No work

RAMESWOR BOHARA

A campaign by the Maoist unions in the past weeks has closed down factories, harmed workers and threatens to unravel the party’s own plan to boost investment and create jobs.

Although the unrest is meant to look like a labour issue, trade unionists say it is a guise to extort money, get jobs for cadres and relatives and a strategy to control the business sector.

“They are not trade unions but political pressure groups, and will not benefit the workers,” says Bishnu Rimal of the Federation of Trade Unions.

In its latest campaign this month, the Maoists have broken an agreement they made jointly with other unions on the minimum wage and have forced the closure of hundreds of factories and firms across the country. It is using an ambiguous clause in the government’s minimum wage decision in October to unilaterally push a populist agitation.

The campaign is led by the head of the Maoist trade union, Salikram Jamarkattel who during the war was involved in extorting money from businesses, bombing and kidnapping owners who refused. His union has also been targeting multinational companies, forcing many to close shop, thus reversing the gains Nepal made in the 1990s to attract foreign investment.

“At this rate, there will be no more investment in Nepal”

“Hit’s got to a point now where even big domestic investors feel it’s just not worth it,” says industrialist and CA member, Rajendra Khetan, “if things don’t improve we’ll all soon be NRNs.” Khetan’s Gorkha brewery has just shelved its plan to open a new manufacturing unit for Carlsberg beer near Biratnagar and is moving abroad. Colgate Palmolive decided to quit Nepal, citing militant labour as one of the reasons. The biggest foreign investor in Nepal, Dabur Nepal, has put ambitious expansion plans on hold. Foreign investors who were thinking of coming to Nepal to set up manufacturing units are moving to Himachal and Uttaranchal, citing the lack of rule of law in Nepal.

“This is the worst investment climate we’ve ever had,” says labour specialist Narayan Manadhar, “businesses are completely demoralised, and the unions have been cowed down by the Maoists.”

Trade unions here have traditionally been beholden to their patron political parties and not to the workers. “Nepali trade unions were run like NGOs and were spoilt by funding,” says Maoist-nominated CA member Hari Roka, who says the Maoist unions have just moved into the vacuum they left.

However, the Maoists are now determined to dominate the business sector even if it means getting the Labour Ministry that they control to illegally register unions. This has sidelined established unions that represented the genuine voice of the workers.

Although Maoist unions themselves have misgivings about this trend, analysts say, Prime Minister Dahal appears to be either unable or unwilling to control the militant ways of Jamarkattel and his team.
As it stands, the Nepali Congress needs to revamp its image drastically. If the NC hopes to be hell bent on fulfilling its ambitions. GPK and Sujata Koirala’s political change its focus of statesmanship. If a democratic system function then the UML will have to rehitch a congrual relationship with the Maistas. The MUF will also soon face its moment of reckoning. Their reused in the government have gone on only marginally better than the UML, but only just. They risk losing more in political terms because their grassroots are different from the UML and the Maistas. It was courageous of Bishakhet Adhikari to admit that ‘One Madhes, One Pradesh’ was merely a political slogan. Protracted participation in government may even lead to fragmentation between radical and pragmatic groups in the party unless the Madhesi ministers in government start exhibiting accountability to the long-suffering people of the four districts of the Eastern Tarai which they represent. Pushpa Kamal Dahal threatened to quit the government to appease hardcore in his own party. But it seems to have given his coalition partners ideas that they could do the same.

As prime minister, Dahal needs to realise the unintended consequences of his statements. He must learn to stop speaking from both sides of his mouth. He should realise that as an elected leader he can’t afford to be an extremist and should show more integrity and statesmanship.

KOLKATA—Someplace Else is among the fanciest addresses in east India’s biggest city. The pub at Park Hotel is teeming with people on Saturday night. A live band is playing; the bartender is pulling pints of beer. It is difficult to imagine there is a recession on, or that Mumbai was under attack less than a month ago. India seems to be not just shining, but swinging here.

ndering whether he can hold on to his entertainment industry job. A Nepali journalist in Delhi sees the Indian media shrink and new opportunities more difficult to come by: “Maybe it should come back for the Indian media boom.”

The Mumbai attacks have also challenged the country’s confidence. Despite the attack, the country will still fare better than most other emerging economies. But the belt is being tightened on many fronts. A stakeholders market will no longer swing wildly with little correspondence to the economy on the ground. Job cuts will affect all sections, from the education MAs to the unskilled construction worker.

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A Mumbai-based Nepali professional (there are many who want to go to colleges in India and availed of the boom) is wondering whether he can hold on to his entertainment industry job. A Nepali journalist in Delhi sees the Indian media shrink and new opportunities more difficult to come by: “Maybe it should come back for the Indian media boom.”

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Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal’s much-discussed threat to go back to the jungles was an expression of his frustration rather than a true intent to wage war again. Despite pretensions of being in charge, he has taken over three months to realise that a prime minister in a parliamentary system is only first among equals, not the boss. The premier in a coalition government is even less of a boss, his role is limited to being a facilitator.

Dahal’s problems begin with his own party members. Few Maoist nominees in the government realise what the limits of their powers are. And their followers still think they can arm-twist and threaten perceived enemies at will.

The UML has packed the cabinet with congenital demagogues. Whether Jhalnath Khanal has done it on purpose to undermine the Maoist-led government or whether it’s just his way of hitting back at party rival Madhab Kumar Nepal is unclear. What is obvious, is that none of the males in the government have brought the party any glory.

Ministers of smaller parties have actually done better. Not everyone needs to endorse the way Upendra Yadav has recalled newly appointed ambassadors from India and the US, but at least he has succeeded in restoring the pride of professional cadres in the foreign ministry. One need not agree with the ethnic politics of Jayrakshak Gupta, Bijay Gachhedar or Renu Yadav to appreciate the way they have been trying to get their ministries to start working again in the face of the violent antics of the YCL and YF and the militant wing of the MJF.

Ganesh Shah, the minister for science, technology and environment, represents a minor faction of the left-wing. He got a cabinet berth in the coalition in recognition of his steadfast loyalty to his CPN (United). Shah is an engineer and is supposed to know a bit about what he is expected to do. Unfortunately, even he can’t resist wearing oversized badges and cutting ribbons and lighting inaugural lamps. When he is free from these inanities, he flies abroad to attend seminars where Nepal can neither contribute nor gain anything. A ministership transforms even a creative individual like Shah into a lab mouse going round and round in his wheel. But to his credit, he is at least consulting fellow-engineer Baburam Gurung about appropriate technologies that could improve lives of rural Nepalis.

Gurung was trained in Czechoslovakia and his suggestions were simple: stop chasing the pot of gold at the end of the Information Technology rainbow and concentrate on simple things that will change lives.

The humble Nepali chulo has remained unchanged for millennia even though it wasted firewood. Improved chulos that are more energy efficient and don’t belch out smoke have been available for decades. But the penetration of smokeless chulos in rural Nepal is negligible. We need to build on the improved chulos on that it takes new fuels like husk, briquettes and dung cakes and get people to use them.

Pit latrines were introduced in Tarai back in the sixties. Half a century later, villagers are still forced to defecate publically. During the rains in the hills and floods in Tarai, typhoid and infections are the result. Isn’t it possible to devise a technological solution for this problem? If we can build ultralights and if Nepali software engineers are contributing to Silicon Valley, improved loos shouldn’t be out of our grasp.

Appropriate technology has become a forgotten expression, but there is no other way to make living in rural Nepal a little more bearable for all those who have neither the wish nor the means to migrate to overcrowded cities. Nepal needs better chulos. The Information superhighway can wait.
Interesting, none of the death certificates mention the cause of death. Where it is noted, a substantial number are given as ‘cardiac arrest’, and officials say there are a surprising number of Nepalis who have reportedly died in their sleep.

Krishna Dawadi, joint secretary at the Department of Labour and Foreign Employment Promotion says Nepali workers are mainly unskilled, often employed in risky jobs and are vulnerable to fatal accidents.

Transporting the body home is a lengthy and complex process. The incident is first reported to the Nepali embassy. If the worker has a legal work permit, the mission then verifies the information with the Department of Labour and Employment Promotion Board was set up this month to have compulsory compensation from the relatives of workers injured. The board has already started receiving applications for compensation from the relatives even before it has actually started its work.

“We have a fund of Rs 450 million and will begin the compensation process soon,” says Thaneswor Debkota, member secretary of the board.

He believes this provision will also encourage Nepali migrant workers to go through the correct legal channels before leaving to work abroad. Half of the estimated 2.4 million Nepali workers working in countries other than India do not have work permits.

Debkota told Nepali Times: “If we halve the number of illegal workers, the risk will go down significantly and it can also help in increasing remittances.”

Stacks of coffins in Pashupati indicate the rising mortality rate among Nepali migrant workers abroad.
Rich man, poor man

When a colleague from United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) suggested the refugee camps in Jhapa as a possible location to take pictures for his book, Howard Graham Buffett, 54, son of Warren Buffett, the world’s richest man, couldn’t believe his ears.

As a businessman, philanthropist, photographer, agriculture and conservation expert, he had worked extensively in Africa and South and Central America, but he didn’t know much about South Asia. “When you think of Nepal you think about the mountains and religion, but you don’t think about the high malnutrition rates, the war, or the floods in Kosi and you would have no idea that there are refugees living here,” says Buffett.

And so the ambassador for WFP came to Nepal as part of his project to complete a photography book on hunger. He worked with WFP in Pakistan during the earthquake and has been to several countries with the organisation.

Buffett is no stranger to issues surrounding food production. He farms 1,000 acres of land at home in Nebraska and is on the board of directors for the world’s largest food retailer ConAgra food, as well as food and beverage giants Archer Daniels Midland and Coca Cola Enterprises. He is also the founder of Nature Conservation Trust, a non-profit Trust in South Africa to support cheetah conservation.

In Nepal, he visited WFP’s maternal and child health project in Solukhumbu, flew over the Imja Glacier, visited Bhutani Refugee Camps in Jhapa and the make-shift camps for the Kosi flood victims.

He also studied the country’s agricultural patterns, concluding that Nepal has serious challenges relating to food production. It may be fortunate to have abundant water resources, but without the infrastructure and training for irrigation, would be unable to deal with the challenges of food security.

“To reap benefits from the irrigation system you need a system of crop development, which in turn depends on extension services,” says Buffett. Most seeds used in Nepali farms are indigenous and haven’t seen any improvement in yield or resistance for years.

Buffett stresses that improved training to develop higher quality, higher yielding seeds is critical.

In addition, Buffett says that Nepal has to be able to take advantage of the successes that its neighbours, China and India, have achieved. “It’s about regional integration—if countries around you have higher fertiliser use, you should have better and cheaper access to fertilisers as they develop research and put development dollars into crops.”

Labour pains

Politicians don’t know how to tame militant unions that they unleashed

Last Sunday, the Beed along with family members and some other people got stuck in the lift at the Hotel Grand. We later came to know this was a regular occurrence. The emergency phones did not work and neither was anyone apologetic about the mishap as the hotel employees had gotten used to rescuing people from the elevator. This perhaps reflects the current state of Nepali business, an indifferent workforce that works for an indifferent set of employees.

The perception is that there are few businesses that are really suffering because of the current labour problems and as long as people can find ways to find individual solutions, no one is interested in looking at a common one.

But the business community has to speak with one voice. Having myriad disconnected organisations is counterproductive when it comes to getting the government to agree on providing security to businesses or resolving labour issues.

The workforce had become an empowered group, patronised by the political parties. Workers who believe in productivity and hard work have no place as they are constantly coerced by politically motivated workers who have no intention of working for the betterment of the business. But now the political parties are wondering how to tame these people whom they let loose for political gain.

The service charge issue, which the Beed continues to harp on about, is a perfect example of how the myopia of businesses and labour has now led to a serious crisis in the hospitality industry. The employers gave in since they could pass on the cost to the customers anyway. Now, there is no incentive for staff to offer the highest level of service because irrespective of their effort everybody makes the same tip.

Anyone who recalls service levels at hotels and restaurants in Kathmandu 10 years ago will know what we are talking about. Nepali businesses and industry will have no future if the worker issue is not resolved.

The country faces the threat of being relegated to a country with many trade unions but no real business or industry. The government and the political parties tend to realise that if they do not rein in their workers and make them agree to the fundamentals, then they have to start finding ways of getting revenues from sources other than business. Where else in the world does a government survive on revenue apart from taxing businesses?

The business community needs to unite based on the workers they employ and the taxes they pay and create an advocacy group that starts to force the government to act. For the government, it would be then to go along with other political forces to ensure that the worker leaderships agree on a solution that will be beneficial for both workers and businesses to operate in Nepal.

Otherwise, the finance minister’s signal of boosting job creation by attracting investments will just be a pipe dream.
Not so humble ministerial habits

Interview with Prachanda, Naya Patrika, 13 December

What’s changed since you became prime minister?
Initially, I thought it would be easy to work according to the people’s expectations and the spirit of the commitment letter. But it’s been challenging—although not impossible. We’ve already made solid changes though, in terms of budget, international relations and infrastructural development.

Are you disillusioned yet?
Work is being done. It may be slow due to procedural matters but if I hadn’t yet got to the stage where we are disillusioned. With the commissions, for instance, we just want work to be done quicker.

Why haven’t the departments for women and land improvement been formed yet?
There’s no need. We’ve taken steps but it’ll take time due to ‘bureaucratic hurdles’.

What did you mean when you said that you may leave the government?
I mentioned something when I spoke at Chitwan and Kathmandu. However, what I said was exaggerated by the media. What I meant was that our government is not obsessed over the ‘chair’ and if we aren’t able to bring positive change here, we don’t see the use of staying. We’re not going to stay by force. Instead, we’ll question why the people’s expectations and the spirit of the commitment letter is happening. But we’re not denying our weaknesses.

If you had to give yourself a score out of 100 since you became prime minister—
[Laugh] Between 60 and 70.
The Unrepresented

Madhesi ministers prove themselves powerless to effect change in the Tarai

In spite of the fact that the Madhesis have lately represented the government the security situation in the region has not improved at all. In fact it is deteriorating. Imakshi Male, chief minister of Ramanagar, feels the administration, constitution, legislation and mentality of leaders must be changed if Madhesi issues are to be addressed. “The government should come up with an immediate relief package for the people. It is sad to know that the movement was purely for power and not for the people,” he says.

But Madhesi ministers argue that the problems of the people cannot be taken care of the Madhesi community. They say security will not improve because the government has failed to address armed groups’ demands. Supply Minister Rajendra Mahato, who claims to have understood Madhesi issues because his party’s founder leader the late Gajendra Narayan Mahato was the first person to bring the issues to light, says, “Even if a Madhesi leader is made the prime minister nothing will happen unless an immediate relief package is made. The present government should implement the past agreements reached between the government and the Madhesis.” Foreign Minister Upendra Yadav, who is also president of MJF, the largest Madhesi party and fourth largest party in the CA holds a similar view. “The police and the army are not inclusive. There is the same old law. How can the government do any good for Madhesi under this system?” he questions. He blames the clash between the Maoists YCL and UML, Youth Force and disgruntled police for the deteriorating security. As for the terror terror out by the Tarai armed groups he says, “If we address their reasonable demands then we can take action against their criminal activities.”

Agriculture Minister Jay Prakash Gupta says the number of Madhesi leaders in the government does not necessarily determine the activities of the government. He points to another spinner in the works – that Madhesi ministers could not forge a united view regarding Madhesi concerns. He believes the government for the violence it as failed to come up with an integrated vision for the armed groups and address the reasonable demands of Tarai armed groups in spite of his proposals.

Others say that three months is not long enough to improve things. UML leader and Local Development Minister Ram Prasad Gupta says the government would improve once the dialogue with the Tarai armed groups concludes. “The formation of commissions to address the issues of Tarai and Muslim communities, reservation provision for Dalits and related laws which are in the offing will definitely bring relief. The new constitution and constitutional restructuring will give a long-term solution,” he says. Rameshwar Kapadi, president of Mid-West State Struggle Committee, says the Madhesi problems have remained unaddressed thanks to the popular political slogan of ‘one madhes, one pradhes’ which overlooked geographic, ethnic and cultural differences. He also claims the Madhesi leaders joined the government with the right sentiment but in the end they did not understand the real problems.

Perhaps everyone is expecting too much too soon given the seismic changes this scared country has undergone. But the government itself is not taking the initiative to bring relief to the people when they say the government can do nothing. Madhesi represent a good one third of the leaders in the council of ministers.

The country’s president, vice president and other Madhesis hail from Saurali, Dhansai, Sapati, Sunari and Morung districts of Madhes movement. It shows the effectiveness of the movement and its achievements. But the people who were on the frontline during the movement in these districts are now living under constant threat.

“We will have one identity—Nepali”

Conclusion of the interview with Krishna Khanal, political science professor at Tribhuvan University, about federalism.

What are the merits and demerits of federalism?

No political system is good or bad in itself. There is no ideal system. But the country might face some challenges once it embraces federalism.

The issue of ethnicity could be one while the division of provinces could be another. Ethnic, linguistic and regional issues have to be taken into consideration when dividing provinces but they are not the sole determinants.

Let’s take Limbuan province for instance. There might be people who think non-Limbu should not be allowed to live there, that they should be driven away. This is against the spirit of federal democratic norms.

The emergence of regional parties will be inevitable if the issues of ethnicity remain unaddressed. That’s not to say regional politics is wholly bad but possible challenges should be identified on time. If political parties are formed in the federal system, that could pose another problem.

In federalism, it is expensive as there will be many different governments and parliaments. But there again the federal system could promote economic growth. Once there are many challenges, which is why political parties appear reluctant to embrace it.

Some argue the country would break up if it goes federalist. The past experiences of federal countries do not prove so. Yugoslavia disintegrated because the federal system was not based on democratic norms. India is a federal country which has been facing the problem of separatist movements from the very beginning but it has not disintegrated in over 60 years. In 1947, the separatists demanded independence for Tamanatha but the issue evaporated when MDK party won. From Nagaland to Manipur, the separation issue is being raised but the state mechanism has been functioning perfectly. In other words, it is through federalism that integration has been protected.

With the exception of Tarai Democratic Front, no other parties or groups have the view of a separate province so far.

How should provinces be created?

In more than one way. In India, federal structures are based on language (Gujarat, Tamilnadu etc), geographical situation (Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh etc) and ethnic settlement (Punjab, Bangal etc). The provinces should be created according to the density of the population and topography. National unity is also important. The state should be self-sufficient in terms of economy, administration and internal security. It should be capable of implementing central government policies, programs and plans. It must be considered whether a province is viable politically and administratively. For instance, a separate province of Chepang with a population of 50,000 could not be administratively and politically viable.

What are the widely accepted norms of federalism?

There are essentially two concepts of federalism that are widely accepted—territorial and non-territorial. America is an example of territorial while Ethiopia is non-territorial. Under the former, provinces or states are demarcated in a certain size and their inhabitants are known as citizens of that particular province. The latter refers to demarcating provinces on the basis of ethnicity.

In Nepal, it is not possible to apply either so the federal structure of our country should be based on ethnicity, language, population density and geography.

What are the basic requirements for a federal system to function?

The basic principles of a democratic system apply. The only difference is the level of ruling. In a federal system, there are different governments and parliaments at the centre and provinces. The duties and responsibilities of the central and provincial government would be as per the established constitution. In many federal countries, the provincial government has a different constitution from that of a central government, while some have a single constitution. In America, Canada and Switzerland, provinces/states have their own constitution. If any state wants a separate constitution that should not be negated.

Another important question is about the type of system. It could be presidential, parliamentarian or mixed. I think an executive presidential system will not be appropriate because of the diversity. Under the presidential system, it is usually difficult, women, Madhesi or Tharus would be elected. We need a ceremonial president and an executive prime minister.

What should be the political, economical and administrative relationship between the central and provincial government?

The constitution will specify the fundamental relationship. Some responsibilities will be shared, some separate. For instance, the issue of environment. When it rains in the mountains, landslides takes place in the hilly regions and the Tarai suffers from flash floods. These are shared issues.

In principle, defence, foreign affairs and treasury remain at the centre and remain outside the provincial government. Hydropower can be of national interest. In this situation, the central and provincial work together.

We should understand one thing – the centre is not a separate entity without provinces. The central government consists of representatives from provinces. No laws are made without the participation from provinces. The centre is the common ground.
PRISONS

Behind TEXT AND PICTURES by KIRAN PANDAY

Most were built during the Rana regime. They are overcrowded, mismanaged and the inmates underfed and angry. In the Siraha jail, the roof leaks and it is on the verge of collapse. The Mahottari jail holds 339 prisoners when it only has enough space for 135.

There are 73 prisons in the country containing 8,810 detainees, 538 of them women. In addition, 62 dependents also live inside the jails with their parents. There are 166 juveniles and 488 foreigners.

Whatever ray of hope one sees inside the jails, is due to the determination of the inmates to make their lives behind bars bearable. In Dilli Bajar prison in the heart of the capital, the detainees association purchased two computers and is conducting training for detainees, 35 prisoners currently attend the course.

In Dhulikhel jail, prison is divided into three sections, one for severely mentally disabled detainees. This is the only prison in the country that can handle the mentally handicapped, but it is clear that many of them should be in a hospital, not a prison.

Pictures selected from an exhibition by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Kathmandu last week.

TEXT AND PICTURES by KIRAN PANDAY

Prisons in Nepal are dilapidated, but their deterioration is not limited to their cracked roofs and crumbling walls.

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Pictures selected from an exhibition by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Kathmandu last week.
LONG NIGHTS: With no other form of pastime, the women detainees sit together and while away the evening.

ANYWHERE BUT HERE: A young child who was born in Mahottari Jail gazes out beyond the prison walls.

A LONG WAIT: A detainee stares idly as he waits for customers in the small store run for prisoners at Central Jail.

PELA FOR FREEDOM: A woman inmate reaches out for a visitor at Siraha Jail. After prisoners broke out of the prison some two months ago, visitors cannot come within 50 metres.

REFRESHING: A male detainee enjoys a bath after a long day of work in Siraha Jail.
Nepalis voted for peace, not for leaders who make threats when the going gets tough

I

In the last few years the cold dark evenings have become unbearable during this load-shedding winter. With 10 hours of power cuts every day, there isn’t much one can do but mull, snore, meditate or worse, think about the state of the country. The political situation in the last week turned as dark as the powerless nights. We have had an earful of threats, accusations and no end of whining from senior politicians and party leaders. When Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, leader of the party with one-third of the seats in the parliament, has been threatening to quit the government and take up arms again, UML’s Madhab Kumar Nepal has been spreading the word throughout the country that the government, which his party is a part of, is a total failure. The changes taking place in the country in the last few months have been rapid and overwhelming. Sometimes it is hard to keep track of how much things have changed. In all this, one characteristic that hasn’t changed is politicians’ habit of complaining and not watching what they are saying when things don’t go their way.

Is it so difficult to understand that one of the reasons why Nepalis went out and voted in such large numbers was because they were tired of the same old way of doing things? Many in the villages of Nepal voted for the Maoists because they were fed up with the war, the killings, losing family members, the threats and the lawlessness war had brought home. Last week in Panauti a local resident Mahesh Kamacharya said what many Nepalis have been thinking but have been too afraid to say. “In the last few months since the Maoists started leading the government they haven’t done anything to prove that they are different from the other politicians who have been in charge since 1990.”

When a prime minister threatens to quit the government because unannounced international powers are not allowing them to work, it makes the people wonder if their intentions for the country are genuine. And these threats come at a time when the media has been reporting on how the lives of the comrades have changed since leaving the jungle, how most of them are now living in the lap of luxury.

Leaders threaten to prove a point either to the opposition or to the people. What they don’t understand is that such threats create cynicism and hopelessness in the people. They can’t trust a party that threatens to go back to war when diplomacy gets a little hard to handle. Nepalis went out in overwhelming numbers and voted for the Maoists, but not all the votes came from die-hard supporters. After ten years of waging war the Maoists have to do a lot more to gain the trust of the people than win an election. The little credibility they may have gained is lost when they bare their fangs.

Meanwhile, instead of thinking of ways to reorganise their parties so that they can gain back the support they lost in the CA elections, older parties like the NC are busy trying to find fault. In the eyes of the people such bickering just makes them look like very bad losers.

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During the CA elections people in the villages were promised education, roads, food, employment, development. Eight months have passed and nothing has been done. Nepalis in the hinterland don’t care about internal party rifts, they don’t care about who was promoted in the party ranks or which invisible foreign hand wants what from Nepal or who said what in Kathmandu. People want promises to be kept. They want to know that their children are safe and their neighbours won’t die of a curable disease. They have had enough of the war. Twelve years of living in fear is enough.
disintegrate?

Not all Maoists in the camps want to be part of the Nepal Army

NO TIME FOR SCHOOL: (†)
Sunita, Samiksha and Niruta quit school to join the people’s war. Now that the conflict is over, they want to resume studies but they say military classes and trainings leave them with no time to return to formal education.

members and children orphaned during the war still use the term ‘chulians’ while referring to the Nepal Army during the insurgency. There are 1,000 PLA in the camp, which includes young mothers, some teenagers, and some wounded, in addition to the verified combatants. Ram Kumar Thapa (Maham) who has lost a hand and eye, says, “We knew we could be wounded or killed but we fought for the liberation of the people.” But what about his future? With his disability he will not qualify for integration. “The state should provide us with the right alternative,” he says.

Another ex combatant, Khum Bahadur Lamsal (Sonam) who lost a leg during a battle in Arghakhanchi in 2002 raises concerns about the injured combatants the Nepal Army has. “If integration is to take place, all of us should be integrated, otherwise those injured soldiers in the NA should also be withdrawn.”

The Nepal Army has 2,625 wounded soldiers while the PLA has over 3,000 personnel wounded during the war.

Nursing mothers in the camps complain of inadequate food for their babies. Although they enjoy a leave of six months, which is four months more than government employees and female soldiers of the Nepal Army get, they have difficulty being able to afford to care for their children.

“We don’t get an extra something for the baby, apart from the regular Rs 2,100, which is not enough,” says 21-year-old Shanta Bhattarai whose four month old son has pneumonia.

integrating a politically indoctrinated army has also cropped up, but vice commander Magar thinks it could be resolved. “When we (PLA and NA) work together for a common goal, we will forget our past grievances,” he says. “We will also be giving up our party membership,’ he adds. However, almost all PLA

truth

The forensic investigation into the 43 disappeared on Shivapuri finally begins to address impunity

skills and build local capacity for identification is imperative,” says Hofmeister, who has worked on exhumations in Bosnia and Latin America.

She adds: “Society may not be ready but the loved ones want to know because they never forget.”

Under international humanitarian law, the authorities are responsible for determining what happened to those who went missing during an armed conflict. Accurate information is impossible without forensic expertise. Identification and evidence is extremely important not just for prosecution but also for humanitarian purposes.

Ranta says that forensic evidence has to be dealt with very carefully and has to be done by experts. Dealing with the past is one of the ways the authorities can build credibility amongst people. She says, “These issues keep coming back and society, government and people will have to deal with them one day. There’s no use trying to shove them under the rug.”

See also: “Forgiving but not forgetting”, #380 “Prison diary”, #290 “Many have died in detention”, #397

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Subash, who works for the Jaycees and Archana who works at Nabil Bank in Damak, are an educated and savvy couple who want change. Subash wanted to set an example in Damak and he fought hard to convince his parents to sanction his marriage, while his wife was easily convinced. “It’s not about rejecting your culture,” she says, “you should be able to spend only as much as you can.”

“We thought what we were doing would be something new,” says Subash, “but there were lots of people who replied to our ad, saying that they were doing the same.”

Chakra Bohara and Gita Mainali Bohara in Dang are one such couple who spent as little as they could when they tied the knot five years ago, while Rajan and Durga had a similar approach. “Instead of using the money for our wedding,” said Durga, “we saved the money to finance our further studies.”

But marriage counselor for the online matrimonial service nepalmatrimonial.com, Shilaja Singh Yonjan says that cases like these are exceptions. Many young people such as Chakra and Gita who have intercaste marriages usually conduct the marriage by themselves, often fresh out of college and have no choice but to be frugal. They do it because their decision hasn’t been accepted by their parents. “The majority of Nepalis,” she says, “still attempt to prove their affluence with lavish weddings.” While many youngsters are now opting for court marriage, it’s still usually the parents who decide on the format of the ceremony.

priceless: Archana and Subash wrote in their wedding announcement in Kantipur. “We want to publicly announce that we began our married life on 13 October without any unnecessary costs, and will donate the money to various charitable organisations.”

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no frills

Getting married simply is a wise move in lean times

ROMA ARYAL

A quarter-page ad in Kantipur announced the wedding of Archana Dahal and Subash Bhattarai on 24 November— but there was no ordinary wedding. No extravagant ceremony with pricey invitations, dowry and lavish party. Instead the couple opted to give all the money their parents had set aside for the occasion to charity and have a small, humble gathering at a temple.

Less than a week after the ad appeared, the couple received an overwhelming response with more than 700 emails and 400 SMSs from Nepalis who had read the announcement from all over Nepal and abroad. Some were deeply touched while others wished they had foregone a lavish affair in favour of something less costly.

A man from Qatar seemed irked that the couple hadn’t decided to marry earlier: “If you had,” he wrote in his email, “I wouldn’t have to leave my pregnant wife, so I can pay off the loans we took for our wedding. I would’ve known that there was another option.”

PRICELESS: Archana and Subash wrote in their wedding announcement in Kantipur. “We want to publicly announce that we began our married life on 13 October without any unnecessary costs, and will donate the money to various charitable organisations.”

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अब हप्ताको सातै दिन फरक विशेषाधक सहित
Nepal may not be internationally recognised as a great engineering nation but there is one area in which it excels. Bridges. This mountainous country has built more than 4,000 suspension footbridges. And now Nepal is exporting this expertise to other developing countries.

With 80 per cent of the population living in rural areas, in rugged terrain, bridges are of vital importance. Without them, isolated valleys and remote villages have no way of communicating with the outside world. Ethiopia and Honduras have similar terrain and socio-economic conditions.

The Swiss aid agency, Helvetas, has been involved in training Nepali engineers in suspension bridge-building for the past 40 years. Now, Nepali companies have their own indigenous capacity to build the bridges.

Instead of people going abroad, engineers from abroad come here to learn how to build trail bridges,” explains Jan Roukema of Helvetas in Kathmandu.

Nepali engineers have learned how to build high quality bridges on tight budgets and also how to place them at the most strategically appropriate locations so that they benefit the maximum number of users.

Shah says Nepal still faces major challenges in bridge-building: governance, ensuring quality of materials and the brain drain. Last year’s bridge collapse on the Bheri in which 50 people were killed was an example of what happens when quality standards drop.
The search for quality on the web

Riza Berkam in NEW YORK

In the not-so-distant future, students will be able to graduate from high school without ever touching a book. Twenty years ago, they could graduate from high school without ever using a computer. In only a few decades, computer technology and the Internet have transformed the core principles of information, knowledge, and education.

Indeed, today you can fit more books on the hard disk of your laptop computer than in a bookstore carrying 60,000 titles. The number of Web pages on the Internet is rumored to have exceeded 500 billion, enough to fill 10 modern aircraft carriers with the equivalent number of 500-page, one-pound books.

Such analogies help us visualise the immensity of the information explosion and ratify the concerns that come with it. Web search engines are the only mechanism with which to navigate this avalanche of information, so they should not be mistaken for an optional accessory, just another button to play with or a tool to locate the nearest pizza store. Search engines are the single most powerful distribution points of knowledge, wealth, and yes, misinformation.

When we talk about web search, the first name that pops up is, of course, Google. It is not far-fetched to say that Google made the Internet what it is today. It shaped a new generation of people who are strikingly different from their parents. Baby boomers might be the best placed to appreciate this, since they experienced Rock 'n' Roll as kids and Google as parents.

Google's design was based on statistical algorithms. But search technologies that are based on statistical algorithms cannot address the quality of information, simply because high-quality information is not always popular, and popular information is not always high-quality. You can collect statistics until the cows come home but you cannot expect statistics to produce an effect beyond what they are good for.

The inefficiencies of today's search engines have created a new industry called Search Engine Optimisation, which focusses on strategies to make web pages rank high against the popularity criteria of Google-esque search engines. It is a billion-dollar industry. If you have enough money, your Web page can be ranked higher than many others that are more credible or higher quality. Since the emergence of Google, quality information has never been so vulnerable to the power of commercialism.

Information quality, molded in the shadow of web search, will determine the future of mankind, but ensuring quality will require a revolutionary approach, a technological breakthrough beyond statistics. This revolution is underway, and it is called semantic technology.

To achieve the level of dexterity in handling languages by computer algorithms, an ontology must be built. Ontology is neither a dictionary nor a thesaurus. Building an ontology encapsulating the world's knowledge may be an immense task, requiring an effort comparable to compiling a large encyclopedia and the expertise to build it, but it is feasible. Several start-up companies around the world like Hakia, Cognition Search and Lexxe have taken on this challenge. The result of these efforts remains to be seen.

But how would a semantic search engine solve the information quality problem? The answer is simple: precision. Once computers can handle natural languages with semantic precision, high-quality information will not need to become popular before it reaches the end user, unlike what is required by Web search today.

Semantic technology promises other means of assuring qualities by detecting the richness and coherence of the concepts encountered in a given text. If the text includes a phrase like "Bush killed the last bill in the Senate," does the rest of the text include coherent concepts? Or is this page a spam page that includes a bunch of popular single-liners wrapped with ads? Semantic technology can discern what it is.

Given humans' limited reading speed (200-300 words per minute) and the enormous volume of available information, effective decision-making today calls for semantic technology in every aspect of knowledge refinement. We cannot afford a future in which knowledge is at the mercy of popularity and money.

Riza Berkam is a nuclear scientist with a specialisation in artificial intelligence, fuzzy logic, and information systems. He is the founder of Hakia.

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“This must be how the Wright brothers felt when their plane first flew,” Bikash Parajuli remembers thinking when the ultra-light he helped build took off for the first time from Pokhara airport on 6 December.

For Parajuli, the first flight marked the culmination of years of planning, overcoming technical and bureaucratic hurdles to make Nepal’s first airworthy aircraft. Called ‘Danfe’, the 400kg ultra-light was piloted by Alexander Maximov of Avia Club and made six take offs and landings at Pokhara airport amidst cheers from hundreds of onlookers.

Parajuli, 27, had been fascinated by the idea of flight from an early age ever since he watched Twin Otters at Pokhara airport as a student at the Pratibha Higher Secondary School. When he was in Grade 10, he built a small model plane at the Kaski district science exhibition but the model failed to take off.

“From that point I was determined to make a plane that would fly,” says Parajuli, who enrolled at Pulchok Engineering Campus where he was a member of the Robotics Club. Along with fellow students, Parajuli spent three years designing and fabricating the Danfe. With support from Natasha Shrestha of Avia Club in Pokhara and guidance from their professor, Bhakta Bahadur Ale and another faculty, the plane was finally ready. The Danfe was ready to fly but Nepal’s civil aviation bureaucracy wasn’t.

The government didn’t give Parajuli the permit to make a test flight, even though Capt Maximov, who used to fly MiGs in Russia was ready to take it up. But the persistence of the Danfe team paid off and the permission for a test flight finally came. The Rs 2 million Danfe has tandem seating for two, has a ceiling of 6,000 ft and has a maximum speed of 200 km/h. But last week, the ministry gave permission for the plane to do circuits and landings at Pokhara airport not flying more than 25ft above the ground.

Parajuli believes that his prototype can be mass produced and boost Nepal’s tourism industry, and can also be used for rescue and patrolling. Enthused by the successful test flight the Pulchok Campus has decided to offer an aero space elective in its engineering course. Given the right opportunity, Parajuli says Nepali students can compete with the best in the world because they have to overcome not just technological challenges, but also lack of resources and bureaucratic hurdles. He feels lucky to be one of those rare individuals who gets to fly a plane that he himself built.

Parajuli wants to go abroad to finish his masters in aeronautical engineering and return to Nepal. He says: “It is better to be lion in your own country than than a monkey in a foreign land.”

The sky is the limit

Engineer overcomes bureaucratic hurdles to test fly the first Nepal-built aircraft

PRAKRITI PATHAK

in POKHARA

“Engineer overcomes bureaucratic hurdles to test fly the first Nepal-built aircraft”

POKHARA CITY.COM

Engineer overcomes bureaucratic hurdles to test fly the first Nepal-built aircraft

POKHARA CITY.COM
EXHIBITIONS

- Symbolic Embodiment by Bithala KC, 23-29 December, 5PM, Yala Maya Kendra, Patan Dhoka, 5553767
- India’s wild orchids and other plants by Hemlata Pradhan, Siddhartha Art Gallery, till 1 January, Sunday-Friday 11AM-6PM, every Monday 12-4PM

EVENTS

- Short Tai Chi Course, 119 December at Himalayan Buddhist Meditation Centre, Keshar Mahal, 4410402
- Christmas celebrations at Dholgai Catholic Church, 24 December, Nepali mass at 5.30 PM and English mass at 9PM.
- On 25 December, mass at 10AM. 5526732
- Casablanca, a film at Laxmi Art Gallery, 25 December 6.30 PM, 4428549
- Wisdom of Emptiness course by Glen Svensson at Himalayan Buddhist Meditation Centre, Keshar Mahal, 23-24 December, Thamel. 4410402
- Taichi Camp at Lakuribhanjyang from 26-28 December, Base Camp Trek, 44. 11 504

MUSIC

- Idiosyncrasy Band performing at Shital Restaurant and Bar, Manahivan, near British camp, 19 December, 4PM onwards.
- Christmas Jazz Special 2008 at 1905 restaurant by Possie & the lags, 1905, 24 December, Rs 400. 421506
- Tuesday Melody at Jazzabell Café, Happy hour 6-8PM. 2114075
- 74 Twister playing live every Tuesday at Moksh, Pulchowk.
- Robin and the New Revolution playing live every Tuesday, 7PM onwards at Bamboo Club restaurant, Thamel. 470157
- Happy cocktail hour, 5-7PM, ladies night on Wednesday with live unplugged music at Cafe Bar.
- Live Sensation, live performance by Yarkey, every Saturday, 2PM, Hyatt Regency. 4491234
- Dance and Cocktails at Cube Bar, Kamaladi. 4438017
- Fusion and Lozza Band every Friday night, Bhumi Resto Lounge, Lazimpat. 4412183
- Rudra night fusion and classical Nepali music by Shyam Nepali and friends, every Friday, 7PM at Le Meridien, Gokarna. 4451212
- Sufi music by Hemanta Rana, every Friday at 7PM and Bar at Dhaba Restaurant and Bar, Thapathali.
- Fusion and Classical Music by Anil Shahi every Wednesday, night with Rashmi Singh every Friday, Sulli & Raga with Hemant Rana every Saturday, 8 PM onwards. Absolute Bar. 5221408

DINING

- Christmas festivities at Kikyo Restaurant, 24 December-9 January, Thamel. 4205040
- Christmas Turkey Dinner from 24 December-1 January at Kikyo restaurant, Beer & Steakhouse, Thamel. 4700243
- Christmas Special, three-course menu, 1905 restaurant, 4215068
- Nuniwche goes Thai at Nuniwche’s Thai kitchen, Baluwat. 4215068
- Christmas Goodies at The Lounge, Hyatt Regency Kathmandu. 4490692
- Strawberry Etagere at The Lounge from 4.30 PM-6.30 PM, Hyatt Regency. 4491234
- Organic Salad Bar and Steak at Jalan Jalan restaurant every Friday from 6PM, Rs 650
- Plat Du Jour at Hotel Shangri-la, Kathmandu, Rs 600. 4412999
- Pasta pesto passion at La Dolce Vita, Thamel. 4700612
- Continental and café item with live band every Friday at Vintage Café and Pub, Woodland Complex, Darbar Marg
- Home made pasta at Al Fresco, Soaltee Crowne Plaza. 4273999
- Reality Bites, The Kaiser Café, 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 liquors at the Asahi Lounge, near Hotel Shanker, Thamel.
- Beer and Barbecue from 24 December-9 January. Beer 6PM at Dhaba. Thapathali. 8641290619
- Ily Expression Coffee at Hotel Shanker-la, Lazimpat and Mandap Hotel, Thamel.
FLAMES OF FURY: Students from Thapathali Campus burn tyres on Tuesday to protest against the failure of the Public Transportation Entrepreneurs Association to drop public transport fares.

LASSES-A-LEAPING: Young girls, dressed in modern and traditional outfits, participate in Sakela Sili, a Kirati dance form, on the occasion of Udhauli festival at Nakhipot on Friday.

HONOURING THE MASTER: Veteran singer Bhakta Raj Acharya, seen here with his son singer Satya Raj Acharya, receives the Lifetime Achievement Award during the 12th Hits FM Music Awards at the Army Club on Saturday.
So our country’s name is about to be changed again. The latest formulation that the Maoist central committee came up with is People’s Federal Democratic National Republic of Nepal (PFDNRN). The fact that the letters ‘NRN’ are contained in the new national acronym must be deliberate.

But as the official name of Nepal gets longer and longer, have we left anything out? Just so we don’t regret it later, we should lump everything together once and for all and call ourselves United People’s Revolutionary Independent Democratic Nationalistic Federal Republic of Inclusive Nepal, known in short as: UPRIDNFRIN. That should give us some added stature at international conferences where our name tag will be even longer than the DPRK. Nothing else seems to matter, but size does.

Why is Pukada getting so paranoid these days about ‘The Foreign Hand’? After broadly hinting that unnamed members of the international community were trying to turn Nepal into a failed state, this week he actually named names at the party conclave and accused western countries and India of arm-twisting him. Luckily, PKD told his centcom delegates, he was able to balance this pressure by using China as the counterweight. Lotus Flower also seems to be spoiled by the deliberate leak of news that His Excellency met His Majesty, and intelligence of another impending visit by an ex-Viceroy Rajan who is said to be pally with the erstwhile rajah.

No wonder Comrade Chairman is sweating: he’s getting grilled from within his party as well as from without. This has made his hypertension go haywire as he tries to divide up the spoils of government to everyone within his party who wants a share of the pie. PKD tried to appease hardliner Kamred Biplop by trying to push him to take the thankless job of heading the commission on land reform, but the smarty pants refused, so he appointed Comrade Gaurav’s cousin, Horrible Gajurel, who immediately showed symptoms of foot-in-the-mouth disease at the Reporters’ Club.

Till press time, not a single car costing more than Rs 20 lacks had been sold after the new govt regulation requiring proof of income went into effect this week. But Marutis were flying off the racks. And over at the Land Revenue office, bureaucrats were advising property sellers how to under-invoice their land so as to avoid the Rs 50 lack minimum for showing income source. All for a facilitation fee, of course. Looks like the well meaning BRB has underestimated the extreme creativity Nepalis exhibit when it comes to cheating the government. The upshot of all this is that there are now billions in black money floating about, and it looks the casinos where Nepalis can now legally gamble is going to be where it is all going to be laundered. And the beauty of it is that everyone gets his cut, and the GDP expands.

You have to give it to the PM, the man’s a genius. This week, he got to inaugurate the 70 megawatt Mid-Marsyangdi project which was started when Nepal was still a constitutional monarchy, and would have been completed four years ago had his guerillas not threatened and extorted the living daylights out of the contractors. The supreme irony in all this was that in the speech he gives before cutting the red ribbon, PKD takes full credit for the project and even pronounces no more load shedding. And we find out why: his government is about to declare an energy emergency and order diesel powerplants to generate 200 MW—in a country with the world’s highest per capital hydro power generation potential. Why not approve all the hydro PPAs that are in the queue?

The adulteration mafia is also trying to lubricate the government machinery to re-instate the price differential between diesel and kerosene. The demand for kerosene has dropped by 70 percent since diesel and kerosene were priced the same last month, proving once and for all that subsidised kerosene was never the fuel of the poor but the fuel of choice for the adulterers.

Tailpiece: Comrade Ferocity described Maoism the other day as a political philosophy that is “truly scientific”. In that case, maybe they should’ve tried it out on animals first.

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