NO RESPITE: Butwal bombing victim Basudev Shrestha recuperates at TU Teaching Hospital, Tuesday. The blast of 27 March killed two and injured 28.

See p3 for full story by Anurag Acharya.
UNSATISFYING FAREWELL

Although I often disagreed with Mr. Jha’s analysis, I did always appreciate his clearly written prose, courteous style and uniquely Madhesi perspective (“Charting the Times,” Prashant Jha, #548). I will at the very least miss the editorial variety that he provided to these pages.

That said, I found his final discourse regarding the Maoists and their putative role in Nepal’s nation-building experiment to be rather unsatisfying. I know that Mr. Jha is neither a Maoist, nor anything even remotely resembling one. But then, my primary arguments have never been directed against the Maoists or their most enthusiastic armchair champions. My primary argument has always been against the oft-repeated refrain, reproduced yet again in Mr. Jha’s final article, that the Maoists’ flawed integration into the political process will ‘deepen’ Nepali democracy.

The Republic and the CA are indeed the offspring first and foremost of the Maoists. No one else in Nepal’s spectrum of political groupings even considered adopting these programs until the recalcitrance of their own platforms that these parties undertook to entice the Maobadis into the mainstream. Nor, in hindsight, is it easy to see how either program has benefited Nepal. The CA is an unsalvageable failure which has yet to demonstrate any capacity to produce a new organic law for Nepal. The document it is tasked to replace (that of 1956) was itself fully democratic and there has yet to be any public forum or debate as to its merits and supposed demerits. As for the Republic itself, republicanism does not automatically equate to progress by default. Iran, Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan come to mind rather quickly. The institutional failure of Nepal’s own regularization experiment may put it in that unflattering company sooner rather than later.

Equality and inclusion are noble goals to pursue, but this need not entail the wholesale dismantling, remaking and/or restructuring of the “merely formalistic liberal democracy” of the 1990s, particularly when no one in the Nepali political spectrum, least of all the Maoists themselves, has anything credible to offer for substitution or even recalculation. The militant far left are not the forces to be relied upon for a more inclusive society, at least from the perspective of those of us who still believe that both the form and spirit of liberal democracy are worth preserving intact. The ‘peace process’ environmental in the CPA foolishly handed the balance of internal force and the primary political initiative to the Maoists and their fellow travellers on the far left, restraining Nepal’s legitimate armed forces while placing no real restrictions on the activities of a largely unformed insurgency movement. This asymmetry of force does not give the Maoists any real incentive to reform themselves, but only to continually escalate their importunities against the state. Mr. Jha is correct to label the political model offered by the Maoists as ‘unacceptable’; I would carry the point further by arguing that their methods of exploiting (not ameliorating) longstanding inequalities for the sake of their revolutionary program encapsulates an attitude which simply cannot be accommodated in a parliamentary system, has nothing at all to offer a liberal democracy, and can only make the day of a genuinely equitable and inclusive Nepal even further off.

New Delhi’s ‘hardline position’ against the Maoists is an inevitable and necessary adjustment of Indian policy in the wake of the manifest failure of the conciliatory policy India adopted towards the Maoists in 2005 under pressure from the criminally idiotic Sitaram Yechuri and his Left Front cohorts. That policy has created an unbiddable monster in the form of a Maoist-domated Nepal and a worsening Maoist revolt within India’s own borders. India has belatedly realised that its own intrinsic interests have been imperiled by a disastrous policy which, far from delivering a plant Bhutanese lapdog in post-monarchy Nepal, has instead multiplied the South Block’s headaches. And from a purely domestic viewpoint, the risk of emboldening Maoist hardliners through marginalisation is easily outweighed by the risk of actually allowing these spine-killing brigands free access to the reins of state.

| John M. Keller |

SAVING RARA

Thanks for this article which uses the case study of Rara’s fragility to highlight the age-old struggle to protect wilderness areas from both poverty and development (“Protecting Rara from the Future”, Kunda Dixit, #545). Experience from elsewhere has shown that only with sustainable development can we use nature’s capital for the long-term upliftment of livelihoods. Instant development brings about irreversible destruction of that natural capital and makes poverty worse. You don’t have to go far to see the after-effects of such ruin in Nepal. More power to wardens like Durga Poudel for their lofty and often dangerous struggle on the frontlines of the war to protect what is left of our nature.

KiranL

WORKING IN-DIGNITY

It’s a depressingly familiar scene. But you’d be challenged not to shed a tear at the sight of a coffin being wheeled out of Tribhuvan International Airport and loaded onto a Tata Sumo.

In it, Pete Pattison charts the plight of Nepali migrant workers, a 1000 of whom leave the country each day. It’s hardly a new story, but it remains a compelling one.

There’s no doubt that despite the hardship of working in climes where you “sweat from the soles of your feet”, many feel it is worth the risk. Millions of Nepalis work abroad, after all, and the billions of rupees they make are keeping the economy afloat. Is it not to be expected that some will fall into the cracks, and inevitably, make the news with their misfortune?

Yet the circumstances of those who are duped by agents and, in the case of Lila Acharya, killed for trying to escape exploitation and beating are heartbreaking. So too are the nullified prospects of the enaciated men who, stranded in the UAE en route to Afghanistan without work, passports or visas, cram into a filthy flat and while away their days. Even the better off are undeniably exploited thanks to the lack of protection accorded to them in countries yet to demonstrate that they believe in human dignity for all, never mind the lack of respect at home.

What is happening to Nepali migrant workers is beyond doubt criminal, morally and legally. The government should be paying much more attention to the exodus via the passport office than to the trickle into Thamel across the road. If it is unable to provide poor Nepalis a better life within its borders, then it should do all it can to help them help themselves. This means raising awareness about the opportunities and risks of working abroad, expediting passport and visa procedures, monitoring employment agencies and prosecuting those found to be exploiting workers, and providing support to our embassies abroad. It also means stepping in firmly and promptly to help Nepalis stranded abroad (we, it is in Libya or Japan or the Gulf, rather than dithering in expectation of third-country support or offering symbolic aid to tsunami victims. Having failed the bulk of Nepalis for years on end, it’s the least the government can do.

In this New Year, spare a thought for those who are not here to celebrate the occasion with their loved ones. Better, let’s think of what we can do to stop Nepal haemorrhaging its future.
No war, no peace

BY THE WAY

Anurag Acharya

I

recent days, the violence in the Tarai has reached alarming levels. While individual assassinations and kidnappings continue, unarmed civilians are now being targeted in public places with the intention of causing maximum human casualties. The blast in Rupandehi once again brought back the horrifying memories of Madi, when a passenger bus carrying 150 people was bombed by the Maoists in 2005, killing 38 innocent people. The blast in Rupandehi once again brought back the horrifying memories of Madi, when a passenger bus carrying 150 people was bombed by the Maoists in 2005, killing 38 innocent people.

The years following the Madhes movement have certainly brought a qualitative difference to the lives of Madhesis. But living in the Madhes is becoming a dangerous affair. The state has simply failed to take any concrete action to protect the lives and the property of its citizens. The prolonged absence of the state in the Tarai districts has left the people at the mercy of armed groups, who openly extort, kidnap and kill civilians, all in the name of the Madhes and its people.

However, the recurring blasts in the Tarai cannot just be seen as an act of terror by armed outfits operating with supposed ‘political agendas’. There is an element of political apathy towards the violence in the region that considers package bargaining at the top as the only solution. This approach completely overlooks the geopolitical vulnerability that people in the Tarai districts face in the form of an open border.

It is quite ironic that New Delhi has been pressing Kathmandu to curb ‘anti-Indian’ activities on its soil while incidents of violence continue on the Nepali side of the border. There is enough evidence to point at armed groups operating from across the border. But add to this the ongoing issues of encroachment, and it becomes clear that Tarai insecurity has to be addressed at the diplomatic level and not just as an internal security issue.

Madhesi leaders in Kathmandu are busy deriving political mileage from the instability in the Madhes rather than working with the government to improve security in the region. Not one leader has expressed concern at the deteriorating security situation in the Tarai districts. Some are negotiating portfolios in the government, while others are angry at being left out, but no one seems concerned at the continued loss of life in the Tarai.

There is growing resentment among the Madhesi population, which feels that the Madhes has become the victim of national and international politics. After all, the surge in violence so soon after Bijay Kumar Gachchhadar and Rajendra Mahato spoke of alienation and warned of dire consequences can hardly be a coincidence, particularly following the duo’s Delhi visit. People have every reason to suspect foul play through collusion with militant groups.

Politics in Nepal has always been tainted by betrayals and reprials. But seldom before has civilian life been so dispensable. People are dying in the Tarai because of political games at the top. How many more will have to die before they say enough is enough!

Behind the headline

The mainstream media was full of speculation about the effect on the peace process and constitution writing, but only for a day or two. The bombs disappeared from the headlines as suddenly as they appeared. Yet for the injured, life will never be the same again. If there was one thing Arjun Kandel, 32, could change, it would be the nightmare of 27 March that took his wife Radha away from him. Arjun had recently returned from Taiwan to take her back with him. “Dai and Bhaiju were supposed to board their flight in two days,” says his sister Devi Kandel. Lying in his hospital bed, Arjun seems shell-shocked: “What had we done?”

Arjun may walk again, but he doesn’t know how to deal with their four-year-old daughter, who still does not know why her parents are not home from the market. Doctors at the B&B Hospital say Radha, 31, died due to excessive blood loss. She had severe facial burns and wounds, and her left leg had had to be amputated.

Arjun now has other worries. His job in Taiwan is uncertain, the personal loss of the victims.

The government has promised Rs 150,000 to the families of the deceased and will cover 75 per cent of medical expenses for the injured. But this will hardly compensate for the personal loss of the victims.

On Wednesday Butwal police arrested three members of the armed group Akhil Tarai Mukti Morcha, who they say planted the bus bomb. APO Dan Bahadur Karki says investigations have shown “encouraging results” but he couldn’t give details of the other victim whose body is still at hospital.

Anurag Acharya

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"We are a soft target"

Binay Bohra, head of the Internet Service Providers Association of Nepal (ISPAN), which shut down web access nationwide for an hour on Sunday, spoke to Nepali Times.

Nepali Times: Why did ISPAN declare an ‘internet banda’ on Sunday?

Binay Bohra: In the past months police have detained or tried to detain directors and employees of Internet Service Providers (ISPs) because they provided internet connections to customers who were alleged to have misused our services for the call bypass racket. This is like holding a telephone company liable for abusive calls, or holding the maker of pressure cookers liable for their misuse as pressure cooker bombs.

But isn’t it possible for ISPs to find out which subscriber is using connections for call bypass? ISPAN sat down with the authorities and explained that the actions of its customers are a third party ISPAN’s responsibility.

But isn’t stopping the internet a bit extreme? In a perfect society such action would not be needed. But we obviously don’t live in a society where our concerns are heard and resolved. It was about protecting ourselves and our industry against an aggressive government and vindictive telecom operators who are determined to guard their expensive international call business to protect revenues and use government agencies to persecute small operators. We were compelled to take this extreme step out of desperation and as a last resort after exhausting all other options. The culture in our country has become one of protesting through bandas and sadly it has become the only form of protest that works.

But the police say ISPs knowingly allow some subscribers to use connections for call bypass operations?

Call bypass requires internet connectivity and access to the telephone network using mobile SIM cards. People involved in call bypass usually take internet connectivity from an ISP and bulk SIM cards from one of the large operators, Nepal Telecom, Ncell or UTL. When the police raid a company liable for abusive calls, or holding the maker of pressure cookers liable for their misuse as pressure cooker bombs.

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number of tens of thousands of internet customers misuses the service.

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call bypass operation, they identify the ISP that provided the internet connectivity and drag that ISP into the investigation.

But why can’t you help the police crack down on criminals involved in call bypass?

When we suspect or discover that a customer is involved in call bypass, we pass this information to the police through the Nepal Telecommunications Authority (NTA). We have also taken pre-emptive action to screen high-bandwidth customers. We have improved the customer documentation process. NTA already has web access to ISPs’ real time MRTG graphs to monitor the usage patterns of high bandwidth subscribers. So, the accusation that we have not provided data to the authorities is a lie.

Isn’t call bypass good for the customer if it is cheaper? Why not just legalise it?

This should be the collective cry of all Nepalis, and it is our demand as well. Large communication companies are changing unjustifiably high rates to poor Nepalis working overseas by making them pay through their noses to call home. Calling Nepal is among the most expensive of all countries in the SAARC region. This is because the big companies refuse to reduce their charges for incoming calls to Nepal. Illegal call bypass operators therefore have a tremendous economic incentive, and had the rates been lower this activity would be reduced without the need for any police action.

In the meantime, what is the solution?

Just as Ncell and Nepal Telecom are not being held responsible for their SIM cards being misused for illegal call bypass, ISPs should not be held responsible for internet connectivity that is misused by its customers. Why this discrimination against ISPs? Obviously the big and strong have protection by its customers. Why this discrimination against ISPs? Obviously the big and strong have protection.

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Vaidya’s medicine

Does Suraj Vaidya mean business or will it be business as usual?

**STRICTLY BUSINESS
Ashutosh Tiwari**

With all that red abir and khaada, were those the election victory celebrations of a business body or the student wing of a political party? That was the question going through my mind upon watching the TV footage of Suraj Vaidya’s victory in this week’s Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI) elections.

The FNCCI bills itself as “an umbrella organisation of Nepal’s private sector.” But its working definition of that private sector is visibly narrow: a few family-run behemoths that have been started by many locally influential jamindars, and various lobbying groups that push for pro-industry and pro-firm concessions.

Characterising the FNCCI as such is not to criticise it. It is to explain what it is. As such, one should not expect FNCCI to advance the agenda of entrepreneurship, innovations, and bold thinking, such as by finding ways to better treat Nepal’s migrant workers. Nor should one expect it to promote small and medium businesses that provide self-employment to many. Nor does one expect it to push for pro-market and pro-competition economic policies that call for a level playing field.

And so, given its nature and the expectations of members who will presumably want to extract their pound of flesh after having spent more than 50 million rupees on the elections, can there be a vision for the new FNCCI leadership? Yes, if Vaidya spends his three-year term focusing on these two critical problems facing the private sector.

**Image:** The Nepali private sector needs a drastic image makeover. It needs to sell itself to the public as a provider of jobs, as a pillar of the community, and as the payers of taxes which in turn pay for public goods. At present, private sector companies are widely and unfairly perceived to be dominated by a few crooks that are seen as tax cheats. This gives the whole sector a bad image at a time when businesses need public support.

Vaidya and his team need not be defensive about the entire range of unsavoury business practices in vogue. But they should use their position to positively sell, through speeches, activities and white papers, the upside of broader private sector-led growth for jobs and prosperity in Nepal.

**Security:** Few businessmen think of starting a factory in Nepal for fear of having to deal with militant and politically charged trade unions. So long as Maoist unions remain as active as they are, nobody in his right mind will invest in the type of company that can generate hundreds of jobs.

In the five years since Jana Andolan II, businesses have not enjoyed the fruits of a peace dividend in the form of security. The numbers of labour strikes, physical attacks, acts of intimidation, and extortion have all gone up. Indeed, the only thing one remembers from the outgoing FNCCI president Kush Joshi’s time is his call to unite against the six-day Maoist banda last May. The challenge facing Vaidya’s team to enable a secure environment for honest business is big.

But if Vaidya is planning to stick to the FNCCI tradition of getting into bed with politicians, then the celebratory scenes of Wednesday only confirm that like with politics, it’s going to be business as usual.
Public opinion?

MY TAKE
Damakant Jayash

Supreme Court (SC) justices Balaram KC, Girish Chandra Lal and Prakash Wasti must be squirming now. Prime Minister Jhala Nath Khanal has reminded the top court how its ruling dismissing a writ petition on the extension of the Constituent Assembly (CA) can be (mis)interpreted of the Constituent Assembly’s task was to draft the constitution and hence it could not expire unless that task was completed. There had been multiple interpretations of what the bench meant. One Law Commission official wrote in an article in a Nepali newspaper arguing that most interpretations, even by noted constitutional experts, missed a crucial aspect of the SC’s wise words: “ahile ko avantha” (the existing situation). The ruling had been made earlier, and on the writ petition challenging the extension on 28 May, 2010; it only came to light after newspapers published the interpretation. The law official said the ruling should be seen in the backdrop of the last extension and not as a blanket endorsement of future extensions. “Dissolving the Constituent Assembly is out of question,” said PM Khanal on Monday while inaugurating the AGM of the FNCCI. “The assembly has the specific mandate of concluding the peace process and drafting a new constitution. Its existing mandate cannot be altered until the mandate is fulfilled,” said Khanal. Oh, and he did not fail to add: “This is the wish of the people as well.”

Without a roadmap, there is no point extending the term of the Constituent Assembly

Khanal of all politicians should know what the wish of the people is. Does Devi Prasad Regmi ring a bell? This policy in action. The political parties led by Khanal slapped him in public in Bahar in January. A loud cry of sympathy is coming back to haunt it. Without a roadmap, it could not expire unless the constitution and hence it cannot be altered until the mandate is fulfilled, said Khanal. Oh, and he did not fail to add: “This is the wish of the people as well.”

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As for the life of the CA, it is not for the government to decide. Public opinion matters and it can no longer be ignored, as has been the case so far. Another extension of the CA is possible only if there is some tangible progress on the contents of the new constitution. At least two of the justices on the bench that have ruled on the writ have noted that the ruling was meant for extension on 28 May, 2010. They have said that if there is to be another extension, the court will look at it afresh. Political parties cannot go on extending the CA’s term without convincing the people why they need another extension under the present circumstances. There has been hardly any progress to justify another extension. There is every possibility that another extended term would mirror to decide. Public opinion matters and it can no longer be ignored, as has been the case so far. Another extension of the CA is possible only if there is some tangible progress on the contents of the new constitution.

New ministers
Prime Minister Jhala Nath Khanal inducted 12 UML ministers, including seven state ministers, into his cabinet on Monday. Gokarna Bista, who was appointed minister for energy, was not present to take the oath as he is undergoing treatment at Mannamohan Memorial Hospital following an attack by masked assailants just hours after he was appointed. UCPN (Maoist) and the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum, UML’s coalition partners, are yet to name their ministerial candidates. The Maoists have been giving the prime Ministry as per the seven-point agreement.

Vaidya elected
Suraj Vaidya was elected the new President of the Federation of Nepal Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI) on Wednesday. Vaidya secured 307 votes while his opponent, Aijad Shrestha, obtained 283 votes. Bhawani Rana and Pratapin Murarka from Vaidya’s panel of candidates and Pradip Jung Pandey from Shrestha’s panel have been elected vice-presidents.

Justice for judges
The Judicial Council (JC) on Monday relevant two Appellate Court judges of their duels and issued warnings to four others for incompetence and improper moral conduct. The outgoing Chief Justice Ram Prasad Shrestha proposed the action against Pahala Appellate Court Judge Om Prakash Subedi and Helena Appellate Court Judge Te Bahadur Karki. Likewise, Sahari Judge Birendra Prasad Sharma, Argakhanchi Judge Achyut Bista, Pansa Judge Pushpababhi Adhikari, and Jaljore Judge Sitadev Prakash have been warned of action.
Ilsa Brittain has woven the entirety of her life into her layered paintings of the female form.

Ilsa Brittain has always been an artist. "One of my earliest memories – I must have been about five – is of sitting down with a pencil and paper and saying to myself, ‘Well, Ilsa, if you’re going to be an artist, you have to learn how to draw faces,’" she says.

The desire to create has never left her, and has culminated with her current exhibition at Siddhartha Art Gallery at Baber Mahal Revisited. But her journey, from a determined five-year-old to the successful artist she is today, wasn’t straightforward.

Ilsa’s childhood was spent as a ‘water gypsy’ on her father’s yacht in the Mediterranean, returning only when it was time to take her exams. She eventually moved on to study art at Brighton University in the south of England.

Marriage to her UN worker husband, John, meant the resumption of the itinerant lifestyle. She has spent the last twenty years moving from country to country, including China, Uzbekistan, Cambodia, Russia, France and Guinea.

During this time Ilsa had three daughters. Somehow, despite the moves and the madness of motherhood, she managed to keep working, exhibiting in France and Russia, as well as studying figurative painting at the Surikov Academy in Moscow.

"Because my work is concerned with human emotions, motherhood fed into it, rather than being a distraction," Ilsa says. "Of course, your world turns upside down when you have children, and finding the time to paint was hard, but the experience of having a family deepened my work. Although I do remember having really strong arms from holding a baby in one arm whilst I painted with the other," she laughs.

Four years ago, Ilsa and her family moved to Nepal, and she says that it is here in Kathmandu that she feels her work has consolidated and matured, enabling her to produce her best pieces to date.

"Coming to Nepal was an inspiration for me," she says. "Sometimes it’s hard to get the quality of materials I need for my work, but the relaxed pace of life and sheer beauty of the place has been wonderful.”

Ilsa works seven hours a day in her studio in Patan. She says paintings can take anything from a day to a whole year to complete; however, she usually works on more than one piece at a time. She also runs art workshops from her studio, teaching drawing and painting techniques.

“I love teaching,” she says. “It’s vital to my work, it feeds the studio, I feel that you have to put in to get out, and the energy I put into teaching has been reflected in the paintings I have done since being here.”

Ilsa says her work is synergistic, bringing together various strands of her life: as a mother, wife, teacher, traveller and artist. Her current exhibition, titled ‘Female Substantive’, reflects the different facets and complexity of the roles woman play.

At first glance Ilsa’s paintings appear to be simply a beautiful fusion of the figurative and the abstract, but on closer inspection the viewer sees layer upon layer of textural codes beneath the oil paint: a bracelet, a leaf, a safety pin, or a number.

“My paintings are filled with secrets,” says Ilsa. “I want them to be a bit like a magnet, drawing the viewer in, and asking them to think about the obstacles and chances in their own lives.”

Ilsa’s exhibition ‘Female Substantive’ is showing at the Siddhartha Gallery, Baber Mahal Revisited, until 22 April.

www.internationalartworkshops.com
http://ilsa-brittain.artistwebsites.com
Irish Pub, not only does it feel like one, but it’s Irish all the way down to the original recipes from the owner’s wife. Go green with their chips.

Nanette’s Creperie

The latest addition to a Jhamsikhel corner already populated by three other eateries, Nanette’s provides crepes. Lots of menus with crepes. Lots of variations thereof under the colours of the rainbow, but for all of two months, insouciantly fills its snacks section. Nanette’s is relatively undiscovered, but one suspects not for long. There’s all sorts of reasonably priced crepes here (Rs 130-455), but for simplicity’s sake you may imagine your buckwheat pancakes filled with savoury combos that include cheese, mushrooms, cream, bacon, smoked salmon, spinach or potatoes, or sweet combos of sugar, chocolate, caramel, banana, butter, honey and more. With decent sides of ratatouille, salad, or potatoes. Le Suedoise was scrumptious, the delicate flavours of the spinach in cream complementing the richer taste of the smoked salmon. La Forestiere Gourmande was almost as grand as it promised, with mushroom, bacon and cheese, but perhaps limited by the quality of its ingredients. The goat cheese next time, I promised myself.

For dessert, the exciting sounding Crepe Flambe fell away to the right. The Apple and Caramel pancake was much better, even if the chewiness of the cooling hamone-made caramel gummed my teeth together. But by this time, faced with a dining companion sans wallet, I was already plotting my course to the nearest ATM. I casually slipped out, cupping my phone to my ear, began pounding the pavement south, turned back thinking it would be quicker to dash home, then realised halfway I’d left my keys at Nanette’s. By the time I made the circuit out to Pulchok and back, I was drenched in the sweat of the unexpected digestive run, and felt I’d hardly done justice to the digesting pancake awaiting me, I returned to find a dull looking pancake awaiting me, myself to the restroom, a little flat. Having excused myself to the restroom, the flame long gone, only the looking pancake awaiting me, and back, I was drenched in the sweat of the unexpected digestive run, and felt I’d hardly done justice to the place. I’ll be back.

Nepali Kukur

Head south from the British School to a be-statued junction. Nanette’s is tucked away to the right.

Space ★★★★☆
Bread ‘n water ★★★★★
Service ★★★★★
Deal-icious ★★★★★
Repeat? ★★★★★
Flower power

UNTIL a few years ago, the small fountain next to the entrance of Patan Darbar Square was pretty much a massive dustbin. It was not uncommon to see plastic wrappers, cups and cigarette butts floating in the pond’s scummy green water.

But take a stroll down to the square today and you’ll see fish in the pond, which has functioning fountains. The pond is now lined with benches and strategically placed dustbins for both degradable and non-degradable waste, welcome you. And there are neatly maintained flowerpots all around.

The brick-paved square now has its own mini-garden.

Double whammy: heart attacks and infections

DHAIVANTARI
Buddha Basnyat, MD

Patients who’ve had heart attacks are a common sight in Nepali hospitals these days. Because most people have no insurance or receive state support, the economic burden for the average Nepali suffering from a cardiovascular illness like a heart attack is crushing, running as it does into hundreds of thousands of rupees. South Asia may be an open textbook for infectious diseases (TB, typhoid, typhus, etc.), but these can often be dealt with by a course of antibiotics. With cardiovascular illnesses, the treatment can be much more drawn out.

Forty-year-old Ram Maharjan, for example, was a taxi driver. One day he experienced sharp chest pain with nausea and vomiting, but he drove himself to Bir Hospital where after tests, he was diagnosed as having had a heart attack. He was referred to another hospital, and after further more expensive investigations, they told him he required a stent (a tube to prop open an artery) for one of his coronary (heart) arteries with severe narrowing. However, he had run out of money for the potentially life-saving procedure of stent placement, having spent it all on preliminary tests. Such a sequence of events is increasingly common in Nepal, where until three decades ago illnesses were generally limited to infectious diseases.

Cardiovascular problems have become so widespread in poor countries such as ours that mathematical modelling has been carried out to determine if taking a preventive pill (a polypill that reduces cholesterol, blood sugar, and high blood pressure, the three important ‘controllable’ risk factors for cardiac illnesses) after the age of 50 helps. The results were very promising; field trials using inexpensive, generic drugs from the Indian drug company Cipla are underway. Importantly, the benefits derived from taking a polypill need to outweigh the risks (side effects) of taking the drug. In countries like Nepal, where treatment of cardiovascular diseases and their complications can be financially devastating, a well thought out, evidence-based preventive measure is an attractive idea.

In the meantime, we need to drink clean water, avoid fatty food, stop smoking, avoid sugary drinks and instant noodles, eat shyabhuvti, and go for morning walks. These precautions should be our health mantras.

There are enough signs to indicate that the northern hemisphere has warmed up. The axis of the tropical jet stream, for instance, has shifted northwards, parallel to the Himalaya, paving the way for a series of warm waves from the south towards South Asia and the Himalayan foothills. Fresh satellite pictures confirm that we will see more turbulent winds and occasional rains with thunderstorms, albeit isolated. For the weekend, expect sunny intervals with passing clouds that will raise the Valley’s temperature to 30 degrees.

SONG AND DANCE: The Indigenous Artists’ Organisation launch a collection of music videos on the constitution, with Constitutional Committee Chair Nilambar Acharya (second from left), Kamaladi, Saturday.

DRY RUN: Funeral pyres burn above the dry banks of the Bagmati River, Pashupati, Sunday.
By the time you read this, this kalam will once more have wandered off the rails of the 9 to 5 into the seemingly limitless and aimless pastures of the freelance life. It is a landscape with which I am familiar, as I spent a number of years prior to my time with the Times as a travelling editor. So the prospect before me does not fill me with dread. If anything, this time around I step away from the uniformity of office life with some relief and much hope.

The last time around, I fearfully forsook the security of a steady job to combine freelance work with creative writing, and found that having the relative freedom to organise the whole of one's time (and not just the evenings) was a boon, in more ways than one. But without self-discipline, this meant nothing with respect to the writing that had to be done. This time, my story repeats itself, albeit with the advantage of having made some headway with the writing, which means that in a sense, I still have a job (and this space). Only to the degree that writing is considered a career, of course. For the vast majority of those afflicted with this psychosomatic condition, the physical manifestation of writing is not lucrative, nor even that which can guarantee economic survival. Its validity as a profession is thus open to debate, particularly in societies such as ours only recently cracking the moulds of doctor-engineer-army to explore different ways of earning a living.

But I digress. I meant not to write about writing, but about flying solo.

Literally and historically, a 'free lance' is a mercenary who is prepared to point his lance at anybody if the price is right. In this sense, then, going freelance is about the most Nepali thing one could be doing, if the idea of calling the Gurkhas mercenaries doesn’t ring your jingo. But the Gurkhas, be they British or Indian or plain Nepali (though not an ethnic group, as every Nepali must have explained at least once), have never been your garden variety mercenaries. One could say they miss the point of being freelance in the modern world, in that they fight other peoples’ wars but are very much focused on having a career, and one with limited but definite possibility of vertical advancement.

Much freelance work, in fact, flies in the face of the idea of a career. Oh, you could be making more or less money than those with careers, and you can even be successful enough to employ people if you so choose. But freelancing today is all about horizontal advancement, in the sense that you move from client to client but never above them. And what is there to aspire to if you are just the boss of yourself, a status that you only share with the unemployed? It is this perception of suspicious stasis, sometimes with an undeniable and very much a mirroring of a global trend away from company careers as an opening up of new vistas for a generation raised on liberal arts curricula. As long as you meet the bottom line, personal achievement over the course of a lifetime need not be measured only in terms of a directorship here, a government citation there: a linear trajectory for a (false) sense of security. Your portfolio could be a music record, a renovation, a website, a restaurant, a development project, a social movement...anything that reflects your interests and particular aptitudes, and it should be respected as such. All of which makes this sound like a long-winded justification for one man’s tomfoolery. I quit already!

Free bod
Going freelance could be the most Nepali of things

If you ever feel like you need a break from your routine, why not try a golf tournament? Surya Nepal Masters 2011 is just the thing you need!

Surya Nepal Masters 2011
Gokarna Forest Resort, Kathmandu
13th - 17th April 2011

Co-Sanctioned by MPBA and PGTI

POWER PLAY
Free Entry for Spectators @ 7.30 pm onwards

SURYA NEPAL GOLF
SURYA NEPAL GOLF TURF 2011

John Player
Standard Chartered

2011
Charlotte Bailey
in Reading, UK

I wouldn’t have come if I had known. The young Nepali woman in front of me tosses her black hair to a side and looks directly into my eyes. Speaking during her lunch break at college, where she is studying for a diploma in Business and IT, Sachita is commenting on the reduction in the hours that overseas students can legally work in the UK.

As of March last year, foreign students on a course below degree level can only work 10 hours a week, down from 20. Anyone with a visa issued before March can continue to work up to 20 hours until the visa comes up for renewal. This is understandably worrying for a lot of students already committed to two or three-year courses. “Working 20 hours, we can afford to pay our rent and eat – that’s it”, Sachita tells me. “On 10 hours, we won’t be able to do even that...it’s hard to live in this place.”

The students say goodbye to their friends, but this is obviously not sustainable. Padma confesses that even before the reduction in legal working hours he found it unexpectedly difficult in the UK. He accuses the education consultancy he sought advice from in Nepal of deliberately misleading him. “I think they did it on purpose – they told me things that turned out not to be true...things like we could work as much as we needed to.” Such consultancies take a cut of the fees when they successfully recruit a student for a UK college. They don’t have an incentive to tell the truth about life in Britain.

The Home Office now wants to ensure that those who enter on a student visa genuinely want to come here to study, not to work or with a view to settling here. The UK government cites evidence that students like Sachita and Padma aren’t going to get any easier for them to find work. As of March last year, foreign students on a course below degree level can only work 10 hours a week, down from 20. Anyone with a visa issued before March can continue to work up to 20 hours until the visa comes up for renewal. This is understandably worrying for a lot of students already committed to two or three-year courses. “Working 20 hours, we can afford to pay our rent and eat – that’s it”, Sachita tells me. “On 10 hours, we won’t be able to do even that...it’s hard to live in this place.”

The restrictions also make finding a job more difficult in the first place, as many employers won’t take on people who are limited to working 10 hours. The result is an unexpected drain on resources back home, with students left with little option but to ask their parents for money.

It’s fine to ask my parents for help with fees,” she continues, shaking her head. “But you feel shame asking for money for everyday living expenses.”

The alternative is to return to Nepal before completing the course. “I cannot go on like this,” says another student, Padma. He is already on 10 hours a week. “My parents cannot afford it. Things aren’t going to get any easier for students like Sachita and Padma (see box).”

Recent announcements made by the UK Home Office mean that from April 2012, overseas students in privately funded colleges will not be able to work at all. The policy of cutting legal working hours for overseas students is intended to reduce fraud within the system. The UK government wants to ensure that those who enter on a student visa genuinely come here to study, not to work or with a view to settling here. The government cites evidence that shows that 26 per cent of students in private institutions are non-compliant with the terms of their visa.

Sarah Mulley, Associate Director of Migration, Trade and Development at the Institute of Public Policy Research, says the Home Office has not been clear about exactly what problem the policy is designed to address. She fears the measure is part of a wider plan to reduce the number of students coming into the country. But there’s also the risk that it may push overseas students into illegal work, where they won’t be protected by UK employment law, including the minimum wage.

“We come here for our own development, not to work,” another indignant Nepali student says. “We work only to support ourselves while we are here.”

The Home Office, though, believes that for too many people, this is not the case. The students say goodbye to me and pick up their bags from the restaurant floor. They don’t want to be late for class.
Despite decades of food assistance from the government and aid agencies, little seems to have changed in the Karnali region. Food shortages are as bad as ever, and there are claims that dependency on subsidised rice has meant what little was left of cultivation has faltered. The general impression is that the dry and rocky terrain of the mid and far west region cannot sustain wide-scale agriculture and that there is no alternative to trucking in food from the outside. But is this really necessary? Documentary film-maker Gorakh Bista of Srinagar, Humla, doesn’t seem to think so.

Karnali already has the crops it needs to feed itself, he says. “If we grow the right crops, there is no reason we can’t produce enough food for ourselves,” says Bista. He cites the example of Cheeno, or Proso millet, a crop that grows readily in Humla. Cheeno is one of the major winter crops in Karnali but is not as extensively farmed as wheat or paddy. “If we can get people to grow Cheeno instead of the low yielding wheat or rice, there would be enough food for everybody,” Bista claims.

Resham Amgain, scientist at the tellingly named Underutilized Crops Unit at NARC, says, “Millet, buckwheat and beans grow well even in a harsh climate, with limited water and efforts. They are also highly nutritious and can well substitute for rice as a staple.” But the preference for rice may mean that production of such crops will go down. “Even in Simikot most people would not be able to tell you about Cheeno today. If the trend continues, most of these crops may die out in a few generations,” Bista says. His warning echoes the fate of quinoa, which until the colonisation of South America was one of the primary crops of the Incas. Despite having been cultivated for nearly 7,000 years, this highly nutritious crop was derided and its cultivation suppressed by the conquering Spaniards.

The government’s lack of interest in protecting Nepal’s hill crops may mean this is not an unlikely prospect. Pantha says that hill crops have long been neglected. The government has only made three varieties of millet available in decades, compared to hundreds of varieties of wheat and rice. The Underutilized Crops Unit under NARC has been collecting local varieties, carrying out studies and recommending varieties of hill crops for commercial release for some years now. Studies on buckwheat, finger millet, Cheeno, Kaguno, barley and amaranth are ongoing.

But the ultimate challenge may be to get the locals interested in these crops. Says Pantha: “In many places we saw people growing millet as fodder for cattle. The government has to introduce policies to prioritise the production and consumption of these crops.”

**RUBEENA MAHATO**

*Feeding the Karnali*
A case against Prime Minister Jhala Nath Khanal has been filed at the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA). Ram Sagar Mahat of Sarlahi, Hajariya filed the case on Friday demanding Khanal be removed from his post immediately.

Sources say Acting Commissioner Bhagawati Kumar Kafle has held discussions with senior colleagues on how to proceed. This is the first time a case has been filed at the CIAA against the PM. Mahat has accused Khanal of being unable to check corruption and extend the cabinet for over two months. He had earlier filed a case demanding the PM intervene to check corruption, and claims that Khanal did not do so because he was encouraging corruption himself. His petition reads: “Corruption is endemic in the government as the ministers are involved in promoting such acts. What is the use of a PM who cannot check corruption?”

PM Khanal has promised to appoint officials at the CIAA, and analysts say the fact that the corruption watchdog has been without a commissioner and investigating officials for four years now has encouraged corruption.

“Political leaders often do not show willingness to appoint officials at the CIAA fearing inquiries into themselves,” says an official at the CIAA. A recent report of Transparency International shows that corruption is on the rise in Nepal, and ranked Nepal 146th out of 178 countries in its corruption index.
The economy of energy

With hydropower development stalled, and no alternative energy sources on the horizon, Nepal has been meeting its energy demands through petroleum products from India. But with import bills amounting to over 60 per cent of the country’s export earnings, and the international price of oil on the rise, this is far from sustainable.

During fiscal year 2000-1, petroleum product imports were equivalent to 27 per cent of merchandise exports. With an average growth rate of 10 per cent per annum spurred by rising loadshedding hours, Nepal spent Rs 41.4 billion or 61.5 per cent of its export earnings of Rs 67.2 billion just on petroleum products in 2008/9. This actually exceeded the total export earnings of Rs 40.8 billion from India.

“It explains the state of the country’s economy,” says Keshav Acharya, chief economic advisor at the Ministry of Finance. “Our foreign currency earnings are spent mostly on petroleum products. This is beyond what Nepal’s economy can sustain.” If oil prices hit US$150 per barrel (up from around US$120 now), then export earnings will have to double just to meet the demand for petroleum products. “We might need funds from other sources,” says Deepak Kumar Kharal, senior energy official at the Water and Energy Commission Secretariat (WECS).

WECS has estimated that 400,605 million Gigajoules, equivalent to 9.3 million tonnes of oil or 15,000MW, was consumed in Nepal in 2008/9. Petroleum products accounted for only 10 per cent of this, while almost 78 per cent of demand is met by transport uses 5.2 per cent, and agriculture 0.9 per cent. “The practice of energy consumption is neither sustainable nor productive,” Kharal says.

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Net worth exports on petroleum from India

The government has also announced plans to produce 2,500MW of electricity within five years. It has proposed an Energy Crisis Control Commission to oversee government programs for power production. Custom duties will be waived for materials related to the production of solar power, as well as income tax for the first 10 years for hydropower companies beginning construction in the next four years. Another stopgap solution is mixing ethanol with petrol. NOC has been authorised since 2004 to distribute petrol with 10 per cent of ethanol, but has not implemented the measure yet. Petrol mixed with ethanol is already used in the United States, Brazil and India.

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A country that prefers to eat cricket rather than play cricket, it’s time to call a moratorium on all cricket metaphors describing current political innings. Still, for those of you who are not familiar with cricket terminology, here is a quick glossary so you can follow the running commentary about politics in the media:

**Agricultural Shot:** A batting lineup that includes a Forum candidate willing to give the Agriculture Portfolio a shot.

**Bouncer:** Similar to a toughie guarding a disco, for example: ‘JNK was already batting on a sticky wicket since he started his innings as the Skipper, but his team-mate KP Oli suddenly bowled a Bouncer from behind him by saying he could have him sacked as UML chairman.’

**Century:** The time it will take for the Batting Team under the current political lineup that includes a Forum candidate willing to give the Agriculture Portfolio a shot.

**Donkey Drop:** The Ass has absolutely no idea what this is, but it has a nice ring to it because it seems to describe accurately the ilklocoa that our politicians indulge in from time to time.

**Drinks Break:** What happens at Pistachio Palace every night as one faction of one party meets with another faction of another party to plot against rival factions in both parties, usually well lubricated with Mao Tai.

**Full Toss:** The defenestration of a UNDP-funded chair from the fourth-floor window of the Constitutional Committee. So far involving chairs only, but may soon upgrade to bigger furniture, and ultimately to Honourable Members of the Constituent Assembly.

**Howzat:** Blood-curdling cry, often emanating from cabinet members, when the Finance Minister is manhandled while trying to present the budget. The Speaker is not required to rule on the physical appeal for dismissal unless asked in this way. But, if asked, he is mandated to form a Task Force, an Inquiry Board or an Investigation Commission.

**Jockstrap:** Also known as ‘groin-guard’, mandatory gear for all newly nominated ministers whose gonads could be the targets of well-aimed yorkers, especially if they are fielding at Silly Point.

**Leg Break:** A form of bowtick carbury practiced during the war by Baddie Bowlers, but still being employed selectively in order to dismiss opposition Batsmen from time to time. Also known as Leg Bye-bye.

**Luncheon:** The first of the two intervals (see also: Drinks Break) taken during a full day’s session of the House, which usually occurs at lunchtime at about 12:30pm Indian Standard Time and can last anywhere up to three hours.

**Match Fixing:** The accepted behind-the-scenes method of cobbled together a coalition government which involves bribing players with the promise of cabinet berths. For example, the Mahabuddie Executive Committee had decided secretly to match fix as follows: PKD 4 ministries Kiran 4 ministries BRB 2 ministries NKS 1 ministry Unfortunately, Awesome and Kiran still haven’t been able to decide whether it should be Coms Mahara or Deb who should bat for the Home-run ministry. And Jhol Gnat’s cabinet seems jinxed from the start, the water minister got hit by a Beamer just as he was being appointed, and the only woman nominee to the Team refused to swear.

**No Balls:** This happens when an ex-minister repeatedly shows a lack of intestinal fortitude in the field and is obsessed with Quickies with Maidens.

**One Day International:** A jambuck in which the Finance Minister flies half-way around the world for a one-day international conference so he doesn’t have to go after fake VATSSmen.

**Overthrow:** Prolonged poor delivery could lead to the fielding team staging a violent takeover, leading to a batting collapse. Rehearsal is the Red Shirt Rally on May 1 during which Com Biglipo’s People’s Volunteers Mobilisation Bureau will try to run out Awesome’s YCL Batsmen. Avoid driving around town that day.

**Partnership:** An alliance of convenience by Batsmen from two parties with completely different ideologies, for example between PKD and JNK, that lasts as long as one of them is not a Golden Duck.

**Powerplay:** The block of overs that offers temporary advantage to the coalition in an endgame struggle to be in government on 26 May.

**Rest Day:** Every day.

**Wicked Keeper:** Another name for party boss, the guy who is Caught Behind while keeping crooked extortees happy.

**Yorker:** Opposite of Googly, as in: ‘PKD delivered a Yorker on a jockstrap-less BRB by calling him an Indian stooge. BRB then quickly bowled him a Googly in retaliation.’