Six months have passed. Four months were spent forming the government, and two more were taken up with the budget and Dashain. The government has formed neither a high-level political council nor a special committee for integration and rehabilitation of the PLA.

With 18 months to go, there has been no work on writing the constitution. At this pace, there seems little chance the constitution will be written by April 2010.

“The government is not concerned at all and the CA members are helpless,” said constitutional expert Bhimraj Acharya, who doubts whether the government is even committed to getting the document written. The CA Rules and Procedures are yet to be finalised as debate rumbles on about whether CA members are subject to the party whip or not.

But some people remain confident of progress. “The rules will be finalised by mid-November,” says Radheshyam Adhikari, a member of the drafting committee.

Donors have taken some committee members abroad for a first-hand look at how federalism functions, administrative and educational reforms in the hope of providing ideas for Nepal. But the drafting committee has remained inactive.

“The parliament secretariat appears unaware of these trips. “We have not received any formal requests,” said Mukunda Sharma, the secretariat’s spokesman, who doesn’t know when the members will return.

The CA was elected for a two-year period, but government ministers are now saying they might extend the drafting period for a further six months. “We have not completely run out of time,” says Acharya. By his perhaps optimistic calculations, six months will suffice for deciding on the constitution’s content. It will then take three months to write it with the correct legal terminology, a further three months for public consultations, and the rest of the time for parliamentary discussion and eventual endorsement.

Adhikari blames the political parties’ squabbles for the delay in finalising the Rules and Procedures. “If the parties cannot reach agreement over their differences, the writing of the constitution will be delayed,” he says.

Subhas Nembang, chairman of the Constituent Assembly, is staying positive. He told Nepali Times: “The schedule might have changed a bit, but we will finish the constitution-drafting process.”

HOWDY: Prime Minister Dahal receives American ambassador Nancy Powell in Singha Darbar on Tuesday. USAID announced a $42 million aid package this week, but the CA hasn’t yet started the constitution-drafting process.

Shake a leg

DEWAN RAI

SIX MONTHS HAVE PASSED. FOUR MONTHS WERE SPENT FORMING THE GOVERNMENT, AND TWO MORE WERE TAKEN UP WITH THE BUDGET AND DASHAIN. THE GOVERNMENT HAS FORMED NEITHER A HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL COUNCIL NOR A SPECIAL COMMITTEE FOR INTEGRATION AND REHABILITATION OF THE PLA.

WITH 18 MONTHS TO GO, THERE HAS BEEN NO WORK ON WRITING THE CONSTITUTION. AT THIS PACE, THERE SEEMS LITTLE CHANCE THE CONSTITUTION WILL BE WRITTEN BY APRIL 2010.

“THE GOVERNMENT IS NOT CONCERNED AT ALL AND THE CA MEMBERS ARE HELPLESS,” SAID CONSTITUTIONAL EXPERT BHIMRAJ ACHARYA, WHO DOUBTS WHETHER THE GOVERNMENT IS EVEN COMMITTED TO GETTING THE DOCUMENT WRITTEN. THE CA RULES AND PROCEDURES ARE YET TO BE FINALISED AS DEBATE RUMBLES ON ABOUT WHETHER CA MEMBERS ARE SUBJECT TO THE PARTY WHIP OR NOT.

BUT SOME PEOPLE REMAIN CONFIDENT OF PROGRESS. “THE RULES WILL BE FINALISED BY MID-NOVEMBER,” SAYS RADHESHYAM ADHIKARI, A MEMBER OF THE DRAFTING COMMITTEE.

DONORS HAVE TAKEN SOME COMMITTEE MEMBERS ABROAD FOR A FIRST-HAND LOOK AT HOW FEDERALISM FUNCTIONS, ADMINISTRATIVE AND EDUCATIONAL REFORMS IN THE HOPE OF PROVIDING IDEAS FOR NEPAL. BUT THE DRAFTING COMMITTEE HAS REMAINED INACTIVE.

THE PARLIAMENT SECRETARIAT APPEARS UNAWARE OF THESE TRIPS. “WE HAVE NOT RECEIVED ANY FORMAL REQUESTS,” SAID MUKUNDA SHARMA, THE SECRETARIAT’Sspokesman, WHO DOESN’T KNOW WHEN THE MEMBERS WILL RETURN.

THE CA WAS ELECTED FOR A TWO-YEAR PERIOD, BUT GOVERNMENT MINISTERS ARE NOW SAYING THEY MIGHT EXTEND THE DRAFTING PERIOD FOR A FURTHER SIX MONTHS. “WE HAVE NOT COMPLETELY RUN OUT OF TIME,” SAYS ACHARYA. BY HIS perhaps OPTIMISTIC CALCULATIONS, SIX MONTHS WILL SUFFICE FOR DECIDING ON THE CONSTITUTION’S CONTENT. IT WILL THEN TAKE THREE MONTHS TO WRITE IT WITH THE CORRECT LEGAL TERMINOLOGY, A FURTHER THREE MONTHS FOR PUBLIC CONSULTATIONS, AND THE REST OF THE TIME FOR PARLIAMENTARY DISCUSSION AND EVENTUAL ENDORSEMENT.


SUBHAS NEMBANG, CHAIRMAN OF THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY, IS STAYING POSITIVE. HE TOLD NEPALI TIMES: “THE SCHEDULE MIGHT HAVE CHANGED A BIT, BUT WE WILL FINISH THE CONSTITUTION ON TIME.”

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Fusion or confusion
The Maosists must clarify their commitment to multiparty democracy once and for all

S peaking at the Constituent Assembly, an elected body that the Maoists don’t seem to want to refer to as “parliament,” Prime Minister Dahal showed just how confused he is about his party’s future ideological course. He said: “We are at the cusp of transformation. We need to manage this transformation and take ourselves beyond the status quo. The people need to see a qualitative improvement in their lives. But because of the prevailing situation, we can neither reach our goal of communism, nor can we stay stuck in traditional parliamentary politics.”

Even since that speech on 24 September, existing doubts about the Maosists’ commitment to parliamentary democracy have resurfaced and intensified. These doubts have not been allayed. In fact, subsequent pronouncements from Prachanda and Baburam have mixed even more serious misgivings.

Dahal is right on one point: not only is it unrealistic to expect Nepal to become a communist, it is doubtful if we can even be socialist in the true sense. Dahal himself has admitted that feudalism has not been completely uprooted, and we need to move from that through an economic revolution towards capitalism. But his hardline political stance doesn’t fit the economic rhetoric.

The Maosists have been describing their current ideological line as a ‘fusion’, but it’s looking more like ‘confusion’. And because they are now leading the government, this contradiction is hurting the country. This lack of clarity doesn’t just reflect on Comrade Prachanda but on Prime Minister Dahal, and through him, on the government as a whole.

What is hard to explain is Dahal’s allergy to the words ‘parliament’ and ‘democracy’ despite his party having come this far into the peace process. During the war, the main targets of the Maoists were the monarchists, the parliament, democracy and the parliamentary parties. In this, the Maosists’ common cause with conservative nationalists who also wanted to weaken parliamentary democracy. The Maosists killed, maltreated and evicted hundreds of political workers of the NC and UML. They bullied many teachers, journalists and intellectuals who did not agree with their politics.

They indoctrinate their cadre on the revolution, armed struggle and protected war, turning them against the concept of ‘parliament’.

It is a well known fact that Prachanda was in negotiation with Gyanendra, and he had said he wouldn’t talk to the ‘servants’ when he could talk to the ‘master himself’. But after he saw that his revolution war was going nowhere, he was forced to negotiate with the ‘servants’ parties NC and UML, and sign the 32-point agreement.

Blind the persistent refusal to accept parlimentarianism is the Maosists leadership’s need to present their transition to mainstream non-violent politics as a ‘victory’. Which is why they are involved in elaborate semantics to hide their political defeat. They insisted on the CA being called a ‘legislative parliament’ as if the assembly’s parliamentary functions would be any different whatever it was called.

The insecurity over nomenclature proves that this is a difficult political transition for the Maosists, and it has exposed the contradictions among party hardliners. The Prachanda-Bahrami line is not followed to the letter within the party, and those in favour of continuing the armed struggle are still strong.

The sooner Prime Minister Dahal puts those contradictions to rest with a clear-cut pronouncement on multiparty, parliamentary democracy and rejection of violence in order to get the CA to do its job of passing the laws, the better for the party and for this nation.

After all, he is no longer in the jungles of Rolpa. He is a prime minister in Singharpur.

Nepalis languish in Afghanistan amid lies and false hopes

Some 500 Nepalis are estimated to be waiting for jobs. The lodges charge $10 a day for small rooms where these men watch Hindi television programs, play cards, cook and just wait. When a job comes along, they go for the interviews. Out of hundreds of candidates, just one is chosen.

Nepalis languish in Afghanistan amid lies and false hopes

Their stories are always the same: they went to Afghanistan to work after selling their crops or land and livestock. The recruiter took them to New Delhi, where they waited a couple of months to get a tourist visa from the Afghan embassy. When they arrived with a visa—usually only valid for 15 days—they left for Kabul. Another recruiter there promised to arrange a work visa for another five hundred dollars. He took their passports and put the men up in small lodges run by Nepalis to wait for their work visas.

They usually never hear from their agents again. Some are picked up by Afghan police and thrown into jail for illegal migration to Afghanistan. But there are those who do get good jobs in Afghanistan, usually in security companies. A job that would earn them $100 a month elsewhere gives them $1,000 in Kabul—which is why Afghanistan is such a magnet despite the war.

Afghan immigration regulations have recently been tightened, and it is no longer so easy to get a visa in New Delhi. When a job comes along, they go for the interviews. Out of hundreds of candidates, just one is chosen.

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Illegal migration to Afghanistan is not a problem that is likely to go away soon, so there is a need for liaison between Nepalis in Afghanistan and the embassy in Islamabad.

Four years have passed since 12 Nepali men were abducted and murdered in Iraq. A new Foreign Employment Act was formulated last year. But imposing bans on countries doesn’t work. As long as there is the hope of high salaries, workers will find ways round rules and laws.

If the government were to lift the ban and allow the registered manpower agencies to send labourers through legal channels, this might reduce the abuse and end the miserable situation of Nepalis languishing in the dingy divers of Kabul.

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TERRAIN WARNING

The way I see it, the attitude of pilots on domestic flights are no different from those of buses on Nepal’s roads. You are right in pointing out (Editorial, ‘Terrain warning’, #421) that there is just too much recklessness. I don’t know where this comes from, maybe it is cultural, partly lack of training and partly insufficient regulation. Whatever it is, the end result is that 400 plus people have been killed in air crashes in Nepal since 1990 and most of it is due to pilot error. What are we going to do about it?

Jangbu Sherpa, email

You have painted a needlessly gloomy picture about air accidents in Nepal and blamed pilots for being reckless. It is true that there are those who do not follow rules and that they take shortcuts, just like in any profession. But Nepali pilots are some of the most experienced, and they fly in the world’s most challenging terrain. They know the risks and they weigh them before every flight. The rate of mishaps is directly proportionate to the challenges of flying in and out of the world’s most difficult airfields day in and day out.

A Pilot, Kathmandu

I completely agree with your portrayal of the cavalier attitude of Nepal’s airlines towards safety. However, it is not restricted to the flight deck. Having been a trekking guide for many years, I have observed money changing hands during check-in, where leaders can easily be bribed to push in couple of hundred extra kilograms of baggage and cargo into the hold. There have been numerous cases during which there have been near-misses when the pilots have made hard landings based on calculations of weight which were not accurate, or when the plane was not in equilibrium.

K Stenton, Edinburgh

The fatalism that guides our attitude towards new technology, especially cars and planes, is seen every year at Dasain when goats and chicken are beheaded and their blood splattered on the machines to propitiate the gods during the coming year. With that sort of attitude is it any surprise that we have so many accidents?

Jujubhai, Asan

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Kumar Mishra, Janakpur

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Growing much more rice

Nepal can easily boost paddy productivity and be self-sufficient again

Nepal’s food shortage is now approaching crisis proportions. Increasing population density, stagnant or falling productivity and fragmentation of land-holdings mean the gap between demand and supply of food grains is greater. More than half the country’s 75 districts now have moderate to acute food shortages, and the government is spending precious resources to fly grain to remote airfields. Malnutrition is now a national calamity as fewer people can afford to buy food.

Rice is grown on 1.5 million hectares across Nepal, and even though much of this is irrigated, rice production has not been able to exceed 4.2 million tons. Nepal’s rice productivity of 2.6 tons per hectare is the lowest in South Asia.

Because we have been so spectacularly unsuccessful in raising paddy productivity, we are spending an average of Rs 5.5 billion to import 500,000 tons of rice a year. Because of the rise in grain prices worldwide, we will spend more this year.

But there is now good news. For the past five years, we have been testing a new way of cultivating rice that nearly doubles harvests but uses 40 percent less seed and needs much less water to flood the fields. This method also uses less fertiliser, pesticides and improved seeds.

It sounds like science fiction, but it is true. Field trials in Morang and 24 sites across the country have shown that the new method could be the miracle that we’ve been waiting for to boost agriculture production in this country.

Called System of Rice Intensification (SRI), the method was developed by a Jesuit priest in Madagascar in 1983. Since then, it has been adopted nationally by India and China, and has boosted rice yields in major producer nations like Cambodia, Vietnam and Indonesia.

Farmers using the SRI method grow normal mansuli rice seedlings. Instead of waiting six weeks as with normal rice, seedlings are transplanted at two weeks. The field doesn’t have to be flooded. In fact it needs to be drained of excess water. The seeds are planted further apart so that while a normal paddy field needs 50 kg of seed per hectare, the new method uses less than 10 kg.

The only catch is that since flooded fields control weeds in normal paddy fields, SRI fields need to be regularly weeded. SRI also demands skillful farming and good preparation, conscientious planting, good timing and careful drainage.

But the benefits far outweigh these obstacles and farmers who have adopted SRI can’t imagine going back to the traditional method. When one farmer tries it, others want to learn the method too, and the practice is spreading.

Pilot projects in Nepal have shown that SRI could easily increase our rice harvest to as much as six tons per hectare. Despite this, there is no political will and an apparent reluctance to push SRI as a national campaign. If the government gave SRI priority and coordinated the various ministries and departments to push the method, Nepal could easily become self-sufficient in rice.

So far, the Poverty Reduction Fund, DFID, Surya Nepal, ICIMOD and Care Nepal have been promoting SRI in pilot schemes in various parts of the country. Much more needs to be done to replicate this on a national scale.

Rajendra Uprety is an SRI pioneer and works at the District Development Office in Morang.

See also:

‘The miracle is, it’s no miracle’, Nepali Times #256
http://www.nepalitimes.com.np/issue/256/Nation/569
http://ciifad.cornell.edu/sri/

Rajendra Uprety

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Kathmandu, Nepal
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NATION
Anti-smuggling meet
Customs officials from six regional countries met in Kathmandu this week to discuss ways to curb the smuggling of ozone-depleting substances.

The conference, organized by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), brought officials from Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka to share strategies to implement the Montreal Protocol which controls chemicals that destroy stratospheric ozone that protects the earth from harmful solar rays.

Although most countries are complying with cutbacks in these chemicals, there is a thriving cross-border trade in contraband chemicals, mainly in Asia, that are used mainly in refrigeration.

Indian ambassador to Nepal, Rakesh Sood told the gathering: “Solving this crisis and minimising its economic and industrial upshot requires close cooperation among nations as well as industry partnership in controlling illegal trade.”

Evening waves
The BBC World Service has launched a news program, Evening Report, that covers current affairs and news related to South Asia. The news program, hosted by Tiriku Ray, will be broadcast every weekday for 30 minutes at 7:45 PM in Nepal and will be available on FM throughout the South Asian region. You can also listen to the program online on BBC’s website.

Everest feat
Everest Bank recently celebrated its 14th birthday in Nepal. The bank pioneered services such as home loans, loans for professionals and loans against share holdings. It now has the largest branch network in the private sector with 27 branches and five extension counters. A 28th branch will open soon, in Guttalur. The bank was named ‘Bank of the year, Nepal’ by The Banker.

Wishing you a very Happy Deepawali

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INNOVATIVE PINS: Innovative PPL has introduced a new mobile application which allows users to recharge their mobile phones without buying a recharge card, but instead through electric recharge pins, which will be available in stores soon.

The service works on any Java-compatible set which has been registered under Innovative PPL.

CORRECTION: Due to an editing error the story in #421 about Hyundai cars had the wrong title. It should have been ‘Responsible cars’.

Global meltdown
Do we need to worry?

We are witnessing the start of an economic crisis that could perhaps dwarf the Great Depression of 1929. The only difference is that the economic growth of the past 80 years might provide a cushion to soften the impact this time around.

ECONOMIC SENSE
Artha Beard

This Beed talked of the looming crisis in March 2008 (6000, The American Dream) and has not been that surprised by the present situation in which government actions around the world are losing credibility. So far, more than three trillion dollars have been poured into banks by different governments, but it appears that this massive attempted bailout has not yet stemmed the crisis.

Just because there has been a crisis—like many others which have been dealt with in the past—it is not necessary to experiment with any other ‘isms’. Our finance minister and other propagators of socialistic economic models should give up those thoughts. Which means Nepal too will be hit, thanks to its fixed exchange rate with India. It is therefore time for our bureaucrats to shed their favourite subject: what to do in the long-term with our exchange rate. Apart from the Indian impact, here are some of Beed’s views on the crisis and Nepal.

Left-leaning economists are having a field day crowing about the failure of capitalism. They feel Nepal should not pursue a market-reform agenda similar to that which has led to the global crisis. However, the only model that has brought about rapid economic growth successfully has been one that seeks a market-oriented economy where the government plays the role of facilitator and regulator.

A short-term impact we might see is a decline in demand for skilled jobs in the US and Europe, which would in turn have an affect on migration—although the labour markets in the Middle East may not be hit so hard.

For Nepal’s overcrowded banking sector, there are lessons to be learnt. The attraction for some banks in keeping all their eggs in the real estate basket may cause them problems. One cannot lend to the developer, the contractor and the consumer of the same building project. And the anti-smuggling lobby does not have the money to bail out our banks in the way other countries have. Banking liquidity here can also be affected by the money taken out of Nepali banks to invest in the Indian stock market through various channels. With the stock market drop of the past six months, it will take quite some time for people to get their money out and back to Nepal.

The most important issue is now for the Central Bank and the government to look at efficient regulation, without becoming a regime of control. Any control-oriented mechanism will hit an already weak investment climate, so the challenge is to design policies and take measures that rise above creating ‘control freaks’ and instead provide ‘facilitators’ to ensure the Nepali economy avoids the worst of the crisis.

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Letter to the Editor in Kantipur, 21 October

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement assured that those killed would be honoured, their widows would get relief, their children would be granted scholarships and those injured would receive compensation. It said seized property would be returned, those displaced would be resettled, the whereabouts of the disappeared would be made public and the two armies would be integrated. None of this has happened so far.

My father, Tikravaj, was killed by the Maoists on 28 February 2000. After eight years, I went back home for Dasain this year. What I saw in my village in Ramechhap was that our public institutions and organisations were being shifted to other places. Tunuraj Giri, who had a limb amputated during the war, did not go home for Dasain this year. Saban Giri spent Dasain at home.

Asmita Pulami was injured in crossfire in Sindhuli, but left the Maoists. Sapana Pulami was afraid to talk to me even though she once had the courage to flee from the clutches of the Maoists. Neither of these two names appears on the list of those affected by the war.

Kailash Giri fled the country after his entire family was thrown out of their home by the Maoists. Anu Bahadur Pulami is the former secretary of the VDC evicted from his house. His health deteriorated when his co-worker was killed by the Maoists. Kasiraj Giri (Nabin), a former Maoist rebel, was injured in a clash in Solu. He paid for his own medical expenses and is now a migrant worker.

Prakash Suderi could not return to his home because of threats from the Maoists. Fear for his safety made Koman Bahadur Khapaille vote for the Maoists. His wife had earlier been assaulted by them.

The very Maoists who killed, looted, injured and displaced innocent people are now in government. Increased impunity has made it easier for the criminal state to threaten people. The so-called peace is lifeless in the village. On the day the government distributed Rs 3.6 million to cadres in the Maoist camps for Dasain, the conflict-affected were beaten by police in front of the office of the UN. Is this justice?

Gyanendra Aamn Member of Neka District Committee Ramechhap

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Australia has become a popular choice for overseas students and the number of Nepalese students has risen sharply over the past five years. According to the statistics published by Australian Education International, the number of enrolment of Nepalese students has gone up to 50% at times. In the year 2007, Nepal became the 10th largest source country in terms of number of student enrolments. In this year another number of students going to Australia has grown up compared to last year. The maximum number has concerned its studies in Vocational Education and Training Sector.

With the dearth of attracting non-European migrants by the Australian Government, Nepalese started to migrate to Australia from 1975. There is no official data before 1973 and only 4 Nepalese permanently migrated to Australia in the year 1970-71. It is interesting to juxtapose the Nepalese migrated to Australia from the year 2008. Nepalese migrants were 258 in 2008, 186 in 2007-08, 2002 in 2002-03, 176 in 2003-04, 236 in 2004-05 and 20 in 2005-06. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the number of Nepalese in Australia is increasing every year and Nepalese community has been well recognised by Immigration Department.

People who want to live permanently in Australia must apply to register as if already in Australia, apply to change their status to permanent residents. There are four parts in Australia’s migration program and they are:

1. Skilled Worker
2. Family Stream
3. Special Disability Stream
4. Refugee Protection Program.
Trekking jam in Nyeshang.

Trekking traffic approaches Humde.

Annapurna II seen from the point from which it rises up from the Marsyangdi at Chame.

There is a trekking traffic jam this autumn in Nyeshang, as Manang is called locally. The ACAP post at Dhampani has registered an average of 300 plus daily arrivals over the last two weeks. The lodges are so packed that guides rush ahead up the trail to reserve rooms for clients. When nothing can be managed, trekkers pitch tents on the flat roofs of private houses. Many lodges and restaurants have been rented out to Gurung folks who are reaping a bonanza.

Manang Valley is about as close as you can get to ‘Alpine’ terrain in Nepal. Above the gorge country beyond the district headquarters of Chame, the glacial valleys are wide and the views panoramic, amid forested meadows leading up to pine forests and dwarf junipers beyond. Annapurna Himal commands the western flank of the Marsyangdi Valley, while the fine and accessible ‘trekking peaks’ of Pisang, Himlung, Kanguru and many others make up the rest of the district. It was in the 1990s that the ‘Around Annapurna’ trek started becoming popular, with visitors peaking in 2000. After that, the war took its toll and trekkers slowed to a trickle. Maoist activity drove backpackers into the ‘tea-house trekking’ mode, which has proved a boon for local hoteliers. The number of trekking staff who used to benefit from carrying loads for camping groups and run kitchens is down drastically, however, and this has adversely affected employment.

Manang will see changes as the road from Besisahar is completed in the next five years as the cliffs are blasted and landslides controlled. There are worries about what this will do to tourism, but the village committees here have agreed not to allow the road to go up to Thorung La.

This season, Nyeshang reaps a tourism bonanza

Rather than fret over how the road’s arrival may destroy the environment, culture and trekking, people here seem determined to adjust to it and take advantage of better access. After all, Chamonix and Zermatt did not collapse with the arrival of the motor road.

Besides Thorung La and Tilicho Lake, Manang’s attractions include the Milarepa Cave above Braga, the massive karst amphitheatre of Swargadwari, the twin valleys of the Marsyangdi and Naur Khola, as well as the great views of the Annapurnas from the north.

Greater access will allow trekkers to climb Manang’s mid-sized peaks: Himlung, Pisang, Yak and Thorung which are ideal for ‘holiday climbing’, a pastime that has not yet made its mark in a country where expedition-style and extreme-alpine-style are the standard.

Last week, after acclimatising in Manang village, a French team with just a guide and a cook was off to Pisang West. The plan was to set up one high camp a day above the village, and make it to the summit the day after.

In future, whether they arrive by road from Besisahar or by air at the Humde airstrip, the holiday climbers will spend a few days acclimatising on the Marsyangdi Valley with side trips to villages, glaciers, lakes, caves and ridgelines. Then they will take their pick of the mountains of Manang.

Kanak Mani Dixit in Manang

Access: Nepal Airlines and Yeti offer flights to Manang’s Humde airfield from Kathmandu and Pokhara. The alternative is to take a bus to Besisahar and start walking. After crossing Thorung La, take a jeep down to Jomsom to fly back, or walk to the road head at Beni.
Manang

The motorable road to Manang is carved out of sheer rock. Swargarwari’s spectacular rock amphitheatre.

Looking back at Annapurna II from Thorung La
Army amalgamation

What happens with the PLA combatants is critical for the peace process as well as the internal dynamics of the Maoists. The rebel army did not lose the war, and past pacts have failed to ensure a future for the fighters.

The country cannot afford to have thousands of war-hardened young men and women disillusioned, angry and insecure. They will not live in the cantonments forever. The Nepal Army knows it will have to take in some of the Maoist fighters. The Maoists know that not all their soldiers can get into the army. They will have to agree on numbers, but only after public posturing and secret bargaining.

There will be a tussle within the NC and the army pushing the principle of individual entry, and the Maoists asking for recognition in principle of bulk entry. How it will play out depends a lot on what happens in the Maoist meeting next month and whether Pahula Kamal Dahal or Maharaj Bhadra emerges the stronger. It will also depend on what COAS Gen Kailawal’s associates inside and outside the army tell him. He doesn’t have the strength to go to the brink by himself.

Dahal needs to find a deal he can sell to his commanders, who can then go and sell it to the guerrillas in the camps. Any such deal will also have to allow the apprehensions of non-Maoist forces that one party will control the entire defence establishment.

The integration debate is not only about numbers, but control

The reason to be hopeful is that both armies have a history of talking to each other from the war days. The JMCC, which includes UNMR and top military brass of both sides, has been a rare institutional success. India has enormous leverage with both sides and will not allow the process to fall apart over a row on integration. The Indians have said the army should not be disturbed but that stance will have to evolve as we approach the endgame. The Indian Army may talk to the Nepali brass, and MEA with RAW will push the Maoists.

But the real battle here is not over numbers, but control. The army has never been as autonomous in its functioning as it is now. It would be hard to retain this independence because of its deep distrust for the political parties, its antagonism towards the Maoists, and its contempt for the civilian bureaucracy.

The army top brass has been unaccountable for all its actions and finances. This is the only country where UN peacekeeping money goes to the army, not the state treasury. Recently, the army transferred officers without even telling the Ministry of Defence. It often purchases equipment on a single tender, generating huge opportunities for kickbacks.

For their part, the Maoists know that their political consolidation will remain incomplete as long as the army is out of play. They did not fight the war to get a few thousand of their soldiers into the army at junior levels. Their aim is to have both political and ideological control over the military and a decisive say in the command structure.

And the army needs to be more inclusive of the marginalised to give diverse communities a sense of ownership and help carve a new sense of nationalism.
The financial crisis may slow this trend. But capital will continue to flow into green ventures. I think of it as seed money for a wholesale reconfiguration of global industry.

In China, green capital investment is expected to grow from $175 million in 2005 to more than $720 million in 2008. China has become a world leader in wind and solar power, employing more than a million people. Globally, UNDP estimates that investment in low-greenhouse-gas energy will reach $1.9 trillion by 2020.

The people’s war’ in 1996. She worked as battalion commissar to a central committee member. She is now a member of Tharuwan State Committee, and sides with the faction of the party that favours a federal people’s republic.

Says Regmi: “We don’t want a Bihari-style republic. The war was for liberation of the oppressed and the poor. We fought to establish a people’s republic. The battle field may have changed but the fight still continues.

She argues that there would have been no need for armed struggle had the democracy addressed the country’s structural problems. “The war dismantled the feudal structure and raised ethnic, gender and class issues, and now it is time for the state to address them,” she says.

Regmi misses her young son who lives with relatives in Kailali when she is in Kathmandu. She studies, and writes when she has some free time. The rest of the time she spends strategising with party colleagues.

She adds: “There is so much to do, and there is so little time. We think about our country’s future and not just about ourselves.”

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Ugandan parallels

There are many things here in Uganda that make a Nepali nostalgic for home, especially during the festival season. Uganda is landlocked like Nepal, and the rolling green hills look like the midhills back home. The children love to laugh and, like Nepali children, break quickly into smiles. Ugandans are gentle, but behind their politeness is a ‘trying to figure you out’ expression and body language, something that is carried over from the country’s 22-year war, before which the country lived under the brutal dictatorship of Idi Amin. Peace and development are relative terms here. Sickened by the excesses of Amin, Obote and Okello, Ugandans have enjoyed peace since President Museveni was sworn in as army fatigues in 1986. His National Resistance Army was a highly disciplined and organised guerrilla force that had the support of the population, especially the young people. Uganda’s GDP which had shrunk by 40 per cent under Amin soon returned to the prosperity of the 1970s when Uganda was called the ‘pearl of Africa’. Museveni not only understood that economic development was crucial, but actually did a lot to spur growth.

He built a government of national consensus and set up a broad-based Constitutional Commission which travelled throughout the country to meet tribal leaders and people from various ethnic groups. Their viewpoints were heard and suggestions were incorporated into the new constitution which took 10 years to write. One wonders about our own two-year timetable for drafting the constitution, of which only 18 months are left. Museveni’s government also didn’t get distracted by politics. It used the 10 years to really kickstart the economy and the campaign of reconstruction and rehabilitation. Will we do the same? Besides the economy, Museveni paid special attention to education and health. He became a crusader in the fight against HIV/AIDS, and Uganda is regarded as a model of how a developing country can successfully tackle the epidemic with public awareness and behaviour change. Absolute poverty was reduced from 56 per cent to 44 per cent by 1995. Primary school enrolment jumped from 2.5 million to 6.8 million. In 1986 there was only one university but by 2001 there were 13. The recent controversial amendment of the Uganda constitution to cater for another presidential term for Museveni has angered many outside his party—and some within his party. Squabbles and rivalries within his party are now fodder for newspaper headlines. The once-disciplined liberators are now accusing each other of corruption. Hopefully our new government will have the wisdom to invest in health and education and propel the economy with investor-friendly policies. Let’s hope our political leaders can work together in a consensus government and not delay the constitution-making process with endless wrangling. Fifteen thousand Nepalis sacrificed their lives in the war. Now their souls demand nothing less.


Freefall over Everest

While the parachutists got all the attention after the first-ever skydiving from above Chomolungma this month, we didn’t hear much from the pilots. Ruedi Benschmid and Henri Schurch flew their Pilatus Porter aircraft all the way from the Swiss village of Bied/Bienne to Kathmandu via Bahrain and India, and then on to the disused Syangboche airstrip, the world’s highest drop zone at 3,883m. For 10 days from 2 October, Benschmid and Schurch took four skydivers at a time up to an altitude of 8,990m above the world’s highest mountain so they could freefall down to Syangboche.

On 6 October, the two pilots along with the skydiving team stopped all jumping activities and observed a minute’s silence to remember the 18 people who had died in the Lukla plane crash. Billi Bierling spoke to Benschmid at Syangboche after he had dropped the first three skydivers to freefall from above the world’s highest mountain.

Nepali Times: You have been a professional pilot for more than 30 years. How was this different?

Ruedi Benschmid: It was a very special and amazing experience. I fly a lot in the Swiss Alps but here you are much closer to the steering limit of the aircraft. It took us an hour to climb to the restricted height. The scenery is stunning and we flew very close to the 8,000-metre giants and Anna Dalkam, the Matterhorn of Asia.

Was there a lot of pressure to perform as many flights as possible?

We have to do as many flights as possible before the clouds come in, and they normally build up in the valley in the morning. I have to closely observe the cloud and if they accumulate around the airstrip I have to land very quickly. If Syangboche is covered up I either have to go down to the airport in Lukla or go all the way back to Kathmandu.

Is it normal for such a tiny plane to fly to almost 9,000m?

We normally do not fly so high and for this event we needed special permits from the Swiss authorities. The jumpers and I are also using oxygen for this flight. The usual altitude for such an aircraft is about 1,000m to 4,000m.

What is the main challenge in taking off and landing at Syangboche?

When we arrived on 2 October it was the first time a Pilatus Porter had landed here in decades. However, what was much more challenging was the introduction course I and my colleague Henri had to do in Kathmandu for Nepal’s aviation authorities. It was all theoretical but the funny thing was that when I asked for the coordinates for Syangboche they did not know them.

How did you find this tiny airstrip without the coordinates?

We got the coordinates for Lukla airport and we found the airstrip using tourist maps I had bought in Kathmandu.

http://www.everestskydive.com/
http://www.highandwild.co.uk/
http://www.swissboogie.ch/
Indian idolatry

A year after he burst on to the music scene, Prashant Tamang unites Nepalis worldwide

surprisingly, was feeling a touch groggy after being woken from his jet lag to talk to Nepali Times in a living room in a southern English barrack town. But once a cup of coffee had washed away the cobwebs, Prashant was a thoughtful and articulate speaker, and still strikingly humble despite the widespread adulation to which he has become accustomed.

So, how has his life changed since winning Indian Idol one year ago? “It’s changed completely,” he says. “When I think about what I was doing before and what I’m doing now, it’s like a different world.”

Prashant was training as a commando in the Kolkata police force when his friends persuaded him to audition for the show. “I was used to performing in the Police Orchestra, but when I sang in front of the cameras for the first time, I trembled as I knew that people all over the country could see me. The cameras make a big difference.”

In the first weeks, the contestants were kept incommunicado from the outside world, so Prashant had no idea of the wave of support and Nepali pride that was surging through India and across the world as fans tracked his progress week by week.

“When we reached the final 10, they let us read the newspaper,” he recalls. “Then I spoke to my mother, who told me that I had a fan club in Darjeeling now, and that people had been sending money from America and Europe to vote for me.”

But the scale of the hysteria only really hit home when he returned to Darjeeling towards the end of the show and was met by a rally of thousands of supporters, with people hanging from windows and climbing onto rooftops for a glimpse of him. “My heart still jumps when I remember that day,” he says.

“Nepali had ever won a competition like Indian Idol before, and I suppose that’s why they were so excited. There is talent in Darjeeling, even though it’s a small place. And I hope that my success will help other Nepali singers to come through,” says Prashant.

Prashant’s victory generated an upbeat feeling and newfound optimism that has indirectly enforced the political wave of support for Gorkhaland autonomy and created a surge of pride among Nepali-speakers across Darjeeling.

“I suppose it was time for this to happen and it happened,” muses Prashant. “Personally I was never really interested in politics, but since Indian Idol I think Nepalis have been feeling more united, both in India and elsewhere. And if that’s had a good effect on politics then I’m happy.”

Prashant says there is certainly a certain ‘Nepaliness’ that united Nepalis all over the world. “I live in India, but I am a Nepali. That’s why I wanted to sing 1974 AD’s ‘Nepali hi’. That’s a great song as it speaks to all Nepalis no matter where they’re living.”

With a record deal from Sony and a worldwide performing schedule, Prashant has come a long way in the past year. He now wants to take his music and singing to a higher level.

After the interview, Prashant is whisked away to dinner with various leading lights of the local Nepali community. At his London concert the following night, women well into their thirties leap up on stage beside him, only to be pulled down by security, and fans of both sexes, young and old, crowd round him when he steps down into the stalls.
EVENTS

- Peace Photo Award 2008 by National Forum of Photographic Journalists and Nepal for the 24 October, 6PM, Bhrikutimandap.
- Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory presents in Jazzmandu 08 Catia Werneck and workshop with Bossa Nova and Brazilian Jazz Band at Hotel Shangri-la, Kathmandu, Rs 600. 4412999
- Non-violent Communication Workshop on 26 October 9.30AM-5PM, Himalayan Buddhist Meditation Centre, Keshar Mahal Lazimpat 401452.
- Cultural Studies Group of Nepal presents from Sherpa culture to social work lecture, 31 October, 9.30 PM, Shanker Hotel.
- New session of French classes, admissions on 3 November, next session starts on the 10 November-22 January at the Alliance Francaise. 4241163
- Divinity of the common life, an artistic performance by Pierre-Alain Hubert and Karl Knapp, 7 November, 8PM, Open Theatre, Kula Manch, free event. 4241163

MUSIC

- Dutch Jazz Prilo, jazz piano & vocal at New Orleans Café, Thamel on 26 October and New Orleans Coffee Shop, Patan on 29 October.
- Jazzmandu 2008 till 27 October. 894164230
- Poesie and Fags a jazz vocal trio from Holland, Saturday at Patan 5522708, Sunday at Thamel 4700736. New Orleans Café, 7PM.
- 74 Twister playing live every Tuesday at Mohit, Pulchowk. 5526212
- Some like it hot every Friday BBQ and live music by Dinesh Rai and the Sound Minds, 7PM onwards, Rs 899 at Fusion, Dwarika’s Hotel. 4479484
- Tuesday Melody at the Jazzabell Café, everyday happy hour 6-8PM.
- Happy cocktail hour, 5-7PM, Ladies night with live unplugged music at Jatra Café & Bar.
- HyJazz Club every Friday from 8.30 PM, Hyatt Regency, Kathmandu. 4489800
- Dance and Cocktails at Cube Bar, Kamalad. 4438017
- Fusion and Looza Band every Friday night, Bhumti Resto Lounge, Lazimpal. 4412193
- Rudra night fusion and classical Nepali music by Shyam Nepali and his friends, every Friday, 7PM at Le Meridien,Gokarna. 4451212
- Sufi music by Hemanta Rana, every Friday at 7.30 PM at Dhaba Restaurant and Bar, Thapathali.
- Fusion and Classical Music by Abin Shahi every Wednesday, rock with Rashmi Singh every Friday, Sufi & Raga with Hemant Rana every Saturday, 8 PM onwards, Absolute Bar. 5521408

DINING

- Fusion Gourmet steaks at the Chimney restaurant till 30 Oct, 6-10PM, Yle and Yeli Hotel. 4424899
- Wok & Curry every Wednesday at Hyatt Regency. 4491234
- Sunday Jazz Brunch at Hyatt Regency with performances by Mariano and his band from 12. 3.30PM. 4491234
- Organic Salad Bar and Steak at Jalan Jalan restaurant every Friday from 6PM, Rs 650
- Fusion of Marcela Regan’s new menu and Mannie’s new bar at Dhoikama. 5522113
- Plat Du Jour at Hotel Shangri-la, Kathmandu, Rs 600. 4412999
- Pizza & Pasta every Monday and Tuesday at Rox Restaurant. Hyatt Regency, 4469316
- Pasta pesto passion at La Dolce Vila, Thamel. 4700812
- Pork special with free Irish coffee at K-tori! Beer & Steakhouse, Thamel. 4700043
- Continental and cafe item with Live band every Friday at Vintage Cafe and Pub, Woodland Complex, Durbarmarg.
- Home made pasta at Alfresco, Soaceit Crowne Plaza. 4279999
- Reality Bites, The Kaiser Cafe, Garden of Dreams, operated by Dwarika’s Group of Hotels. 9AM-10PM. 4425341
- Steak escape with Kathmandu’s premier steaks at the Olive Bar and Bistro, Hotel Radisson. 4411818
- Cocktails, mocktails and liqueurs at the Asahi Lounge, opening hours 1-10PM, above Himalayan Java, Thamel.
- Retro Brunch Barbeque with live acoustic music by Sound Chemistry, every Saturday, 12-3PM at LeMeriten-Kathmandu, Gokarna. 4451212
- Starry night barbecue at Hotel Shangri-la with Live performance by Girey Gurung, Rs 665, at the Shambala Garden, every Friday 7PM onwards. 4491299
- Kebabs and curries at the Dhaba, Thapathali. 894120619
- Ily Expression Coffee at Hotel Shangriita, Lazimpal and Mandap Hotel, Thamel.
- Socially Responsible coffee at Himalayan Java, Thamel

For inclusion in the listing send information to editors(at)nepalitimes.com
THIRSTY PRESIDENT: President Ram Baran Yadav works up a thirst at the launch of a book about Ganesh Man Singh at the City Hall on Friday.

SURFING IN ROLPA: Young women in Thawang learn to use a new computer installed at their local library recently set up by students of Kathmandu University and Tribhuvan University as part of a joint effort to take educational materials to remote areas of Nepal.

YAHOO: A boy jumps into the water of the Lothar river last week in Chitwan. A flash flood on this river in October 2000 killed hundreds of people.
Conjugal ministries and first relatives

T

The Maoists may be against absentee landlordism, but there is nothing they seem to be able to do about absenteeism during Constituent Assembly plenaries. As the house reconvened last week after the Dasain recess, only 32 of the 601 members were present in their seats.

Part of the reason is that Nepal’s donors seem to have decided that the best way to help Nepal at the present time is to send its MPs abroad in large herds during the holiday break. Soon after a big Nepali delegation returned from South Africa, 11 honourable members of the august house are in Japan and 30 assembly members are in Germany and Switzerland this week to learn how federalism works.

Meanwhile, the clock is ticking on the constitution-writing process with only 18 months left, and the members haven’t even been able to agree on the rules of procedure. One rule that should be immediately implemented is a moratorium on junkets.

Not a week goes by without Comrade Dam Dev trying out something new. Last month, it was a curfew on dance restaurants, two weeks ago he went after cybercafes, last week it was the turn of sidewalk vendors and this week he has started cracking down on construction material dumped on the footpath. All these moves have since been revoked amidst protests. Wonder what it will be next week: ban Fashion TV? Lefist God is in a hurry because he has to go off to the People’s Republic (not ours, theirs) next month and he needs to tie some loose ends before that. Bam Dev is Home Minister even though he lost the election because he is the only one who can get the two entities CPN and drop the Maoist grooming him because he is the persistent suitor.

The prime minister desperately seeking kagamis to join the government. The question is what for? What good will that do? We hear GP is also under pressure from internationals to stop sulking. But everyone underestimates the Old Fox’s stubbornness.

Comrade Ferricos is not one who is deterred by a coy Koirala playing hard-to-get. After all, he met the ex-king last week so he must’ve thought the ex-prime minister would be a piece of cake. He took the ex-royal to KTMO on a standby helicopter, Bhayanak went personally to the Koirala Abode like an over-cum-Body Guard) is hobnobbing with ex-royalist tycoons. Whatever.

When newspapers broke the story that dozens of guests were evicted from Shree and Batika hotels in Nepalgunj to accommodate the prime ministerial entourage, their editors probably expected us to be shocked. But nationwide, we readers just gave a big wide yawn. So what else is new?

Nepalis are so used to nepotism doing nepotism from absolute monarchs, to democrats they voted for, to elected totalitarians, that nothing surprises us anymore.

The Ass, having being bumped off a domestic flight over Dasain despite having a confirmed ticket, to make way for some ex-jungles VIPs is definitely not surprised.

Comrade Sita went to the India Sari Palace at Jackson Heights in NY to pick up some silk saris. So? And First Son (Prakash the Computer Secretary-Mahendranagar, Comrade Girjau on his mobile to fix an appointment. But he got the brush-off and was told to talk to his secretary to find out when he was free. Imagine the cheek.

Undeterred, when he got back to KTM on a standby helicopter, Bhayanak went personally to the Koirala Abode like an over-persistent suitor.

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