Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, after waiting for months, has finally decided to bite the bullet on elections. He stretched it for as long as he could to put off handing the prime ministership to Sher Bahadur Deuba of the NC.

Madhesi parties are not on board yet, and have threatened to disrupt elections in Province 2. But Deuba is in no mood to back off now, since he needs votes to boost seats in Parliament.

2017 may turn out to be the Year of Elections. After two decades, there will finally be local elections for the 718 district, municipal and village councils. Following a Supreme Court ruling that Parliament’s term cannot be extended beyond 21 January 2018, the government ran out of excuses to postpone polls. After local polls on 14 May, there have to be polls for provincial councils and federal parliament by the end of 2017.

Dahal faces hurdles all the way. He has to get Parliament to debate the Second Amendment to apportion Madhesi parties. He has succeeded in defusing the transitional justice commissions (see page 14-15 and Editorial) but faces criticism from the international community.

UML Chair KP Oli finally allowed Parliament to discuss the amendment bill on Thursday as a compromise for elections to go ahead. But Chief Whip Bhamu Bikhu Dahal told Nepal Times: “We will do everything to foil this amendment.”

The UML has concluded that the ruling parties will fail to secure a two-thirds majority, and is therefore ready to put the amendments to a vote.

Dahal’s previous strategy was to win the vote by giving ministerial berths to Kamal Thapa’s RPF, Bijaya Gachhadar’s MDP (D) and other fringe parties. But those parties backed off because they knew Dahal’s days were numbered.

Outgoing Indian Ambassador Ranjit Rae visited the Election Commission on Thursday, and reportedly told officials India was ready to support polls if held. The UML is asking Madhesi parties to accept the verdict on the amendment, but they are not in a mood to.

Mahendra Raya Yadav of Tarai Madhesi Saddhavna Party told us: “The amendment bill has to be passed. If it fails, the constitution will fail.”

Om Astha Rai

Cat Scat

Analysis of snow leopard droppings collected by biologist Nishu Cheh shows that more than a quarter of its diet is livestock, allowing conservationists to design protection measures.

Click Nepal Times online to watch dramatic video by Tashi Gole’s camera traps of snow leopards in the wild in Mustang.

SONAM TASHI
PAGE 8-9
JUICE DELAYED, JUSTICE DENIED

The peace process has now lasted longer than the war. We have wanted the past 11 years mired in a transition about which the only good thing we can say is that we are not killing each other anymore.

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005 took a step-by-step approach to demobilising Maoist insurgents, disarming them, integrating some of them into the national army, and holding elections for a Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution. Along the way, some politicians (we know who, and on instructions from whom) sneaked in socialism, federalism and republicanism. But that is another story.

The agreement has provisions for transitional justice, including the formation of Commissions for Truth and Reconciliation and Enforced Disappearances. After years of foot-dragging and running out of excuses, an Act was finally passed. But it is flimsy, toothless and did not meet international norms.

The reason for this was evident. The former adversaries are now components of the state. Mental ennui is, in fact, new partners in the governing coalition. Prime Minister Dahal’s Maoist guerrillas tried to kill the NC’s Sher Bahadur Deuba in a landside attack last month, and Deuba announced a ransom for Dahal’s captured dead or alive.

Since leaders on both sides are on the same boat, no one wants to rock it. Maoist, NC, and RPP leaders are all responsible for human rights violations, and therefore do not want to rock the boat. The leaders benefit from an apathetic public that wants to let bygones be bygones. Even families of the victims have neither the time nor money to pursue justice. They do not know how to work the system, where to go to seek redress.

Relatives of the disappeared, victims of torture do not expect the government to even compensate them or provide justice, so they do not even ask for it. Most families would therefore be happy just to know the truth of what happened to their relatives.

As we report in this issue (page 14-15) and as activist Charan Prasai argues in the Guest Editorial (below) it is no surprise that the terms of the conversations have been extended by another year. They were just fig leaves, anyway, and another egregious example of Nepal’s whitewash politics. A veteran human rights activist Sapkota, the accused in the Arjun Lama disappearance, was shot in the TRC. But Krishan Dhakal, who had nothing to fear, Ganga Maya Adhikari withers away in hospital seeking justice. The political leadership wants to be seen to be on the side of truth and justice, but wants to neither...
DISCOVER BRUSSELS
FLY FROM KATHMANDU WITH TURKISH AIRLINES
The most dangerous possibility of Nepal’s modern era is that of eruption of inter-community conflict. Fortunately, the people on all sides have refused to jump off the precipice despite having been dragged to the edge.

There is of course a spectrum of dissatisfaction among communities marginalised by the Kathmandu-centric state, from the hill/plain Dalit to the Janajati, to the western Khas steeped in poverty, the Himal people of the northern rimland, and the micro-communities all over.

But it is the dissatisfaction among the Madhesi citizenry that represents the most serious challenge to the (mostly Bahundan) state apparatus, which is asked to mend its ways and become inclusive in order to reflect the unique demographic diversity of Nepal.

The country’s future is presently caught between the insensitivity of national party politicians and desperation of place-based leaders fighting for political survival. And it is the Kathmandu leaders and civil society, being in or close to power, that are to be held more accountable.

Jhanakpur and Jaleswar ‘Madhesi’, in its current usage, is a term specific to Nepali, connecting citizens of plains origin. Anyone who defines Madhesia as ‘Nepalis of Indian origin’ must consider attending re-education camp. While the demography across the international border tends to be the identical, a Jha citizen of Birgunj is a Madhesi but not the Jha of Raxaul.

Kathmandu has historically discriminated against the citizens of plains origin, as it has against the Dalit and the Janajati. But the Madhesi have been doubly disadvantaged, for being marginalised socio-economically as well as socio-politically – the projected national self-identity being linked to mountain habitat and culture.

In the modern era, it was not only Kathmandu’s rulers, but also the foreign embassies and aid missions which over-ignored the Madhesi over the decades. When they did get into inclusion in the 1990s, the focus concentrated on the Dalit and later the Janajati fold.

This neglect and lack of funding infusion meant that Madhesi identity activism got opportunity to be genuinely politicised, and communitarian grievances exploded in the form of the Madhes Movement of the winter of 2007-8.

The Movement forced the rest of Nepal to concede the Madhesi’s right to full ownership of the state, even though there has been foot-dragging.
in ensuring communal inclusion (continued till date). Significantly, the denigrating usage of ‘Medhisa’ or ‘Marsya’ more or less disappeared from the public discourse, and the new Constitution was shaped in part by the energies released by the Madhosa Movement.

Consensus politics
What seems to be the current distancing between hill and plain is for now one between the ‘Madhosa-baadi’ leadership and those who run the state administration. But how incredibly that, despite the shock-wave of identity-led politics, the abhakbanda share-the-spoils consensus politics has today left the goal of inclusion in state appointments relegated to the outposts.

In state institutions, from the bureaucracy and academia to the judiciary, the hold of the hill Bahuni remains firmly in place. One looks to the implementation of the new constitution (through three tier elections) to break the logjam of exclusion. The fact that our national leaders have not internalised the lessons is seen in the brazen appointment last week of 14 new ambassadors, with a lone nominee of plains origin.

Inclusion should be integral to the Nepali state, and it should set an example for all Southasia – a country where appointments to state offices are (proportion) without relying on tokenism. A fully inclusive politics will have been achieved when non-Bahun/Chehtri politicians not only become the primary brokers. But function as powerbrokers.

Questions
As far as ‘Madhosa-baadi’ activism is concerned, we must ask how far the push for plains-only provinces (as the central agenda) helps the population of the plains, given that the density of people and poverty are both concentrated here. Does Province No. 2, the only all-plain entity, thus far, and the only one defined by identity among the seven, hold the promise of progress for its inhabitants?

More questions: Do the dozen frontline leaders of the Madhosi Mrocha represent the people of the plains, given that only two of them (Upendr Chandra Yadav, Mahendra Raya Yadav) won seats through direct elections in 2017? How does laying claim to the five-month blockade of Nepal conducted by Indian authorities help the cause of the plains citizenry?

Who represents the voice of the Madhosi masses, given the preponderance of the socio-economic-cultural elites (the ‘BlueBloods’) at the forefront in challenging the new Constitution? We are asked, correctly, to stand on the side of the subaltern, the marginalised. Who speaks for the subaltern Madhosi, substantial and marginalised nationally and further as within plains society?

Having waded into the fraught arena of identity politics, this writer can only reiterate his position on the underlying demand of the present agitation: Provinces that incorporate hills and plains are the best for progress of citizens, particularly of the plains with its habitat density. However, given that we already have one plains specific province, and may have more, we must rise to calibrate inter-province relationships so that the plains people do not suffer socially, economically, culturally and politically as a result.
SMRITI BASNET

A section of the E.P. Highway that collapsed into the Sun Kosi river on Sunday night could have cut the supply chain of Green Growth, but the new online shopping portal for organic produce has a built-in flexibility to survive setbacks.

The innovative start-up delivering home-grown products relies on Nepal’s spreading highway network to source fruits and vegetables and sell them to urban consumers through the Net.

“We are well stock for products that come from faraway places, so we were not affected by the blockage on the Sindhu road, but we try to be prepared for all contingencies,” said Nischal Pandey, in charge of Green Growth’s logistics.

Every Monday, Wednesday and Saturday are delivery days, and Pandey’s team is busy packing online orders into dispatch boxes of fresh greens and fruits that come from places like Kavre, Ilam, Mahottari, Sindhu, Biratnagar and Jumla.

Working out of a small warehouse in Gaighum, the team sorts, packs, and sends out boxes of assorted vegetables and fruits much like an Amazon for local organic produce.

“The idea is to connect farmers to consumers through the Net, and as long as farmers are benefitting and customers are getting the right product from the right place at the right price we are on the right track,” said Pandey.

Tired of the daily hassle of going to market and buying low quality vegetables possibly laced with pesticides, health-conscious customers are more than happy to log on to the site for a variety of goods that makes Nepali supplies.

“It has become extremely rare to find pesticide-free food in the market nowadays. None of the vegetables would last without it,” explained Ramesh Neupane, one of the portal’s customers.

Despite having his own farm in Dukwakot of Bhaktapur, Neupane is a frequent online shopper on the Green Growth site for its carefully curated list of Jumla walnuts, Mustang apples, Sindhu tangerine, or Buri glee.

Green Growth is still a bit ahead of its time, but for increasingly health and environmentally-conscious consumers in Kathmandu it couldn’t have come sooner. In just two years it has expanded beyond organic fruits and vegetables to also chemical-free soaps, fruit wines and plants from all over Nepal.

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Source Dhakal calls himself the ‘chief curator’ of the site, and says the business itself grew organically from a workshop he conducted in Jumla two years ago.

“We were trying to increase the digital footprint of farmers through Internet connectivity,” Dhakal recalled. “It was meant to be a theoretical exercise, but to my surprise three months later, the farmers had sent me sacks of Jumla rice.”

Dhakal took to social media to sell the highest-grown rice in the world, and the response was so encouraging that it gave him the idea to start Green Growth.

“We didn’t even have a business model or plan when we started, we just did it for fun, and I never imagined I would be selling vegetables through the Net,” said Dhakal who now has a new nickname among his friends: Tarkari-keeda.

Whenever Green Growth takes delivery of popular products like Jumla walnuts or fresh oranges from Sindhuli, the portal gets more than 100 subscribers per week. But due to limited storage space and the short shelf-life of perishables, Green Growth has to sell the products quickly and the Internet allows it to do that.

“When they have Jumla’s walnuts in stock, I order 100gms right away,” said Green Growth customer Roshan Chitrakar, who podders the virtual market to the real one near her home in Kalimati.

Although lacking in technology and resources, Green Growth is promoting a low carbon society in its own limited way. Nepal imports food, vegetables and even flowers from India, and Green Growth’s approach appears to be the path to self-reliance.

This year on Valentine’s Day, for instance, Green Growth sourced roses from Sankhu and sold them through its portal by-passing the city’s flower shops which imported roses from southern India.

“We want to encourage Nepali consumers to buy Nepali products through a Nepali company,” said Sumita Kapali of Green Growth, which charges farmers 20% of the sale price as service charge for connecting them to the market through its network.

For the future, Green Growth is looking at “crowd-farming” to make entire neighbourhoods farm organically so that the greener economy of scale will bring down prices and allow it to compete with markets in the city.

Kapali said Green Growth strengthens the interdependence of rural and urban economies, and proves that change is possible.
Studying Cat Scat

Analysis of snow leopard droppings shows more than a quarter of its diet is livestock, allowing conservationists to design protection measures

SONAM TASHI LAMA

Being at the top of the food chain in the mountains, snow leopards are an important indicator not only of the health of their Himalayan habitat, but also of human livelihoods.

But the endangered cat is in the IUCN Red List because of poaching, habitat destruction and climate change. It is facing an increasingly uphill struggle against extinction.

Nepal has between 300-500 snow leopards left in the wild, and this is the fourth largest population after China, Mongolia and India. The animal’s range stretches across 12 Asian countries.

A growing human population and demand for natural resources is putting immense pressure on the snow leopard’s fragile habitat. Conflict between the snow leopard, its prey, nomadic herders and mountain communities has added to existing threats like poaching and climate change.

Nepali scientist Madhu Chetri and colleagues at the Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences recently spent nearly six months in the Nepal Himalayas collecting snow leopard droppings to analyse their prey, and to find clues about human impact on their habitat.

Chetri and his team published their findings in the journal PLOS ONE about the food habits of the rare cats.

“Our findings could provide effective guidance for building future conservation strategies for the species,” Chetri told Nepal Times.

The team collected scat samples of the snow leopard and its important sympatric predator of livestock, the Himalayan wolf, for DNA analysis to find out about their diet. The samples were sourced from 26 representative grids above 3,000m altitude over an area covering 5,000 sq km of the Annapurna and Manaslu Conservation Areas.

By the end of the field work, the team had collected more than 800 scat samples of snow leopards and wolves. The results showed that snow leopards preferred cliff-dwelling ungulates like the biharal (Himalayan blue sheep) and Himalayan tahr.

More than half the droppings had traces of the two prey. A significant 27 per cent of the prey of the snow leopard was made up of domestic animals like goat, horse, sheep, yak and lalu cow.

A quarter of the diet of Himalayan wolves was also made up of livestock, with horses being the preferred favourite. Remains of livestock occurred twice as frequently in scat of males as females.

“We now have a better understanding of the relationship between domestic livestock and the snow leopard and their consequences on the livelihood of the local
communities," said Chetri, who is now trying to evaluate the economic impact of snow leopard killings and finding solutions to ensure the long-term survival of the big cats in the Himalayas.

During his research, Chetri has had some hair-raising experiences of being face-to-face with a snow leopard. It was on his last day in the field in Manang when he was monitoring and guarding the kill of a snow leopard from Himalayan griffons. He remembers bravely looking the snow leopard in the eye and saying in soothing Nepali: "I am not your enemy, I won't harm you. I am a friend trying to help you," Chetri said it was the most mesmerising experience in his 15 years spent researching snow leopards in the mountains.

Researchers also say there is an urgent need to find out more about wildlife diseases to prevent cats being infected by other wildlife and livestock sharing the same habitat, as happened to the Saiga antelopes in Mongolia recently.

The Wildlife Trust for Nature Conservation is promoting traditional predator-proof corrals and solar powered electric fences to save the livestock of pastoral herding communities.

The worldwide trade of snow leopards is totally banned by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) putting it in Appendix I. Despite this, up to 450 snow leopards have been poached annually since 2008 alone. This could be an underestimate because many killings by poachers in remote areas go unreported.

Nepal recently released a Snow Leopard Conservation Action Plan (2017-2021) which will guide protection efforts for the next five years. The research by Chetri’s team could contribute to this effort and protect the elusive cat for future generations.

Dropping In: Nepali scientist Madhu Chetri was collecting samples of snow leopard skull and tooth in Manang to analyse prey composition when he came face-to-face with this female snow leopard (A picture, left) feeding on a bharal kill. "I am not your enemy; I am trying to help you," Chetri told the leopard calmly in Nepali, and it was left alone.

The snow leopard’s favourite food is the bharal (above), which it hunts in steep terrain. Himalayan vultures scavenge the carcass of bharals after the snow leopards and wolves are finished with it.

Madhu Chetri spent six months in the mountains collecting snow leopard droppings near the pass (above) with the skull and horns of a bharal and a sheep killed by a Himalayan wolf in Upper Mustang at 4,800m.

SHOOTING SNOW LEOPARDS

Nepal Times

Madhu Chetri, left, working in the Nepal Times offices (above) during his survey of snow leopards in the Snow Leopard Conservation Action Plan (2017-2021) which will guide protection efforts for the next five years. The research by Chetri’s team could contribute to this effort and protect the elusive cat for future generations.

Dropping In: Nepali scientist Madhu Chetri was collecting samples of snow leopard skull and tooth in Manang to analyse prey composition when he came face-to-face with this female snow leopard (A picture, left) feeding on a bharal kill. "I am not your enemy; I am trying to help you," Chetri told the leopard calmly in Nepali, and it was left alone.

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Madhu Chetri spent six months in the mountains collecting snow leopard droppings near the pass (above) with the skull and horns of a bharal and a sheep killed by a Himalayan wolf in Upper Mustang at 4,800m.
Textile art, Mark your calendar for an exhibition of Mexican textiles from the state of Chupas. Until 27 February, Siddharta Art Gallery, Balie Mohit, 11 am to 5 pm, (01) 4403000, 4718680

Women run, Jog or walk for women empowerment in this run organized to mark the International Women’s Day. 4 March, from onwards, Jawanhield Football Ground. Register: gk@interactzone.com

Pinkathon, Gear up for the Kathmandu Pinkathon, a women-only event, and choose to run in 3km, 5km, 10km or 21km run to promote and encourage women empowerment. 24 February, 7 to 11 am, Dr澤 rash Korgedba Stadium, Fepupegwe, www.kathmandupinkathon.com

Be a trail mechanic, Ladies can participate in a trail-style mechanics skills course led by a renowned mechanic Samirath Rau. 24 February, 4 to 6 pm, Ram Miko Coffee, Jawanhield, Rs 800 (includes course, coffee and cookies).

Squat competition, Register to participate in the 2nd Interclub women’s squat competition organized by Jasmine Fitness and Spa on the occasion of Women’s Day. 3 & 4 March, Jasmine Fitness and Spa, Fepupegwe, (01) 4177115

The Diary of Anne Frank, Those who missed it earlier can save the date for ‘The Diary of Anne Frank’ which will be screened at Rites Bangla School auditorium. 23 & 24 February, 6 pm onwards, Rites Bangla School, Rs 700 and 500 (adults), Rs 200 (students)

The Vagina Monologues, Don’t miss out on this year’s Vagina Monologues 2017 with women’s rights advocates from different walks of life. The event is a benefit production for Shanti Matra.

Meal for a cause, Weigh as Vinda, a Russian and English group, performs a spiritual drama and dance. All proceeds from the event go towards the midday meal program for underprivileged school children. 25 February, Sooner Crown Plaza, 9814252912, Rs 2500 per person (Plates available at Namgyal Ling, Brupar, Dhokhara Cafe, Patan Shikar, Krenzites, Pulchok, Embassy Restaurant and Bar, Jogiwel and Jawanhield)

Music festival, Be a part of this month’s-long festival and experience music in its entirety, enjoy jazz, sari reggae, and many more genres. To 10 March, Bose Bungy, Jawanhield, for more information: 9841230687, pakshike@kathmandu.com

Gut halo, The new home of Newari cuisine, as well as enjoy a continental menu for those who want to play it safe. Lopinath, (01) 4400222

Vootoo, Buddha Maya Gardens Hotel, Add value to your stay in Lumbini with a stay at probably the best hotel in the area. Lumbini, (771) 3000222, 9871053190, info@bmg.com

Park Village Resort, Far away from the bustling crowd, yet so close to the city. Budhanikancha, 7771395780, park@bhol.com.np

Fulhar Resort, Enjoy the scenic view of Pokhara as you pamper yourself with tennis, golf, dinner and drinks. Pokhara, (0144) 461938, 2248

Hotel Barahi, Enjoy a great view of Phewa lake, cultural shows, or indulge in the scrumptious pastries from the German Bakery on the hotel premises. Lakeside, Pokhara, 01416677, 483526

Mango Tree Lodge, Culture walks, rafting in the Kali Gandaki, wildlife exploration, and jungle safari at the Bardia National Park. Bheri, Rathi, info@mangotreelodge.com
The music video Saili has gone viral on social media. Superb acting and direction, as well as haunting lyrics add poignancy to the story of migration that retells the tales of millions of individual Nepali lives. Gaurav Pahari acts as the migrant worker who leaves his wife, portrayed superbly by Menuka Pradhan, in a video directed by singer Hemant Rana himself, and shot on location in Nepal and Dubai.

"It is the singer who writes the song, the lyrics and composition are secondary, and I believe I have done a fabulous job," says Rana on the film’s success, "at a time when most of the popular videos rely on stars at glamour, this one depicts the stories and sorrows of normal people. The video is aesthetically better than most others out there."

Rana credits the entire team for the song’s success. "The composition and arrangement are what makes the song appeal to the ears," says Rana, who directed and also wrote and performed the song himself. "I felt there were discrepancies between what the song was trying to say and what was portrayed on screen. So, I decided to take the risk and direct this one myself," he adds.

The video, directed by Pratik Shakya, in an exhibition in the show, was as the protagonist, and cast Muktha Pradhan because of her superior acting skills. Initially, the plan was to start the video from the moment the two parted, but Rana felt their last night together would add poignancy. "It’s the perfect blend of moment added to the video and made it more relatable," he says.

The video’s global reach and popularity is also due to the spread of smart phones between Nepal and the diaspora, and even Dubai. Says Rana, "These nights being abroad will always be remembered..." says Rana. The video featuring Nepal and Dubai can be seen through the internet, as it was a good decision."

Sahina Shrestha

The return of Erina Tamrakar

Artist Erina Tamrakar’s exhibition In Between the Third Eye opens at the Nepal Art Gallery on February 26. The exhibition will be on display until March 13.

Tamrakar’s works are on display at the exhibition, which is titled ‘Third Eye’ and contains a group of women and a group of women with their eyes closed. But on each of her forehead is a group of women with their eyes closed, and in each of her forehead is a group of women with their eyes closed.

Tamrakar is known for her way of making the audience engage with the emotions of her subjects rather than establishing direct contact. The whole two floors of the Nepal Art Gallery are filled with Tamrakar’s work, each carrying its own message. In some, women are on an equal footing with nature, in others the emotion of women are captured in a single artwork.

Tamrakar’s recent works also use monochromes, which portray an evolving society: paintings of women alongside side tempos that they drove. "It’s a step forward for the society," said the artist. She believes it is only with financial independence that women can fully free.

Apart from the theme, what sets Tamrakar’s art apart from other paintings is her use of black and white. The artist says she is successfully summing up the totality of Nepalis were through during the five-month blockade with the use of sombre hues. "I didn’t feel like using any other colour at that time," said Tamrakar, who has an entire series on the blockade, but is keeping it to exhibit in future. Smriti Banerje

In Between the Third Eye
Till 19 March, 10:00am - 6:00pm
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The Natio wave

"My wife’s name is also Saili, it has been 10-12 years since we left Nepal and I am about to also reach 40. This is my reality," reads a comment on the YouTube page of the music video of Saili’s ‘Nepali Rana. Thousands of others have been to the comments section to say how they can relate to the song’s deals with a migrant worker who leaves his wife, Saili, and adjusts that he will enjoy the fruits of his labour only when he turns 40.

Some viewers have been so moved that they have even penned their replies in verse to the haunting lines composed by Kishal Saub and Kail Prasad Bakshya. Songs on migration are as old as migration itself. From the time Nepal farmers migrated to Asan, when they left to join the Indian and Sri Lankan Army and die for someone else’s country, to the present day exodus to the Gulf and Malaysia, the song has been insatiable among people of Nepal who have migrated to provide for their families back home.

Saili is a personal story of each one of the millions of Nepalis who are abroad," explains singer-actor Rana. "It brings together the issue of migration and love and marriage that is why it spoke to the masses.

Inspired by the stories of the Nepalis they meet abroad, the writers were giving the final touches to the song when Rana came across the haunting lyrics. Bakshya asked Rana to voice the song, and after recording it up on the Net. There was no looking back. Less than two weeks since its release, the song is approaching 8 million views online, which is nearly one-third of Nepali’s population. The song has earned praise for the singer, to sing as well as the sensitive editing and direction of the video which was shot on location in Nepal and Dubai.

"It is the singer who writes the song, the lyrics and composition are secondary, and I believe I have done a fabulous job," says Rana on the film’s success, "at a time when most of the popular videos rely on stars at glamour, this one depicts the stories and sorrows of normal people. The video is aesthetically better than most others out there."
T he terrifying notion of what might happen if we lose a loved one, not to death, but to the vast expanse of the world, is embodied in Lion one of the nine Best Picture nominees for the Academy Awards this year.

Based on the extraordinary true story of Saroo Brierley, the film is about how a very young Saroo (played by the gifted Sunny Pawar), who can’t be more than five years old, loses his way in a train station when he tags along with his older brother Guddu (Abhishek Bharate) who is just about old enough to add to the income of his extremely impoverished family which consists of the two boys, a younger sister, and their very young mother Kamla (played by the luminous Priyanka Bose) who works at a stone quarry to help eke out the family’s existence in a small one-room shack.

In an incredibly unfortunate sequence of events that lead to Saroo’s separation from his family, the little boy, after being separated from his brother at a train station fairly close to home, wanders around and falls asleep on an empty train that is bound for Kolkata, hundreds of miles away from his hometown. The tiny boy goes through a number of nerve-wracking encounters, but finally ends up in an orphanage where a very well put together Bengali lady sets him on a path to adoption claiming that, despite unusual newspaper adds, no one has come forward to claim Saroo - perhaps believing considering that the child was then too young to realise just how far across India he had come.

Years later, after Saroo’s adoption into a wonderful home by the open hearted Sue and John Brierley (played by Nicole Kidman and David Wenham) in Hobart, Tasmania, he is reminded of his real family at the house of a fellow student who happens to be Indian. Now in his twenties, the older Saroo, played by Dev Patel, is tortured by his memories, experiencing heartbreaking flashbacks of his mother lovingly tending him as he brings her little treats whenever he can while she toils.

This film, which ends well, and with many tears on and off screen, is anchored by the absolutely convincing, heart-trending performances of Priyanka Bose, Abhishek Bharate, and the pint-sized, big hearted Sunny Pawar who vividly portrays the tightness of the family unit amidst a dreadful, cruel world – a unity that ultimately draws Saroo back, finding his little village of Ganashalay (one of the few things he remembers), against all odds, added. It must be said, by the existence of Google Earth.

Lion would be unbelievable if it hadn’t actually happened. Even so, watching the film. It is hard to really comprehend the odds that Saroo faced to find his family after twenty years, peering into satellite images from continents away, spurred by the light of his mother’s face and the remembered love in her eyes.

**HAPPENINGS**

**POWER-FUL MAN**: Home Minister Bishnu Prasad Koirala distributes SRA Chief Kilman Griti during the closing ceremony of Nepal Infrastructure Summit on Monday.

**CHINA SYNDROME**: CDS Gen Rupinder Chahal poses with a 15-member Chinese delegation led by CCDC Maj Gen Zhubi Jingzhe of the People’s Liberation Army at Army Headquarters on Sunday.

**VOTE OF CONFIDENCE**: Former Deputy Prime Minister Kamal Thapa casts his vote during the general convention of his RPP last week. He was elected the party’s new president.

**ALWAYS PREPARED**: Nepal Army commandos rehearse anti-terrorist exercises on Thursday at Tushahefor Army Day on Friday.

**ART IN THE OPEN**: An artist paints a wall at Palais Dhaku on Friday for the upcoming Kathmandu Triennale 20 March - 5 April in Kathmandu.
US envoy critical of CSO Act

The United States ambassador to Nepal, Alaina B Teplitz, an op-ed published in Annapurna Post Daily on Monday last, strongly criticized a new draft law making it difficult for civil society organizations to register and operate in Nepal.

The draft Social Welfare and Development Act requires civil society organizations (CSOs) to get multiple approvals from different agencies despite constitutional provisions for streamlined registration and operation.

"The new Social Welfare and Development Act, currently being drafted, appears to run counter to the constitution's call for a single-clear system requiring all CSOs to obtain multiple approvals from different agencies in order to operate," Teplitz writes.

"The draft Act also restricts CSOs' access to foreign funding by requiring CSOs to obtain permission from the Social Welfare Council to implement projects using foreign aid and support. The US government through its agencies and contractors support NGOs in health, education, and gender as well as provide grants to civil society groups working on human rights and democracy. Teplitz said the US engaged with CSOs in Nepal so they had the tools and skills to advocate on behalf of the people they serve. She warned that the restrictions on foreign funding in the draft would be an unnecessary burden on these institutions... would be a violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Civil society organisations, including CSOs in the media, call at times, be difficult or a challenge to the government, that is precisely why our democracy needs them, and why we work with other democratic governments to enhance civil society," she adds.

Civil society organisations include NGOs, the media, community-based groups, non-government, academic and professional institutions. Teplitz writes: "It is imperative that during the democratic transition in Nepal remain open to support an active civil society."
The real truth about the Truth

Nepal's transitional justice process was delayed, now it is doomed

The only significant accomplishment of the TRC in its first two years has been to collect complaints from conflict victims. It received over 58,000 of them in the past year, and is seeking more time to investigate them. However, instead of starting to probe them the TRC is mired in an internal strife, and files of war-time atrocities are gathering dust inside 24 steel lockers. The TCC secretariat has not been able to clear the backlog.

“We felt humiliated,” said Gopal Bahunkar Shah, a Maoist victim who helped organise Chilwal’s death anniversary. “The TCC Chair should not have attended a memorial to a Maoist suspect if he did not have time for a Maoist victim.”

Although Gurung was brought in to head the TCC because of his supposed neutrality, his impartiality has lately been called into question. Last year when TCC members visited Madri of Chilwan where 38 villagers were killed when Maoists bombed a bus in 2006, Gurung asked the victims, “Is it not true that there were some soldiers in the bus?”

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Legitimate questions

Apart from the internal stand-off, the TCC is struggling for legitimacy. Relatives of victims question its credibility because it is rammed with political appointees.

The United Nations and international human rights organisations did not recognise the TCC because of its law that contained provisions for bouncer pardon. After the Supreme Court ruled last year that amnesty cannot be granted to perpetrators of gross violations of human rights, the government is amending the TCC law.

However, there is still a suspicion that the amended TCC law may have its own definition of gross human rights violations. Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal’s statement that Nepal’s transitional justice will be ‘unique’ has also fuelled suspicion that perpetrators of gross violations of human rights will get amnesty.

Dahal assured UN resident coordinator Valerie Jiler last week that Nepal will comply with international laws. But sources at the meeting told Nepali Times the UN delegates were not convinced.

Sajjan Sharma, Attorney General Hari Paudyal, “The draft of the amended TCC law has not yet been shared with stakeholders and experts. It would be wise to consult there before passing the amended law.”
Comission

Disappeared

The TRC was born with a twin: the Commissioner of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons (CIDP). Though freighted through the same controversial law, the CIDP has been able to engage the National Network of the Families of the Missing and Disappeared (NAMJD). It is processing a manual to exhume mass graves—the first major step in the investigation of the 3,000 cases of enforced disappearances.

“Indeed our objection to the TRC law, we decided to support the commission because most of the families of disappeared are more concerned about reparations, and less about punishment for perpetrators,” says NERO President Ram Baran Bhattacharya.

The international community has failed to support the TRC, unless its law is amended in compliance with international conventions of human rights. But the International Committee of the Red Cross has provided a facilitator for the government’s Coordination Committee of the CIDP.

Immediately after its tenure was extended, the CIDP has put out its annual plan, beginning in April, to find human remains and interrogate alleged perpetrators including Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal and his coalition partner Sher Bahadur Deuba.

Advocates argue that the reason the CIDP is making more progress than the TRC is because most of the victims were disappeared by state agents, and so the government is starting to look at the CPI now. They say the CIDP would be toothless in the absence of a law that criminalizes enforced disappearances.

Ven Citaran Prasad of the Accountability Watch Committee: “The best thing this commission might do is to name people behind enforced disappearances, but they will not get punished because disappearance has not been criminalised yet.”

Bhotta had objected to Gurung’s question because it implied that the terrorist attack was justified. The rift between Bhotta and Gurung grew, and had become irreconcilable by the time the TRC’s mandate was about to expire earlier this month.

Gurung wanted a commitment from the government to amend the Enforced Disappearances, Truth and Reconciliation Act 2014 and more autonomy before asking for an extension. Bhotta thought Gurung was waiving, and never pushed for justice during the last two years.

Many felt Gurung was under the sway of Shraw Krshna Subedi, another TRC member handpicked by the Maoists who had earlier defended Maoist leader Agis Sidharta in the Anjan Lams murder case before being appointed as a TRC member. Subedi did press for a stronger law to investigate war-time atrocities, but also argued that the TRC should just forward them to the National Human Rights Commission.

Bhotta accused Subedi of conspiring to sabotage the TRC, and Manmat Gurung for not putting his foot down. Sources said she got Sher Bahadur Deuba to call Gurung and rebuke him for not pursuing cases in which the Maoists were implicated.

Gurung felt humiliated, and stopped coming to office. His deputy Lila Udas is also on leave.

Of the five TRC members, only Bhotta, Subedi and Manchana Jha have been attending the office in Babar Mahal since the TRC was extended on 9 February. Gurung is said to have met Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal and threatened to resign if Bhotta was not sacked. Dahal has promised to form a committee led by a former Chief Justice to probe allegations against her—a prerequisite for removal.

Bhotta herself is sure to move the court if she is fired, and Gurung is likely to resign if she stays. Either way, the TRC is doomed by the conflicting interests of the two former enemies who are now partners in the coalition government.

Gurung has failed to reconcile partisan interests in the TRC even though he himself is said to have political axes to grind. He was previously close to the NC, but the Maoists were convinced that he would not single them out.

The international community has muted its criticism of Nepal’s delayed and flawed transitional justice process reportedly because they still hold that Gurung can salvage the TRC.

“If this TRC fails, it will take years to form another one, and justice for conflict victims will be further delayed,” says Hari Prakash, an expert in transitional justice. “So the problem of politicisation has to be resolved.”

Gharipatan (nearby Airport), Pokhara 061-466652, 9851054404 info@jalmahalpokhara.com | facebook.com/jalmahalpokhara
T
he Cabinet erupted into spontaneous applause on
Thursday as the Prime
Minister proposed a toast. No,
it wasn’t to celebrate the end
of the strike by fuel tankers
after they were allowed to
continue fueling the Nepal Oil
Corporation. Rather, it was to
celebrate an all-party consensus
to ban alcohol at all public
functions with immediate effect.

Bottles of Scotch were cracked
open and the wine flowed freely
at the PMO as jubilant members
of the coalition raised their
glasses to salute the rare and
remarkable occasion in which
leaders laid aside their deep
partisan differences to come
together on a matter of grave
public interest.

“The agreement to ban
booze shows that when it comes
to human health (Kic) this
government will leave no stone
unturned or upside down, and
we will work across party lines
to have another party,” government
spokesman Consul Partha Gharti
told reporters with a noticeable
delirium. Sufficiently lubricated, the
Cabinet then dived right into
the next point on the agenda
which was to amend the
constitution to convince
dissenting Madhesi parties to
agree to local elections in April,
but to nominate new Nepali
Ambassador Extraordinary
and Plenipotentiaries to various
countries around the world.

Because there are more
ambassadorial aspirants than there
are nation states and territories
in the world, things got a bit heated.
The Honourable Ministers first
started addressing each other with
words that may have been in the
letter “M” and sound like a Japanese
designer store, the name of which
we cannot utter here because we are
within earshot of minors.

The name-calling soon
turned into a full-fledged
between political parties claiming
plum ambassadorial posts, while
factions within some parties
wrestled each other and nearly
demonstrated rivalries vying for
vacant embassy slots.

Finally, to the national
interest, two female candidates
heading recruitment companies
for overseas contract workers
were selected for UAS and Oman.

It is an indication of the
importance Nepal places on
female empowerment that women
head manpower agencies. This
is proof that we do not believe
in tokenism, we believe in
hard cash. We honour manpower
agencies by nominating them
ambassadors to countries where
they have valuable clients.

The Cabinet also decided
that since it was difficult
to accommodate all political
appointees from the 8 coalition
partners and various factions
therefor for ambassadorships,
Nepal would henceforth send
envoys to all 193 countries in
the world. It would have been
196 countries, but we cannot send
an ambassador to Taiwan because
of our strict adherence to the
One 
China Policy.)

The Prime Minister, however,
is in an awkward position because
he feels that even after we have
opened embassies in both São
Tomé and Principe thinking
they were too small, there are
still comedians who insist on
diplomatic postings
So, he has hit upon a brilliant
idea to appoint the remaining
as Nepal’s Chargé d’affaires ad
Interim to the Moon, Mars, Venus
and some of the larger rocks in
the Asteroid Belt.

If this goes on, we may have
to venture even further afield —
even outside the solar system.

The discovery this week of seven
new planets orbiting a sun 44 light
years away could be considered
for opening new
Nepali embassies.

We can then
just blast into
space potential
plenipotentiaries
like the Ass.