Kunda Dixit

King Gyawander may have been a divisive force ever since he became king in 2001, but he was a unifying factor in keeping the parties and Maoists together. With the monarchy gone, who will the parties now blame when things go wrong?

Two weeks after the declaration of the republic, the debate over who should be the first president is deadlocked. Two months after the elections, the Maoists have still not been able to form a government. On Thursday they resigned from the government to put further pressure on Prime Minister Koirala.

The Maoists had shown flexibility this week by agreeing to a non-political president and a simple majority to form and sack governments, but negotiations got stuck once more on the issue of army integration and on who the president should be. Both sticking points have to do with the military: the army doesn’t want to induct ex-guerrillas and it doesn’t want a Maoist commander-in-chief.

“It was just a tactic to show they were flexible. Actually the Maoists are as rigid as ever on all points,” says Gagan Thapa, an NC assembly member.

The NC and UML see the president’s post as not just ceremonial but a way to balance Maoist dominance of the government.

After the three-party task force failed to reach a deal, Prime Minister Koirala and Chairman Dahal met Thursday at Baluwatar to give it another try. But by the afternoon, all seven Maoist ministers had handed their resignations to Dahal.

“The new government needs to be formed so that it reflects the people’s mandate, which is why we have resigned from our ministerial positions,” said Minister for Forests and Soil Conservation Matrika Yadav.

The UML and NC insist that integration of Maoist guerrillas into the army should be on the basis of qualification as agreed in the peace accord. The Maoists want all their guerrillas to be integrated into the national army.

A compromise can be reached under which some PLA are taken into the army, while the remainder are recruited into other security apparatus. “If it was only up to us, we could reach an agreement, but there are outside stakeholders exerting pressure,” senior Maoist Ram Karki told Nepali Times.

Subhas Devkota
LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD

The king has been sent packing in a uniquely Nepali way. Unlike the revolutions in Tehran, Addis Ababa or Bucharest, the Narayanhiti Palace was also mobbed—not by journalists, in the end, the crowd drove off quietly. Now the real work begins to make democracy deliver development.

History itself has been reordered. We have voted to uproot a utopian ideology that the rest of the world paid for with the death of tens of millions. One could never accuse Nepali politicians of being ahead of the times; they had never realised till now just what a bunch of dinosaurs they are.

There were socio-political reasons for the Maoist victory, of course, many contributing to it also was our collective blind faith in the hopelessness of the opposition. Recent opinions in Maoist mouthpieces and the speeches of their leaders haven’t helped allay these concerns. These are unformulated revolutionaries, in fact the very word ‘reform’ is a bad word in their lexicon. Words the world thought had been consigned to the dustbins of history are now staple fare in the Maoist-controlled print media. Times the state is against each other, but there is a consistent message: the end goal of a totalitarian people’s republic hasn’t changed.

It still amazes that Khmer Rouge genocide, saying it was “western propaganda”. Every Maoist propaganda meeting has, among the portraits of international communists, the picture of Stalin, the man responsible for millions of deaths in the gulags. Political indoctrination of Nepal’s Maoists includes the glorification of the Cultural Revolution, forgetting that tens of millions of Chinese died. Red Guard purges and forced ‘re-education’ of the other classes there, too, but there is a consistent message: the end goal of a totalitarian people’s republic hasn’t changed.

Our Maoists justify the Khmer Rouge genocide, saying it was “western propaganda”. Every Maoist propaganda meeting has, among the portraits of international communists, the picture of Stalin, the man responsible for millions of deaths in the gulags. Political indoctrination of Nepal’s Maoists includes the glorification of the Cultural Revolution, forgetting that tens of millions of Chinese died. Red Guard purges and forced ‘re-education’ of the other classes there, too, but there is a consistent message: the end goal of a totalitarian people’s republic hasn’t changed.

The international community should know that unrepentant revolutionaries who refuse to learn from history are bound to repeat it, but there isn’t much they can do if Nepal does turn totalitarian. Regimes like North Korea and Burma survive and continue to oppress their people in this day and age, despite international sanctions and the appointment of UN Special Envoys. India, too, is not going to stick its neck out for the protection of democracy when emergency imports or hydropower are at stake. It is eager to do business with the Maoist-controlled Lalitpur and Bhatu’s ethnic cleansers.

This protection of our democracy, pluralism and the defence of civil societies with us Nepalis alone. In this, we have no option but to support entities that espouse these values even though they may have been tainted in the past.

The political parties must have a level playing field: one can’t be a close militant group that idles Stalin while the others are emancipated by their belief in non-violence.

The new government is formed and portfolios allocated which will have even more significance and long-lasting consequences on the ground.

Yes, the two processes are interlinked and it will all be part of a packaged deal. Who becomes the head of the state is inextricably linked with who joins the government in what positions.

If the NC, given up the presidency, it will drive a hard bargain for plum portfolios. If the Maoists let Koirala stay on, they will extract the maximum concessions claiming they have ‘the masses’. Perhaps contributing to it also was our collective blind faith in the hopelessness of the opposition. Recent opinions in Maoist mouthpieces and the speeches of their leaders haven’t helped allay these concerns. These are unformulated revolutionaries, in fact the very word ‘reform’ is a bad word in their lexicon. Words the world thought had been consigned to the dustbins of history are now staple fare in the Maoist-controlled print media. Times the state is against each other, but there is a consistent message: the end goal of a totalitarian people’s republic hasn’t changed.

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The real battle for the NC, UML and Maoists will be at the level of cabinet positions. The MJF will be happy to settle for a few Madhes-related clauses in any agreement or as a part of a packaged deal. Who becomes the head of the state is inextricably linked with who joins the government in what positions.

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The prime minister, and as the largest party forms the government in...
WANNABE MAO
I was proud of the fact that I stayed on in Nepal even after all my friends migrated. Now, reading, watching the news everyday, I wonder whether I want to continue living in this country, and more importantly, do I want my children to grow up here? My family comes first, I’ll think about my country later. Are you listening, Chairman Wannabe Mao? Here I am filling out an online application for an Australian PR visa, listening to a 1968 Beatles song that’s still relevant in 2008 Nepal, and it brings tears to my eyes:

You say you want a revolution / Well, you know we all want to change the world / You tell me that it’s evolution / Well, you know we all want to change the world / But when you talk about destruction don’t you know that you can count me out / Don’t you know / You say you got a real solution / Well, you know we’d all love to see the plan / You ask me for a contribution / Well, you know we’re all doing what we can / But if you go canvassing futures of chairman Mao / You ain’t going to make it with anyone anyhow. (Lennon, McCartney).

Pushpa Kamal Dahal’s barbs against Kantipur were highly irresponsible and the criticism that followed (Editorial, ‘No half way’, #403) rightly deserved. The nation is still reeling from the murder of Ram Hari Shrestha by his cadres and here he is, touting his inviolable status. Perhaps this man and his party are inherently incapable of following democratic norms. Perhaps they belong in the jungles. Such irresponsible remarks will ultimately cause the downfall of the Maoists. What Dahal needs is a history lesson on the story of a divine king who locked up party leaders and clamped down on press freedom. The rest is history, but it is my duty to remind him what happened: the king was demoted from being the country’s most powerful man to a tax-paying civilian in a mere two years, by people power. Grow up and open your eyes, Supreme Commander.

Name withheld, email

It is ridiculous that political parties that lost the elections like the NC and UML want to hang on to power. It is shameful and a disgrace. Grow up, political leaders.

Ram, United States

It seems the Maoist leadership can use a little of what they call critical thinking and analysis (‘The middle way’, #403). Acting on impulse first and thinking later has led to widespread criticism of the Maoists, especially the Maoist leadership. As they have emerged as the biggest winner in the polls it is high time that they think before they speak or act. The Maoists must use their electoral success to make a mark rather than making a mockery of themselves.

Apil Gurung, Australia
KISHOR PRADHAN
in KUALA LUMPUR

S
uraj Man Sunuwar paid Rs 82,000 to a recruiter in Kathmandu for a job in Malaysia. “You are going to work in an American restaurant with an American salary,” is what the agent told him.

When he got to Kuala Lumpur in October, the 26-year-old from Taplejung found that his salary at a McDonalds franchise was almost three times less than the RM 1,700 (Rs 35,000) a month that the recruiter had promised. The Nepali recruiter and his Malaysian partner pocketed the rest of the money.

Sunuwar (pictured) has a basic room and gets burgers and fries for meals. “I still spend RM 200 a month on food—I can’t eat burgers every day,” he says.

Nepalis have a good reputation in Malaysia, mainly because of the British Gurkha soldiers who fought the Japanese during World War II and helped quell a Communist rebellion here in the 1960s.

Many families stayed behind after the war and the Nepali settlements here still celebrate Nepali festivals, but third-generation children are assimilating into Malaysian society.

Despite being cheated on his pay, Sunuwar and workers like him are relatively better off than others who have no jobs when they arrive or are given difficult jobs in oil palm plantations. And although kitchen staff like Sunuwar earn a lot less than Malaysians doing the same jobs despite having a legal work permit, Nepalis without proper papers are exploited more severely.

What partially makes up for all this is that Nepali immigrant workers in Malaysia are respected for their integrity and hard work. A second-generation Indian Malaysian worker, while complaining about discrimination against his own group, told us: “Nepalis are the most honest and disciplined workers in Malaysia.”

Malaysia remains the destination most Nepali migrant workers head for, followed by Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Nepal’s Department of Labour says 41,614 Nepalis have left for Malaysia in the past 10 months, compared with 74,019 last year. The number of Nepalis headed for Qatar last year was 62,705.

The place where Nepalis congregate in Kuala Lumpur is the Kotaraya neighbourhood where every other signboard is in Nepali for restaurants, phone call centres, money transfers and even curio shops and businesses. A stroll through Kotaraya is like walking in New Baneswor. Kiosks sell Nepali magazines and newspapers, and it is clear some Nepalis are doing extremely well.

For somebody like Sunuwar, to find a job in Malaysia and to earn enough to send money home is quite an achievement. If there was better regulation and safeguards were in place to prevent exploitation, he could send back even more.

The advent of a republic back home was celebrated by the Nepali immigrant community here. The labour union GEFONT has a chapter in KL to organise Nepali immigrant workers protect their interests and rights. The current Nepali ambassador is a Maoist political appointee, and there are always groups of Nepali workers at the embassy with job problems.

But only the most severely cheated go to the embassy to file a complaint. People like Sunuwar have no option but to accept their recruiters’ conditions as a given. They know their employers are in a strong position and they don’t want to risk being deported. A Nepali worker who took part in a protest rally here last year was sent back to Nepal by the authorities.

There are around 100 Nepalis working at McDonalds outlets in the Kuala Lumpur area, mostly spread out in four to five clusters across Damansara, Ampang Park, KLCC and Petaling Jaya. Sunuwar and his friends hope the new government in Nepal will tighten controls over recruiters so future migrant workers aren’t cheated.

“Until that happens, the money you save is just not worth leaving home for,” he says with a hint of regret.

With additional reporting by Satish Jung Shah.

The complete radio story on Nepali migrant workers in Malaysia is available at: www.panosradiosouthasia.org

Let them eat burgers
Nepali workers chase the American dream, in Malaysia

For Nepali workers chasing the American dream in Malaysia, life is not always as glamorous as they were led to believe.

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Kagbeni in Shanghai

Quakers water festival

Kagbeni has been selected for the Asian New Talent Competition Section at the 11th Shanghai International Film Festival to be held between 14-22 June. Katti will be accompanied by the film from China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan—India for the Best Director and Best Film Award category. A five-member panel of jury, including Korean film director Sang-jin Yang of My-Sassy Giraffe and Buddhadeb Das Gupta are in the panel.

Surya Nepal masters

Shamim Khan managed a 11-shot victory to carry home the title at the Nepal Masters at Rs 3,24,000 at Surya Nepal Masters 2008. In the international amateur event, Bangladesh emerged victorious by beating the opposition by a huge margin of 36 strokes. The duo of Shekawat Hussain and Shahid aggregated 579 to lead Bangladesh to victory while the duo of Rupak Acharya and Tashi Ghale helped Nepal A finish second.

Fête de la Musique

Music Day. The program will take place during three days on 18, 19 and 21 June. There will be music workshops at various venues on 18 June, round table on the music’s situation in Nepal on 19 June and international music day concert on 21 June.

EURO with Carlsberg

The最强 scoring team number one to discover the best food products and to give away the man of the match award. All the expenses will be covered by the company.

Info Trade 2008

Venu Global management has organized a world-class trade show Bhrikuti Mandap until 17 June. The exhibition, sponsored by Brother Company, will showcase computers, printers, UPS and inverters, education advising centers and organisations, AOL, mobile phones and various other communication technologies.

NEW PRODUCTS

NOODLES: Wai Wai has introduced cup noodles that are packed in a microwave safe pack and will be ready in two minutes. The noodles, which are packed in a microwave safe pack and come with a fork inside, is priced at Rs. 20.

Those energy blues

It’s more than just another fuel price hike

I am quite hopeful that the new government will work for the welfare and development of the people because it is the people’s own government.

Dr K C Chakrabarty, Chairman and Managing Director of India’s Punjab National Bank, talks to Nepali Times about his bank’s investment in Everest Bank and how he sees the future for banking the New Nepal.

My Sassy Girl

Kabeni

Quest Entertainment produced, Bhushan Dahal directed

Shahid aggregated 579 to lead Bangladesh to victory while the duo of Rupak Acharya and Tashi Ghale helped Nepal A finish second.

ECONOMIC SENSE

Artha Beed

The truth is people are tired of opening a quartet of their lives in queues, they have seen the high price of the booming grey market, and they understand the long delays, the interminable businesses having to close down.

The, also government the assured the hilly people by the help of sector would be opened up to private investment. But, like most government pronouncements made in the last, the details remain unknown. With strong government-level contracts between IOC and NOC, and with the Indian government granting IOC a monopoly to supply petroleum products from India, one is left to wonder why private sector players will be able to participate.

For the moment, it’s the transport operators who will benefit most from the price rises. As in the past, there is no correlation between the fuel price increase and the hike in bus and taxi fares. The transport companies — who function like state enterprises in socialist countries — are already making unilateral pricing decisions.

The sector remains one of the most unregulated, and has got away with sharply practices time and again in the past. For every rupee increase in the fuel price, how much should transport fares and weight bands should be a way to control this. Now is the time for bus and taxi customers to question every extra rupee they are charged.

And at this price, the consumer should get a quality product. It is time the petroleum dealers stopped the shabby practice of adulteration and showed themselves to be purveyors of high quality products.

It is not just about quality, but also quantity. Government regulations concerning both fuel quality and the calibration of pump dispensers have always been weak, for obvious reasons which this Beed need not dwell on.

Globally, oil prices will continue to rise as investment in real estate has taken a hit with the subprime crisis. Hedge funds and private equity funds are under constant pressure to increase their returns. However, the high returns they have promised investors, so speculation has now shifted to commodities including oil.

Oil cost $24 a barrel in 2001 and $60 a barrel is near-sixfold in the past seven years. Those analysts who predicted the $200 barrel may yet be proven right, while others predict a return of global oil prices: our GDP is lower than the marketing budgets of some oil firms. But while Nepal cannot do much about the price or supply, it can surely do something on the demand side.

Agricultural development of poor country like ours should be looking at hydropower development more seriously than ever, perhaps even allowing merchant plants to be built without a Power Purchase Agreement in place. The cost of hydropower is low compared to the cost of petroleum products, and the time will come when hydropower prices will be aligned to oil pricing. Product substitution will eventually take place: people will use electricity for domestic cooking and heating, and will buy hybrid or electric vehicles.

It is also time to explore energy from wind, solar and sun, which can all be developed for less than the cost of oil at $20 a barrel. Energy and water management in the 21st century are going to be just as important as the management of state boundaries was in the 19th and 20th centuries. Failure will bring disaster. Any takers? 

www.arthabeed.com

Nepal Times: What has been Punjab National Bank’s experience in Nepal so far?

KC Chakrabarty: Our experience has been through Everest Bank. When we came into this particular arrangement — we invested and also provided management and technical support—Everest Bank’s performance started improving and its share price went up. Its viability has improved more than that, we are happy to be able to provide a large number of product services and banking technology to our customers at Everest Bank.

Where do you see the opportunities for growth for banks in Nepal?

There is a lot of room for improvement in infrastructure, and in agriculture a lot of things have to be done. There are many Nepalis outside Nepal, so we can develop remittance products and also meet their requirements—especially small credit requirements—and what we call ‘lending operations’ when people go abroad. For example, we now give educational loans to a large number of students who are going abroad to study. When there is economic growth, the scope is much greater.

How confident are you about the country’s political stability?

All countries pass through these ups and downs. But I must congratulate the Nepalese people for the way they have changed the system. It was a very peaceful transformation of power. I am quite hopeful that the new government will work for the welfare and development of the people because it is the people’s own government.

You said there are opportunities in agriculture. What sort of opportunities are you talking about?

That is what local people in Everest Bank and policymakers have to decide. They should find out how banks, development agencies and farmers can work together and bring technology into farming. In Punjab we have done this in a big way. We create farming training centres and work with government departments to improve the cropping patterns to enhance farmers’ productivity. But the basic thing is that your credit delivery system must suit the farmers.

How serious is the problem of non-performing loans in the bank?

I think for Everest Bank we have no problem. Non-performing loans are due to a non-performing administration. All banks should know how to manage non-performing assets because that comes with the business. And we have given sufficient advice to Everest Bank on how to manage them.

The subprime mortgage crisis in the US recently rattle the banking sector there. Do you see any risk of a similar crisis happening here in Nepal?

I don’t think so. That type of thing is not going to happen today in this part of the world because our economy is not that developed.

Where do you see Nepal’s banking sector going in the next few years?

I would say the future of the world is in the East. China is developing, India is growing, and trade relations between them are improving. And Nepal is in between the two of them, so I think Nepal will also benefit.

A lot of young people have emigrated from Nepal. How is that an advantage?

It will give them a better education and improve their skills. Right now, they might only do menial jobs, but if you go through the government they can get them some time more salary.

You said Punjab National Bank has been working with the government on agricultural productivity. How can local banks do that here?

Agricultural development cannot happen just through the government. The development administration has to provide some support for irrigation facilities, good quality seed, good quality fertilizers, the land development effort. Small farmers cannot do it all on their own. If the government is not ready to do that then it must involve the private sector if the need be.
From The Nepali Press

Goodbye Mr Shah

Editorial in Kantipur, 12 June

By accepting the decision of an elected assembly to declare Nepal a republic and by vacating the palace in the stipulated time, ex-King Gyanendra’s moves have been proper, correct and satisfactory. This has allowed the formality to be completed for the transition from monarchy to republic.

The king put on a brave, smiling face at the chaotic press conference at the palace on Wednesday. He addressed his remarks to “Nepali brothers and sisters”, not to his “subjects” anymore. His statement was polite, dignified and hopeful. He dwelled on the royal massacre, his assets and his record over the past seven years as king. He tried to justify his actions, saying it was to “restore peace in the then Hindu nation” and that it was unsuccessful for “various reasons”. He didn’t elaborate on those reasons, and that was the big gap in his remarks. He did not dwell on his inability to understand the public mood, he turned the country’s politics upside down in seven years, he violated civic rights, and he sidelined the political parties.

Even so, by accepting the implementation of a republic he has shown considerable understanding. He can now devote his life in whatever profession, business or service he chooses as a citizen to help the country. But if he tries to rally together the political losers in any way, he will not get the same goodwill and respect with which he has been treated.

Editorial in Naya Patrika, 12 June

As former King Gyanendra read a 17-minute speech and left the room thanking the press for coming, it was a new chapter in political history, not only of Nepal but in the world. In history, apart from a few exceptions, a republic was introduced only after the king had either been killed or forced to leave the country. But our former king read his written speech to the press and tv channels broadcasted it live. With his acceptance of the republic, any doubt about the implementation of the republic became clear. The republic has now been approved. In his statement he spent much time justifying his past deeds, but he also accepted the people’s verdict.

Nepal has presented to the world the exemplary exit of a king and the institutionalisation of a republic. It shows the political maturity of the people, political parties and to some extent the former king. A conventional political force has formally vanished from the Nepali political scene.

Now the onus is on the elected political parties to end the political dispute and decide the way ahead. Political parties in the past used to team up sometimes with the palace, sometimes with foreigners, to achieve their interests. But now a new environment has been created for the political parties where they can prioritise national issues for themselves and work to achieve them. This has bolstered nationalism and reduced the risk of foreign interference in Nepali politics. As a citizen, this is also the victory of Gyanendra Shah and his family.

Pitamber Sigdel and Rupesh Acharya in Annapurna Post, 12 June

At 5.30PM on Wednesday, Kashi Bahal in Narayanhiti Palace was packed with journalists. The former king looked his composed self and looked no different from any political figure in a press conference.

Standing amongst such a large crowd of journalists, Gyanendra joined his hands in a Namaste until he sat down. Seeing the room, previously used for the prime minister’s oath taking, teeming with journalists he was perplexed for a while.

For the first five minutes he could not speak due to the shuttering of the cameras. Even after he had asked them to stop clicking pictures and put his red framed glasses on the table, the crowd did not stop. It was only after he raised both his hands and asked for silence that the crowd quietened. A calm Gyanendra looked very sentimental when he talked about the royal massacre and the charges against his family. There was no anger, hostility and sadness in his speech.

During the 15-minute speech, his gaze hovered around the journalists although it was primarily centred on the paper on the table. When the journalists asked him questions, he smiled and said: “No questions, thank you for coming!”
New budget
Dinesh Karki in Deshantar, 8 June

Although the parties have still not decided on a new government, the Ministry of Finance has started working on the first budget for the new republic. The ministry has received the necessary papers from all other ministries and is currently in discussion with the respective parties.

According to a source in the Ministry: “Even if the government is late in getting the budget approved in the parliament, the budget will be out by 10 July.” 90 percent of the programs in the budget will be according to the old projects and as directed by the interim plan while 10 percent of the programs will be decided by the party that leads the government.

According to the source, the total budget is yet to be decided but is expected to be around Rs 187 billion. The budget makers are busy trimming down the expenses for development and administration. However, the ministry is facing difficulties in deciding on policies that the government does not need to invest in due to the absence of a new government.

After the announcement of a republic, the income received by the king and the royal family has been completely cut back. In the last fiscal year, of the Rs 130 million allocated for the royal family, Rs 25 million was spent. However, the budget will allocate money for the employees of the palace, and for the repair and protection of the palace.

The source said the ministries led by the Maoists have asked for enormous amounts of money despite the obvious lack of any new programs. For example, the Ministry for Local Development led by Dev Gurung has asked for Rs 16 billion but the officers of the Ministry have concluded that Rs 12 billion will be sufficient. The Ministry for Planning and Works has also asked for a huge amount but the Ministry of Finance is expected to increase the amount so as to finance the extension of roads.

There is widespread anticipation about who will lead the Ministry of Finance. Although the Maoists have claimed that they will head the ministry, they have not been able to put forward a single capable candidate for such a sensitive job. While Baburam Bhattarai might be the next finance minister, it will look like a compromise for the Maoist second-in-command who has his eyes set on the presidency or the post of prime minister. In such a situation Ram Sharan Mahat, who has led the ministry before, might turn out to be the best option.

Land lies fallow
Deepak Gyawali in Samaya, 6-12 June

BUTWAL—Lack of fuel for tractors and water pumps has put farmers in the west in a bind. At a time when they should be planting seeds, farms lie fallow and barren. Just when the world is heading towards a food crisis, it seems Nepal too will not be far behind.

Bhimlal Neupane, a farmer from Murgiya in Rupandehi District, describes this as the worst crisis yet. “There are no oxen to plough the fields and there is no fuel to put into our tractors.” In recent years, farmers in the Terai have started using tractors, instead of animals, to plough their fields. Fuel is required not just for the tractors but also for the water pumps that feed water into the fields. Says farmer Prem Thapa: “There is no fuel to run the water pumps and even if we wanted to work by rainfall, there is no fuel for the tractors. Now what do we do?”

According to the agriculture office, 75 percent of the fields were ploughed by tractors in the past years. One hectare of land requires at least one and a half litres of diesel. According to Rupandehi’s agriculture office, out of the 85,122 hectares of arable land in the district, around 11,000 hectares are fed by water from tube wells and pumps. Some places use electric tube wells but the majority run on diesel. Even those which run on electricity are at the mercy of loadshedding.

The lack of fuel has put a halt to all agricultural activities. “There is no kerosene to cook food. Where do we get fuel to plough and irrigate?” says Bhujauli’s Prabhu Prasad Chaudhary.
**The word from the top of the world**

**SHAILEE BASNET**

“Will I ever climb Mt Everest?” I had asked a palm reader two years ago, unsure of what the future held for me. But I hadn’t waited around for an answer.

As a reporter for Himal Khabarpatrika, I was interviewing Susmita Maskey in July 2007 when she told me about the first Inclusive Women’s Sagarmatha Expedition organised by the Climbers Club for the following spring. I didn’t think twice about joining.

In the months that followed, the fundraising was more difficult than the training. But we finally flew out to Lukla on 17 April and I couldn’t help thinking what our return down the same trail would be like. The closer one gets to Camp I and the higher we went, the more difficult minor tasks became. We started using bottled oxygen at Camp III and pushed higher to IV. We crossed the crumbling limestone of the Yellow Band, after which I had expected things to get easier. But to my disappointment it was the sheer rock of the Genesis Spur that and it seemed like we’d never get to the South Col.

At the saddle we were nearly at 8,000m. This is where people turn back, where accidents occur, where there is a thin line and thin air between life and death, and I was feeling uneasy about something, but I couldn’t figure out what it was.

We slept for a few hours and then, at 10AM, everyone in our team left for the summit. My climbing guide Pasang and I were late to start out. It must have been one in the morning when a falling rock grazed Pasang, tearing his summit suit. We had to turn back.

Along the ridge, we came across a climber trying to revive a fallen team-comrade. As we got closer, I heard someone saying into the walkie-talkie: “He’s dead.” The Swiss climber was in a fetal position, he had summited without oxygen but died of edema on the way down. We sat with him for more than an hour, and bounded down to camp. Witnessing a death made me wonder whether the mountain is a demon or divine. I still had to go for the summit, so forced myself to think it was a god.

It was a cold, unpleasant night at the South Col. I was wondering if this was the end of the climb for me. The next morning I heard that five of my friends—Nawang Phuti Sherpa, Nimdoma Sherpa, Susmita Maskey, Pujan Acharya and Maya Gurung—had made it to the top. That filled me with immense joy and confidence. Now I knew I could do it.

We set off again. Climbing in the dark, I kept wondering when I’d ever reach the famous Balcony. When we finally got there, Nima Kanchha Sherpa changed my oxygen cylinder. We caught up with Usha, Phurba, Diki and Da Kipa and climbed together.

There was a queue of people on the summit ridge. This was the famous Everest traffic jam. We moved up slowly in the dark, Makalu emerged as a silhouette against the eastern sky. The moon and stars were dazzling above, but the horizon was tinged light blue as dawn broke. The sun was up by the time we got to the South Summit.

Then came the notorious Hillary Step. Without our climbing guides it would have taken forever. After that, I could see the summit and started racing up to it. It was a gentle top with a cornice on the edge, and I was so excited I didn’t even look at the summit. Pasang and I danced with Asha, and removed my oxygen mask for a picture.

This was the most fulfilling moment of my life. I sang a song and danced with Asha, and looked out across the rest of the world. Soon it was time to head down. It was tiring, but the sense of achievement kept me going. Back at Lukla, I thought: “100 per cent success, best possible result.”

Some of the world’s best climbers try to reach a dying mountaineer on Annapurna

**SHAILEE BASNET**

8,460m peak just a few days earlier he had ventured higher than the 8,000m mark. Yet, despite his state of near exhaustion, he was unable to refuse the Sherpa’s urgent pleas. He got up, packed and immediately left for the airport prepared, without hesitation, to go straight back to India.

As Urubko and the Russian Sergey Bogomolov, another recovering from severe frostbite after an 8,000m climb just two weeks earlier, boarded the first helicopter out of Kathmandu armed with bottles of oxygen and a medical kit, about 160km to the west high up on Annapurna, the Spanish climber Hakki Ochoa de Olza (pictured, right) lay motionless in his tent.

Unfurling on the mountains around him was an unprecedented international rescue operation conducted by some of the world’s elite mountaineers. Three teams were eventually mobilised on Annapurna last month, drawn from nearly a dozen nationalities. All were co-operating with the single aim of bringing back one of their own from a height so great that helicopters are unable to fly there and from which few, if any, casualties ever return alive.

Ochoa’s expedition ran into trouble the day before Urubko’s early morning call. Heavily frost-bitten and having deemed himself ill-prepared for the final push into the summit, he told his support team over a faltering satellite phone, “I don’t want to take risks with my hands in such a poor state.”

Ochoa’s decision to go back was a calculated response fitting for a climber who, at the age of 40, already enjoyed a towering reputation in the highly competitive world of high-altitude adventure. The Navarran-born mountaineer, a veteran of 30 previous Himalayan expeditions, was tantalisingly close to completing his ambition of climbing all 14 of the world’s 8,000m-plus peaks. Annapurna, at 8,091m, was to be his 13th.

Half an hour after he and his
climbing companion, the Romanian Horia Colibasanu, took the decision to descend to a lower camp on the mountain’s treacherous south face. Ochoa suffered a catastrophic stroke. The Spaniard began coughing and vomiting before slipping into a state of semi-consciousness. To make matters worse, the team’s third member, the Russian Alexey Bolotov, was missing and the weather conditions were beginning to deteriorate. Colibasanu, himself a highly experienced climber who had partnered Ochoa on many perilous expeditions in the past, did what he could. He made an emergency call to base camp where the leading Swiss climber Ueli Steck was about to embark on his own expedition.

Under darkening skies, Steck, who a few months earlier had set a new speed record for climbing the north face of the Eiger, set off with his climbing partner and fellow Swiss Simon Anthamatten.

The helicopter carrying Urulko and Bolognolo from Kathmandu had touched down briefly in Pokhara, picking up Don Bowie. The Canadian-born expedition this spring. The Basque expedition on Kangchenjunga, the third highest mountain in the world. The expedition was unsuccessful due to bad weather and friction between the Poles and the Basques. In spite of being very young and inexperienced, Ochoa reached the highest point in the degraded expedition but was forced back by bad weather at an altitude of 7,800m.

He went back to Kangchenjunga in 1987 but the expedition was once again unsuccessful. For Iñaki Kangchenjunga remained the magic mountain, which, he lived, would have been the last of the 14 eight-thousanders he wanted to climb. “Kangch has fascinated me since I first set foot on it 14 years ago and that is why I want to keep it for the end,” he once said.

By the time Annapurna took his life on 23 May (see adjoining piece) Iñaki had climbed 12 of the world’s 8,000m peaks. However, the Pamirians, who kept his ‘Seventies look’ long hair and roses of earrings until the very end, was much more than a climber; he was a philosopher, a bull runner and a poet. His website (www.navarra8000.com) is not only a chronicle of his mountaineering feats, but a collection of poetry and messages from friends and family.

A message dedicated to Anatoli Boukreev, the strong Ukrainian climber who died in an avalanche on Annapurna on Christmas Day in 1997, is titled: ‘A song for Anatoli’ and reads: ‘Even though he trained like an animal he was a very modest and sensitive person, who was very entertaining and a good friend to his friends. This could have been a description of himself.’

Friendship meant much more to him than climbing. During an interview with the internet portal ExplorersWeb he said: “Friendship is much more meaningful than mountains, and each peak must be climbed in a worthy way, not as a mere part of a collection.” During his 28 years of Himalayan climbing Iñaki had made many friends and was very much liked and respected. When the news broke that he had succumbed to high altitude sickness, the mountaineering world was shocked. His friends couldn’t believe that he didn’t make it, he just seemed so strong and invincible.

Hotel Thamel, the small, friendly lodge where the Spaniard used to stay, put up a huge poster with the climber in tribute. “It was always good to see Iñaki. He was always friendly and no matter how busy he was, he always had time for a chat,” recalls Anis at the hotel.

Iñaki did not only love Nepal for its mountains, he was also fond of its people and he even spoke some Nepali. “Languages are important to me and I can connect to the Nepalis a lot better when I speak their language,” he once said. He also had a lot of respect for the Sherpas, who to him were more like friends than expedition employees.

In his last dispatch on his website he showed his interest and respect for Buddhism. He mentions the Tibetan nomads, who cry at the wind each time they reach a summit or cross a mountain pass: “Los Gyros”. It means: the Gods have won.

Bill Bierling is a mountaineering journalist based in Kathmandu and works with the Himalayan archivist, Elizabeth Hawley. She also leads mountaineering expeditions to smaller Himalayan peaks.
Irrelevant republic

In Lele, it makes little difference whether Nepal has a king or not

MALLIKA ARYAL in LELE

“Monarchy, democracy, republic—it’s all the same for poor people like us. I don’t have time to talk politics,” says Dhruba Kumar Sunar, a 41-year-old jeweller in Lele, 30km from Kathmandu.

Two weeks after Nepal became a republic, Sunar is more concerned about meeting a work deadline for a pendant he is crafting. “This is what buys our meals,” he explains.

In Lele, unlike Kathmandu, there were no boisterous celebrations when Nepal finally ditched its monarchy. The town is part of the Lalitpur-1 constituency, where Maoist leader Babha Man Pun Magar defeated Nepali Congress politician Uday Shamsher Bana by more than 1,000 votes in the recent election.

“No many in these villages know that Nepal is now a republic, and even those who do know don’t really understand what it means,” says Sunar. He used to be a staunch supporter of UML but joined the Maoist party a few years ago and is now the Lele secretary of the Maoist Dalit Liberation Front.

“There was a time during the war when we were all scared of the Maoists. I joined because the party had done a lot to end discrimination against Dalits and other suppressed groups in the village.”

Sunar remembers the days when his family were forbidden from sitting with high-caste people in local cafes and he would have to wash his glass after drinking tea.

His wife Laxmi says it is too early to tell if living in a democratic republic will be any different. “It is not enough that the king is gone,” she says, choosing her words carefully. “The political parties have to prove to the people that they are better than him.”

Ram Prasad Ghimire, a 65-year-old priest at Lele’s Hindu temple, receives worshippers from the city. Ghimire knows the former king Gyanendra has packed his bags and vacated the palace. “Political parties made mistakes, but the poor king was blamed for it,” Ghimire says.

He is disappointed with the way the king has been made to leave, but understands the people’s desire for a republic. “Does living in a republic mean we let go of our culture and a 240-year-old monarchy?”

Ram Prasad Ghimire knows the former king has struggled to make ends meet, with a wife and three small children to feed and clothe. The government gave him a small compensation payment for his son’s death but he no longer trusts those in positions of power. “I don’t care whether Nepal is a republic, or whether the king has left the palace,” he says. “My son is gone, my life is over and all I worry about is whether I have earned enough today to feed my family.”

Murder most foul

Millionaire’s death to benefit local charity

DAMBAR KRISHNA SHRESTHA

Standing up on stage to deliver a speech is nothing new to Shekhar Golcha, head of the Golcha Organisation. But taking to the stage in a murder mystery—where he ends up dead—was something he had never tried before.

So when members of the Elite Ladies Circle-2 asked him to take part in a play to raise funds for charity, he jumped at the chance. “I have always wanted to act but never really had the opportunity,” Golcha said. “This time everything fell neatly into place. Although I have never acted before, it has been a good experience.”

Playing a character named Claude Faithwell, a ruthless 50-year-old millionaire who has just ditched his pregnant secretary after a three-year affair, Golcha quickly finds he’s a deeply unpopular man. His former AIR hostess wife (Prema Golcha) knows of his affair but doesn’t care because she’s having one of her own with a hunky blackmailing masseur (Amit Began).

His alcoholic, heavily indebted stepbrother (Sunil Mehta) hates him because their father left all his wealth to Claude. And his secretary’s husband (Prerna Golcha) knows of his affair but is not going to reveal all. She was impressed with Shekhar Golcha’s dedication to the role. “He has tried to get into the character and acted really well. It doesn’t really look like he is acting for the first time.”

Murder at Faithwell Manor will take place at Hotel Soaltee Crowne Plaza on 20 June at 7PM. Tickets Rs 1,500.

INFO-TRADE 2008

Date: June 13 - 17, 2008, (9AM - 5PM)
Venue: Exhibition Hall, Bhiruki Mandap, The Complete ICE Technology Expo
Exhibition Profiles:
- Audio Visual Technology
- Software & Latest Technology Equipments
- Computer & Web Designing
- Communication & Mobile Phone
- UPS & Inverters
- And many more...

Organised by: VENUS
Website: www.venusnepal.com

Prepared by:
Eager hands shoot up as the instructor calls for someone to illustrate how an angry man would look in a drawing. A student in the front row walks up to the whiteboard and places a simple zigzag line on the side of the man’s head. It is only when the students raise their hands and shake them to applaud their friend’s efforts that you realise they are all deaf.

“The deaf world is a visual world,” says Sarah Giri, who led a recent cartooning workshop for the deaf at the National Campus in Balkumari. “Everything is picture, action and no sound. The deaf look at the world as a cartoon book.”

With the help of cartoonist Yogesh Khapangi, the workshop aimed to provide the deaf with a skill that might lead to employment, or at least personal enjoyment. Most of the 27 participants were students from the school for the deaf in Naxal. Their deaf hands, which guided the markers with such ease and confidence, showed no sign of them being new to drawing cartoons as they displayed an uncanny knack for expressing action and sensation visually.

Giri, who calls herself culturally deaf and has been working with the deaf for eight years, has introduced deaf culture and sign language on the National Campus in an attempt to raise people’s awareness.

For Khapangi it was a totally new experience. “When Sarah first put forth this idea, I didn’t think I could do it because I don’t know sign language,” he said. “But when she offered to act as the translator I agreed to do it.”

He was delighted with the outcome. “They showed more interest than the hearing people do. They learned almost six months’ worth of course work in the span of one week. During classes there was obviously no noise and their concentration was commendable. I have discovered about eight or ten students who can survive in the professional world.”

Sunil Ale Magar, 23, who is studying for a Bachelor of Education degree, described the workshop as an experience of a lifetime. Another trainee, 25-year-old Rashmi Amatya, was offered a job on the spot after the editor of Chunamuna children’s magazine saw her cartoons.

“Learning cartooning was so much fun that I wouldn’t mind becoming a cartoonist myself, but I want to be a good teacher,” said Rashmi, who is an artist and has made books for children before.

“Some day, I would like to go to different parts of the world and meet different artists.”

As Sarah Giri pointed out, the deaf in Nepal are not looking for charity. They want acceptance, recognition and an opportunity to work with the hearing. They want to be regarded as contributing members of the society.
In the corner of the world where I grew up, my childhood was bombarded with images of masculinity of a particular American type: the muscle-bound Herculean, patriotic and fair-minded. He was the shirt-ripping Hulk Hogan, the relentless Rambo, Arnold in various incarnations, even He-Man, from the animated cartoon whose bookish alter-ego is a cause for derision. My cousins, siblings and I would play with the He-Man action figures, imitating the wrestling moves and postures of WWF: body slams, clotheslines and flips. We would fully embroil our minds with those violent fantasies that are particularly masculine and concurrently childish. In these ways we had a very similar childhood to the Bell brothers who feature in Christopher Bell’s debut documentary—Bigger Stronger Faster—with the significant exception of the obsessive body-building and steroid use. The documentary is an entertaining and revealing documentary about steroid use and its intersection with one family.

In delving into the culture and discourse of steroid use, Bell’s argument is not complete. Instead it is episodic, digressive and not entirely persuasive in its puerile defence of steroid use: What’s the harm? Everyone does it. Yet nary a minute goes by without some interesting insight that sometimes explosively confirms our suspicions and at other times completely upends how we generally think about things. One minute he is exposing the unregulated health supplement industry, revealing the sham before-and-after picture on the labels. The next he is embarrassing a senator who spearheaded the legal attacks on steroid use. It’s all delivered with that faux-innocence that Michael Moore first mastered, and hits with the same humor, relying on the rich source material available for plunder.

The documentary triggers the now familiar discomfort that accompanies intimate revelations in personal narrative. That the two Bell brothers are users makes for compelling movie-making and an insightful thread in the narrative. But it also trips into thorny terrain. Smelly, the younger Bell, coaches in a high school where he outwardly extols the virtues of fair play and rebuffs the use of performance-enhancing drugs. There are even clips of his students declaring that he’s clean and natural. Likewise, he promises to stop using to his worried wife so to assuage any complication with his fertility. But then he admits to camera he will probably resume soon after.

These revelations must certainly have had reverberations after the film was made. But the hurt and fear in the faces of his family as they speak about the steroid in their lives is an intentionally subversive counterpoint. The film succeeds superbly in examining the masculine anxieties of an American psyche fed by a society that esteems those values even as it ostensibly bans steroids. Its thesis is concisely stated in its subtitle—The Side Effects of Being American. But of course, this isn’t an exclusively American phenomenon. Tied tightly to many nations’ self-image is that muscular avatar embodied by an athletic ideal.

And as the documentary points out, the use of steroids began with Olympian athletes of the opposing Cold War superpowers. One has to wonder if the expressed Olympian ideals about fraternity and sportsmanship hide the more base reality (as Bell’s informants claim) of countries engaging in a national-level pissing-contest of male egos.

Now, with the Cold War over, the US still earns the lion’s share of medals but China is closing fast and would dearly love to top the medals table at this year’s Olympics. It is discomforting to think that the urge to be bigger, faster and stronger is not simply a side-effect of being an American, but of a human of any nationality.

**A bigger, stronger, faster**

Director: Christopher Bell

2008. PG-13. 1hr 45min.
An attractive new venue deserves to pull in the live-music punters

VIVA LA SALSA: (l-r) Instructors Rohit Saud, Katia Verreault, Binayek Das Shrestha and Subima Shrestha. take to the dance floor

An increasingly popular, the Bollywood dance—no evidence in movies—is what most urban youth are interested in. Clubs echo with Bollywood lines as boys and girls alike gyrate to Dard-e-disco. But there is a dance style to suit every taste.

“While dancing, the mind and body are in tune,” says Subima Shrestha, kathak instructor for the academy’s workshop. Kathak, the classical traditional dance of Northern India, varies from fiery to submissive, combines intricate footwork with graceful hand movements, and teaches perfect balance.

Caribbean dance forms studied at the academy include the cha-cha, bachata, merengue and rueda, all of them full of energy, vibrant and alive with foot-tapping music and breathtaking movements.

These are what Verreault calls “social dances,” so the instructors encourage participants to interact with each other and with different teachers to adopt varied styles. “It’s important for salsa students to be exposed to a variety of instructors,” she says. “Everyone has their own style, and exposure is the only way to learn different styles.”

Verreault believes dance is something everyone can do. The academy has special sessions for those over 50, for those who don’t want to dance with a partner, or those who just want to dance to stay fit. Late-night classes are available for those people who prefer to work all evening.

The Salsa and More workshop, as its name suggests, will give participants a grounding in salsa, merengue, cha-cha, bachata, rueda de casino, line dancing, kathak, Latin ballroom and Bollywood freestyle. The international team of instructors include Verreault and Binayek Das Shrestha for salsa; Loudi Vinya from Bangalore to teach salsa, merengue, bachatas and rueda de casino; Vik Malipatna from the Philippines for Latin ballroom, Subima Shrestha for kathak and Rohit Saud for Bollywood freestyle. Students will be able to continue with each style at the academy once the workshop is over.

Verreault says more than 400 students have passed through their academy, which used to be at the Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory, leads Trouble Clef but often changes the lineup to bring in new musicians. His signature style of saxophone jazz has become symbolic of the Hyatt Regency, as Trouble Clef often perform at the hotel’s events.

It’s not just the music and the atmosphere at Hyjazz that offer a world of difference from Thamel. The range of drinks is excellent, with the rice wine Marigina highly recommended. And the nearby restaurant Roxy will be providing a special menu of handmade pasta throughout July. This is a place that deserves to succeed. •

Pranaya SJB Rana

Salsa and More dance workshop at the Salsa Dance Academy, 23-28 June. Rs 1,500. For more information on timings and schedules, visit www.salsanepal.com or call 4420604.

Salsa and More dance evening, 7PM on 27 June at the Dharan Hall, Hotel Yak and Yeti. Rs 600 per person including one complimentary drink, Rs 300 for workshop participants.
EXHIBITIONS
- South Asian Fresh Graduate Artists’ Residency, residency of art works by South Asian fresh graduates until 15 June, 11AM-6PM at Nepal Art Council, Bhakathemahal. 9842179514
- MaterialScapes 6th solo collage painting exhibition by Gaurav Shrestha, until 30 June 10AM-6PM at Gallery 32 at Dent Inn, Heritage Plaza.Kamaladi. 4241943
- Tatva multimedia and collage exhibition by Chirag Bangdel until 18 July. 5.30 PM at Bakery Café, Pulchok.

EVENTS
- Baran aqan film by Majid Majid, 17 June 6.30 PM at Lazimpait Gallery Cafe. 4426549
- Fete de la musique music workshops, round-table and concerts presented by Alliance Francaise, 18, 19 and 21 June. www.alliancefrancaise.org.np
- 6th Annual Wine Festival until September at Kijny’s, Jyathla. 4205440. Artistic Dance of Nepal presented by Kelamandapa, every Tuesday 7PM at Hotel Vajra and every Saturday 11AM at Patan Museum.

MUSIC
- 26th Yala Maya Classic with Chand Prasad Kafle and Hornath Gajapathyra on June 16, 5PM at Yala Maya Kendra, Patan Dhoka. 5853767
- Live karaoke with special thai cuisine, every Wednesday at Holiday Karaa’s, Restaurant and Bar, Lazimpait. 4445731
- Rudra night fusion and classical Nepali music by Shyam Nepali and friends, every Friday, 7PM at Le Meridien, Gokarna. 445212
- Sufi music by Hemanta Rana, every Friday at 7.30 PM at Dhaba Restaurant and Bar, Thapathali.
- Bankey 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 Narayani Complex, B.P. 5521408

DINING
- Handmade Pasta experience handmade pasta at the Rox Restaurant, Hyatt Regency until 20 June. 7.10-30 PM. 4489301
- Jaiwab tandoori and kabab festival, 7-10 PM every Friday at the Hotel Himalaya. Rs 550.
- Home made pasta at Al fresco, Soalteee Crown Plaza. 4273999
- Hot summer spicy food at the Jalan Jalan Restaurant, Kupondole. 4208187
- Steak escape with Kathmandu’s premier steaks available for lunch and dinner at the Olive Bar and Bistro, Hotel Radisson. 4411818
- Bourbon Room Restro-bar now open for lunch with dinner and over a 100 cocktails, Lal Darbar.
- Cocktails and grooves with jazz by Inner Groove at Fusion-the bar at Darwika’s, every Wednesday, at Darwika’s Hotel. 4253541
- 30/30 Enhanced Buffet 30% discount on entire bill for a group of four or more for the month of June at The Fun Cafe, Radisson Hotel. 12.30-2.30 PM and 6.30-10.30 PM. Rs. 800. 4411818
- Live karaoke with special thai cuisine, every Wednesday at Holiday Karaa’s, Restaurant and Bar, Lazimpait. 4445731
- Sufi music by Hemanta Rana, every Friday at 7.30 PM at Dhaba Restaurant and Bar, Thapathali.
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WEEKEND WEATHER
KATHMANDU VALLEY: The monsoon is already here but still in its nascent stage. The rains have brought some welcome relief to anxious farmers and cleared the dusty sky over the Kathmandu valley. Satellite images show powerful circulations over the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal, powering up the two arms of the monsoon as they pump moisture to the Himalayas. The amount of monsoon rain depends largely on the strength of the low pressure system that develops over northwestern India. In the first week, rain gauges in the southern part of the country recorded average rainfall while those in the hills saw below-average amounts. The pressure system that develops over northwestern India. In the first week, rain gauges in the southern part of the country recorded average rainfall while those in the hills saw below-average amounts. The pressure system built up over the Himalayas bringing some relief to farmers and clearing the dusty sky over the Kathmandu valley.

About Town

Manifesto of the Timid

WEDNESDAY 17 June

11 AM to 12.30 PM, 4 PM to 5 PM, 7 PM to 8 PM

Hotel Shangri-la

With Professor Baran

Professor Baran, a renowned scientist, will present his latest findings on the impact of climate change on biodiversity in the Himalayas.

Thursday 18 June

7 PM

Hotel Shangri-la

With Professor Baran

Professor Baran will discuss the latest research on the role of the Himalayas in regulating global climate.
MEDIA DARLING: Journalists throng the Kaski Baithak during the former king’s press conference before he left the palace for Nagarjun.

GOING, GOING...: King Gyanendra and Queen Komal leave the palace for the last time at 8.30 PM on Wednesday amidst crowds of journalists, supporters and opponents of the monarchy and curious onlookers.

LAST GOODBYE: A monarchist breaks down in tears outside the palace as crowds gather to see off the king.

SNOOP DOG: A policeman and sniffer dog search beneath a grandstand before Nepali Congress’s ‘victory rally’ at Khula Manch on Sunday.
Friday the 13th

King Gajendra was reportedly waiting for the auspicious time when all the planets were aligned properly to leave Naryanhiti for Nagarjun, and the royal soothsayer had calculated that on Friday evening Saturn, Jupiter, Mars and Venus were all in conjunction with the constellations. But Mr G somehow over-ruled the zodiac man because, as luck would have it, this would have been Friday the 13th. Hence, the priests were asked to come up with the second most auspicious time which was Wednesday 2030 hrs.

The king’s carefully crafted farewell speech on Wednesday was delivered under such chaotic conditions that it was a miracle junior weren’t killed in a stampede outside the Kaski Hall. Now that would have stolen the headlines. As a sign of things to come under the Maoist government, Nepal Television decided that Gyani’s presser wasn’t newsworthy enough and refused to beam it live. The Baghchok chief of NTV, Rishi Raj Baral, said, and I quote: “We won’t cover anti-people press conferences.” With this kind of news sense, expect NTV to lose what ratings it has and an exodus of the remaining advertisers.

Yes, a Nepali royal crown was sold at auction in Bonhams in London recently for 90,000 quid, but it ain’t the Sri Punch crown, probably one belonging to a lesser Rana that was already in the collection of a European art dealer. Which means the king’s speech must be worth a fortune, unless of course the real diamonds and emeralds have been replaced.

But it will be difficult to trade this crown without breaking the CITES law since it has wildlife contraband stuck to it: the protected Bird of Paradise plume. Anyway, it was good to see the two stuffed tigers still snarling from the bottom of the stairs of Kaski Hall on Wednesday, although the snow leopard pelt on which kingji used to stand to receive ambassadors seemed to be missing.