Fresh start

One month after being elected prime minister by parliament, Madhav Kumar Nepal was still not able to complete his cabinet expansion despite the induction of 10 new ministers on Wednesday.

Nepal has still not been able to convince the MJF, TMLP and SP to join. The reason: disagreement about who should get plum ministries.

However, ministers appointed without portfolios two weeks ago finally got their assignments with the UML’s Bhim Rawal at the helm of the key Home Ministry. Analysts say with the problems of rising crime and a deteriorating law and order situation, Rawal has his work cut out.

NC-nominated CA member Nilambar Acharya says he is encouraged because this is a civilian cabinet with members that believe in democracy. “There is no one in it with guns,” he told Nepali Times.

Maoist CA member Hari Roka is not so positive: “They are all people who have lost elections, so they are accountable to their parties and not to the people.”

The visit by Indian Foreign Secretary Shiva Shankar Menon on Saturday is seen as significant as New Delhi tries to use its leverage to end the prolonged political deadlock over government formation. Menon is expected to urge the Madhesi parties to join a consensus government. His visit may also have a bearing on the Maoist Politburo meeting where a hardline faction advocating confrontation is facing a more pragmatic, but beleaguered, party leadership.

Dewan Rai

High and dry: Ama Dablam towers above the Imja Valley in Khumbu last week as rainless pre-monsoon weeks offered spectacular views.
Squeeze the middle

History is repeating itself, but not as a farce

CIVILIAN PARTIES

Confused by the political wrangling and back-stabbing? Frustrated and cynical about the political leadership? Let’s try to simplify it for you. The political forces in this country can be narrowed down to two types: ones that believe in violence as a political tool, and the others that don’t.

Using that criteria, it is pretty clear which side peace-loving Nepal falls on. In the Maoist’s regime change of the party that believes in the supremacy of the gun was replaced by a coalition of civilian parties. The Maoist self-admitted strategy of grabbing the road to power by changing the agenda of total state capture was foiled. Which is why they are again on the warpath.

They seem to have no qualms about stirring the hornet’s nest of the people. They are playing the people with impromptu shutdowns like the one they thwarted Kathmandu with on Monday. A banda is terrorism pure and simple. It is invoked and implemented by instilling the fear of physical harm, by whoever calls for it. The streets of Kathmandu on Monday was a preview of the kind of society the Spielberg wants in Nepal: blocking ambulances, forcing the sick to walk, detaining a cardiac surgeon and setting fire to his vehicle, deflating the tyres of buses, and daring police to barricade and selectively attacking the independent media.

The great pity is that this needn’t be so. With their convincing win in last year’s election the Maoists had the people’s support to engage in non-violent civilian politics. But they chose to retain their militant avatar, their warmer use of threats, intimidation and killings. The call for integration of two armies leaves out the more important component of the guerrilla force: the YCL which roams the country sowing terror.

Unfortunately, the civilian parties are exhibiting the same greedy, selfish, short-sighted opportunism that they showed in the mid-1990s. It’s been nearly a month, and the prime minister doesn’t yet have a functioning government. They have shown no capacity to learn from mistakes and understand the gravity of what is at stake here. This has hurt efforts to demonise the Maoists, and has embittered others. If these are our guardians of civilian politics, they don’t need enemies.

But the onus lies with the Maoists to prove their commitment to non-violent multi-party democracy by disbanding the YCL and all other militant groups, abide by the laws of the land. They must stop using deceit, stoking pseudo-nationalism and fanning the flames of ethnic conflict.

The present political mood is eerily similar to pre-October 2002 and pre-February 2005, with the ultra-left and ultra-right feeding on the monarchy and your willingness to go along with anything and everything. The country was moving left with the Maoist transformation, country was moving right with the monarchy. It is time to see the country through, even if it means going against the grain of the dominant political mood. The world seems to be a laughing stock, media can’t escape the hyperbole. Delhi will not recognise that it may become more powerful in the short-term, but the present route will not allow it to fulfil the role of control things.

The fall of this government, whenever it happens, will be a critical moment. Will it mean a reconfiguration with the Maoists, their re-entry into government, and movement on contentious issues? Or will it be followed by an even more rightward shift in the polity, with the military taking an assertive role?

Going against the trend, the latter is more likely. And Maoist actions will only help push us towards that.

But everyone knew that Sher Bahadur Deuba’s governments (after the dissolution of the parliament as well as the one in alliance with UML), and the merging of two right-wing parties, have been supporting the trend. The Maoists can hardly be expected to play the role of peaceful oppositional politics. We can only hope that they will be more powerful in the short-term, but the present route will not allow it to recognise that it may become more powerful in the short-term, but the present route will not allow it to stabilise its political space, create urban unrest, and attempt a power grab. The revival of parallel governments in Surkhet and Bajura, hitting out at rivals in Kalikot stems from this approach.

Squeezing the middle ground will affect the terrain and orientation of both the ultra left and the right-wingers who are powerful in the present distribution. But the Maoists, hardliners in the ANC, UML continue to always think that the last few years was ‘unnatural’, that another onslaught on the Maoists is both necessary and desirable, and the time is now ripe.

What can pull things back? The Maoists have to practice peaceful coexistence with their rightful roles and re-purpose other parties of their commitment to democracy. Parties have to realise that the army is not an instrument for political control and they will be left behind when the democratic space shrinks. The government must not be thought as the mirror image of the Timmy, Bajuram Bhattaran have learnt the limits of their power after the army’s coup. They want to escalate protests but only in a calibrated manner to increase their chances of winning. Both realise that the only way out of the impasse is to make up with India and other parties.

But they have to deal with the Kirans, Gajurels and Biplubs within the party. These divisions are the real reason for the leadership from the dialogue negotiation recently said that he would like to see the parties go with the army.

Their aim is to deepen the polarisation, monopolise the opposition space, create urban unrest, and attempt a power grab. The revival of parallel governments in Surkhet and Bajura, hitting out at rivals in Kalikot stems from this approach.

CLOSE TO THE EDGE

I was thoroughly depressed reading Prashant Jha’s page 1 story ‘Close to the edge’ (#455). It removed any illusions anyone had that Nepal is a vassal state of India, and New Delhi essentially runs the show here. Prachanda was just the latest victim.

Saman Thapa, email

The most insightful scoop that the Times has ever printed.

Prashant Jha

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PLAIN SPEAKING

Don’t cross the middle

Kiran Dasgupta
Mutually assured demolition

The country lurches from one shutdown to another

JANAKPUR-From a capital paralysed by strikes to a Tarai paralysed by strikes, the long-suffering people of this country have learnt to cope. They’ve also learnt to make hay while the sun shines.

Rickshaw fares quadruple when motorised vehicles disappear from the streets. Since the demand for pedal power far outstrips supply during a banda, it’s the provider rather than the customer who sets the fare. Our driver, Sovit, says he makes most of his money carrying children to school.

That’s the regular income on which he bases his monthly budget. He can take one or two days of banda per month in his stride. But anything more than that can push him below the poverty line.

During the Madhes Uprising two years ago, he says he endured untold hardships for prolonged periods because it was his struggle for a life of dignity. Thanks to the andolan, no Pahadi passenger now dare talk to him in a spiteful tone.

“Isn’t President Ram Baran Yadav also a nagarik?” asks Sovit with the profound wisdom of a man who has pulled rickshaw for a living ever since he dropped out of school at the age of 14 to support his family. A hartal also eliminates the most attractive source of a rickshaw-puller’s income: short trips with the possibility of tips. With businesses shut, people just walk across the street to hire pirated DVDs to spend the day at home. Buses stop, railways do not ply and the cigarette factory is shut. The quadrupled income from one or two trips to the airport doesn’t compensate.

Sovit’s economic sense is remarkable enough, but his political instincts are even more impressive. The 24-year-old looks double his age and sounds as wise, and thinks that no political force other than Forum can resist the Maoist onslaught in the Madhes. The deserted streets confirm his prognosis. There are no YCL hoodlums visible, but the fear of their wrath is enough to force businesses to shut.

Sovit campaigned for MJF lawmaker Sanjay Sah during CA elections but considers Upendra Yadav to be a better representative of Madhesis than the opportunistic gang of Bijay Gachhedar.

Whoever says that the popular verdict that produced a hung Constituent Assembly was a freak phenomenon should listen to porters in the mountains, rickshawalas in the Tarai and cabbies in Kathmandu. The Nepali voter wanted to send a strong message to its leaders: if you don’t swim together, we wouldn’t be there to rescue you when you drown. The message has been either misunderstood or wilfully misinterpreted.

The political class in the capital is yet again engaged in mutually assured demolition of each other’s reputation even as the country descends into anarchy. Sovit is a worried man: his son is not old enough to go to Malaysia and he doesn’t want to keep him in Janakpur. He wants to know if his son can find job as a domestic in a Kathmandu household.

Everybody in Janakpur wants to move to the capital city. The once-famous RR Campus has deteriorated beyond recognition. The town is not safe anymore for girls to walk alone. When Pahadis move to safer locations, it’s big news. But Sovit insists that for every Pahadi settler who has moved out, there are at least two Madhesis who have done the same and for similar reasons. The only difference is that when a Pahadi leaves, he often sells his property never to return.

Criminality is so pervasive that all hopes of the town returning to normal are fading. Work on Dhalkebar-Bhitamod Highway is held up because every gang with a gun wants a cut from construction contracts. People don’t pick up any calls from phones with unfamiliar numbers. Motorcycles are snatched from riders in broad daylight.

Sovit wants to know whether he can survive pulling rickshaws in Kathmandu. He has been told that tourists pay more there than here and plans to move out of Janakpur as soon as his son completes school. At least that’s a point on which the entire country is one: everybody dreams of living in the capital city some day.
Despite all odds

Biratnagar braves floods, crime and power cuts to keep on going

It is the gateway to Nepal if one would consider Indian states of Bihar and West Bengal as potential tourism generating states. Darjeeling and Gangtok are always packed during the summer season, there is no reason why Ilam and Bhedetar couldn’t have similar traffic. The South Asian School of Tourism and Hotel Management (SASTHM) is an initiative to decentralise and regionalise the hospitality industry and tourism education. Everything is highly concentrated within Kathmandu valley. I wanted to make sure that I have a school, which would produce skilled workforce for tourism industry right here thus eliminating the problems of importing skilled workforce from Kathmandu. In fact our graduates are now working in hotels in eastern Nepal, Kathmandu and even Indian hotels are recruiting here. We started with three students who enrolled for Bachelors of Hotel Management course in 2004. What is the role of the government? It can consider long-term land lease, subsidies on construction material or tax exemption. The government has a huge potential of multiplier effect on jobs and economic growth besides helping conservation. Investing in tourism in Eastern Region is never a bad idea. But what are the constraints? First of all, tourism is at a very primitive stage in Eastern Nepal. Even before commercial promotion there is an urgent need to develop infrastructure: accessibility, amenities, activities and attraction management. It is not too late to prepare a tourism master plan for Hile and Ilam right away. Businesses also look at returns on investment, but it is too late to prepare a tourism master plan for Hile and Ilam right away. Businesses also look at returns on investment, but it is too late to prepare a tourism master plan for Hile and Ilam right away.

How can an entrepreneur help make Eastern Nepal a profitable tourism destination? If Nagarkot and Dhulikhel can be considered an attractive destination, why not the hills of Eastern Nepal? If nearby Darjeeling and Sikkim can attract thousands of Indian tourists, why not here? Tourism is a multi-faceted industry which has a huge potential of multiplier effect on jobs and economic growth besides helping conservation. Investing in tourism in Eastern Region is never a bad idea. But what are the constraints? First of all, tourism is at a very primitive stage in Eastern Nepal. Even before commercial promotion there is an urgent need to develop infrastructure: accessibility, amenities, activities and attraction management. It is not too late to prepare a tourism master plan for Hile and Ilam right away. Businesses also look at returns on investment, but tourism is a supply induced demand kind of investment. Darjeeling and Gangtok are always packed during the summer season, there is no reason why Ilam and Bhedetar couldn’t have similar traffic. The South Asian School of Tourism and Hotel Management (SASTHM) is an initiative to decentralise and regionalise the hospitality industry and tourism education. Everything is highly concentrated within Kathmandu valley. I wanted to make sure that I have a school, which would produce skilled workforce for tourism industry right here thus eliminating the problems of importing skilled workforce from Kathmandu. In fact our graduates are now working in hotels in eastern Nepal, Kathmandu and even Indian hotels are recruiting here. We started with three students who enrolled for Bachelors of Hotel Management course in 2004.

Nepali Times: Biratnagar is not thought of as a touristy place or potential tourism destination. What made you start your hotel management school here? Roshan Bahadur Thapa: Agreed that Biratnagar is not a tourist destination. However, for infrastructure and proximity to India, it is by far the best place in Eastern Nepal. Biratnagar is also a hub of Eastern Nepal and is still a growing industrial town with immense business potential.
Last week, the Nepal government said it was taking “stringent” action to prevent a Swine Flu outbreak following an announcement by WHO about a global pandemic.

But public health experts say the government doesn’t have a mechanism to detect, let alone respond, to a future epidemic in Nepal. The current outbreak is caused by a new strain of the Influenza A virus subtype H1N1, and there are now almost 30,000 confirmed cases in 74 countries. The US has more than 13,000 and Australia 1,300 infections.

The government says there are no cases of H1N1 detected, and has a medical team checking every arriving passenger at the airport, leading to long delays at immigration. But India has nine confirmed cases and it is in China too. Countries which source tourists to Nepal also have cases: Japan (549), Germany (95), Korea (53), Israel (68).

Experts say the absence of cases in Nepal may not be because there aren’t infected people, but because of the lack of detection facilities. Currently, samples are sent overseas to confirm the identity of the virus, but there are privately-owned laboratories that can carry out confirmatory tests for H1N1.

Says Sameer Dixit of Center for Molecular Dynamics Nepal: “It is time Nepal got serious about meeting the challenge of this and future epidemics. Nepal must develop its own network of laboratories that can carry out confirmatory tests for H1N1.

A new study released this week says eight of the MDG goals, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health and combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases will be most affected.

The Global Campaign for the Health Millennium Development Goals focuses on the health of mothers and children, and highlights practical ways to reduce the continuing and unnecessary death toll in developing countries.

The proposal calls for increased political mobilisation; adequate financing and effective delivery, streamlined and harmonised aid operations, free services for women and children at the point of delivery, barriers, skilled and motivated health workers at the right place at the right time and accountability for results with robust monitoring and evaluation. (IPS)

Recession hits MDG goals

The global economic crisis is threatening to have a devastating impact on the health of women and children, and may prevent the Millennium Development Goals from helping poverty and disease by 2015.

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Nepal’s political parties have been diferente with another, that they are freedom fighters. They then go on to fight not only the other but to deny almost 30 million citizens the fundamental freedoms that have been enshrined in the Interim Constitution of 2007.

The doctor asks: “What kind of new Nepal are we creating when innocent kidney patients are put on the pressure of the Center’s decision?”

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They have the freedom to move among any part of Nepal, and the freedom to carry on any occupation, industry or trade. The way the political parties, and all other groups, are accommodating citizens’ freedoms is by enforcing bandas. These shutdowns are carried out either nationally or locally, halting anywhere from a few hours to a few days, which brings to a standstill to violence-stamped whole days, or the paralyzing “illegal” bandas.

Since the organisers, who are often opportunistic groups of young political cadres, are trained for explicit threats, those who dare to defy the bandas run the risk of having their vehicles stoned or torched, their shops looted, or even being beaten up in public by large groups.

According to www.nepalbandh.com, a website that tracks the number of shutdowns, so far in June alone, as of this writing, there have been 38 instances of bandas across the country. Since 1 January, only 11 days have elapsed without there being a shutdown anywhere in Nepal.

In line with the government’s calls for increased political mobilisation, adequate financing and effective delivery, streamlined and harmonised aid operations, free services for women and children at the point of delivery, barriers, skilled and motivated health workers at the right place at the right time and accountability for results with robust monitoring and evaluation, the IFJ called this week for the government to develop its own network of laboratories that can carry out confirmatory tests for H1N1.

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Maoists target media

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) this week called on the Maoists and all political groups in Nepal to end attacks on media personnel reporting on street protests.

On Tuesday, Maoists attacked a vehicle carrying FNJ secretary Ram Dahal, Himal Khabarpatrika editor Kiran Nepal, Himal Khabarpatrika managing editor India Shrestha and journalist Rameswor Bohara in Nepalgunj, even after they showed their press pass. They stoned the vehicle and looted the key.

In Sitapaila Avenues TV correspondent Krishna Neupane was verbally abused.

In Sinamangal a vehicle transporting Nepal Samacharpatra editor Bash Tiwari was forced to turn back after activists blocked its path.

In Chahabari a Kantipur Publications van was vandalised. In Gaungam in Makwanpur Kantipur TV host Basudev Krishna was verbally abused.

In Srinagar a vehicle transporting Nepal Samacharpatra editor Bash Tiwari was forced to turn back after activists blocked its path.

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Purushottam Dahal in Annapurna Post, 17 June

It takes an inordinate amount of perseverance and patience to become the kind of politician who has no expectation of a personal return from political life. Shailaja Acharya was one of the very few politicians with such devotion.

In her six-and-a-half decades of life, Shailaja spent around 50 years involved in politics. She was the first revolutionary youth to speak out against king Mahendra’s takeover in 1960. Shailaja was the epitome of revolution. Her death comes at a time when the country is in dire need of such dedicated politicians.

Nepal has been declared a democratic republic, having abolished the monarchy and taken steps towards federalism. But what it lacks is political integrity, which Shailaja possessed. Who in the present cabinet would resign from a ministerial post while admitting their inability to control corruption? Who would stand against those in power and yet appeal to all with her logic?

Shailaja resigned from the post of agriculture minister even when her maternal uncle Girija Prasad Koirala was the prime minister. Baladeb Mohajirani, Lok Krishna Bhattarai and Hemath Dahal were other leaders who were inspired by her to resign. The resignation of former prime minister Girija Prasad Koirala, former home minister Gohindaraj Joshi and erstwhile PM Pushpa Kamal Dahal are remarkable. But their resignations had more to do with strategy, politics and personal dignity than ethics.

Shailaja’s death comes at a time the NC needs good leadership. Shailaja, Sher Bahadur Debdua and Ram Chandra Poudel were all candidates to replace Koirala. Now, Sujata Koirala has come to the fore in place of Shailaja.

In the coming days, Sujata, Sher Bahadur and Ram Chandra will either have to loosen the shackles imposed by the party or work together to lead. It has to be understood that the second generation leaders in NC are as responsible for party failures as Koirala. There is a sense of hope in the new generation, but they are not yet ready to take leadership.

Sujata is attempting to take the leadership of the party with the backing of her ageing father, thereby continuing the Koirala political dynasty. There is not just the need for a new face but also new ideas in order to democratise the party. The party needs a complete overhaul in order to uphold democracy.

#456

Bhutan’s Maoists

Naya Patkha, 14 June

Following the footsteps of Nepal’s Maoists, the Bhutanese Communist Party (MCP) has launched an armed struggle against its government to set up a sovereign democracy. The objectives of the two Maoist parties are remarkably identical. Both have emphasised the dominance of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat and imperialism as major obstacles. Like the CPN Maoists, the BCP wants Bhutan to be secular. Both also opposed the treaties with India, claiming they are unequal.

The BCP is also trying to emulate the success of their comrades in Nepal to turn the country from a monarchy to a republic. Party member ‘Ajay’ says the BCP has set up the Bhutanese Tiger Force, an armed wing to stage attacks within Bhutan. The BCP is trying to capitalise on the frustrations of one-third of Bhutan’s disenfranchised population and the refugees. Currently the BCP is split into two groups with ‘Bikalpa’ and ‘Birat’ as the general secretaries.

Young guns

Interview with Ramesh Chand Thakuri, Inspector General of General Police in Himal Khabarpatrika, 15-29 June

What is the Nepali Police doing to maintain law and order? A committee has been formed in both the east and the Tani that is intervening to improve security. Their work has been made easy as the areas are constantly in touch regarding the law and order situation.

What are some of the challenges you face? The public is not afraid of breaking the law. They are encouraged and supported by the political parties so they don’t get caught. We are often pressurised to release the perpetrators. We can only work well if political parties stop pressuring us. We also do not have enough manpower and necessary resources, which has set us back.

What problems have the party-affiliated youth wings aroused? The main problem comes from them. We do not have the resources or favourable environment to take action against those who break the law. Any offences changed are immediately overruled. Parties regularly interfere in police activities and the locals fend for the offenders because they are threatened. The police follows the law of the country, yet we are always blamed. We are helpless because we cannot even use the rights given by the Nepali law.

New cabinet

1. Prime Minister: Madhav Kumar Nepal (UML)
2. Deputy PM and Physical Planning and Works: Bijay Kumar Gachhadar (MUF)
3. Foreign Affairs: Sujata Koirala (NC)
4. Finance: Surendra Pardey (UML)
5. Defence: Bidya Bhandari (UML)
6. Information and Communications: Shankar Pokhrel (UML)
7. Energy: Prakash Sharan Mahat (NC)
8. Home: Bhim Rawal (UML)
9. Irrigation (NC): Balkrishna Khand
10. Federal Affairs, Constituent Assembly, Parliamentary Affairs and Culture: Minendra Rijal (NC)
11. Local Development: Purna Kumar Sherma Limbu (NC)
13. Peace and Reconstruction: Rakam Chemjong (UML)
14. Labour and Transport Management: Mohammad Aftab Alam (NC)
15. General Administration: Rabinda Shrestha (UML)
16. Land Reforms and Management: Dhumbar Shrestha CPN (ML)

Ministers of state

17. Local Development: Ganesh Khadka (NC)
18. Peace and Reconstruction: Dilli Bahadur Mhat (UML)
19. General Administration: Jil Bahadur Dorje Gajlal (UML)
20. Energy: Chandra Singh Bhattari (NC)
21. Home: Rivan Ansari (UML)
22. Health and Population: Khadka Bahadur Basyal Sarki (NC)

“i am walking on the Prachanda Path! ”

Robin Sayami in Nagarik, 16 June

NEW RELEASE

 Sequel to A People War  

by Kunda Dixit

Published by nepal-lya

www.nepalaya.com.np

Tel.: 4244863

Distributed by Educational Book House, Jamal

19 - 25 JUNE 2009 #456
**We are in the boat we are rocking**

**DHRUBA KUMAR**

Military in Nepal is a cultural residue of the Gorkhali conquest of territory to build a unified country in the 18th century. The contribution of the armed forces in the state-building process was crucial for national integration in which aggression and conquest were employed overwhelmingly rather than negotiation and persuasion.

Though the military is the state builder, militarism and the military in Nepal are perceived and portrayed as a brutal force, violator of public norms with systematic malevolence, and unlawful interference in civil affairs. Military service, at least in the officer corps, has been an elite preserve. Until 1951, the power and political elite ruling Nepal considered the military profession their birthright. It was also the shortest route to political success since during the 104 years of Rana rule, one of the four Commanding Generals always went on to be prime minister.

As the country ruled by militarism till 1951, militarism was naturally embedded in the general outlook of the rulers as accumulation of power, property and privilege in a feudal system. Post-1951, the military remained the privy of the monarchy. The king being the Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces as well as the executive authority enjoyed the power to use the threat to mobilise and use the armed forces.

Suspension of democratic values in the name of order and stability was one of the most serious consequences of militarism in Nepal. The government, though all powerful in accordance with the Interim Constitution 2007, has a weak and tpid leadership as political parties in coalition are overwhelmingly suffering from coryn syndrome, making them least interested in governance than sharing the spoils of democracy. The army therefore believes that a weak and fragile government can be forced to comply with and be made subservient to their interests.

This has encouraged militarism. On 13 May 2006, a day after the Rayamajhi Commission recommended the suspension of security chiefs, the army chief Pyar Jung Thapa, who met Prime Minister Koirala, along with seven other army top brass to express dissatisfaction over the government’s steps of suspending three chiefs of Police, Armed Police Force and Intelligence Agency, told the latter: “You are a politician and that is why you look at the security forces through a political lens. But the security forces do not follow politics... We do not agree with your policy to take action against officers and soldiers of the security forces. The cabinet not taking the security forces into confidence could have adverse effects. You have to think seriously about this.”

General Rokmangad Khatwal, accompanying Thapa, had retorted: “You suspended three chiefs of security. But why did you not suspend the army chief? I may not ask you for an answer but the people surely will... you knew that we had a unified command security force under which the army, armed police, Nepal police and investigation department worked together.”

To all these tone and texture you must work accordingly.”

The meeting closed with a final bit of advice from the army chief: “The people only revolted to bring peace. Talk that will divide the country even before the election for a constituent assembly is a constitution should not be made. The people will make the constitution that they want, only they have the mandate to do so.”

The meeting has only given you the mandate to establish peace, you must work accordingly.”

Dhruba Kumar is a political science professor in Tribhuvan University. This piece is excerpted from Naya Nepal, Gyanko Nepal’ series published by Social Science Baha in Himal Khadgarthik
The bright side of Everest

Mount Everest often gets bad press for commercialisation and the lack of morality of its climbers. However, Nepali Times mountaineering correspondent and climber, Billi Bierling, saw a different side on the way to the summit this spring.

High Crimes, Dark Summit, Mountain without Mercy, Left for Dead. These are all titles of books about climbing the world’s highest peak. I have just come back from climbing Chomolungma, and I saw the mountain in a very different light.

Billi Bierling, Everest Base Camp

Mick Parker, 36

Veteran Australian climber: Mick Parker, died in Kathmandu on 4 June due to dissipated pulmonary and cerebral oedema, two weeks after climbing Makalu, the world’s fifth highest peak.

Two weeks earlier, Parker had summited Makalu with British mountaineer, Roland Hunter. “I probably would not have made if he hadn’t gone ahead and broken trail,” Hunter said. “He was a very strong climber but never talked much about his mountaineering achievements.”

Parker had become quite an institution in Kathmandu. Once you saw Mick wandering around the streets of Thamel you knew that the climbing season had started. The mountaineering world has lost a truly committed and dedicated mountaineer, who shall be greatly missed.

Billi Bierling
Khumbu after nightfall

The lights of Everest Base Camp on the Khumbu Icefall in mid-May.

Camp 2 in the Western CWM, with Lhotse glowing in moonshine.

The night lights of Namche Bazar with the Kwangde Peak in the background.

The slanting golden rays of the sun spotlight (from l to r) Chomolungma, Lhotse and Makalu in this picture taken from Gokyo Ri.
After surviving war, Achham battles AIDS

KONG YEN LIN in ACHHAM

Eight years have passed since the battle that night during which the Maoists over-ran the army and police bases at Mangalsen and Sande. But for constable Prem Chaudhary the memories are so vivid, they may as well have happened yesterday.

“Afraid to completely outnumbered and outnumbered,” Chaudhary, 33, who was a policeman at the district police line, says his compatriots were not so lucky: 40 of the 80 policemen guarding Sande airport were killed that night. All 55 soldiers in the Mangalsen barracks and 18 others were killed. Maoist casualties are not known, but an estimated 150 people were killed that night in Arghakhanchi—one of the bloodiest during the ten-year-war.

What followed was abandonment by Kathmandu, as the security forces confined themselves to their barracks. “They couldn’t even protect themselves, let alone protect us,” recalls a shopkeeper in Mangalsen.

Seven years later, there are palpable signs that Sandhikarka is being neglected by the government. The situation is especially acute in Achham, with its large migrant population in India, as Nepal’s AIDS hotspot with an HIV infection rate of 10 per cent, which is double the national rate.

Mangalsen is a 16 hour bus-ride from Dhangadi, and it is this distance from faraway Kathmandu. Schools here started a new semester on 16 April, but still haven’t received text books. There is only 15 minutes of electricity a day, if at all. The long winter drought means there is virtually no water supply in the district capital.

“There’s an exodus of talented teachers,” says Krishna Hari Sharma, the district police chief, “no one wants to stay and teach here.”

Despite all odds, there are efforts to address the district’s huge health and education backlog. A community-based Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission (PMCT) programme has been launched. This targets the 10 per cent infection rate in Achham, which is double the national rate.

AIDS hotspot with an HIV infection rate of 10 per cent, which is double the national rate. Most transmissions occur through married couples, as infected migrant labourers returning from India pass on the disease to their wives. There is also a worrying increase in child infections. “If the people here were already poor, the disease is creating additional burdens to the families,” says district health officer Purshottam Shedain.

Because of its high infection rate, Achham has attracted many non-government groups. But the service is restricted to the main towns. “It’s hard to reach all 75 VDCs in Achham, where there are no roads and even the ones that exist are not passable during the monsoon,” explains Shedain.

Mangalsen is a town of 12,000, but 50 per cent live in the 16 hour bus-ride from Dhangadi, and it is this remoteness that makes Achham so neglected by the government. Schools here started a new semester on 16 April, but still haven’t received text books. There is only 15 minutes of electricity a day, if at all. The long winter drought means there is virtually no water supply in the district capital.

“Look at the state we are in,” says district police chief Krishna Hari Sharma, pointing to the new building for the district education office. The army moved its base to the hilltop overlooking the town after the attack and is still there. However, it is the police who bore the brunt of the attack in 2002, who have since been neglected.

Principal Kiran Kunwar of Deepika Academy in Mangalsen remembers the battle eight years ago. “There were bullets flying through the windows, and the children and teachers were hiding under the beds. Fortunately no one was hurt,” recalls Kunwar.

But now, having survived the war the school battles apathy. Loma Kunwar, who has since been injured in the fighting, says, "no one wants to stay and teach here."

As usual, attack helicopters overflew the town. But they could do little because of the terrain and the fear of killing civilians in the close combat. The fighting continued till morning and the victorious Maoists marched out of town singing revolutionary songs.

Seven years later, there are signs that Sandhikarka is being rebuilt. A new City Hall is being built, and donors have put up a new building for the district education office. The army moved its base to the hilltop overlooking the town after the attack and is still there. However, it is the police who bore the brunt of the attack in 2002, who have since been neglected.

The power of a
TRIPLE SETBACK: 50-year-old Jamuna Buddha lost her youngest son, a civilian, police, during the conflict period in Achham when he died in battle with the Maoists. Her husband has also passed away and she was discovered to be HIV positive about two years ago.
There's a delicate balance that producers have to strike when taking up an existing piece of popular culture with a dedicated fanbase. They have to bring it mainstream but also keep the core fans happy.

The belatedly released *Fanboys* (two years in the vault), directed by Kyle Newman, is about Star Wars devotees who throw themselves so profoundly into that universe that it seeps into their everyday world. When Linus (Marquette) learns that his three trekkie friends have kept the secret of a terminal illness among their fellowship, he convinces them to take to the road, break into George Lucas' ranch and steal the material. It is not altogether uninviting to outsiders and terminal self-referential, but there are a few head-turning cameos and some amusing shenanigans on the road. But there are also frequent queerbphobic (homophobic?) put-downs, in-jokes that would fly over the heads of the uninitiated (while not being that funny to begin with) and a reverence to George Lucas that leaves him unscathed (probably so the movie could get distributed).

Adaptations of children's fantasy novels are still enjoying success and have a dedicated fanbase too thanks to the overwhelming success of the Harry Potter movies. Production houses have to loosen their purse-strings to replicate the formula. The much-loved *Chronicle of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis has made that jump, to mixed success. Adaptations of Philip Pullman's *The Golden Compass* (2007) and *His Dark Materials* (2007) are among the most successful adaptations of the year. The much-loved *Coraline* by Neil Gaiman. The directorial debut was *Bridge to Terabithia* (2007), a largely successful adaptation of the poignant children's novel by Katherine Patterson, which ramped up the fantasy element in a story marked by its gritty realism. It's a strategy that he applies here too, with grandiose CGI all fall of magic but belief of soul, packed with fantastically-garbed characters but with a tedious unconvincing story (too tedious to repeat, frankly) and dull uninteresting characters. The most important element in the fantasy formula - the draught, mundane existence contrasting with magical reality (Harry Potter's Muggle world, World War II Britain in Narnia, even Franco's Spain in Pan's Labyrinth), is put aside in an effort to make everything appear fantastical. It is that very same separation that *Coraline* explores, exploits and reverses, a gorgeous, creepy stop-animation from Henry Selick, the director of *The Nightmare before Christmas* (1993) and adapted from the novel by (yes, yet another British fantasy novelist) Neil Gaiman. Again, we see an author benefiting from the door that Rowling's Harry Potter series have opened with Gaiman's work reaching the screen in two previous (thankfully good) adaptations, *Stardust* (2007) and *Mirrormask* (2005). *Coraline* is (yet another) precocious young girl whose writer-parents abandon to her own devices in their new home. She discovers a hidden passage to a mirror world where the doppelgangers of her parents lavish her with attention and her neighbours, already eccentric in the real world, put on shows for her entertainment. It is an enticing world that only belatedly reveals its darker purpose. Selick intelligently keeps *Coraline* normal world just as visually interest as the one she escapes to. It is well-matched by the voice talent and the composition by Bruno Coulais whose score is every bit as delightful as the images. *Coraline* is proof positive that just as important as dazzling effects are the characters that are believable and likable and the story, which is tightly reasoned.

**Fanboys**

Director: Kyle Newman
Cast: Sam Huntington, Jay Baruchel, Dan Fogler, Kristen Bell

**The Secret of Moonacre**

Director: Gabor Csupo
Cast: Dakota Blue Richards, Ioan Gruffudd, Tim Curry, Natasha McElhone

**Coraline**

Director: Henry Selick
Cast: Dakota Fanning, Teri Hatcher, John Hodgman, Dawn French, Jennifer Saunders, Jan McNamee
Imperial Court brings together the finest in real estate design and construction. Its an exclusive community that shares your values. Its a place you'll love calling home.
EXHIBITIONS
- The Locus of Continuity, an exhibition of mixed media art works by Sunika Maharjan at Hotel de l’Annapurna, 19-25 June
- In a Different Light an exhibition of Photography by Zoe Childrey at Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal
- Kathmandu Haat exhibiting festival goodies, boutique items, jewelleries at Agrawal Bhanwar, Kamalpokhari. 4493003

EVENTS
- Nepa-layas film tour, 30 June 2009 3.30 PM and 5.30 PM, Russian Cultural Center. 4427883
- Tai Chi, Buddhist Meditation 5-8PM, 1819 June, Himalayan Buddhist Meditation Centre, Keshar Mahal Marg. 14410402
- Call for entries for Film South Asia, 5-7PM, ladies night on Wednesday with live unplugged music at Jatra CafÈ & Bar.
- Music by Strings Band live at Rastriya Sabha Girha, Exhibition Road, 21 June, 4PM.
- Baja gaja, every Tuesday at Moksh, 7.30 PM onwards, Putchuk. 5526212
- Live band every Friday and rooftop bbq everyday at Kausi Kithino, Durbar Marg. 4297298
- 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-8PM. 4220028
- Some like it hot live at Rastriya Sabha Girha, Exhibition Road, 5-7PM, ladies night on Wednesday with live unplugged music at Jatra CafÈ & Bar.
- Live Sensation, performance by Vanyak every Saturday, 9PM, Hyatt Regency, Kathmandu. 4491234
- Live Band performance by Apruskul, every Saturday till late, Rov Bar, Hyatt Regency Kathmandu. 4489382
- Sunday Jazz Brunch by Inner Grove with barbeque, Sunday, 12PM-3.30 PM, The Terrace at Hyatt Regency Kathmandu. 4489382
- Nepal Ghalbis and songs at DiLounge Beijing Duck Restaurant, every Thursday 5.30 PM onwards. 4468589

DINING
- A cafeis cafe Dhoikama Cafe, Patan Dhoka. 5522113
- The Corner Bar, 3-11PM, 7-7PM, Radisson Hotel Kathmandu. 4411818
- 7th Annual Monsoon Wine Festival 2009, from until 15 September, Khiny, Thamel. 4234040
- Mango Etagere performance by Aprilrush, every Saturday from Greece, Italy and the Middle-East at The Cafe, Hyatt Regency. 4491234
- Tepanyaki meat items and garlic rice right at Le Resturant, Gadhinara. 4436318
- Fiat Dout at Hotel Shangri La, Kathmandu, Rs 600. 4412999
- Reality Bites, The Kaiser CafÈ, Garden of Dreams, operated by Dwarki’s Group of Hotels, 9AM-10PM. 4425341
- Stary night barbecue at Hotel Shangri-La with live/performance by Ciney Gurung, Rs 999, at the Shambala Garden, every Friday, 7PM onwards. 4412999
- Himalayan Rainbow Trout at Hotel Yak and Yet, Durbar Mard. 4424999

GETAWAYS
- Relax Package at Hyatt Regency Kathmandu for Rs 5555 plus taxes, for a night on double occupancy with breakfast, complimentary use of spa and, offer valid to Nepalis and local residents only. 4486800

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HAPPENINGS

SHAKE UP: US Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Robert O’Blake made a two-day fact-finding mission to Kathmandu this week.

TANGLED: Pultalisadak gets a facelift as workers try to separate the phone lines from tv, internet, and electricity cables on Wednesday.

FLORAL TRIBUTES: Former deputy prime minister Shailaja Acharya passed away at the age of 65 last week. Those who paid their last respects spanned the political spectrum and included Foreign Minister Sujata Koirala (in dark glasses).

BORDER PATROL: Pulchok Engineering College students protest outside their campus on Wednesday against “border encroachment” of Nepali territory by India.

ELECTRIC CITY: Nearly 35 electric vehicles of all sizes took part in a rally from Kathmandu to Banepa on Saturday to raise money for the Spinal Injury Rehabilitation Centre. Participants urged the government to reduce the tax on electric vehicles.
A psychedelic Prithbi Narayen

That was one helluva successful bund. One of the most successful we’ve had in donkey’s years. Monday’s YCL bund was in fact so effective that even Maoist Politburo members couldn’t get to their conclave at Buddhanagar, and the important meeting had to be postponed.

Comrade CP, however, did make it to the Reporter’s Club to deliver his tirade on Thul Dai, but only because he was travelling in a van with a large laser-printed ‘Press’ sign pasted to the front. Good thing he came through that unscathed because his guerrillas were beating up journalists and doctors out there. Speakers from the other parties didn’t want to take any chances and hoofed it to Putali Sadak, while Comrade Pumfa Devi was seen on Bagmati Bridge as her bodyguards choked on sewage fumes.

Since the ‘Press’ sign doesn’t protect us hacks anymore during YCL bunds, one media org took its staff to work with a ‘Subha Bibaha’ sign in red out in front. Apparently jantis and marriage parties are exempted from band rules, and so are funerals. Ambulances are not allowed but hearses are. So, in a way, the already-dead are better off during a band than the nearly-dead. People seem to have got wind of these changed rules because a large group of easy riders were seen at Toko on Monday cruising the empty streets with the word ‘Makalu’ emblazoned to the front of their motorbikes. The only thing that didn’t quite fit was that they all looked like they were in high spirits.

Meanwhile, 500km away in Kalikot Maoists beat up the entire UML district committee for having the temerity to oppose them, injuring 15 moderate commies who had to be choppered out to Kathmandu for treatment. And guess what the Maoists did the very next day to protest their own atrocity? Yup, they called a Kalikot Bund.

The Ass ain’t complaining. At least they didn’t actually kill anyone, so that is a vast improvement from the war years. And in a lot of ways, the baddies are just following the example set by the kagressis and the e-malaise who during the 1990s unleashed an epidemic of hartals on us. And they’re still at it. On the day that the Maochudies had shut down KTM, kagressis in Chitwan violated their own declaration of Chitwan as a Band-free District, and forced the district to close by getting hired goons to patrol the bazaar.

While their district cadre was doing all this, the NC top brass issued a statement saying the band didn’t have the support of the central leadership. Fat lot of good that did them.

What is emerging from the Politburo meeting is a sharp polarisation between hardliners and even-more-hardliners about whether the party’s future strategy should be outright rebellion or a consensus govt. Stung by the cascade of events that led to his downfall, Comrade Awe-Inspiring is reportedly leaning towards sleeping with the enemy. But the hardcore ones led by Dr Baidya and Com Biplop with the YCL providing musclepower have been holding secret nocturnal meetings to plot ways to pressure Terrifico. The reason for Monday’s band was therefore a show of force not so much against the new government, but to show the softies in the Politburo who’s boss ahead of this week’s meetings.

Laxman Khadka finally got arrested after being caught pink-handed while giving the Grandfather of the Nation’s index finger a new coat of paint. By doing such a psychedelic job with Prithbi Narayen, Laxman should have been allowed to do the same to the assorted Rana-era statuary on Tundikhel. Alas, this country just can’t respect talent.