And I’m standing at the crossroads, believe I’m sinking down: Tripureswor evening rush, last Friday
O nly last week, we re-published an interview with Bob Parker, the Mayor of Christchurch in New Zealand. His city having come through unscathed (unlike millions of its likes) in last September’s quake, Parker reflected on the differences in the levels of preparedness between Christchurch and Kathmandu.

Tuesday’s repeat quake in Christchurch, at the time of going to press, has killed 96 people. The down-to-earth mean that Parker was making empty claims. It does mean that no amount of preparation can guarantee that you are on safe ground when the ground beneath your feet moves. In some sense this is how it feels to be a dictator whose time is finally ending. You think you have all bases covered through your control of the organs of the state. But then the teetotum upheaval of power people blasts through the rotten edifice that you have set up, and before you know it you are calling in favours with friendly despots-in-arms (“Hugo! I gotta go”), Mubarak, Ben Ali, and now Gaddafi are finding out the hard way that hoarding unimaginable sums of wealth while the majority of your population struggles to even earn a living is a slow train to nowhere.

Dictator or no, revolution-weary or not, Nepal would have been a prime candidate for a similar upheaval had it not been the case that three million Nepali citizens across the country for, ironically, the Middle East. But future rulers would do well to recognise the consequences of indulging in corruption, making a farce of democracy, and ignoring the difficulties the people at large are facing. By the same token, if our rulers can learn from what is happening across the Arab world, the brave citizens who have risen in protest there and here can learn from Nepal’s example. Revolutions come and go, but it’s what follows that matters more. Each of Nepal’s revolutions – 1951, 1990, and 2006 – were realised through a combination of political and popular protest, and each subsequently led to prolonged periods of uncertainty resolved (temporarily) by the reinstatement of autocratic rule.

Whatever happens in the days ahead, we must keep our focus on thwarting attempts from any quarter – left, right or centre – to take back in the name of the people what the people have seized from the hands of despots.

POWER GAMES

I cannot agree with Gyanendra Pradhan’s “There is no other way to balance the trade deficit than to export power to India” (“No light at the end of the tunnel”, Dewan Rai & Rubea Mahato, #541). That is really myopic and ill-considered to put it mildly. Yes there is another way, a better way.

You can cut the trade deficit by producing cheap and reliable electricity that attracts industries and manufacturing (local as well as foreign) that in turn can export finished products to India and the rest of the world. Surely this would be better than just exporting pure and raw electricity without any value addition. Today when labour cost is no longer our comparative advantage because of low productivity we could turn cheap and reliable energy into a world-beating competitive advantage.

But industries and manufacturing are much more important than mechanisms to reduce trade deficits. Without industries and manufacturing we will never be innovative. There will be no R&D. We will never develop the skills for living, thriving and dominating in an integrated world economy.

With industries the government and society will have to improve infrastructure continuously. Schools will improve because industries will demand increasing standards in education. Industries mean we will develop the management, technical and financial skills that Nepal sorely lacks today. With flourishing industries politicians will be less inclined towards destructive politics and concentrate on how to support the economy. That means continual reforms of our tax codes, labour laws, contracts, and laws regarding land. That means doing the hard and difficult but right things. Indeed the entire collective intellect of the country will be engaged on it. China, Japan or USA did not become world powers by doing easy things like exporting hydropower and then sitting back and enjoying the revenue streams. They did the difficult things that attracted industries. Look where they are now.

Just exporting raw energy to India means we will sooner become another Nigeria or Saudi Arabia and not Singapore or Japan. Surety Nigeria and Saudi Arabia are not countries that we wish to emulate. Just imagine vast sums of money coming into government coffers without much effort. The mind boggles at the thought of all the prostitution of services, talents and offices that will come in its wake. Perhaps Gyanendra Pradhan forgets that once the hydro plants are set up, there is hardly any need for workers and managers. It is employment light. Perhaps he forgets that just depending on one item for exports will create havoc in rest of the economy by way of Dutch Disease. Perhaps he forgets that monopsony is as bad as monopoly: in this case economically as well as politically. Perhaps he has never heard of disruptive technologies. What will happen if suddenly solar energy’s efficiency went up from 12% today to 50% like silicon did in the late 20th century? Or if there is a sudden breakthrough in fusion technology? We will be faced with a situation with no takers for our hydropower and will go back to square one where we will have to start building our businesses this time without any comparative advantage.

Finally there are those who will say we can export our surplus energy. Yes maybe a small fraction should be exported to keep us on our toes but let us also leave a whole lot of our rivers freely flowing for nature and for future generations. Let us not dam and divert everything and then regret it afterwards. We owe that much to our future generations also. So let us not be Bhutan. Let us be Nepal.

Lochan Naya Baja

Brilliantly laid out how the so-called new politicians still continue to act like kings when they say that they have begun a new era of the democratic republic (“Straddling two boats,” Biraj Bahadur Bista, #541). I see the dual usage and maybe like Bista says the politicians cannot break free from the traditional way of doing politics. So if it is true it is better to bring back the monarchy rather than politicians who cannot decide which boat to straddle.

Social Misfit

DOUBTFUL BENEFITS?

Better let’s ask ourselves – what is my duty as a citizen, a journalist, a teacher, a lawyer, a doctor, or a professional to the new Republic (“Same-same, Prashant Jha, #541”). Why not give the benefit of doubt to the new coalition? At least, after a mockery of more than 15 attempts, the CA members have demonstrated some wisdom to elect a new PM without a remote control from abroad. Bravo, guys! Let’s give them a chance to work, yet let’s monitor their actions, do a proper follow-up by civil society and evaluate their performance.

It is not a surprise that a privileged section of Nepali society (the ‘sukila-mukila’ class) has always been skeptical towards any sort of change; their level of cynicism was so high they could never imagine that the abolition of the feudal monarchy was possible in our lifetime, nor could they ever expect that the sovereign people of Nepal could one day elect their own representatives to the CA to write the people’s first constitution in the history of Nepal. These are achievements of historic proportions by any standard of democracy.

Despite all the constraints and stagnations, the transition has come all the way to this juncture. If the current coalition could just provide stability and confidence to the people that we as a Nation can manage our own affairs and build our own destination I would give them high credit. This alone would be more than half the job done. The other half is just a matter of technical details. Let’s give them a chance with all sincerity!

Anonymous

LINGO, NOT JINGO

The best defence that our nation will have against invading forces is one of diplomacy, not that of warfare (“Jingostic jerks”, Rabi Thapa, #541). Linguists, commies and wimps aside, I am sure the rest of the populous understands that we need more daring shepherds than sheepish daredves.

For a PhD

SIGN NOW, ASK LATER

As with most other things our politicians have signed the treaty without considering what it says and what its implications are (“LO 169, Nepal as a model”, From the Nepal press, #541). It is not without reason that only 22 countries have ratified it so far. Especially noteworthy is that none of the permanent members of the UNSC have signed it. The treaty essentially gives one set of people ADDITIONAL rights in addition to rights already accorded to them as citizens. As per the convention, every person in Nepal could be classified as indigenous or, alternatively, no one. Another can of worms.

WAKE UP, INDIA!

The threat of the Nepal-India border goes both ways: not only is Nepal concerned about Indian dacoits attacking the Tarai, but illegal trafficking of Nepali women and children for Bombay brothels and Indian circuses are well-documented (“The India factor”, Prabin Dhal Samarta, #541). First India annexed the Nepali Maistals and China is tenuous at best. The fact of the matter is that much of their arms shipments were provided by the Indians during the insurgency and not the other way around as widely stated in the Indian press. I have no love for the Maistals but India’s view of Nepal and China is myopic at best. China much more interested in economic expansion than entertaining Indian ilusions of a 21st century ‘Great Game’. Given that, perhaps Indians would be better served by remembering that India itself consists of a large portion of its trade with China. Wake up people: it’s not 1962 anymore.

Jange

Weekly Internet Poll #542. To vote go to: www.nepalitimes.com
UN-Kul

Kul Chandra Gautam’s candidacy for the UNGA’s presidency tells us more about the ability of the Nepali people than about the Nepal state. We are familiar withU N-Kul the polarisation in 2009-10, being oneof the Madhav Nepal government’s key cheerleaders. He was also consulting and presenting papers on integration at conferences organised by an NGO, headed by PM Nepal’s foreign policy advisor. All of this obviously helped him build a political relationship with those at the helm of the Nepali state since May 2009. The government backed his nomination, and he was then appointed as an advisor to the PM to shore up his status. These details are important because it gives us the background to understand the political quid pro quo behind the nomination, and why the country is investing resources in this case.

Irrespective of whether Kul Chandra Gautam succeeds in adding another designation to his CV, there is little Nepal will gain out of this exercise.

S

States often crave recognition. A visit by a leader of a more powerful state; a seat at the high table; an invitation to a summit; or an appointment in the global governance structure are all essentially symbolic – considered important by those who make it their business to conduct diplomacy. But why the Nepali state, or the earlier Madhav Nepal-led government to be more precise, thought it useful and necessary to back Kul Chandra Gautam in the UNGA presidential race at this juncture defies rational calculation.

There are essentially two arguments made by those who have been at the forefront of backing Gautam – it is Nepal’s turn, and Gautam is the best candidate Nepal could ever have.

Nepal is an old member of the UN; it has contributed a lot to peace keeping operations; and this is our chance to be recognised. All of this is factually true. But it is important to demystify this business about our ‘contribution’ and our ‘chance’.

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The UN needs us and our armed personnel put themselves at risk to keep the peace in distant lands. But peacekeeping is a mutually beneficial relationship. It is among the relatively low-risk, high-return options involving military operations. And for the Nepal Army, it is a crucial safety valve that goes a long way in addressing the growing aspirations of officers and soldiers. It adds to the financial muscle of the military, and it exposes our forces to military practices outside our borders, making them more professional. No one is doing the other a favour here.

But let us, for a moment, stick to the conventional parameter of seeing peacekeeping as Nepal’s contribution. Aren’t there other ways we could use that ‘bargaining chip’ to extract more than a UNGA presidency? Could we have used our claims of not having been represented to get a position in other bodies, or additional resources, which would have a tangible benefit for the Nepali people? And at a time of deep domestic crisis, is claiming the UNGA presidency really a national priority? In this case, the state invests scarce political capital and resources in the race, but only the individual benefits. He can do little to use the position for Nepal’s benefit, except by giving a sense of ‘pride’ to a few in the diaspora and a few of his friends back in Nepal.

And that brings us to Kul Chandra Gautam. Gautam is a pleasant man, humble and polite with all irrespective of hierarchy. He was a successful international professional, and in a Nepal starved of icons, a section of the media played an instrumental role in portraying him as the pinnacle of Nepal’s achievement globally.

Since Gautam’s return to Nepal, he has wanted to contribute to national affairs. This is laudable indeed, but the other way to put it is that he has yearned for a formal role. There was a campaign, which he did not inspire but was taken in by, to elect him as Nepal’s first president. The Kathmandu grapevine was then rife with rumours about his interest in heading a Peace and Reconstruction Commission, or being ambassador at large. Whether true or not, what was clear was his desire to cosy up to the powers that be. Just read his speeches introducing Pashupa Kamal Dahal in New York on different platforms, or look at the photographs where he almost looks like a supplicant to the Maoist supremo. But the politics here are more relevant than the person.

When Dahal resigned, Gautam was quick off the mark to praise the president’s action and hailed Ram Baran Yadav as the best thing to have happened to Nepali politics. He played a distinctly partisan role in the UNGA presidency, telling us more about the Nepali state than about the ability of the Nepali people.

UN-Kul
E ver since my first visit to Nepal in 1967, I have been both a participant and observer of the tourism industry here. I have spent 35 years creating over 400 guidebooks for Insight Guides on 125 countries, published in 10 languages with sales of 40 million copies.

The Insight Guide for Nepal was first published in 1984 in collaboration with a number of Kathmandu-based writers and friends. In the process of researching the book I walked and photographed the Kathmandu Valley and visited many trekking regions, one of the greatest privileges of my life.

Tourism is first and foremost a social endeavour with economic consequences, and should not be mistaken with economic consequences, foremost a social endeavour with social consequences. If we realize that the most essential aspect of tourism is the fulfillment of visitor expectations, it is not a complicated business to understand. A happy visitor will bring two more visitors, potentially doubling visitor arrivals in the next season without a single dollar spent on promoting the country. A disappointed visitor will keep two visitors away. Nepal's unique scenic beauty and heritage can double visitor numbers, but how many do we disagree with visa officers who lack manners, torts at tourist 'attractions', or youth who now ask for 'one thousand rupees' on the trekking trails?

The real test of NTY 2011 is not whether one million tourists visit Nepal, but how many days they stay, how much they spend, and where the money goes. Austria, with a population of just 8.3 million, gets 50 million visitors per year and they stay an average of ten days. That is 500 million room nights a year at an average of 300 euros per day. The country earns 150 billion euros per year from tourism. How much does Nepal expect to earn from 1 million visitors – time to get out the calculators?

There is a need to integrate tourism with other sectors of the economy. It is absurd to have a Tourism Ministry. It should be a cross-cutting sector with focal points in each ministry. Is there a minister for the carpet industry? There isn’t even a Ministry of Migrant Workers, although it is Nepal’s biggest source of foreign income. If tourism is really important it should be factored into all aspects of the planning process, not treated separately.

The definition of tourism should be widened to include long-term foreign residents who want to live here and own hilltop properties: the 'Grey Dollar'. Nepal’s tragic misunderstanding is that a ‘tourist’ is seen as a fruit tree to be harvested. Even worse is that it’s not just the fruits that are harvested, but even the trees are being chopped down.

It is a wonderful irony that the most useless agricultural land is often the best tourism property: sandy and salty ocean beaches in Sri Lanka, or arid hilltops in the Himalaya. Tourism has the potential to inject income into the economy, raise awareness about environmental issues among local people and bring sustainable development.

A place to start may be to replace the word ‘tourist’ with ‘guest’ in English and Nepali and recall Nepal's traditional, spontaneous hospitality. That image needs to be rescued from the impression that a tourist is someone from whom we need to wring out every last dollar. We need to create and manage expectations, and we need to be aware that tourists who see ugliness as soon as they get off the plane are not likely to come back, or tell others to come.

Nepal Guest Year

Time to replace the word ‘tourist’ with ‘guest’

M I C H A E L C O X

D espite Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) claiming that foreign travel advice has been toned down in the last year, over-cautious warnings are still deterring tourists from visiting Nepal.

“The number of tourists could be much higher if not for the travel advice from foreign embassies,” says Sarad Pradhan, NTB's media consultant. “Unforeseen things happen everywhere, everyday and Nepal is no different.” He argues that there is no threat of terrorism in Nepal.

At least seven countries advise tourists not to travel to Nepal because it’s too dangerous. The US is always trying to link Nepali organisations with terrorism, but in my opinion this is not true. Like the Maoist Party, they’re a political outfit, they’re not a terrorist organisation,” Pradhan says.

NTB recently wrote a letter to all western ambassadors in Nepal requesting them to review their travel advice and Nepal's Foreign Ministry was also copied in on the letter. Nepal’s ambassador to the US, Shankar Sharma, briefed the US State Department last January in an attempt to sway them to revise their advice, which suggests that Nepal is a dangerous country to travel in (see box).

As part of their commitment to NTY 2011, all political parties signed an agreement assuring NTB that they would not disrupt 2011 with any strikes or protests that will affect the safety of tourists. NTB is confident that this agreement will not be broken.

“We believe the parties will stick to their word,” Pradhan says. Another move by NTB was to put a crisis management and crisis tourism unit in place to further protect travellers in the event of any threat to tourism.

Most of the information that the US embassy uses to determine the security situation is drawn from public sources, including the media and police reports. The US councillor for public affairs, Terry J White, says the US Embassy has an obligation to provide the American people with fact-based information. “This information is gathered, sifted and distilled into what we think would be useful to our constituents,” White says.

President of the Tours and Travel Agents Association, Arjun Prasad Sharma, says this kind of travel advice is produced to prevent foreign embassies from being sued. “This is to protect the jobs of the embassy people and the government people,” he says. “But the benefits of tourism go to the grassroots level people in Nepal, so the embassies have to support the people and stop this travel advice. We don’t need aid, we need business.”

Sharma argues that Nepal is not linked with any terrorist organisations, but adds that Nepal isn’t the only country that bears the brunt of foreign travel advice.

A British embassy spokesman says there is a general threat of terrorism in a country with any British and American ties. The UK advises all British citizens that there is a threat of terrorism wherever they choose to travel. He says they’re not singing out Nepal. “I think it’s fairly balanced (advice), we have a duty to give advice. Travellers have to know about potential risks,” the spokesman says, “and travellers anywhere in the world should have their wits about them.”

The Australian Embassy updates its travel advice every three months and its intelligence is based on anything that affects Australians. A spokesman from the Australian Embassy says, “I wouldn’t say we’re over-cautious, we’re trying to be right on the money to reflect the situation.”

Embassies play it safe, but travel advisories are a risk for Nepali tourism

Scare tactics spoil NTY 2011

United States: *‘unspecified caution’* [www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov)

United Kingdom: *general threat of terrorism* [www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk)


Canada: “should remain vigilant at all times” [www.voyage.gc.ca](http://www.voyage.gc.ca)

New Zealand: *‘some risk…threat from terrorism’* [www.safetravel.govt.nz](http://www.safetravel.govt.nz)
Seven points, with changes

The central committee meeting on Tuesday endorsed the seven-point agreement signed between Party Chairman Jhala Nath Khanal and Maoist Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal. The pollbound meeting on Monday decided to approve the agreement after several revisions, mainly to three points: the formation of a separate force for the PLA has been scrapped; government leadership will not be limited to UML and the Maoist; and the objective of a 'federal constitution' has been modified to a 'federal democratic constitution'.

The party has delegated the task of recommending ministers for the government to the standing committee. However, it is highly unlikely that the cabinet will get full shape as long as the debate on who should get the home ministry remains unsettled.

Supreme orders

The Supreme Court on Monday directed the government to implement free education up to secondary level as per the provision in the Interim Constitution. A division bench of SC justices Balram KC and Bharat Raj Uprety ordered the government to make necessary changes in the laws and regulations to provide free education to everyone up to tenth grade. Currently free education is only available for students up to eighth grade, while free education in community schools up to the 12th grade is provided to students from the Dalit and other marginalised communities, as well as those in the Kamali region. The Ministry of Education estimates that it will cost Rs 13 billion to implement the court’s order.

Khadka passes away

Constituent Assembly member Gaurishankar Khadka passed away at the age of 51 while undergoing treatment for cancer on Monday. Khadka, a central committee member of the UCPN (Maoist), was elected CA member from Jhapa-2 under the first past the post system. He was also the secretary of UCPN (Maoist)'s Kochila state committee.

Nepalis leave Libya

Over 600 Nepali migrant workers have left Libya in the wake of the political strife that has wracked the country of late. Reports say Nepali migrant workers working in a Korean construction company left in eight trucks to the Egyptian border. Officials of the Nepali mission in Cairo, Egypt, received the Nepali migrant workers in transit; the Foreign Ministry is preparing to bring them back to Nepal. The ministry is also working to rescue other migrant workers stranded in Libya.

Speed meter

WorldLink has partnered with Ookla, provider of internet speed measurement website Speedtest.net which allows internet users to accurately measure their internet speed. WorldLink is also hosting Pingtest.net servers, a free broadband quality analyser.

Credit partners

Kumari Bank and Oxfam in Nepal have signed an agreement for Credit Financing under Oxfam’s Enterprise Development Programme. The bank will now provide a revolving credit facility, up to defined limits, to agricultural cooperatives identified by Oxfam.

International deal

South Korean SUV manufacturer Ssangyong Motor and India’s Mahindra and Mahindra have signed an agreement whereby Mahindra and Mahindra will acquire a 70 per cent stake in the company but Ssangyong will continue to operate as an independent entity. Ssangyong is represented by Constant Business Group in Nepal for sales and service.

Fan club

Him Electronics hosted a Bajaj Fans dealers’ conference last week at the Annapurna Hotel. Bajaj sells fans for industrial as well as personal use and plans to expand its current product line up for Nepal. The new proposed products to be introduced by Bajaj are Disney series fans, heavy duty fresh air fans and energy star rating fans.

Olympic fizz

Heineken has been confirmed as an official sponsor of the London Olympics and Paralympic Games – which will include pouring rights for its beer and cider brands at all events where alcohol is served. The deal will also give Heineken sponsorship and venue supply rights associated with the British Olympic teams.
The war’s not over yet

Ekal Silwal

A man who lost his leg during the conflict, who does not know the whereabouts of his missing family, is wandering on the street. “This is the caption of a drawing by Sanju Kumari Tharu, a student in Class Seven at Shree Saraswati Primary School, Jamunia, Bardiya. Sanju’s is one of the drawings on display at Patan Dhoka that captures the trauma of family members who lost their loved ones or witnessed atrocities during the decade-long violent Maoist conflict as well as those who witnessed atrocities during the war. There’s still no final word on the nearly 1,400 people who have been labeled ‘missing’. For the families of the missing who gathered at the Families of the Missing exhibition, organised by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in the capital on Wednesday, wanted an answer: either give us back our loved ones or tell us what you did to them. Most of the 1,377 recorded as missing by ICRC were forcibly disappeared by government forces. For the victims’ families, the pain and suffering is acute and they are undergoing a lot of trauma. Chandrakala Upreti of Dhamboji in Banke district is the mother of two sons and a daughter. Her husband, Bhupendra Upreti, was allegedly arrested by the army on 9 December, 2003. He never returned. Chandrakala received interim relief of Rs 100,000, but even this paltry sum invited derisive comments from her community. “O, now Chandrakala is richer by one lakh rupees,” one said. Patrick Vial, ICRC’s Head of Delegation, says that while truth and justice for victims’ families were important, the need to “relieve the pain of the family” could not be treated lightly. There seems to be a disconnect between the priorities of the victims’ families and the donor and human rights communities working on this area. “We want information about our missing members; they [the donors and human rights communities] focus on impunity and reconciliation,” says Ram Kumar Bhandari of the Family Association of Missing Persons. His father, Tek Bahadur Bhandari, was a teacher in a primary school in Simpani in Lamjung district when he was arrested by a joint security force comprising the army and the police on the last day of 2001 for “feeding the Maoists”. The Supreme Court dismissed an appeal on a corpus writ on the ground that no information was available. This, despite the fact that the chief district officer of Lamjung and the army gave differing accounts to the court. While the former denied the arrest of the school teacher by security forces, the army counsel told the apex court that he had been arrested for interrogation but was killed during crossfire with the Maoists. Victims’ families want all these dismissed cases to be reopened, a demand that the apex court should now look into. A draft bill on a Disappearance Commission is stuck in parliament. It is obvious why the two sides are reluctant to admit to their wrongdoings. As soon as they admit to arresting or kidnapping an individual, they will have to admit to the next difficult part: that those listing ‘missing’ have been killed in custody. That would open the door to prosecution. Hence the long silence, while families continue to suffer.

damakantri@gmail.com
Despite the end of the war, there are tens of thousands of family members of the disappeared who suffer from the psychological effects of their loss. Since 90 per cent of the disappeared were male breadwinners, the impact is mostly on elderly parents, wives and children. Experts call this ‘ambiguous loss’, a loss that has no verification and is without closure.

“This is not a psychiatric problem,” explains Bhava Nath Poudyal of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). “Families face complex socio-cultural and relational challenges that affect their daily lives.”

The ICRC has chosen Bardiya to work on a multi-pronged program to address psycho-social support for families, since it is the district with the highest number of forced disappearances during the 1996-2006 war. Bardiya families have been receiving social and psychological support, including providing women with income-generating livestock in collaboration with Heifer International, legal advice, as well as help to organise religious rituals in memory of the missing.

One of the activities involved working with school children from 23 VDCs in Bardiya to draw and paint what they experienced during the war. The aim is to help children cope with their loss by expressing their thoughts through illustrations, and find ways to move ahead in life.

These are a selection of some of the drawings by children at more than 20 art events in the villages of Bardiya earlier this year.

More drawings will be on display at the Shanti Sangralaya, Madan Puraskar, Patan Dhoka from 26 February - 12 March, alongside ‘A People War’ photo exhibition.

Shanti Sangralaya
Open 11am – 4pm, except Tuesdays
Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya
Phone: 01-5521393
www.apeoplewar.com
EVENTS

29 September to 2 October, early submission deadline: 31 May 2011, final submission deadline (for films made after April 2010): 31 June 2011. Film Southasia Secretariat, Patan Dhoka, 5552141, www.filmsouthasia.org, fax@filmsouthasia.org

The New World Rhizome, exhibition of paintings by Indra Raj Subba 'Stuba', 29 March to 5.30pm, Kathmandu Contemporary Arts Centre, Jhamsikhel, 5521120, www.kcarts.org.np

College Theatre Festival, plays submitted by students from eight colleges. 27 to 29 February, 5pm onwards, Gurukul, Old Baneswor

Death, Bardo and Revival, one-day program by Geshe Thubten Sherab from Kapan Gompa. 26 February, 10.30am to 4.30pm. Rs 2,000 inclusive of tea and handouts. Himalayan Buddhist Meditation Centre, Ekantakuna. 9609891048, hbm.programs@gmail.com, www.fms-hbmc.org


Ke-sang on acoustic guitar and vocals. Every Saturday, 7.30pm onwards, New Orleans Coffee Shop Garden, 5522708 for reservations

Absolute Live Music, by Rashmi & Kikha Band every Friday and performances by Shabnam & Cannabiz Band every Wednesday, Thursday onwards. Absolute Bar, Hotel Narayani Complex, Pulchok, 5521408, 5549504. Placid@bikz.co.uk

Krishmarpan, a specially Nepali Restaurant at The Dwarika’s, Hotel, to 22 courses, an authentic Nepali meal. The Dwarika’s Hotel, Battisputali, 4494498

Jazzo, a quiet place ideal for beer and relaxing conversation. Bring a friend and enjoy their special barbeque set for a mix of everything. Jazoo, 5538321

Dining

Krishmarpan, a specially Nepali Restaurant at The Dwarika’s, Hotel, to 22 courses, an authentic Nepali meal. The Dwarika’s Hotel, Battisputali, 4494498

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Mike’s Breakfast, huge breakfasts and a never-ending supply of coffee amidst a lush garden setting characterise this café, popular among tourists and locals alike. Nasal, 4439303

Sandwiches and Crops promotion at The Lounge everyday from 11am to 6pm. Vegetarian Buffet at The Cafe Thursday to Saturday from 6.30pm and Arabian Nights at The Cafe every Friday from 6.30pm at Hyatt Regency, Boudha. 4491234, 4489362

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

Buddha Bar, has been an establishment since the days of the hippies and offers a warm and cozy space for intimate conversations over a large selection of drinks. Thamel, 981053235

The Kaiser Cafe Restaurant & Bar, enjoy a pleasant BBQ lunch in the ambient settings of The Garden of Dreams and a glass of wine or beer. Every Sunday, 12pm to 3pm, Kaiser Metal, Thamel. Rs 1.30 per person, 4425341, operated by The Dwarika’s Group of Hotels & Resorts

Station BBQ, don the chef’s hat, make your own BBQ. Jhamsikhel, 5522083

Aalishan, serves a mix of both Indian and Chinese cuisines. Jawalakhel

GETaways

Overnight Package at The Dwarika’s Himalayan Shangri-La Village Resort, for local residents, package includes accommodation in Himalayan room, dinner and breakfast. Otdumel, Rs 4,000 (Single), Rs 5,700 (Double). The package rates are subject to a 10% Service charge. For more information/reservations call 4479480 Dwarika’s Hotel, Sales & Marketing Department.

Charikot Panorama Resort, enjoy mountain views and local culture at the historic town of Charikot. Special packages on offer. Charikot, Dolakha, 5524963, lbpanama@ge.com

Weekends Treks Out Package, for expat and locals, 3 Days Kathmandu Valley Cultural Trek (Kathmandu/Lankuri/Balthali/Namobuddha/Kathmandu), includes 2 overnight stays in Lankuri and Balthali with meals, guide and drop & pick-up services. Asia Nepal Tours and Treks, Laxmipatan, info@hinemapeadventures.com, 984706661, 012081099
If you know Jhamel, you’ll know Singma, the no-frills Singaporean-Malaysian eatery that’s now branched out into Bhatbhateni. And if you’ve exhausted that menu, head to its companion venue Momotarou, near Sanepa Chok. Itself a branch of an original in Thamel, Momotarou draws you with fairy lights past the chilly outdoor seating into a solidly residential building with an unpromising tube-lit interior. But never fear: as you warm up with some Japanese tea and a heater, the thumbnail menu will open up the possibilities.

The combination of Japanese, Chinese and Tharu cuisines may seem odd; the fact that the Tharu owner spent some time in Japan and opened Momotarou with Tharu employees from his own district goes some way to explaining this. Chances are you won’t combine the two in one sitting anyway. Our token attempt will be improved on in future sessions.

Faced with an array of Tharu thalis (chichar, poka and dhikari), we ordered the Haas ko Timura (pic, right). No prizes for guessing this is duck seasoned generously with timur. A bit bony, we thought, but tasty……this ain’t the land of the lardy Beijing Duck. And so we moved on to the meat of the menu (Statutory warning: the following dishes were not consumed in a single sitting).

The Donburi dishes come highly recommended if you like your cheap eats hearty. For less than Rs 300, then, take your pick of a meal-in-a-bowl, with rice topped with the seasoned meat, veg and egg of your desire. My favourite has to be the Mabo Don: rice with mince pork and tofu. We steered clear of the sushi, as we didn’t fancy the mostly vegetarian offerings and tuna out of a can wrapped in fancy seaweed. The Suki Yaki (pic, top) with raw egg on the side was humongous, with beef, greens, and tofu delicious in a sweetish broth. The Nabe Yaki, with prawn tempura, mushrooms, and fried egg, looked promising but fell flat in a dull stock. The Tofu Ankake - tofu topped with mince chicken - looked pallid relative to its menu avatar, but lived up to its billing, while a variety of cold veggie pickles kept us occupied in between mains and cups of tea. We didn’t venture all that much into the Chinese menu dominated by glutinous looking splats, and the Takana to Butaniku Ankake slush of spinach and chunks of meat was, in sated retrospect, mediocre.

Momotarou will win no Michelins, but it’s sure to draw the masses for its pitch perfect presentation of price, taste, and variety. It’s too close to my sluggish kitchen for me to keep away.
Oh, that hurts!

Thirty-eight-year old Ram Bahadur woke to find his big toe red, tender, swollen and excruciatingly painful. Even the weight of the sheet covering his foot seemed intolerable. Thinking he might have stubbed it somewhere, he tried to ignore it and left for the hotel where he worked. As the day progressed, so did the throbbing pain in his foot, so much so that by lunchtime he was hobbling in agony and had to go see a doctor. The doctor examined his foot, ordered some blood tests and declared that Ram Bahadur in all likelihood had gout.

This vignette happens all too regularly here. Gout (sometimes non-specifically called ‘baath’ in Nepali) is a very painful type of arthritis which often starts at night, probably due to a lower body temperature, and is caused by high levels of uric acid in the blood that crystallise and are deposited in the joints, tendons, and surrounding tissues. Although not always a reliable test, uric acid in the blood is often checked to diagnose gout. Certain foods such as red and organ meat, fish, ‘geda gudis’, alcohol and sugary soft drinks increase the risk of gout and eliminating most high-protein food from the diet usually helps. But this is not always practical. Many gout sufferers also avoid tomatoes and spinach, but science has dismissed this belief as baseless.

Some medicines like diuretics, commonly used to treat hypertension, and even low-dose aspirin, can increase uric acid levels so avoidance of these medicines can help. Certain diseases and conditions make it more likely that you’ll develop gout. These include untreated high blood pressure and chronic conditions such as diabetes, high levels of fat and cholesterol in the blood, and kidney problems.

Although the exact number of gout sufferers in Nepal is not known, gout attacks are common and seem to afflict us at a younger age (less than 40 years) than what is usually noted in Western medical textbooks (over 60 years). The reason for this predisposition is not known.

Just avoiding certain types of food and alcohol may not be enough to avoid the type of acute gout attacks that Ram Bahadur suffers from. If you get more than two or three such painful attacks a year, it may be prudent to consider taking medicines long term to prevent gout and other related complications such as kidney stones. Effective drugs like Allopurinol that have been tried and tested over many decades are available, but they need to be used under the proper supervision of a competent doctor.

GREEN ACT: Both, a play on climate change, being performed at Basantapur Darbar Square on Wednesday. The initiative was part of the British Council international climate change champion project.

TRICKY SKATES: Artists from the Zhejiang Acrobat Troupe from China perform at the Nepal Academy Hall on Wednesday for a show organised by the Chinese Embassy to mark the beginning of the spring festival.

FRESH INTERNS: The Police’s Sniffer Dog Squad with their latest new recruits, Bathi and Tathi, black Labrador puppies donated by Rato Bangala School, on Sunday. The puppies will start training when they are three months old.

WEEKEND WEATHER

Ever since the sun marched into the northern hemisphere early this month, the Himalaya has been receiving a series of low pressure troughs. This has resulted in revenue of rain-bearing clouds heading towards the region. The Valley saw record-breaking levels of rain this month, at times against the monthly average of 17mm. The heavy rains have compensated for the deficit of the last three months. The satellite picture of Thursday afternoon shows advancing westerly fronts bringing fresh clouds to a larger section of the Himalaya. For the weekend ahead, expect passing clouds, sunny intervals and isolated brief showers in the western and central hills of Nepal.
Dilip Simeon’s debut novel Revolutionary Highway charts the course of a group of students at Delhi University in the late 1960s. Inspired by what appears to be the global pulse of revolution, they become involved in the Naxalite movement taking root in their own countryside. To the dismay of their middle-class, conservative parents, Pranav, Mohan, and Rathin drop out to taste revolution for themselves. The result is both a serious reflection on how individuals decide what makes for (and what can make, including violence) a just society, and a light-hearted evocation of the often absurd everyday of young urban idealists faced with the reality of the rural populations they aspire to liberate.

The novel reads like something of a pastiche, combining as it does frequent (sometimes inexplicable) temporal leaps within the lives of its characters, as well as short case files on various revolutionaries through India’s twentieth century history. Simeon, a former professor at Delhi University himself, is clearly trying to draw a thread through the loops of revolution past and present against the backdrop of Indian history, but here the chunks of blocky explicatory text inspired by a professorial instinct to edify jar with the more lively characterisations of his novel’s protagonists.

But Revolutionary Highway is a spirited portrayal of troubled times that does succeed in illuminating a somewhat forgotten history, and delving into the motivations of the people who were involved. The conversation Simeon had with Manjushree Thapa a fortnight ago, organized by Patan’s Quixote’s Cove, was equally, if not more, absorbing. The audience had the opportunity to get beyond the fictionalisation of history to hearing it from the horse’s mouth – Simeon was also involved in the Naxalite movement in his youth, after all. Perhaps it worked for those present because he is one who has renounced their violence yet remains critical of the state. In between readings both hilarious and sombre, Simeon provided eloquent accompaniment to the themes of his novel. He spoke forcefully against the use of violence as a means to an end, and particularly against the glorification of violence – by revolutionaries and the state – that justifies its reproduction, even when the ends are not so clear.

For those in Nepal arguing for or against the use of violence to achieve a better state of affairs for more people, and those who wonder how ideals accommodate realpolitik, the session with Simeon was thought-provoking. What would our own revolutionary students have made of it?

Rabi Thapa
One can imagine the scene, on a dusty pre-monsoon day in June 1961, in one of the ornate halls of Singh Darbar. Vishwa Bandhu Thapa, then Nepal’s 33-year-old Minister of Education, received the American Ambassador, Henry Endicott Stebbins. No doubt there was diplomatic small talk and tea before they got down to business at hand – the signing of the Bilateral Agreement that established the Commission for Educational Exchange between the United States of America and Nepal.

2011 marks the 50th anniversary of the Bilateral Agreement. Over the years, the Commission became better known as the United States Education Foundation in Nepal (USEF), or the Fulbright Commission. Funded by the US Congress, its stated mission is to promote “mutual understanding between the peoples of the United States of America and Nepal by a wider exchange of knowledge and professional talents through educational activities.”

I recently met with former Education Minister Thapa at his home in Gairidhara. Still vigorous and engaged at 84, he had fond memories of the early 1960s, when Nepal had just begun to march upon the world stage. At the same time, the Government of Nepal also invited the American Peace Corps to start a program in Nepal. While at the UN, Thapa had witnessed the beginnings of John F. Kennedy’s presidential campaign and had been impressed by his energy and vision. The establishment of USEF and the Peace Corps, Thapa told me, seemed to offer opportunities to both share that energy, and to open Nepal up to the world in new ways.

The broad language of the Bilateral Agreement has spawned an impressive range of educational and exchange programs, which have benefited thousands of Nepalis and hundreds of Americans since 1961. USEF is best known for the two program areas that constitute the core of its mission in Nepal: US Government-funded scholarships and Educational Advising.

The scholarship programs include the flagship Fulbright and Humphrey Fellowship programs and the East-West Center programs of the University of Hawaii, offered to Nepalis for the pursuit of post-graduate education, post-doctoral research, or teaching in the US. In recent years, USEF’s scholarship study opportunities have been further expanded to allow Nepali students to pursue undergraduate study in the US through the PLUS and NESA UGRAD programs.

I served as Executive Director of USEF from 1998 to 2005. My favourite part of the job was contacting the Nepali students and scholars nominated by the Fulbright Commission board to inform them of their selection as Fulbright Scholars or Humphrey Fellows. Once I reached a young woman by phone who was so overcome by emotion at the news that she fainted. I thought the line had gone dead until her mother picked up the phone and asked me to call back later, after her daughter came to her senses.

Why are these programs considered so prestigious and what have they meant for Nepal? To win a Fulbright, Humphrey or East-West Center grant means that one has survived a rigorous, nationwide application process and entered an elite international group of students, scholars, journalists, artists and other professionals. Nepalis who apply for grants through USEF can be confident that the selection process will be strictly merit-based. Perhaps it is for this reason that some referred to USEF as the Asha Kendra. USEF scholarships provide a fully funded educational opportunity at the best American colleges and universities. What people choose to make of that opportunity is entirely up to them.

Taking all of USEF’s scholarship programs together, it has funded US graduate study, research and teaching opportunities for approximately 650 Nepalis in more than 60 different
The list of Fulbright scholars includes such American and international figures and leaders as Craig Barrett, former Chairman of the Board of Intel Corporation, Derek Bok, former President of Harvard University, John Atta Mills, former president of Ghana, and Javier Solana, EU High Representative for Foreign Policy. Fulbright artists, actors and writers include John Steinbeck, Aaron Copland, Chuck Close, John Lithgow and John Updike. Nobel laureates such as former World Bank chief economist Joseph Stiglitz and Muhammad Yunus, Bangladeshi economist and Grameen Bank founder were Fulbright scholars, too. In fact, more Fulbright alumni have won Nobel Prizes – 43 so far, including two in 2010 – than those of any other academic program, making a Fulbright one of the most reliable ‘predictors’ of an eventual Nobel Prize.

In 1926, James William Fulbright graduated from the University of Arkansas and was awarded a Rhodes Scholarship to attend Oxford University. Two years later, MA degree in hand, Fulbright returned to the US, determined to see that such educational opportunities be made more widely available. By 1944, he had been elected to the US Senate, where he served until 1974, becoming one of the most influential senators in US history. In 1946, the legislation he authored, now known as the Fulbright Program, established a new bilateral scholarship program. It drew strength from America’s post-World War II commitment to engage constructively with the community of nations and from Senator Fulbright’s long-held dream of creating a program that expanded upon the opportunities offered by the Rhodes Scholarship. Under the new program not only would more Americans have the chance to study abroad; it also enabled students from all over the world to study in the US, determined to see that such educational opportunities be made more widely available. By 1944, he had been elected to the US Senate, where he served until 1974, becoming one of the most influential senators in US history. In 1946, the legislation he authored, now known as the Fulbright Program, established a new bilateral scholarship program. It drew strength from America’s post-World War II commitment to engage constructively with the community of nations and from Senator Fulbright’s long-held dream of creating a program that expanded upon the opportunities offered by the Rhodes Scholarship. Under the new program not only would more Americans have the chance to study abroad; it also enabled students from all over the world to study in the US, determined to see that such educational opportunities be made more widely available. By 1944, he had been elected to the US Senate, where he served until 1974, becoming one of the most influential senators in US history. In 1946, the legislation he authored, now known as the Fulbright Program, established a new bilateral scholarship program. It drew strength from America’s post-World War II commitment to engage constructively with the community of nations and from Senator Fulbright’s long-held dream of creating a program that expanded upon the opportunities offered by the Rhodes Scholarship. Under the new program not only would more Americans have the chance to study abroad; it also enabled students from all over the world to study in the US, determined to see that such educational opportunities be made more widely available.

It is not surprising that the 11,333 Nepali students who are currently enrolled in US colleges and universities make up the eleventh largest group of international students in the US. These numbers attest not only to the quality of American higher education and the value Nepal places on education, but also to the effectiveness of USEF Nepal in publicising that resource.
“Maoists will join the government”

Interview with Pradip Gyawali, UML politburo member, in Karobar, 20 February

Why shouldn’t the Maoists be given the Home Ministry?
The Maoists still have a war mentality. Having concluded that the constitution will not be written on time, they have made the necessary preparations for revolt. What the leaders say is not an issue but revolt is their declared goal. They want to utilise or neutralise state security in the course of achieving their set goal. Besides, impunity is rampant. The Maoists have repeatedly taken the law into their own hands even after the signing of the CPA. Political cadres, journalists and commoners have fallen victim to their violence over this period. To give the Maoists the Home Ministry is to promote impunity.

But the prime minister is willing to give the ministry to the Maoists. I don’t think the prime minister has agreed on this. The party standing committee has named a candidate for the post, concluding that the Maoists should not be given security-related ministries until the peace process is completed. The decision was taken under the chairmanship of the party chair Jhala Nath Khanal. I don’t think he will override his own decision.

It is the opposition that criticises the government in parliamentary practice. Why is it that the UML government has come under fire from within the party before the cabinet has even been finalised? That’s not true. Some comrades have only raised concerns over issues that contradict past understandings. It is just that Khanal should have informed the party before signing the seven-point agreement, which has far-reaching implications. The next thing is for the decision of the standing committee to be implemented.

When will we have a full-fledged government?
After the central committee meeting, the party will come up with a clear stance. I am sure that a complete cabinet will be announced by Saturday.

The majority in your party is not willing to give the Maoists the Home Ministry. With the Maoists out of government, how will the government run?
The Maoists will join the government. They supported UML out of compulsion as their prospect of leading the government waned. They won’t stay out of government for not getting the ministries of their choice.

Will we get a new constitution on time?
We still can complete the constitution within the scheduled date. We will have to skip some tasks, though, like taking the draft to the people for opinion. Seven months were wasted in forming a government. If the political parties seriously work on it, we still can bring out a constitution in time.

Act soon

Editorial in Rajdhani, 23 February

The Constitutional Committee has still not been able to resolve controversial issues in the statute due to the apathy of party leaders. The committee has already completed a round of discussions on all six reports presented by the Constituent Assembly and garnered consensus on 130 contentious issues. But more than 80 issues still remain unresolved mainly because party leaders don’t care to attend the meetings. The parties still haven’t formed a common view on what the governance system, the electoral system, and the mode of cabinet formation will be, let alone decide on complex issues like state restructuring.

The main reason party leaders have not shown interest is because they are obsessed with power politics. Little do they realise that constitution writing and power politics need to be kept separate. If the parties don’t write the constitution in three months how are they going to face the people? It will not be easy to extend the deadline this time. The party leaders have to rise above petty ambitions and work towards the national interest if they are to fulfill the people’s mandate. Otherwise nothing will save them from the public outrage that will follow.

Solar Darbar

Gokarna Awasthi in Kantipur, 23 February

With no extra power likely to be added to the grid, the government has sought an alternative to supply power to the government administrative centre, Singha Darbar, by installing 1MW solar panels.

“The power will be supplied to Singha Darbar within this fiscal year,” says Narayan Prasad Chaulagain, executive director of the Alternative Energy Promotion Centre (AEPC). According to him, it will take three months to install the solar plant. Besides Singha Darbar, the prime minister’s residence and Bir Hospital will be supplied with alternative energy in the first phase. Surplus power will be distributed elsewhere.

The estimated generation cost is Rs 220 million, while the cost for 1MW of hydropower will be between Rs 150-200 million, though costs often increase with increasing interest rates and local disputes.

The demand of power in Singha Darbar is 500KW. “Solar is the best option for Singha Darbar as there is workload during the day,” says Chaulagain. “The surplus energy will be added to the grid.”

The government has decided to proceed with the plan as the current power deficit is 430MW in the country’s central region, including the Kathmandu Valley.

This can be a stopgap solution to loadshedding, if we can expand the service,” says an official at the AEPC, which currently subsidises solar power in remote villages.

The private sector has been asking the government to install multi-fuel plants or whatever is necessary so industrial operation can continue. The Confederation of Nepalese Industries (CNI), in a recent meeting with the finance minister, declared that they were willing to pay Rs 15 per unit of electricity.
Tea history erased

Bhim Chapagain in Naya Patrika, 22 February

Ilam: Nepal’s oldest tea factory, in Ilam, is close to ruin due to lack of care. Its crumbling walls and broken windows can be seen from a distance.

Situated near the district headquarters, the building of the Ilam Tea Factory was in use until 2000, but following the purchase of a 50-year lease by Tribeni Shanghai Group, its equipment was removed and entry to the factory was prohibited.

Set up in 1878, the factory is believed to be even older than Biratnagar Jute Mills and Juddha Match Factory. The genesis of tea plantations in Ilam goes back to 1863. The Chinese government had offered then Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana tea saplings, which were planted in Ilam. In the beginning, the plantations were spread over 135 acres of land. “That’s how the factory was established,” says historian Yuddha Prasad Baidhya.

After Ilam Tea Factory was privatised 10 years ago, its machinery was relocated. “There is nothing left in the factory but we don’t know where the equipment was taken to,” says a woman who worked in the factory for 28 years. Loknath Dangal, chief administrator of Tribeni Shanghai Group in Jhapa, confirms that the machinery was relocated to factories in Kanyam.

The government has leased out Kanyam, Tokla, Baradasi, Barne, Chilimkot and Soktim Tea Estates along with Ilam Tea Factory to the private sector. Machinery was auctioned off at a low price.

Despite its state, the factory building has historic value. “This history,” says local Bimal Baidhya, “has been erased with the leasing out of the factory.”

Stand by your words

Suresh Gautam in Janadisha, 21 February

Jhala Nath Khanal, the president of a party known for its wobbly nature, has finally become the prime minister. When India pushed Bijay Kumar Gachhadhar’s candidacy to ensure that a leader it favoured would win, Maoist Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal withdrew from the election and supported UML’s [Jhala Nath Khanal]. Although a note of dissent was filed against the decision, all the members of the Maoist party voted for Khanal. This shows party unity in action.

But Khanal is the same person who betrayed the Maoists during the Katawal affair. Chairman Dahal did not want to be deceived again, so he made Khanal sign a written deal before supporting him in the election. But as soon as he became the prime minister, Khanal started changing colours again.

If Khanal chooses to flow like driftwood on the signals of our southern neighbour, like Madhav Kumar Nepal and KP Oli, and not stand by the seven-point agreement, his future is not bright. Though he announced that he would not nominate leaders who had lost during the CA elections as ministers, two out of three of his cabinet appointees were defeated in 2008.

It is important to consider whether someone who cannot even stand by his word for two days is capable of running the country, concluding the peace process, and drafting the constitution. Khanal signed a written deal with Dahal and became the prime minister. But leaders of the same party have been declaring that a certain ministry should not be given to the Maoists. This makes UML appear less like a party and more like a mob.

Just a week after Khanal became PM, rumours have been circulating that he might break the record for the shortest period in office. We hope that Khanal can prove the rumours wrong.

Pokhara flies

Santosh Pokharel in Nagarik, 21 February

Air traffic to and from Pokhara was at a record high last year. Narendra Bahadur Thapa, chief of Pokhara Airport, says that 2010 has been the city’s best year for travel, with 25,500 flights taking off from Pokhara, up from 22,700 in 2000. This is despite the fact that traffic actually went down after 2000 due to the insurgency.

“The number of flights hit the lowest point in 2002, when it was just 16,200. After 10 years, 2010 has set a new record,” says Thapa. “Increase in the number of foreign as well as local tourists has fueled the demand for flights.”

Even compared to 2009, there was a 20 per cent increase last year in the number of air passengers. While 301,091 passengers used the airways during 2009, this number jumped to 360,100 in 2010. Thapa explains that the popularity of ultralight aircraft has also contributed to the rise in air traffic.

October to December is the best season for tourist arrivals in Pokhara, followed by mid-February to May. On an average, 70 flights take off from the airport daily. On a busy day, this can be as high as 130. Says Bishal Bhandari’s station manager Gautam Baral: “If there is peace and stability in the country, this number will definitely rise.”
Civil servants, led by the secretary of the PMO, are off to climb Mt Everest this season. Can’t blame them, they probably got bored waiting for a new government to be formed and needed some excitement in their lives. Also, they must want to get as far away from politicians as possible and to a place where the muntris can’t bother them. The North Pole must have been their first choice, but why go there when we have Mt Everest right in our backyard? The Donkey’s best wishes to Team Leader Lilamaniji and his mountain goats.

And over at the Constant Assembly, the Speaker seems to have given up on the constitution being written by 28 May even though his yar, Com Root Canal, is now PM. He is spending his entire day cutting ribbons, putting in some karate practice and watching rose petals being dropped from helicopters. So when the Nashnul Colishun on Rashial Dishcrimination wrote a dummy constitution, the Speaker was more than happy to give a speech and release it at a function attended by, among others, Com Yummy. If you can’t write a real constitution, a pretend constitution will have to do.

Despite promoting political wrestling as a tourist attraction, here comes news that there are stern new travel advisories about the dangers of visiting Nepal during Nepal Tourism Year 2011. Good timing. Which leads the Asinine One to suggest that our Foreign Ministry should retaliate immediately by also posting warnings to Nepalis about visiting Bahrain (could get maimed in a jana andolan), Libya (could be shot at from helicopter gunships), UK (all non-essential families of Nepalis to leave because of the danger of random attacks on public transport), Thailand (Nepalis are warned that whatever they do they should not go to Bangkok wearing a red shirt), US (Nepalis working as gas station attendants are warned that there is a fairly good chance they will be shot at without warning), Australia (Nepalis should exercise extreme caution because they could easily be mistaken for Indians).

Instead of moaning and groaning about Americans declaring Nepal a No-Fly Zone, we should turn that into catchy slogans for our Tourism Year. Three creative jingles immediately spring to ass:

1. Nepal Airlines: No Plane, No Problem, No Fly
2. Visit Nepal, No Flies Above 3,200m
3. Visit the Land of Suruwals: Look, Ma, No Fly

Which brings me to the news item in the Indian press about Nepali Maoaddies extorting the brother of a former Communications Minister in Himachal. The comrade must have thought, it is standard operating procedure back home, so why not extort the Injuns too and make them share some of the 2G scam loot? Our latest item of export: extort.

Chairman Awesome thought he’d pulled a really fast one by withdrawing his candidacy and making Jholanath PM to thumb his nose @ India. What’s he doing, then, meeting Amresh Bhai every day at the premises of Sumargi & Son, Pvt Ltd? And if you think UML is having problems over portfolios, you should wait for the mother of all bandfands within the Baddies.

The Pistachio Palace erupts every night with booze-ups led by Com Awesome, with Com Horrible, Com Hit Man and Com Ugly (btw: what is Com Sapkota doing heading the Tamang Autonomous Council?) in attendance. Com Napoleon is determined to keep Com Snowball out. PKD must have been scorned once more because he went to Bardia and lashed out at the revisionists who were trying to keep him out of power, naming a large country to the south whose name begins with ‘I’. After being heckled by families of martyrs, Fearsome did what he always does at times like these, blame the devil: “We aren’t sheep, but we have been forced to behave like sheep. I assure you comrades, we will roar like a lion again.”

Two papers are tied for the Headline of the Week Contest. “UML, Headed for Splitsville?” “GW-DJ Talks Come a Cropper”

The consolation prize (the Ass’ favourite) goes to “Mule Spills Beans on Fake Notes”