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Weekly Internet Poll # 452

Q. What is the most desirable coalition:

Total votes: 4,676

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UML-NC-MUF: 43.8%

UCPNM-NC-UML-MUF: 41.5%

Weekly Internet Poll # 453. To vote go to: www.nepaltimes.com

Q. What is your opinion of Madhav Kumar Nepal as PM?

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ANANDA SHRESTHA

KIRAN PANDAY

This isn't Darfur, it is a sandstorm hitting the desertified Kosi after the river was diverted to its previous channel. For the 60,000 people displaced by the river after it breached its levee last August the past year has been a living hell. With the monsoons less than a month away, there is fear the Kosi will flood again.

The most vulnerable in the flimsy tented camps are the women and children. Babies born after the flood suffer eye infections from the blowing sand as well as other diseases. And now, there is the added danger of human traffickers who are preying on older children, selling them off as farmhands and restaurant workers in India.

The effect on Kosi Tappu Wildlife Reserve's endangered arna, fresh water dolphin and birdlife have been overlooked. Construction work to divert the river and human encroachment threaten the sanctuary.

The only silver lining is that according to last month's arna census, the number of wild buffalo is up from 159 five years ago to 219 today.

Special Report p10-11

New Nepal

Barring new complications, Madhav Kumar Nepal is being voted Nepal's new prime minister.

The stalemate that paralysed parliament for over two weeks was finally resolved with a compromise resolution in the house, and caretaker PM Pushpa Kamal Dahal addressed parliament on Thursday, making way for a new UML-led coalition. Dahal is moving out of Baluwatar to his rented house in Naya Bajar on Friday.

The House is expected to vote for the new prime minister on Friday or over the weekend. But the bigger hurdle is to keep everyone in the 22-party coalition happy with cabinet posts. From past experience, that process could take anywhere up to a week.

PLAIN SPEAKING Prashant Jha
Past imperfect p2

STATE OF THE STATE CK Lal
A time to heal p3

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START AGAIN

The political deadlock continues because Nepal's rulers either have no idea what they are doing or have no concern for what is at stake: stability, peace and democracy.

The Maoists say that they are hindering CA proceedings to establish "civilian supremacy", Orwellian doublespeak which actually means "we get our way, or else". There is no way an institution can be made supreme without allowing it first to do what it is expected to do: elect a new leader after the old one has resigned.

Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal occupied the moral high ground by exiting from the government the moment he realised his allies had deserted him in the middle of a crisis in governance. He needs to show similar statesmanship and let a successor government take office through accepted norms and procedures of a parliamentary system. Everyone knows he is buying time.

The UML now wants to disown its past in a coalition with the Maoists. It has now emerged that Dahal had taken the decision to sack Gen Rookmangud Katawal with full knowledge, even if not the direct consent, of his UML colleagues. The UML needs to devise a face-saving formula to protect its own democratic credentials and hide its duplicity.

Katawal may have to step down to save the Nepal Army from the charges of harbouring political ambitions. This is an option that can buy the UML support of the Maoists and rid it from the destabilising influence of minor parties. The NC has a selective memory and doesn't realise it set a destructive precedence by obstructing CA session that it has helped call in the first place. The political impasse isn't as inextricable as it seems. It appears knotty because parties in the gridlock are looking for excuses rather than solutions.

Time to stop the blame game and accept in all humility that every major political actor has failed to live up to the expectations of the Nepali electorate. Corrective measures will begin to shape once they realise that all of them are equally responsible for the mess they find themselves in. They should all



MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

Past imperfect

The old discredited conservative guard is back

Maoist impatience, high-handedness, refusal to renounce violence, arrogance, duplicity and stunning ability to antagonise multiple forces simultaneously have all contributed to the present mess.

But does that give moral legitimacy to the new political arrangement that is about to take office? Can the Madhav Kumar Nepal-led formation address



PLAIN SPEAKING
Prashant Jha

the key political issues that confront us today: integration, justice, constitution writing, changing the state structure, engaging with disenchanted communities, and providing services?

While Nepal is the face of this government, he is obliged to five masters who will behave like independent power centres. The first is General Katawal. If anyone kidded himself that the army is apolitical or the chief is just another neutral soldier, the myth has been shattered. Not only was he the trigger for this crisis, he has invested enormous capital in engineering the alternative coalition, using his leverage with old NC conservatives, the MJF right wing and the Oli faction.

Pushpa Kamal Dahal's reference about how a few are talking about being Rajpakeses and treating Maoists like LTTE was a direct take-off from Katawal's conversations with certain interlocutors. Katawal will expect to have a say in crucial political issues. Showing Katawal who's boss will be Nepal's biggest

challenge: a task he may not live up to because of the debts owed.

K P Oli's stance led the UML to take a strong position on Katawal's dismissal, and his backing is allowing Nepal to fulfill his dream. Oli will have a veto over key decisions. Knowing Oli's visceral anti-Maoist stand, his skepticism about the peace process, and his opposition to most demands of the marginalised, do not be surprised if there is little political will to find common ground with the Maoists.

Bijay Gachhedar, who along with Khum Bahadur Khadka and Govind Raj Joshi, made the 1990s synonymous with corruption and opportunism is the third hero of this alliance. He will be justly rewarded for veering the Forum away from the Maoists.

Do remember that till the end, he neither wanted the elections to happen nor the monarchy abolished. Along with Sharat Singh Bhandari, he was encouraged by the army to join the MJF. Gachhedar, who has a stellar record of systematically ruining whichever ministry he has headed, is in the running for deputy prime ministership and the home portfolio.

The fourth in line is President Ram Baran Yadav. Whether you agree or disagree with his action on Katawal, Yadav is no longer a ceremonial head but a political figure. His reply to the SC show-cause notice admits as much. Parties which constitute almost half the CA, Maoists and MJF, have officially termed his action unconstitutional.

Yadav has been engaging closely with politicians in the run up to the government formation, and it is clear where his preferences lie. Even if he does not cross the line publicly, he will play a behind-the-scenes role in key political

decisions.

And the fifth character is Rakesh Sood, unarguably the most unpopular Indian envoy here in the last decade. Contrary to Maoist propaganda, India kept a relatively hands-off approach in the past eight months and did not plot to oust the government. But the Katawal episode changed that, making them angry and insecure and enhancing their intervention.

Nepal could not have cobbled this together without the moral, political and financial support extended by Lainchaur. Indians have an interest in ensuring that the government does not fail miserably. And Nepal will be most amenable to taking advice and instructions. It is unlikely MKN and these five musketeers are capable of responding to the politics of grievances and aspirations that engulf this country.

This is not a plea for Maoist or Upendra rule. Neither is it an attempt to equate Maoists with politics of change. The mismatch between their rhetoric and actions is clear after their stint at the top. The real point is that the old discredited conservative guard is back. This is a plea to re-engineer the broader peace compact.

Even today, there are only three forces capable of doing that. Only a re-energised GPK who sheds his bitterness can counter the loony right-wing tendencies in the alliance he is backing. Only a more honest PKD who sheds his duplicity and dogma can rebuild this process. And only an Indian government which thinks constructively can be the external guarantor by using its leverage to encourage consensus instead of polarising forces further.

Otherwise, welcome the anarchy, conflict and political stalemate that lie right ahead. ●

LETTERS

USEFUL IDIOTS

It is disingenuous of you to use Lenin's famous words, 'useful idiots', to describe only the political parties of Nepal ('Useful idiots,' #450). Lenin, of course, used the term for anyone that (perhaps unwittingly) helped the Bolsheviks attain more power. In the Nepali context, our civil society, human rights organisations and media, as well as foreign powers (India) and the UN have been no less 'useful' in red-carpeting the Maoists from the jungles to our city-streets and ultimately Singha Darbar—all in the name of 'mainstreaming' them and seeking a 'peaceful solution' to the decade-long conflict. Had this feat been accomplished with full sincerity, clear vision and sufficient homework, it would have been truly laudable. But, in reality, it was an objective pursued with little regard to long-term national interest. Your paper itself welcomed the SPA's

hasty and shallow alliance with the Maoists as a way forward ('Breakthrough in Delhi,' #273) despite the fact that the fabled 12-point understanding demanded little commitment from the Maoists to peaceful, pluralistic politics in tangible terms. The hollowness of that 'breakthrough' has been laid bare in the recent Shaktikhor Tapes. Let's face it: the idiocy that brought such dangerous elements into the mainstream of power extends beyond the much-maligned political parties. All these elements need to now jointly take responsibility for the deep quagmire they've gotten us into.

Satyajeet Nepali, email

● Kudos and Kudos to Kul Chandra Gautam for his balanced, analytical and professional piece ('The jury is out,' #451). Thanks to *Nepali Times* for



learn to be as balanced and thoughtful as him. Maybe this will help them 'lead' our politicians in the right direction and

perhaps gradually ensure that Nepalis can once again be proud to be Nepali.

Subhadra Belbase, Uganda

● What I want to know is who elected these self-appointed civil society leaders who are willing to be deployed by the Maoist party as a vanguard to extend their militancy on the streets. Where did they come from? Who elected them? As far as I can see they are a bunch of whining stay-at-homes whose only role is to spread cynicism and abet totalitarians.

Gyan Subba, Kumaripati

● As always *Nepali Times* has been informative, analytical ('Semi-automatic autonomy', # 451) and entertaining ('Civilian society supremacy', #451). Ironies abound about Chairman Chhabilal. He has, in fact, now turned into Chairman Liar.

MP, Calgary, email



KIRAN PANDAY

A time to heal

Nepal may be the fixer Nepal needs

Both Marxist Prime Minister Manmohan Adhikari and Maoist Premier Pushpa Kamal Dahal led a government that lasted only nine months. The official residence for prime ministers of Nepal seems to be jinxed: no occupant has served his full term since this bizarre edifice was set up to house palace puppets during the Panchayat.

There are other similarities between the abrupt ousters of Comrades Adhikari and Dahal. Both tried to rule unilaterally despite being a minority in the legislature. Each tried to subvert the system from within in similar ways: get rid of everyone likely to resist and fill every instrument of the state with hardcore loyalists. Both succumbed to Kathmandu's entrenched power elite. But that's where the similarities end.

Within nine months of its term, UML leaders acquired a taste for trappings of power and had no hesitation later in cohabiting with every imaginable political permutation of rightist radicals and leftist militants. The UML has since loyally served prime ministers of all political colours. PM-designate Madhav Kumar Nepal is perhaps the most pragmatic personality of contemporary Nepali politics, and he is the fixer the nation needs to repair broken channels of communication between different national and international stakeholders.

Chairman Dahal is losing his political stature by coming in the way of a man who would be prime minister for only as long as the Maoists wish. The moment Chairman Jhahnath Khanal gets the hint that the utility of Comrade Nepal is over, the rug would be pulled from under the feet of his 22-party coalition of non-Maoist forces.

Adhikari's aborted premiership, Dahal's fall from grace, Nepal's possible eclipse have the same reason: from crimson to pink, communists of every hue scare the hell out of the Delhi establishment. Having seen the way leftist parties perpetuate themselves in office through means fair and foul once they enter the corridors of power, South Block's tolerance level for the left is low.

The list of Dahal's sins in office is long: he disgraced his office with blatant nepotism, favouritism and partisanship. Random charges of bribery don't appear so plausible, but that doesn't make the ills of political corruption any less serious. However, misreading the lips of Indian interlocutors was his gravest miscalculation.

Little wonder, ranking Maoist cadres have been told in no uncertain terms that if they wish to come back to power, they would have to think of a leader more acceptable to the Indian establishment than Dahal. It may not directly imply that the stars of Baburam Bhattarai are in ascendance, but Dahal knows that his glory days are over. That's the reason the man who was instrumental in bringing down the Shah dynasty has begun to whine. He may bounce back, but communism isn't prone to political reincarnation.

The UML has an asset the Maoists didn't: the bureaucracy. Unlike Dahal, Nepal doesn't have to worry about war-scarred combatants itching to take up guns once more to settle old scores regardless of the consequences of their rash actions. The international community was apprehensive at best of the Maoists' intention, with NGO-run UML, they know what they get when they are paying for it.

Comrade Nepal may surprise everyone by removing the curse that no leftist occupant can last longer than nine months at Baluwatar. In order to do that, he would have to consult Dahal and Koirala as often as possible but keep a constant eye on his own party colleagues. Without an insider, no hidden hand can play foul in the game of musical chairs that are inherent to all evolving parliamentary democracies. ●

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Cash crunch

Printing bank notes without tackling the real malaise will inflame inflation

Nepal's financial system is witnessing a new liquidity crunch. Banks and financial institutions say there is scarcity of higher denomination Rs 500 and Rs 1000 notes in the market. These two constitute more than 90 per cent of the approximate Rs 138 billion currently in circulation.

The crisis adds to the inflation that is a result of the state's enforcement failure. No financial common sense or market logic has answers to the reasons behind the liquidity crisis. Neither does Nepal Rastra Bank (NRB) seem overly concerned about the situation, and its ability and willingness to deal with the problem remains questionable. It has said the crisis will persist for at least



COMMENT
Achyut Wagle

two more months: until the first consignment of the newly printed notes arrives from France.

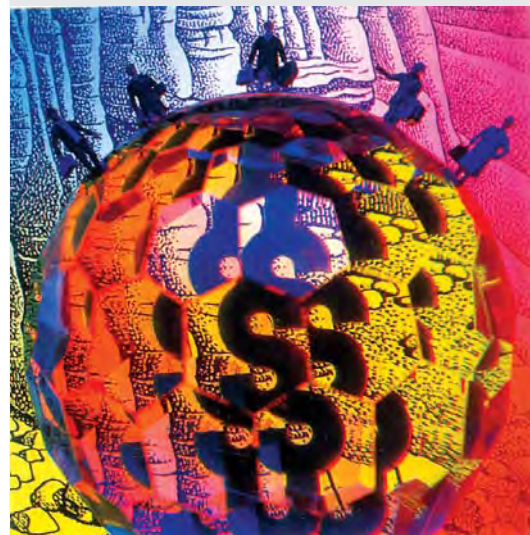
The currency crunch is the cumulative outcome of mainly three factors. First, the Voluntary Disclosure of Income Scheme (VDIS) and disclosure of income source made mandatory by the Maoist government is believed to have driven about Rs 10 billion in cash off the market.

People chose to stash cash in private coffers. In hindsight, the benefit of economies of scale created by this Rs 10 billion would have been much larger than over-trumpeted success of VDIS that netted a mere Rs 1.5 billion.

Second, the oversubscription of IPOs of mainly Class A banks halted the circulation of several billion rupees for a couple of months, as was the case of Sunrise Bank holding about Rs 10 billion this time around. Also, people may maintain substantial contingency of cash reserve for other IPOs, like Prime Bank.

Third, the unresponsiveness and unwillingness of the

government to resolve the problem, and underlying vested interest of the NRB leadership have exacerbated the situation. Had the regulatory authorities wanted, one well-meaning notice would have been sufficient to bring the hoarded



amount to the banking system. Instead, NRB seems to think the solution is to print the new notes and bring them in to circulation as soon as possible.

Interestingly, the currency shortage provides an excuse and opportunity for NRB leadership to print new currency notes. It decided to print about 100 million units of new notes mainly of Rs 500, but without much justification. The market and commercial activities have not substantially expanded. Even with Rs10 billion in cash going out of circulation and the 10 per cent annual growth, the aggregate requirement does not exceed Rs 24 billion.

There are enough reusable notes stockpiled, so the current liquidity crisis could be orchestrated. Be that as it may, but there is a tendency of printing more than required amount of currency notes under different pretexts, especially when a new governor is appointed during periods of shaky politics.

The term of present governor Dipendra Kshetry ends on 2 February 2010, but he may even have to quit early if the Supreme Court reinstates the suspended governor Bijaya Nath Bhattarai. The next hearing on the case is scheduled for 31 May. Kshetry also has the politically-correct excuse of not circulating old notes carrying the portraits of former kings and printing replacements.

As a short term redress, NRB released Rs 2 billion through open market operations last Monday when the inter-bank rate touched 10 per cent and there was no 'investible' liquidity with the banks. The issue of shortage and printing of new bills aside, the reason given by NRB as 'lack of investible liquidity' point to other graver problems in the economy. The recent competition among the banks to attract the depositors by offering higher interest rates implies more than a shortfall in the circulation cycle.

This may be indicative of a decrease in deposits and decline in the repayment of the loans. A significant amount could also be clogged up in unproductive sectors like real estate, and immediate return from this type of investment is unlikely.

In this scenario, the economy may plunge into a contraction trap. The government, regulatory authorities and the financial market should try to address the real problems jointly instead of deflecting them as a temporary defect in money supply. ●



Blue Sky
takes off as an
adventurous
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company

Soaring on tourism



Growing up flying kites in Pokhara, Narayan Prasad Parajuli never imagined that he would someday open up a company whose business would be to make people fly like a kite above the Sarangkot.

In early 2000, when a foreigner offered to demonstrate to a few tourism professionals the potential of this new business, Parajuli (pictured right) signed up for paragliding lessons. He got hooked on the sport. Later that year, together with Swiss partners, he opened Blue Sky Paragliding on the Pokhara lakeside. Since then his company has flown about 2,000 flights, with the annual number going up every year.

"From October to March, Pokhara offers a natural venue for paragliding," Parajuli told *Nepali Times* this week after being selected as the paper's Company of the Month for May 2009.

The Himalayas act as a wall against the chilly mountain air. On any given day, as soon as Parajuli's pilots spot three to five eagles soaring above Sarangkot, they know the thermals are up and they are ready to fly.

Pokhara's location above Fewa Lake is ideal both in terms of scenic beauty and catabatic winds that are essential for soaring.

Blue Sky paragliding currently has six instructors: three foreigners and three Nepalis. It has nine more on its register. "There is an element of visible risk with paragliding," Parajuli said. "At the start of each flight, we make sure that our Swiss-designed and Spain-manufactured gear is safe." The pilots are trained in all required safety procedures. During the off-season, the pilots get refresher courses in first-aid and other safety issues when they renew their licences.

Parajuli says that paragliding is not viewed as a tourism-related sport by the government. It's been characterised as a segment of aviation business. As such, Parajuli and his brothers deal with the Department of Civil Aviation for permits, licences and areas in which to fly. Blue Sky is even thinking of expanding to other parts of Nepal.

He has even done a cross-country test flight from Pokhara to Kathmandu which took a total of three days and a total of 22 hours of flight time. "We are looking to see whether we can reach Kathmandu within a day," Parajuli says.

Blue Sky flies paragliding passengers in Sirkot in Syangja and in Bandipur. There are now two established competitors in



SUBASH KUMAR

Pokhara alone, with two more on the way, so Blue Sky is looking for its own unique selling point by diverse locations.

"Locations such as Rolpa and other mid hill stations across Western Nepal have the potential to be paragliding destinations," he says, "but because they are so remote and under-developed that is a deterrent."

The company pays 50 per cent of its revenue to pay world-class paragliders to serve as instructors, 20 per cent on administration and 10 per cent on logistics. He is happy that as Pokhara becomes famous as a paragliding destination, more and more paragliders from around the world are adding it to their list of must visit places.

"There's a subculture of hard-core paragliders who are very much interested in making Nepal a paragliding destination," he says, "our being a member of Fédération Aéronautique Internationale (FAI), which is the air sports federation in Switzerland, has also helped us access the global market."

Parajuli said that Nepal has to differentiate its tourism offerings. One way to do that would be to market Nepal as a destination for extreme sports that are managed with an eye on safety and affordability. ●

Blue Sky Paragliding, Lakeside Pokhara
www.paragliding-nepal.com
www.fai.org



DAMODAR PARAJULI

On top

On his 19th climb to the summit of Everest on 21 May, Apa Sherpa put up a banner proclaiming ‘Stop Climate Change—Let the Himalayas Live!’. This is one of the events being held by WWF as part of a year-long awareness campaign, which aims to prompt policy makers and business leaders in Nepal to take action.

Branching out

AVCO International, sole distributor of Hyundai vehicles in Nepal, has opened a new showroom at Tinkune. This is its second showroom following the one at Nagpokhari. AVCO also has a new after sale service centre at Dhobighat.

Flat win

CG Electronics is offering lucky draw prizes on every purchase of an LG product as part of its new year marketing campaign. Giveaways include 32” LG LCD tv’s.

Press aid

Orbit MBBS Preparation and Doctor’s Club Nepal conducted first aid and basic life support training for reporters and photographers in Nepal to prepare them when injuries occur while reporting during strikes.

WIRE UP: Chaudhary Group has launched a brand of inverters. They are available from 325VA to 3KVA and CG is offering 24 months warranty on tubular and 12 months on flat plate batteries. After-sale service is also available.

Positive partnerships
Time for constructive thinking

Bangkok: It has been interesting and encouraging to meet positive minded Nepalis here who have launched restaurants and meeting places for their fellow countrymen and women. Unfortunately, these such positive thinking Nepalis are in the minority.



ECONOMIC SENSE
Artha Beed

Why is it that when Nepalis meet each other for the first time, they invariably discuss how dire the political situation is— even if it happens to be a green card holder you meet on a flight who hasn’t visited Nepal for years? Nepali identity seems rooted to the news headlines in the media. I have never heard of Americans, Thais or Indians meeting for the first time and immediately discussing their national political gloom.

Despite all its political issues and the impact of the global financial crisis, Thailand seems to be bouncing back. The stock market in the past couple of months has shown healthy growth and the construction industry is back in business. Cranes are part of the cityscape again marking out where some big building projects are coming up. Working towards another phase of economic growth is what every citizen feels responsible for.

(However it still perplexes me why Thailand is not embracing the English language extensively despite being so dependent on tourism. For Nepal, the reintroduction of English in education in the mid-nineties has by sheer accident been able to produce a fair amount of fluent English speakers able to find access to education and careers abroad.)

The results of the Indian elections also perhaps point out clearly for Nepal how politics is taking a backseat as regionalism, politics of caste and identity



MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

takes a beating. The elections were also a big rejection of the left and how market-oriented societies would like to be closer to the centre right rather than trying to hope for state largesse.

The good news for Nepal is that a resilient India, that has not taken such a severe beating in the global financial crisis as other countries, would hasten its economic pace: with no left allies trying to block reform agendas some of the growth should trickle down to Nepal. This could mean more tourists from India and potentially some Indian companies thinking of investments in Nepal.

There is little each Nepali can perhaps do to influence politics. So why do we let them affect our day to day lives so profoundly?

Staying focused on what you

like doing and what you do best is something that keeps one away from deliberating too much on politics and perhaps that is the only way we Nepalis can bring about economic change as many other “written-off” countries have been able to do from Mozambique to Uganda to El Salvador.

At international meetings when you encounter people from nearly 100 countries it is always good to let the positive energies of making the world a better place brush off on each other. When one hears such great stories of many nations making progress, I just keep on wondering why it is that we Nepalis only have our stories of political mess to share. ●

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Matters of procedure

Interview with Kul Bahadur Khadka, *Naya Patrika*, 17 May

What is your current post?

गर्वा पत्रिका

I was appointed acting army chief by the government, but I am not being allowed to do my job. The Supreme Court has already scrapped the writ petition filed against my appointment and it's clear that both the cabinet and the Supreme Court have authenticated my appointment. According to the law, I should be the army chief. When the post above me was vacated, it was a matter of procedure that the government would appoint me to the post as I was the next most senior general at the time.

Have you carried out the tasks of the army chief?

Even before I could begin, the president sent the letter to reinstate the previous army chief. But Rookmangud is acting out his role. I don't think it makes a difference whether I individually think what he is doing is right or wrong. There's a case filed against the president's move in the Supreme Court and the government's move is also under discussion. This is about the president, the government and law.

What were the army's actions after you were appointed?

The army is a disciplined, professional organisation. Why should they be disgruntled when I started service from the bottom and rose up the ranks by fair procedure to become the head? Rumours that the army is divided are false. The army will continue its service to the country no matter who heads it.



KIRAN PANDAY

Doesn't it reflect badly on the army that it followed the president and didn't listen to the government?

This is concerned with the constitution and law. When there was disagreement and it came to a point where the government resigned, the issue became something above just posts and the army. This can only be solved through constitutional procedure. I hope there's no violence in the country, that the peace process reaches a conclusion and issues like this gain clarity in the new constitution.

What's the difference between being acting army chief and not?

Sometimes I feel that I am under constant surveillance. People who come to visit and my family also feel that way. I've become extremely cautious.

Who is the highest in the chain of command of the army?

Commander-in-chief. But I do not make decisions on who it is. This issue has gone out of the army's control.

Is it true you've been threatened with a court martial?

First of all, I need to have done something wrong to be taken to a court martial. This is also a rumour. If I am in the wrong, the government can decide on punishment. I am open to that.



Coming back empty-handed

Sapana Basyal in *Himal Khabarpatrika*, 15-29 May

हिमाल

The global financial crisis has hit Malaysia, one of the biggest labour markets for Nepal, hard. Many Nepali workers are now returning home empty-handed due to lack of employment.

Malaysia employs the highest number of foreign workers in Asia. At least 400,000 Nepalis are working there making it Malaysia's second highest source of immigrant labour.

One of the major sectors that the financial crisis has hit is the electronic companies, particularly multinationals which are said to provide the best working conditions and salaries. Many companies that employed Nepalis have shut down or are downsizing, leaving the foreign workers jobless.

The Nepali embassy in the capital Kuala Lumpur says that around 40 Nepalis come to the embassy each day claiming they have lost their jobs or are not being paid. Ambassador Rishi Raj Adhikari says: "The number of those who have to return home has increased dramatically. Many have not even been here for a year." A lot of the workers do not even have enough money to pay their fare home.

At the onset of the financial crisis, 45,000 Malaysian workers lost their jobs in February 2008. The government introduced a policy to make sure Malaysians were given priority over foreign workers in various factories such as electronics or textile. When human rights activists and NGOs opposed this policy claiming that it was not justifiable, the Malaysian labour department introduced another, effective from

1 April, demanding that the levy from foreign workers be doubled. After employers protested against this policy, the government withdrew it, opting instead to demand that a single levy be collected from the companies that employ the workers. However, Adhikari says, "Even this policy will be hard to implement."

The depression is also affecting Nepali remittance companies because the migrant workers are sending less money back. Nepali businessman in Malaysia, Biswa Rai, says the downturn is having a dramatic negative impact on Nepali shops and restaurants opened targeting migrant workers.

Also affected by the crisis are publications like *Janprista Bhumi*, which provided news and information about Nepal for workers in Kuala Lumpur has also lost its market there.

Housing the landless

Nepal Samarchaptra, 19 May

समाचारपत्र

A modern apartment block with various facilities will be completed in Sankhamul soon. These apartments are not being constructed by a commercial housing company but by the government for the landless who live by the Bagmati in Sankhamul.

This is a pilot project launched by the government in an effort to solve the acute landless situation in the capital, where land is scarce.

This program was announced in the current fiscal year budget speech and it states that 20m of land from each side of the Bagmati would be set aside for the apartments.

Each flat will have two rooms, a toilet and kitchen for one family.

But the apartments do not come free of charge. Each landless family will have to repay a loan of Rs 350,000 at a minimum interest rate over a period of 15 years. However, Sankamul's 108 landless



MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

families are not all happy with the project.

The project is still awaiting approval by the Ministry of Physical Planning and Works. According to the working policy, the landless will be given the option of either getting land, paying for an apartment at a low interest rate or relocation to another place.



Arms: political party
Injured person: constitution-writing, peace process

नागरिक Abin Shrestha in *Nagarik*, 21 May

Division of sovereignty

Federalism weakens nationalism

MINA PUN

National People's Front is the only political party that is not advocating federalism in Nepal. Although the interim constitution of 2006 declared that Nepal will be a federal republic without the matter being referred to the constituent assembly, it will be very difficult to implement that provision.

There are already major differences in the models proposed by the political parties. Some support creating the federal structure along geographical lines, while others want it according to ethnicity. The proposal put forward by the Madhesi community of One Madhes is not acceptable to the Tharu.

It has to be understood that federalism will not work in a country that is lagging behind economically. The idea of federalism did not come forward through Jana Andolan, but was drilled into people's heads by foreign powers.

Many marginalised communities in Nepal probably supported the idea of federalism because they thought it would finally address their grievances. Instead of coming up with policies to better the situation of various castes, ethnicities and women, leaders are playing politics with identity.

Take India as an example. There many



KIRAN PANDAY

states were created along ethnic lines. There are Punjabi chief ministers in Punjab, Bengali in West Bengal and yet, none of them has helped alleviate the plight of the people they represent. Even at the federal state level, the power is class-based. There are classes even inside castes and ethnicities. Whether the power is with Tamang, Tharu or Newar, those with influence will still govern the poor.

There is no doubt that these groups were discriminated against for decades. But instead of dividing the country under a

federal system, it is much better to opt for a unitary government with democratic decentralisation so that self-governance is also encouraged.

Nepal consists of more than 100 ethnic groups. Carving out states based on a handful of ethnicities will only marginalise other minorities. Drawing up the map by ethnicity will not end grievances. Who's to say that in the future minority ethnicities won't rise up and ask for their separate province, prompting communal violence?

There's also a misconception amongst women that a federal state will address the issues of oppression and discrimination of women. Nepali women are oppressed not because of one person or group but because of the patriarchal social structure.

One Madhes is a very tricky demand. Madhesi do not want a federal system, they simply want an end to centuries of discrimination. The Madhes needs a movement against not just the feudal decision-making state mechanism, but also local zamindars.

There are many Pahadi Nepalis who have been terrorised and killed in the Tarai. Such actions will have a long-term impact on national integrity. The Tarai has many languages, cultures, traditions and religions and it will be very dangerous to promote the Madhes as one autonomous body.

For a country like Nepal that lies between India and China division into many autonomous groups is even more dangerous. Some may form alliances with India, while others may become close to China. They may only limit trading and other relations between themselves, while the rest of the country is deprived and suffers. ●

Mina Pun is a CA member of National People's Front Party

Naturally Nepal

Protecting the natural environment is protecting the nation

DEWAN RAI

With such a high percentage of Nepalis totally dependent on the land for survival, a healthy environment and continued supply of natural resources are vital. Faced with the reality of prolonged droughts, unpredictable weather patterns caused by climate change is making already vulnerable Nepalis even more vulnerable.

Activists are now pushing for environmental rights to be enshrined as a fundamental right in the new constitution. The Constitutional Committee has received the draft on environment, climate change, natural resources management, sustainable use of natural resources and risk minimisation of natural disasters, prepared by the Supplementary Subjects and Inter Committee Coordination Sub Committee of the Natural Resource Management Committee of the CA.

The draft proposes that environmental issues be included in the preamble to the constitution with the line pledging 'sustainable conservation, utilisation and equal distribution of resources for economic, social and cultural transformation as well as for conservation of nature and



KIRAN PANDAY

creatures.'

The draft also specifies the fundamental rights of indigenous communities, women, Dalits and marginalised communities over land, energy and natural resources.

In the Interim Constitution 2007 the universal right to a clean environment was set out for the first time. Article 16 (1) states, 'Every person shall have the right to live in a clean environment.'

But such rights cannot be ensured unless the natural environment and ecological system are healthy in the first place. The IUCN's executive country director Narayan Belbase

says environmental rights should be in the constitution because they are so vitally linked with human existence.

Some 85 per cent of Nepalis are subsistence farmers totally dependent on the natural resources that surround them, he explains. Those communities are the most affected by environmental degradation. "The irony is that they are the ones who are excluded in the process of writing the constitution. The new constitution should guarantee them the right to access the resources they require to simply survive," he says.

The committee has made a

number of recommendations to be included in the new constitution: stakeholders should participate in making environmental law and policies and in implementing and monitoring the activities that might affect the environment.

The CA member and committee coordinator Sunil Babu Pant says: "Environmental and natural resources rights are the most important of all because they are directly linked with people's lives and survival."

Nepal has signed 27 international conventions on environment and climate change. There are also legal provisions for

the preservation of nature. But it has never before had a provision for environmental rights in its constitution. "We hope the constitutional provision on the environment will make the government more responsible when taking decisions regarding environmental issues," Pant says.

About 50 countries have mentioned environmental rights in their constitution including Bhutan, China, Russia, Bolivia and India. Bhutan has adopted the policy of maintaining 60 per cent forest cover.

The initial draft has proposed a provision of compensation for environmental damage with the polluters liable for any damage caused. It has also specified that the duties and responsibilities of the state regarding the environment be included in the directive principles and policies of the state.

It has stated the need to identify, preserve and promote traditional skills. The benefits of such skills should be equally distributed among the communities with the skills. It has also proposed maintaining Nepal's 40 per cent forest cover (up from the current 24 per cent) to preserve environmental resources and the ecosystem. ●



AGE OLD TRADITION: The centuries old therapy of head massage can be used to bring gentle relief to people of all ages.

ALL PICS: THOMAS L. KELLY

The medium is the massage

SHRADHA BASNYAT

There is plenty of room for Nepal to capitalise on spa tourism

Taking purifying baths in sacred springs, healing rituals and massages have long been a part of Nepali culture, long before luxurious five star spa getaways became fashionable. Using medicinal herbs and ayurvedic treatments has been a traditional way of life in the Himalaya for centuries.

Such treatments now constitute a multi-billion dollar global industry which is growing. In Asia-Pacific alone there are nearly 22,000 spas employing 363,684 workers with a turnover of \$11.4 billion, according to the Global Spa Summit 2008.

With the increasing stresses of daily life and changing lifestyles, more and more people are leaning towards spas as a way to rejuvenate the body, mind and spirit.

The global spa industry today is worth \$60 billion and even in Nepal, hotels offering ayurvedic treatments average \$10,000 a year each in profit. Currently, 10-15 per cent of tourists use the 32 spa facilities in the country and the number of locals is also increasing.

Yet, Nepal could still capitalise more on this ancient tradition and knowledge. "Purifying bathing in sacred lakes as a form of revitalisation is an ancient part of Himalayan pilgrimage culture. Spa is not something new that needs to be imported. We have to build on our own indigenous healing knowledge. Our rich natural resources make Nepal an obvious destination for rejuvenating body, mind and spirit," says Carroll Dunham of Wild Earth. Nepal has a wealth of indigenous healing practices suitable for application in modern spas," she says.

While Thamel's shady massage parlours have made people wary, the Spa and Wellness Association of Nepal

(SWAN) along with other organisations want to change that image. Early this month, SWAN and Nepal Tourism Board held a conference with 20 delegates from China, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines to help continue to build and promote the spa sector in Nepal.

"Right now, what we want to promote is simply head and foot massages, so that we can slowly change the meaning of what massage means in Nepal," says Dunham.

The benefits of massage therapy in easing anxiety, tension and depression as well as physiological disorders and injuries are well known. But people are also increasingly willing to look beyond modern medicine, and particularly the use of antibiotics, to ancient, holistic healing rituals and herbs to cure various illnesses.

Rajendra Kumar Giri, who specialises in traditional ayurvedic medicine, says: "Many are opting for ayurvedic treatments as it is natural and has no side effects." ●



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An advertisement for Himalmedia Pvt. Ltd. The top half features a black rotary telephone on the left, with a coiled cord extending upwards. To the right of the phone, the text "Did your paper arrive on time this morning? If not, call our" is in black, followed by "Customer care @ 525 0002" in large, bold red letters. Below this, a black rectangular box contains the white text "DIRECT LINE". The bottom half of the advertisement has a white background with the text "Himalmedia Pvt. Ltd. Hatiban Lalitpur" in black. On the right side, there is a small logo of a stylized animal (possibly a goat or ram) standing on a base with the word "himalmedia" written below it.

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Where the buffalos used



PICS: SITA MADEMBA

SITA MADEMBA in SUNSARI

When the Kosi breached its levee and swept through villages here last August, 42,000 people were displaced. While national and international sympathy, and donations, poured in for the

flood victims, no one gave a thought to the plight of animals in the Kosi Tappu Wildlife Reserve.

The Kosi Tappu Wildlife Reserve is the last remaining habitat for the wild buffalo, arna, in Nepal and the Gangetic fresh water dolphin. Their numbers

have been severely depleted by habitat encroachment and disease, and no one really knew how many there were left in the world.

Kosi Tappu was established in 1975 to primarily conserve the endangered wild buffalo. Twelve years previously, all the arna in Chitwan were wiped out by an

outbreak of hoof and mouth disease spread by livestock and it was felt the population needed to be spread out.

Despite the threats, a buffalo census carried out last month showed that the number of wild buffalo in the reserve has increased from 159 in 2004 to 219

Correcting the impact of the Kosi flood means addressing the needs of the wildlife reserve

this year. Yet conservationists warn that the endangered animals and birds in the reserve face grave threats.

The diversion of the river back to its old channel with the construction of a coffer dam has disturbed wildlife. Last month, security personnel discovered three stranded dolphins and managed to rescue two. The third was fatally poisoned by locals.

The green pastures near the breached levees where the arna used to graze, now look like a desert and the animals have been forced to graze outside the reserve. This puts them at risk from disease and poaching.

Indian contractors working on the rechanneling of the Kosi have also been illegally extracting sand from the arna pastures. The

Flood of babies

Another monsoon is around the corner and newborns in Kosi's refugee camps are more vulnerable than ever

KONG YEN LIN in SUNSARI

The heat and glare in the white sand flats of the Kosi's floodplain is overpowering. Nearly one year after the river suddenly changed course and just before the monsoon starts up again, the misery of 60,000 displaced in Sunsari continues.

After the embankment was plugged earlier this year and the Kosi sent back to its former course, what used to be fertile fields here have turned into desert. The displaced live like refugees in tent cities.

In one of them in Paschim Kusaha a group of 20 women, all cradling babies, are huddled in a maternity tent run by charities. Despite the help, the conditions are terrible.

"When the wind blows, sand gets into our eyes and babies have eye infections," says Naju Katun, who named her six-month-old son Sibir Ansari, after the camp he was born in. "Every breath we take or food we eat, sand gets into our mouths."

It doesn't help that the settlement area lies parallel to the highway where frequent bandas occur and where there is constant exposure to tear gas. Last month the Kosi Victims Struggle Committee staged a week-long



PICS: KONG YEN LIN

blockade of the East-West Highway to protest delayed relief.

The mothers, mainly Madhesi and Muslim, struggle against poor living conditions and risky

deliveries. When born, babies have to survive not just the harsh desert-like environment but also pneumonia, dehydration, malnutrition and diarrhoea. The nearest hospital is 25km away and

it takes a day through ruined roads, when they are not closed by strikes.

Official records show 42,000 locals and 11,000 Indian nationals were displaced when

the Kosi breached its embankments on 18 August last year.

While most have already returned home, there are 1,240 households still remaining in the

to roam



grasslands are now furrowed by 10-foot deep pits where wildlife can be trapped or drown. Conservation official Nilamber Mishra says, “If any animal falls into those pits, it will die. We have requested the contractors and engineers to not dig the holes too deep. But they don’t take us seriously.” Since the collapse of the levee, the reserve has become an island in a sea of humans. Eight security posts that were closed down during the conflict haven’t yet been re-established. The barbed wire boundary erected two years ago has been stolen. Villagers from the buffer zone are now bringing livestock into the

reserve to graze. The movement of people is even more uncontrolled because of all the construction work going on. Kosi Tappu is considered one of the best sites for bird watching with over 480 species of birds recorded and many migrant species, but after the river changed its channel last year the birds didn’t come. Kosi flood victims in Sunsari have demanded that the reserve’s boundary be shifted one kilometre to the west. But if that is done, say conservation officials, the river that is a crucial source of food and water for the animals, and birds will no longer be in the reserve. ●



BORN INTO A CRISIS: Children born during or after the Kosi floods with their mothers in a temporary maternity shelter. Each mother receives a bottle of baby massage oil, an apple and a packet of biscuit a day, but that’s about it. Every drop of fresh water is precious in the desert camps.

12 camps, with half of them landless. The distribution process of government relief is slow and sporadic. One year later, only an estimated 10 per cent of flood affected households have received help. Others remain jobless, facing even greater poverty and destitution than they experienced before the flood. “Plans? I have no plans for the future. Without money and regular income everything is impossible,” says Naju Katun, who used to work as a farm labourer before the flood swept away her farm. “There’s nothing at all to look forward to,” adds Ruksana Khatun. She is ineligible for the

Food-for-Work scheme. But elsewhere, the displaced are trying to rebuild their lives. Hadis Miya, 33, from Sripur counts himself fortunate to be able to receive the return package. The father of five lost his own father in the flood, and now lives with seven surviving family members in a wooden house off Paschim Kusaha. “It’s so hard to start anew, each time we try to move on something gets in the way,” says Hadis, whose provision shop was taken over by protesters during a banda, “I just hope my children have access to basic education facilities and won’t have to continue suffering.” ●

Stolen children

After the Kosi breached its embankments last year, there has been a rise in the abduction of children by Indian human traffickers. If the refugees are vulnerable, their children are even more vulnerable. In the desolate villages of Sunsari, local middlemen of transborder traffickers are taking advantage of the desperation. They are usually locals who partner with Indian criminal groups to sell people into India. Local recruiter Dalu Sada offered to take 11-year-old Phuleswor Sada and his nine-year-old brother Harihar to Punjab to get a job. Now, they work as bonded labourers in a house in Ludhiana. Dalu had promised the family they would be paid IRs 1000 a month and admitted that he sold the boys to an Indian agent for IRs 2000. A *Himal Khabarpatrika* investigation showed at least 23 children from flood affected Sripur and Haripur VDCs have been sold as domestic workers and bonded labourers into India. The most vulnerable are children who live in makeshift tents installed after the flood. Supaul Sada from India convinced Sukhichand Sada’s family in Sripur that he would pay their loan, which had a 15 per cent interest rate, if they let him take 14-year-old Sukhi to Punjab. Sukhichand called home last month, crying and told the family that he had been sold for IRs 10,000. Fourth grader Sushil Sada was sold to a paper factory for IRs 8,000. Three months ago, Sushil called home and there has been no news since. Voluntary health worker in Sripur, Jhwaridebi Ram’s 14-year-old son was taken



SOMNATH BASTOLA

away by Dalu Sada’s gang last July. They paid her Rs 5000 as advance. Child traffickers were active here even before last year’s flood. But it has got much worse. Organ smugglers are also said to be active. Three suspicious innocents have been lynched to death in Sunsari in the past two weeks. Sunsari rights worker Birendra Sah has been pursuing the traffickers and has rescued four children by buying them back from where they were working in Bihar. The middleman who sold them, Jogindar Kumar Srideb, is in jail. But he is the only one. The children sold into Punjab have to work 16 hours a day in farms, fields and brick factories. Sah, who visited a number of places in India while trying to rescue children, say they are tortured if they fail to work and not given food. ● *Somnath Bastola in Sunsari*

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New beginning in Sri Lanka

The Tigers may have been defeated, but has the war ended?

The Sri Lankan army campaign against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) seemed to reach its bloody climax in recent days. The interminable Indian general election had to run its course before Colombo's forces made their final move against Tiger supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran,



HERE AND THERE
Daniel Lak

evidently pinned down with close family and comrades in a patch of coastal forest smaller than Tundikhel in Kathmandu.

All around were the heavy guns, armour and weaponry purchased by years of military expansionism in Sri Lanka. Helicopters and bombers flew forays over targets so tightly packed that it was impossible to miss. Pictures put out by the United Nations at one point showed a landscape pockmarked like the moon.

Then, Tamil Nadu voted on the last day of India's five week election. The green signal came as polls closed in Chennai. President Mahinda Rajapaksa's men unleashed a hellish firestorm into the last scrap of Sri Lankan land beyond government control.



In previous days, the world's conscience had been pricked time and again by the ordeal facing Tamil civilians in the area. India estimates tens of thousands were killed and injured. Sri Lanka says it kept non-combatant casualties to a minimum and blamed the caged Tigers for using "human shields." Tamil groups around the world begged to differ and poured into the streets demanding international action to stop the carnage, to protect, feed and compensate those affected.

The United Nations, Europe, India and the US all called for

ceasefires and access for humanitarian workers, but Sri Lanka had its sights set on closure: an end to 30 years of conflict between the state and one of the world's most effective insurgent groups.

This was a war that began when festering ethnic grievances as old as independent Sri Lanka boiled over in the 1980s. A well organised LTTE with training and support from India took over half of an isle many viewed as Serendip itself, a land so stunningly perfect that it must have been a gift of the gods.

A democracy second to none in South Asia (high voter turnouts, literacy rates above 90 per cent, relative equality between men and women) didn't prevent a sickening downward spiral into violence, hatred and dysfunction.

LTTE cadres infamously fought to the death, either from opponent's bayonets and bullets or the cyanide vials they wore around their necks. Suicide bombing then, strapping oneself with dynamite sticks, bags of ball bearings and clicking a hand-held detonator, wasn't much beyond a last crunch of the teeth into a glass ampoule. Except of course for those you take with you.

Sri Lankan leaders, Tamil moderates, Rajiv Gandhi and countless civilians were murdered by fanatical Tiger cadres. Norway's attempt to broker peace in the early years of this century came to naught, ripped apart by insincerity on all sides and by the fanaticism of some young overseas Tamils and their commitment to a cause they didn't have to die for.

At first, the revitalised Tigers looked strong, capable of standing up to Sri Lanka's army but that illusion was rudely dashed as government forces retook much of rebel-held territory. Crucially, key Tiger commanders were peeling

away from their boss: by then more of a millennial cult leader than a military commander.

This past month's steady advance, interrupted only by India's request for less blood during election time, made it a matter of time. First the Tigers had been caged, then picked off one-by-one, till only the alpha male remained.

No one expects that the Tigers will give up so utterly as a terrorist force. Tamil grievances remain acute and President Rajapaksa has to live up to promises that he'll be generous in victory, compassionate, ready to make Sri Lanka's largest minority a full part of his plans for the island's future.

In the meantime he'll inevitably face those suicide bombs, perhaps even a spectacular, diaspora-funded, overseas atrocity or two. Human rights groups will find much fault with what he has done, and rightly so in the case of civilians casualties. There will need to be redressal.

At the end of the day though, history will conclude that he has done the right thing by eliminating Velupillai Prabhakaran, a monster whose ego and overseas bank accounts were all that benefited from four decades of war in "South Asia's most 'developed' nation." ●

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A couple of friends were surfing on youtube when they came across a site posted by the US Department of State announcing a short three minute documentary competition about a personal perspective of democracy.

Amateur filmmaker Tsering Choden, along with a handful of friends, decided it would be fun to portray the Nepali perspective of democracy in a short film.

Some 900 people from 95 countries participated in the competition and out of them 18 finalists were chosen. Choden’s video from Nepal is amongst the finalists. In order to win, they need votes from the public. The deadline is 15 June after which

seven winners—one each from the Western Hemisphere, Europe, Middle East/North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, South and Central Asia, East Asia/Pacific and one anonymous winner will be announced.

In October, this year, the six winners—one from each of the six geographic regions—will get an all-expenses-paid trip to Washington DC, New York and Hollywood, where their documentaries will be screened. The winners will interact with filmmakers, representatives from the US film industry and meet with government officials and civil society members.

The video from Nepal portrays its struggle for democracy, the April Uprising,

and the chaos of transition. Sound bites from the general public can be heard throughout the video. “We talked to students, shopkeepers, housewives, professionals and even jogis,” says director Choden, “music plays a key role in the video as it is the best way to capture the complex meaning of democracy in a straightforward and simple way.”

Yanik Shrestha of the rap group Lyrics InThePenDense says, “It was important to come up with something witty and unconventional as we were making a powerful point, but it was also important that we have fun while doing it.”

To vote : go to www.youtube.com/democracychallenge ●

Picture freedom



MUNEM WASIF

When the photography exhibition Chobi Mela first launched in Dhaka in 2000, most in the region knew very little about non-western photography chiefly because of the lack of opportunity for South Asian photographers to screen their work. There was another major ambition behind the launch of the festival—in a nation where the majority of people cannot read or write, photography provided one of the few means of communicating with the average person.

Earlier this year, the fifth Chobi Mela took place in Dhaka from 30 January-20 February. It is now travelling to Kathmandu from 22-28 May at Nepal Art Council, Babar Mahal. This year’s theme is freedom and the mela will feature 12 works by artists from Argentina, Bangladesh, France, Japan, the United States, the Netherlands, Nepal, Nigeria and Norway. It will also feature a number of workshops and presentations on topics such as exhibition curation, the use of photography in social activism and digital workflow.

For photographers and media professionals, the travelling festival provides an opportunity to seek inspiration, learn and enjoy a variety of styles and subjects in world class photography. For Nepalis at large it is an occasion to contemplate freedom and what it means to us. ●

The final journey

Probing our unease with death, *Departures* explores the catharsis of ritual and the dignity of work

Death is so unfathomable, so alien to any experience that precedes it, that it is a subject that we avoid, a taboo. Its inevitability is a repudiation of our ingrained sense of self-preservation.

Yojiro Takita’s *Departures* gently probes, almost satirically, our fear and discomfort regarding death by taking as its subject a *Nokanshi* or ‘encoffiner,’ a person whose job is to prepare the deceased for its final journey by reverentially washing and dressing the body in a ceremony witnessed by the grievors. By dramatically documenting this particular cultural practice, Takita creates both a statement about the powerful catharsis of ritual and the dignity of work.

Takita overlays an impressively effective comical touch with a delicate appreciation of the macabre that especially succeeds as

CRITICAL CINEMA
A Angelo D’Silva

it also reveals our own complex feelings about death. But *Departures* is hampered by an overly melodramatic plot and sentimental elaboration from what could have been a subtly persuasive and moving film.

Perfectly scored and sensitively shot, the film opens with an enchanting display of the encoffiner’s art with the protagonist Daigo—stately and adroit—dressing and washing a body as his mentor looks on with the grieving family. Actor Masahiro Motoki communicates the grace and beauty of the practice and the poignancy of a skill being passed from one generation to the next in



an era when such practices may be fading. Then the movie flashes back to the events that led Daigo to take up this profession.

Having lost his job as a cellist in a city orchestra, Daigo and his wife return to his hometown. Looking for work, he almost accidentally stumbles into this

rather morbid job, but the money entices him to stay long enough to overcome his squeamishness and begin to appreciate the art and value of his work. The small town setting provides the film with ample opportunity to celebrate institutions, practices and values that modern life threatens to leave behind.

One of the most powerful images in the film, as one would expect, is the transformation that takes place as Daigo helps his boss (played by a wondrously understated Tsutomu Yamazaki) do the job. The application of make-up restores the familiarity of the visage to the mourners. The seriousness and formality that keeps the grievors civil, thaws and breaks and in that renewed recognition they get to bid farewell a final time. For Daigo, witnessing this transformative magic marks his own evolution as he realises the powerful good his occupation can bring about as he comes to terms with working with the dead.

The taboo of his work also entails dramatic consequences for Daigo including being ostracised from his small community and even having to deal with his wife’s inability to come to terms with it. Unfortunately, these and other overly dramatic plot elements overcrowd the quieter and cleverer parts of the film and draw the film to an unnecessary 130 minutes. Sometimes, I suppose, even with a good thing, the end can’t come soon enough. ●

Departures
Director: Yojiro Takita
Cast: Masahiro Motoki, Tsutomu Yamazaki, Ryoko Hirose
2009, 131 mins.

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ABOUT TOWN

EXHIBITIONS

- ❖ **Festivals of the Kathmandu Valley** - an exhibition by Scott Faiia at Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal Revisited till 29 May, 11AM- 6PM. Daily. 4218048

EVENTS

- ❖ **Tai chi & chi kung**, 23 May, 10-11.30 AM at Himalayan Buddhist Meditation Centre, Keshar Mahal Marg. 4410402
- ❖ **Workshop with members of Rock Power Trio**, 24 May, 2.30- 4PM, Alliance Française
- ❖ **Waiting for Godot**, a play by Samuel Beckett, Hotel Vajra, till 24 May at 7.15 PM. 4271545
- ❖ **Workplace Bullying**, a talk program, 24 May at The New Era Institute, Battisputali. 9851023958.
- ❖ **Citizen's movement in current politics**, discussion by Dr. Devendraraj Pandey, 28 May, 12- 2 PM, Martin Chautari. 4238050
- ❖ **IPL 2009**, watch IPL 2009 live matches at Rox Bar Hyatt Regency Kathmandu at 4491234
- ❖ **Call for entries for Film South Asia** till 31 May, documentaries made in and after January 2007 qualified. 5552141

MUSIC

- ❖ **ROCK NEPAL**, 23 May, 5PM, Invitations available at the Alliance Française in Kathmandu, SAC Music Shop in Thamel, Sur Sudha Music in Thamel and at Party Nepal, Nepal Academy Kamaladi. 4422089
- ❖ **Louis Bertignac & Bijaya Vaidya concert** with SAC MUSIC, Academy Hall, 23 May
- ❖ **TGIF** at Jazzabella Café every Wednesday and Friday. 2110475
- ❖ **Kathmandu express**, performance by International Acts, 7.30 PM onwards free entry at Moksh
- ❖ **Live band** every Friday and rooftop bbq everyday at Kausi Kitchen, Durbar Marg. 4227288
- ❖ **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
- ❖ **Epic**, at the Brunchilli- the Acoustic Lounge every Friday, Thamel. 9851035437
- ❖ **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 8PM. 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 Café & Bar.
- ❖ **Live Sensation**, performance by Yankey every Saturday, 9PM, Hyatt Regency, Kathmandu. 4491234.
- ❖ **Fusion and Looza** Band every Friday night, Bhumi Resto Lounge, Lazimpat. 4412193

DINING

- ❖ **Weekend Brunch** by the Poolside every Saturday and Sunday, Soaltee Crowne Plaza Kathmandu ,11AM-3PM. 4273999
- ❖ **Pizza & Pasta** at the Rox Restaurant every Monday & Tuesday, Hyatt Regency. 4489362
- ❖ **Pasta pesto passion** at La Dolce Vita, Thamel. 4700612
- ❖ **Home made pasta** at Alfresco, Soaltee Crowne Plaza. 4273999
- ❖ **Gourmet trout** at Olive Garden, 6PM onwards at Rs 850+, Radisson Hotel, Lazimpat. 4411818
- ❖ **Chez Caroline** for French and Mediterranean cuisine, Babar Mahal Revisited. 4263070
- ❖ **High tea** with scones and sandwiches everyday at the Lounge from 4.30-6.30 PM, Hyatt Regency, Kathmandu. 4491234
- ❖ **Mediterranean cuisine** every Friday from Greece, Italy and the Middle-East at The Café, Hyatt Regency. 4491234
- ❖ **Nhuchhe goes Thai** at Nhuchhe's Thai Kitchen, Baluwatar. 4429903
- ❖ **Fusion** of Marcela Ragan's new menu and Mannie's new bar at Dhokaima Café. 5522113
- ❖ **Plat Du Jour** at Hotel Shangri La, Kathmandu, Rs 600. 4412999
- ❖ **Reality Bites**, The Kaiser Café, Garden of Dreams, operated by Dwarika's Group of Hotels, 9AM-10PM. 4425341
- ❖ **Starry night barbecue** at Hotel Shangri-la with live performance by Ciney Gurung, Rs 999, at the Shambala Garden, every Friday 7PM onwards. 4412999

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



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WEEKEND WEATHER

by NGAMINDRA DAHAL

With a month to go for the official arrival of the monsoon to Nepal, there are some active fronts developing over the Bay and southern India. However, up here in the mountains the winds are still westerly. This satellite picture taken on Thursday afternoon shows the systems over the Bay, a good sign of healthy pre-monsoon and the timely onset of the rains. A sustained low pressure zone over eastern Tibet is still pulling the westerlies and will blow this circulation away. But the moisture induction will grow into afternoon and evening thunderstorms across the central mountains. Expect pre-monsoon showers to start from next week, leading up to the Big Bang sometime in mid-June. Valley residents may expect hot and humid days with sunny intervals and short showers over the weekend.



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MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

FAN THE FLAMES: Maoists continue their protests against the president's move to reinstate Army Chief Rookmangud Katawal by burning effigies at Khula Manch on Sunday.



MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

SMOOTH MOVE: PLA Commander Nanda Kishor Pun (Pasang) takes part in the Maoist mass gathering alongside Minister of Tourism Hisila Yami at Khula Manch on Sunday.



KIRAN PANDAY

MISTY POLITICS: Madhesi Janadhikar Forum leaders Jitendra Sapkota and Sharat Singh Bhandari help their colleague Bijay Gachhedar decipher a document at an interaction program after he forgot his reading glasses.



MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

HOT OFF THE PRESS: Senior journalist Bhairab Risal releases Tirtha Bahadur Shrestha's collected writings in a book titled *Nepal: Nakhuleka Pataharu*, at the 13th Education and Book Fair on Monday.



MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

HIGH FLYER: Tourism Minister Hisila Yami braces herself to swing from the bridge at the Last Resort on Friday.

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Federal express

Rate we are going, the new federal constitution of Nepal is looking more and more like a mirage. The closer we get to it, the more it recedes. The prolonged coalition-cobbling is reminiscent of mid-1990s. And it's the same old faces.

BijayG being pulled by both arms to switch sides when Upadro refused to **toe the line**. The only difference with 15 years ago is that this time the entire exercise is outsourced to Lainchaur. And the sight of both GPK and PKD courting Kamal Thapa for royalist support just shows how quickly fortunes turn in politics.



Still, they say coalition politics brings out the best in a democracy. And sure enough, all the small parties that no one listened to before now have power. They are driving a hard bargain, like Biswesh Chandra Paswan of Dalit Janajati Party is the only rep in the CA from his party but he got a Muslim included in the constitutional committee and for the government to increase reservation for Dalits. And he signed up for the UML-NC

coalition only after he was offered minister.



And even the bigger parties are out to feather their nests. One senior NC leader, when asked by the Ass if he would be joining the Makunay-led govt, said: "You think I'm stupid to join a sarkar that will last three months? I will join the one formed after this."

After a press meet organised at Reporters Club, one MJF CA member was overheard literally begging Jitendra Dev, the ex-UML MJF and now MJF spokesperson to include him in the Gachhedar faction. We know there is horse-trading in politics, but the Ass has never seen it done this blatantly in broad daylight **within earshot of us hacks**.



How on earth is Makunay going to accommodate all 22 allied parties in the new cabinet? Will he resurrect Deuba-era 56-member jumbo cabinets? And who gets the plum posts? BijayG is gunning for DPM as a reward for almost breaking his own party. **Sujata Didi** could have been Defence but given that

she and Gen Cutwall are not even on speaking terms may complicate things. We don't want to repeat having a defence minister who hates the army chief. The real scramble is over Local Development and Physical Planning because that is where the moola is.



The Baddies are looking for a face-saving way out of the corner they have painted themselves into. Politburo member Kamred Devendra Poudel told Kantipur FM the other day his party would allow parliament to function only if members first passed a declaration against the president's move to save the army chief. Asked what if the CA members voted against such a declaration, he replied (and this qualifies as our **Absurdity of the Week**): "Then we won't agree and continue the house obstruction."



Looks like he is so nervous the Baddies are going to pull a fast one that Comrade Makunay at Tinkunay organised a photo shoot just so there are official

pictures ready for release. Things can still go wrong and the man doesn't want to take any chances. And who was it spreading the news in media down south that MKN is second generation Indian? The Ass had a perfect headline for that one: 'Nepal is from India'.



Maoist-controlled casinos in KTM couldn't get away with legally allowing Nepalis to gamble, so they've now opened back doors for locals. There are emergency exits in case there is a police raid and YCL guards. Now we get it, this was why the war was fought: so the revolutionaries could control all contraband trade, corner all contracts and pocket the "PC" (per cent). The

YCL in the western tarai is the biggest supplier of Nepali oxen to Bangladesh, and they now control the red sandalwood trafficking to Tibet.



After CDgate exposed PKDs lies, the **Worldly Bank** said it may reconsider footing for PLA cantonments (guess what, the lackeys of international imperialists were actually financing the upkeep of our brave revolutionary guerrillas all along). One Maobuddy was overheard saying: "If the bank pulls out, we will just restart extortion." As if it had ever stopped.

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