Having survived a year like the one that just ended, 2016 has to turn out better for Nepal. The country was punished first by God, then by our own incompetent leaders, and now by India. We are glad to bid goodbye to 12 painful months, and would like to think that Nepal woes have bottomed out. There is now nowhere to go but up.

Still, the attrition is taking its toll on 28 million Nepalis and the two million homeless earthquake survivors whose misery is multiplied manifold. This humanitarian disaster is now becoming a crime against humanity.
Having survived a year like the one that just ended, 2016 has to turn out better for Nepal. The country was punished first by God, then by our own incompetent leaders, and now by India. We are glad to bid goodbye to 12 painful months, and would like to think that Nepal’s woes have bottomed out. There is now no where to go but up.

Despite everything that went wrong, however, and as incongruous as it may sound during this period of national crisis and hardship, it must be said: things could have been worse.

It starts with the Turkish Airbus that veered off the runway at Kathmandu Airport on 3 March. If the nose wheel hadn’t collapsed and brought the plane to halt in the soggy grass, it could have been a major catastrophe. As it turned out, Nepal got away with having its international airport closed for four days leaving nearly 100,000 people stranded during the peak tourist season.

Seven weeks later, we were struck by a 7.8 magnitude earthquake, and powerful aftershocks that rocked central Nepal for months. Nearly 9,000 people were killed, three million people affected, more than 700,000 buildings were destroyed and Kathmandu’s historic towns damaged.

Yet, as we wrote in this space in May, we got off relatively lightly. The doomsday scenario of a megaquake in Kathmandu had predicted at least 100,000 fatalities, with unimaginable damage to buildings and infrastructure. The fact that the main quake measured less than 8 magnitude and struck during the daytime on Saturday, the shock waves were of a low frequency which saved most ferro-cement structures, and the shaking lasted less than a minute, saved countless lives. Telephones and electricity were working right away, the highways were not cut off and Kathmandu airport was not damaged. The earthquake was a warning to get our act together before the real Big Ones, which are yet to come.

The earthquake forced guilty politicians to push for regime change, but for that it was first necessary to rush through a new constitution. That was the last element of the peace process, and although it had flaws it was passed by a democratically elected assembly. In their hurry, the Big 3 parties forget that the Tamis isn’t just a vote bank, but is also populated by Madhesis. Tharus and others. Tarai leaders who had lost the 2013 elections after being thoroughly discredited for their greed and incompetence latched on to this lapse (and fanned the flames) to launch an agitation, which India backed with a blockade of the border.

India’s siege of Nepal has now lasted nearly five months. There could have been a silver lining in all this, and the hardships could have perhaps even be justified, if the blockade had spurred efforts towards self-reliance and trade diversification, and a strategic shift away from dependence on Indian petroleum. We hear assurances from the government, but we don’t yet see a strategic national commitment to those goals.

Meanwhile, the attrition is taking its toll on 28 million Nepalis and the two million homeless earthquake survivors whose misery is multiplied manfold. Dialysis patients have to cut visits because kidney centres are running out of fuel, hospitals are out of essential drugs, children in tents are dying of cold. This humanitarian disaster is now becoming a crime against humanity. Yet, the world couldn’t be bothered.

Lately, there have been signs that the Oli-led coalition in Kathmandu and the establishment in New Delhi have realised that this isn’t helping anyone, and are looking for an exit. However, the population in the plains has now been so radicalised by the Madhesi Front and brutal state crackdowns that the leaders are no longer in total control of the streets.

Our hope for 2016 is that in the upcoming weeks the two amendments to the constitution will get the nod from parliament, and the proposal to defer provincial delineation for three months will be agreed upon. That will set the stage for confidence building efforts both between New Delhi and Kathmandu as well as between hills and plains within Nepal.

The egotistical politicians in India and Nepal have recklessly held hostage Nepal’s 28 million long-suffering people. They must end this suffering, and owe us at least this much.

ii

LIVING DANGEROUSLY

The writer has once again failed to comprehend the problem in its proper depth and perspective, and has, instead hastened, rather naively and probably foolishly too, to blaming the government and Kathmandu for the ills that are not “Years of living dangerously”, Anurag Acharya. #788.

Bihari Shrestha

Anurag is one of the few columnists with an honest and unbiased view of the prevailing situation, his assessment of the happenings in the Tarai and elsewhere will be thoroughly missed.

Ambachar Palit

When blaming just Sinha Durbar and Kathmandu for all the country’s woes, one forgets that most of the ministers including many Madhesis running the country for the last 25 years are not from Kathmandu. The politics they bring into Sinha Durbar is just a reflection of the same politics they have been doing locally. It is easy to point fingers at a perceived enemy like Sinha Durbar/Kathmandu, but change and the fight against discrimination has to start at the grassroots level to be meaningful. In its absence, both local and national politics and debate will continue to remain confined to fights between different feudal lords and their followers for the right to rule over the people, instead of being about people’s welfare.

Deb Bhatya

BS

I didn’t agree with all you wrote. However, you wrote passionately from the heart, thought lucidly with your head and left indelible impressions of your travels with your hands.

Namah

DECIDING TO DE-ESCALATE

Nepalis should ask their corrupt politicians to stop blaming India and get their act together (Deciding to de-escalate, Kanak Mani Dixit, #786). What you have seen is simple “Arm Twisting”, not “Blockade”. If it would have been blockade Nepal would have been destroyed by now.

Frederick S Parrock

We should not forget that this is not an isolated case of Indian atrocities against landlocked Nepal. Two earlier blockades, dumping of the Bhutanese refugees on Nepal and steadfastly refusing to help solve the problem for the last 25 years and hosting the Nepal Maoists who went on to kill 18,000 fellow Nepalis from the Indian army and the two million people displaced from their homes.

Kunda Dixit

YOUR SAY

Weekly Internet Poll  #789

Total votes: 201

BS

Most visited online page

Most shared on Facebook

Most commented

Most popular on Twitter

Weekly Internet Poll  #790
The endless transition

A strong, stable and democratic Nepal left alone to solve its own issues is the best guarantor of India’s national interest

Ordinary Nepalis and earthquake victims have been left to fend for themselves as political forces battle it out. The blockade has pushed millions of Nepalis to destitution, and the economy has been irreparably hurt. We might be heading towards imminent state failure if things continue at this pace.

And yet, we can’t really expect anything different from a country where the intellectual leadership defers the rights of political groups to wield terror, violence and even a blockade against their own people. What else can one expect in a country where people are expendable for the sake of pursuing some abstract, untenable political goal? What does democratic process mean when after years of war and political turmoil, Nepal finally gets a constitution through popular vote but is told to throw the document into the bin instead of improving on flaws because it doesn’t satisfy few groups?

The truth is that even if the government is able to fulfill all the demands of Province 2 activists including demarcation that stands at odds with claims of other ethnic groups, there will be no respite because we would have given legitimacy to political blackmail and violence. For yours we were told that Nepal can only achieve development and democracy if we get a new constitution through a Constituent Assembly. A civil war was fought to achieve this goal, but after the conflict ended we were told federalism was the answer.

The last decade was spent trying to figure federalism out. And now we are being told we need a new framework for defining Nepali nationalism. Whenever Nepal has tried to settle these issues through a democratic process, political forces who lost have trampled on them.

Ultimately we have to make a decision: do we want to continue the impasse by letting brute force decide our political fate, or do we want to evolve through continuous practice of democracy, accommodating grievances through inclusive policies and accountable politics? The second option is not possible in this endless and unstable transition.

Corrupt and incompetent leaders, weak institutions, structural discrimination over decades of authoritarian rule, economic inequality are key internal factors driving conflict and instability in Nepal. But it has to be said that being landlocked with an overbearing neighbour has been the bane of Nepal’s existence, and from which much of our current problems of state-building and democratic consolidation arise.

Constitution making is fraught with challenges and Nepal’s success in finally drafting one was an indication that we had passed a vital test of democratic transition and were headed on the right direction. But every time Nepal makes progress in institutionalising democratic institutions and achieving a semblance of stability, new problems are created.

Each time Nepal has tried to assert its independent status, India has responded with tough measures including blockades. India has been a destabilising force for Nepal, fomenting domestic conflict to maintain its control. From Maoists in the past to the Madhesi Front now, this has been India’s tried and tested method to dominate internal politics. Constant upheavals has also left Nepal unable to focus on economic development and institution building. More significantly, there is little incentive for democratic politics in Nepal because India’s approval matters more than popular endorsement, and ostensibly, dissatisfied political forces turn to India for gaining leverage in internal politics. Some civil society voices have become so servile and compromised that free dare to raise a voice against the Indian siege. People inside India oppose the blockade but here in Nepal our own say India is not responsible. Any criticism of Indian intervention is labelled ultranationalism. It is fascinating that while there is seething anger against the Indian blockade amongst common Nepalis, some of our prominent thinkers have disappeared from public sphere just so that they do not have to discuss the blockade or accept that there is one.

When enemies within are helping to weaken and delegitimise the state, there cannot be a positive outcome for Nepal. Eventually, a deal will be reached, the blockade will be lifted and the Madhes crisis will be resolved to an extent. But as long as India’s foreign policy in the region is dictated by its desire to maintain hegemonic control, neighbours like Nepal will remain trapped in endless transition. India should know that a strong, stable and democratic Nepal left alone to solve its own issues is the best guarantor of Indian interests. Coercive diplomacy, inherited from the days of the Raj, no longer works, and will alienate allies and diminish its influence.

The only way Nepal can move forward is by rejecting violent politics of all kinds, balancing state-building with democratic deepening and redefining the terms of our relations with India, And this is where our efforts should be invested in the coming years.
There are at least two ways to go about telling a story. More straightforward, though not necessarily easier, is to document societies and situations that amuse, frustrate, illuminate. Writing in Nepali, in English, one is tempted to do so simply because it hasn’t been done to the satisfaction of the writer, as much as a national and international readership. The risk is an anthropologizing or exoticizing bent that may overshadow the “meaning” of the text.

The alternative is to go straight for the jugular through the mechanism of a central conceit, a fictitious assumption. The advantage is the reader can be more easily convinced, if s/he agrees to suspend disbelief, that there is more to the tale than the tail that you see. The risk, if the writer places too much trust in the reader or has not, in fact, bothered to justify the conceit, is confusion.

Why should a book review begin in such didactic fashion? You may only want to know if *City of Dreams* is good, or bad. But in freely indulging himself in both social realism and fable, Pranaya SJB Rana (pic) has rather forced this reviewer to approach his début collection of short stories written over time and first anthology. These are often cobbled together from stories written over time and given the visceral realism of earlier stories, the writing is always careful, sometimes scintillating, and promises much in what remains a sparsely populated field.

In each of the ten stories that make up *City of Dreams*, the author has tried to pull off something quite different. That of Dreams that, despite their lurid content – a girl who works in a massage parlour, another who suffers abuse in a Kathmandu home – appear to be going through the motions of documenting tragedy, performing the rites of social realism simply because they are worthy, downtrodden subjects. I couldn’t help but think that gender balance aside, the autobiographical author – the pained, meditative yet ultimately losing, sinking male protagonist – worked best.

There are other stories in *City of Dreams* that, despite their lurid space, encompassing formative periods of doubt, learning and inspiration. They can be uneven, both in stylistic approach and quality. And so it is with *City of Dreams*. The second story brought me back down to earth with a jolt, brusquely dispelling the mystery of the first two. Despite the fluent writing, the clever observations of human relations, “Dashain” seemed half-baked, even mundane. Perhaps it simply struggled to live up to the opening stories.

There are other stories in *City of Dreams* that, despite their lurid content – a girl who works in a massage parlour, another who suffers abuse in a Kathmandu home – appear to be going through the motions of documenting tragedy, performing the rites of social realism simply because they are worthy, downtrodden subjects. I couldn’t help but think that gender balance aside, the autobiographical author – the pained, meditative yet ultimately losing, sinking male protagonist – worked best.

But it would also be oversimplifying to say realism, bad; fabulism, good. “The Presence of God” is fantastical, but its second half is more like B-horror than any substantive philosophy. On the other hand, the gentle disintegration of “Our Ruins” as much as the violent denouement of “The Child” are as real as can be, yet work beautifully. There are experiments too, in which Rana plays around with points of view. Dead men speak, finally sorry for the misery they have caused. City folk bounce off each other in a day’s trajectory, a voyeuristic narrator allowing us sneak peeks into their lives as we pass them. These tableaus not only hint at Rana’s imaginative power, they also demonstrate that he is a bold writer, willing to push against the boundaries of what we might have come to expect of South Asian writers. In each of the ten stories that make up *City of Dreams*, the author has tried to pull off something quite different. That he succeeds to the extent he has done is a tribute to the city we live in as much as Rana’s prose skills – even in a losing cause, the writing is always careful, sometimes scintillating, and promises much in what remains a sparsely populated field.

This review was originally published on www.lalitmag.com on 22 December 2013.
New look
Chivas Regal has unveiled a new design for its 12 Year Old bottle that now features the brand signifier more prominently on the glass bottle, in addition to including signatures of founders James and John Chivas.

Mahindra on top
Indian automobile manufacturer Mahindra & Mahindra’s XUV 500 has ranked the highest in a customer satisfaction assessment study conducted by JD Power. The study is based on owner evaluations.

Becoming one
Bank of Kathmandu Chairman Hem Raj Subedi and Director Prakash Shrestha last week signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Lumbini Bank Director Subarna Lal Shrestha for a merger of the two institutions. In July Nepal Rastra Bank had issued a directive asking banks and financial institutions to raise minimum paid up capital requirement to Rs 8 billion by the new financial year 2016/17, prompting many institutions to opt for merger.

Festive price
Gionee’s flagship phone for 2015, Elife S7 is now available at a special New Year price of Rs 26,699. Touted as the ‘slimmest dual-SIM phone’ the Elife S7 was earlier priced at Rs 31,999.

Vacuum power
CG Electronics, the authorised sole distributor of LG brand for Nepal, has unveiled its new range of vacuum cleaners. Designed and engineered in South Korea, these vacuum cleaners have extra large pot beretta of 21L dust capacity with dust indicator, and 2200W motor.

While overcrowded buses were a common sight on the streets of Itahari in the past, restrictions on movement of big vehicles imposed by Madhesi protesters have increased the popularity of electric rickshaws among passengers in this Tarai town. From farmers to students, to even protest organisers, one can see riding on these three-wheelers which can accommodate up to 8 passengers.

Seeing the demand among commuters, local Bhola Paswan (pic, above) recently closed down his fruit stall, and purchased an electric rickshaw for Rs 270,000. On an average Paswan earns Rs 1,000 a day ferrying passengers in his new vehicle.

“I am confident I can earn back my investment within six months,” he says. Travelling in this new vehicle is also relatively inexpensive. A short commute within the city costs passengers Rs 20 while a longer-distance travel to neighbouring Dharan costs Rs 60.

Locally known as ‘City Safari’ the e-rickshaws have especially become popular among students and youths who usually reserve the vehicle to go on picnics and excursions. Electric rickshaws are now being used to transport not just people, but also commodities such as vegetables and daily essentials to the market.

The boom in the use of city rickshaws has pleased both its operators and environmental activists. Yati Shekhar, an Itahari-based journalist and also a campaigner of KIC (Keep Itahari Clean) says electric rickshaws are vital for green rides. “We planted more than a thousand tree saplings in Itahari sub-metropolitan city spaces and introduced intra-city and inter-city electric vehicles like City Safari. This is a great start to campaign for a green city,” he says.

Sonu Jayanti, a theatre artist and another KIC campaigner, says that it is now time for the authorities to promote green rides in bigger cities like Biratnagar and Kathmandu as well. Electrical engineer Raj Kumar Gupta says that the mid-hill highway can be made a green highway where only electric vehicles are allowed to travel. Battery exchange or charging centers can be housed at various points of the highway, and Nepal can ask for carbon budget and other credits from the international community, he says. The government should try to end load-shedding and promote electric vehicles for the long term,” says Gupta. “The Indian blockade is a wake-up call.”

Birat Anupam in Itahari
Collateral Damage 4

One gun leads to another

The wholesale introduction of countless illegal firearms into a country where few existed is yet another tragic consequence of The Pointless War

No matter how you look at it, Nepal is in a terrible mess these days on every front. From the government’s callous neglect of the earthquake victims, to a constitution so flawed it blew up the Tarai, to the never-ending blockade and outrageous corruption, the breakdown of services has got to the point many are asking: “You call this a country?”

As the search for answers lurches from the obscure to the obvious we inevitably come to the matter of guns and their astonishing proliferation. The wholesale introduction of countless un-registered, illegal firearms into a country where few existed is yet another tragic consequence of The Pointless War that looks like it’s here to stay.

Sticking with the obvious, Nepal was a much safer place before the war than it is now. Not only were very few weapons around but the current culture of violence had yet to be introduced. Most guns that did exist were registered with the authorities and the right to keep a private fire-arm privilege to bear arms was a foregone conclusion.

What came first, the guns or the coercion? While those responsible for the collapse of the state under constant attack, their side-kick Maoists and their spin-offs of UN sponsored theatre of the damned, went on a buying spree.

Once the state lost its monopoly on coercion, losing its exclusive privilege to bear arms was a foregone conclusion.

The conflict created unprecedented demand, keeping gun-runners and the illicit firearm makers of Birbar and the Tarai working overtime ever since. Nepali Times carried a piece on disarmament that were solemnly paraded to the UN cantonments, included explicit clauses on coercion, losing its exclusive privilege to bear arms was a foregone conclusion.

None of this would matter, of course, if Nepal had turned into a proletarian paradise as promised. With every spasm of chaos our politicians inspire, including the on-going lawlessness in the Tarai, the illegal arms trade widens further. All reports indicate pistols, both home-made and branded imports, are readily available in Kathmandu for a few thousand rupees. If I’m ever driven to hunt one down I’ll let you know.

All pretence of arms control was mysteriously vanished, only to resurface later as the YCL.

On disarmament that were solemnly paraded to the UN cantonments, included explicit clauses on coercion, losing its exclusive privilege to bear arms was a foregone conclusion.

The Peace Agreement brought another, and as Maoists raided government armories and extorted money to buy more weapons the situation went from bad to worse. In 2003 the government responded by distributing guns to newly formed vigilante squads called Village Defense Leagues. The rationale was a sign of desperate times: people needed protection against marauding gangs of armed Maobaddies and their side-kick Khaobaddies. With the state under constant attack, all pretence of arms control was abandoned and many of these weapons ended up in the hands of the very same people they were meant to protect against. If you think that’s ridiculous, read on.

The 2006 Peace Agreement included explicit clauses on disarmament that were openly flaunted from day one. The pathetic array of ‘arms’ surrendered by Mao-Kiddies, newly recruited teens to fill the UN cantonments, included broken pistols bought from scrap dealers in Birbar, pressure cookers and pieces of plumbing for future pipe-bombs. These bits were solemnly paraded to the containers in a splendid display of UN sponsored theatre of the absurd.

The Peace Agreement brought war to the nation’s cities and a flood of weapons onto the black market. The resulting surge in gun crime got so bad the Birgunj Forest Committee and local school board allotted funds to acquire illegal firearms to protect themselves against all the other illegal guns out there.

The few studies on the subject invariably admit nobody really knows how many weapons are in circulation and there’s no way of finding out. According to a report issued in 2013 by the NGO ‘Small Arms Survey’ some 440,000 guns are in private hands, of which 55,000 are supposedly registered.

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But let’s not forget, dear reader, the one lesson we’ve learned the hard way over the years: no matter how bad things get in Nepal they can always get worse.

Movements become the goal: in the end you can’t even count them. One gun leads to another… and as Maoists raided government armories and extorted money to buy more weapons the situation went from bad to worse. In 2003 the government responded by distributing guns to newly formed vigilante squads called Village Defense Leagues. The rationale was a sign of desperate times: people needed protection against marauding gangs of armed Maobaddies and their side-kick Khaobaddies. With the state under constant attack, all pretence of arms control was abandoned and many of these weapons ended up in the hands of the very same people they were meant to protect against. If you think that’s ridiculous, read on.

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The cold wave that swept Nepal for the past month is giving way to slightly elevated, and more normal, daily temperature range. This will not last. The warmer air is due to a change in wind direction caused by an approaching westerly system that is expected to bring partial cloud cover over Central Nepal and Kathmandu from Friday. The higher reaches will see the first snow flurries of the season by Saturday, ending a two-month drought. The mid-Valley may also see some precipitation. This clouds will bring down the maximum temperature, but the heat trapping property of the clouds will raise minimum temperatures. The clouds will be fast-moving, and will induce thicker morning mist in Kathmandu, the mid-hill valleys as well as the Tarai.

KATHMANDU

HELPING TOGETHER: IRW officer Bilal Aqmad Zargar (left) and LWF officer Chenyen Nekor (right), together with a volunteer hand over construction materials to Nirmala BK in Kalikasthan of Rasuwa.

REBUILDING OURSELVES

A Muslim relief agency joining hands with a Christian organisation to help Buddhist earthquake survivors in a largely Hindu country may sound implausible but that is exactly what happened in Rasuwa earlier this month.

In August, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW) signed an agreement to cooperate in humanitarian relief efforts, a first collaboration of its kind in Nepal. Since then the two organisations have supported quake survivors in five VDCs of Rasuwa district.

“Faith based organisations working together to reach out to the most vulnerable show the way forward towards solidarity and social harmony in a divided world,” says LWF Nepal Country Director Prakhi Manadhar.

The group recently distributed construction materials to build shelter and toilets to the people of Yarsa, a remote village of Rasuwa. The construction materials were a welcome gift for many in this Dalit village who have been braving the winter in animal sheds and under tarpaulin shelter.

“I feel so relieved today”, said Sita BK, 42, “having a toilet of our own will make a big difference.”

The mother of three will however have to manage the construction of her new shelter and toilet by herself as her husband is away working in Malaysia. Like BK, many of those who walked several hours to reach Kalikasthan, where the supplies were being distributed, were mothers with young children. Their husbands are migrant workers in Qatar and Malaysia.

Forty-year old Subha BK who walks with the help of an artificial leg said: “Life became difficult after I became disabled and my wife left me. But I am supported by my friends. With their help and thanks to these materials I can build myself a better shelter.”

However, there were others like Dhan Bahadur BK, 60, who worried about rebuilding his home in the same location. “No place is safe in our village. Unless the government provides us with land in a safer area we will continue to feel vulnerable.”

In the first phase of the collaboration between LWF Nepal and IRW, with the help of local partner Manikor Society, construction materials were provided to over 2,000 families.

In a world marked by religious strife the unique interfaith partnership stands as an inspiring example. Says IRW’s Regional Humanitarian Manager Umair Hasan: “Community integration and religious tolerance does not make for good headlines. But through this partnership we want to send a strong message to the world. It’s a message of religious harmony and humanitarianism.”

RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS SHOW SOLIDARITY WITH EARTHQUAKE SURVIVORS IN RASUWA

LUCIA DE VRIES
**Events**

**Renewable energy expo**, An exhibition of renewable energy technologies organised by Alternative Energy Promotion Centre. 1-3 January, BhrikutiMandap, Exhibition Road

**Leadership workshop**, Learn the ABCs of leadership with Abdus Miya, founder of Open Space Nepal. 7 to 11 January, 3 to 5pm, registration: info@leadershipcorner.org, 9801115094

**CAN Info-tech**, Don’t miss the year’s most exciting info-tech and entertainment conference. 26 January to 2 February. 5pm onwards, Brirkuti Monda, Pradarshani Marg

**SparkX Nepal**, Join a group of 15 entrepreneurs and take advantage of the support and connections to build your business. 9 to 17 April, registration: sparkinternational.org/sparkx

**Farmers’ market**, Local producers gather to sell organic vegetables, dairy products, artisanal bread and pastries and home-made goodies. Every Saturday, (01)4886087, 9823201777

**Creative Rendezvous**, Workshop on 3D artwork using papier mâché, clay and cloth with Rajesh Yadav. Rs 2,600. satpaa.org/creative-rendezvous

**Red Carpet**, Look down at the busy and happening Darbar Marg while dining at a lavish, cozy place that serves mouthwatering cuisines. Sherpa Mall, Darbar Marg, (01)4257705

**Le Trio**, Amazing high-tea and others from this cozy eatery. Restaurant lane, Jhamsikhel, (01)4259075

**Irish Pub**, Don’t miss Kathmandu’s most hip and happening pub. Andrea Bhakta, Lipnapa, (01)4416027

**Meze by Roadhouse**, Spot a superstar at one of Kathmandu’s most popular restaurant. Mercantile Plaza, Darbar Marg, (01)4231807

**Tribute to Bon Jovi**, Miracles will perform the ultimate tribute to Bon Jovi. 23 January, 3pm, Purple Haze Rock Bar, Thamel

**Irish Pub**, Don’t miss Kathmandu’s most hip and happening pub. Andrea Bhakta, Lipnapa, (01)4416027

**Embassy**, Away from the hustle bustle of the streets, enjoy the variety of multi-cuisines foods at a place ideal for business meets and casual rendezvous. Pashupatinath, (01)4414548

**Donate a blanket**

One of Nepal’s most popular online shopping sites, Sasto Deal, has launched its ‘Donate a blanket’ campaign.

Each blanket costs Rs 500. So far, Sasto Deal has received pledges of over 700 blankets from donors in Nepal and from around the world and has distributed over 200. The blankets collected will go to the victims of the earthquake in Gorkha, Dhading, Sindupalchok and villages on the outskirts of Kathmandu.

Donors can pay for the blankets through Sanjava Bank, Nepal Investment Bank or Esewa and can also submit the payment at Sasto Deal Office in Tripureshwar. International donors can make their payments through Paypal. sastodeal.com/page/donate-a-blanket

**Atithi Resort & Spa**

Tucked away in a quiet neighbourhood just about five minutes of walk away from the lakeside, Atithi Resort & Spa in Pokhara provides a complete relaxation package. The hotel offers modern facilities and is well-known for its spa and yoga experience.

Especially for those coming back from a long exhausting trekking trip and seeking for some leisure in the hotel, Atithi will definitely be a good choice.

Get a good night’s sleep away from the lakeside buzzle, and greet the new day from the sun-bathed balcony facing Mt. Macchapuchre, get a soothing massage to ease the sore muscles and exhaustion, then a drink or a doze under the warm afternoon sun in the garden... there’s so much more you can enjoy, on your own, or with family and friends.

Atithi would not let gourmets down with its talented staff at the restaurant.

The breakfast buffet is generous, offering a wide range of both Nepali and western-style foods. Whether you are seeking healthy oatmeal with hot milk, or an appetising curry with rice, Atithi would not let gourmets down with its talented staff at the restaurant.

**Music**

**Recalling 90s grunge**, Ali Stars, Sound Chains Pilots and Newaz will conjure up the awesome 90s grunge 26 February, 1pm. Purple Haze Rock Bar, Thamel

**Guitar Fest 2016**, A guitar competition for all music lovers. Auditions from Jan 18 to 28, Sushila Arts Academy, 9846405554

**Tangal Underside**, Head-bang in this winter tour of the Underside January 2, 2pm onwards, Club 25 Hours, Tangel

**Leaderboard (North Face Kathmandu Ultra)**

Get primed up for hip hop in one of Nepal’s biggest international street dance festivals; winners will take away cash prizes. 2 January, 10am to 3pm, GAA Hall, Thamel

**Street dance festival**, An exhibition of renewable energy technologies organised by Alternative Energy Promotion Centre. 1-3 January, BhrikutiMandap, Exhibition Road

**North Face Kathmandu Ultra**, Get primed up for hip hop in one of Nepal’s biggest international street dance festivals; winners will take away cash prizes. 2 January, 10am to 3pm, GAA Hall, Thamel

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**Guitar Fest 2016**, A guitar competition for all music lovers. Auditions from Jan 18 to 28, Sushila Arts Academy, 9846405554

**Tangal Underside**, Head-bang in this winter tour of the Underside January 2, 2pm onwards, Club 25 Hours, Tangel

**Leadership workshop**, Learn the ABCs of leadership with Abdus Miya, founder of Open Space Nepal. 7 to 11 January, 3 to 5pm, registration: info@leadershipcorner.org, 9801115094

**CAN Info-tech**, Don’t miss the year’s most exciting info-tech and entertainment conference. 26 January to 2 February. 5pm onwards, Brirkuti Monda, Pradarshani Marg

**SparkX Nepal**, Join a group of 15 entrepreneurs and take advantage of the support and connections to build your business. 9 to 17 April, registration: sparkinternational.org/sparkx

**Farmers’ market**, Local producers gather to sell organic vegetables, dairy products, artisanal bread and pastries and home-made goodies. Every Saturday, (01)4886087, 9823201777

**Creative Rendezvous**, Workshop on 3D artwork using papier mâché, clay and cloth with Rajesh Yadav. Rs 2,600. satpaa.org/creative-rendezvous

**Red Carpet**, Look down at the busy and happening Darbar Marg while dining at a lavish, cozy place that serves mouthwatering cuisines. Sherpa Mall, Darbar Marg, (01)4257705

**Le Trio**, Amazing high-tea and others from this cozy eatery. Restaurant lane, Jhamsikhel, (01)4259075

**Irish Pub**, Don’t miss Kathmandu’s most hip and happening pub. Andrea Bhakta, Lipnapa, (01)4416027

**Meze by Roadhouse**, Spot a superstar at one of Kathmandu’s most popular restaurant. Mercantile Plaza, Darbar Marg, (01)4231807

**Tribute to Bon Jovi**, Miracles will perform the ultimate tribute to Bon Jovi. 23 January, 3pm, Purple Haze Rock Bar, Thamel
When 24-year-old Prativa Bogati (pic) was a young girl her gaze would constantly be up at the sky, watching paragliders above the lake. She dreamt that one day she’d like to fly like them. Her dream has been fulfilled, today Bogati is one of four Nepali women who are licensed commercial paragliding pilots.

Since it was introduced as an adventure sport 19 years ago, paragliding has become the mainstay of Pokhara’s tourist attraction. The field used to be dominated by men, and still is with more than 100 male pilots in the business. But women are making inroads.

Bogati got her license three years ago, and believes women are discouraged both by the high cost of training and lack of family support for them to enter a male domain. “Although my husband was supportive, my family wasn’t too pleased with my choice, they thought I was crazy for trying to make a career out of jumping off mountains,” Bogati laughs.

Bogati worked as a receptionist at a paragliding company while simultaneously undergoing her flight training which lasted two years and cost Rs 1.7 million. Her husband, who ran a café in Pokhara, financed her classes but the money was still not enough. So, the couple took a bank loan.

But years of struggle seemed worth it when she flew her first passenger as a tandem pilot. Her son was one of her first clients. “He is happy and proud to say his mom is a paragliding pilot,” says Bogati.

Bharat Timilsina, the owner of FlyNepal Paragliding Company, is proud to have Bogati among his crew and says she is one of his most popular pilots. “There are many customers who ask specifically for her to pilot their paraglider,” he says.

There is a shortage of commercial paraglider pilots, and Timilsina says women fliers like Bogati have proven that women can be as professional as the male pilots.

Yogesh Bhattachari of the Nepal Airports Association says there’s no gender bias in the paragliding industry and the association is now trying to increase the involvement of women in the field by sponsoring the training for young women. For her part, Bogati believes if one is hardworking and professional, gender should not matter, and predicts there will be more young women like her training to be pilots. In fact, women pilots have themselves become a tourist attraction. This week three Chinese tourists insisted on being photographed with Bogati as she unfurls her parachute for another jump off Sarangkot this week. Bogati says: “If men can do it, so can we.”

www.facebook.com/FLY-NEPAL-Paragliding
How do you reboot what arguably the most beloved cinematic franchise in the world? These days it seems all you have to do is call in J.J. Abrams, the man responsible for the excellent Star Trek (2009) origins film, its sequel Star Trek Into Darkness (2013), and before that a number of smash TV hits such as Fringe, Lost, and Alias, some of the most talked about, wildly inventive sci-fi shows in the past 15 years.

Abrams helms this seventh installment (the plan is to make another trilogy) of the Star Wars films with great skill, co-writing and directing with an ease and confidence that stems from being a lifelong fan of the original core material. The 49-year-old film savant (he writes, composes musical scores for his material, and produces) is adept at sifting through and separating the key ingredients of old favourites, adapting the best elements into tight, action packed, humour filled scripts that are tailored as homages to the films that inspired him through his childhood.

This is a very good thing for all of us who grew up loving the original Star Wars films, because while there’s plenty for the Millennial generation in terms of cool spaceships (there is another Death Star), and operatic intergalactic warfare, there is also more than enough for those who have an incurable nostalgia for light sabers, cute beeping robots, exaggerated, intricate hairdos, black masked villains with altered voices, and, of course, some very furry aliens that communicate largely by wailing and roaring.

That is probably the most I can say without entering into the now dangerous territory known as “spoiling” – but I cannot really leave you with just a paean to Abrams. The Force Awakens has taken its life from the imagination of the gifted writer/director, but it also boasts a number of new talents that spin it out of the realm of being just a continuation of the Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia, and Han Solo’s stories (all these roles are reprised by the original cast that really need not be named individually) bringing in new, fascinating character arcs that introduce a fresh line of Jedis, some of whom have already gone over to the dark side.

Much has already been made of the new ensemble cast members, hyperbolising their potential to become the new stars of their generation. While time will indeed tell, after all Carrie Fisher and Mark Hamill are immortalised by the original Star Wars films but never achieved much subsequently, the fresh faces, in particular that of Daisy Ridley who plays the gamine, naturally gifted pilot Rey (there’s a hint for you right there), leaves you at the end of a breath-taking film really wanting more.
CIVIL AVIATION AUTHORITY OF NEPAL

(An autonomous regulatory body established on 31st December 1998 under Civil Aviation Act 1996 has been set up with the objective of ensuring flight safety & sustainability of Civil Aviation)

We extend our best wishes & hearty congratulations
to Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal
on its glorious 17th anniversary

Happy New Year - 2016
A year ago the Center for Investigative Journalism had carried out an investigation which exposed the trend of ambulance drivers being paid commission to bring patients to Kathmandu hospitals. New investigations reveal the malpractice is still rampant in the city, with most big name hospitals involved.

Ambulance drivers bringing patients to Kathmandu first phone hospital officials, and negotiate a price. If the patient is suffering from a critical ailment, and is likely to be admitted for a longer time, drivers receive higher commission.

As an ambulance driver, this reporter spoke to officials of 10 different hospitals in the city, and found a similar deal. “Of course, we will pay you. That’s just how the times are,” said Sandip, an official at Bajraklipi Hospital.

Shrinkhala Lamsal of Lalitpur-based City Center Hospital agreed to pay Rs 15,000 while Basanta Khadka of Vajradhara Hospital promised a cut from the patient’s final bill. Another well reputed hospital, Norvic, was also found to be involved in this malpractice.

The hospital’s deputy general manager Hanuman Golchha said he’d pay up to Rs 6,000 per patient (see conversation below).

Most negotiations, an ambulance driver informed, are done over the phone. Some wary officials, however, ask to meet in person.

Doctors were also found to have provided confidential information of patients to hospital officials before their negotiation with ambulance drivers.

Other hospitals that are guilty of this practice include International Friendship Children’s Hospital, Shivajee Hospital, Akro Hospital, Ganeshman Singh Hospital, Jayamahal Hospital and Hans Hospital.

In the past, some hospitals were known to present motorcycles as ‘bumper gifts’ to ambulance drivers who brought them many patients.

Meanwhile the Ministry of Health, Nepal Medical Council and the local administration continue to turn a blind eye to this misconduct in the medical sector.

It is true that Madhesi protesters are doing the same to belittle the Front and weaken the Madhes movement.

The biggest lie spread by the ruling parties is that the new constitution has given no rights to Madhesi people. It is said it has only brought the Madhesi people to the front.

In the past, some hospitals in the Tarai used limited force to quell protests. But this time in the Tarai political movements in its recent history, and stone-throwing was violent. Nepal has witnessed several violent. Nepal has witnessed several

Madhesi leader Rajendra Mahato was injured in a clash as he tried to block the Nepal-India border check-point in Biranagar on Saturday. He then walked to the Indian side, but was taken back to Golden hospital in Biranagar by an ambulance. He sustained a minor injury to his head, and doctors wanted him to discharge after bandaging his wound.

However, Mahato asked doctors to conduct a CT Scan and photos of him doing the tests spread on social networking sites, prompting Madhesi protesters to vandalise and torch public property in Janakpur.

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The Reconstruction Authority finally has a chief, but now there is no money for helicopters

The government has earmarked Rs 91 billion for reconstruction in this year’s budget, and some donors like China, Germany, the World Bank and the ADB have already signed separate agreements of their pledged money with the Ministry of Finance.

“We now have more than enough money to begin reconstruction,” says Baikuntha Aryal, Chief of the Budget and Program Division at the MoF. “We are ready to disburse money as and when the Authority requires it.”

Donors who had pledged money for Nepal’s reconstruction at a Kathmandu conference in June 2015 are now racing to sign agreements with the MoF. “We are grateful that the reconstruction authority now has its CEO,” said Kenichi Yokoyama, the Country Director of the Nepal Resident Mission of the Asian Development Bank (ADB). “We have already lost several months, and we need to work faster and harder to make up for it.”

However, the road ahead is not smooth. If the past is any guide, Gyewali will face formidable political interference. Pokharel was the NC candidate for the post and lost his job because Oli did not support him. Pokharel has another word of warning for Gyewali: “The $4.1 billion will not be enough, and it will be a huge challenge to meet the cost of reconstruction.”

The donor pledge is also conditional on the money being spent efficiently and without leakage. Yokoyama of the ADB warns: “It will be difficult for us to provide the remaining 50-70 per cent if the reconstruction project funded by us is not completed by 2017. Implementation is therefore critical.”

But even before that, Gyewali’s priority is to save earthquake survivors from dying of hypothermia and infections during this unusually bitter winter. However, just when delivering earthquake relief to remote villages is needed more than ever, the World Food Programme (WFP) has run out of money for its helicopter flights.

The UN Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) coordinated by the WFP carried out 4,784 sorties in the last eight months, transporting 876 tons of food and 1,763 tons of supplies to remote mountain villages. But the UNHAS terminated its service on 31 December meaning that the lifeline for most earthquake shelters in remote areas will be cut.

This week the European Union announced Rs 340 million for the WFP to deliver shelter and emergency relief to mountain communities, but this money is not for helicopter charters. If the delivery of winter supplies to the two million people in temporary shelters is Gyewali’s first priority, then his first big huddle will be transportation.
Few here remember a winter as difficult as this one.

SEULKI LEE IN GORKHA

Life has always been hard in villages among the narrow valleys and towering, jagged snow peaks of northern Gorkha, but few here can remember a winter as difficult as this.

First it was the earthquake on 25 April, then there was the problem of transportation caused by the Indian blockade and the fuel crisis.

With its epicentre just 20km northwest of the district capital, northern Gorkha bore the brunt of the earthquake as the mountains were torn apart. Huge landslides wiped trails off the map. The gashes are still visible on the steep slopes above the Budi Gandaki gorge.

Not a single house was left standing on the ridge-top settlement of Sipchet here in the Tsum Valley, a finger of Nepal that juts out into the Tibetan plateau behind Ganesh Himal. With the trails cut, survivors among the 37 families were left to fend for themselves with only occasional helicopter flights — the only contact with the outside world.

“Everyone here has been sleeping in tents for last eight months,” says Gopal Lama, 49. “There are no toilets, no drinking water.”

After a while, even the helicopter flights became less frequent as operators ran out of aviation fuel due to the Indian blockade.

Winter clothes and supplies did not arrive on time, and villagers in Tsum and the neighbouring Nubri Valley were left to fend for themselves.

From Thursday, the UN’s World Food Programme (WFP) which had handled helicopter charters, stopped emergency flights because it ran out of money (see page 13). Relief agencies that were coordinating assistance for health and education clusters have also stopped work as of 31 December.

Much of the emergency supply for winter like sleeping bags, smokeless cooking stoves and tarps which were to have been distributed by now, have been stuck at the Indian border for months. The backlog will be even more difficult and expensive to deliver to Upper Gorkha. A Mi-17 helicopter of WFP could carry up to four tons of cargo at a time, but the smaller Écureuil AS350 will take four days to transport the same payload even with an external sling.

“We have delivered only half the winterrisation packages in Gorkha, the other half is proving to be a challenge,” says Sudip Joshi of People in Need, a Czech charity.

The Oli government announced it was distributing Rs 10,000 per family to buy winter clothes. Relief workers see this as a publicity stunt, since most people in remote areas have to walk several days to Seti Khola and catch a bus to Gorkha to buy a jacket.

In Gorkha, there are more than 2,000 households in camps living inside huts made of corrugated sheets. Without insulation it is now bitterly cold and condensation falling from under the roof is becoming a problem.

Even when they are available, the price of essentials have shot up, and income from trekking was reduced to a trickle as tourism collapsed. Schools are now closed for the winter, and the few health posts in the region don’t have staff or sufficient medicines.

Helicopters ferrying in supplies used to take sick patients to hospitals in Gorkha, but now even the flights are uncertain.

The Oli government was woken up and rushed to Kathmandu on Sunday. An Écureuil helicopter carries a load of blankets in a sling payload from Gorkha to Uya.

A helicopter lands in Uyo to take women and children down from the cold to warmer Gorkha.

A model vermilion-washed house under construction in Sipchet village in Tsum Valley was completely destroyed in the earthquake, and most of its 37 families have been living in temporary shelters.

Families who survived the earthquake are now fighting the winter chill.

DAMBAR K SHRESTHA IN SINDU Ralph CH

On a freezing morning last week, 65-year-old Sanman Majhi woke up before dawn and left his tin hut to collect firewood. His tattered clothes did not protect him from the biting cold, he was found lying unconscious on a frost-covered field nearby.

Majhi’s oldest son, Purna, was woken up and rushed to the spot to find some villagers trying unsuccessfully to revive his
of the cold

The Manaslu Trail was becoming a popular alternative to the Annapurna Circuit and the Everest Base Camp trek. But after the earthquake destroyed the trails, the flow of trekkers is drawn to a trickle. Only the brave and really adventurous have been coming through.

It has been difficult even for villagers, who have to walk down the valley to buy essential supplies. “We had to crawl up and down the slopes like four-footed animals,” says 50-year-old Dawa Dorje from Namrung, “it was very difficult for us, especially the elders.”

The villages Lho, Namrung and Ghap which were on the trekking route to Larkya Pass have hardly seen any trekkers since April. Trails in the Nubri and Tsum Valleys are also badly damaged. One trekker who went through in October left the following warning in a lodge guestbook: ‘Some trekkers lost their way because of the landslides and dangerous trails.’

Fortunately, some of the damaged trails are being repaired under a ‘Food for Work’ program supported by WFP both for relief distribution and to revive trekking like the trail from Ghap to Namrung (above). The Manaslu Conservation Area Project says most of the Manaslu Trail is now fine, except below Philim. And if that is repaired over the next few months, the Larkya Traverse will be open in the spring season.
Strange things start happening to a nation when a largish southward neighbour insists on squeezing its nuts, and won’t let go. Survival instincts take over and the squeeze comes up with ingenious ways to get back at the squezer in order to survive. We gird up our loins with renewed vigour to safeguard our national manhood. And in the absence of LPG cylinders, diesel and electricity, we set fire to the canisters to heat our homes.

It’s that time of the year again when each of us individually (and in semi-underground criminal gangs engaged in smuggling fuel across the border) have a choice: is it really such a good idea to embark on a new year at this point in time? I mean, do we actually want to go through another 365 days of this? If your answer is in the affirmative, and you have made up your mind to plunge headfirst into 2016 then go ahead, take the bull by the horns of its dilemma in a china shop, and wish you godspeed.

May your remaining days in 2016 be filled with joy, prosperity, happiness, and a full cylinder of liquid petroleum at not less than 32 psi. May you have to wait less than 48 hours for 2 litres of petrol. May load shedding in your neighbourhood follow the schedule and, if it does, not exceed 12 hours a day. May your flush tank always be half-full of water, and not half-empty. May there be oxygen in the Intensive Care Unit when you wheeze in. May your transformer not explode when they switch on the electric crematorium.

On a more cheerful note, let me say that I know from past experience that new year resolutions, once made, are difficult to keep. However hard we try, by January the fifth, we are back to being grouchy and cantankerous. We try, by January the fifth, to keep warm by committing arson on the effigy of KPOji and harbouring an unexplicable urge for 5 litres of petrol. May load shedding in your neighbourhood follow the schedule and, if it does, not exceed 12 hours a day. May your flushing tank always be half-full of water, and not half-empty. May there be oxygen in the Intensive Care Unit when you wheeze in. May your transformer not explode when they switch on the electric crematorium.

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We need new year resolutions that are realistic, can stand up to peer review, and which we can actually take to the implementation phase. In view of the above, therefore, I have drawn up my personal list of new year resolutions which are not copyright and may be reproduced, stored in, introduced into a retrieval system, plagiarised, and transmitted in any form (digital, analog, Bluetooth or as an analog, Bluetooth or as an

1. I will try my best to be grossly and cantankerous throughout the coming year. After all, what is there to be cheerful about?
2. I will take up smoking as a hobby in the new year as part of a personal effort to reduce my life to a premature end.
3. Since it causes ulcer, I will stop drinking tea. And take up Jack Daniels instead.
4. I will try to read a book in 2016.
5. Cross my heart, I’ll desist from making utterances that may be construed to be anti-Indian within earshot of the CIAA, I will only utter them after debugging my apartment.
6. I will spend less time aimlessly stalking random people on Facebook this year, and spend more quality time exercising (this from my belly button.
7. I will not work harder than I have to. I will not do today what I can do tomorrow.
8. We will hold our head high in the international community and tell a certain imaginary country to the South whose capital is made up of two words that begin with ‘N’ and ‘D’ that they needn’t bother officially lifting the unofficial blockade because we’re all raking it in.
9. In the new year we shall refrain from our national pastime of picking our noses in public, and if perchance, our fingers involuntarily start exploring hitherto uncharted sections of our nasal orifice we shall wash our hands with soap. (Only soap, since water is going to be even more scarce this year.)
10. I will try to convince the Oli government to allow me to be an adviser to the newly-formed Ministry of Livestock in the spirit of inclusion, since donkeys are under-represented in a Cabinet dominated by Brahmin bulls. And as long as I am at it, I will also lobby to bifurcate the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Horticulture, Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Horticulture, Ministry of Aquaculture, the Ministry of Monoculture and Ministry of Counterculture.
11. I will endeavour to make a complete list of new year resolutions which are not copyright and may be reproduced, stored in, introduced into a retrieval system, plagiarised, and transmitted in any form (digital, analog, Bluetooth or as an
terrestrial radio message from the Arecibo Observatory aimed in the general direction of the globular star cluster M13) provided these suggestions are not attributed to the author or publisher in a court of law.

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