EYE IN THE SKY: The effect of deforestation in the Terai is clearly visible along the India-Nepal border in this photograph taken from a Delhi-Kathmandu flight recently. The straight line marks the border between the Valmiki Forest Reserve in India’s Bihar state and forests that have been cleared recently to make way for farmlands on the Nepal side.

Cross Border

p3 Prashant Jha looks at the intra-party contentions blocking consensus
p4 Paawan Mathema takes a few short-cuts through Kathmandu’s traffic
p7 Namita Gokhale on the region’s literature and literary festivals
p12-13 Singapore’s Gurkhas could do with the kind of victory the British Gurkhas secured in the UK
CLAIMING SITA
Last week’s story on Sita Tamang (‘Long journey home’, Ekal Shwail), coupled with CK Lal’s commentary on the same (‘Conflict of coverage’), inspired and drew ire. Here’s a round-up of what our readers had to say on the former Maoist child soldier’s recent statement at the UN Security Council, media coverage of the event, and the Maoist threats to Sita Tamang upon her return to Nepal.

- It’s not the media that exploited Sita Tamang as a child. Nor did they force her to join their army against her will and against international humanitarian law. It isn’t the media that threatened her when she dared speak out at the Security Council. Yet, Mr CK Lal blames the media.
- There is not a word against the brutal psychopathic monsters who did this to Sita and tens of thousands of other children in Nepal and continue to do so. I have never been angry reading anything in Nepali Times even if I didn’t agree with it. But today I am boiling mad.

KiranL

- Lal got some things very right and some others extremely wrong: he’s correct to hold Radhika Coomaraswamy and the media responsible for putting Sita Tamang at risk. However, he is absolutely off target, in my opinion. An odd form was this intentional trap for the Maoist! How dare you suggest that the criminals who force children into their army and then threaten them when they communicate their hardships against that experience are somehow the victim? Coomaraswamy & the media were irresponsible. But the Maoist threats in their true Machiavellian intentions through their wicked deeds.

Hange

- If the UN is genuine in its concern for the brave Sita Tamang did they offer her family resettlement in a safe haven? They should then finance the moving, housing and employment/education for her. Surely this is the very least that should be done for someone who has fought enough to rescue such organised abuse of children.

Dave

- Long journey home

- He that has no shame has no conscience. Army and Maoists have neither bodies to be punished nor heads to be decapitated. If you dare to compare Sita Tamang’s or Sita’s cases will remain a cry in the wilderness. Yes, laws catch flies but let hornets go free.

Gole

- The Royal Nepali Army also used thousands of children, not as combatants, but for intelligence gathering and lookouts. The UN has its own global agenda in highlighting a Maoist child soldier. But the state also used children during the conflict. Both sides were guilty. Of course, such facts tend to get buried with the passage of time and when your agenda is to portray the rebels as inhuman and evil. One hopes that those in the know see it as a common problem. It’s a national shame.

gangyal

- Surprised you are not a shaid yet, Gangyal! Committed! The typical way the Maoists respond to allegations of human rights violations is to always say: “But the army did it too.” As if it justifies that their crime. Yes, the army was also responsible. There were many cases of rape, torture and extra-judicial executions. But by stretching the imagination were they using child soldiers. The Maoists should have the guts to admit their mistakes. That they won’t do it again, and that they will compensate the child victims of their crimes. I personally don’t think the Maoists are capable of such remorse or contrition.

Gangyal

If there is one acronym that makes people’s eyes glaze over it is ‘SAARC’. Even if the hint of a write-up on south Asian regional cooperation can induce readers to flip over it is ‘SAARC’. Even the hint of a write-up on south Asian regional cooperation can induce readers to flip over it is ‘SAARC’. Even the hint of a write-up on south Asian regional cooperation can induce readers to flip over it is ‘SAARC’. Even the hint of a write-up on south Asian regional cooperation can induce readers to flip over it is ‘SAARC’. Even the hint of a write-up on south Asian regional cooperation can induce readers to flip over it is ‘SAARC’. Even the hint of a write-up on south Asian regional cooperation can induce readers to flip over it is ‘SAARC’. Even the hint of a write-up on south Asian regional cooperation can induce readers to flip over it is ‘SAARC’. Even the hint of a write-up on south Asian regional cooperation can induce readers to flip over it is ‘SAARC’. Even the hint of a write-up on south Asian regional cooperation can induce readers to flip over it is ‘SAARC’. Even the hint of a write-up on south Asian regional cooperation can induce readers to flip over it is ‘SAARC’. Even the hint of a write-up on south Asian regional cooperation can induce readers to flip over it is ‘SAARC’. Even the hint of a write-up on south Asian regional cooperation can induce readers to flip over it is ‘SAARC’. Even the hint of a write-up on south Asian regional cooperation can induce readers to flip over it is ‘SAARC’. Even the hint of a write-up on south Asian regional cooperation can induce readers to flip over it is ‘SAARC’. Even the hint of a write-up on south Asian regional cooperation can induce readers to flip over it is ‘SAARC’. Even the hint of a write-up on south Asian regional cooperation can induce readers to flip over it is ‘SAARC'.

When the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was set up in 1985, critics said it was way ahead of its time. Now they say it has outlived its usefulness. But blaming SAARC is like blaming the UN: the organisation can only move as fast as its slowest member. SAARC is by definition the lowest common denominator of one of the least developed parts of the world. South Asian countries have shown, as the Europeans have realised now, that all politics is local. You can cooperate on turocracia, postal services and sports, but South Asia, which has twice as many poor people as its sub-Saharan Africa, just can’t seem to lift the living standards of its 1.4 billion people. Regional cooperation is even more intractable if it is about free trade, security cooperation and political multilateralism. Part of the reason the Track One train derailed long ago is because of the gravitational pull of its largest member. New Delhi would rather deal individually with its neighbours than they negotiate.

Which is why Bangladesh is now looking east and is more excited about BIMSTEC. Pakistan is preoccupied with restoring its strategic depth. Sri Lanka and India behave as if it just an accident of continental drift that located them offshore of India.

SAARC is such a karmic beast that its inertia has even infected Track 2 initiatives usually populated by retired South Asian bureaucrats. As one way put it recently at a South Asian conference: “Track 2 is full of Track 1 wannabes.” So perhaps we can already look beyond Track 2.

Track 3 encompasses South Asian artists, activists, film-makers and writers who have joined hands across a region that was once one, before the boundaries of nation states cleaved us into many. A good example is the Travelling Film South Asia documentary festival that begins at the Yala Maya Kendra on Friday. Or the Aman- Asha collaboration between Indian and Pakistani newspapers.

Then there are the South Global Asians we can call Track 4: Pakistanis, Indians, Sri Lankans, Bangladeshi or Nepalis living in Canada, UK, US or Australia. They are lumped together whether they like it or not, and now mingle, interact and are building a common identity. The Gulf and the Malay peninsula, too, are now part of a Greater South Asia.

And what of Track 5: the cross-border oسمosis of traders, farmers, brides and grooms (and even terrorists) that infrate across barbed wire and land mines. The India-Nepal border is perhaps the ideal international frontier: all borders should be as open, allowing people and goods unfettered movement. We know this, and now, more regulations we put into border controls the more our law enforcement and immigration officials get a chance to harass and extort our own people.

Track 6: of the South Asian institutes in universities around the world where researchers and academics know more about us than we do.

Borders shackles our minds and bind us to our petty patriotism, forcing a piecemeal approach when our problems and our solutions are transboundary.

WATER SOLUTIONS
Nepal should give priority to watershed management, rain harvesting, pond making and check dams immediately, instead of expensive constructions, inviting corruption and commissions (Troubled Waters, #510). Community participation should be the basis of implementing such projects for conserving water and storing the monsoon rain. Groundwater recharge projects should be started as pilot projects. This has been successful in desertified areas in India like Gujarat.

GREEN SCENE
It is heartbreaking to read about the efforts of our youth in promoting bicycles in the city (Cycle city, #510). We are building roads along all the rivers. So we should build cycle lanes too, adjacent to the rivers and the roads, so they will not be interfered with by other crossings. Don’t miss this opportunity.

Gauri Nath Rimal

TOURISM AWARDS
At first glance, I thought the structure on your front page picture mines? The North in Nepal, possibly Boudha (First impressions, #510). It was really amazing to see such a clean and elegant pavement in China. I am sure it gave a very inspiring impression to the Chinese and many wanted visit Nepal. But the truth is that the country has gone to the gullows with all the political wrangling prevailing in the nation. We could have so many types of tourism. We are blessed with culture, history, and diverse terrain. The only thing lacking is the political will and an enabling environment to develop tourism.

Nepali Suvchintak

Published by Himalmedia Pvt Ltd  |  www.himalmedia.com  |  Printed at Jagadamba Press  |  Rabi Thapa  |  Advertising@himalmedia.com  |  01-5250017-19  |  GPO Box 7251 Kathmandu  |  Copyright © Himalmedia Pvt Ltd 2010  |  All rights reserved  |  www.nepalimes.com  |  Times  |  nimes@himalmedia.com  |  Ramesh Thapa  |  Kiran Maharjan  |  www.nepaliimes.com

Q. Who should lead the new government?

Q. How many World Cup matches did you watch?

Weekly Internet Poll #511

Total votes: 1,913

Yes, I watched 13

No, I didn’t watch 4

Sorry, but I don’t know 40

I switched on and off 37

I aided my son to watch 4

Weekly Internet Poll #510 1-5 01-5250017-19  |  www.nepaliimes.com

Q. What should the next government do?

Q. How many World Cup matches did you watch?

Weekly Internet Poll #511 1-5 01-5250017-19  |  www.nepaliimes.com

Q. Who should lead the new government?
The present political disarray has resulted because none of the parties have been able to judge, and coherently answer, two questions. Do they want the next elections, and when? Do they want a constitution, and how much can they compromise to get that?

The Maoists remain the strongest organised force. Their internal assessment is that despite greater disillusionment, voters are willing to give them another chance. This week’s revelation that 65 per cent Nepalis are poor shows why the Maoists have a readymade constituency. Ethnic assertion. It has not been figured out caste alignments, or brought in newer Madhesi faces, but the Maoists have destroyed the credibility of the NC, and when supporters cannot shape their future, the Maoists are back in power for an upper hand in the next elections. They are the strongest organised force. Their universal franchise, mass-based support will be enough to win over young, ethnic voters. Old-time supporters cannot shape local level outcomes. The party has no clue how to deal with ethnic assertion. It has not brought in newer Madhesi faces, figured out caste alignments, or pushed the ‘Madhesi agenda’. Without this, it cannot recover its base in the Tarai.

The political parties are too caught up in their own internal dilemmas to be able to forge a consensus with each other for the Maoists would then never even have an invisible force because of their mass-based fronts. But if this line had prevailed and Maoists were sure of electoral success, they would have pushed for a constitution by May 28 this year.

The counter-argument is there are no guarantees in electoral politics. Public sentiment isickle. Rivals will not be complacent, and ‘rivalry and expansionists’ will do whatever is required to defeat the Maoists. This is why there can be no compromises on the PLA till there is a guarantee that a ‘progressive constitution’ is written, the Maoists are back in power, and till they are sure that the next elections are for them to win. If this does not happen, then the present political line only has tactical value and the party should just wait for the next opportune moment to strike through a mass uprising. The existence of this other line, and Prachanda’s opportunism, gives other parties enough grounds to suspect their intentions. They are struggling with their own dilemmas.

The NC has not learnt anything from the 2008 debacle. Only harping on ‘democracy’ is not enough to win over young, aware, and motive voters. Old-time supporters cannot shape local level outcomes. The party has no clue how to deal with ethnic assertion. It has not brought in newer Madhesi faces, figured out caste alignments, or pushed the ‘Madhesi agenda’. Without this, it cannot recover its base in the Tarai.

Most in the NC recognise the need for a new constitution, but there is a strong element within saying this would only benefit the Maoists as their agenda of ‘republicanism, secularism, federalism’ would be vindicated. The only way for the NC to re-emerge as the primary national player, they argue, is by allying with the conservatives. This group may be peripheral, but cannot be dismissed.

The UML controlled the state for the past year, which helped it develop a strong patronage network. But while Nepalis are struggling with their own dilemmas to beable to forge a consensus with each other, the Maoists are back in power for an upper hand in the next elections. They are the strongest organised force. Their universal franchise, mass-based support will be enough to win over young, ethnic voters. Old-time supporters cannot shape local level outcomes. The party has no clue how to deal with ethnic assertion. It has not brought in newer Madhesi faces, figured out caste alignments, or pushed the ‘Madhesi agenda’. Without this, it cannot recover its base in the Tarai.

Most of the UML rank and file are fearful the Maoists are natural allies, but in the ‘battle for democracy’, they prefer the NC-UML combine. Efforts at a unity government have failed because the parties could not address these internal questions. They need time to do so. In all likelihood, we will witness a major political crisis in about six months. It is only when the next May 28 deadline approaches that all parties, especially the Maoists, will be forced to make these choices. Till then, they will try to expand their power for an upper hand in the final negotiations.
It's rush hour. The Balkhu junction on the Ring Road, southeast of Kalanki, is as congested as all the other Valley intersections at this time. But the Balkhu Bridge could breathe a little easier—if only cars heading towards Thapathali steered their wheels to the right, to take the ‘link’ road that runs along the Bagmati River.

Kathmandu’s chaotic traffic needs no introduction. Journeys across the city now have to be measured in hours, not minutes. There are approximately 444,000 vehicles registered in Bagmati Zone and the capacities of the roads have long since reached saturation. Traffic is often at a standstill, with significant costs in terms of lost time, needless wastage of fuel, and pollution. It’s difficult to put a number on the economic cost caused by traffic jams.

“The number of vehicles in Kathmandu increased by over 100,000 last year, while the roads have hardly been extended,” says Binod Singh, Chief of Kathmandu Traffic Police. The unplanned development of the valley makes it difficult and expensive to widen existing roads. But Devendra Dongol, Senior Planner at the Urban Development Department, asserts that building link roads is the most viable option available. “Houses have not yet been built near the rivers’ banks, which makes land acquisition relatively easier and less expensive,” he says. Dhanapati Sapkota, Head of the Urban Conservation Division at the Kathmandu Metropolitan, adds that link roads also help in river management and contribute to the development of the area. There is also the possibility of planting green belts along such roads.

At present, private construction has been restricted along the banks of various rivers and streams in the Kathmandu Valley and the objective is to eventually complete a network of link roads. Roads are now being developed on both sides of the Bagmati, Bishnumati, Mahanama, and Dhobi Khola (see map). Binod Singh says that at present, 25 percent of vehicles use these link roads, but use would increase if the roads were complete. The 2.8 km Bishnumati corridor, funded by ADB, extends from Teku Bridge to Sorhakhutte. Using this route, about 4,000 vehicles travelling between Kalimati and Thapathali, which normally goes via Tripureswor and Lainchaur, chop two kilometres off their journey and a whole lot of hassle.

Not all projects have been as lucky as the Bishnumati corridor in terms of funds. The absence of coordination between responsible departments has also led to delays in implementation. Binod Khadka, Community Liaison Officer of the Dhobi Khola Project, says, “This project received approval in 2003 but actual work started only three years ago when it reached the Kathmandu Valley Town Development Committee.” When completed, a surfaced road will connect Chabahil to the Bagmati Bridge at the end of New Baneswor. “Insufficient funding is now holding up the project. We are hoping that this year’s budget will grant the requested capital.” Clearly, link roads offer an alternative and logical way of extending the length of the valley’s roads while providing ‘short cuts’ across the different routes. There is potential to build such links at Hanumante (Bhaktapur), Mahadev (Balaju), Kodku (Labanpur), Nahil, Karikhuni and Tukucha, and extend the existing connections. The recent confirmation of $22 million dollars worth of aid from ADB for traffic management will assist the further development of link roads.

Simply creating a network of link roads will not be enough, however. “The intersections have to be remodelled to let vehicles from the link roads join the main road smoothly,” argues Anand Joshy, a senior traffic volunteer. “Otherwise link roads will just add to the blockage at the junctions on the core roads.”
D-Day
A frenzied race has started for the premiership after the Legislature-Parliament fixed the date for the prime minister’s election on 21 July. Despite an all-party commitment to electing a consensus government, leaders have been making frantic attempts to form majority governments that will suit them. Parties are required to submit nominations of candidates by 20 July. On 21 July, parliament will be electing its third prime minister since it came into being in 2008.

MRP mess
The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has launched an investigation into Oberthur Technologies following claims that the French firm produced fake documents and non-compliant printer technologies to land the MRP (Machine Readable Passport) contract. Petitions were filed by fellow-bidders Perum Peruri (Indonesia) and De La Rue International (UK) against the Ministry’s decision to award the deal. The deal gave Oberthur the sole right to print and supply four million MRPs. Meanwhile, the Public Accounts Committee has also launched a probe on the decision after some of its members questioned the authority of the caretaker government to decide on such a sensitive issue. The government has also started to freeze the bank accounts of Kham and his accomplice.

Incorrigible Kham
The government has sought the handover of UCPN (Maoist) central committee member Kali Bahadur Kham, ‘Bibidh’, after the former was found to be involved in the Yarchagumba trade and the looting of a Chinese businessman. He is also wanted for the murder of Kathmandu-based businessman Ram Hari Shrestha. Police say Kham has been escaping arrest by hiding in one of the PLA cantonments. But when the home minister asked for disclosure of Kham’s whereabouts, Maoist Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal claimed Kham had not been in contact with the party. The government has also started to freeze the bank accounts of Kham and his accomplice.
ECONOMIC SENSE
Artha Beed
Nepali politicians appear to believe in the phrase ‘ignorance is bliss’. Why else would they choose to pay no attention to the issues of the economy?
Listen to what the lawmakers at the Public Accounts Committee have to say on electricity tariffs or the speeches of our politicians on topics ranging from culture to agriculture. One thing they consistently ignore is the economic aspects of the same.
Cost issues take a back seat whether we discuss PLA integration or the management of dwindling public corporations like Nepal Airlines. Transport syndicates have made the cost of transporting goods on the Arniko Highway ten times more expensive than transporting goods on the East West Highway, but who cares? Rastriya Banijya Bank and Nepal Bank Limited continue to be an experiment for donors as part of financial sector reform, but who cares? Rastriya Banijya Bank and Nepal Bank Limited continue to be an experiment for donors as part of financial sector reform, but who cares? Rastriya Banijya Bank and Nepal Bank Limited continue to be an experiment for donors as part of financial sector reform, but who cares?
Prime minister and backstabbing government, GDP has still managed to grow at 3.5 per cent and the growth of disposable income has not abated.
Companies are going to post good profits and the banks will report profit growth despite the liquidity crisis. One MNC CEO quipped, “Can you believe we can deliver such results despite keeping factories closed for 150 days? Imagine our performance if we could operate at full capacity”. This sentiment may sum up the state of the Nepali economy.
While the growth in the formal market may not be visible, the informal sector is buzzing with activity. No wonder restaurants that don’t provide VAT bills do a roaring trade. The cash made by plundering natural resources like forests, river beds and medicinal herbs is never counted in income computations. Immigration businesses run under the garb of educational consultancies and NGOs and non-profit organisations make money in the name of health and education. But political parties have their mouth zipped as these illegal money makers generously fill the party’s coffers; so what if the state’s treasury is running empty?
In any case the government coffers are too often seen as a transit point.
Economic growth could accelerate if the government took initiatives and action-based responses to some questions. Is load shedding better than buying electricity at prices a quarter of what people spend on running inverters and generators? Are private power producers really welcomed by the government? Could a consistent supply of fuel after standing in long queues be a solution to the fuel shortage? The government could pump large amounts of untapped resources like forests, river beds and medicinal herbs.
A new government will be formed and perhaps this beed will probably write a similar note at the end of the next fiscal year, but one can hope that, like in India, the private sector will begin to defend its own turf rather than fight its own little wars, like the politicians.
WWW.ARTHABEED.COM

Ignored economy

Maybe it’s time to take matters into our own hands

Buddha’s ATR-72
Buddha Air introduced the first of its new ATR-72 turboprop aircraft with a test flight from Kathmandu to Biratnagar and Bhadrapur on Wednesday. The 70-seater twin-engine plane is the most fuel-efficient plane in its class, and has noise-reduction technology in the cabin. Buddha’s managing director Birendra Bahadur Banest says the ATR-72s will be used on the carrier’s new international routes to Kolkata, Lucknow and Patna in the coming year, while the Beechcraft will start operating flights to Paro in Bhutan from autumn on. The plane will initially be used to operate five flights a day to Biratnagar, taking Buddha’s daily seat capacity on that sector from the present 180 to 350.

ECO Yeti
Yeti Airlines has planted 600 trees in a community forest in Kathmandu under its Green Far-West Project. For every passenger that takes a flight with Yeti on the Kathmandu-Dhading route, the company will plant a sapling in a community forest in the far western region.

Swift chasers
Hansraj Hulaschand presented two Pulsar 180 motorbikes to Rupandehi Traffic police. The company has been supporting the traffic police of various districts by providing them with bikes.

SLC win
Sundar International Higher Secondary School will continue to felicitate SLC graduates of Madhyapur Thimi who have made it to the top ten with certificates, awarding the highest scorer with a prize of Rs 12,000. The school will provide scholarships to deserving students.

Smartly cells
CG Impex, the sole authorised distributor of LG Mobiles, has launched the android-powered smartphone LG G Pad (LT GT540). The set allows its users to access a variety of applications and also features enhanced social networking functions in a high-powered multimedia environment.

Real scorer
Ashok Adhikari of Jorpati won the score the Real Goal Campaign from Dabur Real Juice. Adhikari was presented with the bumper prize – a full option KIA Picanto Car, in the National Stadium before the final match of the World Cup.

Grand prizes
Him Electronics, the official marketer of Samsung, announced the 35 winners of Samsung 32” LCD televisions under its World Cup scheme. Prize distribution took place at the Bakery Café, Sundhara.

Biking trophy
After a seven-week promotion, Pepsi announced the final winner of its Football Mania. Rakesh Shrestha from Dolakha has won the Score the Real Goal Campaign from Dabur Real Juice. Adhikari was presented with the bumper prize – a full option KIA Picanto Car, in the National Stadium before the final match of the World Cup.

Branching west
Kumari Bank has opened two branches in the western region in Kawasaki, Tulsipur, Nepalgarhi, Salyan, Surkhet and Dhangadi. The bank now has a network of 27 branches and 22 ATMs across the country.
Indian writer Namita Gokhale is co-founder director of Yatra Books and the Jaipur Literature Festival (pic, right), which attracted over 300 authors and 30,000 visitors this year. Last month, she hopped onto a plane and dropped in on Manisha Koirala’s wedding bash. But she was rather more interested in the Nepali literary scene. Nepal Times asked her what she makes of it all.

Nepali Times: Who is Namita Gokhale? Writer, publisher, festival director? Namita Gokhale: Writer, publisher, festival director…yes, I think it works in that order of priority, although the excitement and intellectual energy and sheer stimulus of the Jaipur Literature Festival tends to take over my life...

Do you think encouraging writing in English through such lucrative prizes will extend the reach of South Asians writing in English at the expense of vernacular and even major national languages? The fact that the DSC prize is open for translated work from any South Asian language into English actually supports and encourages a more multi-lingual appreciation of literature.

What are the difficulties and opportunities for independent publishers like Yatra in India? Independent publishers face challenges in distribution and sometimes in the scale of operations they can sustain. But the commitment in the mindset of the independent publishers, and the lower administrative overhead costs, work positively for them.

What is your take on Nepali literature, and more specifically, Nepalis writing in English? I think Nepali writing is vibrant and rooted and engaged. It does not carry the baggage of postcolonial pretensions and relates dynamically to the changes in Nepali society.

What do you think about the prospect of a Kathmandu Literary Festival? Kathmandu has loyal friends and visitors internationally, and is the eye of the storm in a powerful cycle of change. It makes sense to have a literary festival here...

How was the Jaipur Festival when it started out, and did you ever imagine it would grow in size and stature so quickly? The Jaipur Festival began five years ago with 18 authors. 2 of whom couldn’t make it all the last minute. But it integrated Indian language and Indian English writers, as well as international writers, without pomposity or pretension. I think it was the multilingual, plural and determinedly democratic nature of the Jaipur Festival that made audiences so receptive. Of course I never ever imagined it would grow to this size at this speed, and neither did my co-director William Dalrymple. Then one day we woke up to realise that the world was tuning in to Jaipur!

What is the role of such festivals? I think literary festivals can resist the consumerist dumbing down that the mass media sometimes seems to promote. Festivals encourage individual voices, alternative forums and democratic debate. They give space to young writers and an opportunity to established writers to renew their connection with what’s happening around.

Namita’s yatra
**EVENTS**

Health and Beauty Expo, complete health and beauty solutions under one roof. Till Saturday 17 July, 11am to 6pm, Bhrikuti Mandap Exhibition Hall, 5538878

Travelling Film South Asia ‘10 Kathmandu, showcasing 12 outstanding documentaries from South Asia. From Friday 16 July until Sunday, Yala Maya Kendra, Patan Dhoka, Tickets Rs 20, 5552141, www.filmsouthasia.org

Yala Maya Classic, soulful performances on violin, tabla and gayan. Sunday 18 July, 5pm, Baggikhana Hall, Yala Maya Kendra, Patan Dhoka, 5553767

**DINING**

Splash Bar & Grill, great weekend BBQ dinner, Fridays and Saturdays, 6pm to 9pm, Radisson Hotel, Lazimpat, Rs 1200, 4411818

Olive Garden, Mediterranean food fest. Everyday, 6pm onwards, Radisson Hotel, Lazimpat, 4411818

**LIFE TIMES**

Health and Beauty Expo, complete health and beauty solutions under one roof. Wednesday 21 July to Thursday 22 July, Nepal Academy Hall, Kamala Chaurahi, 4440120, 4433058

Poetic Moments, an exhibition of paintings by various artists. Till Saturday 17 July, 8am to 8pm, Kanpur Art Gallery, Boudhanath Circle, 985108492

8th Annual Wine Festival, be there at Khroy’s for the biggest congregation of wine lovers in Kathmandu. June-September, Khroy’s, Thamel, 4250440

Vesper Café, has an outdoor patio good for leisurely weekend brunches. Serves good salads and steak-wraps. Jhuel, open daily

Attic, newly transformed lounge/bar ideal for Friday night drinking before hitting the dance spots. Popular among local celebrities and passing politicians. Uttar Dhoka, Lazimpat, 94416476

Everest Steak House, an old-school joint for everything steak. A sanctuary for meat. Thamel, near Chhetrapati Chowk, 4260471

Jazoo, 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), 5338321

Summit Hotel, posh Western-style dining area with candlelight and a romantic night view of the city. Get really busy with the succulent ribs basket, and add the finishing touch with a hot Dutch apple pie. Sampsa, 5521610

Haddock, big compound with ample parking space, their Western and Thakali dishes are done to perfection. Jhamel, 10am-10am, 5546431

Lhasa Bar, enjoy a beer or a splash of cocktail at this springboard for excellent young musicians starting out on the Thamel circuit. Thamel, 985101043
Crime behind bars

On first sight, young Malik El Djebena (Tahar Rahim) is unimpressive. Almost mute in his illiteracy, the young Arab who has been sentenced to six years in a French prison appears doomed to being as much a victim inside as outside. From the moment he’s fingered by the prison’s Corsican mafia to kill a fellow inmate, he’s a useful but ‘dirty’ Arab. But El Djebena, in his quiet, unobtrusive way, begins to gain trust and make friends, and through a mixture of persistence, street smarts and boldness, rises far above what others have designated him to be.

In its gradual build-up, Un prophète is as subtle as Scarface is not. The results are plain to see – even when it is clear El Djebena has made it, even when he is wholeheartedly embracing violence, he’s seldom do they make movies that don’t adhere to the traditions of genre. Once is a boy meets girl musical, but that’s where the similarities to a musical end. Writer and director John Carney has here a unique story of unrequited love between two musicians, skilfully played by Glen Hansard and Marketa Irglova. The lead characters of Hansard and Irglova do not have names, but they interact and bond so naturally that you hardly realise it. Hansard’s character is a street performer and a part-time vacuum cleaner repairer while Irglova plays a trained pianist who works as a maid and sells flowers for a living. The girl is first drawn to the street performer’s octave leaping songs and as the movie progresses, they discover each other in their passion for music. As they work together on a recording, the two are linked by an unforced intimacy, even though both of them have their hearts set on someone else. Set in Dublin, this Irish love story is buoyed by a fantastic soundtrack, composed and performed by Hansard and Irglova themselves. The best part about Once is that nothing feels strained or over the top. It’s a delightful experience.

PM

Once (2006)
Dir. John Carney
85 minutes
It’s not just revenue that Everest climbers bring to the country, but tonnes of garbage. And with hundreds of climbers aspiring to conquer our pristine mountains every year, the junk only seems to be growing. Thousands of kgs of oxygen cylinders, plastic wrappers, bottles, tents and mountaineering gear have been carelessly dumped in the mountains, scarifying their beauty and causing pollution in ecologically sensitive areas. Even the bodies of those who have perished on the mountains have sometimes been left behind, to the grief of their families and the horror of those who come across them today.

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I’m hardly alone in heaving a sigh of relief that in inverse proportion to the much-anticipated monsoon, wedding invites have ceased to flow. Too lesser or greater degrees for everyone with a social circle, but especially those firmly ensconced in Valley society, for the past few weeks have been clogged with the invitations to social gatherings. Each day, every evening sees us attending parties—formal or informal, lavish or minimalistic, a welcome opportunity to strengthen the links among friends, but also a forcefully driven reminder that, however busy we may be, we are more positive for society as a whole.

Social capital may be defined as the value derived from the power of social networks, value that can be used to achieve what mere individuals cannot. But it can also be construed negatively, in the sense that ‘bonding’ social capital serves to disproportionately strengthen the links among individuals linked by radical ideals, or individuals marginalised from society.

It’s clear that many marginalised groups across Nepal have taken the initial, necessary step of building ‘bonding’ social capital so as to find their voice. But by limiting themselves there, some of these groups isolate themselves further from the mainstream polity they are trying to break into. ‘Bridging’ social capital, on the other hand, reaches across such boundaries. It’s more difficult to achieve, but its effects are more positive for society as a whole.

In the Valley, however, the bonding that goes on is hardly an expression of marginalisation in the conventional sense. Quite the contrary. It’s a celebration of socialisation within set circles that, alas, has come to burden our financial and temporal resources, and only reinforces our magnificent, privileged isolation from the rest of the country.

This is not to argue for some kind of jackbooted state quota on how many can attend this and that, as has been unsuccessfully attempted in the past. People have the right to assemble in as vastly wasteful numbers as they desire, even if government has the right to advise otherwise. But perhaps we should reflect on whether we are making the best use of our social capital when we find ourselves greeting last night’s weary faces at Party #3 of Shirish Weds Anjali with a resigned, “So, are you coming tomorrow?”

For some reason, my heart swelled with pride for the glory that was heaped on Nepal in this tiny shop and I went to the lady behind the counter and proclaimed, “I am a Nepali. I am from Nepal!” This old lady looked at me as if she’d seen a real revolutionary for the first time and held my hand, exclaiming, “Oh, how nice to meet you. I LOVE Prachanda!” She then sat me down, ordered coffee and proceeded to ask me all kinds of questions about the ‘brave one’. Had I ever met Prachanda? What was he like in real life? How did it feel to be born in a country that was a shining example around the world? Her deferential excitement did not allow me to interject. When another elderly lady walked in, I was introduced to her as “from Nepal, the land of Prachanda”. Without asking me for my opinion they took me as their fellow comrade and invited me to a light lunch to share my revolutionary experiences with other ‘fellas’ of their community.

Perhaps a trip to Nepal is in order for those two ladies.
Shortly after Singapore left the Federation of Malaysia in 1965, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was temporarily moved out of his home at Oxley Road while security was beefed up. When Lee returned, he found Gurkha policemen posted as sentries. At that time, the Gurkhas were mainly used to quell riots and protests that were rampant during the ’50s and ’60s. Now, the safety of the prime minister was their responsibility as well.

The Gurkhas still guard 38 Oxley Road today. Forty-five years after our nation’s independence, these soldiers from Nepal continue to protect Singapore’s most important places and installations. Precious little is known about the Gurkhas except their reputation of unwavering loyalty and bravery. Yet the 60th anniversary of the Gurkha Contingent (GC) slipped by quietly last year.

Presently, the British conduct recruitment of Gurkhas yearly. Some 15,000 youths from all over Nepal vie for about 400 slots, around 100 of which are for the Singapore Police Force. The strength of the GC has been growing consistently over the years, from 760 in 1990 to over 2000 today.

Naturally, the Gurkhas are proud of their unique service to Singapore. “Without the GC, there is no peace and security in Singapore,” says Netra Gurung, vice-chairman of the Singapore Gurkhas Pensioners’ Association (SGPA). The association has scored a couple of small victories, with occasional pension reviews, but Gurung adds that the Gurkhas hope for an inflation allowance instead of arbitrary reviews.

The families of the Gurkhas remain another contentious issue. Widows of deceased servicemen do not get any part of their husbands’ pensions and though the widows of Singaporeans on pension are subject to the same policy, the SGPA contends that the situation is not the same. The wives of Gurkhas are not allowed to seek employment during their time in Singapore and so have no skills other than being a housewife.

And while their children attend local schools in Singapore when their fathers are still in service, they are only allowed to finish their education within the institute they are enrolled in upon their fathers’ retirement.

Official statistics show that slightly more than one out of three people living in Singapore are not citizens, but permanent residents and expatriates.
Ministers go out of their way to explain the need for tolerance towards newcomers, stressing that we need them to boost the population because of falling birth rates, and to provide the skills the country needs.

Yet after spending more than half their lives protecting the island state’s most important people and places, the Gurkhas and their families find themselves unwelcome the moment they hang up their blue uniforms.

Most Gurkhas do not seek citizenship or even permanent residence for themselves. After all, they arrive on our shores as foreign young men. What the Gurkhas do want are the same working opportunities extended to other foreigners and for their children not to be discriminated because of their fathers’ service.

Such requests, made to the Singapore government through letters from the SGPA, continue to be ignored. The authorities are under no pressure to act anytime soon and Singaporeans are unaware of this situation. This is unlike the United Kingdom, where a very public lobbying effort led by actress Joanna Lumley pressured the British government into according full residential rights in 2009 to Gurkhas who serve more than four years. Kharga Gurung, an executive member of the SGPA, says: “The UK Gurkhas had support from the UK people and even the MPs. Maybe if the people of Singapore support us, we will have success too.”

One Gurkha, who spent the ‘60s here fighting communists when the Malayan Communist Party was at the peak of its power, says: “I love Singapore. If anything bad happens, I am ready to fight. I am ready to go back and die for Singapore.” What does it say when we repay such devotion by saying no to their requests to remain among us?

The Mount Varnon camp in Singapore houses 2000 Gurkhas and is something of a closed community (above). SGPA Chairman Haridhoj Gurung (left) laments the Singapore government’s neglect of Gurkha issues: “We have been patient, but how long can we wait?” Tulsi Gurung (below) served as a Gurkha from 1961 to 1972, a tumultuous phase of Singapore’s history.

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Maoists’ one-sided proposals

In order to end the political impasse, the UCPN (Maoist) brought out a working plan on Saturday to manage ex-combatants within three months. The plan mentions keeping the combatants under the Army Integration and Rehabilitation Special Committee. The Maoist proposal to separate the combatants from the party by keeping them under the special committee is positive. But this in itself will not result in sustainable peace. How, when and where the ex-combatants will be managed is the most crucial question here, and this is also the bone of contention among the political parties.

Contrary to the demand of other parties, the Maoists have not specified the number of ex-combatants to be integrated into the security forces in their working plan. The plan says that the committee will hear out each ex-combatant. The Maoists have been saying that it is necessary to first separate those who want to enter social and political life and those who want to take up a rehabilitation package. After this has been done, they say, the remaining ex-combatants should qualify for integration.

The Maoists claim that with such a model, they can separate the ex-combatants in two months and integrate the rest in the remaining one month. But until the dispute over whether security force integration numbers should be determined in the camp or through political consensus is resolved, their plan will not materialise. In this sense, the core of the debate on ex-combatant integration has not really changed.

The Maoists argue that integration should be based on the standards outlined in the Comprehensive Peace Accord, as opposed to existing legal provisions, and that personal admission cannot be a model for integration. But this is unacceptable to the government, as it puts the Maoist army and the Nepal Army on the same footing. The Maoists have also proposed an alternative model of organising ex-combatants to form a new special security department. But since nothing of this sort was mentioned in the peace accord, it is highly unlikely that the parties will agree to it.

The Maoist’s proposal may not be acceptable to the other parties but they can table an amendment proposal or a different proposal based on it. Because until the issue of ex-combatant integration has been settled, constitution building and the peace process will not move forward. The formation of a consensus government, which is the most pressing need of the hour, will also not go materialise until the ex-combatants are successfully integrated.

Rays of hope

Although development works could not progress significantly this fiscal year as well, there have been improvements in the areas of hydroelectricity, roads, communications and education. Finance Minister Surendra Pandey on Sunday unveiled this year’s Economic Survey, which presents progress in the following areas.

Private sector hydroelectricity

The Lamjung Madhya Marsyangdi hydroelectricity project (70 MW) was completed this year while work started on the Chenabla hydroelectricity project in Darchula (30 MW), the Kulekhani III hydroelectricity project in Makwanpur (14 MW), and the Upper Trishuli A hydroelectricity project in Nuwakot/Razana (80 MW).

Projects with private investment such as Patikhola (0.996 MW) and Seti II (0.078 MW) were completed this year. In addition four other projects will be completed within the year with a total capacity of approximately 65 MW.

Transportation

Construction of a 16 km road connecting Kathmandu to Nigad has been completed and an additional 60 km will also be opened. By the end of the year, 216 km will be surfaced and 110 km of new roads will be constructed. Work will have commenced on an additional 60 km.

Telecommunications

Out of 3,915 VDCs telecommunication services are now available in 3,624 VDCs. Over 1.3 million new telephones lines of different technologies have been added.

Community schools

Under the provision to handover school management to communities, this year 6,634 primary schools, 2,136 lower secondary level schools and 1,350 higher secondary schools will be handed over by the end of this fiscal year. This year 24,773 day care centres were opened.

Mortality rate

In line with the Millennium Development Goals, the child mortality rate has decreased to 14 per 1,000 live births from 43 in 1996. Similarly the maternal mortality rate has decreased to 289 per 100,000 from 539 in 1990.

Toilets

1.1 million toilets are being built across the country with the help of a $19.4 million World Bank loan.

Advance heartbreak

Unable to bring out the budget in the stipulated time, the government has had to bring out an advance budget to meet basic expenditures. Finance Minister Surendra Pandey’s prediction that this could lead to the downfall of the national economy has shown how weak our economy has become. For the third consecutive year, the budget could not be implemented in time. Two years ago, too, an advance budget preceded the regular budget and last year, it took almost five months to pass the budget. As a result timely allocation and spending of the budget for development projects could not take place.

With this arrangement, economic development and job opportunities brought about by development projects will dwindle but daily expenditure will continue. The prospect is similar to that of an industry which has no production but continues to pay workers as its staff while incurring other expenditure.

If the government had presented its programs and policies on time, investors could have worked out the feasibility of investing in certain sectors. For aid, too, the government needs to show donors the budget and its expenditures of the past year. With an advance budget, getting foreign aid for new projects will be impossible as continuing work on ongoing ones.

The political parties who have pushed the country into this state of uncertainty have no concerns for the development projects that are in limbo or the youth that are forced to leave the country for want of jobs.

Shouldn’t the UCPN (Maoist), which proclaimed that all problems would vanish once Madhav Kumar Nepal resigned, take the responsibility for the missed economic and development opportunities? If only the Maoists had not created hurdles, this government would have presented a regular budget and at least some economic activities would have been taking place now. But it seems the Maoists do not have a care in the world whether the economic state of the country deteriorates or the poor have to starve, as long as it helps them to ascend to power.

Editorial in Kantipur, July 11

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Editorial in Karobar, 14 July

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Editorial in Kantipur, July 11
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Bal Krishna Gyawali in Aarthik, Nagarik, 13 July

The country’s politics have always overtaken economic development as the priority issue for the government of the day. This has led to delay in presentation of the budget every year. This delay not only disturbs resource allocation but also obstructs timely implementation of projects. In the end, the country’s development suffers. Not bringing out the budget on time means that the government will have trouble sourcing the funds and then spending them on development projects.

The government accumulates funds from internal and external sources. The delay in the budget means that the government will be unable to change the revenue policy in July and will have to continue with the previous rates. The chain effect is that the government will not be able to collect high revenues, and subsequent plans will have limited budgets. Getting the required aid from donor agencies will also be a problem if they are unaware of the specific projects they can fund on time.

The main problem will be in implementation of prioritised development programs. Even if the new budget is passed in mid-August, it is unlikely that the prioritised programs will be implemented even by the end of September. This will affect the entire process of development in the country.

KIRAN PANDAY

Myagdi: People of Mustang have been forced to migrate from their native land because of the impacts of climate change. More than half of the 16 families in Samjung and 22 families in Gheya villages have migrated elsewhere because of climate change, said Bishnu Sharma, a journalist who has been conducting research in the region.

“The after all, staying back in the village is like waiting for death,” he said.

With the rise in temperature, previously unheard of diseases are being reported in Upper Mustang. According to Narensh Lama, head of the Annapurna Conservation Area Project, Lo Manthang, migration has been reported mainly from settlements above 3000 metres above sea level.

Nawa Gurung, an inhabitant of Upper Mustang, said that the government did not respond to their plea to move the village. Claiming that their village was no longer habitable, the locals had demanded that Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal relocate them when he visited Upper Mustang a year ago. The government promised a relief package, but nothing has been done so far.

Upper Mustang has a cold climate and arid topography. It receives less than 180 millilitres of rain annually. Since last year, meteorologists say, this has decreased to 150 millilitres. The locals are concerned that even with the displacement of an entire village’s inhabitants, the government remains unperturbed.

Incorrect priorities

Bai Krishna Gyawali in Aarthik, Nagarik, 13 July

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KIRAN PANDAY
When politics gets uncertain, politicians start seeing stars. Rulers vying for top jobs are all turning to astrologers. Unfed Marxist-Leninists are OD-ing on the opiate of the masses, and the Maoaddies are turning to the ex-royal soothsayers for advice on appeasing the planets. While the comrades shun astrophysics for astrology, Hridesh the Tripartite has added another lapis lazuli to his only unemployed finger, the Leftist God now consults the zodiac before every major party decision so he has the upper hand against Comrade Oily, and for all his tirades against Brahminism Lionheart has conducted a marathon home in his home employing a plethora of bahuns.

So, as we get closer to the 21 July election for the prime minister in parliament, black bokas are being lined up for slaughter at temples across the land, and the Ganeshes are getting ladoos.

Instead of sacrificing or worshipping buffalos, however, Mrs Awesome has this time taken to rearing them. Remember while still underground hubby boy had told the TOI (in that famous interview from Noida in which he confessed to having a crush on Karisma Manandhar) that he drank two glasses of buffalo milk a day? Well, it looks like Comrade Bhayanak could not stand the plastic milk sold at the Naya Bajar corner shop and misses the creamy whole milk of Delhi Dairy. So Sita Ma’m, who has already inducted a jersey cow in the parking lot of the Pistachio Palace, now wants to expand the Red Cow Dairy Farm with a she-buffalo from Chitwan so that the Dahal clan will be self-sufficient in milk and honey.

The question puzzling everyone is why PKD, BRB and the entire baddie brass stayed away from the presscon in which the Maoists announced their high-level talks team. Only Kaji Naran Kamred was there. We can understand that the Chairman has been working overtime to lobby for next week’s election in parliament, but BRB? Meanwhile JNK (jilted by PKD after MKN resigned) better watch his BP when shouting at the PM during UML meets.

Many of you have written to the donkey asking what will happen next. Who do you think I am, an octopus? The asstrologer has consulted the oracles, and here it is:

1. The baddies can’t muster the numbers and reluctantly agree to a Jhallu-led coalition that they will support from the outside
2. JNK belatedly discovers PKD has been promiscuously wooing Upadro Yadav too and says to hell with it and the UML-led coalition with the baddies in the opposition continues
3. The Maoists decide to make the best of it and agree to a UML-MJP-NC coalition led by Madhesis and support from the outside (this will mean the prez, vice-pres, PM will all be Madhesi, yay!)
4. NC-led coalition with RCP as PM with baddies in opposition
5. The world gets hit by an asteroid and Nepal’s travails will pale into insignificance.

BTW, were those YCLs in mufti outside Nirmal Nibas providing security?