bloom, helping identification. But monsoons are a difficult time to travel, especially in the Kangchenjunga area which gets nearly 4,000mm of rain a year, most of it falling in three months.

The absence of motorable roads in this remote part of eastern Nepal on the border with Sikkim means that all equipment for the kitchen, collecting and drying plants and sleeping have to be carried on yaks or by porters. There are no trekkers here, and few settlements.

A typical day involves 4-5 hours of walking and each

day examining up to eight quadrat plots of 100 square metres, explains Ripu Kunwar, a member of Shrestha's team.

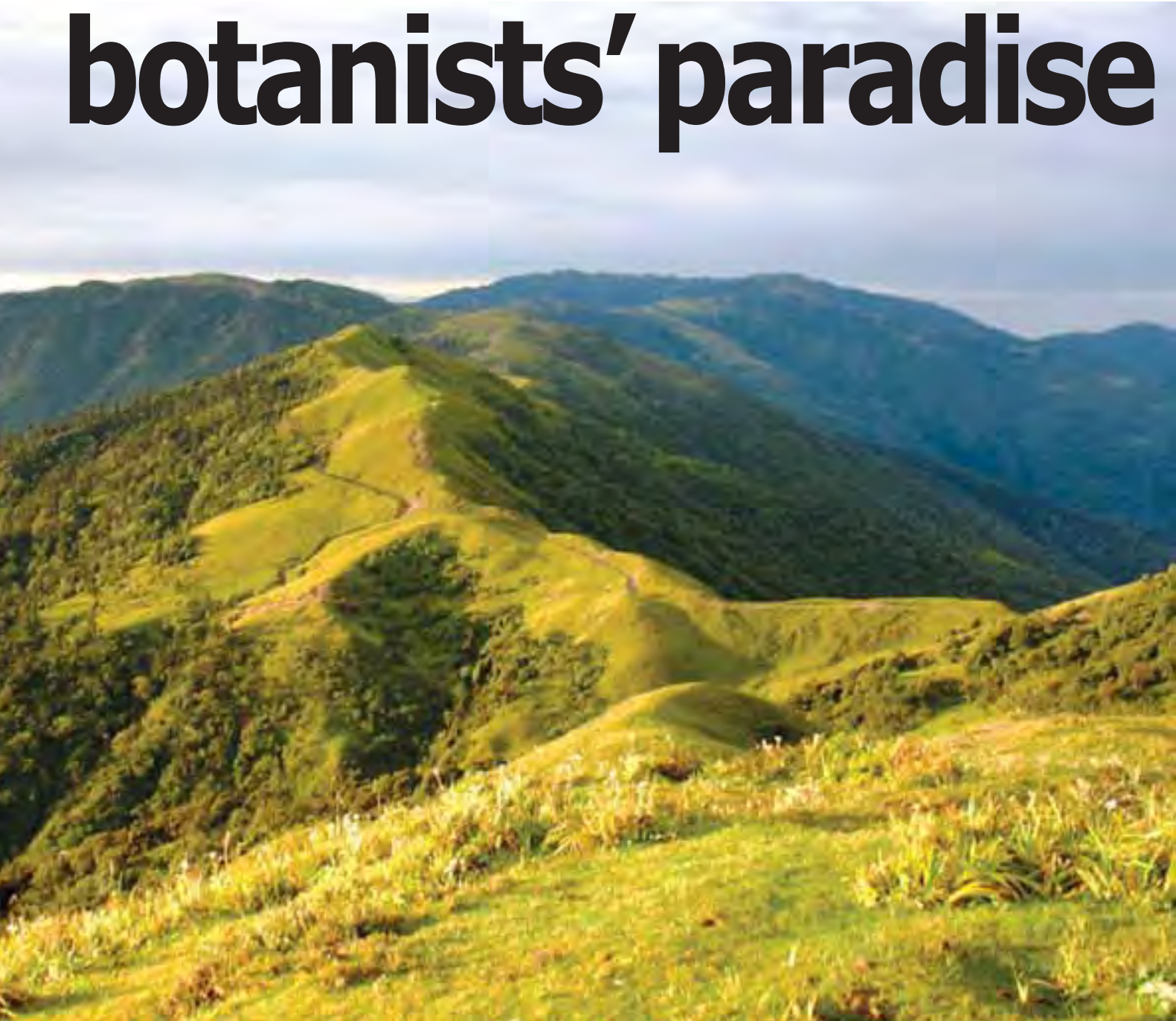
Two separate teams worked each plot, one collecting plants and the other inventorying. Each evening the day's collection of plants has to be dried over coal in a stone hearth.

Shrestha remembers the last expedition which ended in disaster when the drying tent

SCENE SCENERY: Scenic and lush eastern Nepal is doused by the monsoon and has Nepal's richest biodiversity. At night at camp (below) researchers dry and store specimens of rare plants.



botanists' paradise



ALL PICS: KAMAL HUMAGAIN/ESON

caught fire, with some of the specimens inside. The ESON team brought back 600 plant samples of about 300 species, of which half have been identified at the species level and a quarter at the family or genus level. The remaining plants are undergoing identification.

ESON received a one-year grant from the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF), to identify plant diversity hotspots in eastern Nepal a project that is being implemented by Worldwide Fund for Nature – Nepal.

Inventorying is just the first step in the process to identify

high plant biodiversity areas. Through their work, the team has found that the Jamuna and Phalaincha VDCs in Ilam and Panchthar districts are richest in biodiversity. ESON is looking into involving the local communities in plant conservation.

“Our work does not end with identifying and naming plants. We now have the huge task of talking to the local communities here about the importance of conserving plants and working with them on the issue,” says Shrestha.

Although community forests have helped conservation, they

only go up to 2,500m. Higher than that, the forests are considered no-man’s land and are pastures for yaks and sheep. There are signs of overgrazing, encroachment on forests and wildlife poaching. The team sees the removal of the cattle shelters, the provision of sources of alternative fuel and the handing over of unmanaged land to communities as solutions to the problems of plant conservation in these fragile areas. ●

Sampreethi Aipanjiguly is a communications officer with the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund, Eastern Himalaya.

FLOWER POWER:
(from top down) *Impatiens* sp. is known as *patpate* in Nepali and mainly used for fodder.

Panax pseudoginseng, has medicinal value and its root is used as a stimulant and expectorant. Called *mangen* or *nadir* in Nepali.

Daphne papyracea, is used to make handmade paper and is called *kagaj pate* in Nepali.

Rheum nobile is an endangered species called *kenjo* by the Limbus and *chulthi amilo* in Nepali. Its peeled petules are eaten raw or pickled, and the root is of medicinal value.

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Few know of the assassinated Pakistani leader's zeal for meditation

Benazir Bhutto and Vipassana

In the summer of 1994, I got a call from the Home Ministry in Kathmandu. Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, who was on an official visit to Nepal, wanted to visit Dharmashringa Vipassana Center in Kathmandu.

Teachers and trustees of the meditation centre were excited and gathered in the morning awaiting her arrival. We had made arrangements to show her around and explain the Vipassana meditation technique in the tradition of Sayagi U Ba Khin as taught by S. N. Goenka.



COMMENT
Roop Jyoti

Unfortunately, the visit was cancelled. The night before someone had mistakenly told her that the meditation center was a half-hour walk after a 45-minute drive. She did not have that much time and put off the visit. Actually, the centre can be reached in 20 minutes.

Two years later, the Foreign Ministry contacted us again. Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba was going to Pakistan and there was a specific request from Benazir Bhutto to bring along a Vipassana teacher.

Our Principal Teacher Acharya Goenkaji asked me and Nani Maiya Manandhar, both senior teachers, to go with the delegation. Benazir Bhutto was busy with the state visit and sent word that she would meet us as soon as she was free. On the last day of the state visit, the Nepali delegates were returning to Karachi in the afternoon to fly back to



JAHANGIR KHAN

Kathmandu. Nani Maiyaji and I were finally summoned at 3PM, after the rest of the delegation had flown off.

Benazir Bhutto had heard much about Vipassana and wanted to learn the technique there and then. We told her it required a 10-day retreat. She did not have such time, and insisted to be taught right

away. Acharya Goenkaji had foreseen such a response and had given permission to teach her the Anapana technique. So, Nani Maiyaji taught her Anapana. Benazir Bhutto started practising right away and found it very calming. She said that she had not slept for days and after the session of Anapana, she wanted to take a nap

because she felt so tranquil.

We waited while she had a restful sleep. After a few hours, she emerged looking refreshed and happy. We explained to her the salient aspects of Vipassana: a means out of human suffering and misery; not a ritual of an organized religion but an art of living. Vipassana involves no conversion from one religion to another and is open to all without any barrier of caste, creed or gender. The technique helps people control unruly minds and cleanse them of impurities like fear, anger, hatred, ill will, animosity, greed, passion and restlessness. Vipassana teaches how to diminish the ego and to find truth about oneself and to achieve inner peace.

We talked a bit more about Vipassana and where she could possibly sit through a full 10-day course. We also gave her books, tapes and videos. By this time, it was late in the evening and the last flight from Islamabad to Karachi was about to leave. We rushed to the airport. Upon the prime minister's order, two seats had been kept for us and the plane took off as soon as we boarded it. When we landed at Karachi that night, we learnt that there had been a military coup and Benazir Bhutto had been deposed. We have been the last visitors she met as prime minister.

Last week, as news of her assassination came in, I was filled with sadness, but took solace in the fact that she had learned Anapana, an important part of the Vipassana technique. May she be happy and peaceful in her heavenly abode. ●

Roop Jyoti helps run Vipassana Centers in Nepal and is ex-minister of state for finance.

Banco del Sud

An alternative to the World Bank and IMF

MICHAEL SHANK AND AMI CARPENTER

The World Bank's launch in late November of a five-year action plan for fighting the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa is emblematic of the Bank's new direction. The structural adjustment programs are of yesteryear.

Less controversial campaigns are becoming more common and economic strong-arming less frequent. Why the shift? The economies of some former Bank recipient countries have improved, loans repaid, and Bank presence ushered out. Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador have done as much, even creating a Bank of the South, launched in early December with four other South American countries.

The split from foreign aid is a significant one, even though western economists doubt that the southern three will survive on their own. Yet, the numbers already look promising and there is precedence for economic stability in foreign aid-free,



developing countries.

Take Eritrea. Long an isolationist nation determined to be self-reliant, the country's GDP and income both rose nearly 9 percent in the last ten years, with adult illiteracy dropping by 8.4 percent. Life expectancy, school enrollment and primary school completion rate all increased, while mortality rate dropped substantially. During the same period, Eritrea's ratings on

the UN Human Development Index which measures achievement in three dimensions (long healthy life, knowledge and a decent standard of living) rose 9.3 percent.

While Eritrea is no shining star ranking at an unenviable 130th in the HDI, it does challenge the paradigm of dependency, faced by many developing countries, on foreign aid. Its social indicators are improving,

slowly but surely, and without the backing of the banks in the west.

Mimicking Eritrea's headstart on self-reliance, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and most likely others are eager to shrug off what they perceive as the political yoke of foreign aid. They think western aid is frequently aligned with the geopolitical priorities and interests of developed nations.

Not long after the Bank appointed Robert Zoellick and the IMF appointed France's Dominique Strauss-Kahn, South American nations announced their intentions to form the Bank of the South. Now, with December's launch, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Uruguay, Paraguay and Venezuela have staked their self-reliant claim to be free of foreign philanthropy.

How the south will fare is yet to be seen. Venezuela's 2008 budget allocates 46 percent to the social sector with special attention to health, education, food aid, land reform, affordable housing, micro credit and job training. These are sectors in which the Bank and the IMF traditionally focused on.

Some economists see this as serious socialism. How dare Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez funnel oil and natural gas revenues into the social sector and rebuild the deteriorating infrastructure? How dare

Bolivia's President Evo Morales consider an equitable nationwide distribution of revenues stemming from natural resources? How dare Ecuador's President Rafael Correa decree that 99 percent of extra oil income will be distributed among the people, leaving only one percent for foreign firms?

They dare because they can. With fuel prices crossing \$100 a barrel, oil-rich and gas-rich nations are exerting the same power on developed nations that they once did so determinedly on developing nations. The tables have turned and the formerly dependent are less so. And who's to blame them?

HIV/AIDS programs in Africa then for the Bank? With the pandemic on the rise throughout the continent, countries are in weak position to refuse assistance. Self-reliance in Sub-Saharan Africa may be slower to pick up steam than in South America. But don't be surprised if the African continent creates a Bank of its own sometime soon. The Eritrean model may well be worth mimicking. ●

Michael Shank is an analyst with George Mason University's Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution. Ami Carpenter is a fulltime instructor at California State University's Program on Negotiation, Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding.



PICS: QUEST ENTERTAINMENT

The first Nepali feature film to be shot digitally is being released all over Nepal, India and even in New York

MALLIKA ARYAL

With the openness in Nepali media, and a boom in documentary filmmaking in late 1990s, film critics, audiences and film enthusiasts hoped that some of the investment, enthusiasm and expertise would influence feature filmmaking.

In 2000 Quest Entertainment started movie exhibition business via the duplex Kumari Cinema and Jai Nepal in Kathmandu. Right from the time the theatres opened the owners saw that there was a clear demand for Hindi and Hollywood movies. They observed the crowds and concluded rightly that they would never watch mainstream Nepali movies.

The demand for multiplexes was growing in India and more Bollywood directors were looking to have their films released internationally. Hindi movie directors had understood that the money was in middle and upper middle-class audiences, and Indians living abroad determine the success and failure of movies. However, in Nepal it was exactly the opposite.

"It is the general masses who determine the success and failure of mainstream Nepali movies, and the middle and upper-middle class do not even consider watching commercial Nepali films," explains Bhaskar Dhungana of Quest Entertainment. One reason is because the Kathmandu movie

industry is not open to change and do not understand that filmmakers need to evolve.

Dhungana was keen on making a Nepali movie that is different, so he got together with others who shared his vision, and discussed the possibility of working on a feature film that would impress even those who are used to Bollywood and Hollywood. Quest sought help from those who worked in the music video industry because they understood digital media and had successfully used it.

The filmmakers brought in the high-definition digital camera that Silken Imaging, an American company, was just trying out. In October 2006, the cast and crew set off to Jomsom. They shot non-stop for thirty days in Kagbeni, Marpha and Shyang.

"The camera is as big as a CCTV and does not use tapes for recording, everything is saved on hard disk," explains director Bhusan Dahal. The challenging part was that the crew was a guinea pig for the camera in South Asia, so every time there was a technical problem they had to walk a few hours to a cyber café to write to the US manufacturers and wait for instructions by email.

Kagbeni is the Nepali adaptation of W W Jacobs' *Monkey's Paw*. The story begins with Krishna coming back to his village after spending time in Malaysia. After visiting his friend Ramesh, they decide to travel together. On their journey they

come across a hermit who hands Krishna an animal's paw that has power to fulfil wishes, but also create horrific consequences. Unaware of its ominous powers, Ramesh makes a wish, and the journey of betrayal and revenge begins.

The filmmakers say that the story will remind the audiences of Nepali folk stories. They describe *Kagbeni* as a dark drama and say that the story is very simple. "If you compare it to other mainstream films, it is less noisy, there's uniformity in terms of colour and tint, and the film does not exaggerate," says Dahal.

Kagbeni is releasing in theatres on 11 January. Quest Entertainment has digitise 14 theatres all over Nepal, with most theatres also upgrading to digital surround sound. "It took a lot of coaxing, cajoling and convincing the theatre owners about the benefits of digitising movie theatres, not just for this, but also future releases," says Dhungana, who is also the producer of the film.

Kagbeni is directed by Bhusan Dahal, produced by Bhaskar Dhungana, Nakim Uddin and Rajesh Siddhi. The film features dancer-turned-actress Deeya Maskey, pop singer Nima Rumba, actors Saugat Malla, Puja Gurung, Hanif MD, and Anup Baral. *Kagbeni* is the first Nepali film releasing simultaneously all over Nepal, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Siliguri, Sikkim, Dehradun, Shimla, Delhi, Calcutta, Mumbai and New York. ●



Into the silver screen

Audiences are used to seeing Deeya Maskey dancing on stage, or in music videos. She is most popular for her work in Pabitra Subba's *Sirani le bhijayo ki* music video. In summer 2006, Maskey took an acting course with Anup Baral's Actors Studio and was hooked. Fans were delighted to see her again as Charandas Chor in Studio 7's production of Habib Tanvir's *The Honest Thief* last May.

Maskey plays the leading female role in *Kagbeni*. "I was immediately absorbed into the story, and as soon as I realised that my role was more than just being a pretty face, I wanted to be that character," says Maskey.

Maskey says she wants to put her 100 percent in whatever projects she takes up. "Professionalism is very important to me," Maskey adds. After shooting *Kagbeni*, she is splitting her time between working on music videos and is preparing for stage performances in Dubai and the US. She is looking forward to doing more theatre and lots of good acting in the coming year.

For the longest time, pop singer Nima Rumba could not quite figure out why in a country where music, radio, and music videos were doing so well, feature films were not making it. "I knew it wasn't talent that we were lacking because I meet so many talented people everyday through my work," says Rumba. When he heard the story of *Kagbeni*, he immediately knew that was what he wanted to do. "I knew *Kagbeni* was going to be different, it would be a milestone, and I just knew I had to be a part of the change," Rumba adds.

Rumba was offered the lead role, but it was the character of Krishna that attracted him: "Krishna has travelled, is single, street smart and has so many stories to tell, I knew I had to play him."

Many have asked Nima Rumba if he is going to give up singing now that he is an actor but he says he will do both. His next album will be released this year. ●

ABOUT TOWN

EXHIBITIONS

- ❖ **photo.circle xiii** anniversary special with Ashesh Dangol, Naresh Shrestha and NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati, 6 January, 5.45 PM at the Sundhara Bakery Café.
- ❖ **Larger than Life** panoramas by Kishor Kayastha, exhibition and sale, until 15 January, 8AM-6PM at the Indigo Gallery, Naxal. 4413580
- ❖ **Enchanting Life with Light** photo show by Rocky Prajapati at The Bakery Café, Pulchowk until 10 January. 9851014930

EVENTS

- ❖ **City of God** a film by Fernando Meirelles at the Lazimpat Gallery Café, 6.15 PM on 4 January. 4428549
- ❖ **Shastrartha** on labour rights with Ganesh Shah, 5 January, 3-5PM at Martin Chautari. 6910277
- ❖ **animalNEPAL community meeting** to discuss the street dogs of Patan, 4PM on 20 January at the Summit Hotel. 9841334537

MUSIC

- ❖ **Ciney Gurung** every Wednesday and Rashmi Singh every Friday, live at the Absolute Bar, Hotel Narayani Complex, 7PM. 5521408
- ❖ **Catch 22** live at the Zest Restaurant and Bar, Pulchok.

DINING

- ❖ **Illy espresso coffee** at the Galleria cafe, Thamel with contemporary Art exhibition at the Galleria lounge, every Friday espresso coffee cocktails.
- ❖ **Saturday special** barbeque, sekuwa, momos, dal-bhat at The Tea House Inn, Windy Hills, Nagarkot every Saturday. 9841250848.
- ❖ **Dice-licious brunch** at Kakori, Soaltee 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. 4273999
- ❖ **Vegetarian alternative** at Stupa View restaurant and café, Boudha Stupa. 4480262
- ❖ **Enjoy the new menu** at Roadhouse Cafe Pulchok, Bhatbateni and Thamel. 5521755, 4426587, 4262768.
- ❖ **Christmas dinner** with turkey and pork chops at the New Orleans Café, Thamel. 4700736
- ❖ **Cocktails and jazz** with the JCS Quartet and a choice of cocktails at Fusion – the Bar at Dwarika's. 4479448
- ❖ **Starry night barbecue** at Hotel Shangri-la with Live performance by Ciney Gurung, Rs. 666.00 nett. per person, at the Shambala Garden, every Friday 6.30 PM onwards. 4412999
- ❖ **Kebabs and curries** at the Dhaba, Thapathali. 9841290619
- ❖ **Calcutta's rolls, biryani, kebabs** Indian cuisine at Bawarchi, Bluebird Mall Food Court. 9741000735
- ❖ **Rediscover fine Italian** cuisine at La Dolce Vita, Thamel, 4700612
- ❖ **Little Britain coffee shop** fresh organic coffee, homemade cakes, WiFi internet, open all day, everyday. 4496207
- Pizza** from the woodfired oven at Java, Thamel. 4422519

GETAWAYS

- ❖ **Fulbari Resort and Spa, Pokhara** Rs 10,999 for Nepali double, \$219 for expat double, two days and three nights package, with transportation from the airport, drinks, tennis and swimming, discounts on food and beverages.
- ❖ **Weekend getaways at Le Meridien, Kathmandu**, Resident Night Rs 4444 and Two Nights Package Rs 8888. Also includes breakfast, lunch, dinner, spa facilities, swimming pool, steam sauna, Jacuzzi and gym facilities.

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

Quest Entertainment



Tare Zameen Par is a movie that revolves around the life of a child Ishaan (Darsheel Safary), who suffers from dyslexia. When Ishaan is whisked off to a boarding school to be disciplined, he is traumatized by the separation from his family. Things around seem to change, when a new art teacher, Ram Shankar Nikumbh (Aamir Khan) appears on the screen. He transforms the whole scenario, bringing joy and optimism in the lives of the students. All the kids in the school are excited by the flight of freedom except Ishaan. The movie tells a story of a teacher who tries to help his student discover his real world.

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WEEKEND WEATHER

by NGAMINDRA DAHAL

As they used to say in the Panchayat years this weekend is going to be "fair throughout the kingdom". No kidding. Except for a narrow westerly front that crossed from Iran into Afghanistan on Wednesday that will depositing copious snow over Kashmir this weekend, there is nothing to perturb us on the horizon. Effects of this system will send some clouds over western Nepal but not much by way of moisture. Kathmandu Valley will have thick smog over the weekend, which will keep the airport closed till noon so book on evening flights.



रेडियो सगरमाथा
एफएम १०२ थोप्लो ४ मेगाहर्ज

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संज्ञा: ६४५ र रात्री: ८४५
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बसत हुने समय : हरेक शुक्रवार बिहान (८:१५-८:३५)
हरेक साइतबार बिहान (९:४०-१०:००)
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केन्द्रको सहकार्य)

हरेक बिहान ८:३० देखि रात्री १०:०० सम्म सङ्घर्ष विमल र सङ्घर्ष सङ्गठनसँगै जति सञ्चारको आवाज रेडियो सगरमाथा १०२ थोप्लो ४ मेगाहर्ज

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Swearing in Maithili

The 23-point agreement took so much out of the honourable Primordial Minister that he’s gone back to sleep. It’s been a week and there still hasn’t been progress in announcing an election date, and the meeting of the high-level task force has been postponed on one pretext or another, the latest being that only Jana Morcha and UML showed up for the meeting on Wednesday in Balkhu that was supposed to plan for the real summit on Thursday.



Still, that hasn’t stopped our politicians from hitting the campaign trail. Makunay was out town-hopping in the midwest, Comrade Awesome was on a whistlestop tour, kangresis of every hue (especially those who are ministers) are busy raising campaign funds.

The reason Girjau has been so quiet is because he has been busy in his Baluwatar bedroom working on The Reshuffle of kangresi ministers to be announced simultaneously with the date of the elections. OK, if that’s the case maybe El Presidente is not asleep after all, and the Ass takes it back.

There is tremendous pressure on the PM to get rid of Sitaula Bro because he is seen as an electoral liability for the NC. But since the home minister always had a strong insurance policy (Awesome’s in-law) he is probably only going to be kicked sideways to switch places with Ram Chandra Baje or be made Defensive Minister. The other idea is to give Sitaula a token coordination role so he can sit in the corner and twiddle his thumbs. That should make the First Daughter throw a sekt party in Mandikatar in joyous celebration.



Why the Ministry of Science and Technology should be the portfolio set aside for madhesi ministers is anybody’s guess. Even this donkey can understand that the Supply Ministry and the Forest Ministry have traditionally been reserved for tarai ministers, but Scientology? And since Mahanta Thakur quit last month, no madhesi worth his salt is reportedly interested in taking that token ministry where the most important chore is the annual general meeting of NAST.



Poor Comrade Pampha, she had already started taking French lessons, and all for nothing. She’ll just have to put into practice what she learnt in the ministry of women and children. Pity, we had only two women among our ambassadorial candidates and both have been disqualified before they even

reached the semi-finals. Since Durgesh-cha has replaced Shailaja, one wonders if our ambassador designate to India will be unnecessarily beholden to his former guru Manmohanji, stand on his hind legs and go: “Yes sir, yes sir, three bags full.”



Girjau is under pressure to replace Sitaula with a madhesi home minister. If he did, it would be a master stroke. But of course he won’t because if there was that much intelligence and foresight we’d never be in the mess we are in. There are hardcore pahadi kangresis angling for the job who are sending word to the Old Man via daughter, cousin, nephew (or all of the above) that they can kick ass at election time.

So petulant comrade Matrikababu is back, and refused to take his oath in Nepali. He must sure know how to swear in Maithili. Does anyone realise what kind of precedence was set on Wednesday at Singha Darbar? Ministers should now theoretically be required to be able to swear in all 93 Nepali tongues and sign language. And an inclusive proportionally represented parliament will probably need to make room for mentally handicapped MPs as well, that is if we haven’t exceeded that quota already.



When the 23-point agreement finally declared Nepal a democratic people’s federated republic the Ass thought there’d be wild jubilation. After all, isn’t this what we all wanted? But

nothing, nada, zilch. No victory parades, no vermilion smeared leaders circumambulating Tundikhel, no paroxysms of self-congratulation on tv. Kingji is sitting tight as if nothing happened. Insiders say he’s reading the headlines in the papers and watching television with a slightly bemused smile, especially when he gets to the part about recent BJP victories in Gujarat and Himachal.

In fact, royal cronies, hangers-on and heir-apparent Prince Porous are more worried than he is. Insiders say Kingji has reconciled himself to becoming Citizenji and is definitely not going into exile.

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