Weekly Internet Poll # 440.

How do you grade the six months of the coalition on development issues?

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Q. After Butwal, will UML emerge:

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Rules of war

A saw all sadly aware, armed conflicts create victims: women, children, the elderly, forcibly displaced, wounded, sick and detained. All of them have, and deserve, protection and assistance under the instruments of International Humanitarian Law (IHL).

But the fate of these victims is indirectly linked to the willingness, determination and capacity of states to stand by their obligations to respect and ensure respect for IHL, in all circumstances, and of all parties to any conflict to abide by their humanitarian obligations.

To have and to ratify is necessary, but to respect their obligations is indispensable.

The fundamental humanitarian treaties, the Geneva Conventions, are universally ratified and there had been constant development taking place since 1949. This movement has dramatically accelerated over recent years. More than ever, humanitarian concerns are high on the world’s agenda, and the world’s conflicts are conducted has become the subject of the nightly news. At the same time we continue to witness, throughout the world, violations of IHL.

It is the essence of a state’s obligation so that civilians are not attacked, protected weapons not used, nor any weapon used inappropriately, and to ensure that national laws deal with the prevention of such acts, and failings, their punishment. It is a left-leaning and sick in armed conflict, but also addresses matters such as the protection of and assistance to—prisoners of war, civilian internees, children and soldiers. It deals with the environment, cultural property, weapons restrictions and prohibitions, and even war crimes.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) would encourage states to review two treaties which they have not yet to sign and, hopefully, to consider accession to them. Most IHL treaties require legislative steps to be taken to ensure that these international obligations are reflected in domestic law. This is more important for dualist states, including those with a common law tradition, which normally require legislative prior to domestic application of the treaties.

South Asia is part of the world whose general importance in IHL treatment, and accession and implementation rates are somewhat low in this region when compared to other parts of the world. The ICRC hopes that this will increase as a result of events such as the IHL conference in Kathmandu.

Dr Jacques Moreillon is the vice-president of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). This piece was adapted from his keynote address in Kathmandu, to the First South Asian IHL conference on Tuesday.

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Another letter from home

One year after agreement, lessons still haven’t been learnt in the Madhes

JANAKPUR—A committed reader last week complained he'd had enough of Mithila in this column. But there is the familiar dateline again. What makes us go back again and again to the same place?

In the amorphous field of cultural studies, there is an even more rarefied stream called the anthropology of emotions. The penchant for neologism among cultural anthropologists is notorious—they borrow or invent definitional terms with almost every research paper they write. To illuminate the importance of place, American scholar of history of geography John Kirtland Wright (1891-1969) coined the term 'geopiety' with which he attempted to explain attachments people have either for their homeland or for destinations of reverence such as Jerusalem, Lhasa, Lumbini, Mecca, Rome or Banaras.

Extending Wright’s concept of spatial veneration, the Chinese-American geographer of human emotions Yi-Fu Tuan propounded that it is in fact ‘topophilia’ that lies behind one’s affection for one’s native land. In other words: it is just an intense yearning for home.

The romantic notion of home is a place where the heart is at peace with itself and the world. Such a territory exists only in the imagination. In real life, the concept of home is a strange mix of nostalgia and desires.

Mithila embodies both. It still celebrates the involved detachment of King Videha, reveres the practical philosophy of Sage Yagyavalkya and sings songs of 14th century poet extraordinare Vidyapati. Meanwhile, forward-looking Maithils have spread around the world to earn a living or simply to satisfy wanderlust. But no matter where they live, a Mithila-born is a Maithil forever.

The Madhes is a political construct, once a pejorative identity that exerted respectability through organised agitation and a spontaneous movement culminating in a mass uprising that forced the state to accept the idea of federalism. But Mithila is a lived experience that exists in language, literature, arts, painting, customs and cultural practices. Hence, it’s also a significant force in national politics.

It’s not just Madhes-based parties like Sadbhahana, MJF or TMDP that have to rely upon Mithila to recruit Maithili cadres and groom their possible leaders. Barrio revolutions like Hridayesh Tripathi or Sarbendra Nath Shukla, almost the entirety of ethnic Madhesi in national parties is exclusively Maithil. That may be the reason federalism inspires intense emotions and heated debates herein Janakpur.

OMOP, they call it: One Madhes One Pradesh. Leaders of the MJF, Sadbhahana and TMDP admit in private that this concept lost its relevance with the acceptance of federalism and inclusion as guiding principles for the new constitution. MJF and a splinter group of Sadbhahana are coalition partners of the ruling alliance. TMDP has just upped the ante by calling for an agitation to mark the anniversary of the agreement between the government and the United Democratic Madhesi Front on 28 February 2008. But more than totalitarian-minded Maoists, it is the mainstream parties who seem to be having second thoughts about federalism.

The UML has reinforced its exclusivist nature by roundly defeating Ram Chandra Jha and Raghubir Mahaseth for secretaryship of the party in Butwal this week. The NC is also wavering, and Girija Prasad Koirala repeatedly harps on the dangers of federalism, knowing full well that the demands for self-determination are now irreversible.

When constituent assembly members come here to collect suggestions for a new constitution, they will probably get conflicting opinions about OMOP and demand for a Videhabhumi encompassing Morang-Sunsari in the east, Rautahat in the west, Bhitrimadhes in the north and everything in between. Such a territory seems to satisfy Koirala’s strictures against ethnic federalism and his support for economically viable provinces. The former NC stronghold is waiting for the stand that the party of Ram Baran Yadav takes to address their aspirations for self-rule.

MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA
The centre can’t hold
All the parties are competing to appease the militants

JANAKPUR: Brijesh Chandra Lal ran when he heard the cry for help right next to his house last week. He could see a man lying flat on his back and struggling to breathe. Lal suddenly recognised he was Narendra Khali. They had worked together in the NC. Khali was the brother of a popular student leader named Yubari Khali. Narendra had moved on from politics, turned to alcoholism and worked at the Janakpur Cigarette Factory. Lal, a former town mayor, is now a senior TMDP leader.

Khad had been shot in his lower abdomen and was bleeding profusely when the police arrived. He died on the way to the hospital. Jawa Singh’s Dhanusha-i-chi-march, Surya Dev Singh, took responsibility. No reason was given.

The uneasy calm in Janakpur after the murder of Khali belies the fear that he knew. We have known that sections of the administration are complicit with the Tarai’s criminal gangs and share the loot, but it seems to go a lot deeper than that.

Government officials actively encourage loot and extortion. A cop may actually tell a particular group which trader is a possible target and fix a share. An official at the land office may inform an armed militant about recent transactions and who would have liquid cash. A mid-level banker may pass on the details of which family has received money from a relative in the Gulf.

The conventional explanation is that the Madhesi parties are shamelessly backing the armed gangs to bolster their strength. But the tentacles of crime span across political parties. A bus was recently looted in the middle of the day in Mahottari. The transporters threatened to go on strike, the administration reacted swiftly and within a few hours arrested the culprits from Hotel Rama, showing they can control crime if they want to. But the very next day, an NC leader got them released.

Or look at the talks drama. The key aim of the Maoists is to get as many armed groups in the party as possible. Instead of politically isolating the armed groups, all parties are engaged in a competitive appeasement of the militant.

The most visible manifestation of that will be seen in the student union elections to be held next month. Umesh Chaudhary, the present Maest student president of the ARK union, predicts this may be one of the most violent elections in the history of the campus. All candidates boast of the support given by one group or the other.

Dipendra Jha is the present vice president of the campus union. He has been arrested in the past by the police for multiple crimes: stealing assets from government offices, trying to encase a fake cheque. Each time, he has got off because of political pressure. After the talks, armed groups have been allowed to emerge in public. An underground group in the campus is the Jaya Mandal group in Sarlahi. Jha was on the dais. So, it turns out that this office-bearer in one of Taralis biggest colleges was the student front coordinator of a dreaded militant group.

This also gives a glimpse into the way the government talks with the armed groups and allied militant groups. The TMDP’s Bijay Singh says: “The Madhes street on the anniversary of the eight-point accord. The TMDP is set to announce another round of protests next week.”

In short, the government is trying to do many things to appease the militants at the same time.

In Hindi on the Baluwatar lawns: “Believe me, I will implement the eight-point agreement.” Pushpa Kamal Dali and Madhab Kumar Nepal nodded, Mohantra Thakur reciprocated, and spoke in Nepali.

The agreement promised an autonomous Madhes province, inclusion and collective entry into the army.

Paswan, Mandal and Kapar crossed the threshold, and shook their heads when asked whether the promises had been kept. “No, we still don’t have rights and if there is another movement, we will again be on the streets,” said one.

That, at last, sums up the political mood on the Madhes street on the anniversary of the eight-point accord. The TMDP is set to announce another round of protests next week. Asked about their specific complaints, TMDP’s Bijay Singh says: “The province will be decided in the CA. But the government and the major parties can at least institute dialogue. There has not been a single movement driven to the district administration as a warm-up. The MJP has been trumpeting the inclusion ordinance as a result of their pressure. But the government’s local leaders say being in power has put them in an uncomfortable spot. Breakaway Maoists and Marha Yadav is still in his planning stage, in touch with underground militants.”

The Madhesi protests are timed to coincide with the federalism debate. At a two-day event organised by the Mithila Film and Theatre in Janakpur, speakers backed the formation of a Mithila state. Instead of single Madhes provinces, Thewew Manish Madhesi face, Ram Rijhan Yadav told us: “We have decided to make the three sub-provinces: Mithila, Bhojpura and Awadh, into separate states. It is more scientific and will fulfill aspirations of different communities.” The demand has drawn flak from Maoist party leaders who say smaller provinces will allow Kathmandu to play one against the other.

The Madhes movement is still defined by a constant radicalisation against Kathmandu. But this is now tempered by a sense of confusion where Madhesi, including party leaders, do not know where politics is headed.

Analyst Bhaskar Gautam runs it up: “The Madhes is lost. It is trapped between the MFP which is in government and increasingly unpopular on the ground, TMDP which is popular but is internally weak and a state that can’t protect its citizens.”

Prashant Jha in Mahottari
Barricades to growth

The highway to Nepal’s progress is blocked

On Shivaratri day, as the Bee was driving back to Kathmandu from Bandipur, the highway to Kathmandu was blocked by the police for more than 50 miles by children collecting money for the Shivirat pari fine (see picture). Smiling parents looked on as their children stopped passing vehicles and for better or for worse intimidating and forcing people to pay.

To commercialise it.

Nepal needs to develop an overall strategic plan for water resource development and it must mobilise local and international skills and expertise. In addition, they must be based on strategic policy and plans. Third, there must be a realisation that if water resource development is to be fully aware of the assets you have and their value. This means you need to have an asset. This means you need to know that natural resources are very complex. This is evidenced by the fact that there will be many agreements and that they will be long.

One issue is price. Is the price that is agreed upon now increased or adjusted over time? It should be flexible to provide for negotiated and predetermined price adjustments. Nepal will need to develop a risk mentality captures increases in the downstream prices but may have to accept decreases if the market collapses. So the major issue is that natural resource is part of a supply chain and the value of the water resources needs to be considered accordingly. As water resources contracts and development are long-term, it can never be forgotten that a contract must be flexible to adjust to the inevitable changes that will occur over the lifetime of a contract. People who live in the area of natural resources development must be run in a number of ways and must also be compensated. Further, if the developer of natural resources does not abide by its commitments there must be an effective legal way to enforce obligations.

What lessons from Estonia and Georgia are relevant for Nepal today?

There are many lessons. Commercial undertakings must be pursued professionally with a team that combines many different skills, including international lawyers and local expertise. In addition, they must be based on strategic policy and plans. Third, there must be a realism that international companies wish to enter into agreements that because you have an asset. This means you need to be fully aware of the assets you have and their value. And such knowledge should give the confidence to go forward. In sum, you need a strategy, which is a vision and an outlook based on facts, policy, tactical implementation and forward. In sum, you need a strategy, which is a vision and an outlook based on facts, policy, tactical implementation and forward.

In the same way as we allow stoppages of traffic, we allow stoppages of time. When those children grow up they may use similar extortion tactics in the world of business, and it may be to their advantage in the name of culture. In the same way as we allow stoppages to add hours to journey times, perhaps waiting years to achieve economic growth just because we are not willing to change simple fundamentals has become way of life. Bandipur provides glimpses of great opportunities for economic growth. A village that is close to the main road yet a world away from this organised mushrooming of houses in other small Nepal towns. With magnificent views it can be developed as a tourist destination for overseas visitors and a getaway for city dwellers from Kathmandu, Pokhara and Narayangadh.

But such projects have to be run in proper business life and fashion and not driven by donors. We have seen in Nepal that donor-driven projects never metamorphose into large-scale businesses because funding is given for the pilot project only. Donors supported projects rarely attract commercial investors because they are dependent for their continued survival on subsidies, which when withdrawn can kill the project with one swipe.

If projects like Bandipur are to expand commercially, they have to do so by increasing the accommodation at the same time as preserving the character, heritage and beauty of the villages and architecture. It could mean recreating villages with rows of houses with period architecture but modern amenities. The kind of tourists who are attracted to the villages for its stunning pristine views, will also be lured by a high standard of accommodation, food and services.

Nepal’s economic growth will only happen if we capitalise on these opportunities for large-scale projects and that in turn will lead to the creation of jobs and a new generation of entrepreneurs. Donors should not be the ones to stand in the way of big business ideas. There are enough people already who have the expertise to attract bamboo pole across the street. www.arthabeed.com

Milky way

Himalayan Bank has signed an agreement with the Daily Development Corporation to provide simple credit to cooperatives involved in the daily business to buy cows and milk processing units.

Jump ride

Morang Auto Works is offering a free bungee jump to anyone who buys a 125cc Gladiator S5 bike. This offer includes free transport, bungee jump and one nights accommodation. Buyers can also opt for a cash discount instead.

Three more

Bank of Kathmandu has opened three new branches in Trivupeshwar, Gyaneshwar and Baneshwor bringing its total to 26. The branches offer all standard banking services.

Banking sweeps

Aarti Rana and Ranjan Thapa of Global Bank won the Bankers Cup Golf tournament held at Gokuwa Golf Club. Twenty-five players from various banks participated in the tournament.

Barricades to growth

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A long wait
Dhanbir Dahal in†Nepal

when it will come.† says Sushila.

by the Maoists for the same reason on 17 November 1998. Narbir

Bikai of Khalanga-8 was arrested by the army on

24 February 2002 and has not returned yet. None of the families

witnessed her parentsí murder in her own house by the police. Her

Dhan Singh Khadka of Simla was abducted and killed by the

On 20 May 2001, six farmers of Rugha-6 were shot dead by the

police while they were working in their fields. Ram Prasad Dahal,

who watched his father being shot, says, îThey shot

him without even a word. Six people died right in front of

my eyes. For a few days, Maoist leaders came to give

condolence. But later no one
cared about us. I’ve heard

nothing has happened yet.î

In July 1999 Sushila B Kalai of Garayala-3

were left unemployed after the

cross has provided food support for 634. The local peace committee

clashes between the state and the Maoists is unknown, Nepal Red

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ments, people have queued every day to fill out application forms. The

vice district officer, Shiv Prasad Lamsal, says: îWe have been

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The victims of Rukum, which was one of the centres of the conflict
during the decade long Peopleís War, are yet to receive the relief

they were promised.

Failure to pay
Editorial in Alhijran,
23 February-1 March

The Finance Ministry has issued a blacklist of 300 bank defaulters
and has pledged to take action against them. When previous
administrations tried to do this, the process was halted because of
political pressure. In all past efforts, only those who defaulted on
their debts were targeted. This government is making the same
mistake. There has been no move to question those who dole out
loans recklessly or because they are in cahoots with willful
defaulters.

When a bank loan is arranged, the bank’s management is also
responsible for verifying the customer’s ability to repay. It is the
bank’s responsibility to weigh out possible risks and calculate
the assurance of the security of the loan being paid back. The list
of defaulters also includes foreigners. Coincidentally, these
foreign defaulters took loans from banks that have a representation
of the national bank of their country of origin. It’s unlikely that
a government that is so easily coerced into letting off Nepali
defaulters will pursue foreigners.

Opiate of masses
Kantipur, 24 February

Farmers in Bara and Parsa, who were left unemployeed after the
Brigandy Sugar Mills closed down, have started farming opium.
There have been no restrictions on farming ganja in the past years so
young farmers are blooming. Due to lack of proper regulation on the
government, 20 VDCs are farming opium on almost 340 hectares of
land. Locals claim that opium and ganja farming is being sustained by the help of the
police. Most cultivators seem to prefer areas close to the border.

In both districts, locals say that the police only destroy ganja
plantations for show. Last year, the police destroyed just
124 hectares of ganja out of 1,354 hectares. SP Subodh
Ghimire says he has no resources to pursue drug cultivators.

Ten promises
Naya Patrika, 24 February

Recently appointed Centre cabinet minister Prakash Thakuri has made promises:

1. A accountability in the police service will improve.
2. Responsibility will be matched to experience and ability.
3. Corruption in the police force will end.
4. Activities of all personnel will be recorded.
5. There will be no political interference in police promotions.
6. Let the political ans deal with politics, we will deal with criminals.
7. I don’t believe that empty streets mean the security system

is good.
8. The investigation bureau will break criminal networks.
9. A system of rewards and punishment will be implemented.
10. The metropolitan police will live up to its name with the work it does.

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MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

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is good.
Muslims want identity, representation...

KONG YEN LIN (IN NEPALGAON)

When Hasron Idrishi was unable to afford the dowry her in-laws demanded after her marriage last year, her husband dowser her with kerosene and set her on fire. Hasron was rushed to Bir Hospital in Kathmandu overnight for treatment and survived, but the burn disfigured her, and she is still emotionally scarred. Not only did she suffer in silence, she took the pain without saying a word. Now she is an emotional scarred. Not one to speak up, she is still struggling to speak up.

Domestic violence has been endemic in the western Tarai. Rising female literacy, instead of decreasing domestic crimes, seems to be making it worse. A more men and more young girls are becoming more educated, they challenge the masculinity of the husband — leading to increased violence. Muslim and gender activists are now calling for constitutional safeguards against domestic and gender violence.

"Not only should there be stricter enforcement of laws punishing perpetrators of spousal abuse, there should also be family law courts to cater to customary rights of Muslims, especially in the case of divorce," says Mohammad Shahid Reza, a counselor at the Nepal-based Fatima Foundation. "The group recently held on exhibition lectures in 75 venues in 23 Banki VDCs to educate the women on their constitutional rights.

A awareness of their situation is the first step towards reform and equal participation," says Fatima Foundation’s Maurnona Siddiqui, "If their rights were to be sanctified in the new constitution, it would greatly empower them and help them progress.

Leaders have found a new slogan of inclusion and equality, but there has not been any change in their mentality. That Nepal is a common garden of all castes, creeds, communities and classes is just rhetoric to prevent discrimination and injustice, leaders call it being communal and fundamentalist and get away with it. We did not doubt the new constitution will guarantee our rights.

Tahir Ali Ansari (Supreme Court)

Five major areas — political, economic, social, cultural and religious aspects — should be the basis for state restructuring. It is a technical issue to how many provinces can be made that all communities and classes get equal opportunities and deliver justice. It is crucial whether the provinces are vertical or horizontal. Muslims are categorised under ‘Madhesi’ or ‘other’ communities in the constitution, so what can we expect under a federal structure? The new constitution should have a provision of affirmative action for Muslims.

Hamid Ansari (Nepal’s ambassador to Saudi Arabia)

Five major areas — political, economic, social, cultural and religious aspects — should be the basis for state restructuring. It is a technical issue to how many provinces can be made that all communities and classes get equal opportunities and deliver justice. It is crucial whether the provinces are vertical or horizontal. Muslims are categorised under ‘Madhesi’ or ‘other’ communities in the constitution, so what can we expect under a federal structure? The new constitution should have a provision of affirmative action for Muslims.

Tahir Ali Ansari (Supreme Court)

There is no mention of ‘Muslim’ in the constitution, so we have no identity. The state should adopt reservation policy towards Muslims. Muslims want proportional representation in every state mechanism, not only in the central administrative system but also at district and village levels.

Mohammadi Siddiqui (member, NC)

It is only Muslims that are identified as a religious minority, and we must try to prevent discrimination. Muslim girls are denied education in the new constitution. The Madarsa Board and Muslim Commission should have Muslim women members.

Rahamutula Miya

The new constitution should mention us not as a religious minority but as the Muslim community. Nowhere is Muslim mention in the new ordinance on inclusion.

Najarul Hasan Falahi (Amir Islamic Association, Nepal)

Muslims should be included in all state mechanism proportionately. There is a high school for five houses of Pahadi people but just one primary school for an entire Muslim settlement. If Muslims don’t like co-education then the government should make faith schools and colleges for them. The certificate of madrasa education is not recognised. Urdu should be included as an optional subject in school and college.

...gender rights and education

SCARRED: Hasron Idrishi mother holds a picture of her daughter when she was admitted to hospital after her husband set her on fire. In the background are Hasron’s son and daughter, age 15 months and three years old respectively.

at Ideal Public High School. Nepal’s Muslims, who make up one-tenth of the population and half of whom live below the poverty line, see the new constitution as a landmark to improve their socio-political marginalisation. Only 17 of the 600 CA members are Muslim. Representation is equidistant in the army and police.

“Muslims are particularly more vulnerable than Dalits in terms of problems like low life expectancy and poor access to education and employment opportunities,” says Muslim CA member Najarul Hasan Falahi. “This is not the primary agenda is to make sure that Muslims are represented at the decision-making level.”

Says Mustaq Durai, of Rural Society upliftment of Nepal: “If the government lends its support through the strict, we could better tackle Muslim problems at the grassroots.”

KONG YEN LIN
The effect of climate change in the Himalaya appear most dramatic when pictures taken a few decades apart are juxtaposed.

The photograph above was taken by Austrian cartographer Erwin Schneider in early 1950s from Nang Kartshung Monastery. The peaks at centre are Taboche (6367m) and Jobo Laptsan (6440m) with Phari chen in the valley below. Tsholo Tso is a moraine dammed lake at the foot of Jobo Laptsan. The moraine, seen as a white, glacial-like feature, is blocking the lake.

By 2007 (below) the clean, debris-free glaciers and ice nestled below the Taboche summit have been reduced considerably by recent warming trends. The ice in the small glaciers below the ridgelines to the north has suffered the most, perhaps because of its lower altitude, below 6000 metres. A comparison of satellite images of Khumbu Himal taken in the 1970s, and in recent years shows that hundreds of these small glaciers have disappeared.

See also: ‘The melting Himalaya’ Nepali Times #427
‘Himalayan meltdown’ Nepali Times #871

(Pictures courtesy: Erwin Schneider/Association for Comparative Alpine Research, Munich and Alton Byers/The Mountain Institute)
here is 24-hour load shedding here in the Rolwaling Valley, the farmers don’t know who Nepal’s prime minister is, there are no chukka jams because there are no roads. But what they do see in the towering mountains around them are signs of climate change. They don’t know why, but the snowline is receding every year, the glaciers are melting and this winter has been the driest anyone can remember.

Gauri Shankhar VDC is named after the 7,181m mountain known locally as Chomo Tseringma. The distinctive twin peaks are visible from Kathmandu, but from up close the lower spur blocks the view of its majestic summit. This year, there is no snow on the slopes and Gauri Shankhar is just a massive rocky outcrop. Locals are superstitious, and say climate change is a result of the gods being angry. They have no idea that it is all a result of fossil-fuel burning by the rest of the world.

The Rolwaling Valley was first linked to global climate change when the Tso Rolpa lake here threatened to burst in the mid-1990s because of accelerated glacial melt. An expensive effort to siphon the water and lower the pressure on the moraine dam was undertaken. Villages downstream were prepared for evacuation and early-warning sirens were installed. The project was to reduce the water level by 3mm of the targeted 20m, but the cost of lowering the water level further is too prohibitive. “The risk of Tso Rolpa bursting has been temporarily reduced, but there is still a danger,” says Om Ratna Bajracharya hydrologist at the Department of Hydrology and Meteorology in Kathmandu which has listed 200 glacial lakes in Nepal that could burst. Tso Rolpa is frozen solid this winter. Global warming seems very far away amid the frigid Himalayan winter. But climate variability is something everyone here has noticed. Villagers say that the winter snow has been decreasing through the past decade and the mountains all around are rocky and snowless. Farmers down the valley are afraid there will be snow in spring. “Like in previous years, we may get six feet of snow in spring and that will destroy our potatoes,” says Ang Wasang Sherpa of Beding.

Rolwaling villagers say climate change is a result of divine wrath. The gods are angry.

KISHOR RIMAL
in DOLAKHA

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This year the mean temperature has been higher than normal across the country. In central Nepal’s valley the minimum temperature in the 2008-9 winter was four degrees above normal. The irony of it all is that farmers here like Ang Wasang don’t burn any fossil fuels, and are the least responsible for the climate change that is affecting their lives. ● See also: ‘Meltdown’, #400

FIRE AND ICE: Global warming melted the ice that made Tso Rolpa so big (top, left), but last week it was frozen solid. Gauri Shankar towers over the Rolwaling Valley (top) its slopes bereft of snow because of this years dry winter. The sluice gate of a dam that was built to let out the lakes water to reduce the danger of a catastrophic burst (above).
Asylum in Hong Kong

Nepalis will pay to go to Hong Kong even to be declared refugees

DAMBAR KRISHNA SHRESTHA

The number of Nepalis seeking political asylum in Hong Kong is on the rise, even as the government has stopped issuing and renewing student and work visas.

For those who do manage to make it here, the outlook is often gloomy. Kam Bahadur Neupane of Tehri and Hari Limbu of Taplejung pay job agents Rs 350,000 each for a passage to Hong Kong via Singapore and Shenzhen, but neither have jobs. Both have applied for political asylum. Raju Shrestha of Thankot came to Hong Kong while the war was going on six years ago, and has told the authorities the Maoists will kill him for being an informant if he goes back.

In 2005 alone, about 1,500 Nepalis applied for asylum with the UNHCR in Hong Kong, saying their lives were under threat at home. Although the war has ended, some 100 Nepalis have applied for refugee status in the first six months of 2008 citing fear of home. Although the war has ended, some 100 Nepalis have applied for refugee status in the first six months of 2008 citing fear of home. Although the war has ended, some 100 Nepalis have applied for refugee status in the first six months of 2008 citing fear of home. Although the war has ended, some 100 Nepalis have applied for refugee status in the first six months of 2008 citing fear of home. Although the war has ended, some 100 Nepalis have applied for refugee status in the first six months of 2008 citing fear of home.

Nepali community here already and most want their relatives to join. Although the war has ended, some 100 Nepalis have applied for refugee status in the first six months of 2008 citing fear of home. Although the war has ended, some 100 Nepalis have applied for refugee status in the first six months of 2008 citing fear of home. Although the war has ended, some 100 Nepalis have applied for refugee status in the first six months of 2008 citing fear of home. Although the war has ended, some 100 Nepalis have applied for refugee status in the first six months of 2008 citing fear of home. Although the war has ended, some 100 Nepalis have applied for refugee status in the first six months of 2008 citing fear of home.

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When Hong Kong passed a law granting citizenship to those born here before 1983, there was a steep rise in the number of Nepalis emigrating here. But more recently many Nepalis who are duped by job recruiters get stranded and then apply for asylum in order to stay on.

The president of the Nepali Chamber of Commerce here, Tej Rai, explains: "If the government tightens the law back home and grants them a one-month stay during which time they investigate whether or not they are genuine refugees. During that period, they are given a stipend of Rs 10,000 for rent and Rs 3,500 for food per month. After the UNHCR verifies a Nepali as a genuine refugee, they are repatriated to third countries and are not allowed to stay on in Hong Kong. Many who were considered genuine refugees have been resettled in Norway. Hong Kong pull towards Nepalis is strong. There is a sizeable Nepali community here already and most want their relatives to join them. Those who are working here in construction, or as security guards, earn considerably more (Rs 5,000-Rs 200,000 a month) than in Malaysia or the Gulf, and that is an added attraction." Maya Rai of Kathmandu is the president of the Domestic Helpers’ Union and says domestic helps can have their work visas renewed if their employers allow them to stay on, but many others have to return or stay on illegally if their visas expire. The number of Nepali domestic workers in Hong Kong has dropped by half to 1,000 since the ban on work visas five years ago. In 2005 alone, about 1,500 Nepalis applied for asylum with the UNHCR in Hong Kong, saying their lives were under threat at home. Although the war has ended, some 100 Nepalis have applied for refugee status in the first six months of 2008 citing fear of home. Although the war has ended, some 100 Nepalis have applied for refugee status in the first six months of 2008 citing fear of home. Although the war has ended, some 100 Nepalis have applied for refugee status in the first six months of 2008 citing fear of home. Although the war has ended, some 100 Nepalis have applied for refugee status in the first six months of 2008 citing fear of home. Although the war has ended, some 100 Nepalis have applied for refugee status in the first six months of 2008 citing fear of home. Although the war has ended, some 100 Nepalis have applied for refugee status in the first six months of 2008 citing fear of home.

Organic growth

German publisher goes green in Nepal

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When Hans Hofer first came to Nepal over land from Germany in 1969, he went up to Nagarkot to see the sunrise and had what he calls “a this is it” moment. He sold his Volkswagen bus to a friend in Nagarkot, joined a Nepalese family and decided then and there he wanted to work and retire in Asia. He hitchhiked to Singapore, and in 1970 produced his first guidebook on Bali. Within 15 years, Hofer’s Insight Guides had become a global publishing empire with 400 titles spanning 125 destinations. The Nepal edition of Insight Guides came out in 1985 and became an instant bestseller at a time when tourism to Nepal was booming. It was translated into Spanish, German, Italian and French and is now in its 25th edition. A guidebook just for Kathmandu Valley was produced in 1989. Then in 1999 Hofer sold the entire business to the German company, Langenscheidt.

“The creative part of the work was tapering off, and I saw printing on paper as a sunset industry," explains Hofer, “besides, since the beginning I had always looked beyond publishing to this concept of combining organic farming with eco-tourism.” Hofer returned to Nepal to look for the magic spell that the Nagarkot sunrise has cast over him. After much searching, he found Prabhat of Kathmandu and there in 1996 he and his wife, Cynthia, set out to build their dream organic farm and resort. It coincided with the start of the conflict, and it wasn’t easy when staff were harassed by both the Maoists and the army.

But Hofer and Cynthia persevered and the couple now spend two weeks every three months here supervising their Organic Himalaya farm. It produces chemical-free vegetables, fruits, jam and tea for sale in selected outlets in Kathmandu and even air-freights them to Singapore. “I see it as a way to give back to Nepal and the community,” says Hofer who hopes his farm will be catalytic for surrounding villages to raise income and serve as an ameliorating outlet. With their contacts in Singapore, Hans and Cynthia already fly out one shipment every two weeks of Kathmande vegetables to Singapore. Where they are sold to health-conscious foodies. "We could do much more if freight charges were cheaper and there were daily direct flights from Kathmandu to Hong Kong, Singapore or Dubai," says Cynthia, a former Singaporean journalist. Salad greens and coal flowers picked in Phulbari in the morning are rushed to the airport to catch the Silk Air flight and are in kitchen sinks in Singapore the next morning.

"The feedback has been amazing, our customers know they are eating chemical-free vegetables, but they have been really impressed with the taste," says Cynthia. "It’s something about the soil, climate and care in Nepal that brings out the taste." The farm also rents out its residential space for two families at a time for weekends and long-term restreats preferred by writers, painters and poets. Apart from Phulbari, it is only an hour’s drive east of Dhulikhel on the Sindhuhi Highway and from its 1,800m elevation over the Panchlachal Valley, offers a sweeping view of the northern horizon from Ganesh Himal to Numbur.

http://www.apavilla.com
The industry does not have a stable source of quality herbs. In addition, the prices fluctuate without warning. “What we need is to create a sustainable source of our raw materials,” says Dunham, who is developing permanent links with herb cultivators. The herbal soaps face tough competition in the market from commercial brands. “It is next to impossible to compete with them because of the high cost of our ingredients,” adds Dasrana of Streetfair Nature Nepal. The competition is not just from non-herbal soaps but also from herbal soaps that use low-quality materials.

Herbal companies thus opt for niche marketing, using goodwill and personal links. But the main focus is not on retail selling of the soaps but on sales by order, which mostly come from abroad. Last year, Nepal exported an estimated $500,000 worth of herbal soaps to the US, Europe, Japan, Korea, India, Taiwan, and elsewhere. This figure could be much higher if the government had an easily recognised certification system that is demanded by some importing countries.

www.wildearthnepal.com

The people here have an age-old knowledge of how these herbs can be used as remedies,” says Carroll Dunham of Wild Earth that produces a diverse range of herbal products and services, “it is this knowledge that we tap into to create herbal solutions.

Non-herbal soaps are powder-based while herbal soaps are oil-based, making them a better option for skin care. With Nepal’s middle class becoming more-health-conscious domestic demand is also growing.

“Our domestic customers used to be mainly foreign, but now local clients are increasing their interest as well,” says Sambhu Kumar Lamrbo of Farmhouse Herbal Industry which produces the appropriately named My Favourite Soap.

Yak milk soap, whose key ingredient is yak milk, is one of the most popular herbal soaps. “But transporting the milk from the mountains to here safely is a difficult task,” says Sanjiv Pandey of Bounty Himalaya, “the problem is not just with milk but other medicinal and aromatic plants as well.”

www.wildearthnepal.com
Nepali Times: What inspires you when making music?
Sachal Vasandani: All of life, whatever inspiration strikes—my love for great music, my struggles, history, contemporary events, friends and family, love, fear. When I write songs I am trying to share little stories, personal stories, sometimes funny, sometimes opaque...the emotional material varies, but hopefully there are songs that I write or am inspired to perform that connect the whole spectrum of emotions. And how does the writing process work for you?

New York jazz singer Sachal Vasandani is praised for the way he bridged jazz and pop in his debut album, Eyes Wide Open. He is performing on Saturday at the Hyatt Regency backed by the band, Kathmandu Empress. He spoke to Nepali Times about what music means to him.

The ideas can come at any time, anywhere, and I try to have the flexibility to be able to jot down musical or lyrical ideas when they come. The editing process is more predictable, but that’s where I think the initial ideation occurs.

What leads you to want to perform or record covers of certain songs instead of others?
I like great melodies, and you can find those in all types of music. Once I reconcile myself to the lyrics, I might adapt a song to my natural style of singing. Beyond that, I just sing and whatever comes out, comes out.

What have you had to work hardest at as a musician?
I tend to enter into musical situations with a certain level of talent, and I find it’s easy to tread water at that level. When I wish to push to the next level, whether in regard to songwriting, vocal technique, rhythm, memory, etc. I always find challenges. So to the extent that I keep pushing myself, I will always find this line as hard work. But the next level is so rewarding, and the journey to it even more so.

What brings you to Kathmandu again?
I did some shows and a master class with Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory and everyone was fantastic. I remember how cool everyone was in Kathmandu and that the whole energy of the place was laid-back and supportive, which is exactly my kind of vibe.

Sachal is performing live on 28 February, 6.30 PM onwards at the Hyatt Regency.
The Sixth Himalayan Film Festival at the Free University (VU) of Amsterdam on 13-14 February screened 50 films about the Himalaya to 2,200 visitors. The film went on non-stop from 9.30 AM to nearly midnight through the weekend with discussions and even a Himalayan arts and crafts fair.

Glenn Krishna Mitra, medical doctor by day and festival organiser by night, says audience numbers continue to rise every year with better advertising and publicity. “The festival has now become an established yearly cultural event known across the Netherlands,” he says.

Nepal and Nepali filmmakers particularly well represented this year. From feature presentations such as Kagbeni this year. From feature presentations such as Kagbeni to documentary and social commentaries such as Malaamee (Thapa), Chhau (Khadka), Children of God (Yi Seung-jun) and Yuddha Chitra (BK and Tseten); documentaries and social commentaries such as Malaamee, Children of God, and Yuddha Chitra were screened.

The appetite for Nepal-related events seems to be insatiable in the Netherlands. Nepal Samaj (Lang), Daughters of Everest (Sakya Thapa), Chhau (Khadka), Children of God (Yi Bridgham), Returned (Koenig) and Addressed by Sari Soldiers (Dahal) to contemporary politics.

Two other festivals are taking place in the Netherlands, the Return to Nepal and Nepali films were screened 50 films about the Himalaya, and the festival has already been to Tokyo and may travel to other European countries in the future. Taking the festival on tour would be an excellent next move, as it would ensure further exposure for the filmmakers and their creations. The large communities of Himalayan heritage residents in the UK and Germany make these countries in particular natural settings for future screenings.

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EXHIBITIONS
- Love in the Air, art by Ragini Upadhyay-Greia at 5.30 PM till 8 March, Siddhartha Gallery. 4280448
- Faces of Europe, portraits and landscapes by Fritz Risken, till 1 March 11AM-6PM, Nepal Art Council, Babar Mahal.

EVENTS
- A documentary Open School Workshop, 01 28 February at Yala Maya Kendra, Patan Dikha. 985108338
- Short films with a message and discussion at Mind and Body Library, 10AM, 1 March, Triposweesur. 9841869600
- Reprise, a movie, on 28 February, Lazimpat Gallery Café
- Art of loving, a two day course 1-4.30 PM, 28 February and 1 March, Mind and Body Library, Triposweesur. 9841869600
- A workshop by Sachal Vasandani, 28 February, 1PM onwards, Rs 100 entry, limited seats, KathmanduJazz Conservatory.
- Call for entries for Film South Asia, documentaries made in and after January 2007. For deadlines, visit filmsouthasia.org. 355241
- Bhote Kosi rafting, Nepal River Conservation Trust, rafting date from 1 March, Rs 3 1300 registration fee. 4361995
- Francophone week, 16-20 March, film festival, special meals, writing, lottery and pétanque tournament, Alliance Française, Triposweesur. 424823

MUSIC
- Suddhasatri and World Music Festival on 28 February, Rs 100 for ticket, Pradarsan Marg, Naya Bajar, Pokhara
- Sukarma band live, 27 February, tickets available at Mandala Book Point, Kantipath, 5.30 PM onwards, Rasthya Nach Ghar, Jamal
- Sachal Vasandani, live, 6.30 PM onwards, 28 February, Hyatt Regency, Boudha, 5033554
- Sunday jazz brunch, barbecue and live jazz music at the Terrace, Hyatt Regency from 12.30-3.30 PM. 4491234
- Jazz evening at Dolces 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 Café, Happy hour 6-8PM and TGIF party with live band Epic every Friday at BPM, 2114075
- Some like it hot at La Dolce Vita, Thamel, live every Wednesday, 6PM onwards, Rs 350, Mission Restaurant and Bar, Thamel.
- Thursday, at Hotel Shangri La, Kathmandu, Rs 600. 4412999
- Friday night, at the Terrace, Boudha, 6-8PM, Hyatt Regency, Haunt, 4491224
- Saturday night, at The Shambala Café, Boudha, 6-8PM, Hyatt Regency, Haunt, 4491224
- Sunday brunch, at The Terrace, Hyatt Regency, 4PM-6.30 PM, Hyatt Regency, 4912243
- Fusion and Lozza Band every Friday night, Bhumi Resto Lounge, Lazimpat, 4280448
- Fusion and Classical music by Anil Shafi every Wednesday, rock with Rashmi Singh every Friday, sufi & raga with Hemant Rai every Saturday, Absolute Bar, 5521408

DINING
- Gourmet trout at Olive Garden, BPM on wards at Rs 850+, Radisson Hotel, Lazimpat, 4421818
- Chez Caroline for French and Mediterranean cuisine, Babar Mahal Restived. 4260370
- Fresh Himalayan rainbow trout at Rox Restaurant all February 7PM onwards, Hyatt Regency, 449962
- Mediterranean cuisine every Friday from Greece, Italy and the Middle-East at The Café, Hyatt Regency. 4491224
- Strawberry Etagere at The Lounge from 4.30 PM- 6.30 PM, Hyatt Regency. 4912243
- Nuclechi goes Thai at Nuclechi’s Thai Kitchen, Baluwatar. 4418691
- Fusion of Marceia Ragan’s new menu and Mannels new bar at Bhaktinata Café. 5522113
- Plat Du Jour at Hotel Shanti La, Kathmandu, Rs 600. 4412999
- Pasta pesto passion at La Doix Vila, Thamel. 4700612
- Home made pasta at Afroco, Soobale Crowne Plaza. 4273999
- Reality Bites, The Kaiser Café, Garden of Dreams, operated by Dwakirials Group of Hotels, BAK-10PM. 4423231
- Cocktails, mocktails and liqueurs at the Asahi Lounge, opening hours 1-10PM, above Himalayan Java, Thamel.
- Starry night barbecue at Hotel Shangri-la with live performance by Ciney Gurung, Rs 999, at the Shambala Garden, every Thursday 7PM onwards. 4412999
- High tea, with cones and sandwiches everyday at the Lounge from 4.30-6.30 PM, Hyatt Regency, Kathmandu. 4491234
- Organic salad bar and steak at J aJan j Alan restaurant every Friday from 6PM, Rs 650

For inclusion in the listing send information to editors(at)nepalitimes.com
HAPPENINGS

PALACE MUSEUM: Security guards with metal detectors at the gates of Naryanhiti before the former palace was inaugurated as a museum on Thursday.

YOUNG AND COMMUNIST: YCL activists at a function in Tundikhel on Tuesday to mark its unity with the youth wing of the Unity Centre, with which the Maoists merged this month.

POP THE BALLOON: Defence Attaches and their spouses at the traditional pop-the-balloon contest during the Army Day celebration at Tundikhel on Shivaratri.

BURNING ENERGY: Street lights at the airport’s parking lot were blazing away on Tuesday afternoon despite a nationwide power crisis.
ad we not got so used to seeing it being worn by officials, our daura suruwal national dress would look pretty ridiculous. It is a cross between thermal underwear and skirt, and to cover up this embarrassing combination it has a silly western-style jacket and a topi. Our national dress is only slightly less bizarre than the national dress of the Kingdom of Tonga which consists of a reed skirt with a bow tie and a shirtless chest (for men) and a reed skirt with neck scarf on bare chest (for women). Just like a new national anthem, it’s about time we had a new national dress.

The prime minister has taken the lead in modelling a revolutionary national dress which consists of a dark suit, white shirt and red tie with a bhadgaunle topi. It does make him look like one of those rotational monarchs from Malaysia, but the dress is catching on so fast that there is now a severe shortage of topis. Even in the ex-royal army functions this week where the dress code was “Uniform, Lounge Suit or National” baddie ministers turned up in suits and black topis. At the Shivaratri extravaganza the other day, though, it was the Hindi-speaking, dhoti-wearing Veep who appeared in lableda and jodhpurs.

Meanwhile, the renegade Revolutionary Left Wing and Matrika’s Mutineers at their war council in Rautahat have decided to set up the Red Guard to safeguard the revolution from Awesome, whom they labelled “modern revisionist and a toady of running dog capitalists and Indian hegemonists.” Just to recap, these are the guys who split from the original Maoist party before it united with the Unity Centre and changed its name to Unified Communist Party of Nepal. Efforts are underway to bring disgruntled senior Maoists like Biplop and Kirati also to defect. A Rita just might because he’s addressing down from Terrifico the other day for getting his goat into hot water with just about every decision he has made as the Cultural Revolution Minister.

The UML has found it politically difficult to remove the portraits of all communist netas at once, so it started doing it in installments in Butwal. But holier-than-thou comrades noticed Vladimir Illyich was missing from the stage and created a big hoo-hah. It didn’t look like Vladimir Putin’s press secretary was bothered, though, because he was on a heli-hunt in Dhorpatan bagging a couple of blue sheep.