The run up to Dasain this year has been literally disastrous, with an earthquake, landslides and floods, a tragic air crash. Much of the loss of lives could have been prevented with better preparedness, a more responsive state, and if lessons had been learnt from past mistakes. Many like Bandana Dewan and her little brother (pictured, above), in Lelep in eastern Nepal which was devastated by the earthquake, are still waiting for relief. The state’s helpline has been slow, but people are coping the best they can.

On the political front, there is only one week to go for Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai’s self-imposed deadline on concluding the peace process. He is not going to have much of a holiday if he is going to deliver. The prime minister is hobbled by colleagues in the cabinet who don’t share his reputation for integrity, and his own party colleagues, who are threatening a split. May the Dasain spirit provide them with the wisdom and foresight to work together for the sake of the Nepali people.

Himalmedia wishes readers and partners peace and happiness this holiday season. Nepali Times is taking its annual Dasain break and will not come out on Friday, 7 October. The next hardcopy edition will be on 14 October, but you can follow us on www.nepalitimes.com without interruption.
DEMOGRAPHY, DEMOCRACY AND DEMOGOGUES

When the Central Bureau of Statistics released the preliminary results of the 2011 census this week, many of us were pleasantly surprised that the country’s runaway population growth rate has sunk dramatically to 1.4 percent per year. Nepal’s population, which we all expected to touch 30 million this time was “only” 26.62 million.

But analysing the figures further and speaking with experts, we saw no reason to rejoice. Apart from some doubts about the accuracy of the numbers, there are unmistakable trends that point to a dangerous demographic imbalance.

The most serious of these is a rapid depopulation of the hills nationwide. Twenty-three districts have negative population growth, with most of the people moving to the capital Valley and plains. At no time in Nepal’s history, not even during the state-sponsored transmigration from hills of Tanahu, Parbat, Kaski to Chitwan during the Mahatma years, has there been such a large-scale movement of Nepalis within Nepal.

Manang has lost an astonishing one-third of its population over the last 10 years. Khotang, Tenthum and Syangja are also suffering out migration of young men to the cities, to Malaysia and the Gulf. The mid-western hills have seen depopulation that hasn’t abated since the conflict years.

Higher birth rates in the Tarai, and migration from the hills and from across the border, means that the population of the Tarai grew by 20 per cent in the last 10 years so that more than half the country’s population now lives in the plains. It was induced migration due to conflict, or distress migration because of hardships of subsistence farming in the hills.

All this puts tremendous pressure on the land and resources of the Tarai. Meantime, with few young men left, the hills are full of fallow fields. The CBS admits there are nearly two million Nepalis “missing” in the like census, because those who have been away for more than six months were not counted. Our guess is that the actual total is nearly double that, since one counts seasonal migrants to India. Which means the real population of Nepal is probably closer to the 30 million we had projected all along.

But even if the population growth rate is not only way to go.

But no prime minister of Nepal, however visionary or honest, can work on these long-term plans if he is so beset with short-term threats to his government’s survival. Prime Minister Bhattarai is on perpetual damage control mode, mostly trying to patch up the mess his colleagues in the coalition make every time they open their mouths.

We wish Bhattarai well this Dasain so he can address the twin challenges of keeping the country’s democracy and democracy on track, and keeping demagogues out.
Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai’s address to the UN General Assembly in New York on Saturday was among the rare moments in recent times when a Nepali national leader has actually presented what can be called a foreign policy statement.

Speaking for almost 20 minutes from the GA podium with its distinctive green marble backdrop, Bhattarai not only talked about the epochal transformations back home, but delved into the lessons others could learn from us. The quest for sustainable peace, he said, can only materialise if protagonists address inequality, deprivation and marginalisation within their societies. In a moment of irony, Bhattarai questioned the rationale for “war-mongering”. He said: “How can one justify the spending $1.5 trillion on war every year when more than two billion people across the globe lack basic necessities like food and medicine?”

No other Nepali prime minister we can remember has given a speech at the UN that is such a cogent critique of the negative side of globalisation.

The chronic global economic crisis, he said, called for deeper soul-searching and the creation of a new, just and scientific economic order.

Being a PhD as well as the ideologue-in-chief of a Maoist party, our prime minister may have the tendency to lecture, but at least the speech at the New School on Friday did not sound like a Marxist harangue. Some eyes rolled over when he used words like “imperialist capitalism” leading the world into a recurring global financial turmoil. But given the crises besetting the global economy there were quite a few takers. Bhattarai’s “21st century Marxist model” explained the unbridled greed that is at the heart of global capitalism, and how the gap between the rich and the poor globally and within countries can breed conflict.

As the chairman of the Group of 49 ‘Least Developed Countries’, Bhattarai’s speech drew loud applause from member nations, who were clearly more impressed with him than the pro forma speech delivered by his predecessor in Istanbul in June. Bhattarai even had problems with the label “least developed” and suggested “underdeveloped”.

Civil society groups and experts had termed the Istanbul declaration ‘toothless’ for failing to ensure adequate aid, reform unjust trade rules, and remove the burden of debt on the LDCs and subsequently came out with their own Istanbul declaration. After joining the United Nations in 1957 and taking a proactive role in the Non-aligned Movement, what little international influence Nepal had steadily eroded. Chairing the LDC group is seen as an opportunity for the country to find its foreign policy voice. But the conflict and protracted transition have not only weakened our national economy and polity, we have often found our foreign policy pragmatism at odds with our geo-political realities.
Long journey home
Instead of being commended, rescuers of Nepali girls are condemned

After the rescue of 23 Nepali girls from an orphanage in Coimbatore in southern India two weeks ago and writing my report for Nepali Times (A faraway rescue, #571), I was following up to see how many of them had been reunited following up to see how many of them had been reunited with their parents.

The girls, mostly from Humla, had been taken to Michael Job Centre (MJC) in Coimbatore when they were between three to seven by the infamous human trafficker, Dal Bahadur Phadera. Ten years later, the girls were found by the Father Benjamins Memorial Foundation (FMBF) living in the centre as “orphans” of “Christian martyrs” killed by Maoists during the war. In all these years, the children except for those whose parents worked with the traffickers, had no contact with their families in Nepal.

When all girls were handed over and brought back to Nepal, we had expected to receive positively back home and would spur similar rescue efforts of other children sold and trafficked in India. But instead of being commended for the rescue, FMBF has been condemned in an orchestrated media campaign. It has been blamed for forcibly bringing back the girls from a “good English medium school”. A television channel broadcasted footage of angry parents badmouthing the rescuers for endangering the future of their daughters. With their irresponsible and badly researched coverage, sections of the Nepali media ended up helping the trafficker.

They never bothered to check that in Bharawa last week, when the children arrived, Phadera was there as well with the parents, most of whom are his relatives. A UML member, Phadera was convicted for human trafficking but used his political connections to get himself released after serving just three years. Now, he is using all his influence to slander the rescue and sadly, many reporters have played along.

The Coimbatore school is supposed to be an orphanage, but the girls were no orphans. The girls were said to be Christian, they were not. They were said to be victims of Christian martyrs killed by the Maoists, they were not. At anytime, if the Indian authorities had closed down the centre, the girls would have been homeless. The police here have also been trying to pass the buck to cover up their lack of action. DSP Puja Singh said this week that it wasn’t a big deal if the girls were falsely kept as orphans in India because “half the children in Nepal’s orphanages are not orphans either”. Such comments prove how deep Phadera’s political connections are and how everyone from the police to sections of the media are complicit in this crime.

There is not a shred of doubt that the Humla girls were trafficked to India to make money for the Michael Job Centre. The people who have objected to their children beingembarrassed in public by the rescue might do well to remember that their girls were being advertised globally as orphans in the centre’s website. The images and profiles of the girls were displayed online for sponsors to choose from. The centre has removed its website after being exposed. Some parents were not happy to get their children back, they would rather insist that the girls stayed in India without having to worry about their upbringing. But many are happy to have their children back. (See box).

What has got lost in all this is that the presence of the girls at the centre in India was illegal. It is no longer the question of whether the girls or their parents want to stay in the orphanage, they had to come back or face an even more uncertain future in India.

It is typical for the parents of girls rescued from circuses and brothels to disown them. Many Nepali parents also sell their daughters off. We could not help but wonder if some of those parents would have reacted as bitterly if the children were not girls but boys.

But most surprising was how the media chose to argue in favor of traffickers by implying that children of poor parents are better off in foreign orphanages. After all it is often relatives who sell their daughters, sisters and wives to middlemen. Unless we stop, they won’t. The rescuing organisation is ready to take charge of the girls if the parents are not interested. Instead of making ruckus about the fate of the girls which the organisation is willing to look after, we would do better to rally against middlemen. Unless we do, some parents would also like Phadera and their political patrons who sell Nepali girls and get away with it.

Sabita’s homecoming

Sabita Kadel, 14, from Nawalparasi has finally come back home after five years of living as an orphan in Coimbatore in India. After the rescue, her aunt Mina Paudel received her in Kathmandu. “I can’t explain my happiness. For five years, I looked all over for her, two years ago I travelled to Coimbatore but I was humiliated at the centre and they refused to give me back my daughter.”

They didn’t even let Mina talk to Sabita over the phone for all these years. In the Centre’s newsletter, Tortured For Christ, July 2009 issue, Sabita aka Fay has been mentioned as the child of a murdered Christian mother whose other relatives were also slaughtered in a killing rampage by Maoists. Mina says that her family is Hindu and that the child’s father died of kidney failure while the mother left when Sabita was young. “When we got to Bharawa I saw parents refusing to take responsibility of their girls because they were hand-in-glove with the traffickers,” Mina told Nepali Times. “I felt so sorry for those girls.”

For her part, Sabita was ecstatic as she talked of her journey home: “I am so happy. I want to go places and be with my family and then continue school.”
Cashing it big on children

Adoption is just one part of the larger trafficking problem in Nepal

THOMAS BELL

Hundreds of orphanages in Nepal are being run as businesses, filled with children who would have been left with their families if orphanage owners weren’t making money by keeping them in homes.

Child rights organisations estimate that there are about 15,000 children in orphanages although the number is difficult to track because disreputable owners move children around to avoid scrutiny. Many have been lured away from poor families, especially in remote districts such as Humla (see overleaf), with promises of education in Kathmandu.

That practice is familiar from the adoption racket, which saw fake “orphans” matched up with Western parents who paid thousands of dollars to adopt a Nepali child. Farid Ait-Mansour of Next Generation Nepal says: “Everything is linked. Adoption is just one part of the trafficking problem.”

Other children end up in prostitution, child labour or begging. “When there is no inter-country adoption the number of children [in orphanages] always decreases. They send the children elsewhere,” says Dharma Raj Shrestha, Director General of the government’s Central Child Welfare Board (CCWB). “Children who reached European countries may be lucky ones. Unfortunately, some children could have gone to India and Gulf countries. There is no proper record.”

With adoption currently frozen by a dozen Western countries due to rampant fraud, new revenue streams have emerged, like luring foreign volunteers to work in fake orphanages over the Internet. “It seems like a big source of income is foreign volunteers,” said one diplomat. “If it wasn’t for this income they would probably have been left with their families.”

According to another international: “You’ve got foreigners flying in, volunteering for short periods, sometimes with the best of intentions, sometimes with other intentions.”

There is no vetting or background checks of volunteers. Shrestha of the CCWB said that he is aware of cases of sexual abuse by “volunteers”. Next Generation Nepal has evidence of children sometimes kept in abject conditions to maximise donations from foreigners. Orphanage owners sometimes sell gifts of clothes and toys after the volunteer has left. Sometimes the children do not even receive the education which their parents were promised.

Several NGOs have withdrawn funding from the orphanage sector for fear that children are being unnecessarily institutionalised in money-making schemes. But a Google search reveals many private tour companies offering volunteering holidays in Nepal. The volunteer ends up paying thousands of dollars after arriving. Several Thamel travel agencies have murky links with children’s homes in the capital. The CCWB has a list of 454 orphanages, most of them in the Kathmandu Valley, although they admit there could be many unregistered ones.

“Pokhara and Chitwan are also dangerously populated by child care homes,” says Shrestha, whose agency grades homes A-D for their standard of care, and most of them fall in the C and D categories. He says influential orphanage owners have good contact with the donors in Europe, a steady flow of funds, and want a loose easy-going policy from the government. Nepali businessmen often roam through Europe making contacts with potential donors for their fake orphanages.

The government has no effective policy on children’s homes. There is no proper method of assessment in cases where a child may actually need to be put in an orphanage. No orphanages in Nepal, including Bal Mandir, receive any government funding so they are forced to look elsewhere to raise cash.

Shrestha says that some of the most abusive orphanages urgently need to be shut down. “There are some good orphanages,” admits Shrestha. Asked what happens in the bad ones he reels off a list: physical punishment, torture, sexual abuse, begging duty on the street, one meal a day, no treatment when they fall sick, no schooling.

nepaltimes.com

On sale, #339
Cinderella children, #490
Children trapped between supply and demand, #558
Nearly two weeks after a strong earthquake devastated Sikkim, eastern Nepal, China and Bhutan, the known death toll is approaching 100. The relatively low casualty rate has been attributed to the light population density in the remote regions of all four countries. However, not all the information has come in, and the low death toll masks massive damage to infrastructure. Rescue efforts have also been delayed by unseasonably heavy late monsoon rains in the area.

There have been no reports yet from several settlements in and around the village of Ghunsa near the epicenter of the 18 September quake, and no relief yet in the north of Lelep in the Tamor Valley and in Olangchungola on the border with Tibet. Heavy landslides have blocked trails and thousands of people are still sleeping in tents or overhangs and caves.

A large-scale rehabilitation effort needs to be launched to rebuild schools that have been destroyed, and also to repair buildings severely damaged. Had the quake struck during school hours, hundreds of children would have been killed, as these pictures show.

If the slow pace of rescue and relief is any indication, rehabilitation of damaged infrastructure in eastern Nepal will take decades.
1. Bandana Dewan peers from alongside the badly damaged classroom in Lelep the day after the earthquake.

2-3. The mountain north of Lelep before the earthquake and in a picture taken on 19 September with a huge landslide scar. Locals said there was a thunderous sound as huge rocks rolled down the mountain.

4-5. Grade 3 student Arina Anbuhang and her sister of Nangkholaang recount the terrible night, and the ruins of Laxmi primary School where Arina and her sister studied.

6. The newly constructed classroom of the Sideshwor Secondary School of Phejung of Panchthar district.

7. This school toilet in Lelep collapsed completely, with only the doors standing.

8. Families whose houses were destroyed have been spending nights in tents.
Natasha Shrestha married her doctor husband when both were studying in the former Soviet Union. The couple returned to Nepal and Natasha started working at the Bureau of Statistics in the computer department. After helping out with a Russian ultralight expedition, Natasha decided to buy one of the aircraft to use it for sightseeing flights. Buying the plane was the easy part, it took two years of lobbying to get the necessary permits from the Ministry of Tourism. In 1997, Avia Club Nepal was established in Pokhara.

Since then, the company has flown 21,000 tourists on sightseeing flights of the Annapurnas and Machapuchre from its base at Pokhara airport. Avia Club Nepal has become the pioneer in air sports activities and has put Nepal on the international adventure tourism map. "It’s not enough to get tourists to Nepal," says Praveen Gauchan of Avia Club Nepal, "it is important that once here they have something to do." Indeed, flying and Nepal’s Himalayan scenery go hand-in-hand, and the mountains and peaks are magnificent. Avia Club Nepal marks 15 years of service to the tourism industry.

Natasha Shrestha founded Avia Club Nepal in 1997. In a talk with Nepali Times on its 15th anniversary, she recounts her long struggle to make the business work.

Natasha Shrestha: My husband is a Nepali and I’ve come to love Nepal as my own country. As citizens we must ask ourselves what we have done for Nepal. The satisfaction you get from working for your country is immeasurable.

And how come you chose to start an ultralight club in Pokhara? I am a computer engineer by profession, but had to give up my job because of an eye problem. I then started working with Russian tourists. In 1995 a Russian expedition on Everest brought an ultralight with them. I was curious and learnt about the aircraft. I instantly saw the opportunity for it in Nepal’s tourism industry.

With all the bureaucracy, it must have been really difficult to get the initial permission. Yes, the bureaucracy can kill your enthusiasm. But you must be very patient and persistent. My strong desire and passion kept me going and I eventually broke the bureaucratic hurdles.

What kept you going when anyone else in your place would have given up? I believed that if I succeeded in starting an ultralight company, it would begin a new era in aviation sports tourism in Nepal. I was deeply motivated because I felt I was making a contribution to the country and the people. Then during the most difficult times, when anyone else would have given up, I kept going because I had burned all the bridges of retrieve. I had invested everything I had, all of my property and my youth, so it was do or die situation. So I just kept going on.

What for you was the most fulfilling part of running Avia Club Nepal? The most fulfilling part is to see the happy eyes and excited faces of our passengers after a flight, and there have been 21,000 of them from 58 countries in the past 15 years. It is fantastic hearing their enthusiasm and admiration of seeing Nepal’s beauty from the air.
provide a whole new dimension from up in the air as thousands of tourists in Nepal have found.

Avia Club Nepal started out with a couple of delta-wing ultralights with open cockpits ideally suited for aerial photography. Today, the fleet has grown to four ultralights, one fixed wing aircraft, six paragliders and four motorised paragliders.

The company offers special ultralight flights over Pokhara Valley and flights up the Seti and Mardi to the glaciers below Annapurna. It also conducts paragliding tandem jumps and special aviation services like banner towing, flower showering, aerial filming, mountain search and rescue as well as scientific research. The club also conducts Avia Club Nepal Flight Training School.

Avia now wants to try amphibian ultralight operations from Begnas Lake, offer cross country flights to Chitwan and para-trekking which combines paragliding with Himalayan hikes.

Avia Club Nepal’s pilots include Capt Alexander Maximov, a Russian pilot with 4,000 hours of flying experience, and Nepal’s first licensed ultralight pilot, Stephen Shrestha.

Says Natasha: “You really have to believe in what you are doing, you have to keep trying to overcome obstacles that come along.”
Documenting Nepal

White Film South Asia (FSA) brings stories from around the subcontinent, it is the Nepali entries that usually appear to attract the most attention. The audiences, however, are not only acting on their loyalty. Nepali documentaries have risen above their commercial counterparts, and excel in their subjects, storytelling style and quality.

FSA Southasia 2011, screening 36 outstanding films, 29 September to 2 October, 12pm to 7:30 pm, Kuman Cinema, Kamal Pokhari

Cycle 6: Life, a nature and wildlife photography exhibition by Om Yadav. 19 August to 30 September, 10am to 5pm, Galleria CUC, Mahajajpur

Student’s Art Exhibition, the fifth batch of group painting exhibition. 28 September to 2 October, Nawa Chen Art Gallery

Changa Chait, live performances and a corporate kite flying competition. 28 September and 1 October, 11am onwards. Club Himalaya, Nagarkot, 4410432, 4419432

Dasain Mela, celebrate Dasain with b-boying, slam poetry, BMX bike stunts, musical performances, food stalls and game stalls. Tickets: Rs 500 (for children) & Rs 1000 (for adults), 1 October, 10am to 5pm, Shuvatantra School, Sanepa

World Animal Day, photo contest with the theme of street animals. 1 October, 3pm to 6pm, Satya Media Arts collective, Jawalakhel, 9813465716

Photography Workshop, a special digital photography workshop for young aspiring photographers. 30 September to 4 and 9 October, Artstudio, Jyatha. Coat: Rs 2000, 9841240341

Rainbow Music Festival, music from classical fusion to funk, soul, jazz and blues. 30 September, Electric Pagoda, Thamel

Out of the Darkness (73’)
Nepal, 2010, dir - Stefano Levi
1.30pm, Friday, 30 September

Cataract disease, a clouding of the clear lens of the eye that causes blindness, is curable but the treatment is too expensive for the rural mass. Sanduk Ruit from Nepal and his American partner, Geoff Tabin, are in a mission to offer affordable cataract surgery and have developed a portable low-cost surgical procedure to restore sight to cataract disease victims. Filmaker Stefano Levi follows the two doctors as they trek to Nepal’s remote northeast, carrying an entire hospital on porters’ backs.

Saving Dolma (62’)
Nepal, 2010, dir - Kesang Tseten
5pm, Friday, 30 September

The film tells the story of Dolma, a Nepali maid sentenced to death for allegedly killing a fellow Filipino domestic worker in Kuwait. As the film searches for truth in the event, it provides a rare glimpse into the fractured lives of ill-prepared women migrant workers in the Gulf states. Kesang Tseten is the director of numerous documentaries such as Hami kunako manchhe, On the Road with the Red God: Machhendranath, In Search of the Riyal.

Journey to Yarsa (55’)
Nepal, 2011, dir - Dipendra Bhandari
1.15pm, Saturday, 1 October

The opening film of this year’s festival, Journey to Yarsa, follows the family of Puriniya as they join hundreds of others to collect yarsagumba, the Himalayan caterpillar-fungus that is worth its weight in gold in China for its supposed aphrodisiac properties. The whole village is padlocked for two months as the families travel to high mountains of Nepal. Filmmaker Dipendra Bhandari walks along Puriniya and her family to understand the ordeals they go through to find the prized yarsagumba.

Aadesh Baba (77’)
Nepal, 2011, dir - Aurore Laurent, Adrien Vie
3.45pm, Sunday, 2 October

In Kathmandu, Tiger Baba has become an aghori sadhu, a holy man. With a dark look, painted face and almost naked body, Baba fascinates some and frightens others. Aadesh Baba is the story of the sadhu’s quest for the divine. Between alcoholic drifs and holy life, will Tiger Baba succeed? Filmakers Aurore Laurent and Adrien Vie try to find out.
Café Kaldi

Since 1983, Café Kaldi, with a seasonal selection of coffee blends and original roasts, has been a household name in Japan. In 2009, the franchise opened shop in Thamel and recently a second outlet in New Baneshor across from the Everest Hotel.

Its extensive list of beverages reflects Starbucks’s sway on the modern-day coffee shop, complete with sugary creations like the Caramel Macchiato, Café Mocha and Iced Chiyas. But down to basics, the espresso is flat in flavour and stretched a tad too long leaving an acrid aftertaste. The Kokotsu Latte, served iced or hot, is the menu’s sweetest concoction: a latte floating over a heavy layer of liquid raw sugar—cavities beware! When it comes to grub, Kaldi’s palate lacks sophistication. Its dishes are merely cosmetic, clean but plain. So, if you must eat something and are too bothered to traipse down to any of the other proper restaurants in Thamel, the chicken burger and the spicy momos are the only dishes worth sampling. The cakes and desserts are fluffy. These days, due to cutbacks, Kaldi’s customers could easily find themselves drinking or working in an empty café. But as a silver lining, compared to other coffee parlors, its WiFi is still free (come fully charged!), prices (tax included) are decent, and service is impeccable.

Café Kaldi in Thamel

Lazimpat, Ananda Bhawan, 4416027

SOMEPLACE ELSE

Lazy Gringo, fail-safe Mexican restaurant. The lemonade with refills is what won us over, but the food is mighty fine.

Upstairs Café, a delicious range of Vietnamese cuisine to sample. Maharajgunj, near the US embassy

Attic, newly transformed lounge/bar ideal for Friday night drinking before hitting the dance spots. Utral Dikha, Laxmiapat, 994161478

Irish Pub, for the simple reason that the place actually feels like a bar. Don’t miss out on their Irish coffee. Laxmiapat, Ananda Bhawan, 4416027

New Orleans, offers a wide variety of western dishes that are scrumptious yet healthy. We got hooked on the rosemary chicken and hamburgers. Jhamikhel, 5522708

GETAWAYS

Overnight Package at The Dwarika’s Himalayan Shangri-La Village Resort, for local residents, NRs. 4500/- (single), NRs. 5700/- (double). Dullikhel, contact 4479688 for reservations

Dashain at Borderlands, celebrate Dashain with a five day package of trekking, rafting, and canoeing. 3 October to 7 October. Borderlands Eco Adventure Resort, 4700894, info@borderlandsgroup.com, www.borderlandsgroup.com

Park Village Resort, Saturdays and Sundays combo package with swimming, lunch and a bottle of beer @ NRs 950 for adults and NRs 800 for children. Budhanilkantha, 4701910

Café Kaldi

30 SEPTEMBER - 6 OCTOBER 2011

SOMEPLACE ELSE

Turn into Mandal Street from Thamel Chowk and head to the end of the block, and before the turn look right and up the stairs.
A virtual response to a real disaster in Nepal

Overseas Nepalis simulate an earthquake emergency in Nepal to coordinate global rescue and relief

SAPANA SHAKYA in OAKLAND

"An 8 magnitude has just hit Kathmandu. There is utter chaos, fires are raging and there is a communications blackout," announced Suresh Ojha into the phone on a real-time simulated conference call on 25 September, exactly a week after an earthquake devastated eastern Nepal. In Oakland California at the Community Health for Asian Americans (CHAA) there is silence on the line. It is clear that the participants of this mock crisis response exercise are unsure where to start.

"This is exactly the situation, we’re hoping to avoid," explains Ojha, "in the case of an actual crisis we have to be up and running."

Rattling off a list of things to be done if this was a real emergency, starting with hotlines for information from emergency, Ojha said, "We need to move fast, no one knows when the next big quake will hit and we can’t waste any more time not knowing.

The Hackathon took place all day Sunday and there is a ‘Himalayan Disaster Response Portal’ up and running. The portal team of ten software engineers led by Niraula tapped into the rich computer talent among the Nepali diaspora across North America.

Software engineers Nabin Acharya and Kumar Pandey worked on the overall design and structure of the portal while Sambath Aryal, Puran Singh and Leon Smith volunteered to bring the site to life.

The team sourced elements from portals like Ushahidi which was used in Haiti with tools like reporting and mapping from the immediate quake zone, customising it for Nepal by integrating features like People Finder and the Donate from Google App engine.

Pandey explains that the true value of the site will start to become clearer once there are actual members on the ground in Nepal that can populate the portal with crowd-sourced information.

While the Hackathon was going on in cyberspace, Ojha was holding townhall style discussions in a separate room to brainstorm on topics like medical needs, media relations, telecommunications infrastructure post earthquake.

After the initial hesitance in response to Ojha’s earthquake scenario, the network was soon humming with issues: who will be the contacts in Nepal, how will they communicate if lines are down, how will the response be relayed?

Smriti Gurung a nurse from Oakland with experience in Haiti suggested: “It would be great to have doctors in Nepal telling folks coming in what type of specialties they need.”

Archana Kayaatha from Mountain View suggested: “We must have on hand a list of medical supplies we will readily have access to and a team of medical professionals, physicians, nurses and others who can and will be able to fly out as soon as necessary.”

The conversation seemed to gravitate naturally towards Nepal’s readiness to deal with the situation as what happens on the ground will most likely affect the kind of information any portal will happen on disaster preparedness for Nepal by integrating features from portals like CAN-USA which for this exercise summed up the day’s exercise: “With no funding and in less than a week we delivered a prototype disaster response web portal and successfully mobilised diaspora Nepalis. Global Nepalis have a passionate interest in assisting Nepal to prepare for a future disaster.”

Prototype portal: www.himalayandisasterresponse.org

A real disaster in Nepal

A virtual response to

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Prototype portal: www.himalayandisasterresponse.org

A real disaster in Nepal

A virtual response to

Ojha was holding townhall style discussions in a separate room to brainstorm on topics like medical needs, media relations, telecommunications infrastructure post earthquake.

After the initial hesitance in response to Ojha’s earthquake scenario, the network was soon humming with issues: who will be the contacts in Nepal, how will they communicate if lines are down, how will the response be relayed?

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Vacancy: Earthquake Inspectors

Why wait for an earthquake to determine how strong our homes or offices are?

The construction process itself needs a strict quality check of the quality of cement, steel rods and building materials. The construction process itself needs monitoring. People have to realise that if they cut corners, they are not building a house but digging their own graves.

Taking the cue from Department of Commerce, the Department of Housing and Urban Planning or Department of Town Planning could start assessing existing buildings, starting with public structures housing schools, hospitals, malls, cinemas. Other critical infrastructure also needs assessment: roads, bridges, telecommunication towers, water and electricity supply. Government offices should also be checked so that they can function and deploy emergency services and relief during an earthquake.

Buildings that fail the test can be put on a list for demolition or retrofitting. There is a donor consortium for disaster preparedness that is setting aside money for schools and hospitals, the government should do its bit for other infrastructure. Technologies for seismic retrofitting are available in the country and cost Rs 1000 per sq ft. That is not a lot, considering the lives that can be saved. If one cannot afford retrofitting, seismic aspects may be incorporated in the house to minimise the effect of a quake.

We know the government doesn’t have its act together. So why wait for a raid to tell you your house is unsafe? Every individual, family or community has to work on its own preparedness. Groups like NSET-Nepal can help in assessment and advice on retrofitting.

Free trip

C referee announced the winners of its ‘Win a luxurious trip to Cannes, France’ promotion 2011. The four winners will along with their friends have left for Cannes, France. The campaign was conducted in over twenty six hundred stalls all over Nepal.
Once is not enough?

KUNDA DIXIT

Yet another crash. More tv visuals of police and army searching wreckage strewn across a forested hillside. Once again, bodies being unloaded from army choppers at the airport. Reporters interviewing grieving family members yet again. Breaking news was beamed worldwide: ‘Another air crash in Nepal’.

Then the predictable deluge of next day analysis: why is aviation unsafe? How could this be happening yet again? Inevitable speculation about causes: pilot error, aircraft malfunction, lax enforcement of aviation rules.

Up on the ridge of Kot Danda on the eastern rim of Kathmandu Valley on Sunday morning, the clouds hung low and those questions sounded banal, almost callous. The lifeless forms of passengers with horrific bruises were being ferried in stretchers to a waiting helicopter. Amidst the wreckage, a lady’s shoe, a camera lens, bits of clothing, shredded seats, blood smeared on the crashed cabin panels.

The army rescue helicopter had finally landed on a nearby ridge after circling to find a gap in the clouds. Hundreds of people from Lamatar and Kot Danda gathered immediately, trampling over the wreckage and sometimes blocking rescue vehicles with their motorcycles on the access road.

The Buddha Air Beechcraft 1900D with 19 people on board, including three crew, was returning halfway from a Mt Everest sightseeing flight on 25 September because the mountains were covered up by late monsoon clouds. The plane was flying lower than it should have been probably to keep below the cloud ceiling. It also strayed too far to the east, probably to keep distance with preceding traffic.

On the terrace farm there is a long scar ploughed by the right wing of the plane. The gash is in an incline, indicating the crew may have been trying to pull up at the last moment. Another 20 m away, the plane hit the ridge wall, its fuel tanks exploded and the cabin was catapulted up the slope beyond a road. Part of the tail and left wing disintegrated and fell into trees. The starboard engine was hurled 40m to another side of the mountain.

The crash had all the hallmarks of what aviation experts call Controlled Flight Into Terrain (CFIT). Nearly all the crashes that have occurred in Nepal in the past 60 years have been CFIT (see list since 1990 below). Even in good weather, Nepal’s rugged Himalayan terrain is difficult to fly in, during the monsoon with the mountains covered in clouds it becomes even more hazardous.

Pilots being trained in Nepal are told “Never fly into clouds unless you know exactly where you are because clouds have rocks.”

As far as what happened, a list since 1990:

- 25-05-05 Yeti DHC-6 18 Lukla
- 24-08-08 Agni Air Do-228 14 Kathmandu
- 05-10-98 Neon Air HS748 15 Kathmandu
- 30-09-92 Pakistan Airbus310 157 Lalitpur
- 27-06-00 Nepal Air DHC-6 18 Kathmandu
- 31-06-99 Luftansa Boeing727 5 Kathmandu
- 18-09-96 Pepsi Air Beechcraft 1900D 18 Pokhara
- 25-12-99 Skylane DHC-6 13 Naikewarpur
- 02-06-92 Nepal Air DHC-6 61 Kathmandu
- 16-09-94 Yeti Air DHC-6 18 Kathmandu
- 08-10-96 Yeti Air DHC-6 18 Kathmandu
- 24-08-10 Agni Air Do-228 14 Katmandu
- 15-12-10 Tara Air DHC-6 22 Ghalekot

SAME REASON

Nearly all air crashes in Nepal since 1990 occurred when planes flew into mountains in cloud during the monsoon.

Date     Airline Equipment     Fatalities     Location
30-07-02 Thai Airbus310     113     Langtang
20-09-02 Pakistan Airbus310     157     Lalitpur
24-08-08 Lomtien DHC-6     18     Kathmandu
31-08-97 Everest D228     22     Kathmandu
06-09-99 Luftansa Boeing727     5     Kathmandu
25-12-99 Skylane DHC-6     13     Naikewarpur
05-10-98 Neon Air HS748     15     Kathmandu
27-06-00 Nepal Air DHC-6     18     Kathmandu
22-09-02 Sharpa La DHC-6     18     Kathmandu
25-05-05 Yeti DHC-6     3     Lamjura
23-08-06 Shree Air Mi-17     24     Ghunsa
08-10-08 Yeti Air DHC-6     18     Lukla
24-08-10 Agni Air Do-228     14     Katmandu
15-12-10 Tara Air DHC-6     22     Ghalekot

William E Henderson

As pointed out in this well-written piece by Kunda Dixit, CFIT is the reason for most accidents in Nepal given our terrain and weather conditions, especially during the monsoon. They can be prevented with GPS-based TAWS (Terrain Awareness & Warning System) equipment on board. Such systems contain a database of the terrain which allows pilots to “see” mountains even during white-out conditions.

From this article it is clear that there was miscommunication of the geographical location-altitude, terrain altitude and flight level. Such accidents have occurred previously due to negligence of not following the flight rules. Instrument Flight Rules and/or Visual Flight Rules.

Datta Tray Roy, ex-ATC

If the Beech 1900D was equipped with an Enhanced Ground Proximity Warning System (EGPWS) instead of the older GPWS the accident might have been avoided since it is more accurate and does not shut off on flaps and wheels down configuration. For smaller aircraft such as the Twin Otter there are new FAA approved stand alone GPS systems that give visual terrain warnings suitable for such aircraft flight routes. Used correctly these aids can easily eliminate CFIT accidents.

New GPS units with TAWS are not expensive anymore and quite suited for Nepal operations. A good, functional second hand unit is available for around $6,000. Any airline can afford it.

Airline Professional

Feedback

Pilot qualification, certification and re-certification should be looked into. A pilot’s mental and physical conditions are important. Should you go to fly in the morning after all night partying? I would not.

Another thing to keep in mind is how pilots have been distracted due to current commercialisation of pilot recruitment. You are completely right about the growth, so less incompetent individuals may be making crucial decisions. I have flown on mountain flights, and think they should not operate in the monsoon.

For more feedback
Air crashes rarely have one reason, it is usually a combination of factors. In Nepal it can be weather, terrain, lack of training, pilot error and the lack of equipment. State-of-the-art GPS-based Terrain Awareness and Warning System, Enhanced Ground Proximity Warning System (EGPWS) or the new RNP-AR (see box) approaches to airports in mountainous terrain would make CFIT less likely.

The human factor doesn’t just have to do with pilot error, it is also about airline recruitment policy that only takes pilots who can afford to pay up to Rs 2.5 million for simulator training and conversion. Salaries and poor pay mean the best pilots migrate to work in foreign airlines.

There will be another investigation report in a few weeks that will recommend better monitoring of crew training, spot checks, review of approach procedures. Then everyone reverts to vapid complacency again. Until the next time.

Safer, smoother navigation for Kathmandu airport

Qatar Airways is teaming up with Airbus Industrie and the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAAN) to improve safety at Kathmandu airport, which has difficult approach and departure because of surrounding terrain.

Airbus’ Quovadis subsidiary has a new satellite-based navigation procedure called Required Navigation Performance with Authorization Required (RNP AR) that are used in many airports around the world with similar terrain.

It allows aircraft to fly precisely along a predefined route using on-board navigation systems and the GPS-based global navigation satellite system, enabling higher efficiency and enhanced safety. It makes the approach track more flexible, allowing aircraft to fly around bad weather and in between mountains with greater precision. It will also make the approach into Kathmandu less steep, and smoother.

Qatar Airways is paying for the replacement of Radio Nepal’s shortwave transmitter mast at Khumaltar near the airport. Quovadis is training Nepali air traffic controllers for the introduction of the new system that is to go on trial later this year.

“As a major player in Nepal’s airline industry, we felt we had to invest in improving the civil aviation infrastructure at Kathmandu airport,” the Qatar Airways country manager for Nepal, Ramdas Shivram, told Nepali Times. “It will improve safety, reliability and operational cost not just for us but for all operators flying into Kathmandu.”
Unity in diversity

Krishna Khanal in Himal Khabarpatrika, 18 September

There are 101 ethnic and caste groups in the country. At a time when ethnic sentiments are on the rise, the Maoists have added fuel to fire by declaring an ethnic front of the Khas community, the largest group comprising of Brahmins and Chhetris. This community makes up 40 per cent of the total population and if it opens a political front to ‘preserve’ its own interests, there will be further ethnic polarisation in the country. Those who see the Khas community as politically and culturally dominant group fail to appreciate the fact that only limited section of this population enjoyed political clout in the past regimes. To be sure, the adoption of Nepali as an official language favored their academic and personal development. Undoubtedly, present ethnic movements in Nepal seeks to make up for the historical marginalisation of the minorities and preserve their religion, language and culture, in order to establish their distinct identity.

Ideologically, there might not be any room to doubt that Maoists want a united and inclusive Nepal. But the modality of state restructuring that they have proposed will ultimately lead to separatist tendencies because legal provisions will stand at odds with cultures and traditions that is proposed as the basis of ethnic states. But distinctiveness need not necessarily call for division. Unity, even in diversity has been the hallmark of Nepali society and it must be preserved. The most effective way of doing this is to adopt a multi-ethnic basis to federalism. Nepal can perhaps learn from experiences of countries like Ethiopia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. While we must appreciate the ethnic and cultural diversity of our land, there is no mistaking that if badly managed, it will lead to disintegration.

Quote of the Week

“"If the wrongdoing is proven, nobody will be spared."”

From Minister Sabaran Bhattarai in BBC Nepali Service interview when asked about his wife Hisila Yami asking for government SUV.

Stop the anarchy

Lastakshak, 25 September

The onus for Nepal’s peace process undisputedly rests on the Maoists. But the irresponsible activities of a faction within the party, led by vice-chairman Mohan Baidya has led to a public speculation that the party does not fully appreciate this fact. At the last factional gathering in New Baneshwor, Baidya not only declared the formation of a parallel party structure but also rejected the Madhesi-Maoist alliance in the government as ‘anti-national’. The meeting is said to have chosen Mohan Baidya as the party’s ‘trustee’ while nominating Ram Bahadur Thapa as the chairman.

After the news of the gathering reached the party establishment, party chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal asked Baidya for a clarification. He maintained that the gathering was for ‘political training’ of the cadres. The faction tried to win over the support of the combatants, inciting fear over the uncertainty, as well as called on the families of the injured and the martyrs of the conflict to protest.

While the commanders cleared their stance by expressing their solidarity with the party decision, even the others are distancing themselves from the faction. A member of the association of injured combatants from the third division in Jutpani said: “Earlier I got carried away by their rhetoric. But now I realise, they have no vision. Their entire philosophy is reactionary.”

The failure of the Baidya faction to logically back its criticism against the party’s decisions and its alliance with the Madhesi front not only proves that it is ideologically bankrupt but also exposes its anarchist tendencies. More importantly, the rhetorical similarity between the Baidya faction and the NC-UML opposition indicates growing convergence between two extreme points in Nepal’s political landscape.

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Interview with Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai by Rabinda Mishra on BBC Nepali Service, 28 September

BBC Nepali: Previous prime ministers could not move the peace process forward. How can we believe you when you say you can?

Baburam Bhattarai: The government led by Prachanda had a chance, but we missed it. The other two governments that followed were ad-hoc, we couldn’t expect much from them. The current government is led by the largest party, that is positive, now we need the NC to be on board as well.

You keep harping on consensus government, but you are no different from Jhalnath Khanal. I took the biggest risk of my life. Either I had to quit or content the election. Maybe an individual taking risk could move the peace process and constitution writing forward. So, I took the risk.

You proclaimed zero tolerance on corruption but your cabinet is made up of tainted ministers, and even one accused of murder. I have no answer to that. You have to evaluate it through my performance. But I have adopted a ‘zero tolerance’ policy on corruption. I have not done anything wrong since I came to office.

Then you had said you wouldn’t interfere with the civil service, but the home secretary was transferred by a minister in your cabinet. That was an exception. I have an answer to that. You have to evaluate it through my performance. But I have adopted a ‘zero tolerance’ policy on corruption. I have not done anything wrong since I came to office.

Defence Minister Sarat Singh Bhandari set off an uproar with secessionist remarks. Can we relate this issue with the four point deal?

No. I talked to the minister. He has already clarified that this was not his intention. This government is committed to national sovereignty and integrity.

There are reports of your wife asking for a government SUV. I have talked to her about it, she has clarified her point of view. If it is proven that rules were violated, no one will be spared.

Will the mandate of the CA be extended? It should be extended until the constitution is written. But the SC has said it is not constitutional. That’s not true.

By how long should it be extended? It might take six months more, maximum.

Will your party remain intact until then? Don’t worry our party is not going to split.

Who made you the PM? Some say India did. It is people who make the PM in a democracy. I won the election with 82 per cent of the votes cast in Gorkha district and secured 346 votes in the parliament.

What will be your agenda of India visit? We have been doing our homework.

Some are concerned about installing air marshals and the extradition treaty? Let’s not run after rumours.

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Acupuncture for pain

The treatment of physical pain is big business. There are pain clinics, especially in the western world where individual clinics just focus on headache, back ache, leg pain, shoulder pain etc. Acupuncture has been a treatment for pain relief, and many in Nepal as elsewhere will swear by the effectiveness of this form of therapy in relieving pain. If you are one of those who are reaping benefits from this form of therapy, this article is not meant to discourage you from acupuncture. Please continue acupuncture.

Recently as reported in a prestigious journal called Pain (what else?), E. Ernst and colleagues carried out a review of published articles on acupuncture to ascertain if indeed acupuncture alleviated pain and if there were any risks involved. The final conclusion was not clear cut, at best the evidence for the effectiveness of acupuncture for pain is mixed, according to this review.

This study was a mega review, a review of reviews. If you will, it covered a range of pain syndromes. Of the 36 reviews rated as good or excellent quality, 13 (36 per cent) reached a positive or tentatively positive conclusion, 14 (39 per cent) failed to show effectiveness and 9 (25 per cent) were inconclusive. In short, the results provided meager evidence that acupuncture is generally effective.

In the 36 per cent who felt that acupuncture worked for them, there was one factor that may have helped, that is the placebo effect, which is not easy to measure to begin with. This placebo effect could possibly be attributed to a consultation with a sympathetic doctor. Many think that health professionals in the ‘alternative’ branch of medicine (which includes acupuncture, homeopathy, ayurvedic medicine etc) in general better emphasise with patients and treat them with a greater degree of compassion than practitioners of Western medicine. The alternative medicine doctors probably realise more clearly that the internal fear and pain of patients may be decreased with the doctor’s voice, words, and smile. Perhaps the value of acupuncture is also attributable to the sympathy of the acupuncturists, rather than to their manipulative skills with needles. By the same token, devising trials to meet the standards of modern scientific medicine using double blind controlled trials to observe the true efficacy of acupuncture may not be practical or possible.

Importantly, at a minimum, because acupuncture primarily deals with needles which can potentially spread diseases, it is crucial to make sure that aseptic precautions with clean needles are practiced.
A shok K Banskota is the doctor known for being the founder of B&B Hospital that specializes in orthopedic care. But there is a personal side to him that few know about. It was for this that he was honoured recently with the World of Children Award for Health which he will receive in November in New York.

Banskota set up the Hospital and Rehabilitation Centre for Disabled Children (HRDC) in Banepa 20 years ago as a world class centre for quality health care. Thanks to HRDC’s reconstructive surgery thousands of children with deformities and disabilities live improved lives. The hospital, which doubles as a rehabilitation centre, has treated 43,000 children.

Thirty years ago when I returned from the US, it was impossible not to be affected by the plight of children suffering from disabilities,” Banskota told Nepali Times this week. “Poverty and social ostracism compounded their suffering, and that is how the idea for HRDC came up.”

He had left his career option in the US to retire to Nepal and do what he always desired: make use of his expertise to serve ordinary Nepalis. “We can either turn our backs to the country or use our skills to enhance the health care system here. The second road was more difficult but it was worth pursuing,” he said.

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With support from the Swiss-based Terres De l’Homme, a rehabilitation centre, has treated 43,000 children.
Comrade Awesome made himself the laughing stock when, soon after becoming prime minister in 2008, he said he was a man of compassion and peace and compared himself to Gautam Buddha. Taking his cue from that, protégé Com Horrible Gajurel told fellow Maoists this week: “I used to be a Gandhian.” We are now waiting for Comrade Hubby to declare himself a Shakyamuni and Comrade Bigplop to liken himself to Nelson Mandela.

At least BRB doesn’t try to be what he isn’t. Still, if he really wants to fulfill the people’s hopes he will have to rein in the 3Ms: Madhesis, Maoists and the Missus. After the ‘Mandu Post this week exposed Com Yummy bossing people around and trying to forcibly requisition a Prado, Comrade Hubby had a man-to-woman chat with her that evening. By Thursday, she had reduced the demand from Prado to Bolero. And if there are any other follow-ups to that story, she’ll probably have to settle for a Nano. With all the stolen SUVs in Maoist possession (one can recognise them on the street by their diagonal yellow-green license plates and kamikaze drivers) why does Yummy insist on a govt vehicle anyway? Whatever the case, BRB needs to have another pillow talk with his not-so-better half.

So the entourage arrived at the VVIP lounge at TIA for the prime minister’s departure to New York. He didn’t take up the Ass’ humble suggestion to stand in the one hour queue at immigration with fellow-outbound Nepalis, it has to be said. The airline offered BRB a free upgrade which the prime minister politely declined. Eye-witnesses reported that Com Yummy and Deputy PM Kazi Narayan were visibly crestfallen on economy bulkhead seats. By the time the group got to Doha for the seven-hour layover, they were sulking because the prime minister refused to go to the Business Lounge. At JFK, BRB appeared none the worse for wear since he is acclimatized to sleeping only four hours a day. But Kazi looked wilted. Which must be why he decided not to fly back with his boss, and postponed his return by two days so he could upgrade himself.

The Indians are always saying the Buddha was born in India, but now they have even laid claim to the Sept 18 earthquake. Why is it called the “Sikkim Earthquake” when the epicenter was located 5 km inside Nepali territory? The student wings of some parties may want to stage a protest outside the Indian Embassy, or even go into an indefinite and/or fast- unto-death (whichever comes first) to lay Nepal’s rightful claim to the epicenter.

If you think KTM Incontinental Airport and there is a crisis like a cracked runway, an earthquake or a bomb scare all hell really breaks loose. When the earthquake struck and the control tower started swaying, our intrepid ATCs apparently abandoned their stations, leaving planes circling in the air without instructions. It’s now become commonplace to have monkeys on the runway, but there was a new twist recently when a flight had to go around because the Right Honourable Tourism Minister decided to do a surprise inspection of the runway cracks just as QR351 was on final approach.

While the Parsa police frantically looks for Com Godman in connection with murder of a fellow Godman in Parsa one year back, the Minister-at-large was seen posing with Kamred PM at a function on Monday. When mule’s correspondent took it to a bigwig in Nepal Footish, he said the warrant is yet to make it through Naubiseko ukalo and is hoping that the heavy Dasain traffic will delay it until it is no longer warranted.

And, last but not least, we have three quotes of the week:

“I will not criticise anyone for three months. Anyone who takes that as a sign of weakness is a running dog lackey of imperialism.” - PKD

“We didn’t loot property during the war, we transferred their ownership.” - BRB on BBC

“Our torch rally was called off because of bad weather. We took a rain check.” - Comrade Cloud