Mount Olympus

Chomolungma falls victim to Olympic politics

A
fter stopping expeditions climbing Chomolungma from the north side between 1-10 May, the Chinese government is pressing Kathmandu to also ban expeditions from the Nepal side of the world’s highest mountain.

Chinese officials reportedly met representatives of the Home, Defence and Tourism Ministries in Kathmandu on Monday to ask for the halt. Till press time Thursday, Nepal’s trekking and mountaineering companies were trying to negotiate a compromise that would allow expeditions to go up to Camp 3 till 10 May.

“We are hoping for a last-minute compromise at a higher political level,” a participant of the meeting at the Tourism Ministry told Nepali Times.

Last week, the China Tibet Mountaineering Association sent a letter to expeditions from the north asking them to “postpone” climbing because of “crowded climbing routes and increased environmental pressures”.

But the real reason seems to be worries that protesters may try to disrupt a high-profile climb in early May which will take the Olympic torch to the summit of Chomolungma. Tibetan activists want to use the August Olympics in Beijing to highlight their campaign for a free Tibet, and have stepped up protests worldwide this week.

There were even protests inside Tibet on Tuesday with monks taking out rallies at Ganden and Sera monasteries outside Lhasa. Last year, American activists who unfurled a banner at base camp on the Chinese side that read: ‘One World, One Dream, Free Tibet 2008’ were deported.

The Chinese have been sensitive to the presence of Tibetan activists in Nepal, and have got Kathmandu to crack down on functions to mark the Dalai Lama’s birthday celebrations. Last week, Nepal deported a Tibetan refugee and police baton-charged a pro-Tibetan protest in Baudha on Tuesday.

The Nepal government stands to lose at least 1.2 million dollars in royalties alone if expeditions from the Nepal side are cancelled, and many high-altitude guides will lose their jobs on both sides of the mountain. Last year there were a record 48 expeditions from north and south.

Early May is the peak climbing period on Chomolungma when expeditions establish camps, fix ropes and acclimatise for the final summit push towards the third week of May. Nepali mountaineering firms are trying to get the Chinese to agree to allow expedition to get up to the Western Cwm and make summit pushes only after 10 May.

The question is what will happen if the summit torch is delayed because of bad weather.

Reported by Dewan Rai
RED ON THE INSIDE

Among the things that we can be justly proud of is Nepal's track record in nature conservation. Where once was a militaristic monarchy or a messy democracy, in times of peace or war, our national parks and nature reserves became international show cases. The success story of Chitwan’s people’s-part initiative, the model that is now being copied to fund grassroots development in the Annapurnas and the success in melding tree-hugging with environmental protection in Sagarmatha National Park are now recognised by experts the world over.

Nepal suffered a national tragedy when we lost most of our top environmentalists in a helicopter crash in September 2008 at Ghunsa in the Kangchenjunga area. Among them was Thirtha Man Maskey, the architect of Chitwan’s people’s-part concept, Mingma Norbu, who made the Sagarmatha eco-tourism model work. Chandra Gurung, the man behind the Annapurna-tourism-for-development project.

The country will take a long time to recover from that momentum loss. But it is a tribute to the people who masterminded that they worked so well and so long.

Another reason our national parks still have tigers has been the involvement of the army to protect them. This has not led to the redeployment of army units from national parks, and resulted in a dramatic increase in poaching and encroachment in the tarai parks. Since 2005, 185 tigers are killed for their skins in Chitwan and another 72 translocated rhinos have been poached in Bardia. No one knows how many tigers have been killed.

In Chitwan, the army outposts closed down during the war have been re-established, but in Barda, Sukla Phanta and Kosi Tappu this process has been slow. Another fallout of democracy has been the conversion of the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation into the National Trust for Nature Conservation. The former was run like a royal fiefdom and there is evidence of gross mismanagement in the past. Despite this, the Trust was asked to replicate the Annapurna project in Kangchenjunga and Manaslu. (See p 4)

The Trust’s name has changed and it has been transferred from the royals to the Maoists who have turned the organisation into an employment centre for the YCL. Saving wildlife and protecting the environment doesn’t come easily to comrades who had no qualms about killing human beings.

But here is one area where the Maoists don’t have to destroy in order to rebuild. We have proven expertise in promoting rural development not by exterminating tourists, but through park fees. We have shown how villagers in the buffer zones can actively help protect nature.

The Maoists are trying to portray themselves as the defenders of nature, but they compensate all the people they have harmed by nature. They are reminders that we need to find a new way to do this.

The Maoists have set an agenda, will they benefit many people? The Maoists have set an agenda, will they benefit many people? They have set an agenda, will they benefit many people? They have set an agenda, will they benefit many people? They have set an agenda, will they benefit many people?

David Seddon

David Seddon's question to David Seddon, with due respect, is this. Can the CPN-Maoist, which is modeled on Peru's Sendero Luminoso, conform to mainstream political to make a modern republic? And if the answer is yes, how can one reconcile the difference between their ideology and that of multi-party democracy? Maybe it’s true the NC failed to empower the people, but you should be aware that the empowerment that occurred after 1990 was more implicit than explicit, as it allowed ordinary people to realise that change was both necessary and possible in Nepal. I would have difficulty voting for a party whose ideology and policy seem to be conflicting. Even though the Maoists have set an agenda, will they compensate all the people they have harmed while doing so?

Pradip Ra, email

POLL DRAMA

This election is very crucial to all Nepalis as it will determine the future of this country (Poll drama, #390). The election must be free and fair, and it will be disastrous if any group uses violence to get their desired outcome. We should not believe the communist rhetoric of a proletarian revolution, as at least up till now they have delivered nothing but bloodshed.

PB Rana, email

It’s very important that the CA democratically elects the President so that we have a credible authority to peace the differences and to maintain order, as many see today.

Vimal Ghimire, Solukhumbu

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PRADEEP RA, email

WOMEN'S DAY

The article ‘Deepa, Pushpa, Sita and Maya’ (#390) on International Women's Day was touching. Thanks for featuring the stories of these four women who have shown that they can struggle against all odds. They are reminders that we need to do more to help the families that were affected by the war.

Manoj Aryal, email

ASININE

Much as I admire your Assinaries, these have not been always well, asininen. A case in point, his ‘requiring British visas at the VFS Global Visa Application Centre in New Delhi’ (#390). The visa application files are now being processed by the VAC in New Delhi (at no extra cost to the applicant) where the decision will be made. Applicants are turned round quickly and there is no need for the applicant to visit Delhi at any stage in the process. This is all part of a worldwide move to issue all British visas from a handful of regional centres in the interests of efficiency and higher standards of service. And of course, there will always be a warm welcome from the UK to all genuine Nepal visitors.

So, please don’t be mulish. Provide your Assinaries with a decent fact-checking mechanism, and stop end up writing of his desidera (that’s diplomatic speak for…, oh, never mind!)

Andrew Hall, British Ambassador, Kathmandu

CORRECTION

The photograph of the Maoist attack on the Naumule police station that accompanied the translation ‘Naulme row’ (#390) was inadvertently dropped. It was taken by Chandra Shekharkarki.
KOLKATA — Hindus of the Shakta sect believe that those who have recently lost their mothers should visit the shrine of the Goddess Kali in Kolkata. The Celestial Mother is supposed to release the faithful from filial obligations and free her from all worldly bondage. With her blessings, vices disappear and doors of virtue open.

There are still some professional beggars around, but the endless rows of fly-infested lepers and shrieking invalids that once lined the temple entrance are gone. However, much to the disgrace of the Marxist government in West Bengal, vulture-like priests still pounce upon vulnerable devotees.

No organised activity in West Bengal is said to be free of party control. Marxist and Leninist minders of the Kali temple must be getting substantial cuts from the extortionist priests at the temple.

The more things change, the more they remain the same is truer of Kolkata than any other city in the region. This is a place where rickshaws are still pulled rather than pedaled and pushcarts with wooden wheels and bamboo platforms creak along wide avenues under the load of 60 bags of cement. Kolkata was the first city in India to get a functioning metro, but it continues to run trams built in British India. Ambassador taxis jostle for space with American SUVs on narrow streets which are perpetually dug up to make space for underground utilities. However, unlike the maniacal honkers of New Delhi, drivers in Kolkata don’t display road rage and switch off their engines and wait whenever a VIP motorcade or a marriage procession holds up traffic.

Howrah Bridge Long Ago: Kolkata is marginally less destitute than it used to be. Nepal’s monarchists may wish otherwise, but the left-orientation of the Indian establishment is unlikely to end despite US pressures. The Indians have learnt to live with Marxist-Leninists. There is no reason for Nepal to fear the domination of Leninist UML or Stalinist CPN-M in our own constituent assembly. At the very least, once left parties come into power, they are in no hurry to leave.

If Nepal’s donum value political stability so much, they would do well to let CA elections produce a left-dominated house. So what if Maharajgunj is renamed Marxgunj and Lainchaur Leninchaur?
Maoists behave no differently than royals in Nepal’s premier conservation trust

DEWAN RAI

N epal’s Airlines, the Nepal Army and our embassies abroad were stripped of their “royal” prefixes after April 2006. Even the conservation group, King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation, was not spared. It had “King Mahendra” tipped off last year.

But this change is not just in the name. The Maoists have replaced the Trust’s former royal patrons and turned Nepal’s best-known conservation organisation into a recruitment centre. Instead of crown prince Paras, the Trust is now headed by the prime minister with the Maoist Minister of Forest and Soil Conservation, Matrika Yadava, an ex-cabinet minister.

After the Maoists joined the conflict, they bargained hard to keep Yadava as forest minister. He appointed a new governing board in which almost no one has any conservation experience to oversee pioneering eco-tourism initiatives like the Annapurna Area Conservation Project.

Maoist-appointed member secretary Bimal Kumar Bariya says the new board is more inclusive. “We have members representing women, Madhes and indigenous communities,” Bariya told Nepal Digam. But former employees say the trust is no longer the gold standard.

The trust has re-staffed and is now headed by the Maoist’s Basundhara Bhattarai, as ex-officio chair. The Maoists have also appointed a new governing board in which almost no one has any conservation experience to oversee pioneering eco-tourism initiatives like the Annapurna Area Conservation Project.

Maoist-appointed member secretary Bimal Kumar Bariya says the new board is more inclusive. “We have members representing women, Madhes and indigenous communities,” Bariya told Nepal Digam. But former employees say the trust is no longer the gold standard. Basundhara Bhattarai is a conservationist, but he is not the best person for the job. The Maoists have appointed a new governing board in which almost no one has any conservation experience to oversee pioneering eco-tourism initiatives like the Annapurna Area Conservation Project.

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Global leader
Aashmi Rana has been chosen by the World Economic Forum as a Young Global Leader for 2008. Drawn from a pool of almost 5,000 candidates, 200-300 young leaders are chosen from all over the world as global leaders. Aashmi Rana is managing director of the Himal Pashmina Udhyog.

Uphill all the way
The hurdles which big business has to face in Nepal

Big businesses are rarely celebrated in Nepal. First, there’s the perception problem. Most are seen, often without good evidence, to be corrupt and discourtingly close to those in power, and to most educated Nepalis in non-private sector jobs, the phrase ‘big businessmen’ unfairly conjures up images of smooth-talking hustlers or middlemen who make money by fleecing innocent customers and producers.

And second, while almost all political parties are quick to announce various job-creation policies, they remain incapable of understanding that greater good can only come about if the government is confined primarily to the role of enforcing the existing rules fairly, while allowing many competitive small and large businesses in all sectors to play out their sagas under the watch of a fiercely independent business press.

For the past six years, the boss monthly magazine has worked hard to change the negative perceptions surrounding members of the business community. It has chronicled the success of Nepali entrepreneurs, bankers and managers, giving the next generation of businesspeople role models they can look up to.

On Wednesday, the monthly hosted a well-organized and well-attended 5th Business Excellence Award in which Nepali businesspeople, entrepreneurs, CEOs and management students, judged best in their respective categories, were given trophies.

But these perception problems and stories of excellence there remain two major constraints which are likely to hinder the growth rate of most Nepali companies in times ahead. One is the shortage of middle managers. The other is the rise of militant unions.

Rise of militant unions: These days, almost any sector of Nepali business has one or more labour unions, often affiliated to political parties. True, in many cases, shoddy management practices made it timely for these unions to come up to defend labourers’ rights.

But now, drunk on the success of some of their earlier victories, most union leaders could not care less about good or bad management practices, and spend more time building up their own power base. Lip-service for Lenin and Mao makes personal design, and union leaders view themselves at a rank equal to that of a company’s senior management. Needless to say, they are not hesitant to use brute force to get what they want.

Some Nepali companies have tried pleading with their militant unions; others have tried ignoring them. Some have shut down altogether after incurring losses to accommodate union demands.

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In times ahead, whatever else happens, learning to engage positively with the unions in an open, fair and communication-intensive manner will remain a challenge for senior management in many Nepali businesses.

Business perceptions can be overcome by visible success stories. Besides those present at the boss awards, these are still too rare in this country. We can only hope there will be more examples for others to emulate in the future.
Booth youth

Drish, 11 March

While Chairman Prachanda is threatening to capture power after the CA polls, an eleven point circular has been secretly distributed to the Maoist party workers in various districts. The circular directs workers to use force to secure CA elections in their favour. It reads as follows:

1. Create a secret emissary in all VDCs to check the daily activities and the roles of various people in the elections. Collect information and keep tabs on the opposition. The area committee should submit all information to the district committee.
2. Prepare at least 20 YCL cadres in each VDC. The YCL should follow the directions of the party and try to make the youth pro-Maoist. Try and influence everyone to vote for the Maoists. Make and submit the list of people who are not in favour of the Maoists to the respective authority.
3. Make it difficult for NC workers to stay in the villages. Lower their self-confidence and make them unhappy so that they lose the elections.
4. Make the oppositional forces fight amongst each other. Sit together to eat and drink but hit them hard when you get the chance. Work to divide the international forces especially India, America and European Union so that they cannot monitor our activities.
5. Bring the dead to life for the 10 April elections. Make a list of those killed or absent from the village and vote in their names. The security forces and the police are afraid of us so we do not need to fear them. Everyone should vote. If possible forbid the opposition to caste votes.
6. The YCL should keep khukuris, sticks and other weapons of self-defence at secret hide outs.
7. Be very good to the people of the lower rungs of the society. Cripple the middle class and threaten the upper class so that they are unable to play any role in the village.
8. Start the election campaign from mid March without caring for your life. Use all the tricks known to turn all important elections in the favour of the Maoists.
9. All activities of the party will be broadcasted regularly as a cultural program on Gandaki FM. Everyone should listen and inform others of the program.
10. Encourage and be nice to nationalist forces.
11. Draw together teachers, intellectuals, social workers and businessmen. Turn teachers, students and youth into full-timers. After a month or two there will be a huge campaign to make full-timers.

The prime minister also doesn’t look too happy about the army integration. While the army has clearly stated its opinion on PLA integration, views on the inclusion of Madhesis and other ethnic groups have only come out indirectly. This is no doubt due to the fact that the agreement on this was signed by the three main parties currently forming the government.

Commitment

Jorelold, 11 March

Exactly a month from today, Nepali people will vote in the great move towards a new era.
The day will be historic in the creation of a modern Nepal. The voting will instruct the government to establish the federal republican Nepal that has been announced in the interim constitution.

As the CA polls near, royalists and foreign powers who are against the nation are worried that the people will choose revolutionary forces in the elections. The imperialists and feudalists have come to the conclusion that now there is no stopping the victory of the revolutionary people in Nepal, and these enemies of the Nepali people are conspiring against the CA polls. There is no doubt that the people will once again foil their attempt.

The Maoists are responsibly trying to unite the leftist parties, patriots and republicans, and help them work together to make the CA polls successful. However, the UML are siding with the conspiring imperialists and feudal royalists. The people have begun to despise the opportunistic and cowardly nature of the UML. The Maoists are committed to making the people win.

No inclusion
Gorkhapatra, 12 March

Although the interim constitution has clearly spelled out that the political parties should consider the principle of inclusion while choosing candidates (clause 63, sub-clause 4), this principle has not been implemented in the direct elections.

The candidate lists that have been filed for nomination from 16 different parties clearly show that women, janajatis, Madhesis and Dalits have not been proportionately represented.

The national census six years ago shows that women form 50.1 percent of the total population. But, in most of the political parties, women candidates make only 10 percent of candidates. The Nepal Workers and Peasants Party has the highest percentage of women candidates at 27.5. The Maoists have 17.5 percent, whereas the UML and NC have 10.4 and 10.4 percent respectively.

Although there is a compulsory provision for including a minimum number of women, janajatis, Madhesis and Dalits in the proportional election procedure, there are no such compulsions for direct candidacy.

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A road ru

When Swiss geologist Toni Hagen in 1952 took the famous photograph of porters crossing the Kali Gandaki with Nilgiri in the background, he chose it for the cover of his book, Nepal. For decades, that picture became symbolic of Nepal’s sheer beauty and its poor infrastructure. It was also an iconic photograph that introduced the rugged terrain of the deepest gorge on the planet to the outside world.

Hagen, who died in 2003, probably would never have imagined that barely 55 years later, a highway would pass along the valley where he made the first-ever geological exploration.

The Kali Gandaki is called the deepest scar on the earth’s surface. Up the valley at Dana, this frothing river flows at only 1,200m above sea level in between the ramparts of the 8,000m + peaks of Annapurna and Dhaulagiri which are only 25km apart.

This dizzyingly deep gorge should have been declared a world heritage site, but now it’s too late. It was perhaps inevitable that a river that has cut through the mountains would be the only trade route between Tibet and India. For centuries food and cloth from the south and salt and skin from the north were bartered in the market towns of Nepal. The motorable road has just followed that old trading route. Once Jomsom is linked to the Chinese border, and the road is paved, one could get from Kathmandu to Lo Manthang in one day.

The sound of dynamite blasting through the sheer rock face at Bandarjung had been reverberating in the narrow valley for the past four months as the Nepal Army tried to clear the last major obstacle to link the two ends of the highways from north and south.

Mindful of the criticism that it just opened the Surkhet-Jumla Highway and left it at that, the army is trying to make sure the
Kali Gandaki road is safe and motorable.

“The highway was delayed by the conflict, then work suffered because of the diesel crisis, but we are also trying to make sure that this is not just a pilot track when we hand it over,” says army engineer Min Bahadur Basnet.

This week, a convoy of four-wheel drives made history by traversing the road from Beni to Jomsom for the first time. Things are never going to be the same again in the Kali Gandaki valley, and there is mixed reaction among locals.

“If it wasn’t built today, it would have been built in five years, we can’t stop it,” says Mana Gauchan who plies a jeep from Beni to Tiplang. He expects a windfall of business with tourists, pilgrims as well as Mustang’s apples and apricots and is planning to add more jeeps to his fleet.

But owners of trekking lodges are distressed. “It’s finished, first it was the war that killed trekking, now it is the road,” says Nara Gurung, who runs a lodge near Tatopani.

Not everyone is giving up on tourism. There are motorcycle taxis already ferrying pilgrims plying between Beni and Dana. In Jomsom, former lodge owners are investing in tractors.

There might even be a trekking boom. Myagdi DDC is working on an alternative trekking route up the valley on the other side of the highway. Some trekking groups are already planning new hiking itineraries now that the East Dhaulagiri Glacier, Mirliti Khola and the upper reaches of Annapurna South suddenly become more accessible.

Infrastructure minister Hishia Yami helicoptered in last month on an inspection, and admitted that the highway has been delayed because of the conflict. “We shouldn’t have targeted the army building the road,” she admitted to journalists. She added, “But the work would have gone much faster if the two armies were integrated.”

Min Bahadur Basnet supervises the blasting of the 200m section of cliff at Bandarjung overlooking the Kali Gandaki gorge near Ghasa as soldiers use pneumatic drills to lay dynamite.

At Timure near Beni, the road has to be literally carved out of the rock face above the Kali Gandaki.
In Constituency
On the campaign trail with the 'first president'

Mesh Lal Das refuses to accept congratulations for being included in the PR list for elections. Instead, he is angry and hurt and holds forth for an hour on the injustice of politics.

They pushed me into this sheet of paper, one year of being on the streets for the Madhes movement and I still didn't get a ticket from MJF.

Despite proportional representation and all the talk of 'inclusiveness', Umesh's caste worked against him in an election that is supposed to frame the laws of a new Nepal. Caste, which was concealed by the broader Madhes struggle for the past year, is back as an election issue. It is determining the way in which the Madhesi alliance is selecting candidates and getting splintered, and it will decide who will win.

To see just how complicated caste is in Bara, just look at how it is divided.
Constituency 1 has Yadavs, Kushawas and Kalwars. While most parties are fielding Yadav candidates, TMLP has put up Jitendra Singh who is banking on a split in the Yadav vote to see him through. Number 2 has Yadavs, Muslims and Telis where Congress and UML will see a tough contest.

Constituency 3, which includes Kalaiya bajar, has Kalwar, Kanu, Muslims and Dalits. Some believe NC will win while others think MJF's Pramod Gupta has a chance.

Constituency 4, with areas like Jitpur and Parwanipur on the highway, has a substantial chunk of Muslims and will see a contest between Farmullah Mansur of the NC, UML's Mahmood Alam, and royalist Yunus Ansari. Number 5 is a Tharu stronghold with NC's Umakant Chaudhary having a head-start while the sixth will see a Pahadi winner, possibly Puroshottam Dahal of the UML. The Maoists will be able to pick up votes in all constituencies, especially the ones with a sizeable Pahadi population, to add to their vote share in the PR.

But hold on. Where is the Madhesi wave for Madhesi parties? Less than a month after the signing of an agreement with the government, bickering within the Madhesi alliance has eroded its support base. Even Madhesi cadres are annoyed. Ramkeshore Yadav of the MJF says testily: “Who do these leaders think we are? They used us to get seats and forgot about the Madhesi cause.”

The big parties are therefore back in business, but fielding Madhesi candidates because they know the Madhes Street will not accept Pahadis. They have the experience in electoral politics, the organisational strength, the traditional loyalties and the money. In the 11 constituencies of Bara and Parsa together, the NC and UML may take as many as eight seats.

The elections may actually strengthen the hand of Madhesi radicals who can now point to poor representation of the new Madhesi parties in the constituent assembly to show that nothing has changed.

Electoral violence
With only a month to go until elections, a poll watch group has recommended security and crowd management must be improved to reduce the danger of violence.

Democracy and Election Alliance Nepal (DEAN) in a report issued this week urged that party organisers keep their cadres peaceful.

Political party leaders should immediately denounce use of violence by their supporters, cadres, and affiliated groups, “the group said in a statement.

DEAN’s Political-Election Violence Education and Resolution project also tallies instances of violence in the run-up to elections and recorded a dramatic increase in January to 97 wounded in 45 incidents. There were 25 other instances in January of kidnappings and intimidation, clashes between youth groups in which 19 were wounded, 3 killed, and 6 kidnapped. The project relies on a network of 240 monitors in each constituency who report on violence and tension in their communities, and is funded by USAID.

No Madhesi wave
Caste and the big parties sideline the Madhesi alliance

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Comrade Chairman was greeted by a stronghold in Rolpa. At Pharping, 'Prachanda for President' letters anyone can still read the slogans, but the paint is thin and have been white-washing wall commission’s orders, the YCL forests and fields below was Pushpa Kamal Dahal, the weeks, it threatens to capture candidates, set off getting marginalised. If they step up violence, the political survival. If elections happen, they risk for not acknowledging its role in the movement, intellectuals front, chips in, "Mahant Thakur is government is fooling people." Singh says with a mixture of pride and self-pity: "He was treated in Bihar's Darbangha, and Saptari a few years ago left him with a bullet injury."

But villagers remember that Dahal was quite open about his Marxism, and says he became more careful while they step up, the public may turn against them. "This is the lull before the storm," says Rabindranath Singh, "the road to Dakshinkali is a long way. Less than two years time it will not be me who is won, but the people lost. This has never won in the true sense." he said, "all the chance. "Let's see if he can prove himself," he said, "the Maoists always win, but the people lost. This time will not be me who is winning, it will be you the people. Dahal, and Nepal, have come a long way."

Says Sunnari insarch, Krish, who is on the run for having allegedly killed Shekhar Koirala's brother-in-law in January. "If the government is fooling people, it ultimately have to work with the Maoists. Some extremist caches are even involved in poll campaigning," a Maoist cadre quotes, "In certain seats, we may support some candidates if they are committed to the Maoist line," says one leader, "the assembly won't give us any rights and the Madhesi parties will come to us for help. And we will lead the next movement."

"The Militants are now running scared of the Indian authorities, and have become more careful while they step up, and forth between Bihar's border towns where they live with sympathisers. Unlike the mainstream Maoist parties, Jwala's group is more inclusive of all Maoist castes. The top leaders include a Dalit, Yadav, Brahman, Kushawa, while the district chiefs include a Musahar, a Dom, Brahman, Raijput, Muslim, and even, it is said, a Sikh. But the extremist groups deeply distrust each other over money, dealing with the media and attitude towards talks. Prime Minister Koirala personally spoke with his leader on the phone in January, inviting the group for talks with his daughter. While one faction was keen on it, Jwala Singh vetoed the idea. Koirala’s hardline statement this week, however, has weakened this faction's effort within the armed group. Says Ramsher Singh: "We are not against talks. Our preconditions are release of activists, withdrawal of cases, calling off STF operations, and a unilateral ceasefire by the state."

Pushbant fja in North Bihar

I n 1976, when Pushpa Kamal Dahal picked up his suitcoat to leave Arughat, the villagers came out to see him off. At the bus stop, a crowd stood round him, many weeping. Two years earlier when he arrived in this village in Gorkha, Dahal was a fresh graduate from the Rampur Campus in Chitwan, and came to teach agriculture at Arughat's Bhirnodiya High School. "A talented teacher," recalls Satrughan Shrestha, an ex-student, "he never had to refer to the textbooks and would tell us interesting stories to keep our attention on the subject. "He gave us a lot of homework," recalls another student, Krishna Kumar Shrestha, "and after dinner he went door to door to make sure we were doing it." He never even let him lose his temper or raise his voice. He chose patience over punishment. During the two days, Dahal taught at the school, it achieved an unprecedented 100 percent pass rate in agriculture.

Students say they respected him, but also maintained friendly relations outside school hours. "When he caught us peking at him swimming in the river, instead of reprimanding, he would call for us to come," recalls Shubhak Prasad, now a retired grandfather. It has been 32 years since Dahal left Arughat to lead the Maoist movement and become Comrade Prachanda. Dahal was a strong believer in education, local rumor, and he taught literate adults in the evening, four days a week. During his free time, he would go down to the fields to demonstrate modern farming techniques to improve harvests. He was also the first to teach villagers how to build outhouses and chimneys. Honest, helpful, and responsible, that is how most people here remember the man. But more difficult to believe may be that the Maoist chairman was an avid dancer, and choreographed performances that won the village first place in two local dance competitions. Ganesh Kumar Shrestha, a colleague, admitted that Dahal wasn’t the best dancer in the world. "But he was very creative," he hastened to add. Just about everyone in the neighbourhood knew that Dahal defeated the monastery: "He was against the caste system, and used to stress the importance of equality," said Bhuban Pasad Shrestha, Dahal’s former landlord in Arughat.

When cleaning Prachanda’s room, Bhuban once glanced at a stack of communist books, including Das Kapital and others by Mao and Lenin, which he had been hiding under his bed, it being the Panchayat era, political parties and communist literature were banned. But villagers remember that Dahal was quite open about his beliefs. Subkahudor Nagel, who attended Prachanda’s night classes, said that the literacy lessons were sometimes more like communist sermons. Another man, who had joined the dancing competition, realised later that the tune, Najau Bides, chosen by Prachanda, was actually a communist song.

But Dahal’s name was not just stuck with his idea on the young minds at school. None of the former students interviewed was aware their teacher was a communist. But a passing comment he once made to a colleague perhaps hinted at his political aspirations. "If I want to be a minister of the country, I can easily achieve that," he had said.

With elections around the corner, no one is predicting which way the vote will go in Arughat which suffered from the brutality of the war years. But if Dahal was a candidate here, he may have a good chance of winning.
Ae Gorkhaliharu

Britain’s gain is Nepal’s loss

A nyone who follows the British media will know, Prince Harry, who is in the UK this week, was on secret military duty in Afghanistan. Apart from his pride and joy at being able to ‘muck in’ as one of the lads, Harry expressed his respect and admiration for the Royal Gurkha Rifles in which he served. He is also happy with the khukuri they have given him as a present.

Meanwhile, back in Pokhara and Dharan lots of new villas are coming onto the market. Servicemen are getting on a bit, there are always their children, who are normally haughty Maoists seem subdued, content to say that if beleaguered with the constant talk of coming elections. A Chinese pocket war-weary and still struggling Nepal, it is also a loss for the British government to give citizenship rights to retired Gurkha servicemen. As usual, British reaps benefits.

Let me explain. In contrast to Nepal, which is burgeoning with youth, the UK’s population is growing old. The demographic shift is becoming so serious that the country cannot replenish its workforce from its own birth rate alone. In this situation, although many in the country try to deny it on various emotive pretexts, Britain needs immigration in order to keep the economy functioning properly. And who are more obvious discriminate than those the British Army Brigade of Gurkhas webpage calls “the closest of friends and bravest of allies that Britain has known”? Nepal Gurkhas must be one of the most attractive groups the British government can hope to recruit en masse to join the UK job market. They are used to hard work, they have comparatively very few networks of organised crime or fraud (well, every country has them), they have been conducting community programmes, fielding their inclusive candidates. No mass rallies yet and no poll sharing, says Manejangbo. “If smaller parties come to us then we will of course take them in, but we will never link up with the NC or UML.”

Rather than expectation and excitement, the mood in Dharan seems to be one of indifference. “We are certain that the elections will happen but since none of the parties has shown any strong initiative, we’re not really bothered,” says doctors at Dhamar’s BF Koirala Institute of Health Sciences. Police are a compliment to the country both economically and socially. Although Dharan is traditionally a UML bastion, Tilak Rai is certain his party will pull through. “We have the only candidate in this region, so the women’s vote is secure,” says Rai confidently. The normally haunted Maoists seem subdued, content to say that if given a chance, they will change things. Says Manejangbo: “We are a new party and we are young. Why vote for those same old tired faces? Just give us a chance to prove ourselves.”

There is slightly more action in Kathmandu. UML graffiti is smeared across temple walls and the customs office, Maoist slogans adorn other vacant spaces and a motorbike draped with the Nepali Congress flag speeds past. Party flags fly high on bamboo poles at strategic intersections. “Although there haven’t been any big rallies or mass meetings, the parties have started campaigning,” says Inspector Dorpak Giri, at the area police station. “There already been visited by candidates from all the three major parties,” says Hem Limbo, a convenience store owner.

All the parties seem to be on best behaviour, and Inspector Giri seems confident that everything will go off without a hitch. There has been no trouble as of yet, and even the agitating Limboum groups seem pacified at the moment. “It doesn’t matter how many people the parties deploy,” says Giri, “there will be enough security forces to make sure nothing untoward happens and that no one is hassled.”

Dhanar is far from election frenzy

An quiet on the eastern front

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Once is not enough
An anti-musical romance

John Carney’s Once, aptly named, is quite a singular film. Although a musical, it is very different from both the Bollywood and the increasingly frequent Hollywood varieties. Here we have intimate, simply crafted songs that are naturalistic as opposed to flashy, showy numbers that are fantastical. The musical sections are not moments of escapism with costume changes and orchestras. Instead they emerge believably from the characters (who are musicians), and entrance the viewer with their intimacy. In Once, instead of melodrama, there is quiet melancholy; instead of idealistic declaration of love, a rarely-voiced affection and the gritty realism of circumstance. Yet you will be hard-pressed to find a more satisfying romance from recent times.

Set and shot in Dublin, Once is a simple story of two characters. One, an Irish busker, strums his guitar for a pittance when he’s not helping out at his dad’s vacuum-cleaner repair shop; the other, a Czech immigrant, does odd-jobs to support herself and her family while harboring a talent for the piano. This pair, down-trodden and semi-tragic, and offset by the trendy retail stores and bustling crowds of metropolitan Dublin, are two individuals evidently out of step with the mainstream society around them.

Glen Hansard’s character (who, like his counterpart played by Markéta Irglová, remains nameless, the credit roll simply identifying them as ‘The Guy’ and ‘The Girl’) is nursing his wounds from a break-up with his girlfriend who has moved to London, while Irglová’s more complicated home-life – estranged husband, a toddler – pushes their developing relationship into uncertain territory. This premise ties together a songbook of Indie pop-rock.

Once is a chaste romance, and at the same token quite convincing. Glen Hansard’s character is bumbling and earnest in his pursuit of the forward, cheeky yet evasive character of Markéta Irglová. Their attraction, charged as it is, is sublimated into a creative collaboration, which to both themselves and to the audience is a delicate metaphor for a relationship that isn’t named. She is the catalyst for his ambition to record an album which is the product of a relationship, and the eventual impetus for him to leave Dublin for London. The actor Hansard is the lead singer of the Irish band The Frames, and Irglová’s character is a pianist-songwriter, so their talents easily lend themselves to the musical requirements of the film, which they pull off with real verve and feeling.

The filmmaking, like the characters, has a scruffy charm which impresses both in its modesty and ambition. The film wears its thin budget on its sleeve. Eschewing sets, it uses public spaces for many of its main scenes. Here the camera is unobtrusive, keeping its distance and rarely crowding the characters, and passers-by seem oblivious to the fact that a movie is being shot at all. Yet, it does not shy away from cinematic flexing, with flourishes such as a several minutes long mid-en-scene trailing ‘The Girl’ walking to her neighbourhood store trying out the lyrics she’s written to some music by ‘The Guy’, which she’s listening to on a Discman.

In an altogether unassuming manner, the film shows up many bigger-budgeted productions, and its tiny imperfections make it possibly more endearing. The melodies and characters of Once will linger sweetly long after the film ends.

Once
Director: John Carney
Cast: Glen Hansard, Markéta Irglová.
2007. R. 88 min.
EXHIBITIONS

- Paintings by Neera Joshi Pradhan, 11AM-5.30 PM, until 23 March at Park Gallery, Lazimpal, 4419353
- Double vision prints by Nan Mulder, Gea Karhof, Seema Sharma Shah and Rekha Upadhuyay, until 15 March at the Siddharta Art Gallery, Babahal Mall Revisited.
- Tibetan Lhosoar photographs by Daniel Collins at the Saturday Café, Boudhanath stupa, until 31 March.

EVENTS

- Francophonie week with Recontres a multidisciplinary exhibition with 10 Nepali and French artists, at the Alliance Francaise, starting 14 March at 8PM, 4241163
- Nepal Malaysia Education Fair organised by Google Educational Foundation, 14-16 March, 11AM-5PM at Hotel Maila. 4420457
- 3rd Tews Carnival at the Brenta International Convention Centre, 15 March, 10AM-7PM, Rs 100
- Breathless a film by Jean-Luc Godard, screened by Cine-Sankalpa, 17 March, 5.30 PM at the Rimal Theatre, Gunakul. 4468956
- Weekly human rights film screenings with The Syran Bride a film by Eran Riklis at the Sama Theatre, Gunakul. 5PM on 16 March. 4468956
- Toastmasters a communication and leadership program, organised by Kathmandu Toastmasters Club every Wednesday 6PM at Industrial Enterprise Development Institute (IEDI) building, Tripureswor. 4288847

MUSIC

- 23rd Yala Maya Classic with Drubhesh Chandra Regmi and Pramod Upadhuyay, 15 March, 5PM at Yala Maya Kendra, Patan Dhoka. 5055767
- 1974AD Unplugged tunes from 1994 to 2008, 22 March, 6.30 PM at the Patan Museum, 9841230007
- Yankey and friends live acoustic music every Friday at the Bourbon room Restro-bar, Lal Darbar.
- Anil Shahi every Wednesday and Rashmi Singh every Friday, live at the Absolute Bar, Hotel Narayan Complex, 8PM. 5521408

DINING

- St Patrick’s Day with green beers and silly hats, 17 March at Kitefly’s Thamel. 4250440
- The Kaiser Café open now at the Garden of Dreams, operated by Dwarika’s Group of Hotels, open from 9AM-10PM. 4425341
- Steak escape with Kathmandu’s premier steaks available for lunch and dinner at the Olive Bar and Bistro, Hotel Radisson. 4418118
- Jalan Jalan Restaurant with a new Italian menu, Kuopondole. 5844927
- Bourbon Room Restro-bar now open for lunch and dinner with over a 100 cocktails, Lal Darbar.
- Cocktails, mocktails and liqueurs at the Asah Lounge, opening hours 1-10PM, above Himalayan Java, Thamel.
- Continental and Chinese cuisine by the Kathmandu Toastmasters Club every Wednesday 6PM at Industrial Enterprise Development Institute (IEDI) building, Tripureswor. 4288847
- Illy espresso coffee at the Galleries cafe, every Friday espresso cocktails.
- International four course buffet with the JCS Quartet and a choice of cocktails with a choice of cocktails at The Tea House Inn, Windy Hills, Nagarkot every Saturday. 9841250848.
- Scrumptious wood fired pizzas at Java, Thamel.

WEEKEND WEATHER

The big event of this week is a sudden rise in temperature, marking the real beginning of spring. The satellite picture on Thursday morning shows two opposing fronts in action – first, a southerly front pushing warm air from the north Indian plain towards the central Himalaya, and second, a northerly front crossing the western Himalaya to pour cold air over into Afghanistan and western Pakistan. Currently the low pressure sitting over northern India and Nepal is sucking in clouds from the surrounding areas. However, the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean is still warm and this will produce much more than thunder and drizzle. Expect the mercury to keep rising up until early next week, when the current system is likely to reverse temporarily.

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NEWSPAPER ON SA...
EVER WATCHFUL: The eyes of Boudhanath loom over Tibetan refugees’ demonstration to mark 49 years since the 1959 uprising on Monday. Police stopped the demonstrators at Chuchepati on the road to Baluwatar, where they planned to hand a memorandum to the Chinese Embassy.

BE GOOD: Election commissioner Bhoj Raj Pokharel takes cabinet members through the code of conduct for the CA election.
Given the tectonic forces pushing the Indian landmass relentlessly from the south and the Eurasian continent squeezing us from the north, it is easy to understand why Comrade Prithbi Narayan the Great likened Nepal to “a sweet potato between a rock and a hard place”.

It is geology that pushed Mt Everest to its present height but it is geopolitics that is making the Chinese really antsy about Tibetans using the Olympics to get into the news. Now comes word that the highway built to Sagarmatha base camp on the Rongbuk side won’t be used for a while because no expeditions will be allowed on the north face till 10 May.

Not just that, the Chinese have leaned on us not to allow expeditions from the south side either till that time. That is why there are only four expeditions from the Khumbu this spring compared to 25 last year. Can understand why they’re worried. Wouldn’t want any pro-Dalai Lama demos on the summit just as the Olympic torch being carried up the northeast ridge is being beamed live to the world now, would we?

The real question the Ass has is how they are going to keep the Olympic torch from being blown out by the jet stream up there at 8,848m.

From the land of a dead Mao to the land where Mao is alive and kicking came Chinese vice minister of foreign affairs HeYafei. He met our Supreme Commando and apparently told him in comradely fashion that he shouldn’t be using the Great Helmsman’s name in vain because it was tarnishing Mao’s name.

After all, the CPN-M is no longer strictly speaking a Maoist party but a Stalinist one. Actually the Maoists should rename their party CPN-L since they have now abandoned Maoism to adhere to Leninist traits. Hearing the First Emperor of a Republican Nepal go on about “capturing” power and “taking over” if his party loses the constituent assembly elections must remind people of Vladimir Ilyich and how he staged a military coup when the Bolsheviks lost the constituent assembly elections in Russia 90 years ago. Which must be why the building that houses the Maoist unions at Tin Kune is called Lenin Bhavan.

Young commies in tracksuits beat up a UML cadre in Ramechhap so badly he had to be helicoptered out. Surya Bahadur Thapa’s election entourage in Dhankuta, was attacked and warned not to come back unless he wanted a hasty departure to kingdom come.

Why is the YCL trying its level best to sabotage its parent party from winning this election?