School children on an outing at Swayambhu look down on an overbuilt Valley on Monday. Kathmandu is ranked number one among top 10 cities around the world where a catastrophic earthquake is imminent. An 8.4 magnitude earthquake like the one that struck central Nepal at 2:30 pm on 15 January 1934 will kill at least 100,000 people outright, and three times that number will be injured.

A disaster of that extent was so unthinkable that the government was paralysed into inaction, and didn’t know where to start. However, scare tactics, greater awareness, donor pressure, and support seem to be finally yielding results and the government has started a campaign to retrofit schools and hospitals in the Valley.

**Early warning**
Earthquake alarms that detect fast-moving P waves can give up to 30 seconds of advance warning of an impending quake. Installing one in a home, school or office could save many lives.
The doctrine of sovereign rights is the last refuge of scoundrels and demagogues in the world’s most brutal and authoritarian regimes. They don’t want any outside interference as they go about committing genocide on their own peoples.

The police state needs complete independence to do whatever it chooses. It understands the barriers are there for economic, cultural, and social reasons. In a country plagued by inequality and discrimination, where hunger is rampant and good governance is seriously lacking, one can make quite a convincing case for shelving political freedoms until everyone has enough to eat. Which is exactly what one-party states, those still ruled by communist parties, those under command capitalism or populist socialism are doing.

In countries as diverse as China and Singapore, Venezuela and Russia, political parties have, with varying degrees of success, lulled citizens into believing that one can’t eat democracy, or that freedom makes you poor. In reality, ruling parties are just using this argument to consolidate their power. Proving their hold on power is the key. When rulers exploit populism or whipped nationalism to get to power and then proceed to systematically dismantle and emasculate the very democratic institutions that they used to get to office.

Every day that Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai stays on in power, it is clear that he is most comfortable in an authoritarian role. It would be wishful thinking to believe that a hardcore ideologue-in-chief of the Maoist party would behave any differently. After all, this is a man who, when confronted with graphic images of executions and violence committed by his cadre during the conflict, defended the use of “political violence in a historical context”.

Which is why Bhattarai’s outburst on Tuesday in which he lashed out at the UK government for the detention and trial of Col Kumar Lama of the Nepal Army for his involvement in torture during the war was not at all out of character. The irony of it all, of course, was that he was defending an officer of an army that his guerrillas fought against.

This war was different from others in the region because neither side won, and neither side lost, the warring sides are both in the establishment. Quite clearly, there is a covert support network between the Maoists and the Nepal Army, Police, and the Armed Police Force to let bygones be bygones and not take up wartime atrocities. In the same speech on Thursday, Bhattarai went one step further to warn that judicial proceedings against the killers of Dailekh journalist Dekendra Thapa would undermine the peace process. Thapa was detained, tortured, and buried alive by Maoist cadres who confessed to the crime. “Protecting the peace process’ has now become a euphemism for both the Maoists and the security forces in Nepal for impunity and a blanket pardon for all those involved in war crimes.

If this is Prime Minister Bhattarai’s take on justice, the protesters demonstrating for the past two weeks at Baluwatar against violence against women may need to assess whether holding protests in comparison to the war atrocities of the communists. That is precisely what may be so hard for Maoist leaders who are now in positions of power.

Profiting the peace process’ has become a euphemism for both the Maoists and the security forces to push a blanket pardon for all those involved in war crimes

The war on women

Thank you for putting the spotlight on this important issues (‘The war on women’, Editorial, #637). In terms of international norms, Nepal ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against women (CEDAW) in 1991, but the politicians have failed to fulfil the state’s obligations, such as the duty to eliminate discrimination in all its forms and to ensure full enjoyment of women’s rights. The government is also required to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women by any person or organisation and to modify or abolish laws, regulations, customs, and practices that discriminate against women. In this ‘political disarray’ where is the political will for any of this? As for women’s consent, it is not only important, it is paramount.

I agree that Nepal’s patriarchy needs to be broken, and women need to be empowered. But I wonder how much change 40 years standing on Baluwatar’s sidewalk in down jackets and for boots, looking pictures of each other ‘Phew from the heat on the site, can bring! For a campaign to turn into a mass movement, people have to spontaneously descend to the streets.

Nepal Times is doing a good job of covering these issues, its reporting about rape, and doing it well. The editorial is on the mark, as depressing as it is. I hope 2013 brings less violent news to write about.

Anonymous

INDIA’S SECOND WIND

Will you please send this article to Baburam Bhattarai to read?’ (India’s second wind; Martindale, #637).

POLEMICS FOR POLICIES’ SAKE

It is amazing to me that you chose to characterise King Mahendra’s banning of political parties in 1962 as the government’s desire to have a benevolent dictatorship (‘Politics for policy sake’, Editorial, #632). Why can’t you credit him as a farsighted leader who knew that if Nepal were ruled by the parties, it would bring bout unmitigated disaster? He was not anti-democratic, he just didn’t accept the conventional wisdom that democracy has to be some sort of an imitation of the western European or North American political systems. He was in fact enough to be distrustful of the political parties. Have not the last 22 and certainly the last six years proven the veracity of his foresight?

Certainly the Panchayat system was plagued with corruption and mismanagement. But it was an honest attempt to develop a new sort of democracy which was rooted in and suited to Nepali society and tradition. How is what has replaced it since 1990 been in any way an improvement? Please don’t say that there have been elections. The mere holding of elections by a group of criminal enterprises (political parties) can’t be used as evidence of progress in a society.

Daniel Birch
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Although their low energy consumption made LEDs ideal for diesel and solar-powered lighting in Nepal, they were just too expensive.

Not any more. Prices of LEDs (light emitting diodes) have come down dramatically, and with Nepal’s energy crisis here to stay, these high-tech fixtures have become affordable for home, office, and factory lighting.

Nepal made the switch from incandescent and fluorescent tubes to CFLs some five years ago, but LEDs save even more energy and money. In an LED bulb, electrons hit holes within the device to create electroluminescence, and depending on the quality of LED lights they last up to 40,000 hours - four times more than fluorescent tubes and 10 times longer than incandescent lights. LED bulbs were initially used in rural electrification but are now becoming popular in cities as well.

Illuminium in Kupondole which introduced customised LED lighting three years ago has seen a steady rise in customers with large corporate houses to restaurants and hotels (see box) eager to make the switch from CFL to LED.

“The leap from CFL to LED hasn’t been as swift and massive as the switch from incandescent bulbs to CFL, but the demand for LED lights has definitely increased,” says Anil Karki of Illuminium, who urges that LEDs be arranged sensibly around the home or office to take maximum advantage of the interior.

What has deterred many Nepalis to adopt LEDs so soon after switching to CFL, however, is the cost of the bulbs. Lighting companies believe it will still take some more years for individual households to join the LED revolution.

Many businesses now conduct energy audits to help them make the switch to more energy efficient products. And they have been replacing CFLs with LEDs, covering the initial installation cost through reduced electricity bills.

Many businesses now conduct energy audits to help them make the switch to more energy efficient products. And they have been replacing CFLs with LEDs, covering the initial installation cost through reduced electricity bills.

Companies in Nepal are hopeful that the gradual phase-out of CFLs across the globe due the health risks will eventually lead to competitive pricing of LEDs.

Says Raj Kumar Thapa: “Once the lights become more affordable I am sure Nepalis here will come flocking for LEDs.”

Move over CFLs, here come LED lights that save even more energy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LED</th>
<th>CFL</th>
<th>Incandescent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Projected lifespan</td>
<td>50,000 hours</td>
<td>10,000 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watts per bulb</td>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>13-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KWh of electricity used over 50,000 hours</td>
<td>320 KWh</td>
<td>787 KWh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Taking the lead

As more and more concrete high-rises undermine Kathmandu’s style, underlining the Valley’s historic heart, one new tall hotel in Pulchok is trying to be different. The 11-storey Meconopsis Hotel is aiming to be the most energy-efficient high-rise in the capital by being powered completely by LED lights: all 2,000 watts of it.

“LEDs are expensive, but they consume less power and are ideal during long hours of load shedding when we have to use diesel generators, they help keep our electricity and diesel bills down,” explains Bishan Shah (pictured) of Meconopsis. LED lights with their longer lifespans and low energy consumption pay for themselves within a year, making them ideal for an energy-starved country like Nepal.

BRIGHT AS EVER:

LED CFL Incandescent

Polkano: Courtyard, Lakeside 2, Nepal | Tel.: +977-61-465 819 Fax: +977-61-465809
Kathmandu: Antelias Apartments, Thamel, Nepal | Tel/Fax: +977-1-421 5982
info@templatetennepal.com | www.templatetennepal.com

nepaltimes.com

LEDing Light, #522
Energising the economy
Making industries energy efficient will not be possible until they change their behaviours and attitudes

Nepal is the second richest country in terms of per capita hydropower resource in the world, yet it contributes only three per cent of Nepal’s total energy. Only 56 per cent of the population has access to electricity. The state likes to boast about Nepal’s hydro potential and has made energy a high-priority sector, but it can only supply power to 15 per cent of Nepalis.

The net electricity generated per capita in Nepal is the lowest in the world and so is energy density. Since the state has failed to deliver the required power, households and communities have taken up the challenge and gone into alternative renewables like biogas, solar, wind, and improved water mills. Nearly 60 per cent of consumed energy comes from such sources and about nine percent of Nepalis have access to them.

With more than 12 hours of blackouts during the most critical and productive hours of the day, the economy has been the hardest hit by the chronic energy shortage. While commercial electricity consumption has swelled in the last two decades in large part due to growing consumerism (transport and retail, hospitals, the booming education sector), the government has been (transport and retail, hospitals, the booming education sector), the government has been unable to meet the demand. And looking at current trends, demand will continue to outstrip supply for another five to six years.

However, even the available energy is being wasted through pillage, system loss, and carelessness leading to greater inefficiency and stunting the country's growth. Industries and commercial buildings that are unscientifically built without energy efficient technologies in lighting, heating, ventilation, air conditioning, insulation, roof, windows, and appliances are the biggest culprits.

Both the state and international organisations have stepped in to encourage industries to minimise energy wastage. The Nepal Energy Efficiency Program (NEEP) along with the German aid agency, GIZ have identified the eight most energy-intensive industries in Nepal, such as hotels, and are helping them to reduce their energy consumption and save money. Similarly, donor agencies like Winrock and Adelphi are working on capacity building programs for efficient energy use.

Despite these efforts, changing deep-rooted consumer habits is not easy. Making industries energy efficient will not be possible until we can change these behaviours and attitudes. This is where government intervention is needed. To ensure that there is acceptance and adoption of energy efficient products and practices across the board, the state should raise the standards for mandatory adoptions and introduce certain incentives.

Adequate monetary incentives like tax credits, tax deductions, solar rebates, and accelerated depreciation could be provided to industries and businesses who comply with energy efficient standards. Minimum energy efficiency quotients should be fixed for industrial equipment, and the adoption of such practices should be made mandatory for obtaining financing. Listed companies should be required to make disclosures on their energy performance, and energy audits should be mandatory for all companies to ensure compliance.

In addition, for maximum impact, energy efficiency efforts require greater engagement and participation. Awareness campaigns should be carried out among companies and businesses to educate them on the benefits derived from making energy saving choices. Commercial property owners and developers must be made to realise that they can fetch higher rents from tenants for more efficiently designed and structured properties. Tenants should be informed that energy efficient properties will reduce their overhead and operating costs in the long run.

There is a saying in Japan about food: "If you don't like it, throw it away." The same approach can be applied to energy consumption. If industries are not disposed to improve technologies or switch to greener methods due to high capital costs; industries are ill-disposed to improve the energy efficiency of their equipment and premises because for them energy efficiency is not a prime concern. Since energy bills are a small portion of their overall operating costs, many companies would rather keep the production line running than to prioritise energy savings.

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Harvard Professor Bryan T. Hehir in his famous class named Ethics of Statecraft liked to say: “The strong do what they will, and the weak do what they must.”

Nepal falls into the category of nations that is forced to do what it must. Our despair and frustration at being a weak country means that we compromise for it with jingoism, pseudo-nationalism, and an inflated sense of our worth as a nation.

The latest example of that is the reaction in Kathmandu to the arrest of Nepal Army Colonel Kumar Lama in London by the UK Metropolitan Police. Had a British person who had violated human rights during the Northern Ireland ‘troubles’ been detained while trekking in Nepal, we would not be invoking universal jurisdiction to apprehend and prosecute him, for sure.

But should our ineptness and powerlessness infringe upon our need to uphold human rights and the pursuit of justice? The case of Kumar Lama might be over-inflated. The alleged torture of a civilian at Gorusinghe Barrack in 2003 may not be comparable to what the Maoists perpetrated during the insurgency. It may be far less inhuman than the behaviour of US interrogators in Guantanamo.

For sure, Lama’s transgression was much less brutal than the monstrous treatment of journalist Dekendra Thapa by Maoists in Dailekh at about the same time. Thapa was severely tortured for two days and buried alive when he refused to accept his mistake in protesting Maoist acts. There were far more ghastly crimes committed during the insurgency, so Lama should not be the only one punished.

Let us look at this through the eyes of the family of Ujjan Kumar Shrestha, a shopkeeper of Karobar newspaper in Kathmandu. Prateek Pradhan is the editor in chief of Karobar newspaper in Kathmandu.

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Kesar Lall (Shrestha) was one of Nepal’s best known folklorists and most widely published writers. He published over 50 books of stories and translations alongside significant collections of poetry and journalism in Nepali and Newari as well as in English. Kesar Lall passed away last month at the age of 85. The following are excerpts from a long interview with Kesar Lall conducted by Mark Turin in Kathmandu, 10 years ago.

Mark Turin: You don’t use the name Shrestha very often in your writings.

Kesar Lall: I like names with just two words; Ruskin Bond, Bernard Shaw. So I started to write just Kesar Lall. It wasn’t a rejection of my caste or of the name Shrestha, simply that in those days, people didn’t have to use their last names or their caste names unless they were writing a legal document or an application.

How did you start working with BP Koirala?

In 1951, soon after the revolution, BP who was then Home Minister and already a household name was looking for someone to work for him. A friend of my father’s asked my father whether he should look into getting me a job. I ended up working for BP as a typist for about eight months. When Koirala was out of office, I had to find another job. I had a friend who worked in USAID, which was called USOM then, and after that at the US Embassy for 30 years.

How did you end up feeling so comfortable speaking and writing in English?

I don’t know, but it just feels natural. But I am still learning all the time, and these are specific things that I have learned from different people. When Edmund Hillary was here, the prime minister asked me to prepare a draft letter to him. So I began with, “My dear Sir Hillary.” Mr Koirala said, “No, in English it should be Sir Edmund.” These are the little things that I remember, and they do matter. I like to write as simply as I can.

When I read Nepal Off The Beaten Path, I was interested that many of the metaphors you used and much of the imagery is very American oriented.

I have always been very influenced by what I have read. Irving, Kipling, of course. Sherlock Holmes. All those old books. (My writing style) may have something to do with my choices. I also read the Reader’s Digest and National Geographic. For the last 20 years, Ruskin Bond has been my guru. I wish I could write like him, with empathy.

Does your documentation of folk literature ever have a political dimension?

No, not at all. My first collection consisted of stories told by my mother and grandmother, and stories that I had heard from friends. Story telling was very common in those days. Whenever I went on a trek, I would ask people for stories. I found that one good way to encourage people to share their stories was to tell my own stories. Japanese stories, Newar stories, whatever. Gradually while I was talking to them and telling them my stories, they would remember their own stories and start telling me.

Is it a struggle to provide adequate context when translating oral history?

I have problems translating stories from Newari. Writers have a habit of muddling up the order and tenses, so sometimes I have to do quite a lot of editing, or cut something down to explain it in a better way. Translating from Newari is really difficult, whereas I find translating from Nepali to be easier.

When will your work be done?

I’m thinking in about two years’ time when I reach bura janko at 77 years, 7 months, 7 days, 7 hours, and 7 minutes. So I must work very hard, if I can, until I am 77.

Remembering Kesar Lall

Review of Kesar Lall’s collection of poems, Ageless wonder, #322

Mark Turin: You don’t use the name Shrestha very often in your writings.

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Bharatanatyam, witness the finest of South Asian theatre as Santanu Chakraborty dances to the beats of Carnatic music in the role of Siva. Rs 200, 13 January, 7pm, Indigo Gallery, Naval, Limited seating (01)441500/9851072339/9851097740 for bookings.

Appreciative inquiry, learn how ordinary Nepalis can contribute towards building a bustling economy with management guru Ravi Shrestha. 11 January, 10am to 1pm, Mahabhi's Centre for Nepal Connection

FILM COMPETITION, make a short, attractive, and appealing film on the theme of 'wealth creation' and/or 'economic development' and win prizes up to Rs 165,000. 25 January, 9851015260.

Techknoti, Robotics Association of Nepal invites you to pitch your ideas for a chance to participate at the Autonomous Robotics Challenge organised by IIT Kanpur, India. 12 January, 9am, Local Development Training Academy, Jawalakhel.

Video editing workshop, explore ideas and techniques to make your own independent movies. 12 to 24 January, Artsy, call (01)442037/9441379990 for reservations.

Live at Cafe 32, live music and delicious food every Friday. 6pm onwards, Cafe 32, Battisputali, (01)4424421

Sarangkot Fortsday Restaurant, have a Sarangkot special breakfast while enjoying spectacular views of the mountain ranges. Sarangkot, Pokhara, 061986920, 987138886.

Falicha, give yourself away to the twin pleasures of lemon juice, chicken and mutton handi kabab. Himalshikha, Lalitpur

MIKE'S BREAKFAST, huge breakfasts and an endless supply of coffee amidst a lush garden setting characterise this cafe, popular among tourists and locals alike. Nuwakot, (01)4424303

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, (01)4701510

NO NAME RESTAURANT, friendly ambience with palatable dishes, try its delicious momochas. Cafe, popular among tourists and locals alike. Naxal, (01)4424303.

DRAGON CHINESE RESTAURANT, try the Kung Pao Pork if alone and the Mai Ca0 if with company. Lakeside, Pokhara

Shangrila Kitchen, try the majestic Gyakok and a wide variety of cocktails. 9 am to 10.30 pm, Hotel Tibet International, Boudha

Boudha Stupa Restaurant and Cafe, bide your time with free wi-fi as you enjoy wood-fired pizzas, homemade pastas, and the Tibetan gyakok. Boudha, (01)445555

Taza and Tawa, savour a wide variety of Nepali meat dishes and reserve your palate for the heavenly Chusta. Pulchowk, Kathmandu

Magic Beans, coffee, cakes, and sandwiches with magical touch and taste. Sherpa Mall, Garbar Marg, (01)4235914

STOP MOTION ANIMATION WORKSHOP, learn how to make your own animated films by designing and creating characters and backgrounds, storyboard, capturing images using cameras and latest computer software, and compiling and editing them, 12 and 13 January, 11am to 4pm.
I am a non-apologetic meat lover and immune to proselytising by avid vegetarians. I will probably pay the price for my meat loving ways in the future, but pleasures in the now are worth every bit of pain that may follow. But if you can convince me that the food is packed with goodness, which was delicious, crunchy, and filling work day lunch. The cooks do rice well and my fears seem to be well founded. The oyster sauce chic (Rs 205) has slices of deep fried faux chicken in oyster, but could just as well be black bean sauce or plum sauce or any other sauce. It doesn’t taste like the real stuff at all, but kind of like chicken that has been deep fried so long as to remove all its taste and moisture. This was my first experience with mock meat and I’m still just going to prove my point: stick to the real stuff.

But if you want to be vegetarian, that is your prerogative, stick to the real stuff. So will I go back to Yeok Teck? Actually yes, I will abstain from all forms of mock anything, but the actual vegetable dishes are nice and reasonable. They have good jasmine tea. And there is no rush so you can sit and have three hour long conversations fueled by cups of tea and the owners won’t mind. On a parting note, as the Bard correctly said: “O beware of jealousy! It is the green-eyed monster That doth mock the meat it feeds upon.”

Mock meat, also called meat analogue, faux meat, or imitation meat, tries to replicate the appearance, flavour, and texture of meat and is usually made out of soy and/or wheat gluten. It is said to be the go-to choice for vegetarians, vegans, and those seeking to curtail their meat eating ways. ‘Guise meat’ is believed to have first been developed by Buddhist monks to encourage new converts to stick with vegetarianism and to help them feel like they weren’t missing out.

The two decades from the 1960s to the 1980s was a time when Nepali artists experimented with ‘modernism.’ Many artists who studied in India and elsewhere came back and lead the revolution and became vanguards of modern art in the country.

Park Gallery invites art enthusiasts to a special exhibition to reexamine and reevaluate the works that helped shape modern art in Nepal. The exhibition will also feature works of later artists to reassess the progress made in the later years.

Discussion with Sanj Bajacharya on 13 January exhibition runs until 31 January Park Gallery, (01)5522307, www.parkgallery.com.np, free entry
When Whip and Katerina get to the plane (it is by now blatantly clear that Katerina is one of the crew - a stewardess) Whip is more than bright eyed and bouncy tailed; he has the slightly manic energy of someone who is both still drunk and high. What proceeds in terrifying, but spectacular cinema. Taking off in bad weather, the plane experiences extreme turbulence, but Whip flies the plane through without losing his cool, though arousing the suspicions of his young and slightly nervous co-pilot. Just as the plane is nearing Atlanta, however, it goes into a sudden seemingly uncontrollable dive, losing altitude at a pace that could be fatal. I will not elaborate on what follows for words cannot always describe great cinema. Suffice to say that Whip manages to land the plane after some eye popping manoeuvres saving almost everybody on board, but killing Katerina and another stewardess who had unbuckled themselves to assist the passengers. Whip is lauded as a hero, but subsequent investigations by the pilot’s union and the NTSB (National Transportation Safety Board) uncover Whip’s drinking and drug habits as well as various other indicators on board the wrecked plane that point to his intoxication. It is Washington’s nuanced and restrained performance that holds this film together. His character evolves from beginning to end with the viewer never really knowing if there will be any kind of happy ending for a man who has the makings of a hero, but is destroyed by his habits. Many amazing actors support Washington in this film as it unfurls in a way that no one can really foreshadow. John Goodman plays Harling Mays, Whip’s cocaine dealer, Don Cheadle plays Hugh Lang, the lawyer hired by the pilot’s union to protect Whip, the luminous Kelly Reilly plays Nicole, the photographer turned cokehead with a heart of gold, and then there is the great Melissa Leo who plays a key role at the very end, a role without which the film would not have come together in the way it does. Watch this film and marvel at the skills of writer John Gatins who has crafted a story that is both subtle and daring at the same time, one that will surprise you at every turn.

Testing screens

For breast cancer, mammograms (which uses low energy X-rays) is the most common method to look for abnormal tissues. Doctors recommend mammograms every two years for women over 50 and every 10 years thereafter till 75. Out of all the tests, screening for prostate cancer is controversial to say the least. Many low risk prostate cancers are slow to grow and may outlive the patient. So what is the point of screening? Furthermore, once cancer in the prostate is detected, most people will want to do further tests and procedures which may not be risk-free. After evaluating the risk-benefit ratio of prostate cancer screening, the US Preventive Service Task Force no longer supports the commonly used prostate-specific antigen (PSA) test which is a blood test. They suggest the digital (finger) rectal exam instead.

For heavy smokers, screening for lung cancer with chest X-rays or sputum exam is not worthwhile, but the low-dose CT (LDCT) of the chest is a good alternative. On the other hand, giving up smoking would be the best way to avoid this leading cause of death.

For ovarian cancer, no screening appears to be beneficial for women with average-risk, keeping in mind the risk-benefit ratio. For patients with special risks (for example, patients with a family history of ovarian cancer, colon cancer etc), the recommendations discussed above for all the different cancers may not apply.
Republic of bananas

The unending transition, lack of elections, and impunity are turning us into an international laughing stock

A s the Kathmandu-centric media’s obsession with the knockout tournament of political wrestling continues, the people have become even more disinterested and detached with another presidential ultimatum to the parties to form a consensus government.

All this is taking its toll on the budget and the economy. We have become an international laughing stock for having a prime minister who pardons murderers and challenging the doctrine of universal jurisdiction. Coalition members have stonewalled on the ratification of an international anti-money laundering bill, and if Nepal doesn’t meet the deadline next month it will be blacklisted: a disaster for a country so dependent on remittances and tourism.

The worst harm from this fluid transition is being caused at the grassroots. Local accountability was already suffering because we’ve not had local elections since 1997. A year after the dissolution of the all-party mechanism, which ran local government on an ad-hoc basis since 2008, millions of taxpayers’ money are being embezzled across the 75 districts. Local political leaders, bureaucrats, and village strongmen are all in cahoots to loot state funds. When this crooked arrangement breaks down, there is violence, as seen in remote Simikot which was under curfew for three days this week.

A report released on Monday by The Asia Foundation notes that corruption at the local level has become an enduring practice which has gained general acceptance among multiple stakeholders. The report points towards ‘ethical degeneracy in local politics which is inherently different from opportunistic corruption’ in other sectors of the government.

The report has made a detailed analysis of the mismanagement of health and education services in 13 VDCs of six districts and (surprise, surprise) concludes that the capacity of institutions at the local level and the quality of services they provide have not improved after 13 years since the Local Self Governance Act went into effect, depriving the people of the democratic dividend.

Baburam Bishwakarma of the Centre for Investigative Journalism comes to a similar conclusion about government neglect in improving the quality of education at the local level. Government-run schools in the districts have been inflating the number of students enrolled to cash in on the state’s incentive program, people up and down the line in the bureaucracy and local political parties are on the take, and everyone gets a share.

The story, published in Shikshak magazine this month, exposes how the Ministry of Education couldn’t be bothered. The plan to improve the quality of education and ensure accountability by transferring management to local communities has backfired, with a powerful few capturing school management committees and pocketing kickbacks from construction of school infrastructure and procurement of books and stationery. A similar story arises in community, health, and roads. Local health posts and hospitals lack equipment, medicines, and manpower. And despite a sharp increase in government spending on health sector (no 7.5 per cent of the budget), a lot of it bankrolled by donors, people continue to die in large numbers from preventable ailments. This is happening not just in remote areas of the country. At the Koshi Zonal Hospital located in Nepal’s second-biggest city of Biratnagar, doctors conduct surgeries by candlelight because there is no diesel for generators. The Local Self-Governance Act devolved responsibility for local development in the 1990s to elected village and district councils without effectively giving them decision-making powers. And in the absence of elections, local units are now plagued with political interference and malfeasance.

This has resulted in a breakdown in Nepal’s much-vaunted progress at local development through community action. The story is repeated across the whole spectrum of rural governance because of the criminalisation of local politics: rackets involving fake citizenship papers, logging inside community forests, and national parks, illegal sand-mining from the rivers, and the embezzlement of old age pension funds and the budget set aside for youth self-employment.

Investigative reports in the media about these crimes fail to force the government to act, confirming that corruption and impunity have gained general acceptance. The central government, obsessed with extenuating its tenure, seems past caring. Political corruption is tolerated because that is the only way the government can survive. It has become fashionable for our leaders to blame everything on the transition and propose that people must be willing to sacrifice for the sake of the ‘peace process’ and ‘revolutionary changes’.

But an unending transition and lack of elections cannot be an excuse to turn the country into a banana republic.

For local governance to succeed in Nepal, we need greater devolution of power from the centre with a system of horizontal accountability. Going into a student protest about governance may address that to some extent, but it could also open a whole new can of worms unless local elections throw up responsible leaders.
It’s that time of the year again, as Nepal gears up to mark another anniversary of the devastating 8.4 magnitude earthquake that struck Kathmandu at 2:30 pm on 15 January 1934, and killed at least 10,000 people.

As in previous years, government ministers will give speeches all next week and light lamps at disaster preparedness workshops. But the consequences of an earthquake of similar strength to the one nearly 80 years ago in 1934 are so unthinkable that no one seems to know where to start.

The public is aware of what an earthquake can do, but few are building seismic-resistant homes, retrofitting weak structures, or planning for the aftermath of a disaster. Historical records show that a big earthquake strikes central Nepal every 70 years: the next one is due any day now.

Earthquakes cannot be predicted exactly because scientists can’t tell when the tectonic stress is ready for release. However, it is certain another 8.4 magnitude earthquake will strike Kathmandu, we just don’t know when. In one scenario, 60 per cent of the buildings in Kathmandu Valley will be destroyed, more than 100,000 people will be killed outright depending on the time of day, and three times that number injured.

Many of the 12 big hospitals in Kathmandu will be damaged, and there will be few open spaces left for survivors. International relief will not get through because of damaged airports and roads. Casualties will be even higher if the quake strikes during school hours.

However, awareness generation, donor pressure, and scare tactics seem to be finally shaking up the government. “There is more awareness about earthquakes and preparedness,” explains Amod Dixit of the National Society for Earthquake Technology-Nepal (NSET). Two earthquakes struck Haiti and Chile in 2010. More than 300,000 people were killed in Haiti, and fewer than 600 were killed in Chile, even though it was a much bigger earthquake, mainly because the Chileans have better preparedness and stricter building codes. “Nepal has Chile-like earthquakes in a Haiti-like environment,” says Dixit, “but we can also be Chile-like if we are prepared like they were.”

Despite political instability and an aversion to long-term disaster planning, the government is finally beginning to retrofit schools and hospitals, implementing building codes, planning for prevention, and disaster relief.

Nepal took a big step forward in 2009 with the National Strategy for Disaster Risk Management. A new National Disaster Management Authority will be formed, and the National Planning Commission will integrate climate change and disaster reduction risk management into its development strategy.

The government along with international partners has also formed the National Risk Reduction Consortium (NRRC) to prepare for future disasters, including earthquakes with school and hospital retrofitting on top of the priority list. The consortium includes the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Red Cross, UNDP, World Bank, AusAid, DFID, the EU, Japan, the US Embassy, and WHO. Pradip Koirala of the Disaster Management Section at the Ministry of Home Affairs says work has been done, but there is much left to do: “We have identified 83 open spaces for evacuation in Kathmandu Valley, emergency water supply, and sanitation.”

Kathmandu is ranked number one in the top 10 cities around the world where a catastrophic earthquake is imminent. But John Galetzka of the California Institute of Technology says Nepal today is better prepared after the Haiti and...
Although earthquakes cannot be predicted with any accuracy, earthquake alarms are available that give up to half-a-minute warning of an impending earthquake by detecting the first tremors. One earthquake alarm available in specialised stores senses the P wave (compression wave, pictured in seismograph above) that first radiates out of an earthquake. These waves travel faster than S wave (shear wave) which are more destructive. The alerts can give homes, offices, and schools up to 30 seconds to flee to safer places, but the early warning depends on how close and deep the epicenter is.

To order: www.earthquakestore.com

Japan quakes. “Remember that the UN mission in Haiti suffered, and they don’t want that to happen again in Nepal,” Galetzka explained, “they also know they will have to step in for relief and rehabilitation after a future disaster.”

Foreign embassies and donor agencies have their own post-earthquake evacuation plans, they coordinate relief strategies for citizens, and conduct regular drills. Foreign earthquake experts have tried to convince Nepali authorities that spending a dollar on prevention and preparedness will save hundreds of dollars in post-disaster relief. But until recently, no one was listening.

Man B Thapa, manager of UNDP’s Comprehensive Disaster Risk Management Program, says: “If you understand the value of preparedness you can reduce risk, so a school built without proper safeguards is not a good investment.”

Because the task is so overwhelming, it has been difficult to figure out where to start. The government has decided that schools and hospitals are the most urgent, and has undertaken an ambitious retrofitting campaign with donor support (see box).

The Kashmir and Sichuan earthquakes in the last 10 years were wake-up calls because of the thousands of children who died under collapsed classrooms. Most schools in Nepal are private and housed in buildings not designed as schools. Says NSET’s Dixit: “If we were a rich country we’d demolish them all and build stronger schools. But we’re not.”

NSET is working with the government to retrofit 50 schools every year in Kathmandu Valley to make them seismic resistant, and 300 schools will be strengthened in the next four years. The UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction inspected every school in Kathmandu Valley last year and the overall target in the near future will be to retrofit nearly 1,000 additional school buildings.

Retrofitting schools is important because besides helping to save lives, the buildings themselves can serve as shelters in the aftermath of a future earthquake.
Punish Lama

Editorial, Kantipur, 7 January

The arrests of Colonel Kumar Lama in the UK and the murderers of journalist Dekendra Thapa in Dailekh are positive steps forward in addressing the human rights violations during the conflict. The arrests of Colonel Lama in UK and the five convicts in Nepal have reminded us of the commitments made after the Comprehensive Peace Accord and the urgent need to form a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and a strong mechanism to ensure justice for the victims. Had the commission and mechanisms been put in place in time, it could have helped address rampant impunity.

The arrest of the five convicts in Dailekh comes eight years after Thapa’s torture and murder, so it doesn’t exactly call for celebration. It is unfortunate that the victim’s family had to wait for so long and also reflects the challenges in bringing war criminals to justice. It is about time the government and the political parties started acting on behalf of hundreds of Nepalis seeking justice and bringing the culprits to book.

While the arrest of Thapa’s murderers has been welcomed by all, there is news about the CPN-Maoists threatening the justice system. It is sad to see that the government is still not sensitive towards the formation of TRC even seven years after the signing of the peace accord. The government needs to take stern action against all those convicted and accused of human rights violation and provide victims the long overdue justice.

Release Lama

Editorial, Annapurna Post, 7 January

The arrest of Nepal Army Colonel Kumar Lama in the UK is a matter of deep concern for Nepal because it stands against the principles of international law and sovereign jurisdiction of a nation state. Lama was detained under section 134 of UK’s Criminal Justice Act 1988, which allows the Metropolitan Police there to arrest individuals suspected of overseas crimes, torture, and human rights abuses.

However the Nepal government wasn’t informed prior to the arrest, making it completely wrong of the British government to arrest Lama. This is a blatant interference by the British government in Nepal’s internal affairs and an attack on our sovereignty. Political parties and the people of Nepal regard this issue very seriously, and demand that Lama be released forthwith. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also submitted a strong protest note to the British government demanding the same.

Nepalis are still healing from the wounds of the decade-long conflict. Although the political parties have reached a consensus on principles to ensure justice to war victims, it has yet to be implemented. Our peace process might be moving ahead slowly, but at least it hasn’t derailed. It is clear that the British government, taking advantage of Nepal’s fragile political transition, made haste to arrest Lama.

There have been cases of impunity, but that doesn’t give the British government the right or the authority to arrest a serving Nepal military officer. The victims on both sides of Nepal’s conflict have been demanding justice for the violation of human rights during the war, and Lama’s arrest and trial in UK has now created a difficult environment to address such cases.

Submiting a protest note to the British government isn’t enough, the Nepal government needs to put strong diplomatic pressure at the highest levels to bring about Lama’s release immediately. The government also needs to take the initiative to let the British government know that what it has done isn’t acceptable to Nepal and Nepalis. The government also needs to commit to providing justice for all war crimes and punish Lama in Nepal if and when he is proven guilty.

Heavy burden

Editorial, Naya Patrika, 7 January

When schools in Solukhumbu shut down in winter due to the cold, students skip their vacation and earn money as porters. Boys, aged 10 to 14, most of whom are from Jajung, form a human ferry and carry loads from their own villages to the district headquarters in Salleri.

But it is not an occupation of choice. 14-year-old Jasbir Rai from Jajung says he is compelled to do this if he wants to study. ‘I will minimise spending and save money so that I can buy copybooks. With the rest, I plan to buy some books.'

It takes them three to four days to make the journey up from Salleri to Jajung. Jasbir says he carries 50 kg at one go and receives Rs 120 per day. For these palty earnings, students studying from grades four to seven ply on trading routes to ease the burden on their families.

Keshab Rai, says ‘My parents don’t have a job, nor do they have any sort of earnings. So it is up to me to make some money by buying essentials.’ Likewise, his friend and fellowporter Jeewan Ghimirey says he buys stationery and clothes with his savings and give his mother the remaining money.

Although they were born into poor families, and suffer as a consequence, they also say they are proud to stand on their feet at such a young age. By cutting costs and sharing resources, they save up to Rs 15,000 after each month-long shift.

For Hira Raj Rai, it is a different matter. His friends may have been compelled into forced labour due to economic conditions, but Hira says he is here on his own wishes. ‘I saw that they earned money when I stayed at home, so I came here. I will buy some copybooks with the money I make.'

Yes and No

Editorials published in two Nepali newspapers on Monday for and against Col Kumar Lama’s arrest in the UK this week.

Wall: Solidarity against gender violence

Banners: Occupy Baluwater

Plaque: PM’S residence, Baluwater

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

If graft by the current government was investigated, the entire cabinet would be in jail.

MIFN chairman Upendra Yadav in Naya Patrika, 7 January

Abin Sheestha in Kantipur, 9 January

Yes or No
Prime Minister Baburam Ram has been quick to take umbrage at the British government’s detention of our Colonel and has demanded his immediate release. Unfortunately, there are no indications that the Brits are listening. It is therefore time to up the ante, and enhance our bargaining position. Not that the Ass has been asked for advice by Balu Water, but if it had, here are my 10 Brit-bashing tips for the PM:

1. Suspend diplomatic relations with the Court of St James, and if that doesn’t do the trick...
2. ... declare war on Great Britain and resume hostilities from where we left off in 1816
3. Terminate Gurkha recruitment by GB, offer Gurkhas to the Argies
4. Boycott British goods, drink only fake Red Label from Khasa
5. Nepal deployed deadly leather cannons to defeat the Angrez in 1814, restore our leather cannon assembly line in Chhauni
6. Retaliate by supporting Scotland’s secession in 2014
7. Give military training to RIM
8. Suspend visa on arrival for Brits
9. Fast-track Nepal’s clandestine program to enrich plutonium at a top-secret underground facility in Gathaghar
10. Return to London medals like the OBE and the Knights Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath conferred to our hereditary prime ministers

Businessmen are so sick and tired of extortion by the Dash Baddies that they got the FNCCI to speak up. The money was being raised to set up welcome arches and to feed and house hundreds of delegates from the districts who have congregated in Kathmandu this week to warn that they will resume murder and mayhem. So to summarise, the Dashies are forcing the Nepali people to fork out money so that they can kill them. It fell upon the FNCCI’s Suraj Vaidya to say enough is enough, but only after all the extortion was over and the Dash Convention had begun. Vaidya’s Boys of a Different Tune. Instead of spending all that energy on extorting the living daylights out of everyone in town, Kirin Kaka’s loyalists should have forged an alliance with the royalists. They’d have gladly bankrolled him, and announced the alliance by inviting ex-Majesty Gyan Dai up on the stage at the Khula Munch on Wednesday. Mandalays and Maobaddies were always one and the same.

Even the baddest of the Baddies have bad days, but one Baddie is having it badder than the rest and that is none other than Herr Fuhrer himself who is being hounded by his own gorillas. Brother Number One has stopped going to Paris Hillock and stays within the heavily guarded confines of his Lajimpat villa. He doesn’t want to face the wrath of UNMIN-disqualified Mau Mau minors who are now full-blown adults, and have gheraoed HQ to raise slogans against the chairman every time he stops by. But what really spooked PKD was BRB threatening him face-to-face at a closed door meeting that he may have to be prepared for a hastened departure into the after life. Red Flag hasn’t forgiven Lotus Flower for hatching a conspiracy to remove him when he’d flown off to Mugu last month in the company of the C-in-C. The reason Baburam needs the army brass on his side is not so much to checkmate the president, but as a deterrence against his own chairman.

The reign of His Serene Majesty Baburam Bhattarai is a déjà vu of the Panchayat years, and like the last Shah king the man seems to be his own worst enemy. Last year, he sacked the head of the government’s own national television for not covering him in favourable light, and last month heads rolled in Radio Nepal when a studio guest was allowed to wax eloquently about the prime minister being in India’s pocket. Then he shoots himself in the foot by opposing the investigation into the murders of a journalist. Now, his Minister of Disinformation and Miscommunication has anointed a crony for the top job at state radio. Handing him the appointment letter, the minister who is also a self-appointed MJF Chairman, gave him a one line TOR and said: “Make me more popular than Baburam.” Or words to that effect.