The government’s attempt to roll back the gains of community forestry through an amendment to the Forest Act is a direct attack on grassroots democracy and successful local management of natural resources. It will only benefit the logging mafia and dismantle Nepal’s internationally-recognised conservation success story.
Nepal’s community forests survived the war, now they are threatened by peace.

In stark contrast to the foot-dragging in parliament over the ratification of three key international agreements on money-laundering, terrorism and extradition (the double-dealing last week, but the government lobbied to buy more time citing political instability) it has displayed unusual speed in pushing through new amendments to the 1993 Forest Act.

There is something very fishy about this. The Madhesi-Maoist coalition’s undue haste in ratifying amendments could destroy Nepal’s community forestry program that has taken 30 years to build, and is accepted internationally as the best-working model for local natural resource management. As is usual with these things, the reason the government and sections of the bureaucracy want these amendments is because the trees local communities nurtured are now fully grown, and there is big money to be made by chopping them down.

Nepal’s traditional systems of managing local forest and water were made by chopping them down. When community forestry was first introduced as a pilot project in Sindhupalchok in the 1980s in an Australian-funded initiative, it built on these traditional conservation practices that had then been destroyed by state intervention and nationalisation. Community forestry gathered pace in the 1990s because it dovetailed with grassroots democracy and local self-government. The result is there to see across Nepal’s midhills where canopy cover expanded by 20 per cent between 1990-2010. Landsat images taken twenty years ago in Sindhupalchok (see pictures) show a dramatic increase in forest cover because of community-based conservation efforts.

But as the trees grew into maturity and acquired commercial value, it coincided with the post-conflict erosion of local democracy, state-sanctioned corruption through all-party mechanisms and the criminalisation of politics. The fact that most community forestry user groups survived the war and pressure from corrupt politicians proves how resilient the model is. It has to be said that the Madhesi parties and the Maoists never really came to terms with the community forestry concept. The Maoists because it is just too democratic and too decentralised for their liking, and also because of a perception that forestry user groups across Nepal are UML-dominated. The Madhesi parties have seen the Tarai’s hardwood forests as timber to be mined, and not as a natural resource to be conserved.

The proposed legislation will undo in a few swift months what took 30 years to protect. It will weaken the power of community forestry user groups, and legitimise illegal logging across the land. It will further erode grassroots democracy, and profit a few local crooks at the cost of communities.

Nepal’s community forests survived the war, now they are threatened by peace.
The mote in thy brother’s eye
The judiciary must first do justice to its own credibility

In 2007, Transparency International categorised Nepal’s judiciary as one of the most corrupt. Not much has changed since, we are still at the bottom of the index. Five years of transition have emptied political institutions of their fundamental democratic values, and glaring impunity has eroded public faith in the law. Widespread abuse of public office by greedy individuals has been the hallmark of Nepal’s transitional politics. Accountability and rule of law have been put on the back burner in the name of peace process. Consensual, promiscuous politics is undermining the effectiveness and legitimacy of the state.

The Supreme Court’s recent verdicts in landmark corruption cases, and its decision to put a cap on extension of the CA are celebrated as an example of judicial activism, but there are mountains of impunity and cases still pending. While the rot begins right at the top, a serious lack of integrity and competency in the lower courts challenge justice delivery. Deputy Attorney General Surya Prasad Koirala told me this week after the Gupta ruling that the indictment for corruption of a sitting minister and senior government officers are landmark verdicts. “But,” he hastened to add, “the rulings have brought into sharp focus the larger question of competency and integrity of the lower courts.”

Chief Justice Ram Prasad Shrestha had commented before retiring last year that corruption could be substantially checked by ensuring competency and integrity of judicial heads. Shrestha proved his theory during a short but effective period in office. It was in his tenure that the clamp down on corruption began and he set a judicial precedence by taking a note of the writ petitions filed against the special court’s ‘inconsistent’ verdict on corruption cases against senior government officials and ex-ministers. The SC revoked the clean chit provided by the special court on these cases, some as old as 10 years, citing intentional overlooking of evidence and flawed investigations.

Today there are at least a dozen high profile corruption cases pending. Government Attorney Tej Narayan Paudel who has argued several cases against corruption believes recent verdicts are encouraging and send a strong message to the corrupt, but he cautions: “There is long way to go before the hammer comes down against the wrong doers.”

The nation is still preoccupied with the peace process and statute drafting and questions of transparency and accountability have fallen victim to the political deadlock. The media has done its bit, but corruption is so widespread and accepted that citizens take it as a given. Almost as important as an activist judiciary is overcoming public apathy.

The judicial council may already be investigating the culpability of those in the lower courts who gave a clean chit to Minister JP Gupta, and it will probably find that corruption runs deep within the judiciary itself. The justice system is partly to blame for the growing impunity and Nepal’s poor human rights record. At a time when truth and justice are vital in ending the political transition, there is an erosion of the people’s faith in the system.

The judiciary has a challenging task of doing justice to its own credibility before it commands moral clout, besides legal authority, to deliver justice.
हामी आउँदैहुँ तपाईको घरदैभोमा फेरि एक पटक

बाम्पर उपहार
एक घरमा बसाउनुहोस् जस्तै बाम्परसङ्गीतका सामान्य उपायमेंटका २ बेडः अपार्टमेंट

हुरेक महिना
TATA Nano कार र Mahindra Rodeo 125 स्कूटर एक जलसाई

हुरेक दिन
Maxx Mobile र D.Light Solar Light एक एक जलसाई र शुक्रवार सानाफिकका अनुसार वायाक र Digicomm Stand Fan तीन तिमिर जलसाई

हुरेक साता
LG को Refrigerator, Micro-Wave oven र Washing Machine एक एक जलसाई

हुरेक क्षण
हरेक झाकेरे फाउंडेशन हाल बसाउने रुपमा बुझ्रापुर तिब भित्र लाभीक उपहार

रजिस्टर गर्नुका लागि CIR ठाउँमा सर्व ५०२५ मा एक.एक.एक. माउथलिङ। यो सेवा मोबाइल टेलिफोनमा नाप उपलब्ध छ।
Nepal narrowly escaped being blacklisted by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the global anti-money laundering watchdog, this week.

As the FATF plenary sat in Paris to decide Nepal’s fate, we were running around making intense diplomatic efforts at home and Paris. Nepal was at high risk of being blacklisted for not endorsing the bills against money laundering but was allowed to remain in the list of countries with ‘Improving Global Anti-Money Laundering and Combating Financing Terrorism Compliance’. The transitional political situation and the fact that the bills in question are already being tabled in the parliament were factors that are said to have influenced the FATF’s decision. Ratification of key UN Conventions (International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism and UN Convention Against Transnational Organised Crime) in June 2011, also helped.

Nepal now has two months to pass the three bills, Mutual Legal Assistance Bill, Extradition Bill and Bill Against Organised Crime, that were supposed to be endorsed by 2011. But since the timing coincides with the CA extension when legislators will be completely distracted, we are sure to have another cliffhanger in May.

These bills will help Nepal develop a healthy financial system, create a positive investment environment and boost international trade. But they are stalled in parliament right now because the hardline faction of the Maoists believes that the bills are against national interest and are being imposed on the direction of ‘imperialist forces’. These self-professed ‘nationalists’ chose to boycott the meeting when the bills were being tabled for endorsement in the parliament before the deadline. The real reason for obstructing the bill seems to have been the hardliner’s desire to see their own prime minister roast slowly in the fire.

It is difficult to understand what can be more against national interest than holding the country’s reputation hostage and not implementing anti-money laundering measures. Nepal could have easily joined the other 15 countries, including Pakistan and Sri Lanka, that were blacklisted last week.

The country still faces a host of money-laundering threats, including those resulting from narcotics trafficking, corruption, smuggling, tax evasion, fraud and human trafficking. Money laundering is also rife because of the country’s largely cash economy, fat informal sector and extremely porous border with India.

The consequences of being blacklisted will hit the financial sector and the economy hard. Nepal Investment Year 2012-13 will be dead in the water if the bills are not passed by June. The few investors that are ready to recognise Nepal’s potential despite the poor infrastructure, energy and labour problems would also turn away. Nepali banks would lose their credibility and imports would suffer as banks abroad may or may not honour local letters of credit. Exports on the other hand might become more expensive as the costs rise. International banks could block bank accounts of Nepali diplomatic missions abroad. Visas would be denied to Nepali nationals. It would also be difficult to process foreign donors would impose more stringent conditional ties for aid and grants once the country is blacklisted.

Nepal should use this borrowed time wisely and endorse the bills. What can be done in two days should not take two months. The Maoist obstructionists should understand the repercussions of not fulfilling international commitments in fighting the flow of dirty money on the economy.

Doing so would prove that they have lots to hide and are themselves afraid of being extradited, or are sheltering crooks engaged in money-laundering and smuggling.
The previous time leaders of various student unions came together was for a shutdown last month to protest the government’s decision to hike fuel prices. Together, leaders of student unions affiliated with the Maoists, UML and NC set about vandalising vehicles that dared defy their strike. But this time the same student leaders weren’t burning tires on the streets, they were paddling furiously to keep their rafts on track on the white waters of the frothing Trisuli River. For two days last week, they left behind their political ideologies, rivalries and worked as a team to hone their leadership and communication skills.

“It is extremely important for young student leaders to be team players, which is what we tried to enhance through the program,” says Megh Ale of Borderlands, which organised the two-day white water rafting program for young politicians in collaboration with the group, Demo Finland, a Finnish cross-party co-operation, seeking to foster mutual understanding and a constructive and inclusive political culture in developing countries.

And in the evening, after a day on the river, huddled around a camp-fire on the banks of the Trisuli the student leaders vented all their frustrations on the leadership of their parties. They all agreed that their leaders lacked the vision to drive the country forward, and there was an utter absence of trust.

Said Mohammed Rafi Halwai of Madhesi Youth Forum: “If everyone of us trust each other and communicate effectively most of the tasks can be completed on time.”

The exercise also simulated the importance of trusting the leadership and the responsibility of the leader to take the team forward. Participants were divided into groups irrespective of their political affiliations, and they had to raft down the Trisuli. The main goal was to move ahead as a team to get to the destination. And they did just that. “Metaphorically the raft became the nation, and they had to take it forward,” explained Ale, who said the student union leaders needed the same skills in navigating politics today.

Sarita Rayamajhi from All Nepal National Free Party-affiliated students go white-water rafting to improve on teamwork, leadership and trust

“All in the same boat”

Party-affiliated students go white-water rafting to improve on teamwork, leadership and trust

BHRIKUTI RAI in GORKHA

“Now we should get our party leaders to also go rafting together.”

Sarita Rayamajhi, ANNFSU student leader
Student Union (ANNFSU) Kavre felt mixing up the participants across party lines in one boat underlined the importance of trust and teamwork. Rayamajhi was so happy with the outcome, she felt the leaders of political parties should also have been part of the rafting program. “Maybe then they would learn to put nation building ahead of their party’s needs and trust each other more,” she told Nepali Times.

Nima Giri of Nepal Student Union felt there is a wide communication gap between student wings and their parent parties. “We don’t want to be mere appendages to the parties to be mobilised only as a show of strength on the streets, we want them to take our plan of action seriously,” Giri said.

The student leaders all agreed that the rafting exercise will have a positive impact on upcoming union elections which is usually national elections in a microcosm, and makes it to the news for all the wrong reasons. “Since we got to interact and work with our friends from other parties, the level of tension and animosity will definitely decrease during the election,” Giri said.

Most of the young leaders have common goals but rarely get the platform to connect with each other on a personal level. Basu Gautam of Demo Finland said: “We want to create a lasting bridge between the student wings of different political parties so that they can work alongside each other.”

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BORDERLANDS
Tibetan Losar Celebration, enjoy Losar with the thrumming beats of DJ Shobhe and DJ Sundyy, 24 February, 5:00 pm onwards, Club Platinum, Durbarmarg

2012 - The Leap, enjoy the best of Salsa and jazz music. Every Wednesday and Friday 6pm onwards, Jazzabella café, Jhamsikhel, Patan. Call 2144075

Ides of March, be it a fish or a steak burger, Bench Burger offers many types and tastes for your palate. Annapurna, Patan

Jhamsikhel, 24 February, 6pm onwards, Live Music at Jazzabella Café.

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Music

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Dining

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Ghanshyam Cafe, a quiet and relaxing place with delicious food. Although known for their open momos, their Chef Sabit is equally mouthwatering. Pulchowk, 5527873

Enjoy scrumptious brunch and indulge in corn with sugar and lemon. Jhamshikhel

Just Baked, try the most amazing fruit tart and succulent brownies in town. Old Bazaar, 9851053235

PHOTOJOURNALISM WORKSHOP

2nd Nepal Human Rights International Film Festival, 24 February, Nepal Tourism Board, Call 4437965

25 February, Park Gallery, Pulchowk, Neera Joshi Pradhan. of acrylic and water colour paintings by 2nd Nepal Human Rights International Film Festival.

Dining

25 February, Park Gallery, Pulchowk, Neera Joshi Pradhan. of acrylic and water colour paintings by 2nd Nepal Human Rights International Film Festival.

Buddha Bar, offers a warm and cozy space for intimate conversations over a large selection of drinks. Thamel 965105335

PLACID NUANCES, 5th solo exhibition of acrylic and water colour paintings by Neera Joshi Pradhan, Til 16 March, Park Gallery, Pulchowk

Cafe Soma, enjoy scrumptious brunch and indulge in corn with sugar and lemon. Jhamshikhel

Welcome Summer, Red Carpet is all set to welcome summer in style. 25 February, 1:00 pm onwards, Club Platinum, Durbarmarg

2012: The Leap, enjoy the best of Salsa and jazz music. 29 February, 5:30 pm onwards, Shishir and DJ Sundyy, Club Platinum, Durbarmarg

Live music at Salsaabana, enjoy the music, drinks, karaoke and happy hour. Casablanca Lounge, Babar Mahal Revisited

Nepal Heliosphita Society. 31 March, 1pm to 8pm

Appetizing Food, enjoy scrumptious meals at this six and eight degree Award, 2008. Moksh, Pulchowk. Call 5526212

Live music by SION band every week on Fridays and Saturdays, Baja Gaja, 7:30 pm onwards at Moksh, Pulchowk. Call 5526212

Khumbu Playing for Heritage II, Khumbu will be travelling across Nepal. To generate awareness on preservation and protection of local heritage. Till 15 April

Music

Baja Gaja, playing live every Tuesday, 7;30pm onwards at Moksh, Pulchowk. Call 5526212

Bench Burger, be it a fish or a steak burger, Bench Burger offers many types and tastes for your palate. Annapurna, Patan

Bench Burger offers a good cause. Dementia and Laakhey performing concert with bands like Antim Grahan, Jindabaad, Severe

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Saigon Pho

Moving on up. Owners of Upstairs Café in Maharajgunj (not to be confused with Jazz Upstairs) have opened a second location in Lazimpat, an aesthetic upgrade from the quick-fix, Kithapackkati and Basantapur. Call 4256655.

Japanese Crepe Station, by the unique stroke of a cepe for a quick fix, Kithapackkati and Basantapur. Call 4256655

Casa de Cass, offers continental delicacies, baked goodies, brewed coffee and everything in between. Jambeshwar, 5521339

Cinnamon Grill and Lounge, mouth watering delicacies with live music. Try the grilled tenderloin steak and quiche tournire with fresh fruit salad. Jhamikhel, 5521339

The Bordersland Eco Adventure Resort, call in the right. K Tate, try a canyon descent, an off-the-beaten path to a hidden monastery. Call 4700894

Everest Steak House, an old-school joint for everything steak. Thamel, near Chitrakuta Chowk, 4260471

Dhokaima Café, exquisite atmosphere, friendly service, cozy bar, place to see and be seen at. Patan Dkha, Yala Maya Kendra, 5522133

The Last Resort, be a part of the Bungy or Swing Jump over the Bhotekos River 160 metres below or mountain biking up to the Tibetan border. The Last Resort, 80, Hotel Complex, 5536919

Saigon Pho serves authentic plates like Sour and Spicy Pork and Kung Pao Chicken. Thamel. Enjoy the Vietnamese stew like Pho dac bief. Also pastries that you will love to go for in a subtly sweet sauce and incorporated well, the bowl is satiating. Go for the barbecue pork or tolu or the separate served chicken sugarcane sticks. You’ll see why.

The titled dish is Pho dac bief. The titled dish is nothing new but is a mainstay worth mentioning. The Special Pho consists of sliced beef and chicken and shrimp rendered in a simmering broth garnished with lime, green onion, coriander, basil and bean sprouts. Plum and chili sauce make the dish.

Che bap. Still no che ba mau but a nice finish, the sweet corn in coconut milk dessert renders a warm and filling nightcap.

Saigon Pho serves authentic plates like Sweet and Sour Pork, but this uniquely Vietnamese appetizer consisting of minced chicken or pork barbecued on a sugar cane stick is worth reevaluating even the most pigheaded comfort. The

**Ruling the street**

Kagira.com is organising an all women scooter rally on 8 March to mark International Women’s Day. The rally will start from Kauthambudi Durbar Square, pass through major landmarks of the valley and finally end at Bhaktapur Durbar Square. Participants will be provided refreshments at various checkpoints. Awareness programs related to women’s issues are scheduled to take place after the rally. The band Abahaya and the Steam Injus will perform at the start and end points. Leading women entrepreneurs and celebrities will take part in the rally and celebrate womanhood.

8 March, 8 am onwards.
Registration fees: Rs 250/- (including t-shirt and refreshments) Call 9851043390 for more information
A Dangerous Method

T

here is always something eerie and specific about a David Cronenberg film. Horror, explosions, emotions that most people would never dare to admit. These have been his trademark and his genius for many years over the course of films as diverse as the post-modern Videodrome (1986). The Fly (1986) a film of the scientific experiment gone awry genre. The clever mind and reality-bending eXistenZ (1999) a better film than the now cult-like The Matrix (also made in 1999), and more recently the excellent and atmospheric thriller set in a foggy London about the shadowy Russian mob, Eastern Promises (2007).

Cronenberg, a Canadian, has often been funded by the government to produce his risky but critically acclaimed films. Today he is one of the most adventurous and skilled directors in the West. In the world of cinema, a Cronenberg film is a rare and specific kind of hybrid animal: science and horror intersecting with high drama and violent action. There is a distinct departure from that in A Dangerous Method (2011). Everything that Cronenberg has ever dealt will overfly is now beneath the surface, subtle, instead of in-your-face. In many ways all of the themes that Cronenberg has been fascinated with over the years culminate and are manifested in this film.

Universal health insurance

Most health care in Nepal is paid out-of-pocket. Catastrophic health care expenditures are the major cause of indebtedness and poverty of many Nepali families.

Twenty-year-old Shital Rai was all smiles that morning during medical rounds. Three days ago in Khotang in eastern Nepal, he had high fever and rapidly became somnolent. His relatives, fearing the worst helicoptered him to Patan Hospital where he was diagnosed with chronic renal failure. Hemodialysis (cleaning the impurities in the blood) was begun, and she became alert and well-oriented. The change was dramatic, but the improvement would be temporary if she did not continue to have at least two dialysis sessions a week at a cost of Rs 20,000.

Taxi driver, Kumar Babu, 55, suffered a heart attack while driving, but after the diagnosis was made, he had no money left to pay for a stent placement in his blocked heart vessels which would cost Rs 1,00,000.

A high-pressure system reigns supreme over north India and the western Tibetan plateau. This has caused a fresh northeasterly circulation into Nepal, which will in turn clear the air and offer spectacular mountain views right across Nepal into the west. Kathmandu Valley will be crisp and sunny, although the morning songs will take until about 10AM to lift completely. The maximum temperature will peak up to 20 by Sunday due to the sun shining through until late if not at all. The minimum will also go up, but will still stay in the single digits.

Excuse Me: Fire engines make their way through a single-laned road to control a fire outbreak at a house in Asan on Monday.

BYE BYE: Information and Communications Minister Jaya Prakash Gupta being transported to Dillibajar Jail after the Supreme Court slapped a one and half year jail term and Rs 4.6 million fine for corruption. Gupta is the first sitting minister to get convicted on charges of corruption.

Bamboo by Bamboo: Japanese volunteers help build and renovate old homes in Kakarbhitta, Jhapa, on Sunday, under the Habitat for Humanity initiative of Habitat Nepal.

Whistle blower: Traffic police personnel traveling in a crammed pickup truck in Kathmandu on Monday.

Watch trailer

FIRE ENGINES MAKE THEIR WAY THROUGH A SINGLE-LANED ROAD TO CONTROL A FIRE OUTBREAK AT A HOUSE IN ASAN ON MONDAY.
“then they set her ablaze…”

NARAYAN DHUNGANA

Nepal doesn’t make it to the international headlines often. But last week, foreign wire services were filled with stories from Madil Valley, Chitwan, of a gruesome murder. A 40-year-old widow and a mother of two, Dhegani Mahato, was beaten and burnt to death for being a ‘witch’.

The person who set Mahato ablaze was none other than her own brother-in-law, Bikana Mahato, who is also a local Maoists cadre. Locals say that Bikana often boasted of his closeness with the Maoists, and had no fear of the police.

Superstitious Bikana had been accusing Dhegani of being a witch after his son-in-law, Bikram, fell ill. His superstition was fuelled further by Jogeshwor, who claims to be a shaman. This wasn’t the first time Bikana had alleged someone of being a witch. Many other women had already fallen victim to his abuse.

Bikana, who had been arrested for harassing Dhegani, was released only four days before the fatal incident. Neighbour Radhika Chaudhari says that he began planning the murder as soon as he was set free from prison. “He was also chanting, dancing and beating a drum to exorcise evil spirits that he believed plagued his son-in-law,” recalls Radhika.

Dhegani had been warned by Bikana’s wife, but she didn’t take it seriously. On the evening of 17 January, Dhegani left her house to use the latrine, with no idea that Bikana and his accomplices were waiting for her. She was beaten brutally, but the locals heard her screams only after she was set on fire. She was dead by the time anyone had courage to intervene.

“I rushed when I heard her screams,” recalls Dherdari Mahato, her neighbour. “They had set her ablaze and threatened to kill me too.”

Investigations reveal that Bikana was involved in a land dispute with his father, Jhari Mahato. He had won the case, but was forced to give a small piece of land to Dhegani on insistence of village mediators. “He thought of me as his enemy, but he killed his sister-in-law instead,” said Jhari Mahato.

Eleven people have been arrested in connection to the murder after Jhari Mahato filed a complaint. District Police Chief Bhupal Kumar Bhandari stresses on need for strict punishment not only for Bikana but also the bystanders who let Bikana carry out such a heinous act.

As he was being arrested, Bikana was heard mumbling that one witch had been killed in prison. “He was released only four days before the murder, and that was the first time Bikana had fallen victim to this medieval scourge,” said Neighbour Radhika Chaudhuri.

And there were 11 more in the village. The women are demanding life sentence for the culprits, in fear that Bikana will be released again and will come after them. Says Radhika, “If he can kill his sister-in-law, he can kill any one of us too.”

Also in India

GAYATRI PARAMESWARAN

A mong all the states in India, Chhattisgarh is where violence against women accused of being ‘witches’ is most prevalent. Each year, dozens of women are lynched or burnt to death.

The state passed the Witchcraft Prevention Act that carries a three years imprisonment in 2006, and three women in Lachkera, a village about 80 km from the state capital, have used the law, Jhari Mahato, points to the spot where she died. (left) Her children hold her picture.

As he was being arrested, Bikana was set free from prison. “He was.realpath as his enemy, but he killed his sister-in-law instead,” said Jhari Mahato.

Eleven people have been arrested in connection to the murder after Jhari Mahato filed a complaint. District Police Chief Bhupal Kumar Bhandari stresses on need for strict punishment not only for Bikana but also the bystanders who let Bikana carry out such a heinous act.

As he was being arrested, Bikana was heard mumbling that one witch had been killed in prison. “He was released only four days before the murder, and that was the first time Bikana had fallen victim to this medieval scourge,” said Neighbour Radhika Chaudhuri.

And there were 11 more in the village. The women are demanding life sentence for the culprits, in fear that Bikana will be released again and will come after them. Says Radhika, “If he can kill his sister-in-law, he can kill any one of us too.”

Also in India

GAYATRI PARAMESWARAN

Among all the states in India, Chhattisgarh is where violence against women accused of being ‘witches’ is most prevalent. Each year, dozens of women are lynched or burnt to death.

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For everything that goes wrong in this country, our leaders always have someone to blame. Usually it is some organization, an invisible enemy or the foreign hand. But it is clear we don’t need outsiders to bring the nation down, we’re doing pretty well by ourselves.

The Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation is preparing to amend the Forest Act of 1993, which if endorsed by the parliament, would effectively demolish Nepal’s successful, and globally-recognized community forestry program. A quarter of all forests in Nepal are managed and protected by over 17,000 community forest user groups.

But fearful of losing control and tempted by profits from the timber trade, the amendment proposes new restrictions that would undermine the fundamental principle of community forestry: manage local resources through grassroots democracy. Communities have been running health posts and repairing bridges from proceeds of forests they have protected. The government wants to take that money away from them.

The amendment will restrict community forests to only those areas which cannot be developed as ‘block’ or ‘collaborative’ forests. There will be limits on the maximum area for community forests, user groups will not be able to fix rates for forest products anymore, and they will have to pay half the proceeds from sales to the state. To top it all, communities will be at the mercy of DFOS (district forest officers), who have acquired a well-deserved reputation for corruption, to renew their operational plans.

The ministry says it had to act because there is illegal logging in community forests. But there are plenty of examples of how the forests are the first to go if the state gets involved. User groups throughout Nepal have proved that they are perfectly capable of managing forests, raising local living standards, and protecting watersheds. Bringing in a corrupt and callous state is to guarantee the destruction of Nepal’s forestry success story.

The philosophy of community forestry has never really caught on in the Tarai, and the prolonged political transition has tainted some user groups. Illegal logging has been reported mostly from the Tarai districts which account for 5 per cent of community forests, and in the midhills in some forests which were in the process of being handed over. But corruption in a few villages is no reason to dismantle the entire program.

If the government really wants to control illegal logging, why not go after corrupt ministers who have amassed wealth in ‘pre-paid’ transfers of DFOS and local groups who run protection rackets? A well thought-out government propaganda is in place to prove that community forestry has failed in Nepal and is being fueled by local media and pseudo experts.

A study conducted by the Swiss group, HELVETAS, however, has shown that there is 33 per cent more forest cover in Dolakha district than 20 years ago, and the growth of canopy initiative in 2010. The program aims to conserve the fragile Chure landscape, but community forestry user groups suspect the government wants to take back the forests they nurtured.

“It was natural for the villagers to be worried if the government decides to take over the forest they preserved for years,” she explained. “Political parties in cabinets with smugglers and local administration cashed in on this fear.”

Chapagain is critical of the government’s proposed amendment to the Forest Act which will levy a 50 per cent tax on timber sale, and other provisions that would undermine the community forestry concept. The District Forest Officer (DFO) is given the power to decide on the future of community forests.

“Even today, DFOs are demanding bribes, imagine what will happen if they are given even more discretionary authority?” asks Chapagain.

Yagnanath Dahal at the Ministry of Forests defends the amendment, saying it aims to regulate forestry. “We found the involvement of community forests in illegal logging particularly in the Tarai,” he told the Nepali Times. “It is too early to say for sure, but Dahal readily admits that only five per cent community forest user groups could be involved in illegal activities.

Former forest minister Dipak Bohara had proposed the amendments to the act because he feared the user groups had ‘captured’ forests across the country. His two successors did not move the amendment file until the Bahubam Bhattacharje government came to office last year.

Current minister, Mohammad Wakil Musalman came up with a provision of setting up a monitoring mechanism and lifted the logging ban three months ago after which the Dadeldhura clearing went through.

Dhungel at the CIAA is adamant to bring those who committed the environmental crime to justice. He told us: “It is too early to say for sure, but the political parties are directly involved. No matter who they are we will bring them to justice.”
Village forests go through midlife crisis, #509

The hills of Kavre, Sindhupalchok and Dolakha used to be barren in the 1970s. But after the community forestry initiative took hold in the region, the districts have been transformed. This dramatic change is illustrated in a new book published by the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC) to mark 50 years of being in Nepal, Kathmandu to Jiri: A Photo Journey. This book consists of 19 pairs of before and after photos that clearly show changes in landscape over three decades along the highway from Kathmandu to Jiri, and what is most striking is the increase in forest cover because local communities and forest user groups have been in protecting their forests.

The book also details how forests have helped agriculture by preserving watersheds, protecting the mountains from landslides, and promoting tourism. Kathmandu to Jiri: A Photo Journey
Dr Bharat Pokhrel and Anupama Bhatt
Nepal Swiss Community Forestry Project
SDC, 2011

Also available online on pdf:

YESTERDAY AND TODAY: The barren, arid hillside in Dandapakhar in 1975 (left) and in 2005 (SDC). Landsat images taken in 1990 and 2010 (right) of Sindhupalchok, north of Kathmandu, showing growth in vegetation due to community forestry (HELVEAS).

cover in community forests were double that of government or privately owned forests. Unlike what the ministry wants us to believe, the model remains a success. User groups across the country have built schools and roads with the profits of the forest and an obligatory provision to reserve half the membership in user committees for women and disadvantaged communities has made local democracy more inclusive.

It is not hard to see who benefits from the smear campaign against community forestry. They are the same crooks who plundered Nepal’s forests to near extinction during the Panchayat, and are now eyeing the savings of user groups that run into billions.

The new legislation is a case of medicine being worse than the disease. If the government is really serious about saving Nepal’s forests, it should stay away and leave them in care of the communities.

YESTERDAY AND TODAY: The barren, arid hillside in Dandapakhar in 1975 (left) and in 2005 (SDC). Landsat images taken in 1990 and 2010 (right) of Sindhupalchok, north of Kathmandu, showing growth in vegetation due to community forestry (HELVEAS).

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Four after four

Kapildev Khanal, Himal Khabarpatrika, 13-27 February

For the past three years, students from Gyansankali in Nawakot district have been repeating fourth grade, because no school in the region offers classes beyond the fourth standard. In the absence of further schooling, the children are forced to remain in the same class year after year or risk being trafficked to India. Citing the shortage of students, the district education office had revoked Ghayankedi Primary School’s permit to run classes up to fifth grade in 1985. Another school, Indravati Primary, is in a far worse condition where the principal has been missing for the past three years and where teachers are regularly absent.

Even though the government had allocated 1.7 billion rupees as the education budget for Nawakot between 2008 and 2012, schools have shown no signs of improvements. The District Education Office plans on spending a further 18 million rupees to build new infrastructure during the 2011-2012 fiscal year. But locals are not sure how this fund will help resolve the turmoil the schools in Ghayankedi and surrounding areas find themselves in.

Final verdict

Interview with Chief Justice Khl Raj Regmi in BBC Nepal Service, 22 February

BBC Nepal: In the wake of the Supreme Court verdict, will the judicial council take actions against special court judges (who acquitted JP Gupta)?

Khl Raj Regmi: The action will be taken after the judicial council completes its investigation to ascertain whether or not there was intentional wrongdoing on behalf of the judges in question.

Why is further investigation necessary when the Supreme Court bench has itself ascertained ‘serious and intentional misappropriation’ in the case?

Bench did indicate misappropriation but it is important to investigate the nature and level of misappropriation and determine the extent of culpability.

Safe passage

Naya Patrika, 23 February

Senators James P.McGovern, Frank Wolf and Joseph Wright have sent letters to Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai and President Ram Baran Yudhoy taking the government to provide exit visas to Tibetan refugees and abide by the ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ reached between Nepal and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Nepal’s failure to address the concerns of Tibetan refugees and its attempts to obstruct the movement seem to have irked the three Congressmen and they have made their displeasure clear through their letters.

The President’s office, office of the Prime Minister and the foreign ministry haven’t responded to the letters yet and government representatives claim they know nothing about the correspondence. “We have no idea if a letter has been sent. The government is committed to the sovereignty of its neighbouring countries and sticks by one China policy,” said Tirtha Raj Wagle, deputy spokesperson of the foreign ministry. But a high ranking officer from the home ministry says that the government is aware of the growing concerns of the US over the treatment of Tibetan refugees: “It is better to remain silent on this issue at the moment. We can’t change our foreign policy just because some country wants us to.”
“Integration in three weeks”

Interview with Pushpa Kamal Dahal ‘Prachanda’ in Nagarik, 20 February

You resigned from your position because of your tussle with the army. But now it seems like you are on their side. Why is you so keen on integration?

Dahal: We never had problems with the army. There was conflict because the army chief refused to follow the government’s decision. Now we have come to the final stages of integration and if we can quickly conclude this process it will be in the larger interest of the country. As the leader of the biggest political party and commander of the PLA, the Nepali people are expecting me to achieve these goals. That is why I have been trying to speed up integration and calling for greater cooperation with the army.

Will the constitution writing also gather speed after that?

Dahal: Peace process does not just mean demobilization of the cantonments. There are other crucial matters like forming a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, commission on the missing people, and rehabilitation of people affected by the war. Constitution writing is also a part of the process. Within three weeks we will complete army integration, the constitution will be written and then no one can blame the Maoists any longer. But there are several contentious issues in the constitution. How do you propose we deal with them?

Dahal: There are differences on issues of state restructuring, governance and judicial system. But the major debate is over the basis of state formation and that is going to be the most difficult part in creating a new constitution.


Bihar and Nepal

Sambhu Shrestha in Drishti, 21 February

Democracy by definition means rule of law. Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai had to go to Bihar to figure out that integrity is vital to a country’s progress. It is because our leaders have not been accountable that decades of democracy has kept Nepal way behind Bihar. Among all the others, it is the Maoist party that has pushed this country back. The Maoists are not committed to democracy, and this has put a big question mark over the future. Maybe it was to give Bhattarai a lesson or two in governance that Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar made him the chief guest at the Patna conference.

The Maoist party is emulating the Laloo government in Bihar that looted from the state coffers. Just as previous ministers in Bihar used to engage in blatant corruption, Bhattarai's cabinet colleagues are doing the same. The government is following the same characteristics that we thought were the trade mark of ‘Bihar-style politics’. There are ministers in government who talk about separatism, that is how incompetent this government is.

Who gave Prachanda the right to publicly challenge the Supreme Court? Who gave Bijay Gachhedar the right to direct the administration to distribute citizenships to foreigners? Nepalis are worried about such disgusting actions. These are not good signs for the future of democracy and rule of law. If things are allowed to go on like this, it will bring back dictatorship.

Without a democratic dispensation even the Maoist party will cease to exist. They abandoned a war they knew they couldn’t win. But if the Madhesi and Maoist parties do not accept a democratic process we will take 50 years to achieve what Nitish Kumar achieved in five years in Bihar.

That is the only lesson the Maoists need to learn from Bihar for a ‘safe landing’. Otherwise they will take themselves and the country down.
Everytime his erstwhile majesty Kingji goes off to India and meets Sonia and/or Kali Baba, it triggers rumours again among Kathmandu’s chatterati that there is a plot afoot to revive the monarchy. And so it happened this time. No sooner had king G slipped back into the country under cover of darkness last week, than word spread that he had the blessings of Godmen down south for the baby king proposal to enthrone king-in-waiting Hridayendra as a cultural monarch.

Although we have it on good authority that clown prince palas (as they call him in Bangkok) is said to be ticked off they are skipping one generation to pick his son. Parasji himself moved from Singapore to Thialand, probably because of the strict lèse-majesté laws there and they are pretty much used to heir apparents making asses of themselves. Anyway, ex-CP Paras’ latest escapade was not on Pat Pong in Bangkok but on Park Street in Kolkata where he got roughed up one night last week by a local Bong gang after a drunken brawl. Stay tuned.

The other guy who is against the return of the monarchy is Comrade Caesar Maximus, not because he is a republican but because His Eminence Prachanda Pratapi Bhupati has ambitions to become a Maharaja Dhiraj himself at some point. This is probably why he is looking forward to his Delhi trip next week, where he is expected to pay his respects at unusual pilgrimage sites for anointment.

Meanwhile, BRB is feeling a wee bit beleaguered as PKD starts in earnest to pull the rug from under him. Awesome is even trying to convince gullible kangresi top guns to make a go for prime ministership (“the UML had two turns, we’ve had two, now it’s your turn”) just so he can have his deputy out of the way. The real question everyone is asking is whether BRB deliberately leaked Chief Sab’s proposal on integration, or he just naively gave it to PKD to look at not realising that it was PKD himself who was the architect of the proposal. Anyway, the long and short of it was that the fit hit the san within the army brass and the proposal was dead in the water. Who is really directing policy on Nepal these days, the MEA or the Indian Army?

Someone quickly tell the prime minister’s outsiders that there is no way around a traffic jam, you have to wait like everyone else. (If the traffic jam stretches all the way from Solhi Mode to Tribhuvan Salik you know the media house has clout.) Case in point was the Kantipur anniversary bash on Wednesday when Mustang One tried to outmaneuver the traffic by crossing over to the wrong side of the narrow road and promptly trapped itself and everyone else in a massive gridlock that lasted well over an hour. Comrade Yummy was waiting at Megha Malahar for her “Baje” to turn up, and was overheard saying: “He’s always late.” Memo to Prime Minister: you should’ve just walked from solti Mode.

Suggestions for those planning to invite the prime minister, president or vice-president to cut ribbons, light lamps, launch books or officiate at weddings: please ensure that the function starts after 9PM so as not to bring the entire nation to a halt! Just a suggestion.

The Ass congratulates the winners of this week’s Headlines on Deadline Contest. And the winners are (the Ass’ asides in brackets):

(“Ground Control to Major Tom: We have contact with Yak.”)

(At which point we must mention that Thai girls are rumoured to have quite a few tricks with hats, or without, if one prefers.)

(Traditional Nepali victory ritual is to decapitate the captain of opposing team and take his or her head home as trophy.)

(Wouldn’t it have been better for the prez to gnaw at Gupta himself? There is nothing like a good old-fashioned cannibalism.)

(Even better: ‘Headless Body Found in Topless Bar’)