Weekly Internet Poll # 436. To vote go to: www.nepalitimes.com

Q. What comes first, politics or garbage?

Weekly Internet Poll # 435
Q. What is your reaction to soon-to-be 20-hour power cuts?

Total votes: 3,330

It all started with the Maoists hacking off the legs of UML activist Bibek Debkota, near the waste landfill site at Tinpipple in Nuwakot three weeks ago. Although the UML and Maoists are both in government, the highway to the dumpsite was blocked for two weeks by locals demanding better compensation for allowing the capital to dump 400 tons of garbage a day in their backyard.

And just as the government sorted out that problem, Debkota’s neighbours resumed the blockade demanding medical treatment for him, employment for his wife and free school for his children. Local development minister Ramchandra Jha said his ministry could do nothing and said the prime minister should intervene. He added, “There is too much politics mixed up with garbage.” Meanwhile, life goes on amidst streets filled with stinking waste, like this view of Asan on Thursday.
Subhadra Belbase, email

This will be the best way to remember Uma Singh and her fight for freedom of expression. There should be no Exceptions to the law of freedom of speech and thought. No one should be deprived of the right to express their opinion, regardless of whether it is popular or not. The public must be protected from the state's arbitrary actions. The right to free speech is a fundamental human right that must be upheld. We must stand up for those who are being abused and suppressed.}

Oscar Psik, email

Sajana Reshi, email

The Maoist party's goal is clear: to establish itself as an independent and powerful force in the political spectrum. The party is not afraid of confrontation or taking on the authorities. It is determined to fight for what it believes in, regardless of the consequences. The Maoists are ready to make sacrifices if necessary to achieve their goals. The party's goal is to establish a Maoist state, where the people will be in control and the interests of the masses will be protected. They will not back down in the face of opposition or threats. The Maoists are prepared to fight for their beliefs and will not tolerate any interference in their struggle for freedom.

Sudha Banerji, email

Thank you for calling for a strong and independent Nepal. I believe that the Maoist party is the only party that can bring about genuine change in Nepal. They are the ones who have fought for the rights of the people and the voiceless. The Maoists believe in the power of the people and the importance of unity and solidarity. They are committed to fighting for a better future for all Nepalis, and I support their struggle.

Chetan Chhal, email

Nepal's Problems

I write this because I am very concerned about the situation in Nepal. I have read news coming out of Nepal. Power cuts have extended to 16 hours. This is the most unacceptability that is happening in a country. But that is not where our problems end, we have had dire shortage of clean drinking water for the past few decades. As a result, there are deaths and illness. We must address these issues. And yet the leaders have the audacity to talk about a new Nepal. Nepal's life is so much better. It looks like the leaders bought nothing for us but to gain power. They would throw us at every day, but where is the action.
Jaleswar had been the capital of Mahottari ever since this district was created about a century ago. It was from here that Bada Hakims, usually Rana cousins or their distant relatives, controlled the vast territory between Bagmati in the west, Kamala in the east, the Chure range to the north and India in the south.

Mahottari’s revenue was so huge that the office in Jaleswar came to be called Bhari Maal, or ‘hefty takings’, in official documents. During the Panchayat, the central government recognised the political importance of the place by posting heavyweight hardliners as Damodar Shamsher, Lila Raj Bista and Shankar Raj Pathak as Anchaladhis of Janakpur. Attempts to shift the Janakpur Zone capital to Sindhuli was discarded once it was discovered that even the construction of the East-West highway had failed to move the weight of population northwards.

The sleepy pilgrim town of Janakpur thus emerged as an unintended beneficiary. It became de-facto centre of zonal administration and politics. Since 1990 the CDO has been operating from offices and residences built in Jaleswar during the Rana era for Bada Hakims. Jaleswar has been seized with another existential crisis after 18 years. Early this week, protestors padlocked all government offices to oppose the transfer of some administrative functions to Bardibas on the highway. Locals fear it’s an attempt to shift the district headquarters by stealth and the lockdown is an indication of the statelessness in most Tarai districts where anyone with a grievance can disrupt public services.

Dismounting the tiger

Time for PKD to say what he means and take responsibility

Dahal’s threatening growls are sounding more and more like whimpers of supplication. The antidote to his vulnerability lies in cultivating the leadership of his coalition partners and other political parties. He would be merely whetting the appetite of hardliners in his party by promising revolutions that this country can no longer afford. It seems he has shifted his tiger. Till now, he was scared of getting off because it could eat him up. Now, despite the risks, he will have to dismount the tiger.

In Kathmandu, residents along the road to Siddhi landfill always want some more privileges to let garbage trucks pass unhindered. Villages far away from the flow of Melamchi claim special concessions from a project meant for the capital. Almost every sector wants extraordinary exemption from load-shedding schedule with little or no concern for finding ways that can help reduce demand, improve supply or balance distribution.

There may have been many reasons behind Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal’s threat to revolt and seize power if any attempts were made to topple his government. For a Maoist supporter, it’s difficult to see the difference between previous regimes and the one that is supposed to be theirs. The prime minister is probably under pressure to show that this government is different from those of Marich Man Singh or Manmohan Adhikari in the past. He has to reassure his cadres that this indeed isn’t their government but the one in the future is going to be truly Maoist. The need to sound more radical than others could be another impetus behind Dahal’s shrill rhetoric. In most leftwing parties, the leader has to appear belligerent in public to prove his purity. Restraint and modesty are not the virtues of a revolutionary.

Dahal sowed the wind during the insurgency, and he suddenly finds himself having to reap the whirlwind. He says he wants ‘disjointed continuity’ (‘krambhanga’) – a stark contradiction in terms that could only be coined by Maoists. If Dahal can say things like that and get away with it, so can everyone else.

So a communal bureaucracy in Jaleswar concludes that it will be more comfortable in a town less dominated by Madhesis. If the decision hurts the interests of national unity, then that should be a matter of concern to the Maoist leadership rather than Home Minister Bam Dev Gautam. Similarly, Siddhi and Melamchi hold the capital to ransom.

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Still a mess

The only hope for the Madhes is sensitive and sincere dealings by Kathmandu

T

o years after the Madhes movement altered Nepali nationalism, the Tari is in a mess. Anger against Kathmandu was the defining feature of this period. Now, a mix of disillusionment, rage, helplessness and fear prevails. Macro politics in the region is more fragmented that ever, across party and caste lines. And at the micro level violence has become the only tool to resolve both political and personal disputes.

In terms of party politics, the MJF managed to prevent a split this week. All leaders realised they needed each other (Upendra needs Gachchhadar’s Tharu base and Pawan’s manipulative skills, and both recognise that Upendra remains the face of the Madhes movement).

All this is happening as the polarisation in national politics deepens. With inter-party relations improving somehow in Kathmandu, the mood at Bharatpur, Makhanigand and Lainchaur will continue to determine MJF realignments.

The TMDP has begun protests demanding implementation of the eight-point agreement. Apart from a few committed activists, people are in no mood to come out into the streets. But this is a chance for the party to expand its organisation and caste base, get its leaders out into the Tarai and occupy the moral high ground.

There is a churning among the armed groups. The government talks drama has had a few unintended consequences: intermediaries have made money, ragtag groups have gained legitimacy, some serious groups have been forced to introspect and the security situation has become even weaker with the police told the security situation has become even weaker with the police told the police...
Growing investment

Nepal Investment Bank has opened new branches at Boudha and Hetauda. Both the branches will be linked through ABBSS (Any Branch Banking Services) to all other 23 branches of the bank and will provide all standard services. An ATM has also been installed at Boudha.

B’day bank

Himalayan Bank celebrated 16 years of operation in Nepal. The bank’s net profit at present is Rs 188 million.

Breaking grounds

Gorkha Brewery will construct a new building for Senior Durga Primary School in Mukundapur to upgrade it to a secondary school. The brewery will also provide furniture, drinking water, electricity and monthly salary to the teaching staff. The foundation stone was laid down by the Danish ambassador Finn Thilsted.

Defence up

Tara Services has partnered with Bit Defender, an international anti-virus software. Its sister organisation, Tara International will market and promote the 2009 version of Bit Defender in Nepal.

Info ties

Infotech Computers has become the authorised distributor of Taiwan based Elitegroup Computer System (ECS). Infotech will distribute ECS’s motherboards.

Real dealers

Dabur Nepal organised ‘Real Mango Bonanza Lucky Draw & Prize Distribution Ceremony’ for its dealers and wholesalers. Surbir Dhajistha of Dhajistha Traders won the first prize.

In a mismanaged state

Since we don’t implement our plans, problems mutate into disasters

If management is about looking ahead and carrying out actions today to prevent problems from coming up, then it’s time to declare Nepal a mismanaged country.

Since 1951, we’ve had our fill of elaborately drawn-out five-year plans. But since we execute little of what we plan, problems mutate into disasters and we then get busy playing the blame game.

evens when the need of mismanagement is plain to all to see there is a reluctance to frame Nepal’s broader failures in terms of management. Civil society pundits would rather use the euphemism ‘failed governance’ than be caught saying that Nepal’s same-old politicians have failed us at the nation’s management.

Almost 300 years after electricity was first introduced in Kathmandu, this nation of glaciers and rivers suffers from crushing daily 16-hour power cuts. Why? When elected leaders repeatedly fail to plan for the rising demand for electricity, why doesn’t that strike us as arm- amered naivete?

Lanes meant for buggies in the Ranas are jostled by pavemen
tess roads today, with motorcyclists fighting for space with cars and buses. The Valley’s first urbanisation plan was made in 1972, yet we carry on as if crowded streets and squalid urban sprawl must continue to define our surroundings. Holy rivers have returned to open sewers. Yet we put our blame on politicians in general terms, but never make their lack of management skills an issue to consider when sending them back to the parliament again.

One reason why it’s hard to talk about the lack of management skills is that management remains an odd discipline. Indeed, most otherwise well-educated Nepalis don’t know what to make of it. Universities may offer a degree in management, but rarely do they offer a degree in management.

The craft of management can be honed only through intensive, multi-year apprenticeship in the real world, just as it is in law and medicine. And the thinking is that if one takes a course in management, one can immediately use the prescription skills are well above average. Even the self-conscious prefix of “I am not a manager, but...” does not stop confident-sounding amateurs from doling out patches to problems that require fine-grained judgment on multiple levels, on balancing resources and personal lives with timing and results. With most articulate people thus assured of their own superior managerial know-how, honest, searching conversations about actions that achieved results for most Nepal’s become rare in the public sphere.

This rarity offers an opportunity to smart young politicians in the Constituent Assembly to start seeing their careers as being national managers. To reduce power cuts, they should be asking: What have we learnt from previous mistakes? How can we effectively deploy large pools of capital to generate power within a few years? How much will it cost, how much will it require, who will get the benefits and how will we get the money to pay for it all? If plans go wrong, how will we get back on track? Who should be held accountable for the results?

Granted, asking those questions alone will not solve the problems. But they change the emphasis from discussing problems to finding solutions. And finding solutions to the problems (i.e. good management) is what we should demand all the more from our politicians.
Dirty politics

Front page editorial, Kangra, 17 January

The garbage in the capital has not been collected for over a week. Heaps of waste have become a common sight. It is impossible to stand the stench. The garbage attracts the vermin, and makes it way to people’s homes. The Madhesi people have not only lost the government but also lost the key to the country’s resources. However, their inability to address the simple demands of 266 households in the Sindhi Pundits in Dumchighat has forced the people of Kathmandu to live in a stinking hole. The government is so incompetent that it can’t even ensure its people a clean environment. Kathmandu is a historic city and a heritage site, but it now looks like a rubbish heap. This not only damages the image of our country internationally. What happened to the government that once picked up brooms and cleaned the city?

Two-track

Kristhummani, Annapurna, 21 January

The present Adhadi and Janajati movement is waiting and watching. The movement has now adopted a two-track policy:

First track

If the Constituent Assembly drafts the new constitution ensuring Adhadi and Janajati rights, including that of self-determination, autonomy, ownership and authority over their land, the country can head towards peace and prosperity. Those in the movement believe that the issue will be taken up by the Adhadi and Janajati leaders in major parties. If they are disappointed, they will rebel against their own leaders and parties. The formal caucus will be attended by all parties and independent Adhadi and Janajati CA members. An indication that their efforts will soon take a concrete form.

Second track

A section of Adhadi and Janajati leaders, intellectuals, party activists and CA members do not believe that the CA will ensure the rights. There is growing sentiment that the government will not listen to them unless they burn tyres on the street or pick up the gun. They believe that rights are not given, but have to be forced out and this can be only done through revolution. If the draft guaranteed of the constitution does not guard the right to self-determination and establish Adhadi and Janajati autonomous regions, the present movement may take an extreme form.

Let’s hope that the government and parties, and the CA will immediately work to address Adhadi and Janajati grievances and give them ownership.

Missing drugs

Tufan Neupane, Himtai Khabarpatna, 14-28 January

The government increased the budget to buy medicine for free health care, but here in Dolpa the drugs haven’t arrived. A patient at the Dolpa Public Health Office, clipper and prepared Bachu Thapa says: “Nothing significant has happened in this last one year.”

The decision to provide free health services was a hasty one, taken without assessing support services, manpower and infrastructure, especially in remote districts. The government provides essential medicines to health centres and posts and an additional grant of Rs 6,000-42,000 to buy them. Organisations like NF, UMN, GTZ and UNICEF also provide support for medicine in the Karnali. However, health posts here have medicines only for fever and headaches.

There is no hospital in the Karnali. The posts of the health workers are vacant in all five district hospitals. Three doctors have been appointed to the Jumla District Hospital, but only one is working. The hospital has provisions for six staff nurses but there are only four. Lab assistants and radiographers don’t exist.

In Dolpa there are posts for public health officer, medical superintendent, doctors, staff nurses, family planning assistant, assistant statistician, dark room assistant and assistant administrator, but none of them are accredited. Among the 14 sub-health posts of the district, four have been forced out and this can be only done through zealous action.

The situation is worse in villages—there is no health centre in the Chitilapa, even the assistant’s position is vacant.

Will the government draft the new constitution on time?

Doesn’t look like it. The Maoists haven’t even set an agenda on national reconstruction. Some party activists haven’t even thought about what the new constitution is going to look like. They may fear that revealing their agenda will expose their failings. Meanwhile, they distract us by fighting over petty details. Other parties are talking about is against the 12-point agreement. This never-ending bickering has weakened their political strength achieved so far and has provoked a resurgence of anarchy. Now, the political parties are engaging in backstabling that will only undermine the spirit of a true republic.

Isn’t the One Madhes demand an indicator of national fragmentation?

Only a few Madhesi parties want a united Madhes. However, a united Madhes is inconsistent with federalism because it will not ensure the rights of the people. The politicians of the Madhes are talking about is against the 12-point agreement. This never-ending bickering has weakened their political strength achieved so far and has provoked a resurgence of anarchy. Now, the political parties are engaging in backstabling that will only undermine the spirit of a true republic.

So whose fault is it?

The party that’s leading the government is encouraging anarchy. What we want is a collaborative and inclusive democracy, not the retributive people’s democracy that the Maoists talk about. Instead of utilising their power and working with other parties, the Maoists view their partners as enemies. But there can’t be an ‘enemy’ party. They have chosen to disregard the results of the election.

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Isn’t the One Madhes demand an indicator of national fragmentation?

Only a few Madhesi parties want a united Madhes. However, a united Madhes is inconsistent with federalism because it will not fulfil what the Madhesi movement stood for. In reality, creating a united Madhes will only result in a shift from one unitary system to another. The Madhesis demanded for federalism, not for a unitary system. That demand was met. If they don’t realise this, they will lose what they have.

When will peace come?

My heart breaks to see the country’s state. We want political parties to become stronger but they are the ones causing conflict. The politicians themselves are fishing in murky waters. This is not my hopelessness talking, this is a call for a new generation of politicians to come forth. It’s clear that the current politicians can’t do much.

Why do you always dress in yellow?

Yellow signifies peace and harmony.
Tharu autonomy

We want a real Tharu autonomy, not One Madhes Pradesh

F
deralism is a mechanism to devolve power from Singha Durbar to the traditionally marginalised communities across Nepal. It is an idea whose time has come. Genuine federalism can end discrimination and oppression and uplift groups, castes, regions and classes that have been oppressed by Nepal’s feudal system for centuries. That explains the attraction of federalism to the oppressed: they see it as a path to their liberation.

But as the debate on federalism begins, we are also getting regional entities interpreting it in such a way as to encompass maximum territory to the detriment of indigenous and marginalised groups like Tharus, Muslims and Dalits within those territories.

Geographical division is one of the key elements in federalism, but it should ideally be determined by the peoples living there. For instance, the Tharus inhabit the Tharu forest, but they aren’t the only one inhabiting it. Similarly, is not handing over of rights but doesn’t make sense there. Federalism, uninhabited therefore self-determination doesn’t make sense there. Federalism, similarly, is not handing over of rights but doesn’t make sense there.

For instance, Antarctica is uninhabited therefore self-determination doesn’t make sense there. Federalism, similarly, is not handing over of rights but doesn’t make sense there. Federalism, similarly, is not handing over of rights but doesn’t make sense there.
Weaving a

Villagers in Siddipur combine tradition with business to preserve a skill passed down through generations.

Tara Maharjan works with precision and speed, weaving a straw mat. Sukul weaving is a traditional skill passed down through generations, but the Maharjans are now producing straw products commercially.

The head of the family, Ramchandra Maharjan, inspects the straw used to produce straw furnishings available on order. The straw comes from corn crops and is treated for softness and then coloured.

Measurements are noted on a chalk board for the different products made by the Thasi Recourse Mobilisation Centre. The template promotes efficiency and allows the five workers in the centre a standard to follow.
A few strands of straw probably mean nothing to the average man on the street, but Ramchandra Maharjan weaves wonders with them. His deft hands thread the straw through lines of straw rope, quickly binding them together. With machine-like speed and precision, intricate knots eventually form and adorn the mat.

Villagers in Siddipur in Lalitpur have been weaving straw mats for household use for as long as anyone can remember. Maharjan’s family has also been weaving mats, but he was the first to go commercial.

Setting up the Thasi Resource Mobilisation Centre five years ago, the villagers started selling the mats in the city. Maharjan is a French instructor in the French National School in Maharajgunj and coaches fellow villagers in the skill of straw weaving.

“Weaving straw is a traditional skill that is passed onto us, but now we are making a little money out of it,” says Maharjan.

Since the market for straw mats is not big, the centre produces other straw items like doormats, penholders, shoes, coasters and backrests, to name a few.

Although the centre promotes tradition by making it profitable, there have been subtle changes to the weaving methods. The coarse straw is now treated to make it softer and coloured to make it more attractive.

Maharjan says some city folks are reverting back to traditional straw mats from carpets. The centre gets orders mostly from resorts and hotels. “Straw mats condition room temperature automatically,” he says. One can even put a straw mat on the bed, a common practice in the village.

Villager Nawaraj Diyali says: “Siddipur has now a new claim to fame—our quality straw mats.”

Straw weaving is no longer just about mats. Coasters, penholders, baskets and shoes are just some of the products the Maharjans can conjure up with simple straw.

Sukuls are now increasingly used in homes in place of carpets. Maharjan says he is receiving many orders from resorts and hotels as well.

TEXT AND PICTURES
BY CHONG ZI LIANG
अब हप्ताको साते दिन
फरक विशेषाध्य सहित

छल चौक बागमती!
The government is planning a tax raise on private schools to improve education, but the affected schools are not giving up without a fight.

At the heart of the disagreement lies a five per cent increase in taxes on private schools that the government says will be used for public school reforms in remote areas of the country.

Private schools, already taxed as private companies, are up in arms over this proposal and say the tax is an extra burden to parents and guardians of their students.

Leading the protest over the tax is the Private and Boarding Schools' Organisation, Nepal (PABSON) that says private schools registered as companies were already paying 25 per cent tax on incomes. Under existing rules, private schools also have to give scholarships to 10 per cent of students. "Most private schools will not be able to handle a rise of five per cent in taxes," says Bhoj Bahadur Sha, President of PABSON, "This is a violation of a fundamental human right to education."

PABSON submitted a strong memo to the education ministry and the prime minister earlier this month. PABSON and other educational organisations took out newspaper advertisements last week condemning the proposed tax rise.

The architect of the tax is Finance Minister Baburam Bhattarai, and he asks schools to trust the government to use the money properly to improve the quality of the government school system.

"We guarantee it is only used for public school reforms," Bhattarai tells Nepal Times. "It will strengthen the public education system, but it doesn't mean the private schools should be closed down." Acknowledging the dissatisfaction with the proposed tax, Bhattarai says the five per cent tax on admission and tuition fee was taken up from recommendations from a task force set up to study ways to improve public schools. He adds, "It is up to the schools to decide if they want to transfer it to parents. We don't interfere."

But private educators feel they have paid their dues to society by providing quality education to Nepalis, something they say government schools do not. To drive home this principle, Principal of Advanced International Model School, TR Dhakal, says 14.2 per cent of government school students pass their School Leaving Certificate at the end of Grade 10, whereas more than 70 per cent do so in private schools.

Public schools are also sorely lacking in basic facilities to provide a conducive environment for learning, says Dhakal, who is also secretary-general of PABSON. To upgrade public schools, funds spent on these schools should be more accountable for and properly spent. Dhakal feels the money should be drawn from other sources instead of cannibalising resources from the private education sector.

Rajan Suwal, principal of Khwopa College in Bhaktapur, agrees that the five per cent tax is a bad idea. "The government thinks all private schools are rich and families who send their children there are wealthy but that's just not the reality," says Khwopa College, which offers cheaper education which is subsidised by the municipality. Some private schools here charge only Re 50 to 200 per month in fees—unheard of anywhere else.

Even private school owners who are supportive of the idea to channel more funds to public schools say they are not confident that revenue from the proposed tax will be used for reforms in public education.

"Unless there is a mechanism to ensure the money is distributed to the poor areas, it is unlikely it will happen," says Dhakal. He adds that funds spent on public schools are already mismanaged, resulting in a serious lack of basic facilities in institutions.

Rajan Suwal, principal of Manjushree High School, has even harsher words on the five per cent tax. "This money will never go to the poor. It will only feed the Maoist cadres."

Vacancy Announcement

Senior Programme Officer
Human Rights and Good Governance

The Embassy of Denmark invites applications from qualified Nepali citizens for the position of Senior Programme Officer for Human Rights and Good Governance.

The embassy is actively supporting the protection and promotion of human rights, democracy and good governance in Nepal, in particular through the human rights and good governance programme (Daniad-HUGOU), which includes three components:

1. Inclusive democracy,
2. Human rights and justice,
3. Local governance.

The senior programme officer will be based at the Embassy of Denmark in Kathmandu. He/she will work under the direct supervision of the Chargé d'affaires for human rights and good governance and the Ambassador, and be part of a team of highly skilled Danish and Nepali development professionals.

Duties and Responsibilities

The main tasks of the senior programme officer will be as follows:

- Assist the Chargé d'affaires in facilitating and supervising the implementation of activities in the human rights and good governance programme, including reporting and monitoring.
- As part of the above task to provide the Embassy’s inputs to the implementation of the MLD Local Governance and Community Development Programme (LGCDP).
- Participate in the preparation and implementation of political dialogues on human rights and good governance issues and political party reform.
- Responsible for communicating with relevant authorities and development partners on programme issues.
- Undertake administrative tasks related to programme management, including budgeting, financial oversight and upkeep of project databases.
- Monitor general developments in human rights, democracy and good governance in Nepal and advise the Embassy on appropriate actions.

Required Qualifications

- Advanced university degree (Master’s Degree or equivalent) in social science.
- At least six years of relevant working experience.
- Experience from management of development assistance.
- Experience with local governance and decentralisation will be an advantage.
- Good analytical skills.
- Excellent command of English and Nepali (oral and written).
- Skills in report writing.
- Good knowledge of Microsoft office.
- Good knowledge of national and international human rights instruments, the peace process of Nepal and the national regulatory frameworks in relation to decentralisation.

Conditions of Employment:

- 3 year contract with possibility of extension.
- Competitive salary and benefits.

The Embassy of Denmark is an equal opportunity employer committed to achieving a staff composition that reflects the social and ethnic diversity of Nepali society. We believe that social inclusion and diversity contributes to excellence. Under-represented caste and ethnic groups, and women are especially encouraged to apply for the available position.

Written applications should reach the Embassy no later than 6 February 2009 and must include education certificate and two references. Applications may be forwarded by e-mail accompanied by scanned copies of associated documents. Only short listed applicants will be contacted for the selection process.

Phone calls on this matter will not be entertained.
Obamania

It's not just the US that's optimistic about Obama

JIM LOBE / WASHINGTON

Never in human history have the hopes of so many people for positive change in international relations rested on one person as they do on Barack Obama.

A new 17-nation poll released by the BBC World Service on the eve of his inaugural showed that of the 34,000 people polled two out of every three respondents, and majorities in 15 of the nations, said they expected US relations with the world to improve under Obama.

“These are really big numbers, and they're a remarkable trajectory,” said Steven Kull, director of the University of Maryland’s Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), which helped design and analyze the BBC survey, along with GlobeScan Incorporated, a London-based consultancy firm.

“A global phenomenon whereby so many people are looking to one person, this is probably unprecedented,” he said.

Nearly three out of every four respondents, which included key countries in western Europe, East Asia, Latin America, west Africa, the Islamic world, as well as Russia, India, and the US itself, said the global financial crisis should be Obama’s “top priority.”

Half of the respondents put withdrawing US troops from Iraq that category, while 46 per cent said addressing climate change and 43 per cent cited breaking the peace between Israel and the Palestinians, a significantly higher proportion than the 29 per cent who thought supporting the Afghan government against the Taliban should be the top priority of the new president's agenda.

This survey largely mirrors the steady growth in optimism about an Obama presidency within the United States since his election even as the financial crisis that broke out has become increasingly serious.

In a New York Times/CBS News poll released Sunday, nearly four out of five respondents (86 per cent) said they were optimistic about the next four years under Obama, the highest level of optimism about a new president since the question was first asked in 1977 about Jimmy Carter.

No doubt the US polls, as well as BBC’s 17-nation survey, reflect the popularity of the incumbent, George W Bush, whose eight-year tenure, especially the Iraq War, the absence of effective US leadership in the global arena, and the sharp rise in oil prices have all contributed to an unprecedented collapse in US popularity.

Conventions for the treatment of prisoners and other global treaties and the aggressive unilateralism of his first term, in particular—brought Washington’s reputation for global leadership into disrepute.

Much of the goodwill reflected in the BBC poll may be attributable to the contrast between Bush’s unilateralism and Obama’s supposed emphasis on diplomacy, multilateralism and international law, most recently signaled by his decision to close down the Guantanamo detention facility and ban the use of torture.

The latest BBC survey, which was carried out in most countries in December, included 1,000 or more respondents in each of the 17 countries: Chile, Mexico, Ghana, Nigeria, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Egypt, Turkey, Japan, Indonesia, and China.

The most optimistic views were found in Ghana, where 87 per cent of respondents said US relations with the world would improve under Obama, continental Western Europe (70 per cent), Pakistan and Nigeria (74 per cent), Britain (70 per cent), Chile and China (68 per cent).

Particularly notable, according to Kull, was the sharp rise in optimism in the predominantly Islamic countries compared to 2006 and 2007, turning them into the most optimistic in the world. In Pakistan 58 per cent in Egypt, 46 to 64 per cent in Indonesia, and 51 to 51 per cent in Turkey, whose relations with the US have traditionally been by far the least friendly.

In China, the BBC poll showed a 16 per cent rise in optimism, whereas French respondents showed the greatest concern: 93 per cent called it a “top priority.”

The global financial crisis, Chinese respondents showed, has come to transform China’s relations with the US. If the US is to win Chinese support, it will have to demonstrate a greater willingness to fight for Chinese interests.

The only two countries where US relations declined noticeably were Russia and Germany, with Russian tensions reaching their highest level since the Cold War.

US relations with the world are reversing course.

On dealing with the financial crisis, Chinese respondents showed it was the most important issue, with 49 per cent calling it a “top priority.”

Germans were resolute: 83 per cent said that US relations with Germany were the most important issue. As the European debt crisis continues, US relations with Germany and other large European countries will continue to be the most sensitive.

Donors should pool their funds into a single international account, which we can call the Financial Cooperation Mechanism (FCM). These pooled funds would enable farmers in poorer countries to obtain the fertilisers, improved seeds and irrigation equipment that they urgently need.

The time for business as usual is over. The donors promised to double aid to Africa by 2010, but are still far off track. Indeed, during the past 20 years, nearly 80 per cent of the cuts in aid for agriculture programs and only now are reversing course.

History can be made next week in Madrid when the world’s richest and poorest countries converge to seek solutions to the global hunger crisis. To live, the billion poorest people depend on it.

Project Syndicate

Jeffrey D. Sachs is Professor of Economics and Director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University.

Min Ratna Rijal

A breakthrough against hunger

The lives of the world’s one billion hungry will depend on an international conference next week

Today's world hunger crisis is unprecedentedly severe and requires urgent measures. Nearly one billion people are trapped in chronic hunger—perhaps 100 million more than two years ago.

World leaders will gather in Madrid next week to move beyond words to action. With Spain’s leadership and United Nations Secretaries General Ban Ki-moon’s partnership, several donor governments are promising to pool their financial resources so that the world’s poorest farmers can grow more food and escape the poverty trap.

The benefits of some donor help can be remarkable. Peasant farmers in Africa, Haiti, and other impoverished regions currently plant their crops without the benefit of high-yield seed varieties and fertilisers. The result is a grain yield (for example, maize) that is roughly one-third less than what could be achieved with better farm inputs. African farmers produce roughly one ton of grain per hectare, compared with more than four tons per hectare in China, where farmers use fertilisers heavily.

African farmers know that they need fertiliser, they just can’t afford it. With donor help, they can. Not only do these farmers then feed their families, but they also can begin to earn market income and to save for the future. By building up savings over a few years, the farmers eventually become creditworthy, or have enough cash to purchase vital inputs on their own.

There is now widespread agreement on the need for increased donor financing for small farmers (those with two hectares or less of land, or impoverished pastoralists), which is especially urgent in Africa. The UN Secretary General led a steering group last year that determined that African agriculture needs around US$8 billion per year in donor financing—roughly four times the current total— with a heavy emphasis on improved seeds, fertiliser, irrigation systems and extension training.

Research centers such as the International Rice Research Institute and the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre provided the high-yield seeds and innovative farming strategies that together triggered the Asian Green Revolution. These centres are not household names, but they deserve to be. Their scientific breakthroughs have helped feed the world, and we need more of them.

Dozens of low-income, food-deficit countries, perhaps as many as 40-50, have elaborated urgent programs for increased food production by small farms, but are currently held back by the lack of donor funding. These countries have appealed to the World Bank for financing, and the Bank made a valiant effort in 2008 to help them through its new Global Food Crisis Response Program (GFCRP). But the Bank does not have the sufficient funds to meet these countries’ urgent needs, and has had to ration assistance to a small fraction of the cases that could be effectively and reliably used. Hundreds of millions of people, in the meantime, remain trapped in hunger.

Despite the dedicated efforts of many professionals, the response to the hunger crisis remains inadequate. The 2008 planting seasons came and went with much too little additional help for impoverished small farmers. African countries are desperately poor and mostly fruitlessly, for the small amounts of funding needed for their purchases of low-cost and improved seeds and fertilisers.

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shlesha Lissanevitch, Mina Ghartimagar, Achal Sumsher Thapa (pictured), Milan Rokaya and Sandesh Singh Rathor and took part in the Under-14 (second group) category of Asian Tennis Championship that ended on Wednesday in Kuching, Malaysia.

The championship saw over 80 young players from 38 countries compete for the cups. The five were selected from 116 players who participated in the Seventh Jaykar Memorial Junior Open.

Although Nepal didn’t make it to the semi-finals the performance is quite commendable. Among the boys Sandesh ranked 14th. Milan and Achal stood 26th and 29th respectively. Ashlesha, whose strong forehand shots, height and skills in the court had made Nepal’s foremost hopeful, made it to the 15th position among the girls. Mina stood 21st.

The Nepali coach and team manager Surya Bhushan Bajracharya feels the players are as competent as those from any other country. In the 2004 championship Ramesh Karki had made it to the semi-finals, his success was an inspiration to the newcomers.

Nepal played against Bhutan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kazakhstan and Malaysia. If Nepal had reached the semi-finals, the game would have been against contenders from Group I which include India, China and Thailand. India’s Sania Mirza was also once a winner of the U-14 category of this Championship.

The performance of the players has boosted the confidence about the future of tennis in Nepal. “We plan on organising junior championships under International Tennis Federation (ITF). This will allow the players to achieve points required to meet international standards and will also help increase the popularity of the sport,” says Manoj Sumsher Rana, president of All Nepal Lawn Tennis Association.

Five tournaments are organised annually in Nepal, which include one national championship, two junior, one open and one veteran. A national tournament is being organised this February. Although tennis as a sport is yet to develop in Nepal, we do have a history to be proud of. In 1982, Sarad Lama and SK Singh received rave reviews on their performance in the Asian Games held at New Delhi. In the 1984/85 Wimbledon, Sujay Lama was selected in the junior games. He wrote a regular tennis column for Nepali Times from 2004-2006, and is now coaching players at a US university. His doubles partner and also the Nepali co-ordinator at the ITF, Krishna Raj Ghale laments, “We were not able to build on the successes of the past.”

However tennis does have plenty of potential because tournaments are held regularly for those aged 5-50 and over. In the ITF Veteran Championship (over 45) held in India last June, the team of ex-ministers Kamal Thapa and Madhukar Rana reached the doubles semifinals. Rana even made it to the finals in the over 65 category.

Suresh Raj Neupane

FROM THE BASELINE: Ashlesha Lissanevitch, Mina Ghartimagar and Achal Sumsher Rana practice at the Saddobato tennis court before leaving for Malaysia to participate in the Asian Tennis Championship.

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REMEMBERING A MARTYR: Madhesi journalists shave their heads to mark the tenth day of the murder of journalist Uma Singh, in front of Singha Darbar on Tuesday.

SUDDEN LOSS: Family, friends and co-workers offer condolences to talk-show host Indra Lohani at Pashupati on Friday. Lohani, who ran the discussion program Bahas on Kantipur Television, died of a heart attack.

YOUNG BEATS: Nepali tabla players at a concert organised at the Rastriya Nach Ghar on Wednesday to mark the 38th birth anniversary of the late tabla maestro Atul Gautam.

POWERLESS: Journalists attend a discussion program on loadshedding organised by the Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists on Sunday.

Skullduggery in Chait

Just when you thought things couldn’t get much worse in this erstwhile kingdom of ours there comes word from Jhapa of the martyrdom of thousands of chicken. This government deserves a break, there hasn’t been a dull moment since it came to power with one endless crisis after another. Wonder what’s in store for us next week—a plague outbreak?

The Ass was determined to write at least one Backside column without mentioning loadshedding, but it seems impossible. This week we have to share with you there in the dark some good news that there are places worse than us in terms of power cuts: the Gaza Strip and Goma in the DRC. And we hear Karachi has 18 hour daily power cuts. At least in Kathmandu we know when the power is going off.

It’s a good thing there are only 24 hours in a day. Because it means there can’t be more than 24 hours of daily loadshedding.

We have to give credit where it’s due. The government’s wise (and brave) decision to put the price of diesel and kerosene par has stopped fuel adulteration for the first time. As a result, NOC reports that the import of kerosene is down by 40 per cent, while diesel import is up 60 per cent—mainly because of the use of generators.

The Panchangan Committee has decreed that next year, 2066, we will only have 11 months and we’re going to be skipping the month of Chait in order to make up for the loss of one day in the earth’s rotation over the past two millennia. The Gregorians, who are much more precise about these things because they have caesium atom clocks, added a second at midnight of December 31 on New Year’s Eve to synchronise GMT with the earth’s rotation. Here are the advantages of a 11-month year:

- Government saves billions in salaries to civil servants and can plough the cash into populist programs
- There will be no loadshedding because NEA doesn’t have to supply power for a whole month, thus allowing the Kulekhani reservoir to fill up
- We’ll all be younger by a month
- At least we don’t have to pay a day’s salary in Chait 2065 for the Finance Minister’s Robin Hood tax for the hare-brained Youth Self-Employment Scheme
- The Nepali people will no longer have to put 11 pages on the不需要the
- The new court will no longer ever be applicable

Nepal makes it to the world headlines for all kinds of strange goings-on, but the latest is that this great nation of ours is now a major conduit for the smuggling of contraband human skulls. Oh yes, if you didn’t know, the trade and transport of human skulls is banned by international law. It seems our customary officials were oblivious to this and had been allowing human skulls to enter the country unhindered across our open southern border to be put on cargo flights to the far corners of the earth.

AApparently there is a huge world demand for human skulls as candles and India is the biggest supplier. But now that Indian sleuths will be manning the security at Kathmandu airport, looks like all this skullduggery is going to come to an end.

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