Kathmandu Valley’s scenic location is also the reason for its vulnerability to big and frequent earthquakes. The collision of two tectonic plates thrust the Himalayan mountains into the sky, and the two land masses are still squeezing into each other at 4 cm a year.

Sunday, 15 January marks the 1934 earthquake that killed about 10,000 people in Kathmandu. Today, the population has grown to 3 million and a similar 8.0 magnitude earthquake would kill 100,000-200,000 people depending on the time of day, 700,000 will be injured and up to 1.5 million will be homeless. And that quake is overdue.

The government seems to be finally waking up. A new project aims to retrofit 900 Valley schools and work has started to strengthen at least three hospitals and stock them up with emergency supplies. A lot more needs to be done, and we are racing against time.
For a glimpse of what Kathmandu will look like after a big quake, just look at the buildings torn down for road-widening and multiply that by 10,000.

SHUFFER TO THINK

years ago with Australian assistance was put to the test as a clearing house for information, and to coordinate response. But official response was slow and woefully inadequate. The Prime Minister flew off to New York later that night without even bothering to find out the extent of the damage. There was no aerial reconnaissance the next morning to gauge casualties and spot potentially disastrous river blockages. It was a miserable death bill wasn’t higher.

Nature gave us a wake-up call, but we slept right through it. A coalition government that has earned a disagreeable reputation for graft and greed seems least bothered about ‘natural’ calamities in the future.

So, as often happens in Nepal, we have to depend on individuals, families and local communities to do their bit. Groups like the National Society of Earthquake Technology (NSET) are working with schools and wards to bolster preparedness. Nepali earthquake experts, ironically, are more in demand outside Nepal than here, and foreigners seem more worried about what is in store for us than we are.

A 1998 study of nearly 400 government schools in Kathmandu Valley showed that a 1934 type earthquake would kill nearly 30,000 students and teachers outright and injure another 43,000. Since that survey, the number of schools has more than doubled.

A quarter of them need to be torn down, half can be retrofitted. After a quake, the injured can’t be rushed to hospitals because roads will be blocked and hospitals will have also collapsed. All but two of Kathmandu’s hospitals are equipped to withstand strong shaking, and even if they survive the diesel for generators and medicines will soon run out.

A 6.0 magnitude earthquake epicentered near Kathmandu would kill 100,000-200,000 people depending on the time of day and 100,000 will be injured and up to 1.5 million will be homeless. Such a quake is long overdue.

It’s no wonder that international seismic experts have depicted Kathmandu Valley as the number one among top ten cities around the world vulnerable to a catastrophic earthquake. The government seems to be finally waking up to the task ahead, but time is of the essence.

Editors:

Mahesh Kunwar

SLUM MILLIONAIRES

In a country where musu-bhat, a plot of land, 1,000 rupees, or a promise of a job by a boytone, can any election be called fair? ‘Slum Millionaires’, Dewan Rai, #586?

My choice of government will never come to power simply because I am part of a minority which wants good governance, law and order, peace and prosperity and equity. But I guess this is too much to ask from our ‘democratic’ leaders?

Mr Reader

DEAR LEADER

I have always liked Atsushi Tanwari’s ‘Strictly Business’ column but I will have to disagree with him on this one (‘Dear Leader’ #586). Yes, the Maoists are facing the legitimate problems, but they deserve full credit for finally widening the roads. There was just no other solution. The slums too will have to be eventually dismantled; we cannot live in filth and stench anymore. Please support the good work of any government instead of being critical for the sake of criticism.

Mr Thapa

OLIVE OIL

Hats off to Harmut Bauder for his perseverance and dedication (‘Nepali olive makes the grade #586’). However, the Nepali government has failed to promote and protect new business initiatives. I remember in the early 1990s, there used to be a small-scale carpet and handicraft industry in Kathmandu started by Tibetans refugees. The carpet was very popular among tourists and was helping Nepal earn foreign revenue as well as providing employment to many locals. Then the ‘revolutionary’ Maoists interfered: they brainwashed workers, politicised the labour unions, and created rifts between employers and employees. Unable to withstand the intimidation, more than half of the carpet factories shut down and the entrepreneurs shifted to India and Tibet. Such narrow-minded politics has harmed Nepal’s business fraternity for too long and needs to stop.

Tashi Lama

LIVE AND DIE

It is preposterous for Rokmangad Katwal to be talking about commerce in Nepalis and using terms like ‘Nepali first’ (‘I will live and die in Nepal’, #586). During his tenure as C.I.C, his army was entirely loyal towards the monarchy. Where was his ‘Nepali first’ principle at that time? After all, most of the ordinary Nepalese are footing the bills for the army, why isn’t it more responsible towards the people? The party’s policies and practices have continued for too long and far-reaching reforms are needed in the top-heavy and caste-based Nepali army.

Shamsher
The parties have once again locked horns and the peace process is stuck. The debate about executive president vs parliament has spilled out into the op-eds with politicians writing opinion themselves or through proxies. Kathmandu’s powerful prefers coterie politics and has chosen to disengage from the masses and their needs. A majority of bemused Nepalis don’t care either way as long as their lives get better, and their hard-won freedoms are protected.

This week, the NC and UML coagulated with 16 other parties to pressure the Maoists, who themselves are going through the throes of internal turmoil. The utter disregard shown by both sides for cooperation and compromise goes against the spirit of 2006 people’s movement and the mandate of the 2008 interim constitution.

The NC fears that an executive head directly elected by the people will lead to a totalitarian president, especially if the person is Pushpa Kamal Dahal. The NC’s Ram Sharan Mahat and his cohort in the media and civil society feel the Nepali people are incapable of choosing the right leader and must therefore leave the task to the traditional parliamentary parties. This sums up the up arrogance of the political elites who consider majority of the population as ‘cattle-class’ with no aspiration or understanding of democratic norms and culture, not to mention the party that has been in power for most of the period after 1990 has repeatedly let the people down.

There is growing anxiety in Kathmandu’s power centres about losing their kingmaker role and stepping into the unknown domain of mass politics. Their long writeups in the Nepali media reflect this uncertainty over treading in uncharted territory.

This is not so much about whether or not Pushpa Kamal Dahal becomes Nepal’s executive head, but who gets to call the shots, the reluctance of kingmakers to let go of what they passionately enjoyed doing for so long. The people no longer want to be told what they should or should not want. If the people don’t want Dahal as leader (either as MP, Prime Minister or executive president) they will not vote for him. If they want him, that is their democratic choice. And if he turns out to be a dictator, the same people will also throw him out. The cynics would do well to look to last year’s Arab Spring which uprooted military dictators after decades.

In the last two months, after the signing of the seven point agreement, the parties made a remarkable progress on both peace and constitution. There were 200 contentious issues resolved by the dispute resolving sub-committee, and there are only two main ones left on state structure and form of governance. There were many give and takes, compromises along the way that made it possible for parties to get this far. This is not the time to let anyone’s personal or partisan agenda to dominate the discussions. There is no alternative to give-and-take with an intent to come up with a workable model that is acceptable to all and reflects the public good.

When the history of New Nepal is written it will feature those who thought outside the box to take Nepal out of the paralysis of the past decades. The absolute monarchy didn’t work, the parliamentary system floundered, we now need to devise a stable system with sufficient checks and balances, details are besides the point. It is up to Ram Sharan Mahat and his likes to decide whether they want to be a part of this change or watch history pass them by.
The casualties in the 18 September earthquake last year were surprisingly low, but it should have sent shock waves through parts of the government machinery supposed to prepare for the next Big One in Kathmandu.

The numbers are chilling: an 8.0 magnitude quake like the one in 1934 will kill between 100,000 to 200,000 outright, 700,000 will be injured, and 1.5 million made homeless. The airport will suffer damage, half the bridges will collapse, 95 per cent of water mains will be destroyed, there will be no electricity and phones won’t work. Nearly all the hospitals will suffer damage, and half of all schools will collapse. And that is just in Kathmandu Valley.

Most earthquake experts have given up on the government getting its act together quickly enough on enforcing building codes to prevent future earthquakes from killing people. They are focusing on the aftermath: planning for rescue and relief, but even that will be a daunting challenge.

Even if private homes, offices and apartments can’t be refitted to be earthquake resistant, the government and Nepal’s international partners are working together to at least strengthen schools and hospitals.

“Retrofitting of schools and hospitals can save thousands of lives, and that is our focus,” explains Surya Prasad Acharya of National Society for Earthquake Technology (NSET) which is working with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to retrofit Kathmandu Valley schools.

One such is Shri Balkumari School on the outskirts of the city (pictured above). On Tuesday, children were all excited at the inauguration of their new building that is supposed to withstand quakes of up to 9.0 intensity. The classroom walls have safety instructions and an evacuation plan.

“We are at least confident that are our students will be safe,” says a beaming Nawaraj Kunwar of the Balkumari School Management Committee.

Although the plan is to retrofit 900 schools in Kathmandu Valley in the next five years, NSET estimates there are 60,000 schools around the country with flimsy construction. About 60 per cent of them can be refitted, but 15 per cent need to be demolished and rebuilt from scratch.

The reason for the sense of urgency is that if an 8.0 magnitude quake like the one in 1934 will kill between 100,000 to 200,000 outright, 700,000 will be injured, and 1.5 million made homeless. The airport will suffer damage, half the bridges will collapse, 95 per cent of water mains will be destroyed, there will be no electricity and phones won’t work. Nearly all the hospitals will suffer damage, and half of all schools will collapse. And that is just in Kathmandu Valley.

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The reason for the sense of urgency is that if an
8.0 magnitude earthquake were to strike during school hours, as many as 100,000 students could be killed and many more injured. More than 17,000 school children were killed in the Pakistan earthquake six years ago, and thousands of children were trapped under shoddily built schools in the 8.0 magnitude earthquake in Sichuan in 2008. Around the world, schools are used as temporary shelters during natural disasters, but in Nepal it will be schools that will collapse first. Half of all structures that were damaged in East Nepal in September were schools, and the only reason no children died was because the earthquake hit after school hours.

Hospitals will not fare much better. Apart from the Japanese-built TU Teaching Hospital and Patan Hospital, most health facilities will collapse killing thousands of patients and medical workers. Many hospitals don’t have a disaster plan, there are no stockpiles of emergency medicines or diesel. The National Blood Bank at Bhrkuti Mandap is so badly built it may be the first to go. If the earthquake is terrible, the aftermath may be even worse. Survivors will have to deal with dead phones, no emergency services, contaminated water, lack of food, shelter and a poorly prepared government. “If an earthquake were to strike today, there will be no hospitals for the injured to go to,” says Pradeep Vaidya, a doctor who is coordinating Hospital Preparedness for Emergency (HOPE).

The government is showing signs of waking up to the danger. It is now working with the international community’s National Risk Reduction Consortium for the seismic strengthening of schools and hospitals. TUTH, Birendra Military, Civil and Patan hospitals are being equipped to deal with an earthquake on its own. The government, the World Health Organisation (WHO), OXFAM, ICRC and others are working to retrofit hospitals, mitigate non-structural risks and stock emergency supplies.

Says Vaidya: “The aim is to have enough water, medicines, and fuel to last us at least for the first few days. We have no choice, we have to be prepared.”

Peace Corps returns

US officials formally announced in Washington on Wednesday the return of the Peace Corps to Nepal after they were pulled out following an explosion set off at the UAS Information Centre in Gyaneswor in September 2004. Peace Corps Director Aaron S. Williams and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Assistant Administrator for Asia Nisha Biswal signed an inter-agency agreement to re-establish a Peace Corps program in Nepal. “We are pleased that the government of Nepal has invited Peace Corps volunteers to return and work with local Nepali communities, in collaboration with USAID, once again,” said Peace Corps Director Williams.

Since 1962, more than 4,000 Americans have served as Peace Corps Volunteers in Nepal, working on projects in the sectors of education, environment and natural resource conservation, health, and community and youth development. The first group of approximately 20 Peace Corps volunteers is scheduled to arrive in Nepal later this year and will largely work in the nutrition sector.

US Ambassador Scott DeLisi said: “We are so very pleased that the Government of Nepal so eagerly worked with us to make this happen. We will have a program with PM Bhattarai and others next week to re-launch the Peace Corps program in Nepal.”
Mass prayer for world peace

Bodhgaya hosts the latest and possibly largest Buddhist Kalachakra initiation

LINDA KENTRO in BODHGAYA

At least 400,000 people gathered this week in Bodhgaya to participate in the latest and possibly largest Tibetan Buddhist Kalachakra initiation, a ceremony dedicated to world peace.

The Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, who won the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize has given the Kalachakra 32 times in nine different countries since 1984. This year was marked by the attendance of many Chinese Buddhists as well as Tibetans who were granted visas for the event.

Presented in words, painting, sand drawings, and dance forms, the six-colour Kalachakra mandala is a meditational guide. It encompasses the Buddhist ground truth that the self has no inherent and independent existence, realisation of which can unlock immense creative power.

It also guides the development of bodhicitta, the aspiration to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. The Dalai Lama lightly suggested that bodhicitta also makes practical sense, as giving up Rs 100 for oneself to gain at least Rs1,000 rupees for self and others would make great business sense as well.

A shelter has a 2.2 KW photo-voltaic array on the roof that keeps Ama Ghar brightly lit at night while the surrounding settlement is in darkness during power cuts.

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“A relay switch flicks the circuit to solar when the power goes off, so we don’t have a lights-out problem,” Ellison explains. The shelter often uses solar power even when there is electricity from the mains supply to his guardian there to set up a shelter for Nepali children like him.

Last November, Ama Ghar moved into its new home which was designed by Bonnie Ellison, who herself grew up in Nepal in the 1960s. She wanted it to be a bright and comfortable home for children but also energy efficient and easy on the utility bills.

“Using our resources wisely first means to be eco friendly but the other good reason is to save money on utilities, which in turn frees up money for other necessities like food and educational expenses,” says Ellison, who is affectionately called “Bonnie Aunty” by the children and staff. Ama Ghar doesn’t just conserve resources but is also designed out of necessity because of the shortage of water and power.

The building has a rainwater harvesting system that collects monsoon runoff from its roof, filters and stores it in a 30,000 litre underground cistern. Excess water is used to recharge ground water through a well, or redirected into an irrigation canal so neighborhood farmers can put it to good use.

Foundation for

BRITTANY SEARLE

Children’s home is also a model for green architecture

SMALL FOOTPRINT: Bonnie Ellison (left) who grew up in Nepal as a child is now helping Nepali children grow up in Ama Ghar’s new building (right) which is designed to conserve energy and water.
The event re-assembled the Tibetan diaspora, Buddhists from across greater Asia, and thousands of others under the blue and white ceilings of a huge tent. At each day’s close, most devotees struggled to straighten legs that had been crossed for four to five hours, while children ran about in excited release from their struggle to stay still and elders swayed against bamboo corral rails.

Tech savvy monks captured and broadcast the live event on mammoth LED screens. Twice daily, volunteers delivered hot tea and flat breads across an appreciative crowd. Outside the tent, more pilgrims sat in orderly rows along the streets working prayer beads.

Tibetan activists disseminated information on disappearances and the state of the environment. Brillant ethnic costumes were in abundance, including the fine hand-stitched jackets of the Tawang community from Arunachal Pradesh, prime donors for this year’s event. Nearby, high lamas led prayers at the holy Mahabodhi Temple, a World Heritage Site, commemorating the place of Prince Siddhartha Gautama’s enlightenment into Buddhahood.

At his nearby monastery, the Karmapa, a young Kagyu sect leader with a powerful presence, gave early morning talks with a Zen-like ring, on aligning right intention, firm concentration, and strategic aim for better navigation through a busy and distracting world.

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**EVENTS**

Beach Volleyball, don’t miss the sixth Riverside Springs Beach Volleyball Tournament. 13 to 15 January, Riverside Springs Resort, Kurintar, for more information call Januka at 5544263, 9803789617

**MUSIC**

Live Night, groove to the live performance of the band Night. Tickets Rs 200, 21 January, 6.30 pm to 8.30 pm, Utter Dhoka, Lastimat

Classical Music Night, enjoy and appreciate classical music every second day of the Nepali calendar. 16 January, 5pm onwards, Baghkhana, Yalamaya Kendra, Patan Dhoka

Hope Concert, Bethel Fellowship Trust Nepal and Bahram Ministries Nepal present live performances by Divine Connection and Kumbha. 21 January, 3pm to 6.30 pm, St. Xavier’s School, Jawalakhel, 9841271766, 9809821717

**DINING**

Cibo, a sandwich bar at heart, this cafe serves up one of the best sandwiches in town. Lastimat

Hanukk Sarang, from Bibimbab to Samgyeopsal, Hankook offers a wide range of Korean delicacies at affordable prices. Thamel (opposite Roadhouse Café)

Cafe Kaldi, this famous restaurant serves a great variety of coffee and offers free internet access. Thamel

Yin Yang Restaurant, east meets west as you choose from a variety of Thai and continental dishes. Add a little spice to your life with the pad thai or green curry. If you can’t handle the heat, fall into the safety net of its western dishes. Thamel, 10am to 10pm, 4701510

Chikusa, enjoy a cup of freshly ground coffee with syrupy pancakes, waffles and crepes. Thamel

Mike’s Breakfast, huge breakfast offerings and a never-ending supply of coffee amidst a lush garden setting characterise this café, popular among tourists and locals. Naxal, 4424303

Stuffed eggsplant or chocolate mouse cake, Flavor’s promises a delicious meal. Boudhanath

Imago Dei, be it casual hangouts or business meetings, Imago Dei is the place for you. Nag Pokhari

Sole Delicatessen, a range of gourmet food that will satisfy the most refined palates. 10am to 6pm (closed on Mondays), Babar Mahal Revisited, 4216433, Soldelicatessen@gmail.com


Ultimate Digital Photography Workshop, learn everything about photography. Fees Rs 3000, 7am to 9.30 am, 15 to 24 January, The Image Park (Opposite of Peanuts), New Road, 9841420341, 9841497639

Australian Musical, don’t miss out ‘sPlat, a musical production by the Australian company The Style Group. 12 to 13 January, 1pm to 5pm, Russian Cultural Centre, Kamal Pokhari

Winter Party, warm up your weekend with a great party by Shadow Guzz and SANK Events. Tickets Rs 500 (advanced) and Rs 999 (door sales), 14 January, 6pm to 8pm, Club Durbar Mang

New York Underground, a solo performance by Indian actor Murad Ali. Tickets: Rs 325 (available at Dhokaima Cafe, Chez Caroline, Sol Delicatessen, Nina and Hagar), 13 January, 6pm onwards, Manny’s Eatery and Tapas Bar, Shaligram Complex, Jawalakhel, 5536919

**PRANAYAMA POWER YOGA**, Pranayama brings a month-long yoga session for a healthy start to the new year. Rs 350 per class, starting from 2 January, 7am to 8pm, Kantipath, info@pranayama-yoga.com

Cycle 7: Identity, three photography installations: Navarasa, Ink’d and The Tales of Dirty Feet by talented photographers. 9.30 am to 8pm, 6 January to 15 February, Galleria CUC, Deetya Complex, Maharajgunj

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**PHOTO ESSAY**

Taking a holy dip

Football foot-brawl

**NEW YORK UNDERGROUND**

From Bibimbab to Samgyeopsal, Hankook offers a wide range of Korean delicacies at affordable prices. Thamel (opposite Roadhouse Café)

This Japanese restaurant is popular for its spaghetti and burger steaks. Thamel

Pumpernickel Bakery, get an early breakfast or brunch with interesting choices of bread and sandwiches. Experiment with its goat cheese or yak cheese sandwiches, or have a sip of coffee in the classy indoor dining area. Thamel, 7.30am to 7pm, 4269185

Caffeinated with a rich blend of nostalgia and excitement, Cafe Kaldi offers a great variety of coffee and even free internet access. Thamel

**COVERAGE STORY**

Unity in Kathmandu’s diversity

**EDITORIAL**

Unaddressed differences

**REPORTS**

Bulldozed by the state

Unwell UML

Terai’s others

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Football foot-brawl

**HIMAL KHABARPATRIKA**

15-30 January

From this issue Himal Khabarpatrika comes out regularly in bigger size and full glossy paper.

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Chongqing Fast Food

Chinatown has a new address and at its heart is a hole in the wall that is easy to miss. If you’re lucky to chance upon Chongqing Fast Food in Thamel (hint: the sign above it refers to a different city due east), don’t be discouraged by the failing plastic swivel chairs, the saccharine posters of Caucasian toddlers or the Chinese-only-speaking service.

Take a seat if you can find one and if Mandarin isn’t your forte, point for the picture book and poke fun all you can at curious translations of Chinese dishes like ‘Spicy The Fish’, ‘Meat to Cook Lunch’ or ‘And Pulled a Red Leather’ because before you know it you’ll be coming back week after week for the most authentic and border cuisine in Kathmandu.

Kaucáu! (chopathicka) Por set meals the Double Fried Pork Slices, fried bacon, or the Kung Pao Chicken, diced chicken, vegetables and peanuts, served with bottomless rice are reliable lunch values at Rs 140 each (don’t be offended, plated sets are meant to come with a spoon). Fúwúyúwún! (waiter) Better yet, schmooze with a stranger and go à la carte or family-style dining. Favored sharing dishes include the sweet and sour pork slices (Rs 380) or the pork with sautéed agarics, a wobbly ‘wood-ear’ fungus that holds a slight crunch (Rs 320).

Málá! (lit. ‘numbing and spicy’) The pairing of huājiāo, or Sichuan pepper similar to the Nepali timur, and chili pepper is a cold-cock combination and a key ingredient in the traditional Sichuan má lì hot pot. Try the beef or pork variety at Rs 300. But fosa beware! Hot pot is not for novices (misspelled as ‘quick fried mater convolvulbus’, if in season). Mîñfán! (rice) Rice is calculated by person at Rs 30. So sauteed with your belly’s desire; regulars usually refill themselves.

Mādīn! (bill) The year-old Chongqing Fast Food makes a mockery of highbrow establishments in Thamel. Its grill-free setting doesn’t deter its generous servings of Sichuan and Chongqing specialties at an affordable bill.

Marco Pollo

A few shops north of Chikusa, look for red and blue columns, opposite the Utse Hotel in Thamel.

Nepathya on the road

Nepathya is all set to embark on the second leg of its ‘Sharikko lagí Shivaya’ concert tour. The tour which started on 3 January has garnered positive reviews so far and has been performing to packed auditoriums. Through their concerts, Nepathya aim on raising awareness about education as a foundation for long-term peace in the country. All proceeds will be donated to local schools in each respective area and used to build recreational and educational facilities. Like earlier years, Nepathya has been collaborating with nepathya and local organisations to put up its shows.

Tickets are priced at Rs 300, Rs 500 and Rs 1000, 3 to 20 January, 3pm onwards (Gates open at 2pm).

GETAWAYS

13 January          Butwal,Rupendehi                  Milan Chaichitra Mandir
15 January          Wang, Syangja                       Subhas Chaichitra Mandir
17 January          Baglung                          Pup Chaichitra Mandir
19 January          Pokara, Kaski                       Pothana Sathagriha
21 January          Goshoia                          Himal Chaichitra Mandir
Elephantiasis

Lymphatic Filariasis, endemic in Nepal, is in the news this week. It is a mosquito-borne illness like malaria, Japanese encephalitis and dengue fever. The parasite (Wuchereria bancrofti) which the mosquito injects into humans is elusive, and Draculula-like appears only at night in the human host’s blood circulation. Clinically, the presentation of lymphatic filariasis can range from being asymptomatic to the full-blown elephantiasis, (Hatipaule in Nepali).

In Nepal the disease also presents itself as a hydrocele (water-filled scrotum) and keeps surgeons busy. But this is one of the more common, easier operations and keeps surgeons busy. Although lymphatic filariasis is not usually a life-threatening disease, clearly it is a nuisance at the very least.

The good news is that there is very effective medicine (diethylcarbamazine, DEC) for the prevention and control of mass annual distribution of the drug, given once every year for about five years will profoundly suppress the bug in human hosts. If the suppression is sustained then transmission (spread of the disease) by mosquitoes is interrupted. This community intervention campaign was helped with a pledge in 2000 by two pharmaceutical companies (Glaxo SmithKline and Merck) to donate the drug to eliminate the disease coordinated by WHO. It is reported that over 700 million people in over 50 countries have participated and the disease has been eliminated in certain defined areas. Eliminating the disease is clearly an important reason for the present mass drug administration drive in Nepal. DEC has been available for decades and its side-effects (mild fever, chills, nausea, headache) in some patients are well known but short-lived.

The community-wide mass treatment program is being implemented to treat the entire at-risk population. So for people in many parts of Nepal including Kathmandu, if you are 2 years, not pregnant, and have no chronic illnesses and other contraindications, it may be a good idea to consider taking the drug. In a smart move, albendazole which cures worm infestations in the intestine (a widespread problem in Nepal) is also being given by the government at the same time with DEC.

Melancholia, Another Earth

The infinite possibility of science fiction

With this issue, Sophia Pande starts a new weekly DVD review column, Must See, in Nepal Times. Two beautiful tragic blonde women, Hethero unprobable and Tilda Swinton appear in the early vein into view of the Earth, alarmingly dysfunctional family dynamics. These are the uncanny similarities between Lars Von Trier’s Melancholia, and Mike Cahill’s Another Earth both of which were, oddly enough, released within months of each other in 2011.

Kirsten Dunst as Justine, in a heart-wrenching performance, is a luminous but sightly unstable bride who behaves more and more erratically during her wedding reception just after she sights a malevolent star that later devolves as Melancholia gets closer and closer to Earth. As Justine becomes silent and solipsistic, she seems to subtly pose questions about our understanding of master constructs of science fiction. In the hands of master film-makers like Andre Tarkovsky, films like “Solaris” using extraordinary “scientific” events to frame the human condition, are able to subtly pose deep philosophical questions about our understanding of fundamental things like family, humanity, love, death – all the big questions.

Science fiction at its pinnacle (“Think Avatar”) succeeds by maximising the visual potential of cinema. Its sole responsibility is to open up our imaginations. I wonder if any one, anywhere, Kathmandu or elsewhere, after watching the planets rise into the night sky in these two brave new films wouldn’t wonder at the existence of another earth, another planet, other life, and endless possibilities.

Both films are available in Thamel or at Suwal on dvd.


devolves as Melancholia gets closer and closer to Earth, and the film chronicles her struggles with her family and with the inevitable existential crisis that arises as she contemplates the imminent end of our planet and every living creature on it.

Another Earth starring the newcomer Brit Marling, who also co-wrote the screenplay, starts initially with a slightly more mundane Marling’s character, Rhoda Williams, has a sparkling future. She is beautiful, bright, and has just been accepted into MIT. Driving home at night after celebrating her acceptance, she is looking out of the window at the ‘other Earth that has just been glimpsed orbiting the sun when she slams head-on into a car with horrific results. She kills a toddler and his mother, leaving the father injured, but alive. Three years later, after serving time for manslaughter, she emerges, silent and solipsistic.

The other Earth has now been converted into a mirror image of ours, hidden previously by its slightly different orbit of the sun. Rhoda slowly awakens to the possibility that there might be ‘another’, better, luckier version of herself on this minor planet. Just as she starts to obsess with getting herself there, she also starts to stalk, and even more disturbingly, fall in love with the survivor of the car accident.

Neither film has much real science in it. The other Earth, and Melancholia are devices, albeit visually gorgeous ones, used by Von Trier, and the Cahill-Marling duo to examine the behaviour of ordinary people trying to deal with their very human miseries when suddenly they are faced with cosmic events that alter the very fabric of what we believe is possible. This is the potential genius that lies behind the films like “Solaris” or “think Avatar” succeeds by maximising the visual potential of cinema. Its sole responsibility is to open up our imaginations. I wonder if any one, anywhere, Kathmandu or elsewhere, after watching the planets rise into the night sky in these two brave new films wouldn’t wonder at the existence of another earth, another planet, other life, and endless possibilities. Both films are available in Thamel or at Suwal on dvd.
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s the country lurches from one scandal-of-the-week to the next, there is a sense that this is a government that only reacts to the media. There is always a controversy brewing up in national politics, and reporters feel safe in the knowledge that they don’t have to go after the news, the news will come to them.

The politicians have figured this out, and know just how to spin a story so that their pronouncements at the Reporters’ Club get prominent placement in tomorrow morning’s paper or the evening news bulletin. Not happy with that, top politicians are now all regularly writing lengthy opinion pieces in the op-eds: mostly faulting others, but never themselves.

Last month, Dalit lawmakers across party lines obstructed the House over the murder of Manbire Sunar in a remote village of remote Kalikot district. They demanded the government to punish the killers, a Dalit group closed down Dang village of remote Kalikot district. They demanded the government to punish the killers, a Dalit group closed down Dang village of remote Kalikot district.

The mainstream media failed in its duty of cross-checking facts, and this is not an isolated case. A lazy media parrots the loudest voice, the headline-grabbing incident. Over time this cuts a part of the media, activists, parliament and government all fell hook, line and sinker. But the biggest failing was of the media, the role of which is to demand the dead man be declared a martyr and his family awarded the mandatory Rs 1 million compensation.

The Prime Minister, perhaps the most hapless in history, has been giving in to everyone’s demand to save his coalition. He was quick to agree to this one too. Editorials and articles were written shaming the government and ‘elite’ groups for discrimination. Sunar’s case fit nicely with the discourse of continued marginalisation of those at the bottom of the caste ladder. It had all the makings of a good story: a member of a historically ostracized community was ‘lynched’ in one of the most neglected parts of the country at a time when a new constitution was being drafted to stop precisely this kind of thing from happening. Some went even further to blame the state for Sunar’s murder because it took place in a Bahun-Chettri dominated area.

All very normal, except that the truth was slightly more complicated than that. A human rights investigation showed Sunar and his murderers were both Maoists, they were good pals, often ate and drank together, caste was no bar in their past. On the day of the murder, both were drunk and got into a fight. But none of this fit the accepted narrative, so the media, activists, parliament and government all fell hook, line and sinker. But the biggest failing was of the media, the role of which is always to exert skepticism, play the devil’s advocate and an adversarial role especially in stories that just sound too pat. Everyone loves a good famine’ is the title of a media book by Indian journalist P Sainath. One can say the same thing, it seems, about murder.

A credible INSEC investigation concluded that Sunar wasn’t killed for touching the fireplace, and although derogatory casteist remarks were made during the drunken brawl, it was not the main reason for the murder. The case, tragic as it is, goes on to show how easily an entire nation can be fooled by a few unexamined facts. The case, tragic as it is, goes on to show how easily an entire nation can be fooled by a few unexamined facts.

In Nepal, the maximum sentence for rape is 10 years. However, Kabita believes the minimum punishment for rapists should be life imprisonment. “Nepal’s law is not strong enough to deter people from committing such heinous crimes,” she told Nepali Times, “until there is stricter punishment more innocent lives will be ruined.”

Dewan Rai

BY HER SIDE: Krishna Tamang tends to her daughter at the Teaching Hospital in Kathmandu after her rape in June.

They also stole the Rs 130,000 she was carrying that her sister Kabita Tamang, had sent home for constructing a new house in the village. When she gained consciousness the next morning, the nun found herself tied up inside the bus. Members of the Limbuan Volunteers were alerted and caught the culprits who were handed over to Chainpur police.

Seven months after the incident, the nun is still recovering from physical and psychological trauma at a hospital in Kathmandu, while her family struggles to keep up with bills. Having lost his house during September’s earthquake, Krishna Tamang has no money to support his daughter and the nun’s aunt, Chandra Maya Tamang, is relying on loans to cover hospital costs. In Nepal, the maximum sentence for rape is 10 years. However, Kabita believes the minimum punishment for rapists should be life imprisonment. "Nepal’s law is not strong enough to deter people from committing such heinous crimes," she told Nepali Times, "until there is stricter punishment more innocent lives will be ruined."

Dewan Rai
Ramechhap district may be only 100 km to the east of Kathmandu, but it was till recently as remote as far-western Nepal.

Villagers had to travel three days on foot to reach Manthali, the district capital. The nearest roadhead was 70 km north in Charikot of Dolakha. Soon, after the bridge over the Sunkosi is built, Ramechhap will be connected to the Sindhuli Highway and Kathmandu will be only four hours away. And all 55 VDCs of Ramechhap are now connected by roads.

However, despite the improvement in connectivity, Ramechhap is still lagging behind many neighbouring districts in education, nutrition and child survival. Things were much worse in 1984,

The Ramechhap model offers valuable lessons in community empowerment.

ANURAG ACHARYA
RAMECHHAP

NATION

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Only Mustangs in Mustang

The prime minister has chosen to drive around in a Mustang, but in Mustang passengers have no choice but to ride on syndicate-operated Mustangs. Ever since the Beni-Jomsom track was opened four years ago, tourists and locals are at the mercy of a transportation cartel. In October, green-plated tourist jeeps were forced to stop on the road and terrified tourists and pilgrims were forced to walk. Other vehicles had their tyres deflated by locals affiliated with the Muktinath Bus and Jeep Transportation Committee which has a monopoly on the route. Like other bus syndicates in various parts of the country, this one has also earned notoriety for its intimidation tactics and has forced other operators from carrying passengers to Muktinath, Kagbeni and Upper Mustang.

The cartel operates 20 mainly Mustang jeeps daily from Pokhara to Mustang and has arbitrary pricing with drivers often charging as much as they wish. The syndicate has been defiant despite opposition from local passengers and tour agencies.

NO GREEN LIGHT FOR GREEN PLATE: Tourist vehicles like this one in Jomsom have to pay a hefty fee to local syndicates for the privilege of being on the Pokhara-Jomsom route.

The syndicate’s secretary Raju Lachhram admits he has to intimidate other operators and stop them. “How else am I going to run my business? My workers will be out of jobs.” Lachhram’s argument is that since the army built the road, there has been no maintenance by the Road Department, and the syndicate has to spend money to keep the highway operational. “We maintain the road, so why should others benefit from it?” he asks.

But the violent tactics and threats have affected the inflow of Indian pilgrims to Muktinath as well as tourists on their way to Upper Mustang. Says local tourism entrepreneur Chandra Bastaokri: “There used to be hundreds of tourists, now it has gone down to a trickle, and local passengers are put off by the high ticket price.”

Despite a Supreme Court ban, syndicates are prevalent throughout the country. Mustang’s CCD Yogendra Pandey admits that the bus cartel is not constructive to business, but says he also needs to keep the peace in his district, which probably means the syndicate owners have powerful political connections and are untouchable. Whatever the case, the national government and local administration are not fulfilling their regulatory role in the transportation sector.

Hari Devi Rokaya in Jomsom

My way or no way

The people have been let down once more in their desire to see closure of the constitution and peace process. The Maoists have again allowed their internal power struggle to spill into the national arena even while the PLA is starting to be decommissioned. The Maoists have gone back on their previous agreement and set forth the condition that they will not move on the integration and rehabilitation of their fighters unless the other parties agree to their proposal for a new state structure (under a directly-elected executive president). This is a clear indication that they haven’t given up on their goal of state capture and the setting up of a totalitarian state. The Nepali Congress has concluded that the Maoists are trying to write a new constitution with a gun pointed at everyone’s head. Even Pushpa Kamal Dahal, who had shown flexibility in the recent past is now towing a hard line, and the opposition has reason to be worried.

The Maoists could be trying to delay the process and haggle over the future form of governance. Some even reason that if the Maoists are able to delay the peace process beyond the 31 May deadline, the constitution itself will be void and it will be easier for them to establish a totalitarian regime.

Whenever there is an agreement on the constitution or the peace process, Maoist leaders suddenly start having a public disagreement about it. They have endless meetings and leak their positions to the press and then they start dismantling the agreement point by point. All this could be because, the reasoning goes, even if the constitution is written and fresh elections are held the Maoists will be unable to win a majority without guns or violent behaviour. Furthermore, there may be investigations into war crimes and human rights abuses.

Whatever the cause, the Maoists and other parties must work towards ending the current stalemate over the forms of governance. On one hand, a directly elected presidential system neither ensures political stability nor will it necessarily lead to an authoritarian regime. On the other hand, a parliamentary system has provided stability in many countries. The real reason why some systems fail and others succeed has to do with the style of governance and whether or not the political parties show a democratic culture. Political leaders now need to weigh all the available options and resolve this matter sensibly.

Editorial in Nagarik, 8 January

Comrades no more?

Netra Pantii in Nayapatrika, 7 January

Three decades of camaraderie between Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Ram Bahadur Thapa, has spiralled into bitter political rivalry. Dahal and Thapa who have been friends since their days at Rampur Agriculture Camps were seen ignoring each other at a recent central committee meeting, where Dahal communicated with Thapa through his brother.

Enmity between the two has existed since the early years of the Maoist insurgency and Thapa’s disapproval of Dahal’s influence within the party and his leadership role during the war is no secret. However, Dahal’s decision to hand over the keys of weapons containers in September 2011 without consulting Thapa, the party’s military chief, worsened their relationship.

The following conversation between Dahal and Thapa during the rebellion gives an insight into the duo’s volatile bond. “We grew up together, worked together but you seem to have forgotten the past,” Thapa said, to which Dahal responded sternly, “You are talking of 20 years back. At present, I am the party chairman and you are a central committee member.”

Despite the rift, Thapa never took any sides and remained loyal to the party to prevent a split. “I am not a peak, I don’t want to be. I am the foundation that supports the peak.” Thapa once said at the Chunwang meeting in 2005. But Dahal’s indifference and Bhattarai and Baidya’s constant criticism seem to have pushed Thapa to finally join the hardliners.
Interview with Kantipur editor, Sudheer Sharma, and Nagarik editor, Narayan Wagle, on BBC Nepali Service, 7 January

Prez or premier?

BBC Nepali: Why do you think Nepal needs a directly-elected executive president?

Sudheer Sharma: The parliamentary system after the 1990 movement was the main reason for political instability in the country. A directly-elected executive head of state, whether a president or prime minister, will provide much-needed stability and kick start the stalled development process. There is no guarantee that the new system will succeed, but given the ineffectiveness of the past system, it makes sense for us to adopt one where an elected government can at least complete its full tenure.

Narayan Wagle: Before calling the parliamentary system in Nepal a failure, we should remember that it was never allowed to function properly in the first place. People argue that the parliamentary system has bred corruption, but there are legal provisions within it to punish the guilty. On the one hand, leaders talk about decentralising governance and making it more inclusive, and on the other they advocate for a centralised system with a directly elected executive head.

SS: Although corruption is a serious concern, the inherently destabilising nature of the parliamentary systems is its greatest drawback. Before the royal takeover in 2005, we had 10 governments in 12 years, and given our deep-rooted coalition culture, the trend is likely to continue unless we have a better system. And there is no reason why decentralisation of power at the local level cannot take place alongside effective governance at the centre. Regardless of whether the executive is directly elected or elected through parliament, its functions must be well-defined and it should be able to carry out its responsibilities without the political hickering that we see today.

NW: At a time when the general consensus seems to favor a federal system with a mixed electorate, it is wrong to assume that supporters of a Westminster system want to maintain the status quo. Besides, if we adopt a parliamentary system it will certainly be different than the previous one, because fundamental changes will be introduced. If we look at the experience of other countries, many of them have prospered irrespective of their form of governance.

SS: Once we finish writing the constitution, we will have a new state structure in place and to ensure that changes are institutionalised, we need an effective enforcement mechanism. However, we also need sufficient checks and balances to avoid the concentration of power in one office.

NW: The last two decades of instability were not due to the failure of the system, but rather the failure of political parties. If our biggest concern is stability in politics, then let us not allow the opposition to bring ‘no confidence’ motions against the government for a certain period.

SS: The culture of politics in a parliamentary system is preoccupied with numbers and anybody can manipulate this system to gain an indirect majority in the parliament.

NW: Parliament is a place for numbers, and those who can convince the representatives with their arguments will have majority support. I see nothing wrong with that. At least such an executive is accountable to a parliament, unlike a directly-elected executive who is only accountable to people on the streets.

SS: It is wrong to assume that a directly-elected executive will necessarily lead to an authoritarian regime. There is a vibrant opposition in the legislature and an impeachment provision to ensure accountability. It’s only a question of how that executive is elected.
So Comrade Wen is coming after all. Maybe we need to update our wish list for all the goodies we want from China besides a new Pokhara Airport, trans-Himalayan railway to Lumbini and an Outer Ring Road. Since the Nepal Police is getting new surveillance equipment, the Ass has drawn up a list of items we want the Chinese to give us for to apprehend perpetrators who are using ever-innovative techniques to smuggle cocaine in mackerel cans, heroin in body cavities, sandalwood in ambulances and dollar bills inside underwears:

1. Endoscopy machine, 3
2. Can openers, 150
3. Full body scanners, 15
4. Breathalyser sets, 250
5. A new set of office furniture for the Bhaktapur District Court

Rumour is going around that Kaji Naran Kamred once again risks having Wen Jiabao cancel his visit because he deliberately leaked a new date for the rescheduled visit. Apparently he wanted to buy some time for his govt as Madhesis parties get ready to jump ship in droves. It’ll probably work, since no one is going to dare overthrow the government just before the Chinese PM arrives. That would be really embarrassing.

The political promiscuity these days has broken all national and world records. Everyone is jumping into bed with everyone else. We thought the MaoBuddies and the Madhesi made an odd couple, but look at what is happening to the love triangle within the Baddies. First, RBT got RBT and MK for a secret rendezvous at the Siddharth Cottage in Dhobikhola to bad mouth PKD. This led to RBT refusing to date PKD, and PKD had to send his younger brother as emissary to try to placate Comrade Cloud. Now, Lotus Flower has turned the tables against Red Flag and is holding hands with Comradeerie Kiran again. Chairman Awestruck proves the old adage: ‘there are no permanent enemies and no permanent jilted lovers’ in politics. Have to admire the man’s single-minded tenacity to achieve his goal of Executioner President. He has no qualms about holding the peace process hostage to get the prize, and seeing PM BRB as an obstacle, he has now decided to go back to the hardline fold. Apparently Comrade Overwhelming has denied he wants to be a new “Raja”, but he said he didn’t mind being a “Raja-pakse”.

The Baddies are in government, and they are threatening to revolt. Against whom? Even Comrade Dina seems to be confused which side he is on anymore. At a Baddie meeting the other day the Re-education Minister got a bit carried away and called for the Prime Minister to step down.

Chairman Shock and Awe now seems to be past caring whether he ticks off the Injuns anymore, at a party meeting last week he got so carried away he equated himself with BP Koirala because, he said, “we were both removed by the Southern Power”. He probably thought this would endear him to the Muzungu.

No Oil Corporation(NOC) celebrated its 42nd birthday this week but there was no party. Apparently, the invited guests demanded jerry cans full of petrol instead of cake. Since the Kangresis have refused to come around on directly-elected executive, the Baddies have instructed their gorillas to stay put on integration. With the freezing cold and acute power shortage, PM Baburao is feeling a bit under the weather, and is finding it hard to fight back a crying for his resignation. But what’s with our PM! He gets sick everytime he goes to his home district of Gorkha. Although this week it was apparently because he attended a photo-op for Elephantitis, and took the tablets as a symbolic gesture. He shouldn’t have swallowed them.