After the death of an Indian protester in Birganj this week, India has tightened its blockade on Nepal. The economic damage to the country of the two-month long blockade already far exceeds the impact of the earthquake. Yet, parachutist journalists from the international media who were so quick to descend on Kathmandu in April are nowhere to be seen. The international community is still calling it a ‘fuel crisis’, ignoring the fact that India has violated several international treaties by not allowing cargo to pass through its border to Nepal.

In his address at the inaugural session of the UN Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in Geneva on Wednesday, Deputy Prime Minister Kamal Thapa said: ‘We are currently at a very delicate situation resulting from the obstruction of essential supplies at the border points’. But chances of the blockade being lifted before Tihar festival appear slim. Prime Minister KP Oli has hinted that the blockade might last long, asking business leaders to help ‘safeguard nationalism’.

Sooner or later (the sooner the better) this blockade will come to an end. It must. It is unnatural, illegal, destabilising and detrimental to the longterm national interests of both countries.
Sooner or later (the sooner, the better) this blockade will come to an end. It must. It is aberrant, illegal, destabilising and detrimental to the longterm national interests of both India and Nepal. Once the border is open again, we will have to start counting the cost. Nepal will have bore about losses in monetary terms – the economic damage to the country of the two-month long blockade already far exceeds the impact of the earthquake that affected 12 districts in April. Nepal’s already-shaky economy will take years to recover from the cumulative destruction – which is far greater than the sum of its parts – of the earthquake and the blockade. Nepal’s growth forecasts for the coming years will have to be revised downwards. Development has suffered a tremendous setback. Of more immediate humanitarian concern is the effect that the blockade is having on the delivery of relief and construction materials to nearly 2 million survivors of the earthquake so they can rebuild before a harsh Himalayan winter. This is an unfolding and ongoing disaster, and unlike the earthquake is completely human induced.

Yet, parachutist journalists from the international media who were so quick to descend on Kathmandu in April are now nowhere to be seen. A blockade, what led to it, and what it is doing to us, is too complicated to explain to the outside world. Food scarcity, the shortage of medicines and the lack of fuel is now hurting Nepal all over. Nepal has done to us, is too complicated to explain to the outside world. Food scarcity, the shortage of medicines and the lack of fuel is now hurting Nepal all over. Nepal has done
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The Indian blockade has exposed the failure of successive Nepalese governments in ensuring self-reliance in energy and import diversification, but one of the most glaring shortcomings has been the inability to maintain a robust national airline.

With or without a blockade, heavy lift air cargo capability would have allowed landlocked Nepal to be less dependent on access to the sea through Indian ports, and a flag carrier with a larger fleet would have given 4 million Nepalis abroad the option to fly their own national airline. Although Nepal Airlines is beginning to spread its wings again, chronic political interference and mismanagement have left the company a shell of what it was during its ‘royal’ days.

Optimum fleet utilisation for a new plane should be 18 hours a day, but the newly-acquired two 30-year-old 777s make two flights a day ferrying on each inbound flight from Kolkata up to 30 tons of aviation turbine fuel which are then defueled to keep Nepal’s domestic flights running.

The Airbus 320s burn up to 35 per cent less fuel than a 757 on the same route. This means they can fly non-stop to Hong Kong while the 757s have to make refueling stops on Kuala Lumpur flights. However, the 320s are not suitable for flight times of more than four hours on most existing routes, and the passenger volume.

The company is planning to add at least two wide body Airbus 330s for which it would need nine sets of 36 new pilots. Conversion training has to start much before unlike the ad hoc last-minute simulator exercise in Toulouse this year with the 320s. Fortunately, cross crew qualification is possible since 320 and 330 cockpits and systems are compatible.

“The time to go for wide bodies is now, we are ready,” said Capt Srawan Rijal who liaised closely with Airbus on the 320s. “But planning must start right away.”

Having widebodies would also allow Nepal Airlines to compete with carriers that use 777s and 330s on its main routes to Bangkok, Hong Kong and Doha. Passenger load for the 330s would be assured because of the huge numbers of Nepalis in the Gulf and Malaysia, and Nepal Airlines could ink code sharing deals with international airlines for traffic from Europe, North America and East Asian traffic.

In the final analysis, however, Nepal Airlines needs a complete makeover in its administration and management to handle the new equipment. It is currently over staffed, there is overt political interference, and the technical backup is not up to mark. The airline has asked for bids from international airlines to handle operations, engineering, marketing and finance with 25 firms submitting letters of intent.

Says 28-year veteran at the controls of a Nepal Airlines Airbus 320 Capt Vijay Lama: “Nepal Airlines is Nepal in a microcosm with the same management and systems. And like our country, the airline is also trying to reform it so it works better.”

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The snow that fell in Kerung just over the border in China will soon begin to fall on Nepali soil. Premier Oli’s oil tankers have made it back across the border to Rasuwagadhi this time, but it seems the weather, if nothing else, will likely get in the way of his abiding love of country next time around.

The autumn of the patriot

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As a fleet of Nepali oil tankers negotiated its way through a precarious road along the Bhote Kosi from Tibet, through Rasuwa (pic) and into Kathmandu this week, the denizens of Kathmandu imagined an end to their misery.

Tanker drivers were greeted like heroes with garlands, and they said how proud they felt to be able to help lift the motherland out of a crisis.

But the euphoria was short-lived. Nepalis realised that importing fuel from across the Himalaya is more difficult than first thought and the celebration was muted. More tankers will arrive in the coming days, but when, no one knows for sure. The Kerung Highway will be closed due to snow soon, and the Kodari link is badly damaged by the quakes. Like it or not, Nepal cannot rely on any other country but India for the commercial import of fuel at least in the near future. So Kathmandu needs to look south and within to find a political solution to this long-drawn crisis.

Foreign Affairs Minister Kamal Thapa’s visit to India last month failed, and Kathmandu seems to have made up its mind that further negotiations with New Delhi would be meaningless for now. The recent Nepal-China petroleum deal was not a manifestation of Kathmandu’s tilt towards Beijing, but a symbolic move. This is not how it should be. Negotiations are needed with agitating groups and their Indian mentors.

The Madhesi parties have been the camouflage allowing New Delhi to deny there is a blockade on Nepal. There was forward movement in talks in Kathmandu between them and the government, but the Birganj violence on Monday has stalled those negotiations for now. Home Minister Shakti Basnet ordered police to chase away Madhesi protesters from the Birganj-Ranauli border on Monday morning. That was a mistake.

The Madhesi Morcha has now threatened to pull out of talks, calling them a “ploy” by the government. India, angry over the death of ‘an innocent youngster from Bihar’, hinted at further tightening of the blockade. If that happens, neither the government nor the country will win. The people’s suffering will continue.

Since the days leading up to the promulgation of Nepal’s new constitution, India has been reiterating the need for ‘broad-based consensus’. But consensus is not possible if the Morcha rejects talks and tries to bring the government to its knees through street protests and the blockade. The government could respond with a sincere apology as a first step to resuming talks.

This is also time for the ruling parties to be honest about those of the Morcha’s demands that they cannot address. Nearly three months after it began an indefinite strike in the Tarai, the Morcha on Sunday unveiled its 11-point(455,946),(544,987). That was a mistake.

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The Morcha does not represent the people of these five disputed districts. The four members of the Morcha collectively received 12,902 of the total 344,963 (just about 4 per cent) valid votes cast in Jhapa under the Proportional Representation system in 2013. None of its candidates won in any of Jhapa’s seven constituencies under the First-Past-the-Post system, and most of them failed to secure even their deposit money. If any of the Morcha’s seven constituencies under the First-Past-the-Post system, and most of them failed to secure even their deposit money. Even if all this is ignored, other regional parties demanding a Limbuwan province will not agree. For the sake of a compromise, these districts can be divided and boundaries of the two plains provinces expanded. But the Morcha should spend more energy on constructive negotiations rather than exploring even more sinister ways to weaken the country and hurt its people.

China cannot alleviate the pain inflicted by India on Nepal, let’s look within and mend fences
Around this time of the year, Kathmandu Valley’s own smog and morning inversion would have kept the capital’s weather misty. But the blockade has reversed that, and Kathmandu will continue to enjoy good visibility. It is still warmer than usual, but expect sunny intervals with an average maximum temperature in the early 20s and minimum still in the double digits. Slightly, there are already reports of snowfall in the higher reaches, and light rain may occur in one or two places in the eastern and western hilly regions on Friday.

KATHMANDU
KATHMANDU

Undeterred by the current blockade, the annual jazz festival, Surya Nepal Jazzmandu - kicked off with its inaugural event on Wednesday evening: Jazz for the Next Generation. Held outdoors under the setting sun within the grounds of the Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory in Pulchok, Jazz for the Next Generation showcased a high standard of up-and-coming local musical talent. Seven artists were selected by the Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory to play in front of an enthusiastic crowd and guest judges: members of Katamon Cherry. With performances ranging from covers of pop legends such as the Beatles and Tina Turner; to jazz legends such as Chet Baker; as well as a range of outstanding originals, Jazz for the Next Generation proved once again that talent is not a commodity in short supply in the local music scene.

The judges had the difficult task of choosing four titles: Best Vocalist; Best Accompanying Act; Most Outstanding Artist; and Best Band. Announcing the winners, guest judge Haim Deskoff of Katamon Cherry, said: “The performances were so diverse... it was very hard for us to decide”.

Their jazz original clearly impressed both the audience and judges. Many were surprised to listen to the music of the band, which started playing together only two weeks ago. “We formed this band just for the festival,” Mark Donald Rani, the band’s drummer told Nepali Times. Rani was also awarded the title of Most Outstanding Artist. Other members of the Indo-Nepal band include: guitarist Anish Malla, bassist Shawnert Pyngrope and pianist Sanjay Shrestha. As part of their prize, the band will be performing at Jazz Bazaar, one of Surya Nepal Jazzmandu’s premier events to be held this Saturday at the Gokarna Forest Resort. The members will also get to take part in a series of masterclass workshops with a wide range of international and local acts involved in the music festival. Not knowing each other personally before their formation, the only commonality the band shared was the Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory, as well as an overwhelming commitment and skill for music, of course.

But with three originals already in its repertoire, the band is enthusiastically planning for the future: “The masterclass is the greatest prize,” the band’s pianist, Sanjay Shrestha admits. When asked about the band’s future plans, Shrestha expressed the organic approach the band is taking. “We’ll see how it evolves,” he replied.

The Forty Fingers Collective is definitely an upcoming group to keep an eye out for and those who missed out on the band’s Wednesday performance can hear them at Saturday’s Jazz Bazaar.
Philip Blenkinsop first came to Nepal in 2001 drawn by the then-elusive Maoist guerrillas in a war that the rest of the world didn’t know was happening in the Himalaya.

But that year in June, Nepal did suddenly hit the international headlines. The royal massacre took place, and the Thailand-based Australian photographer found himself in the thick of the dramatic events in Kathmandu. Since then, Blenkinsop has kept coming back to Nepal. He is here again this week to exhibit his hitherto unpublished photographs, *In the Shadow of Hope*, at Photo Kathmandu.

"I knew after that first trip that I would be coming back," he says while setting up his exhibit at the Old Courthouse in Patan. "I have an immediate sense of responsibility to the people of Nepal."

Philip’s photography depicts the silent and the invisible, he is an ardent believer in the unfiltered projection of truth. His work is often shocking, but he uses this emotion as a tool in communicating what he terms ‘a catalyst for change’.

The projection of overlooked injustices is a relevant concept in contemporary Nepal, but Blenkinsop’s images always evoke a sense of struggle and hope. The simplicity of sparingly hung, large format black and white photographs that line the crumbling walls of the Old Courthouse *In the Shadow of Hope* contrast heavily with the vivid scenes they depict. Blenkinsop strives to make his exhibition interactive. He says: "A good photograph is one that doesn’t necessarily give answers but it asks questions of the viewer.”

Blenkinsop’s passion is evident in his work, and he says the photographs are not just for the viewer but for the subject as well: usually they are families of the mistreated, exploited or killed. "I can’t tolerate injustice," he says, "the whole fuel and direction of my journey for the past 25 years has been against injustice. I interpret scenes as honestly as I can to show where I’ve been and what I’ve seen.” These are real lives of real people, caught in a transient moment and shown to the world so that people may know, and so that people may change.

Asked to summarise his main message in the exhibition, Blenkinsop has a simple answer: "Come and look at the show, and make up your mind.”

Hannan Lewsley

*In the Shadow of Hope*

3 to 9 November
10AM to 7PM
Old Court House, Hakka, Patan

ALL PICS: PHILIP BLENKINSOP
Finnish photographer Tuomo Manninen first visited Nepal in 1995 with the aim to see the side of the country not portrayed in international media. Twenty years later, he returns with We, a collection of photos taken during his one-year stay in Nepal. The exhibition is part of the ongoing photography festival, Photo Kathmandu.

Manninen’s images—all structured group portraits—lie within the blurred lines that divide art and photojournalism. The artistic nature of his work allows a visual portrayal of life in Nepal free from the constraints of objectivism.

He maintains a very dynamic perception of art. Asked where the boundary between art and photojournalism lies, he attributes the difference to purpose: “It is art, if that is what the creator intended,” he says.

Fourteen out of the 30 images that comprise Manninen’s collection from Nepal line the stone walls of the historic entrance of Mulchowk, within the grounds of Patan museum. The photographer is thrilled at the opportunity to show his work to the people who made it possible.

With subjects such as the staff of the Nepal Stock Exchange Limited; a Nepali wedding band; and farmers posing in front of a timid elephant, We succeeds in capturing life in Nepal, rarely seen outside the country. Captured on film, and exhibited as an integral part of Photo Kathmandu, Manninen’s exhibition offers a genuine insight into everyday Nepali life, twenty years ago.

Mulchowk Entrance, Patan Museum.
10AM to 7PM
3 to 9 November

Nepal, 20 years ago

TUOMO MANNINEN
FILM SOUTH ASIA 2015

A biennial festival set up 20 years ago, Film Southasia (FSA) mainly popularises documentaries, in its words, to entertain, inform and change lives. FSA organises screenings, discussions and workshops across South Asia to promote South Asian non-fiction and also contribute to initiating local changes. So far, nine editions of the festival have been held. At each festival, films are judged by a three-member South Asian jury, with the best film being awarded the ‘Ram Bahadur Trophy’ along with a citation and a cash prize of US $ 5,000.

After each FSA festival, about a dozen films are selected to be screened across the subcontinent and around the world at the Travelling Film Southasia (TFSA) package. This year, FSA has 43 films from South Asia, ranging from a documentary on press freedom in a highly dangerous place for reporting to a story about aSalman Khan look-alike. FSA has also curated a package for films coming out of colleges and institutions to promote visual storytelling across the South Asian sub-continent.

10 to 22 November
Kala Sangam, Patan
For schedule: www.filmsouthasia.org
For a long time, Kathmandu was known as a drug paradise, but mainly for ‘soft’ narcotics like marijuana. Lately, however, raw and processed opium from India have become available – especially after Indian growers moved into remote lawless parts of Nepal.

Heroin is a semi-synthetic form of morphine, a naturally occurring substance that is extracted from certain types of poppy plants. Heroin is also derived from opium, which is the sap of a poppy plant. The name opium comes from the Greek word ‘opos’ meaning ‘sap’. Media has glamourised heroin, described as feeling ‘high’ or a ‘rush’. Heroin is considered to be the most addictive recreational substance because cravings are extremely persistent and treatment is often long and difficult, but not impossible.

Typical treatment consists of a detox period, whereby patients undergo intense withdrawals while receiving medication and counseling in an attempt to eliminate short-term relapse. However, the rate of relapse is high and multiple cycles of rehabilitation may be required.

A transitional period in a safe and sober environment will help the patient treat heroin addiction with continued success as it shields the patient from triggers, such as individuals that contributed to the heroin addiction at the onset. An inpatient treatment for heroin addiction is one of the safest and most guaranteed roads to full recovery.

In a majority of cases, people initially experiment with heroin for either recreational or medical purposes as a means of achieving a temporary feeling of euphoria. The first stages of heroin addiction cause the user to continuously crave or chase their initial ‘high’.

Individuals that have undergone traumatic experience are more susceptible to using substances such as heroin than those who have not. It is also more likely for someone with a mental health illness to use substances to ‘self-medicate’ or cope with their current situation. Some common causes of heroin addiction are the environment, genetics, suppressed family/relationships and stress.

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Heroin use gives the individual a ‘down’ effect while providing temporary relaxation and euphoria. Similar to other opiates, heroin use inhibits the brain’s ability to feel pain. Heroin users may be able to hide the use for a short period of time, but if you suspect a family member or a friend is using heroin, some potential signs and symptoms to look out for are: track marks (the areas on the skin and blood vessels damaged by a needle) possession of paraphernalia, sudden change in behaviour or levels of motivation, sudden weight loss as well as an increase in time spent sleeping.

Heroin is a dangerous and addictive drug that affects the individual, including their loved ones. As the user increases their dosage, a result of increased tolerance, more physical symptoms become increasingly visible. Heroin may affect various aspects of an individual’s life: physical, psychological/mental and family/relationships. Its use leads to strained relationships and also ends many of them.

There are effective and successful treatments available for heroin addiction, including medications (methadone, buprenorphine) and behavioral therapy (cognitive-behavioral therapy). These methods help repair and restore brain function and behaviour to a degree that allows patients to lead normal lives, with a decreased chance of relapse. But the most effective approach consists of using a combination of both medications coupled with behavioral therapy under monitoring and supervision of a qualified medical professional.

Phalano Coffee

Phalano Coffee is a few metres west on the same line.

How to get there: Find a path that leads to the Coffeeghar’s much recommended cakes. But knowing we would be back for more visits, we felt no qualms about foregoing desserts this time around.

With its most reasonable prices and great atmosphere, Phalano Coffee is a welcome respite from the usually over-priced eateries around Pulchok and Jhamele.

Sarthak Mani Sharma

Pulchok. Phalano is a few metres west on the same line.

F

atey, we have spent much of our lunch hours simply looking for restaurants that can calm down our noisy gastrointestinal juices. All thanks to the ‘fuel crisis’. But on Monday, we were pleasantly surprised. We stopped by at Phalano Coffeeghar with no intentions to write a review of the place, but were left so impressed by the restaurant knowing we would be back.

For starters, Phalano offers almost the entire menu when the blockade has confined many to preparing just momos and noodles. The place has an enchanting ambience, too. With a bottom floor that is suave and an upper one that offers a great terrace-view of Pulchok, Phalano has an environment few can rival.

We began with the Coffeeghar Special Sandwich (Rs 275). Its filling of chicken was generous with the portion, we had a few bubbles. Bits of bacon was used sparingly, and it turned out, they were sprinkled only on the top. The sauce and cheese clung, overwhelming the taste of the dish and leaving the bacon in the sideline. If Phalano used less sauce and cheese and more bacon, the dish would be far better. But what little it faltered in taste the kitchen more than made up for in the spaghetti’s presentation. It was easy to see that Phalano cared about how its food looks. When the Seafood Hakka Noodles (Rs 190) came, we were struck by its presentation. And luckily the taste matched up to the look: the noodles were spicy and tasted authentic.

By the end of our third dish, we were so full, we had no space left to try the Coffeeghar’s much recommended cakes. But knowing we would be back for more visits, we felt no qualms about foregoing desserts this time around.

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Sarthak Mani Sharma
The Salt of the Earth

WRITING WITH LIGHT AND SHADOW (“photo” being “light” and “graph” meaning “to write” in ancient Greek) is a suitably poetic interpretation of photography and a particularly apt beginning for a film that is a deeply personal, impressionistic rendering of the life of Sebastião Salgado, the revered Brazilian photographer who is now in his early seventies.

Started as a project by Salgado’s older son Julian Ribeiro Salgado, Wim Wenders, a highly experienced film-maker and family friend, was invited onboard in an effort to keep some essential perspective in a film that might have otherwise veered into a family self-portrait without much structure.

Filmed without any of the usual talking heads, The Salt of the Earth explores how Salgado discovered photography as his medium, transitioning from a consulting economist for the World Bank to one of this century’s most important photographers.

Making a documentary about a photographer may seem somewhat redundant – after all both are visual mediums that can be engaged independently from each other – but the film starts to make sense as we hear Salgado’s thoughts in his very intimate, candid, trustful voiceover speaking about his own evolution as a photographer as he becomes ever more deeply engaged with his subjects. As a result, Salgado’s photography is piercing. Almost always in black and white with that essential, dramatic light and shadow – the products are likely to sear into your retina, such is the power of some of his images.

We can always try to engage with art on its own, away from the context of the artist’s life, but there is an undeniable richness that comes from linking the man to his works – which is why this dreamy, sometimes indulgent, but frequently powerful documentary is so riveting, elucidating the man behind the machine.

Photography as a medium has changed the way we perceive the world in our ability to capture moments. In the hands of a man like Salgado, pictures can indeed become testaments written in light and shadow. As we welcome Photo Kathmandu – our first international photography festival, this is a film that illustrates just how effective a photo can be given care and thought; a useful thing to remember in these days of “point and click”.

MUST SEE

Sophia Pande

NEW ROLES: President Bidya Bhandari administers the oath of office to Vice President Nanda Kishor Pun at Shital Niwas on Sunday.

LEADING NOWHERE: Leaders of Madhesi Morcha call a press conference to condemn the killing of an Indian national by security forces in Birganj on Monday and said talks with the government were turning “meaningless”.

POWER PLAY: US Ambassador to Nepal Alaina B. Teplitz (centre) with actor Gauti Matta (left) and director Tsering Phlingbar Sherpa on Tuesday at the launch of Singha Durbar, a tv series funded by USAID.

PHOTO FIESTA: Visitors check out an exhibition, part of Photo Kathmandu, an international photography festival, which began in Patan on Tuesday.

FRESH SOUND: A band performs at the ‘Jazz for the Next Generation’ competition at Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory in Pulchowk on Wednesday.
The tug of the motherland

The third generation of young Nepalis in Hong Kong are eager to return to earthquake-hit Nepal

SONIA AWALE

in HONG KONG

Their grandfathers fought for the British Army and were stationed with the Gurkha garrison in Hong Kong. Their parents toiled to build a decent life for their families here. Now, some from the third generation of Nepalis in Hong Kong want to go back home to help their earthquake-hit motherland.

The young Nepalis feel the urge to return partly because the descendants of ex-Gurkha soldiers find it difficult to fit into Chinese society. Even those born here live in tightly-knit Nepali communities, and still regard Nepal as home.

“I felt relieved and guilty when the earthquake struck Nepal,” says Eina Gurung, 20, a student of European studies at the University of Hong Kong who has been living in the city since she was seven when she first came to Hong Kong, is one of them. He has spent most of his life here, and doesn’t wish to go back.

“I have things going smoothly here, what is there to go back to Nepal for?” he asks. His father was a former British Gurkha soldier and now works as a security guard.

Prem Thapa runs three restaurants serving Indian and Nepali cuisine and has been living in Hong Kong for 17 years. He is encouraged that even though their grandfathers were soldiers and their fathers may have been construction workers, a new generation of Nepalis is pursuing higher education.

Prem Thapa says: “That gives me hope,” he says. He urges the new generation to help people there.”

Both Gurung and Sunuwar come from the families of Gurkha soldiers who served in the British Army in Hong Kong. After the handover in 1997 some brought along their families from Nepal in the hope of a better life, and there are now about 40,000 Nepalis here working as security guards or in construction. But the third generation is increasingly trying to find its roots, and help Nepal especially after earthquake.

As much as young women like Gurung and Sunuwar feel the tug of their homeland, there are other Nepalis too busy making a living to think about returning because Nepal has little to offer.

Mandip Limbu, 29, who works at a Thai restaurant and was born and raised in Hong Kong, is one of them. He has spent most of his life here, and doesn’t wish to go back.

“I have things going smoothly here, what is there to go back to Nepal for?” he asks. His father was a former British Gurkha soldier and now works as a security guard.

Sumyang Hang Limbu was seven when she first came to Hong Kong while her grandfather was in the British Army, and has been living here for more than a decade. Now 26, she is a welfare worker in a charity helping non-Chinese immigrants in Hong Kong. She says: “I don’t see myself going back to Nepal anytime soon but I’d like to get involved with the youth in Nepal to help rebuild the country.”

One of the reasons some in the third generation feel like going back is that they are not fully assimilated into Hong Kong society, and few speak Cantonese. “I still feel like an outsider despite having lived here 19 years. I grow up in a Nepali culture, we hang out among ourselves, have our own circles,” says Gurung.

Sumyang Hang Limbu agrees: “We all have an identity crisis, in a way we don’t really belong in Hong Kong, there is a language barrier, immigrants are stigmatised, the system doesn’t favour minorities and we Nepalis also don’t make an effort to integrate into Hong Kong society.”

Gurung says: “We have to try to fit into Hong Kong society and at the same time help develop Nepal. After my studies I want to go back to Nepal someday and contribute to my country.”

Nepali students at the University of Hong Kong launched an earthquake relief campaign in May and have raised US$40,000 which they plan to spend on improving health care in Gorkha and other districts where their families are from.

Merina Sunuwar, 21, also studies at HKU and shares the sentiment. She moved here at eight with her siblings and is studying social work. She says: “I want to further my education and then return to Nepal and work to help people there.”

Both Gurung and Sunuwar feel the urge to return partly because the descendants of ex-Gurkha soldiers find it difficult to fit into Chinese society. Even those born here live in tightly-knit Nepali communities, and still regard Nepal as home.

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Eina Gurung

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Wish you a very
Happy Diwali 2072

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13
Qatar is reforming labour

Under sustained international criticism Qatar has reformed its controversial laws governing migrant workers. But for significant improvement in labour conditions there have to be changes in the way the Nepal government and recruiters treat their own workers.

After Qatar’s king approved an amendment to the law last week, more than 400,000 Nepali migrant workers, mostly hired for construction of infrastructure for the 2022 FIFA World Cup, are hopeful it will now be easier for Nepalis to return home or switch jobs more easily.

The new law will affect all 1.8 million foreign workers in the Gulf state, 400,000 of whom are Nepalis. Unskilled and illiterate migrant workers from Nepal and other South Asian countries are expected to benefit the most from reforms in the notorious ‘kafala’ system.

“We are happy that there will be less restrictions on us,” says Kumar Karki, a Doha-based Nepali migrant worker. Kafala allowed Qatari employers to treat foreign workers like bonded labourers, requiring workers to have the employer’s permission to leave Qatar or join other companies even after the end of a fixed-term contract.

“You cannot return home even if a relative dies, you cannot find a job elsewhere even if you do not get your promised salaries,” says Abhiman Singh Lama, a Qatar returnee now working for Prabasi Nepali Coordination Committee. “Kafala used to give unlimited arbitrary power to employers.”

As soon as migrant workers reach Qatar, their passports are seized. And if they attempt to escape an employer, they would be rendered illegal and slapped with a heavy fine.

One year after it publicly promised to amend its law under pressure by rights groups, Qatar finally reformed Kafala to allow migrant workers to apply for permit exits directly from a Qatari ministry as opposed to their employers. But the amended law, which will come into effect only next year, still restricts migrant workers from leaving the country without the consent of their employer. The amended law promises to set up an authority to hear grievances of migrant workers who are denied exit permits by...
Qatar deserves the best’ say signs along important roads in Doha, the capital of Qatar where one in every five people is a Nepali migrant worker. The whole city looks like a construction site as the country builds railways and stadiums for the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

Qatar has the third-largest reserves of natural gas in the world, and has the highest per capita income in the world. Nepali, Indian, Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi, Filipino, Pakistani and Egyptian workers can be seen in protective gear toiling in the 45 degree midday heat.

There are concerns about labour conditions. A worker is owned by his employer, there are often prolonged delays or non-payment of wages which means workers fall behind in repayment of debt that got them here in the first place. Every migrant worker must have a ‘sponsor’ who must also be his employer. The migrant worker cannot change jobs without permission, and cannot leave the country since the employer keeps the passport.

“Nepal needs to renew the labour agreement with Qatar, convince Qatari authorities to raise the minimum wage and focus on sending skilled manpower,” says Karki.

This year the Labour Ministry in Kathmandu said Nepali workers going to Malaysia and six Gulf countries need not pay for their air tickets and visa fees. The policy faced stiff resistance from labour recruiters, and a committee was formed to review it.

With the government changed, no one knows what will happen to that policy. Says former Labour Minister Tek Bahadur Gurung. “If the new government cares about poor Nepali migrant workers, the policy should be implemented. But I am not very hopeful.”

PATTABI RAMAN
IN DOHA

NEPALI AND INDIAN MIGRANTS WATCH A BOLLYWOOD MOVIE INSIDE THEIR CAMP. NEPALI MIGRANTS RELAX DURING A BREAK.

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“Iraqi workers are being exploited mercilessly,” he says. “But before that, we need to reform our own law.”

One such loophole is Article 15 of the Labour Act that allows the Chambers of Commerce of Gulf countries to attest documents related to recruitment of Nepali migrant workers. Labour recruiters have been duping Nepali workers by getting fake documents attested by unreliable and unaccountable agencies.

The Nepal embassy in Doha has been operating without an ambassador for more than one year, and protecting migrant worker rights has never been a priority there. A bilateral agreement on labour signed in 2004 has not yet been renewed, and Nepal has been announcing a minimum wage on its own even though Qatari companies are not obliged to pay minimum wage.

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from home

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IN DOHA

NEPALI AND INDIAN MIGRANTS WATCH A BOLLYWOOD MOVIE INSIDE THEIR CAMP. NEPALI MIGRANTS RELAX DURING A BREAK.
HEALTH WARNING: Some readers may find this week’s column disturbing and objectionable because it will make no reference to the unofficial “Blockade” imposed by so-called “India” on purported “Nepal”. It will instead concentrate on Tihar, when we set aside one day to worship our favourite animal, or thing. This column also contains some flash photography.

9 November
Day of the Crow
British scientists recently discovered what we in Nepal have known all along: that crows are collectively smarter than human beings. To test this hypothesis, they placed a treat in a test tube, and left a piece of copper wire casually lying around. Guess what the smarty pants crows did: they bent the wire into a hook, fished out the said treat and had a picnic. They even knew how to talk with their mouths full. Over at NAST, Nepali biologists were pretty blasé about the whole thing. Our ancestors have known all along just how smart the birds are, which is why they chose the crow as the aide-de-camp to the God of Death over a short-list of other applicants including the Female Anopheles Mosquito, The Tick, and the Fruit Bat. The reason we worship crows in Nepal is that they are not only numerically superior to human beings, but they also have far higher IQs than them. In fact, the time may have come for Nepal to have its first Crow Editor-in-Chief, first Crow ex-King, and if we had a Crow Prime Minister heading a Cabinet of Ravens, Rooks and Jackdaws, perhaps we’d not be in the mess we are in right now.

From my own personal observation at our favourite neighbourhood garbage pile (which is about ten metres away as the crow flies from where I am sitting now) I can tell that several of the crows feasting there deserve PhDs. British crows may use primitive tools to extract treats from test-tubes, but their cousins at Krishna Galli have discovered fire. Yes, they actually set the trash ablaze this Halloween and organised a pot luck barbecue. And since crows are socialist animals they even invited crows from as far away as Babar Mahal for the party.

So, on 9 November we honour Yamaraj’s roving ambassador and plenipotentiary and feed them the innards of a deceased Water Buffalo, which itself is the vehicle of the God of Death. Quite how that works, I have yet to figure out.

November 10
The Day of the Dogs
This is the day when dogs are gods for a day. We worship man’s best friend and reward Kaley, Setay and Khairey for being around when we need them most to provide us with security in these troubled times by yowling non-stop all night at everyone in general and no one in particular. Disregarding our own personal discomfort and sleep deprivation we get up at the crack of dawn on Dog Day to round up the neighbourhood dingo pack and feed them body parts of fellow animals, resisting the temptation to lace it with pulverised sleeping pills. Veneration of our nocturnal canine choir is a tradition that has been passed down to us from generation to generation ever since, as British scientists recently discovered, the first dog was born 75,000 years ago in what is now Nepal. Not in India, so there.

11 November
The Day of the Cow
Then comes Friday, the day in our animal kingdom reserved for none other than the Holy Cow which was recently elected by parliament for a third term in office beating the One Horny Rhino 7-5 in a tie-breaker. It is an indication of the reverence we accord to our National Animal that we give her the privilege of serving as bovine traffic islands at the Jorpati Intersection weekdays from 9-5. The cow’s terms of reference is to not budge, especially if Prime Minister Modi’s motorcade whizzes by. On Friday, let us show that we are gender balanced by also paying respects to oxen and bulls.

12 November
Gas Cylinder Day
This year, Bhai Tika has been replaced by Gas Cylinder Day when we will garland the half-full cylinder that took three days of waiting in line at Salt Trading and pay it divine reverence at an auspicious hour designated by the ex-royal astrologer.

From this year, Tihar has been extended by a few more days to include new items of reverence in New Nepal. Which is why on 13 November we will take our prized 1l plastic mineral water bottle filled with petrol, place it in the altar and venerate it.

14 November
Day of the Donkey