Legacies of war

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Legacies of war

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In the Tarai, the lawlessness and corruption that has proliferated in the aftermath of our own civil conflict and prolonged political instability is giving rise to another, more frightening legacy.

It was bad enough that food crops were being displaced by cannabis. Villagers with no alternatives are now turning to highly lucrative opium cultivation, helped along by Indian middlemen and local politicians and police. The road to Afghanistan is a short one.

On a more positive note, Nepal may still be dragging its feet on signing up to the Ottawa Mine Ban Treaty, but significant progress has been made in clearing landmines: it is estimated the last of 53 army minefields will be cleared by mid-2011.

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On a more positive note, Nepal may still be dragging its feet on signing up to the Ottawa Mine Ban Treaty, but significant progress has been made in clearing landmines: it is estimated the last of 53 army minefields will be cleared by mid-2011.
The conduct of the ongoing school-leaving exams gives us plenty of indication as to how our state and society functions. On the one hand you have a curriculum not designed for critical thinking. Then you test students on their ability to cram that content and regurgitate it in an exam, the importance of which, in the life of a student, is unnecessarily and greatly exaggerated. The whole examination process is seriously flawed, it rewards those who can memorise and those who cheat. There are no marks for creativity, originality, or honesty. The exam is a sham.

Cheating in the annual test has become such an accepted part of our culture that it doesn’t even raise eyebrows anymore. In fact it only makes it to the media when some novel method of cheating is uncovered somewhere. Students who get answers SMS-ed to them, fake students taking exams, or teachers and parents sitting outside the classroom filling out the answer sheets of their students. It has become so blatant, the collusion between parents, teachers and students so open, that writing about it has given us plenty of indication as to how our state and society functions.

It is not that the constitution of Nepal holds? Q. Will the HLPM’s promise to deliver the new constitution hold? A. It’s high time we encourage the kind of politicians we have. For too long we have been selecting mediocres, unsophisticated, selfish and vindictive bunch of people. Counter to reason, we expect excellence from them. We need to sit down and understand the simplest truth that you reap what you sow. Until good people are encouraged to get into politics, we will get nothing out of it but filth and frustration. I have met several dynamic and visionary young Nepalis with strong leadership potential. All enjoy commenting and lecturing on politics but none are willing to throw themselves into it. For these Nepalis, politics in Nepal is a risky investment. But if significant numbers of good people don’t actively commit themselves, Nepali politics will never change, no matter how much we talk about it, no matter how many times we change the constitution and the system of governance.

It’s high time we encourage the most talented and able amongst the younger generation to enter politics. We must ensure they realise that if they are really serious about transforming the country in their lifetime, politics is one of the most appropriate vehicles to use. Politics is too serious a business to be left in the hands of the kind of politicians we have. We deserve better, we need better. Without those with the right leadership ingredients this country is doomed for many years to come.

The blogs
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Weekly Poll: #496

Q. What does Guruji death mean for Nepal?

Total votes: 3,275

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Q. Will the HLPN’s promise to deliver the new constitution hold?

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A full constitution cannot be written by May 28. Neither can the integration and rehabilitation of the PLA (a precondition for the constitution, according to NC and UML) happen before that. That leaves three options.

One, come up with a ‘brief’ constitution. The CA chairman floated this proposal some time back. The homework to set up a State Restructuring Commission and let it determine the nature, boundaries and powers of provinces seems a step in that direction.

But the lack of a political consensus and severe time constraints reduce the possibility of even such a statute. Many Maoists feel this would be a trap to impose a 1990-style constitution and cheat them of their ‘progressive’ agenda. Madhesi and Janjati groups have already called it a conspiracy to subvert federalism.

Disagreements persist on many issues besides federalism, and there is no broader political deal in sight that could enable what one observer has astutely termed ‘Constitutional conundrums’. The second option is what Sarita Giri proposed months ago – amend the constitution in order to pave the way for an extension of the CA. Many leaders, especially those who are in the CA, privately say this is the easiest way out.

But no party wants to be seen as pushing for an extension publicly, as they fear it would make them look desperate, erode their legitimacy, and give their rivals an edge. There are also differing views on how to go about it. NC lawmaker Radheshyam Adhikari has forcefully argued for a minimal common document, which could form the basis for an extension.

The disagreements deepen, no side is willing to admits to it publicly. The government will be seen as a failure. And the president will step in, if only to appoint a new caretaker government and a new constitution drafting committee. The Maoists will erupt onto the streets, provoking a security response.

There are many in the top echelons of NC and UML who have no stake in the process. They were reluctant converts to what they saw as the ‘Maoist agenda’ of the republic. Everyone knows the best way out, but no one is willing to admit to it publically.

The alternative to such a broad agreement is greater anarchy and violence. Take your pick.

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The new range of HD LCD TV is here to enrich your lifestyle. With its exquisite design and vibrant natural colours, discover a visual experience that will inspire your style quotient.
The year of print

Despite the existence of a dozen television channels and over 200 FM radio stations, the year 2066 BS too belonged to the print media. The Nepali daily Nagarik and its sister belonged to the print media. The stations, the year 2066 BS too Fortnightly Himal tabloid Naya Patrika maintained completed 100 days. The bash in town when the twins the scene, throwing the biggest warhorse Kantipur consolidated its innovative streak. The trusted Nepal, from the Kantipur stable, didn’t do too badly. The weekly ground. However, newsmagazines weekly newspapers lost some publications to choose from, of Nepal.

And the Grand Old Lady of New Delhi, Kantipur, turned into infotainment. Murdochisation, as news was analysing conspiracy theories from every possible angle and speculating about outcomes. With little to report on Maoist activities in the countryside or the diplomatic games being played out in Kathmandu, television cameras rushed around the capital chasing beauty queens, aging cine-actors and bevy of politicians on their way to or from New Delhi. Some junior ministers made desperate attempts to grab media attention by slapping a policeman on duty. But when nothing substantive was happening, the cameras alone could do nothing. Power cuts ensured audiences wouldn’t sit in front of the idiot box anyway.

The news on the radio, too, lost some of its sheen with hourly updates repeating the same thing all through the year: political parties had failed to reach a consensus. There are so many stations doing the same thing, all at the same time, that no FM channel has a current affairs talk-show host who can hold the attention of listeners for long.

In this year’s long, sply by season of feckless government and wearisome opposition, the print had a clear lead over television and radio in making up stories about the power struggle within UML and the Maoist Politburo alongside reporting on the antics of Sujata Koirala in the Nepali Congress. The Nepali print media also began to learn the ropes of Murdochisation, as news was turned into infotainment.

Newspapers experimented with provocative headlines, spicy photos, and a jaunty rightward tilt in the overall content. In every possible angle and analysing conspiracy theories from every possible angle and speculating about outcomes. With little to report on Maoist activities in the countryside or the diplomatic games being played out in Kathmandu, television cameras rushed around the capital chasing beauty queens, aging cine-actors and bevy of politicians on their way to or from New Delhi. Some junior ministers made desperate attempts to grab media attention by slapping a policeman on duty. But when nothing substantive was happening, the cameras alone could do nothing. Power cuts ensured audiences wouldn’t sit in front of the idiot box anyway.

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The campaign to give all retired Gurkhas the right to settle in Britain was one of the most powerful political movements of recent years. Last May it garnered such enormous support from the media and the public that the government suffered a rare defeat in the House of Commons. Prime Minister Gordon Brown was forced into a humiliating change of policy.

In a moment that became an instant television classic, the actress Joanna Lumley forced a minister to admit he was wrong on live TV. Lumley became what, famously declared, she was “a daughter of Nepal” and was greeted by Madhav Kumar Nepal and Ram Bhan Yadav. GAESO organised a large group to support Lumley and everywhere they went they were surrounded by GAESO flags and banners, appeared on Gaes.org, waved the organisation’s logo.

Since then things have gone a little sour. News reports started appearing saying that some of them were giving advice about destitute old men turning up in London with nothing, unable to speak English, Some ended up sleeping rough. Some had sold their belongings to pay for advice. The people who made those accusations must know them to be untrue.

Yet the only critical comment from the government was by a junior defence minister, Kevan Jones, who complained to a parliamentary committee a few weeks ago that Lumley had not spoken out against GAESO’s GBP 500 charge. “Her deathly silence, frankly, irritates me,” he said.

Jones instead of reminding us of the government’s real failure was telling former Gurkhas that if they wanted to settle in Britain they had to pay the organisation Rs 60,000 (GBP 500) for advice. For advice.

The applicants were told they would get free houses and jobs straight away, even if they could not speak English. Upon payment, they were sent to a representative of Howe & Co. working out of the GAESO building in Pulchowk, who filled out immigration forms. In reality, the whole process should have been free, being paid for by the British Legal Aid system.

Last Monday, the British campaigners called a press conference in central London to “clear their names”, which had been “smeared and traduced”. They claim the British Ministry of Defence backed them into a corner against them. A solicitor from Howe & Co even accused the government of behaving like the Stasi, the former East German secret police.

“Does the government really want to pick a fight with Joanna Lumley six weeks before a general election?” warned Peter Carroll, now a parliamentary candidate.

“It has been suggested that I somehow was parachuted in, took the headlines and ran. I think that’s a smear,” Lumley thundered. “It has been suggested that somehow spread falsehoods amongst the Gurkha communities both here and in Nepal about what they could expect. The people who made those accusations must know them to be untrue.”

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Jones apologised “unreservedly” for his comments fifteen minutes before the press conference began. Prime Minister Gordon Brown, too, hastily telephoned Lumley to apologise. But there are still more questions than answers about the British campaigners’ role, what they knew and when.

According to Gopal Siwakoti ‘Chintan’, who has been GAESO’s Nepali lawyer for ten years, he warned Lumley about GAESO’s fees charge. “Her deathly silence, frankly, irritates me,” he said.

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Succession issues

It was the late Girija Prasad Koirala who nurtured the political careers of Shree Bahadur Deuba, Ram Charan Poudel and Sushil Koirala from the ‘60s through the ‘90s. As Nepali Congress sails into its post-GPK phase, these three are now vying to be the chairman of the party, and newspaper reports indicate the inevitable bickering has already begun.

One does not attend meetings called by the others, and each loudly proclaims his own list of sacrifices for and contributions to the party. To be sure, this spectacle was to be expected, in part because GPK, in a prestige-donating move to bolster his daughter’s political career, did not work hard enough to institutionalise a proper succession plan.

Choosing a party leader based on bygone sacrifices, struggles and contributions might have served Nepali politics well in another era. In today’s politically competitive times, what if such measures are too narrow, looking and outdated to choose a party leader? What if traits and skills such as an ability to position the party, an ability to understand and work around external change agents, and an ability to work collaboratively to focus on national priorities matter more in the selection of the new leader?

Positioning: In most voters’ minds, Nepali Congress comes across not as a clear entity, but as a haphazard blob. Given this unclear positioning, how will the new leader clearly place Nepali Congress in the voters’ minds? Will it be a party still wringing its hands between socialist policies and a competitive market economy? How will it defend the tenets of pluralism and multi-party government jobs to party cadres a long-term way out. What plans does the new leader have to start addressing the issue of unemployment? More and more Nepalis are moving to small towns and cities for education and jobs. How will the new leader help restore the instruments of local government so that responsive governance starts to take root at the local level?

Nepal needs both “hard” (building roads, upgrading electric grids, etc) and “soft” (improving gender parity, providing universal access to water and sanitation, etc) forms of development. How will the new leader articulate and sell Nepal’s development needs to international aid agencies and international investors? China and India are fast becoming global economic success stories. How can Nepal, sandwiched in the middle, benefit from their boom?

Priorities: The decisive priority is to ensure that the constitution is drafted in time so that the pall of uncertainty hanging over the country’s future is lifted. The longer the delay, the more uncertainty spins energy and resources. Does the new leader have the ability to focus on what matters, and bring all squabbling political parties together to rally around a commonly accepted national goals that benefit Nepal’s future?

Going through the pangs of critical transition, it’s tempting for Nepali Congress or any other party to seek solace in embracing its own history. But such an approach is ultimately short-lived and self-defeating. What the party must do in today’s politically competitive times is to look ahead, ask questions about the future, and choose a leadership best able to represent the most viable prospects for the party, regardless of that person’s past sacrifices and contributions.

It’s not past glory that counts when it comes to the Nepali Congress, it’s the future.
In a tiny space on the second floor of a Thamel shophouse, tattoo artist Mohan Gurung is hard at work within a gargantuan world — one filled with age-old tribal symbols to modern bio-mechanical images. He is a conduit for the art, which flows through steady hands onto canvases of skin.

“I have a big studio in Pokhara, but little business. Here in Kathmandu I have a small space, but big business,” jokes Gurung. The quiet and affable Gurung, who received his training in South Korea after some persuasion from a good friend who noticed his talent, counts celebrities and fans from all over the world among his clients. He is so busy, in fact, that he is booked all the way till the end of the year and has stopped taking any more appointments.

Tattooing is an art that transcends time and physical boundaries. The threshold of pain is pushed in the hours required to apply even a simple design. And not only for the person getting the tattoo — the tattoo artist sits locked in rigid concentration, knowing full well that even a single mistake is unacceptable.

After about 3 hours of work with Vijay Lama, a pilot with Nepal Airlines who calls himself a ‘devotee’ of Gurung’s art, the artist limps off for a break, the physical and mental toll apparent. “He spends 12-14 hours a day in this little place, hardly moving, and yet he is one of the happiest people I know,” says Lama. “I’m amazed.”

Gurung returns and explains that he is in talks with the Nepal Tourism Board to hold the country’s first tattoo convention in April next year. “With tattoos becoming more popular here, there is a niche for tattoo tourism,” he says. Returning to his seat, Gurung picks up his tools and gets back to work, his dreams of becoming a great artist and sharing his passion spurring him on. And the wider world is ready and waiting for him.

www.mohanstattooinn.com

TOTAL TATTOOS: Tattoos and piercings adorn Gurung’s entire body. He gets inked by fellow artists, some of whom are his idols, at tattoo conventions all over the world.

PREP TIME: Natural, vegetable-based dyes are injected into the skin at the rate of 80-150 times per second through tattoo machines from Micky Sharpz, a well-known brand. Needles range in size and configuration for different purposes like outlining and shading.

IMMENSE FOCUS: Making a mistake is out of the question, and even experience cannot be taken for granted. Gurung is always looking forward to his next piece, because he knows it will be better than the last.

PAPER IS GOOD, SKIN BETTER: Akash Bhairab is the emblem of Nepal Airlines. Captain Vijay Lama has made it his own to mark his dedication to the national flag carrier, and hopes for clearer skies ahead.

INK COMMUNION: Mohan Gurung, of Mohan’s Tattoo Inn, works on a design of Akash Bhairab (Sky Shiva) on the arm of his friend, pilot Vijay Lama.
13th Floriculture Trade Fair, with spring in the air, beautiful flowers from all over are gathered in one location for your convenience. Choose from over 50 stalls displaying their best specimens. Bhrikuti Mandap, 10am-6pm, 1-5 April.

Any One of Us: Words from Prison, re-run of the adaptation of Eve Ensler’s Vagina Monologues first staged at Nepal Academy on the occasion of International Women’s Day. Sunday 4 April, Kamal Mani Theatre, Patan, tickets Rs 200, discount for students.

Chaitya & Silent Flow, works of Kalash Shrestha and Sushma Shukla made during their one-year residency sponsored by the Australian Himalayan Foundation. Opens Sunday 4 April, Siddhartha Art Gallery, 4216546.

Khariko Ghero (The Caucasian Chalk Circle), a Berlolt Brecht play about a peasant girl and her adopted son set against our recent, politically turbulent history. Directed by Max Webster and Mia Theil. Have at Rimal Theatre, Gurukul, performances resume from 6 April-1 May, 5.30pm, everyday except Mondays, 4466956.

American Voices: Broadway-focused workshops, five-day long workshop for theatre enthusiasts that will end with a joint performance with ‘American Voices’ performers this weekend. Saturday, 3 April, Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory, Jhamsikhel, 4491234.

Infiltration of Darkness, an exhibition of paintings by one of the most promising young artists of Nepal, Sunil Sigdel, 26 March-18th April, Kathmandu Contemporary Art Centre, Jhamsikhel.

Painting for peace and harmony, mural painting with Andorran artist Jordi Casamjor on the south perimeter wall of Hyatt Regency Hotel, presented by The Himalayan Children’s Foundation of Kathmandu, 4 April, 10am.

Spring Camp 2010, organised by Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory, open to children aged 3 to 12 to discover the joy of dance, music and theatre. Runs till 9 April. Reservations at 5013554 or info@katjazz.com.np.
MUSIC

Disco party and tapas festival, seems like an unlikely combination but the disco itself will be a good change from the trance-y oblivion that is Thamel. And we are told Christine will be serving tapas all night long. Friday, 2 April, 8pm onwards, Délices de France Restaurant, Ganesh Man Singh Building, Thamel, 4260326, dress appropriately.

Moksh Rock Festival, workshops and performances by a who’s who of the Nepali rock music scene. Expected guests: Muki Shuya of Muki and Revival, 1974 AD, Hari Maharjan, and more. 10-13 April, 5pm onwards, Moksh, Jhamsikhel.

Albatross live at Lakhey, Pey brought the house down with their first reunion gig at the House of Music last Friday. If you are new to the band, we suggest you print out the lyrics of their songs because everyone will be singing along. Wednesday, 7 April, 7pm, Lakhey Bar, Darbar Marg.

Kalakarmi, launch of Hari Maharjan Project’s debut album, Kalakarmi. The album will be one to watch because Hari Maharjan has been labelled the best guitarist in Nepal. Saturday, 3 April, Nepal Music Center, Pinjathatih, 4450463.

JSC Quartet, bringing you live smooth jazz through the night at Comfort Zone. Hang around with the cool cats and enjoy the cool breeze of the night with a rooftop view. Thamel, rooftop of Bank of Kathmandu, every Friday, 7-11pm, 9841364368.

Jazzfusion at New Orleans, Jhamsikhel at 7pm, 2 April. 5522708.

Jatra ladies night, one free cocktail for all the ladies and mesmerizing Sufi and Nepali music with Dhamendra Shwan. Sounds like a win-win. Every Wednesday at Jatra Bar, Thamel.

GETAWAYS

Mountain Bike Festival, go for an exhilarating downhill ride on a mountain bike at the festival organised by Initiative Outdoor, then relax with food and drinks from the stalls. Saturday, 3 April, Gyanodaya Residential School, Khokana, 2pm till late, 9851014586, www.initiativeoutdoor.com.


Paragliding picnic, head towards Godavari on your favourite off-road bike, take a tandem paraglide flight with one of the experienced pilots, and finish off with a picnic in Godavari Botanical Garden. Pick up also available, booking and info at 5536863, ktmparagliding.com.

DINING

The Oriental Tearoom at Pipalbot has rather complicated opening hours but a mouth-watering spring menu. Try sake-cured salmon for lunch and twice-cooked caramelised pork belly for dinner. Wednesday to Monday for lunch, and Thursday to Saturday for dinner, Batar Mahal Revisited, 4267657, bookings preferred. Everest Steak House, an old-school joint for everything steak. A sanctuary for meat. Thamel, near Chhetrapati chowk, 4260471.

Jazo, a quiet place ideal for beer and relaxing conversation. Bring a friend and enjoy their special barbeque set for a mix of everything, Jawalakhel (near the zoo), 5538921.

Admissions twice a year: February & August
HAPPENINGS

KIRAN PANDAY

GRAINS OF HOPE: Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sujata Koirala, whose father passed away recently, serves rice to seniors at an old age home in Pashupati on Wednesday, as is customary on the 12th day of mourning.

KIRAN PANDAY

WEEKEND WEATHER by NGAMINDRA DAHAL

KATHMANDU

FRI SAT SUN

25-13 26-14 27-14

Wednesday night’s thunderclouds delivered less rain than they threatened, and left in their wake clear skies and cool daytime temperatures. The westerly front that entered our climatic zone last week has lapsed, though pressure should remain low. People in the west can expect scattered and light rainfall. Those in Kathmandu can look forward to beautiful, sunny days.

RAM & RAM: President Ram Baran Yadav swears in Ram Prasad Shrestha as chief justice on Monday at the Presidential Palace.

KIRAN PANDAY

INTO THE BLUE: Devotees pull a chariot into Gahana Pokhari, Handi Gaun in celebration of Gahana Khojne Jatra.

WELCOME PUSH: British Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s Special Representative for Peace-Building, Jack McConnell, meets Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal in Singh Darbar on Wednesday.

KIRAN PANDAY

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N.A.T.I.O.N | 11

Flower power

AHMAD ISKANDAR

ook through the lyrics of Nepal’s best-loved songs, and you may conclude this country has an obsession with flowers. Even the national anthem, Sayani Thughar Phool Kaa, (made of hundreds of flowers) serves as a reminder of their power. But if the people are singing praises of flowers, the floriculture industry is moving to a rather more melancholic tune.

Since the Floriculture Association of Nepal (FAN) was set up in 1992, the number of floriculture nurseries has grown from 60 to 600 in 2009, according to president Arun Chettri. But the full picture is far from rosy. Numbers have virtually plateaued since 2003, when there were 550 nurseries. Chettri attributes the slowing of growth not to a saturation of demand, but the absence of a floriculture policy like that in many other leading industries.

"Local demand is growing at a steady rate of about 10 per cent yearly, but the supply has not been able to match demand," says Chettri.

Empowering flowers

1. Government policies, such as air freight subsidies and loans to lower interest rates.
2. Joint research on hybrid seed production and diseases and pest resistance.
3. Cooling storage at international airports and market districts.
4. Collaboration of government, agricultural institutes and private floriculture companies to strengthen human resources.
5. Training, conferences and seminars by qualified government personnel to impart more technical knowledge to growers.
6. Joint research on hybrid seed production and diseases and pest resistance.
7. Cooling storage at international airports and market districts.
8. Joint research on hybrid seed production and diseases and pest resistance.
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Apart from the need for technical growing expertise, acquiring financial backing has also proved a problem. "Banks are only providing short-term investment loans, when the industry itself needs 10 to 15 years to mature," says Gaire.

Such obstacles have hampered the growth of the floriculture industry. "Local demand is growing at a steady rate of about 10 to 15 per cent yearly, but the supply has not been able to match demand," says Chettri.

FAN figures show that cut flower imports went down to a low of 18 per cent in 2002, but crept back up to 25 per cent as of last year. Subarna Shrestha, operations director of major retailer Women in Floriculture, offers a similar breakdown. "Up to 20 per cent of her flowers are imported from India, and the figure is double in certain seasons.

This is a worrisome sign, as Nepal’s closest competitors India and China are catching up and slowly eating into the local market. "If this continues, I might eventually have to close down my business," lamented Gaire.

Nepal’s floriculture industry has also failed to capitalise on export potential. Exports of Rs 60 million were divested by dollar sales of Rs 560 million in 2009. "Indian floriculturists get up to 90% of support from government, for instance government will provide wells for water," says Shrestha. "Nepali growers are at a disadvantage as they get no help at all.”

So how can the industry reach its full potential? A study published in 2009 by the Department of Biology at Kathmandu University has several recommendations (see box) that emphasise government support and research. This help might just be around the corner.

According to Shashi Adhikari, under-secretary of the planning division of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, a floriculture policy has been finalised and will be tabled in a cabinet meeting next week. If it is passed, it will provide the boost industry players need. “The floriculture industry has huge potential, and with the policy in place, the sector is sure to flourish further,” says Adhikari. "It will be a huge milestone, and Floriculture will become one of Nepal’s major industries.”

The seeds of Nepal’s floriculture industry have put down strong roots and begun to bloom beautifully. The right attention is needed to ensure our flowers don’t wither away.

The 13th Floriculture Trade Fair will run from April 1-5 at Bhirikut Mandap.

he parallels with Afghanistan are already frightening in the Nepal Tarai: criminality, impunity, the absence of the state, corruption and militancy. Acres upon acres of white poppy flowers now complete the picture. Just as in Afghanistan, it is difficult to tell the difference between political militancy, criminality and terrorism. Police estimate that up to 2500 bighas (4175 acres) of farms in Bara and Parsa are growing poppies. That is enough to produce 30,000 kg of opium, which can be refined into 3.5 tons of heroin. Officials estimate that Nepal is now exporting nearly Rs 3 billion worth of opium.

Middlemen come to villages to pay IRs 65,000 for a kilo of opium, but if the farmer can take it across the border himself, the same amount can fetch IRs 80,000. “Why wouldn’t I grow poppy if I can make up to Rs 100,000 per Kathha (0.08 acres)?” asks Shahidullah Dewan. Opium has become such a lucrative cash crop that many farmers in the Tarai who were growing cannabis have switched to poppies.

Afghanistan today supplies 90 percent of the world’s opium. Travelling across the badlands of the Tarai these days, you find many of the same conditions as in Afghanistan: economic collapse, years of war, criminalisation of politics, poverty and joblessness. And just as the Taliban now source their income from opium, the Tarai’s separatist militants could do the same. More ominously, poppy fields would find even more fertile political and climatic conditions in the midhills.

“It is clear that Nepal is not just a transit for the drug trade, but is emerging as a major producer,” warns former police AIG Keshab Baral. Farmers in Parsa say the entire trade is conducted from across the border in Bihar. Indian wholesalers even send their own agricultural experts to advise farmers on farming methods. Indian middlemen pay out advances to Nepali farmers, and buy the entire crop even before it is harvested. They even promise security in case they are harassed by police. Bani’s farmers are now so professional, they produce their own poppy seeds.

“This is exactly what happened in Afghanistan,” explains police superintendent Devendra Subedi, who was an adviser for the UN in Afghanistan till 2007. “There is political instability, law and order have collapsed, there is no investment. We are on the same path.”

India has huge tracts of government-supervised farms where it grows opium for medicinal purposes. But there is also a large underground trade in contraband opium for production of brown heroin meant for export. With Nepal emerging as a major producer of opium, it is only a matter of time before Indian heroin syndicates move their production to Nepal’s lawless Tarai.

There is little doubt here that the open opium cultivation would not be possible without police and political protection. One local politician admits: “A large proportion of the farmers rely on poppy cultivation, there is no way I can do politics here if I try to stop it.”

Police involvement is nothing new. During the war, a police unit traveling to Bani’s interior to collect protection money from the drug mafia was caught in a Maoist ambush, in 2005. Thirteen police were killed.
Ganja, too

When the Indian Embassy organised a function for the inauguration of a school it helped renovate in Auraha village recently, the dignitaries probably didn’t realise that they were sitting next to a vast field of cannabis (pic, above). District officials estimate that nearly 60 per cent of the cultivated land in Parsa district is under cannabis, a total of 15,000 bigha (25,050 acres). Opium is displacing a lot of the ganja fields of the Tarai, but the area under cannabis is still considerable and is not restricted to the Tarai. Makwanpur has become a major producer, and the hill districts of the mid and far west have traditionally been bigganjs growers.

Former VDC chairman of Khaireng in Makwanpur, Rajkumar Malla, says cannabis cultivation is open and was established in the past 15 years. Had it not been for this cash crop Makwanpur’s subsistence farmers would have migrated for work because they can’t feed themselves for even six months with their meagre harvests of millet and maize.

“I have calculated that just in Khaireng alone, farmers made Rs 10 million from selling marijuana,” says Malla. A farmer with one bigha (1.67 acres) can grow a ton of ganja, and sell it at Rs 500 per kg. If he can take it across the border, the farmer can get more than double that amount.

Farmers now grow cannabis on every square inch of available land in their kitchen gardens, in backyards and on the boundaries between terraces. Cannabis even grows next to schools, health posts and behind police stations. The police are all in on it, and get Rs 400 per 12 kg packet of marijuana smuggled to India. In fact Makwanpur’s marijuana is escorted by police in night convoys of up to 40 motorcycles each, cutting the price of marijuana by half.

The only problem for farmers here is that a glut in the market has cut the price of marijuana by half.

DOPE MATHS

1 bigha (1.67 acres) of ganja field Cultivation cost: Rs 80,000 Protection money to police: Rs 100,000 Income: Rs 500,000 (if sold to middlemen) Rs 1,000,000 (if sold in India)

Cannabis was always one of the major cash crops of Nepali farmers.

Operation decontamination

“We can see the light at the end of the tunnel where mines are concerned”

Boris Cerina, ICRC Regional Weapon Contamination Adviser for Asia-Pacific, visited Nepal recently. Excerpts from an interview with Nepal Times:

Nepali Times: What brings you to Nepal?
Boris Cerina: I visit Nepal from my base in Bangkok every three to four months to exchange information on the situation in Nepal, as ICRC has no mine action delegation here. I also try to clarify what we do. Everyone, including the UN (which leads demining activities in Nepal), uses the terminology ‘mine action’ and ‘mine awareness’. In reality we are all talking about the risks posed by different kinds of mines, unexploded ordinances, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and small arms and ammunition – hence the term ‘weapon contamination’ that was introduced by ICRC last year.

So what work do you do on ‘weapon decontamination’ in Nepal?
We started a pilot project on mine risk education – again, including other weapon risks – in 2005, before the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed. We were working in up to 40 districts in 2006-7, and are now back down to 10 districts.

We support two physical rehabilitation centres – the Green Pasture Hospital in Pokhara (since 2004) and the army rehabilitation centre in Kathmandu (since 2009). The centres treated a total of 1100 people in 2009, and distributed artificial limbs and crutches where needed, for free. ICRC also runs regular ‘war surgery’ courses, which are emergency and trauma courses for doctors.

ICRC programs such as Micro Economic Initiatives provide families, including victims of the conflict and landmines, with grants of Rs 10000 to get their lives back on track.

What is the situation with weapon contamination in Nepal?
The Joint Mine Action Working Group brings together diverse actors such as the Nepal Army, the UN Mine Action Team, INSEC and others (including ICRC/Nepal Red Cross Society). There are no exact figures on how many mines there are, but there are 53 mine sites, mainly around army barracks. Twenty-four have been cleared, 20 more will be cleared this year, and the remaining nine should be cleared by the middle of 2011 by four demining teams. So we are doing pretty well on this count.

It’s difficult to gauge the extent of IEDs that were used by the opposition, but these are what cause the most accidents, mostly involving children (80%). The total number of casualties since the CPA stands at 262.

Why hasn’t Nepal joined the Ottawa Treaty on banning mines?
105 countries have joined so far, but there are no reasons for Nepal not to join as it is already implementing parts of the treaty. There are other legally binding provisions such as destroying mine stockpiles and so on, but the reason seems to be a lack of awareness and prioritisation. This takes time, which is why events held during the UN’s International Mine Action Day (April 4) are important. But progress is being made on the ground and the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction is taking a proactive role; it is currently studying what joining Ottawa will require.

You’ve worked with ICRC close to two decades, starting in your native land, Croatia. How has this informed your approach, and what would you consider a success story?
You never get used to human suffering, you just become more professional, less emotional. And it is more difficult to be neutral in your own country. But our role is clear – it is to assist the victims of conflict, whichever side they are on.
All the places I have worked in are success stories in one way or the other. But compared to places like Cambodia, Afghanistan, Iraq and even the former Yugoslavia, the problem here was on a much smaller scale and was not complicated. In five years, we are already seeing the light at the end of the tunnel here. But we would like to see Nepal join the Ottawa Treaty.

See also
‘Anti-ordinance ordinance’ #484

COLLECTIVISED: Farmers in Bishrumpur in Parsa trample their cannabis harvest underfoot before selling it to Indian middlemen.
No load-shedding zone

Makar Shrestha in Kantipur, 29 March

Singati (Dolakha): 45-year-old Bhakta Siwakoti of Lamidanda-6, a village in the north of Dolakha district, has set an example for rural electrification by lighting up three VDCs. About 200 households of Laduk, Lamidanda and Jhyaku villages are getting uninterrupted power supply from the plant Siwakoti installed himself. Kerosene lamps have become obsolete in these villages.

Siwakoti took a loan from a local cooperative and started the project. As the project progressed, the costs crossed his estimation. He borrowed money from his relatives. “The project cost me Rs 2.1 million altogether,” he says.

Besides lighting up the villages, the electricity is used to run mills for rice, flour and oil. Siwakoti only studied up to Class Four, and was completely new to the field. But he mobilised locals. Chet Kumar Shrestha offered him technical support while his friends and family members helped him in construction work. “This is not work for experts,” he says.

The tariff rate is also reasonable: Rs 105 for fixed 15 units per month and Rs 10 per unit beyond that. “We got rid of kerosene lamps,” says local shopkeeper Arjun Pande, “We open our shops until late in the evening these days.”

Introduction to the new Maoist website, www.ucpnm.org

The twenty-first century is the century of information revolution. Globalisation of information, thanks to Internet technology, has reduced the entire globe into a small rural unit. And, due to this, any positive or negative development in any corner of the earth can have its impact on the whole world in the blink of an eye.

The time we are living in is, as Lenin pointed out, the era of imperialism and proletarian revolution. But, because of Internet technology and globalisation, some features of imperialism, its mode of hegemony, are not, needless to say, alto as they were in the 19th century. Its obvious and logical consequence is that this very change can have a generous say upon the characteristic of contemporary proletarian revolution, into which the historical document of our party’s second national conference ‘Great Leap Forward: The inevitable necessity of history’ delves lucidly.

What can be the role of media in the establishment, defense and development of People’s Democracy? How the media can be one of the weapons of people’s scrutiny and control upon the state in the system of DEMOCRACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY? These questions, by the way, demand more time and effort to be answered. We’ve launched www.ucpnm.org hoping that the website will provide easy access to information about our party, the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), and our movement to all. Our party believes in no ‘conspiracy theory’ but mass line. ‘From the people, to the people’ is the basic premise of the Maoist mass line. People should have easy access to information and their right to information should always be protected. And ucpnm.org is an attempt in this direction from our side. The feedback, critiques and comments from our readers and viewers are always the most precious asset for us and our party.

From the Nepali Press
L ocal leaders still claim the May 28 deadline for the constitution can be met, but the people are sceptical. The Limbuwan National Federal Democratic Forum and the Federal Limbuwan Council of Ilam have been working on programs to protest the anticipated failure.

Dharmendra Acharya of the Nepali Congress has been pinning his hopes on leaders that an agreement will be reached soon, particularly on two issues: state restructuring and forms of governance. He is against the idea of a concordant constitution. “The constitution should be written no matter what it takes,” he says. “It’s doubtful however that the parties will resolve contentious issues any time soon. They will realise the significance only after the country enters armed conflict, resulting in economic crisis and ultimately foreign intervention.”

Bhemeshi Basnet’s’ss Committee on State Restructuring and Sharing of Power earlier this year.

The political parties’ stance’s are the main obstacle to writing the constitution. Instead of focusing on constitution writing, he feels, they launched protests in the name of civilian supremacy and an anti-Indian movement, and pulled stones or showed black flags to ministers. “They want to create instability and reap benefit from it,” he says. But president of the Maoist-affiliated Limbuwan Liberation Bar Association Appellate Unit, Madan Khadka, warns there is not enough time to follow all the procedures in enacting the new constitution. He thinks the political parties should first agree on the forms of governance and the federal model to move the process along.

Some local leaders and intellectuals are still hopeful, but the public is not. Bijay Rai, who runs a hotel in Pokhareli Bus Park, Ilam, is worried about a possible conflict. “We were hoping the new constitution would put an end to conflict in the future but it does not seem to be the case as the political parties are engaged in power games,” he says.

Already vexed by frequent bandhs and strikes, the eastern districts are worried about the delay in constitution writing and its potential consequences.

Party stances are the obstacle

Debi Khadka, Maoist CA member, Dolakha 1

How is the constitution-writing process going on?

Apparently, about 75 per cent of the constitution has been completed. But a lot of things are yet to be done. The political parties have not agreed on the fundamental issues of the constitution.

Who is to blame for the disagreement?

The political parties’ stance’s are the main obstacle. They are refusing to be flexible.

That is what is holding up the constitution-writing process?

If the leadership acts wisely, the constitution can be written on time. For that, there should be political consensus.

Your party is involved in putting down the government instead of writing the constitution?

Constitution and government are interrelated.

Recognise Chamor community

Shanti Devi Chamor, UML CA member, Kapilvastu

How many Chamor representatives are there in the CA?

There are five of us.

You are also in the Committee on State Restructuring and Sharing of Power for the Chamor community with the 14 provinces as proposed?

The draft has overlooked the issues of the Dalit community. Dals are assured special rights within the provinces, which is not sufficient. Although I approved the draft, the provinces should not be created on the basis of ethnic identity only.

Are you a supporter of political prerogatives?

The proposal came on the final day of the meeting, recommending political prerogatives for certain communities. I opposed the idea as it ignored the wellbeing of the Dalit community. We don’t want mercy in the federal system. We were discriminated against and treated as untouchable in the past. The state should compensate Dals by providing them with reservations in state mechanisms for a certain time.

What is the Chamor community expecting from the new constitution?

Chamors do not have their own land. So they should be provided with land. Chamor women are supposed to take care of women who have given birth for minimal pay, this practice should be eliminated. They should be trained as nurses and midwives. Chamors should be provided with free education and health facilities. Chamors are more discriminated against than hill Dals. Mathes leaders should understand our difficulties.

What will you do if the constitution is not written on time?

The Interim Constitution is due to expire on May 28. If it is not amended before that we will no longer be CA members.
Like half of Kathmandu, the Ass got up at an ungodly hour this week to head off to Tundikhel. Sitting cross-legged on my hindquarters doing the analom vilom and then kapalbhati while listening to Ram Dev holding forth on geopolitics, it suddenly occurred to the Mule that we should restore the monarchy and make Ram Dev king. “Sita was born in Nepal and Ram was born in India, so Nepal is India’s mamaghar,” said the godman amidst ripples of applause, “but China is Nepal’s kakaghar.” Could this be why the big flex poster behind him on the stage that depicted Ram, Sita and Gautam Buddha also had a panorama of Mt Everest, but the north face view from the Chinese side?

One-time Bollywood bomb Madhuri Dixit once got into trouble for innocently saying on arrival in Kathmandu that she felt Nepal was “like India”. But this week Ram Dev went a step further and said “Nepal aur Bharat ke janata ek hai” and no one raised an eyebrow, there were no angry editorials. His Holiness went on to talk about Nepal’s hydropower potential and how it could eradicate loadshedding and hypertension from Nepal forever. Such pearls of wisdom convince me the guru is by far the most popular public figure in Nepal today. He seems to know his stuff, and even Ram Baran looked up to Ram Dev to pay his respects. Since all our so-called leaders seek his blessings, why not make him the supreme leader and get it over with?

By now, Chairman Awesome seems to have realised that he shoots himself in the foot every time he opens his mouth. Just the other day he was warming up to his favourite subject (“no constitution until we come to power”) when he paused and said: “I’ll stop there because I have been warned not to talk too much…” But when he got onto stage with Ram Dev this week, he got so carried away again that he babbled on about how his revolution actually was a “fusion between spiritualism and dialectic materialism”. He also said he agreed with Ram Dev that animal sacrifice was barbaric, but that (under certain objective conditions) human sacrifice was ok. And he had just started waxing eloquent on how yoga was an inherent part of Mao Thought when the crowd started heckling him. Comrade Stupendousness was oblivious to the hooting, so Ram Dev came to the rescue and sent the Chairman down to practice diaphragm exercises and to explosively expel air through his leftist nostril.

The reason Comandante Terrifico seems to be hooked to the opiate of the masses is that he is losing his edge in an internal power struggle. PKD told UML honchos the other day not to trust BRB because he was RAW. Com Red Flag emerged much stronger after Kamal Kiran sided with him on not going for a vote of no confidence against the govt now. Being much better in maths since his SLC days, Baburam Sir knows his party could never muster enough votes. Besides, he thinks the UML-led coalition will get all the blame for not finishing the constitution on time if it stays on till May 28. The pro-Baburam section of the Baddie media have unleashed uncharacteristically blistering attacks on Brother Number One, and BRB himself wrote in an op-ed (choosing his words carefully) that getting into government now without a two-thirds majority would be “awesome stupidity”.

The newly-revamped Maoist website is worth a visit (www.ucpnm.org) because it has the latest updates, central committee decisions and even a streaming video of the Chairman’s speeches, minus the Shaktikhor tape. It will soon carry the new constitution drafted by Com Khimlal Dev-quota, to be launched at the May Day rally. The site also contains the address of the party headquarters at ‘Perish Danda’.

If you are a Tamang from Nepal with ‘Lama’ as a surname, be prepared to be singled out at immigration in Shanghai for special interrogation. Apparently those guys think you are all related to HH, The Dalai Lama. ass(at)nepalitimes.com