A
der 150 days of unrest in
the plains, four months
of border blockade, and
25 rounds of failed talks, a deal
between the Big Three parties and
the Madhesi Front finally appears
within reach.

A meeting of the top three
leaders on Thursday resolved to
ink a deal with the Front next
week, providing a face-saver
for India to fully lift a blockade
it never officially admitted to
imposing. The Front has already
backed down from its stance to
withdraw protests only when
federal boundaries are readjusted,
apparently after New Delhi
leaned on it. It is willing to
agree to an all-party mechanism
to redraw boundaries within a
certain timeframe.

But there is still disagreement
over the legitimacy, jurisdiction
and scope of the proposed
all-party mechanism. The
Front is now seeking a written
commitment from the three
parties that the mechanism
will be mandated to readjust
provincial boundaries.

Rajendra Shrestha, a Federal
Socialist Forum Nepal (FSPN)
leader who represents the
agitating side in the joint task-
force formed to prepare the
framework of a deal, told
Nepali
Times on Thursday: “A deal
is possible as and when the
ruling parties assure us that
the mechanism will create two
identity-based provinces in the
Tarai without breaking ethnic
clusters.”

The ruling UML-UCPN
coalition and the main opposition
NC are afraid that Madhesi
leaders will gain the upper
hand in future negotiations if
they now promise to create two
provinces encompassing the
whole Tarai. They are ready to
give legitimacy to the mechanism
by getting it passed by Parliament
or adding a clause about it in the
constitution, but they rule out
any commitment on the number
of provinces in the plains or their
boundaries.

NC negotiator Mahesh
Acharya proposed to “reopen
and revisit” all issues after a joint
taskforce meeting this week,
while Deputy Prime Minister
Bijaya Gachhadar, the only
Madhesi leader in the UML-
led government, rejected the
demand for two Tarai provinces,
arguing for a third for his Tharu
community.

UML whip Gokul Prasad
Gharti said the Madhesi parties
were under pressure to show
flexibility as India had agreed
to begin customs clearance
for Nepal-bound goods from
Raxaul once a deal is reached.
He told us: “The Indian Prime
Minister promised our Prime
Minister during their telephone
conversation that the blockade
will be lifted when parliament
passes the amendment.”

The three parties and the
Madhesi Front are due to reach
an agreement by Monday and
Parliament is expected to
convene on Tuesday, 19 January.
Already there are signs of the
blockade easing, as all Indian
border checkpoints barring
Birganj are now fully open. Even
fuel tankers stranded in Raxaul
are being rerouted through other
checkpoints.

Om Astha Rai
Sufficiently low frequency, causing damage to older mud brick buildings and monuments but sparing most ferrocement structures. These and other lucky factors, like that the main earthquake struck on a Saturday afternoon, saved many lives. Based on the number of classrooms that were completely destroyed, it is estimated that 75,000 children could have died had the quake happened on a weekday. Seismologists say that there are now two looming dangers. One is that tectonic tension underneath the central Nepal block was not completely dissipated. This could be set off slowly and safely through what scientists call ‘creep’, but the rock strata could also snap without warning causing a major earthquake epicentred south of Kathmandu. A similar double whammy occurred during the 1833 and 1866 earthquakes in eastern Nepal, when tectonic tension stored underground was not fully released in the main event.

The other even more nightmarish scenario is the seismic gap in western Nepal between Pokhara and Dehradun in India where there hasn’t been a major earthquake for over 500 years, and the accumulated energy could lead to a sudden crustal shift of up to 11m. This is a ticking time bomb, and when (not if) it strikes, it could be a 8.5 magnitude event that will devastate western Nepal, the cities in the Indo-Gangetic plains and also Kathmandu. The April 2015 Earthquake will pale in comparison.

On National Earthquake Safety Day, we should remember not to forget what happened nine months ago. We should be conscious of the fact that we got off relatively lightly. The earthquake was a warning for us to redesign and build seismic resistant homes, schools and public buildings, have a preparedness plan tested for coordination, and be ready not just in the 15 affected districts, but in all 75. It is worth reminding ourselves that earthquakes don’t kill people, weak houses and bad planning do. Earthquakes should not be considered ‘natural’ disasters, they are manmade. There is a false sense of security among Nepalis after April that multi-storey concrete structures are safer. They will actually be terrible death traps in the next Big One. The earthquake stirred us, but did not shake us out of our complacency and fatalism. There are many towering substandard buildings that will crumble unless we heed the lessons from 2015.
A fter months of inconclusive talks, a breakthrough is being expected between the Madhesi parties and the government to resolve the current crisis. Leaders from both sides have hinted broadly at a possible agreement. The blockade at the Indian border has eased at most points except Birganj. It is possible that the Madhes movement, like most movements that preceded it, will culminate in a back-room power-sharing deal even though underlying issues remain unaddressed.

With us, or against us

Those blindly supporting the tactics of the Madhesi Front are the ones who have harmed the Madhesi people the most

It is only a matter of time before disillusionment sets in again among those who supported the Madhesi Front despite their use of violence, terror and a border blockade. But amidst all this the most worrying trend has been the deepening polarization between the hill and plains communities in Nepal.

All of a sudden, we were being asked to choose sides. You are either a supporter of the Madhesi and the marginalised or you are their enemies. This with-us-or-against-us mentality is so strong that Madhesi who dare raise their voice against the Front’s terror tactics and their support for the Indian blockade are immediately branded traitors.

By contrast, every atrocity of the Madhesi Front is defended or dismissed as a fringe incident including setting people on fire and the bombing of public transport. The blockade was vociferously supported by a section of Madhesi activists as if it was a fundamental right, ignoring that millions of Nepalis — including the Madhesi people themselves — are suffering because of it. Many got around the dilemma of defending the indefensible by saying they support the movement but not the blockade. But few dared challenge the Madhesi leaders to change their methods. Instead of strong and forthright condemnation of the blockade and the violence, we were served with ‘if’ and ‘but’ justifications.

The division has deepened to such an extent that people talk only about killings committed by the other side. People’s lives matter only if they are affiliated to one group or the other. As a Madhesi, it pains me to see our politics and public discourse deteriorate to such an extent. Are there any values that we won’t compromise with or does the end justify all means? Does being from the ‘oppressed’ community absolve the Madhesi leaders of all responsibility for their actions?

As someone who has been at the receiving end of these labels, I can only say that those blindly supporting the Madhesi Front and its tactics are the ones who have harmed the Madhesi people the most. Is this struggle about equality, justice and rights or about revenge-seeking? How are we any different from those who have oppressed us if we see no problem in forcing millions of our own people to suffer to have demands met? And if indeed current methods are successful in forcing the government to fulfill all demands, would that be a victory for Madhesi people or can co-exist, who insist violence is the only way and who have no qualms sowing seeds of long-term ethnic discord for immediate political gain. Whether the Madhes movement will endure and achieve its true goals will ultimately depend on how soon the Madhesi people are able to see through the deception of their leaders.

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Ham radio to the rescue

Amateur radio can be a vital source of information in the aftermath of future disasters

SARTHAK MANI SHARMA

A phone lines were severed the internet went down in Nepal after last April earthquake, the only way Manju Sunar could find out if her daughter was safe was to ask an amateur radio operator in France, who was able to contact another radio hobbyist in Nepal who then sent people out on motorcycles and friend Sunar’s daughter safe.

Amateur radio enthusiasts, called ham operators, can speak to each other across the world through shortwave transmitters. The 2.5 million licensed operators communicate through voice or Morse code, a method of sending messages in a series of electronic pulses. With additional equipment, operators can even attach files and send emails through radio signals alone.

Though primarily taken up as a hobby, these devices become crucial in times of disaster when all other methods of communication fail as happened in Nepal, or during the tsunami in 2004, when ham radio operators coordinated rescue.

“We probably helped search and rescue over 400 people,” says Pravin Joshi, a ham radio operator in Kathmandu.

Ham radio was introduced in Nepal by Marshall Moran, a Jesuit priest who established St Xavier’s School in Godawari in 1951. Over 50 years later in 2005, there were only five operators in the country. However, the number now has risen to 101, most of them based in Kathmandu.

“There is an increasing interest amongst Nepalis in ham radio (not just as a hobby) but also as a means of communication during emergencies. People have now understood its value,” says Lakmi Khadka, a media professional, who is one of 20 female operators in Nepal.

As soon as the earthquake struck, many Nepal ham radio operators worked to locate and rescue survivors. Some of them went to hospitals every day to receive lists of dead and injured persons so that they could answer queries from relatives and friends around the world.

Sahibe Kharel is a well known lawyer, but few know that he has been a licensed ham operator for over two decades. Last April, he worked with operators not just within Nepal but with ham enthusiasts in India, Portugal, Israel and elsewhere to answer questions about earthquake survivors.

“During power cuts I connected the radio equipment to my own car battery and got it to work,” Kharel reveals.

Operators in Kathmandu were at first at a loss when they started receiving queries about people at the epicenter in Buxa, when the village was cut off for many days. One amateur operator, Ramkrishna Muli, went to Buxa with his transceiver and battery, hung a dipole antenna on a tree and stayed in a tent to answer questions.

Though ham radios helped in search and rescue efforts, experts say their role was, unfortunately, limited. The ham radio station at NSIT-Nepal, an organisation that specializes in earthquake preparedness and recovery, broke down when it was damaged.

Anil Upadhyay, who oversaw Nestt’s communication after the earthquake, blamed the lack of training and poor practice for the inability to utilize ham radio. “We didn’t have a separate person in charge of overseeing ham radio operations,” he admitted.

There is little support from the government. Many countries host annual ‘field days’, amateur radio drills when operators are trained to coordinate search and rescue in mock emergencies and trained to make ham radio more effective and useful.

We asked an official at the Ministry of Information and Communications if the government has any policies to promote the use of ham radios in Nepal, especially during disasters. But it didn’t seem like much thought had been put into it besides conducting license tests for interested operators. The Ministry had stopped license tests in 1998, citing security concerns during the Maoist conflict.

For ham radio to become more effective during the next disaster, operators say there need to be more people interested and to set up a nationwide network of operators. Says Joshi: “Not many people have heard about ham radio. That needs to change.”

Joshi is active in organizing awareness programs on the uses of ham radio, and this week he will set up an event in which school children will communicate with astronauts at the International Space Station through a ham radio transmitter in Kathmandu.

He admits that amateur radio was seen to be a slightly expensive hobby in the past. But the cheapest equipment can now cost as little as Rs 10,000. The International Ham Amateur Radio Union also subsidises equipment for enthusiasts in many countries including Nepal.

“We definitely need more people to join in,” says Karki. "Engineers, teachers and journalists - everybody should follow ham radio as a pursuit and help tap its tremendous potential.”

So you want to be a Ham Operator?

They were developed long before the internet, but ham radios continue to draw loyal followers from around the world. Queen Noor of Jordan, King Juan of Spain and Bollywood superstar Amithabh Bachchan are some famous names who have maintained this hobby.

Ham radio has helped coordinate rescue and relief in emergencies such as the September 2001 attacks. Hurricane Katrina and the Haiti earthquake. Faster transmissions are now being developed so that operators can send any form of digital data through radio signals. With more advanced equipment, operators can also locate the GPS of their fellow during emergencies.

Today operators are also involved in creating their own gear, participating in contests and even trying their luck at tough tasks such as using the moon or a meteor trail to bounce off their radio signals.

In Nepal, Satish Kharel and his group of operators are helping Nepal Police set up, and train them to use, ham radios for emergency situations. Amateur radio enthusiasts must apply for a license at the Ministry of Information and Communications and sit for a written test that consists of questions on everything from electromagnetic theory to applications of ham radio. They will then be tested on the Morse code. Prospective applicants can reach out to Kharel at 6SN1AM@wcdn.org for help with testing preparations, use of equipment and for other information.
Exorcising the Indian ghost

The lesson from this blockade is that we must develop alternatives in sourcing and managing our energy supplies and some coal only with energy.

Even within state-owned companies, the government’s direct control is certainly increasing. New Delhi is under pressure from the stock exchange regulator to divest a bigger share of its companies to keep them publicly listed. In part, it is also because the markets have themselves become more dynamic, forcing government-owned companies to change. To adapt, they are fighting back by using them as a public policy tool. Last year, for example, New Delhi had to resort to a presidential directive to get Coal India Limited (CIL) to behave in a certain way because its board declined to tow the government line. The government owns 90 per cent of the shares in the company.

Third, although international energy companies have not yet been able to successfully penetrate the Indian energy market, India’s links with the international market in coal, oil and gas have become closer. The country is adding the internal infrastructure capacity to deliver imported energy across the country. There is, for instance, a network of natural gas pipelines connected to liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals that enable import of natural gas.

Today, India is a net exporter of petroleum products with complex refineries that offer some of the better margins in the world. In most cases, India’s dependence on foreign energy is being developed and managed by the private sector.

The evolution of India’s energy market offers Nepal an opportunity to de-politicize energy. In today’s context, energy vulnerability doesn’t stem from the risk that governments will shut off supplies. Outside Russia, perhaps, no one country can singularly affect supplies, and these days even Russia has to think at least twice. As this blockade so aptly demonstrates, energy shocks happen because energy supply chains are not built with big enough buffers to protect against political interference. Building northern road links to China for alternate supply sources is one option. A better idea may be to tap into opportunities extended by the evolution of India’s energy market. Closer ties with state governments, the private sector and international markets could create diversification and make energy supplies less vulnerable.

All of this requires clearer thinking on our side. Our approach must allow for greater complexity in how we source, contract and manage our energy supplies. We can’t engage with today’s energy markets if haste is the only form of financial contract we allow.

Most importantly, for energy independence our politicians must be able to bring in structural reforms that make themselves (ah, how do I put it) a little more redundant. The only reason we can’t catch ghosts is because our minds are haunted.

Bishal Thapa is the vice-chair of the Energy Development Council.
Near a deal

Fearful of anarchy and criminalisation, the Madhesi parties and Kathmandu are coming close to a deal, but will it last?

After many months of shadow boxing and posturing, the marathon sessions between the major parties and the Madhesi Front seem to be reaching an agreement on a new political framework under which the main demands for proportionate representation in all institutions of government, electoral constituencies based on population, and extending the provision of citizenship are being guaranteed.

The major demand of the Madhesi parties is the creation of a federal system with autonomy for the provinces in the Madhes, and an integral part of this is the demarcation of the boundaries of those provinces. The compromise being hammered out is that the future boundaries of the plains provinces will be decided by a high-level political committee within a stipulated timeframe. Having been double-crossed before, the Madhesi parties are doubtful about political committees — especially when the position of the two sides is so far apart. The Madhesi parties want a strong constitutional commitment about the political committee. “We know that political parties will once more go back on their word because they have done it before,” one Madhesi leader told me this week. “We already have our mind set on giving them another jolt in three months time if the demarcation doesn’t meet our demands.”

But for now, the Madhesi parties appear willing to sign an agreement.

According to an insider in one of the Madhesi parties, Kathmandu politicians are still dismissive of their demands for autonomy and fairness even after five months of agitation. So the Tarai-based parties have a two-pronged strategy: one is to go through with the agreement for now which will create some forward movement but in the longer term they want to keep their options open. This may mean relaunching the agitation in three months.

In a candid assessment of the current situation in the Tarai, the Nepal Army suggested to the government that there are four main problems: political, economic, social and defence. The crisis in India-Nepal relations and the problem of security.

The feeling in the Madhesi camp is that Kathmandu doesn’t really care about the situation in the Tarai, and is letting the uncertainty lead to anarchy. Already, the black market economy and the activities of organised crime are moving out of control of the government and the political leadership. That is one of the reasons the Madhesi parties feel a sense of urgency to sign an agreement. However, they worry that the agreement may not be respected.

No matter what the deal is, those on the ground in the Tarai will react with anger. It will not satisfy everyone, especially not the hardliners. However, the Madhesi parties also see the need to end the drift towards criminalisation and a breakdown in law and order. Such a situation benefits no one.

An agreement may bring temporary respite, and a return to normality along the border, but the real question is: will it last?

Navin Jha is a journalist writing on Madhesi issues and blogs at dalaangopal.com.

Imitating nature

Nepal’s most modern printing facility, Jagadamba Press, now makes natural colours come alive with its state-of-the-art equipment.
The drought conditions will continue into mid-January until the arrival of a westerly disturbance mid next week. Although there has been some precipitation in the higher valleys of the central Himalaya like Manang, Langtang and Rolwaling, the mid hills are parched. Next week's anticipated rain will break the spell. It will also result in a few really cold days where the maximum temperature is not likely to rise above 15 degrees. The rains will be followed by foggy mornings and bright sunshine more characteristic of Kathmandu winters. The weekend will see the sun shining through haze, with some passing clouds.

The Nepal Literature Festival returns for its fifth instalment since its inception in 2011, and for the first time it's being held outside of Kathmandu. Celebrated as the only international literary event in Nepal, this year's festivities will take place in the scenic town of Pardi, Pokhara, from 29 January to 1 February. Organised by the Bookworm Foundation, the event in the past has seen participation from renowned international writers including Shobhaa De, Farah Guznavi, Ned Beauman, and Vinod Mehta, among others.

This year, participants will get the chance to interact with more than one hundred local and international writers, journalists and politicians throughout the four-day event. More than 30 interactive sessions are scheduled to be held on topics ranging from literature, theatre and art to business, economics and politics. Key speakers include writer Ira Trivedi, literary historian Rakhshanda Jalil, filmmaker Uday Prakash and celebrated screenwriter Javed Akhtar.

More so than previous years, the Festival will showcase a diverse array of speakers and sessions. Events include a discourse on Naya Shakti with politicians Baburam Bhattarai, Gagan Thapa and Ghanshyam Bhusal. Actors Rajesh Hamal and Dayahang Rai will join writer Yagayshi to discuss what constitutes a 'hero' in Nepali films. Journalist Pradhan Jha will be in conversation with Barkha Dutt on her first book, The Unquiet Land: Stories from India's Fault Lines. nepalliteraturefestival.com

Lit-Fest in Laketown

This year’s Nepal Literature Festival will be held in Pokhara, with hopes of inspiring dialogue through an eclectic exhibition of art.

To find out more about this year’s event, Nepali Times caught up with Ajit Baral, director of the Festival.

Nepali Times: The festival has been organised since 2011. What is new this year?
Ajit Baral: The festival was more literature-focused in previous years, but the themes for this year are more diverse and will include politics, economics and much else. This is also the first time we are going to organise the festival in Pokhara.

Why did you choose Pokhara as the venue?
There are several reasons. We, the organisers, happen to be from Pokhara and we want to support the fledgling literary movement there. Everything seems to be centralised in Kathmandu and in terms of academic and literary activities, places outside the capital are left out. In fact, Pokhara is an ideal place for a literary festival. It is home to bands like Nepathya and is also known as the city of watercolor – painters love to come here and turn the beautiful scenes into art. Our festival’s venue, I hope, will help the economy recover after a particularly bad year for Nepal.

English language writing in Nepal appears to be limited. What will be the festival’s role in promoting such writing?
Yes, there aren’t a lot of English language writers – probably just five or six are reputed ones. In the festival we hope to identity what has been impeding English-language writing in the country. I hope our festival and its discussions will draw the attention of many aspiring writers to the opportunities for writing here.
Interview

I

playing outside as she works on

eye on her four-year-old son

Sukmaya Tamang keeps a careful

Tamang was devastated when she

wanted to join the Nepal Army, but

national army or taking a voluntary

choice of being integrated into the

years there, the guerrillas had a

Maoist fighters. At the end of three

supervised camps for the 19,000

people's liberation,” she recalled.

I first got to wear combat fatigue,

education, and I was thrilled when

me not to pursue the bourgeois

in the party. “They convinced

her village who were ‘whole-timers’

the Maoist militia by senior girls of

Thokarpa.

a Maoist gathering in nearby

helicopters dropped bombs on

was nearly killed when army

to an end. A month earlier, she

parliament and the conflict came

before king Gyanendera restored

guarding a telecom tower a day

attack an adjacent army base

District Hospital and used it to

April 2006 captured Chautara

1,000 Maoist guerrillas who in

Tamang was sent off to Shaktikhor,

peace accord in November 2006,

OM ASTHA RAI

EX-MINOR

EX-MAOISTS

Ten years after the conflict ended and exactly five years after they were discharged, former Maoist child soldiers are now in their 20s fighting for survival and against social stigma

was disqualified because she was

a minor at the time of signing of

the peace accord. She was among

2,972 Maoist guerrillas let go by

the UN because they were child

soldiers. Another 1,036 minors

were disqualified as they were

recruited only after the peace

deal, and just given bus fares to

go home and wait to sign up for

vocational training.

Five years after the UN-

supervised camps were dismantled

those disqualified for being 'minors' feel betrayed by the party

and stigmatised by society. “The

party dumped us,” says Pradip

Malangwa. He says: “Our

battles lost his closest friend in

Malangwa. He says: “Our

biggest mistake was to

quit school. When we were

discharged, it was too late to

go back to studying.”

The United Nations

Mission in Nepal (UNMIN)

offered vocational training

to discharged combatants.

But many who signed up

ended up learning nothing useful.

A former child soldier who was

trained to be a cook found no

one would hire him when they

found out he was a Maoist. Their

‘glorious’ party has split into five

factions, and their ‘revolutionary’

leaders have now become like the

politicians they once fought.

During the 1996-2006

conflict the Maoists recruited

children as spies, cooks, porters

and even front-line guerrillas.

As voume men became harder

to get, the Maoists

went to schools to

enlist children, indoctrinate them and

then destroyed the

classrooms.

Although the

UNMIN disqualified

about 3,000 ex-

combatants, the Maoist

leadership delayed their release for

three years so they could bargain

for bigger rehabilitation packages.

As a result, child soldiers were

released only when they had

grown into young adults. By then,

their rehabilitation had become

much more complex.

In 2010, the Maoist leadership

released the child soldiers without

substantial rehabilitation packages,

and did so only after fears that

they may be charged with using

minors in conflict. Maoist leaders

have never acknowledged their

use of child soldiers, either

justifying the use of child soldiers

or apologising to them and their

families.
Khadka Bahadur Ramtel (above) was just 11 when he was abducted, sent to indoctrination camp and recruited as a whole-timer by the Maoists. He is now 25, and married to Motisara Khadka, also a child soldier. Ramtel still vividly remembers the day a group of gun-wielding rebels stormed into his school and captured all the students.

“I was in the middle of writing a test,” he recalled, “they didn’t even let me submit the paper. They took us up a mountain and we had to learn about communism.”

The abducted students were then allowed to meet their families one last time before being trained to kill or die. “I had no choice,” Ramtel says, “they would have harmed my family if I hadn’t gone with them.”

So, in 2001, Ramtel left his village of Maila in the remote Humla district for the life of a guerrilla. His job was to deliver confidential letters to guerrillas. As a Dalit who had experienced discrimination, what appealed to Ramtel about the Maoists is that they did not believe in untouchability.

Ramtel got the nom de guerre ‘Samrat Birahi’ after joining the Maoist militia, but he was physically too weak to use heavy guns. “I was shorter than a rifle, so I was just trained to clean, maintain and repair guns, and also to make bombs,” he recalls.

At 13, his unit was sent to Jajarkot and two years later he took part in attacks on security bases in Surkhet and Banke districts. His commander was killed during an attack on an army checkpost on the East West highway, and he was so traumatised he nearly deserted. He says: “I wanted to go home, but there was no way out of the war.”

After the ceasefire in 2006, Ramtel was sent to a UN-supervised camp in Surkhet (in photo, above) where he fell in love with Motisara. Both were disqualified from joining the Nepal Army because they were minors during the war. Motisara is from a ‘high’ caste and her family did not accept Ramtel as their son-in-law. Despite raising arms against it, Ramtel found caste discrimination alive and accepted in his own village. The couple moved to Kathmandu, but found that they had no money and limited education. They took up construction work for the first two years.

Ramtel now drives a three-wheeler to feed his wife and young son. “The dream I had of an egalitarian society was an illusion,” he confided, resignation in his voice, “I have just woken up to reality, and it is very cruel.”

Om Astha Rai

LENIN BISTA, 24, is livid at the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) that supervised the demobilisation of Maoist guerrillas for classifying former Maoist child soldiers as ‘disqualified’ and not eligible to join the national army or opt for voluntary retirement. He says the term has been humiliating and has labeled them as failures in society. “We cannot go to our villages because we are looked down upon as ‘disqualified’ people,” says Lenin, who now heads an organisation of ex-child soldiers to seek reparations. He even led a group of other ‘disqualified’ child soldiers to attack UN vehicles in Chitwan.

They were promised by Maoist leaders Barsaman Pun and Janardan Sharma that the party would look after them. But when nothing happened, Bista laid siege to the Maoist party headquarters. Says Bista: “They must say sorry. The party wants to forget about us, but we will not let them forget.”

A BOY NAMED LENIN
Maghe Sankranti

For many, Maghe Sankranti immediately conjures up images of ghos choklu, tik ko laddu and other goodies in the mind. The first day of Magh, which falls on the 15th this month, is an event of special meteorological and religious significance for many ethnic groups in Nepal. Similar to many solstice festivals around the world, Maghe Sankranti or Magh as the Tharus call it, marks an end to the inauspicious month of Phous, in which all religious ceremonies are put on hold. Beginning this day, the sun is thought to start its northward journey after leaving its most extreme position in the south, bringing an end to the gloom and doom of cold days.

Ghous choklu (candies), tik ko laddu (balls of sesame seeds) and tarul (yam) are just some of the food items relished during Maghe Sankranti celebrations. For many, Maghe Sankranti immediately marks an end to the gloom and doom of cold days. Ghiu chaku (molasses), teel ko laddu (balls of sesame seeds) and tarul (yam) are just some of the food items relished during Maghe Sankranti celebrations.

The end of the universe,
Stay in a family-run hotel that is located atop Mahankali hill. It is believed to be one of the oldest hotels in the area. Mahankali Mandir, Nagarkot, Bhaktapur, 974150969

Sasto Deal is organising a ‘Donate a blanket’ program for victims of the earthquake in Gorkha, Dhading and Sindhupalchok. Contribute Rs 500 per blanket. info@sastodeal.com

Balthali Village Resort
A small, cozy retreat with a bird’s eye view of green terrace fields dotted with ochre-painted houses. Balthali, Kavre, 9851075818

Neydo Monastery, A monastery and guest house, Neydo is home to many significant religious sites of the great siddhas. Leave your troubles behind and book a room. Pharping, Kathmandu, www.neydohotel.com

Waterfront Resort, Head to this eco-friendly resort right in front of Phewa Lake. Self-Night, Pallikot, (01) 5466 369/34A, 9807166371, sales@waterfronthotel.com

Jhule mountain resort, Resting 2050m above sea level, the eco-resort boasts a farmhouse that stretches across a hill covered in fresh green. Enjoy an organic homestay experience. Shivapuri-Rajguraj National Park, Lapsi (Jhule), 01562/2298
A traveller’s tale

Upon entering the gallery space at Bikalpa Art Center & Cafe in Pulchok, you are greeted by three untitled photographs. The first is a group portrait of women, the second is an all-male group portrait, and the third shows damaged school buildings—all three images were captured during the April earthquake.

However, as you walk through ‘Yatri’, a photo exhibit by freelance photographer Kaushal Sapkota, you realise that it is more than just about the earthquake—it’s about life in Nepal in general.

In total, 35 photographs are displayed on three sides of the 16 by 34’ gallery hall. Each side evokes a different emotive experience to the yatri (meaning traveller in Nepali). The eleven photographs on the left convey the three major themes of life, solitude and peace, the right depict New York City. The keywords describing the Nepal side are ‘opportunity’, ‘migration’ and ‘spirituality’ while the words ‘makeover’, ‘Sisyphus’, and ‘9/11’ represent New York City.

Each image of the final section, as you turn to your right hand, has its own theme. Eight of the images are breathtaking scenes from Upper Mustang, Rara National Park. The traveller, still searching for answers about himself and human nature, becomes overwhelmed by the beauty of the natural landscape of the Himalayan range. One exemplary photograph entitled ‘Heaven on Earth’ captures the image of the holy site Muktinath with the expression: ‘God’s mystic creation’.

As you face forward, the images on the centre wall are less heavy and focus on the depiction of contemporary life. Three images from the earthquake mark the central focus of this side. On either side from this centre point, two photos highlight the lives of women in Nepal and education being spurred on to improve their situations. The symmetry extends further from the centre extending to the left side and the right, with contrasting images. The remaining photos on the left side are from Mustang, Mugu and Kathmandu, while those on the right depict New York City. The keywords describing the Nepal side are ‘opportunity’, ‘migration’ and ‘spirituality’ while the words ‘makeover’, ‘Sisyphus’, and ‘9/11’ represent New York City.

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Sicario means ‘hitman’ in Colombia, a grim name for a grim film that deals with all the shades of grey that seem to be the default setting of trickier political issues in life, be they immigration, gender politics, and in this case, the condoning of extreme violence within the morally murky world of drug smuggling in the Americas.

Sicario detaches from the usual male oriented antics that are usually associated with films about busting shadowy druglords by casting the wonderful Emily Blunt as Kate Macer, an FBI agent working in Arizona. Focused, and thoroughly competent as the leader of her unit, Blunt as Macer is a captivating, fully dimensional human being who refuses to engage in the high strung antics of her other male peers. Her partnership with the stoic, humourous Reggie Wayne (played with wry wit by Daniel Kaluuya), is the only balanced human relationship in the topsy-turvy world of law enforcement portrayed in the film.

Josh Brolin plays shady CIA agent Matt Graver, a man with nebulous morals which are compounded by his partnership with Alejandro Gillick (Benicio de Toro), an enigmatic Colombian whose intentions are unclear even while his actions induce chills along the spine. As Graver and Gillick endeavour to pin down a nefarious Mexican drug lord, Macer is drawn into this world as a pawn of sorts, as she is swept into both witnessing and inadvertently partaking in acts of extreme violence (as a self - defence mechanism) - making Sicario an uncomfortable film to watch.

The filmmaker, the Canadian Denis Villeneuve – who often indulges in making films about extreme situations without ever quite justifying his motivations - is saved by the casting of Emily Blunt. Blunt is increasingly impressive in her non-histrionic ability to deal with extreme material, both violent and not, with humanity and grace. Her performance is the saving grace of what would have otherwise been an unbearably pointless film about jaded people trying to set the world right by arguing for a skewed kind of justice by way of the gun.

Sicario is being hailed as a kind of neo-realistic take on what it might be like to be an everywoman trying to work in impossible situations. Personally, I cringe at this explanation, particularly when the ending leaves you with a poetic sense of absolutely nothing – a classic Villeneuve indulgence that doesn’t seem to have evolved since his interminable, yet lauded previous films such as Incendies (2011), another excruciating work that leaves you utterly cold.

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BIZ PEER:
FEST PREP: A sweet maker in Lalitpur prepares molasses or Chaku as is called in Nepali for the upcoming Maghe Sankranti Festival on Thursday.

SPOTLIGHT: Actors Priyanka Karki, Saugat Malla and Keki Adhikari at the premiere of Funko, a new Nepali movie at QFX Kumari on Wednesday.

MISSION REBUILDING: Prime Minister KP Oli chairs the first meeting of the newly set up National Reconstruction Authority in Singha Darbar on Monday.

SPLITISTS: As a result of the cabinet expansion to accommodate more ministers, one building in Singha Darbar now houses three new ministries.

CHIEF GUEST: Finance Minister Bishnu Prasad Paudel (centre) attends the 23rd annual function of Nepal Stock Exchange at its premises on Wednesday.

SPOTLIGHT: Actors Priyanka Karki, Saugat Malla and Keki Adhikari at the premiere of Funko, a new Nepali movie at QFX Kumari on Wednesday.
Rivalry in Madhes
Ratan Kumar Jha in
www.nepostimes.com, 13 January

When the Madhesi March 1st launched an agitation against Nepal’s new constitution five months ago, no one anticipated that the crisis would last so long. But even after the death of 50 people and 20 rounds of talks, the unrest in the country’s southern plains continues.

There are multiple factors behind the delay in talks resolution, but division among the top Madhesi leaders is the biggest one. Had they been able to overcome their rivalry, they could have forced the ruling parties to address Madhesi demands much earlier.

Saibhawanna Party Chair Rajendra Mahato has always tried to be seen as the messiah of the Madhesi people. This is why he sometimes ends up making silly decisions. He recently announced separate protests but returned to the front after Madhesi people refused to only behind a single party.

Madha is still repeating talks with the government, demanding an apology from Prime Minister KP Oli for the police attack on him in December. His impulsive behavior and frequent attempts to antagonize other Madhesi leaders do not bode well for their collective movement.

However, other Madhesi leaders also need to be criticized for their lack of zeal to fight on the streets. While Mahato has hardly left his house after announcing an indefinite strike in August, other leaders are mostly busy in Kathmandu for futile talks with the ruling parties.

When Mahato was hospitalised after being injured in the police attack, other Madhesi leaders did not even bother to visit him. Jwala Limpda, a Madhesi activist, accused Mahato of trying to gain cheap popularity. Ananthvard between Mahato and Yadav is not new, they have always tried to belittle one another. While Mahato claims to be the only saviour of the late Madhesi leader Ganesh Sapkota Singh, Yadav believes he deserves full credit for leading the first successful Madhesi uprising in 2007. After being left out of the constitution writing process, they have joined hands but their rivalry still exists.

Yadav is a mature and intellectual leader. He has a better understanding of social dynamics of the Madhesi than any other leaders. But he is a lone wolf. He does not believe in being hand-in-hand with other leaders. He has thwarted efforts to unite all Madhesi parties in the past.

Mahat Thakur is the most seasoned of the top four Madhesi leaders. But he is still seen as many in Madhes in Nepal Congress as the most capable Congress leader with a large following. He firmly leads street protests, and his party looks like a club of retired intellectuals.

Mahendra Yadav, the fourth Madhesi leader, was also in Thakur’s party. But he formed his own party as Thakur favoured only Maheshi Brahmin and other high-caste leaders.

Madhesi people believe that their leaders need to be united if their voices are to be heard.

A hill settler finds a home in the plains
Shrawan Kumar Doo in
Himal Khabarpatra, 10-16 January

Born into a hill Chhetri family on the outskirts of Lalitpur district, Sishodh Khadka, 36, never imagined he would settle down in Madhes. As a carefree youth, Khadka decided to move there on a whim, partly due to his love of mangoes.

When Khadka was still living in Lalitpur, his father’s best friend, Ram Narayan Yadav, visited them one day from Nangiho village in the Saptari district. In conversation Khadka professed his love for mangoes, and Yadav offered to feed him as many as he could eat on the condition that he visited Saptari. It was 2003, when relations between Madhesi and Pahadi people were not as tense as they are now in the Tarai.

Khadka instantly agreed to visit Saptari, where he then tutored local children for a few days. The students were so receptive to his teaching methods and their parents were not ready to let him leave. Khadka eventually grew so attached to the local people and culture that he decided to settle down there. He worked as a teacher for two years before founding a primary-level English school that now has over 650 students. “I now love Madhes more than Pahadi,” he says.

Two years ago, he brought his new wife, Ramila Bhattarai to Saptari. Raised in Kathmandu, she was not accustomed to the life in Madhes. “I didn’t like the food,” she says, “I didn’t understand the local Magahi language. I cried and longed to return to Kathmandu. But as time passed by, I fell in love with the wonderful people around.”

Khadka and his wife now speak Magahi fluently. They are the only Pahadi family in a Madhesi village exclusively inhabited by Yadavas, Maudals, Thakurs and Guptras. “I hear a lot about the stratified Madhesi-Pahadi relations these days,” he says, “But I don’t feel anything like this here. Everyone treats me like one of them.”

Shambhunanda Chandrakhy, a human rights activist in Saptari, says the love that Khadka’s family has received in a Madhesi village is exemplary, particularly at a time of prolonged political face-off between the major parties and the Madhesi Front.

Khadka says he feels indebted to Madhesi people for the love and respect they have shown to his family. In gratitude for what he has received, he says, “I am trying to educate their children in return.”
Alternative post-quake

More than 600,000 buildings were destroyed during the earthquake of April, 2015. Nine months later the biggest challenge is still to rebuild the houses.

As survivors brave the winter and snow, many worry they will end up with the same unsafe houses rebuilt from salvaged material that will once again put their lives at risk.

Nirpal Adhikary (above) of the group, Asha which promotes safe and environmentally sustainable designs says safety doesn’t have to be costly. Part of the solution is to rebuild low-cost earthquake-resistant homes using quality locally available materials like bamboo and rammed earth.

“The benefit of using bamboo is that once treated it is durable, as strong as steel, but flexible. Rammed earth walls are extremely strong and last a long time,” said Adhikary, showing us an under-construction building for Medan Puraskar Pratikalaya in Patan.

Sahina Shrestha of UN-HABITAT agrees that locally available materials will be
cost-effective because of their durability and safety. Rammed earth is a soil-based wall system that is dense, solid and stone-like with environmental benefits and low maintenance characteristics. Moreover it uses materials found right under our feet as it is made of compacted gravel, sand and clay with little cement added to it.

Concrete is not an option for hilly areas. Since they are not easily available transporting them can be expensive,” said Joshi.

Using cheap and environmentally friendly building materials like bamboo and rammed earth in post-earthquake reconstruction can solve the issues of safety, environmental protection and cost.

Hollow concrete blocks and compressed stabilised earth blocks also provide ideal alternatives to bricks. Hollow concrete blocks are highly durable, fire resistant, provide thermal and sound insulation, load bearing capacity, low maintenance, economical and sustainable.

Compressed earth blocks also use on-site clay or soil which reduces cost and increases efficiency all the while being environmentally friendly. Joshi suggests using locally available materials like straw for construction. Straw bales can be used as basis for walls. It provides excellent translucency and is energy efficient. It is easy to make and is cheaper because it is available locally.

After the earthquake as many of the concrete houses in Kathmandu Valley survived and it was the old clay and mortar structures that went down, there is a misconception among people that concrete houses are stronger than the traditional houses.

“The only reason many of the houses in Kathmandu survived is because of low intensity of the earthquake here. Look at Chautara for example, a lot of concrete houses went down there,” said Joshi.

He adds that using alternative materials can last a long-time provided the timber and bamboo are properly treated. Said Joshi: “It is not like concrete, which is a good thing because that way you can maintain and improve it over time.”

Prefab housing also has its downsides, since most of the material is imported and it doesn’t follow the concept of the 3 R’s: Reduce, reuse, recycle. Building materials like mud, clay and timber on the other hand can easily be reused and disposed of back to the soil.

The biggest challenge that remains for the alternative building materials despite having so many benefits is the mindset of people. Not many want to spend their money on a mud and clay house.

Said Adhikary: “The main challenge about alternative earthquake resistant housing is to change the mindset. We have been able to change the people’s mindset but we are still waiting on the policy makers.”

Rebuilding better: Nripal Adhikary of the alternative housing group, Nari, about exploring the techniques used at the site of a bamboo and rammed earth structure that is replacing the building of Moti Prakash Pratishala in Patan (left) that was badly damaged in the earthquake.

Rebuilding ourseves

After every big earthquake that tends to strike once in a century, Kathmandu Valley has rebuilt itself anew. This time around, the old settlements of Pālchāhēn and Bungamati are using last April’s earthquake as an opportunity to not just rebuild the physical structures but also to rediscover their crafts, heritage and festivals.

Ramesh Maharjan fondly remembers growing up in the narrow alleys of Pālchāhēn, an old Newar settlement in the ancient town of Yala (now Patan). When eighty-two houses were destroyed in his neighbourhood in April, he saw loss but also an opening.

“This has become a perfect opportunity for us to revive our forgotten socio-cultural heritage and festivals that were slowly disappearing,” he told us during a tour of the historic locality.

When he was a boy, Maharjan saw the old architecture give way to cement houses and wooden Abharas replaced by ugly metal shutters. He also watched as the newer generation moved away in search of work and the farms overrun by urban sprawl.

Working with the Maya Foundation, Maharjan put forth a plan to rebuild Pālchāhēn to serve as a model of preserving the traditional architecture while also creating economic opportunity for its residents.

“We have rich history, culture and architecture, and we want to use that for economic revival through tourism,” he says. The idea is for the community to reconstruct houses with traditional architectural features without compromising on modern amenities so that tourists are attracted, and this creates jobs.

Govinda Raj Pokhrel, formerly of the National Planning Commission who briefly headed the Reconstruction Authority, encouraged Pālchāhēn’s revival.

“I see this as a step in the right direction after the earthquake is not just about restoring damaged buildings, but the cultural heritage, festivals, crafts, and livelihoods that they represent,” he says.

With volunteers from Global Shapers and architectural design (price, above) provided by CE Services, the project is estimated to cost Rs 470 million. The Vipeng Foundation has donated Rs 40 million and another Rs 10 million has come from individual donors.

Ten km away on the southern outskirts of Patan, the heavily damaged township of Bungamati is similarly trying to rebuild the temples, monasteries and neighbourhoods. Of the 1,351 houses in Bungamati, 85 were completely destroyed including the temple of Machhendranath. The community wants to revitalise the town while preserving the architectural heritage, woodcarving tradition and its famous chariot festival.

Community first: Volunteers clear rubble of destroyed houses in Pālchāhēn, an old Newar settlement in Patan.

The Bungamati Reconstruction Committee is getting help from UN HABITAT, KU Leuven University in Belgium and other groups to plan the socio-economic revival of the town through tourism. A vocational school is also being planned to ensure that handicrafts and hospitality will sustain a tourism-based economy.

Says the Committee’s Prem Bhakti Maharjan: “Rebuilding the town will not only preserve the cultural heritage but also ensure the livelihood and economic benefit for the community, but rebuilding using old architecture is expensive and without soft loans or subsidies, the locals cannot afford to do so.”

Sahina Shrestha
PM’s an Ass

The Ass is soon going to be out of a job if PM KP Oli keeps up all this jokery and clowning around. He’s hilarious. Probably the funniest prime minister in our nation’s history (and geography) and someone who makes our troubles seem so far away.

He is giving stiff competition to comedians like yours truly. You don’t know how much I have to struggle with this stuff every week, while for PMI it all comes very effortlessly as if he was a natural born comedian laureate of Nepal. A Court Jester. Gokarna KP is a pro, his material is far more superior. He is able to make the whole country laugh with him.

We can see that Oli Uncle takes his job of tickling our funny bone seriously. This is no mean feat for someone who had the grim task of heading zamindars during his childhood. And thank goodness for that because he provides us with comic relief in this time of national gloom and doom in order to brighten up our days and nights.

It has become de rigueur and rigor mortis for Nepal to poke fun at the incumbent prime minister. That is every citizen’s right in a democracy; every Nepal is entitled to call the prime minister an ass if he/she/it so wishes. But we must also bear in mind that the man is a visionary. Some of KP’s plans for the well-being of the Nepali people are truly groundbreaking, and would lead to a transformation of the country if we only allowed him.

For instance, the prime minister was not shooting the breeze when he said he wants to generate wind power to electrify every home in the country. To realise that dream, we could create a National Wind Power Authority that will be responsible for harnessing our vast potential to generate electricity from the capacity of every Nepal to break wind. This would finally make us individually and as a nation truly self-sufficient as long as we keep eating trad beef.

The Prime Minister’s other ingenious proposals, and one that confirms he is spending sleepless nights trying to find ways to reduce the hardships of the people, is to pipe natural gas to every home so that families don’t have to wait in line for two days for half a cylinder of LPG. It also shows that the prime minister is not obsessed about taking credit for such a project of national prestige even though he knows that we all know that it will take at least till the second half of the century for piped gas to be a reality in Kathmandu.

Being a progressive politician, the prime minister is also extremely sensitive to gender issues. He has time and again proven that he regards the interest of Nepali womenhood in the highest esteem which is why he remarked on YouTube the other day that there is no reason why Nepali women should sit to become police officers when they can become president by being from the right party and having the right friends in high places. And speaking of YouTube, if you didn’t already know how passionately PM Oli feels about the One-horned Asiatic Rhinoceros, you should watch his take on it. Exact quote: “A life lived without seeing a rhino is not a life worth living.”

Every decade or so a Nepali leader pops up to say that he will turn Nepal into Switzerland by such-and-such a date. What these leaders don’t know is that Nepal is already Switzerland, just look at all the similarities between our two countries:

1. We are both landlocked.
2. Neither was colonised.
3. Both will soon be ethnic confederations.
4. Our mercenaries guard the British Queen, theirs guard the Pope. Ours use AK-47s, theirs use Swiss Army Knives.
5. Our leaders trust Swiss banks as their own.
6. If the RPP has its way we may have a referendum every month for everything.
7. They export Ferrero Rochers, we export Pastakaris.
8. They have cantons, we had cantonments.
9. They have mountains, ours are higher.
10. They have cuckoo clocks, we have cuckoo leaders.