Despite fears that Nepal’s tiger population has been decimated by habitat loss and poaching, an ongoing cat census in Chitwan has found encouraging signs of their numbers bouncing back.

The nationwide tiger census will be completed in March, but with half of Chitwan National Park covered so far, 20 adults and 12 cubs have been counted. The number of breeding tigers is expected to top 60, which was the total number from the previous census in 2000.

“The situation doesn’t appear to be as bad as it was thought,” says a beaming Narendraman Babu Pradhan, chief warden at Chitwan.

The census is being carried with 50 sets of digital cameras that are placed along jungle trails and triggered by movement. The images are analysed and individual tigers identified by their distinctive stripes. Forty staff on five elephants are involved.

The camera trapping technique is also being used in two western reserves in Bardiya and Sukla Phanta where tigers were decimated by Indian poachers in the past eight years.

In Sukla Phanta, tiger numbers dropped from 20 in 2005 to eight last year; however, preliminary results of the census show that the majestic cats are springing back there too.

Says Naresh Subedi of the National Trust for Nature Conservation, which is carrying out the census with the Department of National Parks and Wildlife: “We will have to wait for the final tally, but so far we are all pleasantly surprised at least in Chitwan that tigers aren’t as badly affected as we had feared.”

In 2000, there were 123 breeding tigers and about 200 cubs in national parks all over Nepal. A further 100 tigers probably live in wilderness areas that aren’t designated national parks. That number has probably gone down, but conservationists expect the total tiger tally in the country to be about the same as in 2000.
Citizen Dahal

In his address to the nation as a "common citizen" last week, Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal bemoaned that frequent strikes were scaring away investors. He said the tendency of Nepal to hit the streets at the slightest pretext needed to be stopped once and for all.

That's what Citizin Dahal feels. But what is Prime Minister going to do about it? He must know it is going to be from his own party who are undermining his efforts to woo investors. The head of the Maoist student wing publicly threatened last week to "break the backbones" of anyone daring to oppose his union. Since they have done it before, nobody doubts their ability to carry out the threat.

Union warfare has now become the single biggest worry of the private sector. It continues to create havoc in the Birgunj-Hetauda and Itahari-Dubahi industrial corridors. Many entrepreneurs have bought peace at prices that nobody knows about. Emboldened by the easy success of their technique of intimidation, Maoist labour is now targeting schools and hospitals. It is of no concern to the union mafia that these institutions already pay much higher wages than the minimum fixed by the government.

But then it is not really about wages. Is it? It is about control and extortion.

When asked about the violent and brahsh behaviour of his foot soldiers, Finance Minister Baburam Bhattarai actually replied that a planned chaos was necessary to wrest control of the state. That wasn't a slip of the tongue. It is looking more and more like the game plan is to unleash anarchy for forcible state capture. If that is the case then restoring law and order is not a Maoist priority at all. It is now up to members of the coalition to up the game plan is to unleash anarchy for forcible state capture.

He said he'd nab the murderers of Gauchan and Janakpur one by one, but journalists are being killed one by one. Things were never this bad for the Nepali media: not in the conflict years, not even during the time of emergency when journalists were routinely detained, kept in solitary confinement and tortured.

Today, while journalists are being brutalized, the state is perpetrating impunity by taking action, and in some cases getting the attackers. And when the state really does take action, it punishes it own sympathisers and hope that the problem will just fade away.

When Himalmedia was attacked, Prime Minister Dahal told a public meeting in Butwal that he didn't understand what the big fuss was about, as "no one was killed”. He went on to ask why there wasn't similar outrage when Dhani gand journalist JP Joshi was killed last two months previously.

Of course there was an outrage. Even though Joshi was a district committee member of the Maoists, and there were suspicions that Maoists themselves were behind the killing of the Federation of National Journalists, the IOM's action was so limited.

It is this sort of insensitivity and such irresponsible comments that has got the government into hot water over subsequent attacks on media. They tried to make the perception that the Maoist party has never been serious about press freedom, and that it only pays lip service. How can you expect answers and justice in a government that seems so oblivious to the threats to press freedom?

The media fraternity doesn't care what political persuasion a journalist belongs to. Journalists want to cover the newsworthy events, not collude with the enemies of press freedom. The Maoists, and there were similar outrage when Dhangadi journalists were outraged.

The media is the medium of which public debate takes place. It is our duty to present dissenting points of view, even if the viewpoint is held by the enemies of press freedom. The media doesn't want journalists to be declared martyrs, they don't want any more nonsense from a commando of inquiry, they just want the perpetrators of murder caught and tried. Is that too much to ask?
There must be something in the Vastu of Singha Darbar that makes its principal occupants think and behave like little emperors. Like Louis XV, Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal announced last month that any effort to dislodge his government would trigger another revolution and Maoists would eventually capture power.

STATE OF THE STATE
C K Lal

His Indian mentors who persuaded him in 2005 to join mainstream politics probably forgot to tell the guerrilla chief that a revolving-door government is an essential feature of the parliamentary system. The day Balkhu Darbar decides that it has no further use for Premier Dahal, he will have to make way for Madhab Nepal. The mood in the legislature is turning distinctly anti-Maoist. Almost all the parties, including the kangris, would be only too happy to join a UML-led coalition, whatever the unpredictable consequences of such an unlikely formation.

Dahal needs to realise that like everybody else in any democratic set-up, he is neither irreplaceable in his own party nor indispensable to the country. History has an uncanny habit of getting rid of powerful men when they least expect it. In any case, no prime minister since Chandra Shamsher, incidentally the prime minister who built Singha Darbar, has served what could be called a normal term of office in that jinxed palace.

Since the British days and the rise of the Ranas, Lainchaur has always been a factor in influencing the outcome of court intrigues in Kathmandu. The other influential player was always the army. Popular support, when it mattered at all, came last. The first elected prime minister of the country BP Koirala realised this reality when he found himself behind bars despite two-thirds majority of his party in the parliament. Dahal's party commands the loyalty of only about one-third of members of the legislative assembly.

The Tarai is another factor that can upset the best calculations of power brokers. Despite boasts of some Hindi-speaking Madhesi leaders and allegations of extremists of the left and right alike, the Indians have very few levers of manipulation in the plains of Nepal. Madhesis blame the Americans for funding and abetting King Mahendra’s planned transmigration of Pahadis in the Tarai as a part of a Cold War strategy. US-friendly non-governmentals have recently made inroads into the central Tarai, but their impact is still largely peripheral. It’s not for nothing that Matrika Yadav decided to explore China before designing a political outfit to face the challenges of the future.

From Mohan Baidya to Krishna Bahadur Mahara, every Maoist leader considers it a part of his ‘nationalist’ duty to denigrate Madhes-based parties. This strategy may help them consolidate their base among former royals but is unlikely to win friends and gain supporters in the Tarai. Perhaps a more sensitive approach is necessary to assuage the fears of Madhesis that they would not be short-changed once again by the new ruling class.

A year after Tarai acquiesced to constituent assembly elections on the promise of change, the plains are once again ripe with apprehension that the coalition government isn’t serious about their concerns. There is a clear trust deficit between the rulers and the ruled and government hasn’t helped its case by floating the idea of Integrated Services Centres (ISCs) to be located along the east-west highway.

Before they raise a storm in the Tarai—Madhes, the Maoists would do well to earn the trust of Madhesis. The issue is too important to be left to slogan-mongers unthinkingly raising the bogey of separatism or chauvinism.

The spring storm
The Maoists want more influence in the Madhes

The spring storm
The Maoists want more influence in the Madhes

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Forget Kathmandu

The NC needs to get out of the capital and re-invent itself

Most kangreis don’t read. Ask why, and the joke goes there is no need because BP’s Kerala has read enough for all of them. But members of the Nepal Congress may want to pick up a booklet published recently by the Social Science Balance, titled From the Field: Anthropological Perspectives on the CA elections. The NC’s challenge comes from a Maoist party that wants to ruthlessly consolidate. If anyone was entertaining illusions about hardline-softheart divisions, they should look at Baburam Bhattarai’s recent article which reiterates that the ultimate goal has not changed.

But this desire to expand and control is common across parties. The NC did it when it was in power, padding the Nepal Police with cadres, ensuring the bureaucrats would be loyalists, using the state apparatus to leverage support on the ground. The UML ensured the last local polls went their way when they had control of key ministries. The Maoists are doing the same thing. What makes it different this time is that they are aided by a strong ideological belief, a coercive apparatus. And they just happen to be smarter than the rest.

Below all the complexity, there is a simple truth: if you don’t like what the Maoists are doing, then you have to fight them a political challenge. Don’t do what you did during the war—run away and leave a political vacuum. During the insurgency, the valid reason was fear. There may be instances of intimidation now, but the political space has opened up. NC leaders are not doing this, and they are now afraid that they will be completely marginalized. It is this insecurity that is driving much of the NC rhetoric on Maoist ‘totalitarianism’. It is making the NC top rung suck up to India and the army yet again, hoping they would do the job for them by rallying against the Maoists. The army should be careful and not be employed when NC encourages it to go against the civilian chain of command.

At the root of the NC’s problem lies its inability or unwillingness to face the election result head on. Yes, there was coercion but to over-estimate that element is intellectual laziness and politically suicidal. The polls were a lot more complex and until the NC sits down, honestly evaluates each seat and why they lost, there will be no revival.

The Baha has compiled three essays by academics who went back on Election Day last April to villages where they had been working for decades. The key lesson is: all politics is local.

David Holmberg visited Nuwakot to witness an election for the first time parties had given tickets to local Tamangs. But this desire to expand and control is common across parties. The NC did it when it was in power, padding the Nepal Police with cadres, ensuring the bureaucrats would be loyalists, using the state apparatus to leverage support on the ground. The UML ensured the last local polls went their way when they had control of key ministries. The Maoists are doing the same thing. What makes it different this time is that they are aided by a strong ideological belief, a coercive apparatus. And they just happen to be smarter than the rest.

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Managing to get by

Nepali companies need to adopt and adapt if they want to survive

W

ile teaching a weekly course on corporate governance in an evening program at management college last year, one requirement I had for students was to visit and study two Nepali companies, and write about those companies’ corporate governance practices.

That is, explain how those companies were elected and controlled for stronger business results.

Most students wrote about public companies such as banks and manufacturing units, in part because information obtained from them could be verified from other sources.

The two key findings were as follows:

Family on Board: The board composition of most Nepali-owned public companies is too many red flags. Unqualified relatives and family members of the founders were assigned seats on the company’s board to such an extent that even nominally public companies were an ill family business under the control of a patriarch who brooked no dissent.

With the independence of the board thus compromised, hiring was mostly about getting relatives, friends and loyal hangers-on into the company.

Often, there was an audit committee to make sure that the company’s financial reporting was truthful. And the board members themselves ran the companies on a day to day basis, telling the hand-picked management staff what to do and not do. Besides, with no one questioning their actions, such Board members found it easier to repeatedly use the company assets for personal use.

Indeed, if I were to name why some Nepali financial institutions went into receivership in the last three years, the inherently faulty composition of their boards—which then led to board members’ treating banks as personal piggy banks—would emerge as a trigger point that eventually led to their downfall.

Management mistakes: Often, managers at most companies have to perform in such a way that they hardly have any interest to deepen the necessarily unglamorous tasks of cleaning up their company’s nittynands that led to long-term instability.

As such, most companies have left it up to the stakeholders, both internal and external, to decide what companies they want to grow are soon left behind. Nepali companies are left with only one of two choices: either adopt better corporate governance practices or summarily establish and maintain the basic standards of corporate governance.

In all fairness, though, most public companies in Nepal do know about the importance of adopting stronger corporate governance practices. But their understanding is comparable to that of a couch potato comprehending the benefits of regular exercise.

My students learnt that the internal control mechanisms at companies they studied were too set to change anytime soon, though some have recorded progress in the presence of professional management and shareholders who ask pointed questions.

Still, the best hope lay in speeding up the magnitude of change in the external context of competition (for customers, managers, peers and resources) in such a way that the companies that want to grow are soon left behind with only one of two choices: either adopt better corporate practices so that decision rights are clear for stronger business results or exit from the marketplace altogether.
One country two armies

Nepal, 8 February

Defence Minister Ram Bahadur Thapa and COAS Rookmangat Katuwal have been at loggerheads on the issues of army recruitment and integration. The row became acrimonious as rumours swirled that Thapa was getting ready to sack Katuwal. The prime minister himself had to deny there was any such plan. Eventually, Thapa accepted that there had been a misunderstanding. But only three weeks later, the controversy has erupted again with Thapa complaining in public that the Army was refusing to take his orders. The NC and the UML have taken the stance that the Army is adapting to a democratic civilian chain of command. Ex-general of the Nepal Army and army official. The personality clash between Thapa and Katuwal seems to be at the root of the controversy. It is only natural for the Maoists and the Nepal Army to have differences because they were killing each other till not too long ago. The government is now the third option. But taking that road will not be easy because the Maoists are isolated. The Maoists now have three options: Sadhhabana have joined in, the Maoists are isolated. The Maoists have taken the stance that the recruitment process should continue. Now that even the MJF and JMB have taken the position that the recruitment process should continue, the Maoists will need the support of the top brass. However, the question arises: why is Thapa raking it all up again? Does Thapa want to create a new position for himself in his party? Or are the Maoists planning to take over the army? “Both of them are egoistical,” says an army official. The Ministry for Peace and Reconstruction is designating seven villages in seven districts as ‘peace villages’. The move is part of an effort to bolster the peace process in areas where the wounding from the conflict is still fresh. “We wanted to rehabilitate areas that faced the most violence during the war,” says Minister of Peace and Reconstruction Janardan Sharma. The moves are an effort to bolster the peace process in these areas. Last year, the National Planning Commission drew up a plan for the villages. However, the allocated budget is not adequate to start construction this year. Senior engineer at the ministry, Dhitu Poudel, said that local participation will be high in the re-construction of the villages. According to him, an estimated Rs 300,000 will have to be invested in each village, where schools, drinking water facilities, roads, sanitation and libraries will be built. The reconstruction commission is also planning to construct a Rs 7 million Martyr’s park in Okamara, a model city in Salyan, a Rs 1.1 million school and a village for those affected by the conflict in Kanchanpur. The Ministry for Peace and Reconstruction is designating seven villages in seven districts as ‘peace villages’. The move is part of an effort to bolster the peace process in areas where the wounds from the conflict are still fresh. “We wanted to rehabilitate areas that faced the most violence during the war,” says Minister of Peace and Reconstruction Janardan Sharma. The moves are an effort to bolster the peace process in these areas. Last year, the National Planning Commission drew up a plan for the villages. However, the allocated budget is not adequate to start construction this year. Senior engineer at the ministry, Dhitu Poudel, said that local participation will be high in the re-construction of the villages. According to him, an estimated Rs 300,000 will have to be invested in each village, where schools, drinking water facilities, roads, sanitation and libraries will be built. The reconstruction commission is also planning to construct a Rs 7 million Martyr’s park in Okamara, a model city in Salyan, a Rs 1.1 million school and a village for those affected by the conflict in Kanchanpur.
Therefore the constitution writing will gain political stability. The more the country addresses and incorporates the dialogue. The more the new constitution through Tarai that are not yet present in some dissatisfied factions in the national unity. But there are still the CA then it will certainly the legitimate wishes of the marginalized communities, the constitution-drafting process.

DHRUBA SIMKHADA

T he lack of worthwhile proposals received from the public regarding the CA's constitutional reform process has been attributed to people's confusion rather than inertia. The State Restructuring and State Rules Delimitation Committee's Thakur Prasad Baral believes the public is confused by 11 committees asking for suggestions at the same time. "This work should have just been given to the Civil Relationship Committee for better management," he says. The committee members have started collating experts' opinions on constitution principles, the merits and elements of federalism and state structure. In the next phase they will go out to the people to gather their thoughts and opinions.

However, despite devoting the process across the media only about 500 suggestions have been received and most of them are not practicable. Baral says the committee is engaged in internal discussions—studying various publications and articles, looking into international practices, collecting parties' manifestos and consulting with experts.

The CA has been facing problems paying for advertisements that were distributed in the media without careful planning. Kumar Adhikari, under secretary at the secretariat, says newspapers and television channels are coming to the secretariat demanding payment but there is no money allotted. He said one TV broadcaster produced a bill for Rs 3 million. The committees have discontinued ads on seven TV channels, all radio and daily papers for now. Suggestions vary wildly and many are sloppy and wishy-washy. The Civil Relationship Committee received a proposal for mediation in quarrels between husbands and wives. Other proposals included demands for fertilizers or simply full of abuses for the CA and its members. The Natural Resource, Economic Rights and Revenue Allocation Committee received 13 letters, of which there were requests for advertisements. But experts have also sent suggestions, these include conflict expert Bishnu Raj Upadhyaya. The secretariat has placed two suggestion boxes in Singha Darbar and one in the International Convention Centre.

MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

If the transformation of Nepal has considered the CA and the constitution writing process one of its key objectives. But for marginalized communities, the constitution writing process represents not just a ripoff for the state but an opportunity for change. This is because the new constitution will legitimize the voices of the marginalized and give meaning to their relationship with the state.

This is where it becomes crucial for the Madhesi community who had participated in great numbers in the CA elections. The belief was that the new constitution would include the legitimate wishes of the Madhesi people. If the transformation of Nepal can take place peacefully through the CA, then it will certainly strengthen democracy and national unity. But there are still some dissatisfaction factions in the Tana that are not yet present in the CA and it is important that their voices are also included in the new constitution through dialogue. Therefore the constitution writing process should not be viewed as a purely technical process but a social-political one. The demands of the Tana people are not very different from those of other regions. They too wish for the country's transformation into a federal democratic republic which is inclusive, and want long term peace. The Madhesi movement and Madhesi leaders don't believe that the state and its leaders hold a positive view of the Madhesi community. Despite the CA elections the ambience of distrust still continues.

For a few years the Madhesi political, social, economic and cultural wishes and requirements have been aired through various media. These aspirations have been incorporated in the state reconstruction process, which is a sensitive and long-term issue and has been the subject of discussion and controversy. We have to carefully consider the Madhesi expectations as well as that of the whole country. The Madhesi itself has multiple cultures, religions, languages and ethnic groups. To establish a clear vision for the Tana, the Madhesi parties first need to take certain initiatives. The constitution writing process can progress smoothly if the parties can develop a common understanding that is acceptable to the majority as well. If the constitution is based on understanding rather than mathematical foundation we can hope for longer lasting peace and an end to conflict. Among the Stakes holders that will be elected in the CA, most seem to agree on the establishment of an inclusive, secular and federal republic. We need not only address their needs but also bring in acceptance and a sense of common ownership. We also need to consider the concerns of people from other regions towards the Tana.

To implement the agreements signed between the Nepal government and the United Democratic Madhesi Morcha, the Madhesi need to understand and agree with each other. The Maoists, NC and the UML. It is also necessary to have similar understanding among the Madhesi parties to address the Madhesi issues in the constitution. Civil society, in turn, should help develop cultural tolerance through discussion and assist the parties in this process.

Chandra Kishor

The democratic movement in Nepal has considered the CA and the constitution writing process one of its key objectives. But for marginalized communities, the constitution-writing process represents not just a ripoff for the state but an opportunity for change. This is because the new constitution will legitimize the voices of the marginalized and give meaning to their relationship with the state.

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SNOWLESS: A prolonged winter drought and receding glaciers notwithstanding, the mountains are still awe-inspiring.
Temperatures plummeting to 20 degrees Celsius outside and 12 inside at night. Having to walk knee-deep in snow. Being stuck in Lukla till spring. The inability to find lodges open out of season. Anxiety about being isolated. Such fears may explain why no more than 300 or so trekkers visited the Sagamartha National Park in the first three weeks of January compared with a record of over 9,000 last October.

But there are many reasons to opt for low season over high. In October 2008 trekkers rarely saw the major peaks through the cloud, there were queues of walkers, porters had to race ahead to bank a bed for clients in the lodges where they often camped on dining room floors, people had to wait up to three hours for a meal. If planes were cancelled, a backlog of trekkers quickly accumulated. This January, the skies are clear right through two weeks on a return trek from Lukla to Gokyo. Although drinking water freezes in our rooms, we can’t boast of having had to endure freezing temperatures. And throughout the entire ascent we encounter only 12 other trekkers. Once above Namche, and out of phone range, the feeling of isolation intensifies. In Dole, Machermo and Gokyo the womenfolk have deserted the lodges to winter in Kathmandu, leaving their men to look after the odd passing traveller.

Every day of the trek is quite distinct from another. In the fertile villages leading up to Namche, people are still harvesting pak choi and winter saag while bridges are in a state of disrepair, and a wind tunneling over huge boulders. Higher still, sheltered from the sun, the rhododendron, camellia and deciduous trees draped in moss, the waterfalls are frozen solid. Then from Dole it opens out, becoming quite wild and affording magnificent views.

There are many advantages of trekking the Khumbu in the low season

There are many advantages of trekking the Khumbu in the low season. Below is a list of the perks of trekking during this time:

- **Clear Skies**: The skies are often clear and blue, providing unobstructed views of the Himalayas.
- **Lower Crowds**: Fewer trekkers mean less congestion and more serene walking paths.
- **Wildlife Sightings**: The lack of snow and human presence can attract a variety of wildlife, including leopards, ibex, and eagles.
- **Fresher Air**: The air is often fresher and less polluted during the low season.
- **Cultural Immersion**: You have a better chance of interacting with the local community, as they are often busier with their own activities.
- **Cost Savings**: Lower crowds mean lower prices for lodges and transportation.
- **Unique Phenomenon**: Witnessing the unique visibility of the peaks due to clearer skies.

But for those who dare, and you don’t need to be that daring, this is the time to visit the Khumbu. Before the crowds get here.
Our fire engines, no water, a team of 35 under-equipped men, only less than half of whom are trained firefighters—that is how prepared this city of 2.5 million is for a major fire.

Less reassuring still is that the most modern engine is 25 years old, and there are vintages from the Rana era. Most of the fire trucks are grounded due to poor maintenance, there is not enough water, and there aren’t enough water tankers when there is a fire. Bijay Singh Lama of Juddha Fire Brigade says, “The firefighting system is far from what it should be. It’s not even close to addressing the needs of the city.” It is a gross understatement. Lama says the lack of preparedness is worrying and there is just no awareness at the policy-level to be prepared for fire disasters.

Juddha Fire Brigade was established in 1935 with one fire engine and 15 firemen trained by the British after the devastating 1934 earthquake. Kathmandu’s fire brigade currently has two 1976-model German Movable with a capacity of 4,000 litres and a ladder truck. The fire brigade in Patan and Bhaktapur have a 1976 model German Magirus Deutz each with a 2,400 litre capacity. The entire city of Bhaktapur just has one Magirus Deutz. Most of these were added after Singha Darbar was destroyed in a fire in 1973, there have been no upgrades since.

The government provides a mere Rs. 200,000 for fuel and maintenance of the gas-guzzling vehicles that struggle to even start. “The amount is hardly enough to repair the huge age-worn engines of the fire-trucks,” says Kewal Chapagain of the Firefighters Volunteer Association of Nepal, which is pushing for an urgent upgrade. “It’s a miracle these engines are running at all.”

But the fire engines’ condition is not the only the problem. No new firefighters have been recruited in the last 15 years. When manpower went down to just eight firefighters in the Kathmandu Fire Brigade last August, additional strength was called in from the Armed Police Force (APF).

“The training given to the initial batch of firemen was the first and the last ever conducted,” says Lama. The firemen now get ‘on-the-job’ training—meaning they train when there is a real fire. The Ministry gets training offers from foreign countries, but these have turned into free vacations for ministry officials. Little attention has been given to the safety of the firemen, who risk their lives every time someone dials 101.

“There is no insurance, no fire-proof clothing, no equipment” says Baudeb Hengaraju, Kathmandu’s Chief Fire Commander. The firefighters use hand-me-down helmets and gear from a US fire brigade. The jackets don’t fit, the boots are too big, but it is better than nothing. Recently, one of the APF’s had a narrow escape when he received an electric shock that knocked him unconscious while fighting a fire.

Then there is the shortage of water. The brigade’s 10,000-litre water storage tank has been empty for years, so Mahankal, up Chabahil, has become the new supply station. “There are times when we have to rush to Mahankal to get water and then rush to the site of the fire,” says Hengaraju. They fall back on fire hydrants on the road are useless,

It’s an emergency

Dial 101 for fire…and pray

PAAVAN MATHEMA

F our fire engines, no water, a team of 35 under-equipped men, only less than half of whom are trained firefighters—that is how prepared this city of 2.5 million is for a major fire.

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The government provides a mere Rs. 200,000 for fuel and maintenance of the gas-guzzling vehicles that struggle to even start. “The amount is hardly enough to repair the huge age-worn engines of the fire-trucks,” says Kewal Chapagain of the Firefighters Volunteer Association of Nepal, which is pushing for an urgent upgrade. “It’s a miracle these engines are running at all.”

But the fire engines’ condition is not the only the problem. No new firefighters have been recruited in the last 15 years. When manpower went down to just eight firefighters in the Kathmandu Fire Brigade last August, additional strength was called in from the Armed Police Force (APF).

“The training given to the initial batch of firemen was the first and the last ever conducted,” says Lama. The firemen now get ‘on-the-job’ training—meaning they train when there is a real fire. The Ministry gets training offers from foreign countries, but these have turned into free vacations for ministry officials. Little attention has been given to the safety of the firemen, who risk their lives every time someone dials 101.

“There is no insurance, no fire-proof clothing, no equipment” says Baudeb Hengaraju, Kathmandu’s Chief Fire Commander. The firefighters use hand-me-down helmets and gear from a US fire brigade. The jackets don’t fit, the boots are too big, but it is better than nothing. Recently, one of the APF’s had a narrow escape when he received an electric shock that knocked him unconscious while fighting a fire.

Then there is the shortage of water. The brigade’s 10,000-litre water storage tank has been empty for years, so Mahankal, up Chabahil, has become the new supply station. “There are times when we have to rush to Mahankal to get water and then rush to the site of the fire,” says Hengaraju. They fall back on fire hydrants on the road are useless,
the Water Supply Corporation has long cut its supply.

And when, against all these odds, the fire engines make it to the road, they are often unable to provide timely service because of traffic jams and narrow roads that are not built to pass an eight-foot wide vehicle.

“A fire brigade is necessary not just in case of fire but also for rescue processes in case of disasters like earthquake,” says Ghulam M Sherani, the program manager of the UN’s Disaster Management Program. “We have to develop a standard fire brigade system that is highly equipped to respond to such hazards, especially because of the unplanned urbanisation in Kathmandu.”

The fire brigade is in serious need of new fire engines, ambulances, staff training and equipment as well as smaller fire trucks to negotiate Kathmandu’s narrow alleys.
The global Obama

Like Barack, Nepalis will transcend the limitations of their birth only with education

Barack Hussein Obama has become the darling of the world, and we will do well to ponder the making of Obama at a time of our own ambition to fashion a new multicultural Nepal for Nepalis.

Obama overcame many hurdles to become such a transformational figure, not the least of which was a middle name that was terrifying to many white American ears. So, what was the most crucial component in the making of Barack Obama? What is the one ingredient that contributed to developing and bringing all the other elements in his personality such a potent and persuasive mixture? It is his education. It was the quality of American education that helped Obama transcend the limitations of his birth and the circumstances of his upbringing.

In his autobiography, Dreams from My Father, Obama recounts how his mother woke him up at four-thirty in the morning and gave him English lessons once both found themselves in Indonesia where she could not afford to send him to the International School where the wealthy and the expatriates sent their children. When he complained about the early hour and sleep deprivation, his mother, who worked full-time, said, “Well, this is no picnic for me either, busta!” She sent him back to Hawaii at age ten to be with his maternal grandparents so he could have a better education. He had access to public libraries found in every city, no matter how poor and deprived, and every county, no matter how rural and remote. Schools cultivated the spirit of intellectual adventure, critical thinking and creativity rather than rote learning and hero worship. In the absence of a father whose African blood still carried the notorious “one-drop rule” Obama found himself racially alone and confused about his identity. He was perceived as black but his mother and his grandparents were white midwesterners from Kansas.

Obama indulged in drugs, avoided speaking to the only other black girl in his class, but eventually sought out the company of authors like W E B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X. By the time he reached high school at the exclusive Punahou Academy in Honolulu on a scholarship, Obama was ready to identify with and explore black America through his readings. In Occidental College near Los Angeles, where he spent two years, he was more than ready to speak in public against South Africa’s Apartheid regime. In New York at Columbia, Obama became reclusive, focused, and devoted as an undergraduate. His roommate Hassan advised him to lighten up but Obama was relentless in his single-minded pursuit of knowledge. Academics combined with interest in public service led him to Chicago as a community organiser and on to Harvard Law, where his book-black identity and white upbringing helped him avoid the bitterness of many blacks and enabled him to cultivate diverse friendships. His academic achievements, his mixed racial ancestry and public service made Obama one of a kind-flexible in his identity, able to draw on the entirety of American heritage in his expression. He was willing to focus on race as an issue and a problem but determined to go beyond to find a wider horizon. So, what made Barack Obama, what made him find his place in history? He didn’t just drop from the sky. When Obama speaks about his story only being possible in America, he is talking about his unique American education.

Here in Nepal we are at a crossroads to build a multicultural Nepal. In order to achieve this goal, we must focus on building a culture of quality education with schools, libraries and motivated teachers. They must provide equal opportunity to all Nepalis to widen their horizons, and a culture of social service, unleashing their full potential. Only open access to knowledge available to all everywhere will enable us to fashion a new breed of Nepals-flexible in their identities, committed to the common good, and intelligent and compassionate enough to navigate and lead through the fast-drive future that is in store for Nepal.

Pramod Mishra is on research leave from Augustana College in the United States.
A month everyone who left Sajha Prakashan’s book fair at the Ratna-yu Sabha Griha in Kathmandu took home a bundle of books that were cheaply priced to start with, and then discounted. “Each year, we have a mass increase in both the number of people who come and the sales,” says Rudra Neupane, head of the marketing department at Sajha. The book fair has been held for the past 25 years and takes place simultaneously at 28 other locations in Nepal, besides Kathmandu. This year, discounts ranged from 25 to 80 per cent on some especially old but valuable issues of Sajha’s magazine Garima. However, Sajha Prakashan has been struggling to pull in the funds to print and sell books in 32 districts in the Eastern and Western development regions, Sajha has lost its monopoly in cities where it was able to maintain a profit margin that was able to subsidize expenses for sales to remote districts. In places like Jumla where books have to be transported by helicopter, human omnibus back, Sajha allows a subsidised 86 per cent discount on its books. While the private sector is apathetic towards remote regions of Nepal, as a public utility controlled by the government, Sajha needs government pressure to distribute. Although the government does not provide financial support to Sajha, government officials oversee and coordinate activities. “We have been asking for subsidies, but demands have not been met so far,” Victor Pradhan, general manager of Sajha Prakashan told Nepal Times. Discussion about making Sajha an independent institution has also been going on, but nothing is certain yet. Sajha is not publishing prolifically – printing mere 30-40 new titles per year. However, it works together with 30 other private publishers who are also being represented at the fair. Of the 5,000 titles on display in Kathmandu, everything from children’s classics, spiritual, self-help and academic books are available. However, Sajha continues to make plans to expand its reach in terms of the book fair this year. The book fair will go on till 13 February, every day from 9AM -6PM.

February sky

In February, we have two brilliant planets to entertain us in the evening skies and a surprise celestial visitor (comet Lulin) swinging in the pre-dawn skies. As the evenings are getting warmer, February is a great time for the amateur astronomer. Granted, the western sky is kind of dull. Fomalhaut, the brightest star near the southwest horizon, sets about an hour after the Sun. Most of the Great Summer Triangle has already set with the Sun but Deneb gives us a good show before dipping below the horizon. However, there are many bright stars in the east and they will be visible until dawn. In the evening, at about 8.30 PM, you can see the Orion with three stars in its belt. Around Orion, you can easily identify the six brightest stars that belong to the so called ‘Winter Hexagon’. The bright star to the south east of Orion the Hunter is the Dog star Sirius, the brightest star in our right sky. In fact this star is 25 times brighter than our Sun. Upon closer observation, you will see that the hunter and his dogs seem to be chasing the Bull, Taurus, which is just to the west of them. The Bull’s right eye contains the bright red-orange star Aldebaran, another member of the Winter-Hexagon. Notice that the three stars in Orion’s belt point northwest to Aldebaran. The Bull’s face and horns form a distinctive “Y” shaped pattern. Comet Lulin, discovered in July 2007, should be the highlight of this season. It’s predicted to reach about fifth magnitude in late February, so it should be visible through binoculars. It may even become detectable with the unaided eye in a dark, moonless sky. Both professional and amateur astronomers have been tracking this unusual comet. Its most interesting characteristic is that it is actually moving in the opposite direction to the planets. As it moves to its closest approach to Earth on 24 February, Lulin is expected to brighten to be visible to the naked eye and will be observable low in the sky in an east-southeast direction before dawn. Mercury is at its greatest separation west from the Sun on 13 February. But it rises only just over an hour before sunrise making the planet almost invisible this month. Venus is still a brilliant ‘Evening Star’ in the south-western sky at dusk. On the evening of 27 February, the narrow crescent Moon will appear directly below Venus, both fitting nicely into the same field of view through binoculars. Mars is rising only a few minutes before sunrise and we won’t be getting good views of the Red Planet until after the summer solstice, like Mars, rises less than an hour before the Sun this month. This giant planet won’t be easily observable until after the summer. Saturn is rising in the middle of the evening, and it’s well up in the southeastern sky by dawn. Many of Saturn’s moons can also be seen in the telescope including the largest and brightest saturnian moon Titan. On the evening of 11 February, the gibbous Moon will appear directly below Saturn, just a few degrees away. As the international year of astronomy (IYA 2009) is being celebrated throughout the world, don’t miss participating in some of its corner-stone projects, especially the global star party http://www.100hoursofastronomy.org/ Wishing you clear skies and great stargazing in February! ●

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ABOUT TOWN

EXHIBITIONS
- Love in the Air, art by Ragni Upadhyay-Greia at 5.30 PM till 8 March, Siddhartha Gallery. 4218048
- Rakshya Nepal Mela on 14 February from 10AM to 5PM at The New Era, Battisputali
- A Search for Serenity, artwork by Chirag Bangdel till 15 February, Gallery 32, Kamaladi
- Lunch-hour doodles, Illustrations by Preena Shrestha till 15 February, The Bakery Cafe, Pulchok

EVENTS
- Second DOS Workshop ‘09, 16-26 February at Yala Maya Kendra, Patan Dhoka, 9851108338
- Call for entries for Film South Asia, documentaries made in and after January 2007 qualified. For deadlines, visit timesouthasia.com. 555241
- Valentine special at Buy & Sell Flea Market, first Saturday of every month, Sangal Museum Road, Chitwan. 9841203646

MUSIC
- Yala Maya Classic featuring Tarabir Singh Tuladhar and Jeewan Rai on 13 February at 5PM at Yalamaya Kendra, Patan Dhoka, Rs 100. 5535767
- Sarangi Ethnic Project Poesie and the Fags, Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory, Jhumsikhel. 5013354
- Rock with Rashmi every Friday and Suli and Ragia every Saturday at 8 PM onwards, Absolute Lounge Bar, Pulchok.
- Sunday Jazz brunch barbecue and live jazz music at the Terrace, Hyatt Regency from 12-3.30 PM. 4491234
- Jazz evening at Delices de France restaurant every Wednesday, 11AM-2PM. 4260326
- Strings Band live every Tuesday at G’s Terrace Restaurant and Bar, Thamel.
- Wednesday Melody at Jazzabell Cafe, Happy hour 6-8PM and TGIF party with live band Epic every Friday at BPM. 2114075
- Some like it hot every Friday BBQ and live music by Dinesh Rai and the Sound Minds, 7PM onwards, Rs 899 at Fusion, Dwarika’s Hotel. 4479488
- Happy cocktail hour, 5-7PM, ladies night on Wednesday with live unplugged music at Jatra Cafe & Bar.
- Live Sensation, live performance by Yankey, every Saturday, 9PM, the Hyatt Regency. 4491234.
- Fusion and Loosa Band every Friday night, Brum Resto Lounge, Lazimpat. 441293
- Fusion and Classical Music by Anil Shalí every Wednesday, rock with Rashmi Singh every Friday, Suli & Ragia with Hemant Rana every Saturday, 8PM onwards, Absolute Bar. 5524108
- Ladies night with free cocktail and unplugged music, every Wednesday, happy hour everyday 5-7PM, buy one get one free, Jata R&B.

DINING
- Chef Caroline for French and Mediterranean cuisine, Babar Mahal Revisted. 4263070
- Fresh Himalayan trout at Rox Restaurant all Saturday 7PM onwards, Hyatt Regency. 4483892
- Mediterranean cuisine every Friday from Greece, Italy and the Middle-East at The Café, Hyatt Regency. 4491234
- Strawberry Etagere at The Lounge from 4.30 PM-6.30 PM. Hyatt Regency. 4491234.
- Nhuchhe goes Thai at Nhuchhe’s Thai Kitchen, Balkuwat. 442903.
- Fusion of Marcela Ragan’s new menu and Mariné’s new bar at Dhokaiya Cafe. 5522113
- Plat Du Jour at Hotel Shangri-la, Kathmandu, Rs 600. 4412999
- Pasta 24799 at La Dolce Vita, Thamel. 4700612
- Home made pasta at Alfredo, Sailake Crowne Plaza. 4273999
- Reality Bites, The Kaiser Cafe, Garden of Dreams, operated by Dwarika’s Group of Hotels, 9AM-10PM. 4425341
- Steak escape with Kathmandu’s premier steaks at the Olive Bar and Bistro, Hotel Radisson. 4411818
- Cocktails, mocktails and liqueurs at The Ashleigh Lounge, opening hours 1-10PM, above Himalayan Java, Thamel.
- Starry night barbecue at Hotel Shangri-la with live performance by Cineyu Gurung, Rs 999, at the Shambala Garden, every Friday 7PM onwards. 4412999

In Luck by Chance, Sona (Konkona Sen Sharma), a wide-eyed yet ambitious girl comes to Bombay with big dreams of becoming a film star. She is willing to do whatever it takes to make it. Living in the city, she makes friends with those whose lives are interconnected to Bollywood and are all in search of their own grandiose dreams of making it big. When Vikram (Farhan Akhtar), who came to Bombay leaving his past life in Delhi, and Sona start spending time together, they soon form a romantic relationship. Meanwhile, Rolly (Rishi Kapoor) is making a potential blockbuster. But when Rolly’s troubles on the sets of Rolly’s new film, fate hands Vikram a chance at his dreams when he is called in for an audition.

Call 4442220 for show timings at Jai Nepal
www.jainepal.com

WEEKEND WEATHER

by NGAMINDRA DAHAL

This year’s winter drought is about to enter into five months this week, already second driest of a decade. As a consequence of cloud sunny days, mercury levels are about 5 degrees higher than the expected maximum of this month. For example, Valley recorded 26 degrees on Wednesday while average maximum temperature of the month is 18 degrees. Satellite pictures of Wednesday evening show no westerly fronts and associated clouds around us to break the persistent drought. This means no change in existing weather pattern—foggy morning and sunny afternoon in the mountain hills. Most of the Tarai will remain under suspended mist layer.

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For inclusion in the listing send information to editors@jainepaltimes.com
LISTEN TO ME: NC president Girija Prasad Koirala, UML’s Madhab Kumar Nepal and Rastriya Jana Shakti Party’s Surya Bahadur Thapa at a discussion about the constitution at Everest Hotel on Wednesday.

AU REVOIR: Outgoing UNMIN Chief and Special representative of UN Secretary General Ian Martin and his newly appointed successor Karin Landgren at a farewell lunch at Hotel Shangri La on Wednesday.

20/20: National eye sight program conducts a mobile eye camp in Adarsha Kanya Niketan School in Lagankhel on Tuesday.

WALK THE LINE: Newari women participate in the annual Baha Puja in their traditional costumes and visit Buddhist bahas in Patan on Tuesday.
Prado and Rado

Every time the political trinity has a summit and buries the hatchet, you can be sure some mantri or other goes and shoots his mouth off, triggering another avalanche of accusations and counter accusations that reverberates for a week.

No sooner had PKD and GPK smoked the peace pipe, and the prime minister assured his ex of house rental, secretariat expenses, health care benefits, and sundry perks, than Cultural Revolution Minister Kirati suggests every Nepali should bear arms to fight southern expansionism.

And BRB writes that since anarchy would hasten the day when the Maoists could stage state capture, the current chaos is good for Nepalis.

Then Maoist union leader Comrade Lekhnath threatens to “dislocate the spine of anyone who dares stand in our way” (exact quote).

But why did Girja Bau have to be so greedy and accept PKD’s offer to use taxpayers’ money to pay for his retirement benefits? In his own devious way, he probly thought he’d pulled a fast one on His Fierceness because while He (Awesome) would think GPK would return the favour and not try to topple his government out of sheer gratitude, he would actually double cross the PM and intensify efforts to oust the Maoists by wooing away the eh-maleys. No wonder the prime minister has a grudging admiration for the Old Fox because Sanu Buwa is actually even more unreliable than he is.

The reason Dahal wanted Koirala to accept the perks was to set a precedence so that when he is out of a job, he’d also be eligible. Smart. We hear that while ex-interior minister Sitaula was the middleman in the PKD-GPK deal, and strongly urged his boss to accept it, while Sushil Da was dead against saying the Maoists would demand a pound of flesh. And there is also talk of GP striking a sweetheart deal for Sujata under which the First Dotter gets Sunsari in a platter in the by-elections.

Could it be because both words ‘Nepal’ and ‘nepotism’ start with the prefix ‘nep’? The saga of Comrade Yummy’s sis continues as she flits about from KUKL to NPC, and has now been installed at the Lok Sewa. The only fellow in the Yummy household who hasn’t yet got a govt job is the family canine, but the Ashis heard the mutt too is being promised to be a sniffer in the Bomb Squad with the rank of Staff Sergeant. In all this, hubby Rambabu has been squeaky clean, going out of his way not to help anyone who is a blood relation, only folks from his Gorkha neighbourhood.

One wonders where COAS Cutwall gets his confidence from despite being blistering ondiat the PLA’s on everything from new recruitment to army integration. The general’s handshake is extra firm these days and he seems to have the prime minister in his vice-like grip.

Once again, at ascet Unified Maoaddies meeting this week the cadres poured derision at their comrade leaders going soft and adopting the “Prado and Rado” culture. And the hardcore seems to be trying to sabotage the leadership’s overtures to India by deliberately targeting Indian JV’s, the latest being the medical college in POKhara. At a three-royal Golf Club even the caddies have become baddies. The YCL’s ‘energy’ could be deployed much more constructively if they all got on stationary exercise bicycles installed with dynamos and generated electricity to feed into the grid.

There was a time when Nepalis pretending to be Bhutan refugees started arriving at European airports without travel documents to seek political asylum. How the tables have turned. It seems young Bhutani women are in high demand in the Japa and surrounding districts because local Nepali guys aspire to be accompanying spouses in third country resettlement.

The Tailpiece: Biratnagar industrialists this week staged a chukka jam to protest frequent chukka jams by (guess what?) staging a chukka jam.

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