India doesn’t seem to have a Plan B on Nepal

PRASHANT JHA in NEW DELHI

ew Delhi is confused and frustrated about continued uncertainty over elections in Nepal. Nepali watchers here are convinced that missing the deadline yet again will mark the collapse of the peace process. They say they are working on politicians in Kathmandu to get their act together, but admit their leverage is limited.

An exasperated official told Nepali Times: “We can’t do much if Kathmandu’s myopic political class doesn’t want elections. They will create new excuses, and this time the excuse seems to be the Madhes.”

Indian agencies are said to be in touch with all Madhesi groups, but deny India is instigating trouble in the Tarai. “Why would we want to prolong instability and bloodshed in the Madhes when its first negative fallout is on our own side in Bihar and UP?” asked one official.

Delhi has alerted the Bihar authorities about the presence of Madhesi militants, but officials say without more engagement from Kathmandu it is unlikely that Patna will step up the heat on the extremists.

The policy thrust now is for a quick fix on the Madhes to enable polls to go ahead. It is a difficult balancing act of backing the larger process while maintaining influence over Madhesi groups.

India is happy with the unity and alliance of Madhesi groups and the distilled six point demands. “The government must sincerely reach out to the Madhes, and Madhesi groups shouldn’t allow themselves to be used as a pretext to cancel polls. They should consolidate and get votes,” said a senior diplomat, summing up Indian policy.

India is also keen on an understanding between the NC and Madhesi groups to strengthen ‘democratic forces’ so they can stand up to the Maoists. On her recent visit to Delhi, sources said US ambassador Nancy Powell warned her interlocutors that the Maoists were bullying their way through the process. There is concern here that the Maoists will use the VCL to intimidate voters and rig elections.

India doesn’t seem to have a neat Plan B in case elections do not happen. But one top policymaker told us, “We don’t even want to think of that scenario... it will be like a civil war.”

Meanwhile, the king is lobbying hard in Delhi to retain the monarchy. Son-in-law Raj Baburaj Singh was in town this week, meeting the BJP’s Rajnath Singh and Jaswant Singh, among others. The message is that the Maoists plan a power grab, and only the monarchy can counter it. They were pleased about BJP’s prime ministerial candidate K. Advani launching a blistering critique of India’s Nepal policy last week.

Nepal is high on New Delhi’s agenda these days. Minister for External Affairs Pranab Mukherjee personally tracks Nepal and speaks regularly with Prime Minister Koirala. The visit to Kathmandu this week by senior Congress leaders Digvijay Singh and Venugopal Mallya is described here as testimony to the importance Sonia Gandhi attaches to the situation in Nepal.
The Madhes and Dahal differ on state restructuring

Perceptions in the Madhesis differ from the state restructuring agenda in Kathmandu, and this is one of the reasons for the deepening crisis in the Tarai. As the stalemate continues, the NC may be paying a price in the Tarai for cohabiting with the Maoists in Kathmandu.

The Madhes reveals of January 2007, in contrast to the people’s movement of April 2006, was not led by a political party and wasn’t cadre-based. It was fuelled by perceived wrongs and injustices rather than being motivated by an agenda, structure or program. What a movement that subsequently began to search for someone to lead it. Eventually, Maoist figures of various hues tried to give it leadership.

The average Madhesis has a different take on the agenda of state restructuring. Opinion surveys have repeatedly shown that a large number of Madhesis are for Hinduism being the state religion and a multi-ethnic language policy. They continue to be relatively more support for retaining the monarchy. They overwhelmingly support turning the unitary state into a federal one.

In contrast, the NC has only lukewarm support for federalism. There are some in the NC who like to be identified with the Maoists like to be identified simultaneously as a Nepali and as Madheta. This holds well for national integration, contrary to what many non-Madhes tend to assume. The category “Madheta” often all, does not have any political significance on the other side of the border.

Kathmandu has responded to Madhesi demands by addressing only issues permissible within the ambit of the state restructuring discourse. Issues such as that of secularism continue to remain non-negotiable.

The animosity towards Kathmandu in the Madhes is in large measure due to the presence of the Maoists in the coalition government, where many believe it is the Maoists who call the shots. Unfortunately for the Maoists, many in the Madhes continue to perceive them as alien atheists who are intent on imposing a godless ideology upon the rich religious and cultural traditions of the Tarai.

This negative perception was reinforced when the Maoists instigated local criminals into their fold when they expanded rapidly in the Tarai 2000-2005. The Maoist propaganda in tandem with the NC and UML on the other hand, seems to be motivated by their perceived apathy towards Madhesi grievances. By battling with the Maoists, the NC and UML seem to have overlooked the deep resentment the Maoists have towards the party.
THE MONARCHY

One correction: the monarchy has no more relevance in Nepal whatsoever? You are saying a few months back the monarch would be overthrown and the people would not suffer the problems of the Tarai are addressed, the country cannot head toward the polls.

Amil Ranjan, email

Prashant Jha’s monotonous ranting about the Tarai and blaming Pahadis for all the Tara's problems is not what we need to hear during these sensitive times. The first paragraph of his article is too generalised and assumes too much. Not everyone in Kailasmandu is insensitive to ‘ghare’ Madhesi issues. But if he is talking about the silence of civil society regarding a federal system with right to self-determination or an independent Tara state then I think that a circumspect approach is appropriate, because it is a sensitive issue which has only arisen recently (it was not on the agenda or mandate of the April revolution in 2006). The concept of a federal system with right to self-determination is premature at this stage. He doesn’t want to acknowledge that the majority of Tara people desire elections. Political parties which organise peaceful meetings have more legitimacy than criminal outfits with political cover who terrorise their own compatriots.

Anil Ghimire, email

POWER

Despite the potential for hydropower generation that could meet most of the country’s power demand, Nepal suffers acute energy crisis. Your story on hydropower in Pajda (‘Do it yourself’, #385) highlights what we can do on our own. Even a small initiative of resource mobilization at a local level can bring massive benefit. At least Pajdal people do not suffer the load-shedding which we now have to endure daily in Kathmandu.

Amish Mulmi, email

OUTSOURCING

Nepal requires an institutional framework not only for the outsourcing industry, but for the economy as a whole (‘No outsourcing’, #386). As for the service sector, investment in human capital is a grave necessity. Education, particularly higher education, is the need of the hour if Nepal wants to make a shift to becoming a service sector economy.

Prasanna KC, Kathmandu

MADNES

I agree with Prashant Jha in (‘Missing the story’, #386). The state media and even the big private media have been reluctant to cover news which shows the real situation in the Tarai. The Tarai is burning, no question about it, and it is crucial that the government along with the nation’s media consider the situation very seriously. The constituent assembly election is very important, but unless the problems of the Tarai are addressed, the country cannot head toward the polls.

Amil Ranjan, email

Prashant, Madhesis have been marginalised for a long time, we agree. But sometimes the vehement and one-sided reaction from Madhies intellectuals makes us worried. Regardless of their political leanings, they seem to disregard their responsibility in helping to search for viable options for resolution of the conflict. They could act as mediators between the opposing sides, but they are supporting the Madhesi movement without properly considering the characteristics of the politically active groups, both armed and unarmed. The issues raised by some of these groups are of course valid and important, but we also need to consider that other forces are irresponsibly exploiting these issues to serve their own interests. The Madhese groups agitating against the mixed electoral system register are ready to contest the elections under the same system...do they really believe in their own demands or are they only making them for populist reasons?

Mahesh Acharya, Lalitpur

I think Prashant Jha is not a journalist but a spokesman of the Madhesi parties. He should be honest at least in this regard so that the readers can make up their mind right from the beginning. Nepal Times seems to be aiding his efforts by providing a platform to propagate blatantly false accusations. What does he mean by saying that the Insec district head is a Pahadi? In his article he repeatedly pins Pahadi against Madhese to stir up hatred between them.

The criminal gangs in the Tara are killing innocent people, including journalists, just because of their origin. So how can they report properly on the atrocities? Even human rights monitors are targeted because they are not Madhese. Prashant Jha justifies these actions. Regarding his remarks on the Gaur and Kapilvastu massacres, the human rights groups could not visit the sites immediately because of obstructions created by Madhese criminal gangs – this is more than clear. A STF should have been mobilised long ago to control the criminal gangs in the Tarai but because of Girja and the Maoists’ squabbling that did not happen, and so-called Madhese ‘parties’ are now bargaining with a weak transitional government and threatening national unity. Had this story offers hope for the feasible solution to our power problem, we should opt for tapping power from small rivers and streams, and strengthening and empowering communities for the process at a local level rather than looking for time-consuming and expensive mega hydroprojects. After all, little drops of water make a mighty ocean.

Manisha Sharma, Kalanki

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LeTTers
**Free drugs**

Good idea, but needs monitoring

Health and education are the responsibility of the government. When government doesn’t take this responsibility seriously that the private sector and charities step in to provide vital services.

**COMMENT**

Aruna Upreti

But this has brought with it a whole set of problems. The over-commercialisation of medical care is now a national epidemic. And it is to address this crisis in the health sector that the government has announced, and the parliament has ratified, a free health care plan. It’s a laudable and ambitious goal, but as with everything else in this country, implementation will be key.

Unless properly monitored, free health care will not just be a burden on the government but may also foster corruption.

On a recent visit to hospitals in the far and mid-west region there was a discussion on the government’s plan to give women delivery money when they deliver babies in district hospitals. Sounded like a good idea, but since only 15 percent of women give birth in hospitals in Nepal that number is even lower out west.

“Yes, we have the program but we had not been able to give the money because Kathmandu never sent it,” was the comment from hospitals in Achham, Salyan and Doli. Many young mothers we spoke to in these districts said they had heard of the government initiative but hadn’t gone to collect the money after delivery because it was too time-consuming and they weren’t sure whether they would be handed the cash.

A few women who got money said that they had to wait for two extra days after the delivery because the accountant had gone home. Most of the money they did get was spent on food and lodging along the way.

No doubt without proper monitoring the government’s free medical program could face a similar fate. There is a big risk that the free medicines will be past their expiration dates, or of low quality. Last year in Dailekh we saw antibiotics and anti-inflammatory drugs made by dubious companies that looked like counterfeits. Local doctors said they knew the medicines were fake, but the administration said those were the only available drugs.

In Sankhuwasabha in the east, the drowning medicine Albendazole which costs 79 paisa per tablet was bought by the District Health Office for Rs 1 per tablet. Amsacillin was bought for double the retail price. The government’s pharmacy distribution network in Biratnagar bought Brufen for three times the market price and sent it to the health post. It may not seem like much, but with 676 health posts and 3,129 sub-health posts all over the country the leakage due to corruption is huge.

It’s not just the free medicine, how is the government going to ensure the availability of motivated and trained health workers? Even in Lalitpur district south of the capital, health post staff go to their stations only once a month to collect their salaries.

In Mugu last year we observed a health post that was running well, but that didn’t because it was staffed by a voluntary group. But even here, the auxiliary nurse midwife didn’t know that prolapsed uterus was a serious problem. No one had told her the women would be hesitant to volunteer information on such a sensitive affair.

We all like to see the free medicine scheme work. But there are many hurdles, and it needs determination and integrity on the part of the government health delivery machinery.
Hospitals united
Hospitals India and Smile Train have signed an agreement to become partner hospitals. Heritage Hospitals in India is a 250 bed multi-specialty hospital while Smile Train is an American foundation that runs programs in 71 countries all over the world to do free cleft lip and palate surgeries.

Power bonds
For the first time ever, Nepal Electricity Authority is issuing a seven percent power bond worth Rs 1.5 billion. These bonds will mature in five years and will be issued by Nepal Merchant Banking and Finance.

Women winners
The fourth edition of the Fair and Lovely VOW Top 10 College Women Competition concluded on 8 March at the Everest Hotel. The winners in the 10+2 category were Vatsala Shah, Jini Agrawal and Sumana Sharma; in the Bachelors category were Sujan Gurung, Agrawal and Sumana Sharma; in the Masters category were Richa Thapa, Outstanding student of the year went to Rooplata Sethia in the Masters category. Anita Shrestha, Parikshya KC and Haushala Thapa and Sampada Malla were in the Bachelors category.

Showy interiors
MacDecor’s new showroom has opened up in Kopundol. The building’s six levels will provide not only local handmade products but also foreign products imported from China.

Breaking the deadlock
We need to rethink the way we negotiate

Last October, a vernacular newspaper reported that Ram Chandra Poudel, the Minister for Peace and Reconstruction, had spent a total of two months, out of the six months that he was in office, and tens of millions of public money to talk to 59 different disgruntled ethnic and political groups.

Poudel’s aim was to settle differences among the groups. But his success rate left much to be desired. Only four talks led to agreeable conclusions. All others ended in failure. Leading to further protests, demonstrations and shutdowns all across Nepal.

With those results, it’s tempting to dismiss Poudel, a senior politician, as a misfit who doesn’t know the first thing about how to work for peace, let alone run a peace ministry. But that would be too limiting a view.

Given how frequently disagreements appear to break out among various groups in Nepal these days, and given how easily those disagreements escalate into full-blown public disorder, it’s worth considering that there might be something fundamentally wrong with the way we have come to approach the process of negotiation in Nepal. It doesn’t matter whether the negotiation is between political parties and ethnic groups or between the labour and management of a company. Our failure-prone template seems to run like this.

Trust taken lightly
Before the cameras even when they know that they are being watched. An eager to reach agreements and smile for the cameras even when they know that their steps ahead will start damaging trust building exercises.

No clear rules of the game
Often, our parties do not take time to decide in advance what they will or will not accept in a negotiation. As a result, many of our negotiations become not a conversation to solve issues, but a way to buy time, continue to shift goal posts and paint the other side black for showing bad faith. This happens because the rules of the game get made up as parties go along. But it’s only when a party is clear about what it will and will not accept in a negotiation, that it will focus on what it can do. If most Nepali negotiations were publicly reframed to clarify what the non-negotiable rules are which all parties will adhere to, it would help all to not waste time trying to deal with one another over continuously shifting goal-posts.

No neutral transparency: If you watch minister Poudel in press conferences after each negotiation, you will see that he’s busy explaining what the other parties said or did not say. He seems to forget that his task is to make the government’s case to the public, not summarise others’ positions on television. By his actions, he unwittingly decreases the levels of transparency. As an antidote, he can have the minutes of most of his meetings published on a website. This way, people can judge the contents for what they are.

To be sure, every negotiation has its own particular dynamics that cannot be pre-determined by a formula. But given how much of the present government’s time is taken up negotiating with various groups, only to fail again and again, a different thinking is required. Activities that build or repair trust, clarify what’s negotiable and what’s not, and promote transparency are likely to create a better negotiating climate in Nepal.

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Excerpts from an interview with CPN-M chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal in Himal Khabarpatrika, 13-27 February

Is the CPN-M in a different place from where it was when the People’s War began?

When the People’s War started we had specific beliefs and strategies, but they have evolved, and we are now at a different place. Five years after the war started, we understood that we could not fight forever. That is why we made some changes to our strategies.

From reading Lenin’s documents I understood that had he been alive a few more years, he would have also entered the multiparty system. Lenin’s new financial policy was bourgeois. I am not trying to say that we are going against the beliefs we had when the People’s War started. That would not be true. The truth is that the difference between the beliefs we had before the 10-year war and the belief system we follow now are very different. We say that they represent an evolution of principles and understandings.

So what were the reasons behind the People’s War?

The poor, the farmers and the labourers in the rural areas are empowered. Women and communities that were hitherto discriminated against are also more aware. For the first time in the history of Nepal, thousands of women took up arms to transform our society. Over 2,500 women fought and sacrificed their lives for this change. Karnali, Seti, Mahakali and other regions became empowered. It took 10 years and the lives of over 10,000 Nepalis for us to reach where we are, to be talking about CA elections, a federal republic and proportional representation.

But didn’t the armed groups we have now learn from the Maoist legacy of using violence as means for getting things done?

That would not be the right thing to say. The entire world knows and accepts that it is always the state that uses violent methods first. Violence means discrimination, exploitation, oppression, and suppression. In Nepal as well, the state started using violence first.

So the present violence can be understood as resistance?

There are those who use violent resistance because there are millions of people to be represented, and no means remain other than violence. There are others who think they can use violence to get all their demands, even petty ones. Those who came with us learnt to fire guns, use bombs. Those who are spreading terror in the Tarai have the same weapon skills, but what they don’t have is philosophy, a political work plan, or program that would include all groups. That is why it is necessary that we stop those who are spreading violence in the Tarai. Because we Maoists are a strong group, it is our moral and physical responsibility to stop them. If we are given the responsibility to run the state, we will use constitutional means to stop them.

Many violent activities have taken place against your orders.

Rebellion is a historical necessity, but one should not be cruel to the people. In the past we have learnt from our mistakes and taken actions against the guilty in our party. We took action against those responsible for the Madi incident, but some fled the country.

Those groups, including the JTMM, that are spreading violence in the Tarai are the by-products of the Maoists. Jwala Singh was our scribe, and member of our party’s district committee. He used to ally with the chief district officer and threaten our party activists. We took actions against him when we understood that he had been involved in suspicious activities. However, I think Goit is a political person and a senior leader. His popularity came when he spoke at a council meeting during the ceasefire. He was made the president of the Madhesi Mukti Morcha because he is quite charismatic. However, when Matrika was made the president at a meeting in Patna, Goit felt slighted. Right after that the state of emergency was declared and we could not contact him for four months. We heard that he was quite confused and nervous at that time and took violent means. Goit can still think politically, but Jwala Singh is not like that.

Does violence have space in the political future of Nepal?

Nepalis fought a war, and they won, but a battle is still left. The feudal class won’t let go unless there’s a final push. They know that they will lose their identity after the CA elections, which is why they are trying their best to conspire against the elections. They are capable of violence and the people may have to use force against them. The international community understands that the left is becoming strong in Nepal, and they are trying their best to incite violence to stop that. We should take the violence in the Tarai as a sign that they are becoming stronger. If the violence increases in the Tarai, the people will again have to rise up and use force.

“We couldn’t fight forever”
Splintered

Biplav Bhattachan in Nepal, 17 February

ILAM—After the police detained two Limbu activists, the media have been speaking of a state of strikes demanding proportional elections.

The Limbu region has been under immense pressure. The increasing activities of Limbu activists in the eastern hills are likely to affect the CA polls.

The Limbu activists have made it compulsory for vehicles travelling on the Mechi highway to have 'Limbuwan state' imprinted on them, and some offices, including the Dhannu municipality, now have boards in Limbu language. The increasing activities of Limbu activists in the eastern hills are likely to affect the CA polls.

The Limbuwan state council has been calling for strikes demanding proportional election procedures and the establishment of a self-governing Limbuwan region. The Limbuwan activists have stopped forcing people to make 'donations' in the name of taxes until further notice, and the Lingden activists still haven't changed their ways.

Helpless NEA

Editorial in Naya Patrika, 13 February

The daily eight hours of load shedding puts the country to sleep early, lets people sleep late and makes people lazy and unproductive. The future looks even bleaker: we will have to wait four years until these power cuts end.

On being questioned by the finance committee of the parliament, the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) repeated that the load shedding will have to continue until the completion of the Upper Tamakoshi hydro-power project. Regardless of the long talks with India about purchasing electricity, the NEA has no substantive plans to reduce the power cuts. This clearly shows how irresponsible and incompetent the NEA is.

Although there are no signs of immediate reductions in power cuts, the 40 megawatt deal with India could provide some relief. However, NEA has done nothing to set up a private company to distribute power.

The reduced production of electricity is not the only reason for the increase in load shedding. Water levels in the rivers have decreased while even the little electricity produced cannot be used efficiently. Leakage is endemic. The overall consumption of electricity by those with money and status has further aggravated the problem. If the government delays the electricity purchase agreement, and does nothing to speed up the hydro-power projects, not only will the success of the NEA be questioned but the government will have a hard time saving face.

Team India

Ghulam jee Bich, 13 February

Nepal can always depend on India to help in a political crisis. A high level Indian delegation arrived in Kathmandu on the invitation of the NC this Tuesday. Although the delegation headed by the General Secretary of Congress, Digbijaya Singh, is allegedly here to discuss an array of political issues, political analysts believe they are here to solve the Madhes crisis.

The delegation met with the home minister and the reconstruction minister on Tuesday and is scheduled to meet the leaders of various political parties. The delegation will fly back to New Delhi after their meeting with the prime minister on Thursday.

The delegation has told the political parties that there are no alternatives to the CA polls. They will talk to the Madhesi leaders on Wednesday. Analysts believe that the discussions between the Indian delegation and the Madhesi leaders will have an important influence on the political situation of the country.
When smoke spews out of the chimney, the brick factory comes alive.

TEXT AND PICTURES BY SAM KANG LI

The dry season starts from November, but it will not last. To make the most of it, workers, usually Indians and rural Nepalis, toil in 24-hour shifts. Just above them, a flag carrying the symbol of Hanuman flies in the wind. It will bless them with strength, a factory owner says. They might as well be blessed with speed too, for time is also critical. Each day, the kiln gobbles up 50,000 rupees worth of coal. Slow production means greater losses.

The main ingredients though, soil and water, cost next to nothing. Both are found on the very same land that the chimney sits on. They are mixed by hands and feet to form mud, which is cast into bricks and left to harden in the sun for several days. Once hardened, they are moved to the kiln to be baked at high temperatures for hours, gaining a reddish tint in the process. Above the kiln, workers stand amid hot air escaping the vents to seek warm comfort in the winter chill, some even topless.

Nearby, trucks wait to be loaded with bricks ready for sale, even as another buyer drops by to place an order at the nearby office. For the workers, the same cycle simply repeats, until the first monsoon rains fall in April and wash the dust off their faces.

“People use the three Ds to describe this kind of work. Dirty, Difficult, Dangerous.”
- Brick factory manager Bharat Surendra

Asses, often guided by young children considered too weak to work, are used to transport heavier loads.

Bricks are laid out to dry after being cast. A single kiln can produce up to 70,000 bricks a day. Each brick is sold for Rs 3.5.
Children are a common sight at brick factories because both parents work, often on the same site. Most of them will never receive proper education.

A worker wets soil with water drained from nearby streams to form mud for moulding bricks.

An Indian child worker takes a puff while waiting for the next truck to fill with bricks. Indians and rural Nepalis provide cheap labour for the factories.

Smoke and dust

Work continues even when dark, as the factory makes the most out of the dry season. Rain wets the bricks and makes them unstable.
Flood gates closed
Government preparing new laws on inter-country adoption

Following the exposure of a market in ‘orphans’ and the taking away of children without their birth parents’ consent in Nepal’s poorly regulated adoption process last year, the Ministry of Women Children and Social Welfare, headed by a Maoist minister, suspended inter-country adoption.

The ministry stopped processing files, and those awaiting final signature from the ministry were sent back to the District Administration Office. Embassies stopped issuing visas, and the ministry said that nothing would move until the inter-country adoption process is altered to make it similar to the adoption policies in other countries.

When international adoption from Nepal was stopped, there were over 400 families awaiting final signature from the ministry who could not take their children with them. The indefinite halt meant that some parents started camping out in Kathmandu, adoption forums like Nchild and Adoption Nepal started filling up with stories of the children left behind, pleas for information and open letters to senators and to the ministry in Nepal.

When the Maoists left the government in September, the families who were awaiting response thought that things might change in their favour. However, it was only after much pressure from the US and European governments, and months of deliberation and debate that the government decided to ease the ban for the 400-plus families whose files were pending at the ministry.

Three months since the decision was made, the ministry is in the process of approving the few files that are now left from the original 400. “Inter-country adoption is still suspended,” says the ministry’s legal officer Prakash Arulkari, adding, “the ministry only has a mandate to process the 400 or so pending files, and we are in the final stage.” He said that once the process is complete the ministry would focus on the real policy on adoption.

Gyan Lama at the Kathmandu’s district administration office, who was on the review committee to draft the new set of policies, said that the policies are transparent and specific in terms of regulations for inter-country adoption. The new set of policies was sent to the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, which sent it back to the Ministry of Women Children and Social Welfare with recommendations, but when the minister resigned in September the process was stopped.

Although the ministry has a new minister, the new set of policies will not be ready before elections on 10 April. (Malika Aryal)

Responsibility of donors
Who is responsible if an orphanage fails? Who will be held responsible if the children are abused, or end up on the street when the orphanage goes bankrupt? NGOs and their donors have a moral responsibility for the spending of their donations.

If relatives are too poor to feed, or educate the kids, donors should question whether placing the child in an orphanage is the best solution. Contributing to support the family – not by giving cash, but by providing means to generate income – can help it to afford to feed all its members and send the children to school. The money spent on one child in an orphanage per year (400-750 euro) is enough to support several families in this way.

Having some orphanages to cater for abandoned children is helpful, but 1,000 is really too many. Those who want to help Nepal should think of the long term effects of a project: for them it is a satisfying hobby, but for the beneficiaries it determines their future. The best projects address the causes of a problem, and aim at self-sustainability. Only then can they truly help to break the vicious circle of poverty.

Wilko Verbakel and Susan van Klaveren are board members of a Dutch NGO, the International Council for Friends Of Nepal (ICFON). More information, and an extended version of the article can be found on www.icfon.nl.
Krishna sits quietly in a corner, earnestly taking down notes written on the board. Together with him are 20 other Nepali students paying close attention to their lecturer.

It seems like an ordinary class on an ordinary school day, except that he is at least a decade older than his classmates, and the setting is 5,000km away from his home in Nepal. The 37-year-old flew to Singapore a year ago and has spent a total of Rs 350,000 in order to study hotel management in a private school here.

The number of Nepalis studying tourism and other related subjects in Singapore has continued to increase in recent years. The country is particularly a popular study destination for Nepalis because many of its colleges issue internationally-recognized certificates, which make it easier to apply for further studies in Europe and North America than if they applied straight from Nepal.

Singapore also has an abundance of employment opportunities and a relatively good average wage. Tourism courses are especially popular because they offer both the chance to get a good qualification and, as they include On the Job Training (OJT), the opportunity to work and earn money.

Most tourism students on OJT earn about Rs 260 per hour as waiters at restaurants and hotels. Even though this money can only offset part of the large expenses they incur in coming to Singapore, most see the hardship as worth bearing for the prospect of a brighter future.

Mani Prasad, a student at the Tourism Management Institute of Singapore, says: “My parents have made a big investment to help me be financially independent.” He is working as a trainee but finds it harder than he expected to meet his everyday expenses.

Together with his cousin, he rents a room at Little India hostel in central Singapore. Besides them, there are more than 20 other Nepali students staying in the hostel, with three to five of them crowded into each room. He can’t afford to go out very much, so to pass the time he stays in the room and watches DVDs. He’s not sure what he should do next: “I might take another course, go to another country or head back home. Nothing is fixed yet,” he says.

Binod, another hotel management student, studied mass communications in Nepal and aspires to be a journalist. Currently working as a waiter on his OJT period, he has applied to study journalism at another school after his course finishes. If his application is successful, he will be one step closer to his dream, but he will also have to fork out another large sum of money for the school fees. When asked if he would return to Nepal, he nods his head without hesitation: “But only when I have name and fame,” he adds.

Many Nepalis in Singapore have spent most or all of their savings to come here. Krishna had originally wanted to go to the US or Canada but despite the fact he holds a degree from Tribhuban University, both his applications were rejected. Singapore was a more reachable destination for someone of his means.

“My friends said Singapore has many hotels, easier to find a job,” he says. Having faced many difficulties to make ends meet as a student, he has now managed to secure a work permit to begin after his course, which will allow him to work full-time and earn between Rs 50,000-65,000 per month.

He is currently satisfied with his situation, but he still hasn’t forgotten his dream: to try again for America or Canada. But his life-plan, like many other Nepalis in Singapore for now, is to stay put until the chance comes up to move to greener pastures.
Kathmandu has ranked first in a study of cities most vulnerable to earthquakes, followed by Istanbul, Delhi, Quito, Manila, and Islamabad.

When it comes to earthquakes, a magnitude 6.0 rumble in San Francisco may shake the same as a 6.0 in Delhi. But you’re far more likely to die in India. Blame that mortality spread on exponential population growth, increasing poverty, and lax or non-existent building codes. In short: poor nations run far greater risk of fatalities than rich ones.

GeoHazards International, a nonprofit research group aiming to reduce suffering due to natural disasters, measured the lethal potential of seismic disasters facing small and large cities in Asia and the Americas—areas most at risk for seismic calamity. The sample cities spanned both developed and developing countries. Variables measured building frailty, potential for landslides and fires, and the rescue, firefighting and life-saving medical abilities of local authorities.

The only first-world cities on the list were in Japan: Tokyo, Nagoya and Kobe. Fatalities in these cities were estimated in the hundreds, not the thousands.

Events since then show the estimates to be fairly accurate, if not low. The magnitude 7.6 quake that struck the Kashmir region of Pakistan in October 2005 killed more than 73,000 people, many in remote parts of the country, not dense urban centers like Islamabad. Geohazard’s study predicted a 6.0 hit on Pakistan’s capital would kill 12,500 people.

GeoHazards warns the problem would become worse, citing a study of estimated earthquake fatalities based on population growth and construction changes in northern India. One scary finding: A magnitude 8.3 earthquake striking Shillong might kill 60 times as many people as were killed during a similar size quake that hit in 1897, even though the population of the region has increased by only a factor of about eight since then. Reason: The replacement of single-story bamboo huts with multistory, poorly constructed concrete-frame structures, often on steep slopes, has made the population much more vulnerable.

The opposite has happened over the last century in developing nations. Building codes have improved in earthquake-prone regions, as have preparations for disasters. Populations have grown in urban areas, to be sure, but at nothing like the rates in third-world cities, where an influx of rural poor has created increasingly dense living arrangements.

Economic impacts from earthquakes are radically different as well. Geohazard finds the cost of the 1994 California earthquake was about 1 percent of the regional gross domestic product, and the cost of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake was only about 0.2 percent of the regional GDP.

By contrast, he pegs cost of the 1972 Nicaragua earthquake at 40 percent of that country’s entire GDP, and the cost of the 1986 El Salvador earthquake at 30 percent of that country’s GDP.

(FORBES)
On their journey home, a Palestinian boy and his father are affected as a politically charged and militarised reality; an atmosphere that serves to make the struggles of a father bringing up his son even harder.

L’œuf sur le dos (One Fine Morning)
In a quiet little town two men, a student and a photographer, learn that their pets do not correspond to new government regulations. They agree, albeit reluctantly, to sacrifice their pets to comply with the regulations, but soon find out that the regulations extend to more than cats and dogs.

Playground shorts, 25 February, 5PM
Le manie-tout
Ten-year old Martin takes a new shortcut through a mysterious alley to get to his new school. On the way, a strange old man sends signals to him from behind a dusty window. This man, Manitout, is able to make Martin’s satchel come to life. And for the intrigued Martin, a whole new world where everything imaginary and wishful comes to life is opened.

Marottes
Gilles’s parents leave her alone for a few days with her two brothers. During her parents’ absence, she meets Valentin, a young, unstable boy given to violent spells. Their games and backgrounds differ vastly but create a mixture of mutual curiosity and fear.

The Candid Society will also be conducting workshops on the short films. 4241163, www.alliancefrancaise.org.np.

Be Quiet

No short shrift for shorts

Short films rarely get the respect as their feature-length brethren, passed over for distribution and often merely accompanying longer pieces in festivals. Yet it is with shorts that filmmakers most freely explore their craft, taking on stories and ideas they might not attempt in longer projects. In Voyages en Courts, a short film festival by Alliance Francaise, this medium gets the attention it deserves.

The ‘World Shorts’ program assembles six international short films. Among them are Diane Girkimbazza’s Goretli, one of the few documentary entries, a poignant portrayal of 16-year-old Dushinhima Goretti, a Rwandan AIDS orphan who is left to care for her younger siblings. Her narration is articulate, and all the more heart-wrenching for its unostentuous delivery. Closing the programme is the Thai entry Araya Surhams’s Pillow Talk, a hilarious and raunchy black comedy about a woman who cannot find satisfaction in her marriage so takes up with a phone repairman. It is a tone-perfect comedy and saves a clever twist till late on, leaving you cackling through the credits.

Alice Winocour’s Kitchen, impeccably securing the absurd dread a woman experiences at the presence of a pair of live lobsters she is attempting to cook, is the highlight of the ‘Strange Programme’. Though this programme is also home to a couple of pieces that seem more about special effects and computer wizardry than story and character, it is sense of mood the rest manage to conjure, from the dreamlike to the creepy, that ties them together.

The true gee-whiz entry, however, belongs in the ‘Clement-Ferrand 2006’ program. There you will find Carlotopis by Luis Nieto, a film where Nieto conducts ‘experiments’ on a mouse, including a film where Nieto conducts ‘experiments’ on a mouse, including...
**EXHIBITIONS**
- Remains of a smile sculptures and prints by Jamal Alafaghi, 11AM-5PM, 17-23 February, at Siddhartha Art Gallery, Babar Mahal Revisited.
- Metamorphosis paintings by Christian Salzgeber, 15 February-9 March, at the Indigo Gallery.
- Design show with Kripa Joshi and others at the Pulchock Bakery Café, curated by photo.circle, until 29 February.
- Tibetan Lhosar photographs by Daniel Collins at the Saturday Café, Boudhanath slapa, until 31 March.

**EVENTS**
- Tare Zameen Par a 9pm by Amrit Khan, 15 February, 5.30 PM at the Lazzimat Gallery Café. 4428549
- American Gangster with Denzel Washington and Russel Crowe, PM, 16 February at the Lazzimat Gallery Cafe. 4428548
- Bingo Nights at the Welcome Food Plaza, Darbar Marg, starts 6PM every Monday. 2337201
- Play and Learn German at the German Info and Culture Centre, Thamel. 4709032
- Toastmasters a communication and leadership program, organised by Kathmandu Toastmasters Club every Wednesday 6PM at Industrial Enterprise Development Institute (IEDI) building, Triputeswor. 4288847

**MUSIC**
- Classical music concert with Steve Gorin and Homadh Upadhyaya, fifty tickets at Rs. 1,200 each, 6-8PM, 16 February at the Indigo Gallery. 4413580
- Electronicia with DJ DannyCool from Ukraine, 8PM, 15 February at Jbar, Thamel. 4418209
- Ciney Gurung every Wednesday and Rashmi Singh every Friday, live at the Absolute Bar, Hotel Narayani Complex, 7PM. 5521408

**DINING**
- Rekindle the romance with love songs by Ciney Gurung and a three course meal with a glass of wine, 7PM on 14 February at Shambala Garden Café, Hotel Shangri-la, Rs 999 per person. 4411995
- Greek food festival with chef Georios Vagionas, 7PM, 15-29 February at The Café, Hyatt Regency. 4491224
- Continental and Chinese cuisine and complimentary fresh brewed coffee after every meal a Zest Restaurant and Bar, Pulchok.
- Ily espresso coffee at the Galleria café, every Friday espresso cocktails.
- International four course buffet at the Sunrise Café with a range of Boris’ signature dishes at the Chimney, Hotel yak and Yeti. 4248899
- Wine and Cheese every Friday and Saturday at the Rox Bar, Hyatt Regency, 5-8PM. 4491234
- Jazz in Patan with coffee, food, drinks and dessert at the New Orleans Café, Jawalakhel. 11.30 AM-10PM. 5522709
- Saturday special barbeque, sekuwa, momos, dal-bhat at The Tea House Inn, Windy Hills, Nagarkot every Saturday. 9841250848.
- Dice-luscious brunch at Kokiri, Sis side Crowne Plaza, roll the dice to the number of the day and get 50% discount on an individual meal, Saturdays and Sundays, 12.30-3.30 PM. 4273999
- Scrumptious wood fired pizzas, cocktails and specialty coffees at Roadhouse, Bhaktapur 4426587, Pulchok 4571755 and Thamel 4928187.
- Cocktails and jazz at the JCS Quartet and a choice of cocktails at Fusion – the Bar at Dwarka’s. 4479448
- Starry night barbecue at Hotel Shangri-la with Live performance by Ciney Gurung, Rs. 600.00 net 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 and curries at Bawarchi, Taare Zameen Par by Daniel Collins at the Saturday Café, Boudhanath slapa, until 31 March.
- Indian cuisine at Bawarchi, Taare Zameen Par by Daniel Collins at the Saturday Café, Boudhanath slapa, until 31 March.
- 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**
- Relax Package with a one night stay, full buffet breakfast at The Café and access to Club Oasis at Hyatt Regency, until 29 February, Rs 5,000 plus taxes, valid only for Nepalis and local residents. 4498800
- Fulbari Resort and Spa, Pokhara Rs 10,999 for Nepali double, Rs 2119 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 4,499 and two nights package Rs 9,998. Also includes breakfast, lunch, dinner, spa facilities, swimming pool, steam sauna, Jacuzzi and gym facilities.

**WEEKEND WEATHER**

KATHMANDU VALLEY

Weekend weather is expected to be sunny with some occasional showers in the evening. The temperature is expected to remain cool with some occasional showers in the evening. The temperature is expected to remain cool.

**NOW OPEN IN PUCHOW**

Special lunch buffet: Cusine and drinks on the top floor, house of art gallery. And a brand new garden. Open: 11:30am-9:30pm every day.
FULL REGALIA: A sea of red at the Maoist rally to mark the 13th anniversary of the start of the People's War, Wednesday.

INTRIGUED: Maoist cadres arrived in Kathmandu for the rally watch Nepal Army soldiers practising for Shiva Ratri at Tundikhel.

WITHOUT END: Motorcycles, micros, buses and cars locked in yet more queues for fuel in front of Bhadrakali.

SHOWING THE WAY: PM Koirala accompanies the Norwegian prime minister Erik Solheim during his visit to Nepal this week.
It's a circus out there

Everything they say in travel guides about Nepal being a peace-loving and gentle people is true. In any other country they'd have set fire to gas stations and hijacked diesel tankers by now.

Our drivers wait for 12 hours in a petrol queue, and they are still laughing away and playing chungi in the middle of the road. And when they are told the pump has run out of gas just as they get to within a stone's throw of it, do they run amok and go on an arson spree? Nope. They shrug their shoulders and head back to homes which have no power and no electricity.

There are a lot of reasons why there is no gas in the pumps (except for ‘d’ none of the points below are made up):

a) NOC owes IOC so the Indians are doing what Gazprom is doing to the Ukrainians
b) NOC is exacting revenge on the people for not being allowed to raise prices
c) Dealers are hoarding because of the Madhesi blockade of the capital’s highway lifeline
d) This is part of Nepal's commitment to Kyoto protocol to reduce our carbon footprint by cutting fossil fuel use to 1990 levels

f) And now tanker drivers are on strike.

A gas shortage is a great leveller. The more dependent you are on the fossil economy the more badly hit you are. So for 95 percent of Nepalis who don’t own vehicles of any type, there is no direct impact. And only 35 percent of Nepal’s population is hooked to the grid, so a majority of the population couldn’t be bothered about load-shedding and in fact must be saying khuching to the rest of us. This is the revenge of the powerless.

There is a shortage of just about everything in this country: electricity, water, gas, kerosene, diesel, CDMA phones, SIM cards. The latest is that Rastra Bank has run out of bank notes.

There is a shortage of cash in this country.

However, there is never any shortage of alcohol in the market. We never run out of booze. And pharmaceuticals. The Ass has yet to hear of the neighbourhood pharmacy running out of drugs. (In Chinatown, a distillery has just widened its product range to also manufacture medicines to treat liver ailments.) And how come we never hear of a cigarette scarcity in this country?

At the annual function of Nepal Telecom recently, its CEO got away with severe criticisms of politicians. Must have taken a lot of guts since the guest-in-chief was none other than Maheshabhu. The audience listened attentively to the man, who really let himself go since this is the end of his term. But grapevine has it that CEO in question has already been granted an extension because of generous campaign funding to the right quarters. Is that why the minister was mum? So when are we actually going to be able to make a proper phone call on Tera mobile?

While the first Maoist election campaign speech by none other than Comrade El Presidente himself was getting going at Khula Munch, the Army was staging its Shivraini rehearsal just over the fence on Tundikhel. Does this come under the Comprehensive Peace Accord, the Ass wonders. It’s getting more and more difficult to separate election campaigns and rallies as they are happening cheek to jowl. Last week, the Marxist Leninist (Maley) faction of the CPN decided to have its first election rally at Ratra park. Trouble was, it was a Saturday and the venue clashed with couple of other ahn sahabas including one by the All Nepal Federation of Security Guards (Nas-revolutionaries). But there were also two young circus artists who were staging their contortions to the public and pulling a huge crowd.

Peacenick minister Ram Chandra Poudel is the least popular member of the government among the international community. After his heated exchange with the Danish ambassador recently it is clear Ram Chandradai doesn’t care too much for diplomatic niceties. The Ass wonders if he is the bête noir of the Europeans because he’s the only one who can’t stand them telling us what to do.

When is it going to be a circus.