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 childbirth 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.”
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. Every country will try its best to strike home its advantage on water. But time is running out more for us in Nepal not only because we have a huge energy shortfall in the dry season, but because we need raw materials and income from power exports to drive growth at home. India can always meet its energy needs with nuclear power or run interriver 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 a fair deal forregulated water?

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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 Gyanendra, failed negotiations with King Gyanendra and shelters in Siliguri. Sher Bahadur Deuba’s NC-D and Madhav Nepal’s UML had debated themselves by associating with the royals. Unintimated with any accusation of compromising sovereignty of the people, the NC was ruling 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 middle 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 Darbar on his own terms.

Nepalis from the rapacious police officers at security who want to take bribes from tourists so they can retain the brass idols bought for bribes from tourists so they can take money out of our wallets, ask officers at security who want to refuse to allow us to board the plane because we don’t have a ‘sponsor letter’. Name withheld, 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 Sawanyja. Maybe if Madhuri had stood alongside bigger actors, she would’ve gotten a larger audience. Madhuri, chin up. Name withheld, email

Corrections

- In ‘Hydropowered education’ (#377): the capacity of the Nigurte 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 Nepalganj riots in Tarai Eye (7th year of the madness, #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.com/issue/380.

Om Rajhindra in ‘A real state developer’ (#380) spells his surname with a y.

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4

New Arrival

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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, Tari Budhijiwi 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 top leader of the JTMM. They look thrilled. They have just got news from an FM station about the assassination of a top leader of the JTMM. The leadership of armed groups 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 tari) armed groups as “criminal” since they have a symbiotic relationship with the politicians. Criminals are learning political manoeuvres, and politicians accept crime for organisational benefit.

The cadre largely comprises of young, ill-educated people, some politically committed activists have joined the armed movement. Chandrashekhar says, “It is their GTO, their SP, their election system. Only pahadis will win. Kathmandu doesn’t want polls 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 Bishrohi, Sinhasinh in-charge of the JTMM, is despondent. Police action and infighting have caused losses. “We tried to control the abductions of madhesi people. But several of our fighters ran off 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.”

Chandrashekhar looks at his grand-daughter, who is looking 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 Netauda.

Tarai frontline

Madhesi militant groups are preparing for a showdown

PRASHANT JHA
in NORTH BIHAR

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Contestants had to come up with creative excuses for Hajmola. The Bahana in Nepal.

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

Qatar Airways has a new next generation inflight entertainment. Qatar’s entertainment

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

Shineya Rani Shrestha of Balaju is Dabar 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.

Himalayan profit

Himalayan Bank concluded its 19th 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 451,023 million and has declared a 25 percent bonus share and 15 percent cash dividend.

Asambhav winner

Sanj 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-Thihar offer where customers of Yamaha bikes had a chance to win a house.
Gorkhaland re-ignites

Dambar Krishna Shrestha

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. 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.

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Old wounds

Amrita Anamol in Nepal, 6 January

NAWLAPASSI—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 Chandhary, 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.”

Hungry children

Dhurba Kumar Rawal in Naya Patrika, 1 January

NUWAKOT—The children standing on the roadside were shivering, they looked tired 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 Kaliko Primary School adding, “I am hungry, cold, but the teacher won’t let us go.”

Finance Minister Ram Shambh 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. Sashil 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.”

Our separate marchpasts

YCL towards Susta

Maoist leaders towards the embassy

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 Bhupani 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.”
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 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 squint 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, cafés and restaurants that you had previously ignored. Choosing to drive 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 that 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, 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
ST INNOCENCE

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

outs 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, which sells handmade stationery goods, has seen business boom in the past year. “It seems that political instability creates more problems than traffic,” says Shupal 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.

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

Sick system

NICK MEYVEN in HUMILA

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. Shani, a woman in Simki, 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 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 medicines for the poor. It 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 kids were effective fundraising 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.

sick-system@times.com

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 0°C.

They prayed at the pond and when returning switched to an alternative track leading to a fairly remote terminus 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 kempa, 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 yak 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...
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 Phalathar 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 issues,” 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.
Few know of the assassinated Pakistani leader’s zeal for meditation

**Benazir Bhutto and Vipassana**

**I**n 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 center were excited and gathered in the morning waiting for 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.

Unfortunately, the visit was cancelled. The night before someone had 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 center can be reached in 30 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 Maiyaji 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 Kathmandu in the afternoon to fly back to 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 Anapan technique. So, Nani Maiyaji taught her. Benazir Bhutto started practicing right away and found it very calming. She said that she had not slept for days and after the session of Anapan 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. She related the experience to 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. This practice 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 video. By this time, it was late in the evening and the plane took off as soon as we boarded it. When we landed at Kathmandu that night, we learnt that there had been a military coup and Benazir Bhutto had been deposed. We had 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 Anapan, an important part of the Vipassana technique. May she be happy and peaceful in her heavenly abode.

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**Banco del Sur**

**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 yesterday.

Less controversial campaigns are becoming more common and economic wrongs are being less frequent. Why the shift? The economies of some former Bank recipient countries have improved, loans were repaid, and Bank presence waned 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 (longevity, human health and knowledge, and a decent standard of living) rose 9.3 percent. While Eritrea is no shining star ranking among an unenviable 130 in the HDR, 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.

Minicini Eritrea’s boost in self-reliance, Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador are more likely others are eager to shuck 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 2006 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 a 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 nation-specific distribution of revenues stemming from natural resources? How dare Ecuador’s President Rafael Correa demand 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 determinately on developing nations. These tables have turned and the formerly dependent are less so. And who’s to blame them? IMF/World Bank 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 slowing to pick up steam even in South America. But don’t be surprised if the African continent creates a Bank of its own sometime soon. The Eritrea model may well be worth mimicking.

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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.
W ith 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 Bollywood 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. 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 Bhusan Dahal 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 2000, 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. Jacob’s’ 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 digitised 14 theatres all over Nepal, with most theatres also upgrading to digital surround sound. “It took a lot of convincing, cajoling and convincing the theatre owners about the benefits of digitising movie theatres, not just for this, but also future releases,” says Dhunagama, who is also the producer of the film.

Kagbeni is directed by Bhusan Dahal, produced by Bhusan Dhunagama, Nakish Udani and Rajesh Siddhi. The film features dance-turner actress Deeya Maskey, pop-singer Nima Rumba, actors Swapat Mahat, Paja Gurung, Manil MD, and Anup Baral.

Kagbeni is the first Nepali film releasing simultaneously all over Nepal, Nepal, Dubai, Delhi, Calcutta, Mumbai and New York.}

### Aiming high with Kagbeni

The first Nepali feature film to be shot digitally is being released all over Nepal, India and even in 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 Singh’s Sinam and Bhayajyus’ 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 Subba’s Sirani le bhijayo ki music video. In summer 2006, Maskey was a part of the change,” Rumba 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.
EXHIBITIONS

- photo.circle xiii anniversary special with Ashesh Dangol, Naresh Shrestha and NayanThula Gurung Kakhapati.
- Larger than Life panoramas by Kishor Kayastha, exhibition and sale, until 15 January, 9AM-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 Cafe, 6:15 PM on 4 January. 4428549.
- Shastrarthra on labour rights with Ganesh Shah, 5 January, 5-9PM at Martin Chaurai. 6910277.
- animalNEPAL community meeting to discuss the street dogs of Patan, 4PM on 20 January at the Summit Hotel. 9841204537

MUSIC

- Ciney Gurung every Wednesday and Rashmi Singh every Friday, live at the Absolute Bar, Hotel Narayan 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 barbecue, tikuwa,emos, 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. 4275899.
- Vegetarian alternative at Stupa View restaurant and café, Boudha Stupa. 4480262.
- Enjoy the new menu at Roadhouse Cafe Pulchok, Bhatbateni and Thamel. 5521755, 4428587, 4262768.
- Christmas dinner with turkey and pork chops at the New Orleans Cafe, Thamel. 4700736.
- 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. 984120619.
- Calcutta’s rolls, biryani, kebabs Indian cuisine at Bawarchi, Bluebird Mall Food Court. 974100735.
- 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.

WEATHER

- KATHMANDU

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The weather pattern looks dry this weekend, with slight chance of showers. Winds will be light with haze. No active systems appear on the horizon. No advisories were issued. For inclusion in the listing send information to editors(at)nepalitimes.com
DANCING REVOLUTIONARIES: Maoist chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal claps as a girl dances at Tamu Lhosar, the Gurung New Year, at Tundikhel on Sunday.

NOT SO VOLUNTARY: Maoists collect ‘voluntary donations’ from an American tourist at Ghat in Solu Khumbu last week. The Maoists claim that the donations will be used for community projects and not arms and ammunition.

BLIND LEADING THE BLIND: A blindfolded man leads people holding lighted candles and placards at a rally organised by the Continuous Peace Campaign (Ahanirsh Shanti Abhiyan) on Friday.

FESTIVE THAMEL: Thamel thangka shops are happy business has picked up with the boom in tourism.
Swearing in Maithili

T he 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 politicos 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 Durga cha has replaced Shalala, one wonders if our ambassador designate to India will be unnecessarily beholden to his former guru Mammojani, stand on 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 hard-core 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 precedent 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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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.

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