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SHIVA KHANAL

ROADBLOCK

In 2014-15, the Mugling-Narayangad Highway claimed 19 lives. This year, 99 people have already been killed on this 36km section of the road.

The much-delayed road-widening has disturbed slopes weakened by the earthquake and rains. When it was finished in 1982, heading east from Kathmandu preferred to take this 200km detour to avoid existing narrow mountain roads. The highway became Kathmandu's main artery and it got congested.

Even after widening, the road will be beset by rockfalls for a few more years and not able to handle future growth in traffic. Alternatives are sorely needed, and those will not be fully operational for a while.

All three roads to Hetauda from Kathmandu need upgrading and widening. The Army is going to take three more years to finish the fast-track to Nijgad, and the BP Highway is too narrow for buses and trucks.

It speaks of the lack of vision, planning and implementation by successive governments in Kathmandu that a faster and more efficient transport corridor to the plains has not materialised 50 years after talking about it.

Like everything else in Nepal, the Mugling Highway is an example of poor governance and lack of accountability of those in high office. It is political failure that keeps Nepal stuck.

Photo Feature page 8-9



SHREEJANA SHRESTHA




Go online to take a ride down the Mugling Highway and understand just how perilous the journey can be on a busy road beset by landslides that has already killed 99 people this year alone.

Water from the sun

Even a small loan can make a huge difference to an impoverished farming family. Hira Chaudhary (above) used to be a bonded labourer and a subsistence farmer in Kailali. All it took was a Rs70,000 loan from the Poverty Alleviation Fund for a solar-powered irrigation pump to allow her to grow surplus food, improve nutrition of her children and send them to schools.

Read more page 11



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THE HIMALAYAN THAW

Ever since the brief but fierce war between India and China in 1962, the world's two most populous countries have observed an uneasy truce, keeping their border dispute in a deep freeze. The Himalaya is hotting up 55 years later, and the cause is not just global warming.

When they met in Beijing in 1988, Deng Xiaoping and Rajiv Gandhi had an unwritten understanding to let the 3,000km Himalayan arc separate their spheres of influence. This pact has withstood numerous skirmishes along disputed borders in Arunachal, Ladakh and Bhutan, the Dalai Lama's presence in India, and the lingering distrust between the two nuclear nations. Until now.



There are now geo-strategic rumblings along the Sino-Indian Himalayan border. China feels increasingly encircled, relations with Burma and Singapore have soured somewhat, and there is volatility in the Korean Peninsula and the South China Sea.

Beijing and New Delhi used to go out of their way not to irritate each other, but lately they are doing just the opposite. China has been preparing carefully for the post-Dalai Lama era, and could feel it expedient to keep the pot boiling on Tibet. Modi's India could feel the need to perform an occasional war dance for domestic purposes.

It is mystifying why the latest flashpoint

had to be the disputed Doklam Plateau near the Bhutan-China-India tri-junction in the Chumbi Valley, which itself is astride India's strategic Chicken Neck corridor. The timing of this flareup just 100km away from a violent statehood agitation in Darjeeling is also intriguing (*See page 4-5*). All this is a rude awakening for happy little Bhutan, the only neighbouring country with which Beijing has no diplomatic ties.

Nepal cannot be unconcerned about tensions so close to our eastern flank. Those who are secretly delighted that Bhutan is getting caught up in this Clash of Titans may note that although Bhutan may depend on India for defence and foreign affairs, Nepali nationals are deployed by the Indian

Army on the frontlines.

As in 1962, thousands of Indian Gorkha soldiers could be killed if there was another Himalayan war. We are forced to re-think the anomalous state of affairs where nationals of one country serve in the military of another, which is a foe of at least two of its own friendly neighbours.

India and China benefit from the fact that there is a 1,500km section of the Himalaya they don't need to guard because Nepal is a buffer state. Nepal's stability is in their interest. And it is in Nepal's national interest that this conflict does not escalate. The sabre-rattling by the media on both sides is deafening. It has degenerated to the point where Indian journalists are resorting to racist epithets to counter belligerent prose in China's semi-official *Global Times*. Going by the tone of Indian and Chinese social media content, war has already broken out.

New Delhi and Beijing need to put the Himalaya back into the deep freeze. Both countries have bigger things to worry about.

GUEST EDITORIAL

VIDYADHAR MALLIK

Leapfrogging poverty

Nepal has shown satisfactory reduction in absolute poverty, and progress in social and economic indicators affecting poverty. However, the data need to be read with caution because of the impact of remittance and economic liberalisation favouring the entrepreneurial class, which was less poor to begin with. Further reduction in poverty will be more difficult because the remaining poor are 'hard to access' groups with multiple disadvantages – vulnerable groups with little social and economic capital, living in remote places.

The old formula of microfinance, donor-sponsored quick impact programs (QUIPS) focused on visibility of immediate results won't work anymore. They will need more empathy and compassion, deeper and prolonged, often iterative engagement. Microfinance also does not serve the 'hardcore' poor, does not finance entrepreneurial innovations, and many programs charge exorbitant interest and service fees.

The Poverty Alleviation Fund (PAF) is a successful community-driven enterprise in reducing poverty, especially for really poor households. The focus is on social mobilisation, small-scale rural infrastructure and employment generation. It has reduced the number living in absolute poverty, and also raised their quality of life by investing in social infrastructure and community empowerment.

The flip side is that the PAF is regarded as an unsustainable donor-driven program (the World Bank is pulling out), lacks resources for up-scaling and is occasionally marred by corruption and elite capture,

especially by the NGOs who facilitate community groups.

Most poverty reduction programs run by the government are supply-driven, heavily centralised and spend most of the budget on overheads. They are more like branding exercises of political parties, and rarely reach the really poor in remote areas. How local governments elected for the first time in 20 years will address this problem remains to be seen.

Mobile and off-line banking and e-banking could help Nepal leapfrog in fighting poverty. Universal cash transfers or smart targeted social security programs based on individualised unique identity could hold the key to poverty reduction. There needs to be coordination between agencies responsible for health, education, sanitation, rural infrastructure, financial inclusion and cooperatives. Elected local governments need to extend support for employment generation by community organisations set up by the PAF, which have billions of rupees in revolving funds.

It is a tough job that will demand innovation, accountability, grassroots democracy and less greedy microfinance institutions. People will now demand practical action for accessible and less costly services on the ground.



Vidyadhar Mallik is former vice-chairman of the Poverty Alleviation Fund.

Times.com

ONLINE PACKAGES



HIGHWAY OF DEATH

The widening of the Mugling-Narayangad Highway was first delayed by the earthquake then the Blockade. Weakened slopes have failed repeatedly this monsoon and frequent landslides have killed 99 people in the past year alone. Take a hair-raising ride with our reporters down the Mugling Highway, skirting excavators and wrecked vehicles. See for yourself just how perilous the journey can be.



BACK TO THE LAND

The solution to poverty, malnutrition and out-migration is so simple: a solar-powered irrigation pump. Watch video of how an irrigation system powered by the sun can quickly raise the living standards of subsistence farmers, provide better nutrition and keep them on the land. Follow our reporter to Kailali to see how a former bonded labourer has harnessed the sun for water and lifted her family out of destitution.



PRICE OF RICE

Join *Nepali Times* on a fact-finding trip to Pokhara and marvel at the stunning diversity of rice varieties in the Valley of Lakes. Visit our online page to watch a video highlighting the efforts of local farmers like Surya Prasad Adhikari (*above*) to preserve Nepal's local varieties of rice by cross-breeding strains to make them hardier.

NOT SO SURPRISED

Dear Editor, why do you sound so surprised when you write 'The political cartel suddenly realised it gave away too much to local governments and is trying to back pedal on devolution with a draft bill in Parliament that would essentially cut off the money supply to new village and municipal councils' ('Devolution revolution', Editorial, #866)? These greedy politicians will become prime minister over and over again. For real devolution, you need a real revolution.

SJB

NO PROVINCIAL AUTHORITY

It is injustice that 85% of revenue goes to the central government. It should have been the opposite: 5% to central authority and 85% to a local body ('Keeping power in Kathmandu', #866). The provincial authority should be scrapped, it is not necessary to have a three-tier government.

Utsuk

Shrestha

YET TO BE TESTED

When considering that UML has done well in the Tarai, this article forgets that most of the Tarai have mixed populations of hill settler and Madhesi/Tharu/Muslim communities that would likely affect the voting patterns ('A 3-party state', #866). The demographics are very different in Province 2. VDCs with Madhesi/Tharu/Muslim majority are towards the southern part of the Tarai, with the exception of Jhapa and Kanchanpur district. The real test to see if the UML can revive support amongst the Madhesi community, will be the province 2 results.

Tarai-analyst

WHAT'S TRENDING



Art in a virtual world

by Sahina Shrestha

Most viewed story last week was the profile of digital artist Ashim Shakya, who dazzled readers with his apocalyptic images of Kathmandu after the earthquake and Blockade. Visit nepalitimes.com to see how Shakya uses animated digital visuals and traditional canvas.

Most reached on Facebook
(7, 268 people reached)

Taking the lead on lead

by Sonia Awale

There is a strong correlation between elevated blood lead levels and decreased IQ. This report on how exposure to alarmingly high levels of lead risks the intellectual development of Nepali children was the most shared on social media last week.

Most popular on Twitter
(24 retweets, 25 likes)

Most shared on Facebook

Nepalis caring for Israel

by Tsering Dolker Gurung

Most Nepali caregivers in Israel need to be on call at all hours, leaving no time for social life, but they feel lucky to have safe working conditions and relatively good pay.

Most visited online page

Purposely provocative

by Damakant Jayshi

The writer's take on Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba's provocative comments on the *Sajha Sawal* talk show last week and the similarity of his antics with those of other leaders globally generated the most comments. Go online to read the feedback.

Most commented

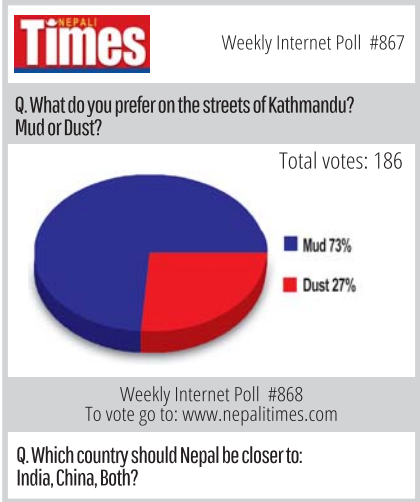
QUOTE TWEETS

Nepali Times @nepalitimes
Kathmandu's population of 2.5 million requires 62 fire engines and 3,000 fire fighters. Full story: <http://bit.ly/2sOYI2J>

Robert Piper @UN_Piper
This was one of my big concerns during my 5 years in #Nepal. I trust new Mayor is going to make this a priority. Finally?

Nepali Times @nepalitimes
Big 3 threaten to roll back decentralisation by cutting off money supply to newly elected local councils <http://bit.ly/2uQVHek> @omastharai

Prakash C Joshi @pcjoshi17
This is like giving by one hand and taking back by another



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Bhutan-Nepal bhai-bhai ?

Thimphu and Kathmandu must begin exchanging notes for the sake of Himalayan stability

The Himalayan chain is on a geopolitical boil, with eruptions occurring in many places, and other parts ripe and ready. China and India are in confrontation on multiple fronts and levels, and the rancour is at a pitch not heard since the 1962 war.



ON THE WAY UP
Kanak Mani Dixit

Times have changed dramatically over the last half decade, with China's pole-vaulting global ambitions hitting like waves on the northern flanks of the Himalayan chain. To the south, India is ruled by a prime minister who runs foreign affairs through a coterie rather than use the MEA superstructure, and whose Hindutva-laced ultra-nationalism seems to goad him further into the quicksand.

All of which is a recipe for instability and limited war, which will be disastrous for all who live to the north, south and within the Himalaya, be it the peoples of Tibet, the Ganga-Brahmaputra flats, or the mid-montane region from Baltistan to Arunachal, including Bhutan and Nepal.

As the two independent countries of the region, regardless



KUNDA DIXIT

of their differing size and orientations, it is in the interest of Bhutan and Nepal to be in minimal contact to find ways to reverse the escalating belligerence. But such bilateral collaboration faces three challenges:

- Thimphu and Kathmandu have tended to remain apart for fear of displeasing New Delhi
- Kathmandu's poor diplomatic credibility due primarily to unending domestic political instability
- The distance between the two countries because of the Lhotshampa refugee crisis.

While one cannot do much about the first and second points, on the last, the two capitals may want to patch-up after a quarter-century of chill. This need for rapprochement is necessitated by what is happening across the Himalayan arc, starting with the events on the Doklam plateau at the Bhutan-India-China trijunction. Beijing has also upped the ante on Arunachal even as New Delhi goes into overdrive on Indian suzerainty over the territory. In Ladakh's Pangong Tso, India allows the prime minister of the Tibetan

government-in-exile to fly his flag by the lakeside.

Darjeeling is burning yet again with reports of five protesters killed, and Sikkim is reeling under a plains blockade that has Pawan Chamling venting ire against Mamata Banerjee. Kashmir Valley is once again imploding, even as terrorists ambush and kill Amarnath pilgrims. Further north-by-northwest, New Delhi is incensed by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which pushes through Pakistan Administered Kashmir claimed by India.

The war of words between Beijing and India has reached fever pitch, and as this is written the world waits to see who will blink first as the soldiers jostle at Doklam. Meanwhile, this tripartite faceoff is also of interest to Nepal because of the Kalapani sector and Lipu Lekh trijunction, both hanging fire all these years.

Amidst this frightening scenario, Thimphu and Kathmandu should be in deep consultation in order to protect their own interests and seek to avert conflict among the two Asian giants. And yet they have been apart since the early 1990s when the Thimphu government so cruelly and efficiently implemented its depopulation project, of ridding itself of a major slice of its Nepali-speaking

Lhotshampa citizens.

Nepal was saddled with more than 100,000 refugees, and bilateral relations plummeted, with New Delhi (through act and omission) taking Bhutan's side. The refugees thankfully were given protection by UNHCR, and so their status was preserved for a full decade-and-a-half in the hot and humid camps of Jhapa and Morang.

But donor fatigue was beginning to set in, and UNHCR itself was getting restive. After 9/11, the American refugee intake superstructure went dry and Washington DC went in search of a docile yet sizeable group of refugees to take in, which was when the Lhotshampa were discovered. The last decade has seen the steady emptying of the refugee camps in Nepal, with the bulk of the refugees (some enthusiastically, others in deep melancholy) now settled mostly in the US, with smaller numbers in Norway, Holland, Australia, Canada, UK, Denmark and New Zealand.

There are still around 10,000 refugees left in southeast Nepal, and while Thimphu seems to have weathered a crisis of its own making, the prolonged refugee problem will be forever a moral blot on the nation-state of Druk Yul.

The sticking point for now is Bhutan's unwillingness to take back its citizens still remaining in the refugee camps, which it is morally bound to do. In the meantime, given the grave geopolitical issues arising, Kathmandu and Thimphu must agree to disagree on the origins and reality of the refugee issue and begin contact. Today, there is not even back-channel communication.

The initiative to revive bilateral relations should come from Kathmandu, whose political leaders seem to have forgotten that Bhutan exists. The same may be true for the political class of Thimphu. As they get in touch, at the very least, they could be exchanging perspectives even as the elephant gnashes teeth and the dragon breathes fire. 🇳🇵

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Squeezed in the Himalaya

Nepal and Bhutan find themselves in a tight spot as Sino-Indian tensions grow

SEAN SHOEMAKER

The confrontation between India and China over the strategic Doklam region of Bhutan has the potential to flare up into the most serious tension between the two Asian giants since their 1962 Himalayan war.

The sabre-rattling by officials and media on both sides show that a resolution to this stand-off is not imminent, causing anxiety to the two countries that are sandwiched between them: Bhutan and Nepal.



The initial trouble began in early June when China demolished two old bunkers in Bhutan built by the Indian Army garrisoned there. The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) then brought bulldozers to start constructing a road on the Doklam Plateau towards the tri-junction of the borders of Bhutan, China and India.

This led to both countries deploying troops to the area, and a war of words

erupted in Delhi and Beijing. The *Global Times* in Beijing carried a story stating that India will suffer worse losses than in 1962 if it continues to push at the Bhutan-China border. On the other side, the Indian newsmagazine *Outlook* chose to run an article entitled 'Chink in the Checker's Board'.

Each side has roughly 300-400 soldiers at the stand-off site. India is said to have moved another 2,500 troops to the area, and China has also deployed an unverified number of soldiers at the strategic Chumbi Valley. India and China have said they do not intend to back down in this fight, leaving the burden of diplomacy on Bhutan whose

exasperation many Bhutanese feel about India's dominance. Meanwhile, in India there is a feeling Bhutan is not protesting enough about Chinese activities on its border.

"Bhutan has chosen to isolate itself, which has proven to be a mistake at times such as this. It has done well in economic development, environmental conservation and selling power to India but today's world order is very unkind to small countries," said Nishchal Pandey of the Centre for South Asian Studies, in Kathmandu.

Nepal's situation is less precarious than Bhutan. It remained a neutral buffer state in the 1962 conflict, has a policy of equidistance between its giant neighbours. However, there are about 50,000 Nepalis in the Indian Army and any open conflict in the Himalaya would be detrimental to its security (*See Editorial page 2*).

Bhaskar Koirala of the Nepal Institute of International and Strategic Studies said the timing of the current tension is linked to remarks by Indian Foreign Secretary S Jaishankhar in Washington DC during Prime Minister Modi's visit there last month in which he used the term 'strategic convergence' between the US and India. The joint US-India-Japan naval exercises in the Indian Ocean and the Dalai Lama's visit to Arunachal Pradesh seem to have added to China's suspicions.

But if the situation in Bhutan is to escalate, a third party will inevitably interfere and if contemporary history is to be trusted, then that party will most likely be the United States.

Koirala explained: "The US can't fully support India because the US and China have a lot of shared interests. The US would also urge Nepal to stay neutral." 🇳🇵

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Trade aid

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has approved a \$21 million loan to support Nepal in streamlining its trade processes to meet international standards. The project will help Nepal develop a national policy and legal framework for trade facilitation and also strengthen the Department of Customs to expand exports.



to the Project for Human Resource Development Scholarship by Rs 257 million for the coming year for two-year scholarships to 20 Nepali government officials to pursue Master's degrees in Japan.

Yeti ATR-500s

Yeti Airlines is overhauling its fleet by replacing its Jetstream 41s with ATR 500s. The first of two aircrafts will arrive next week and the other by August. A third 52-seater French-Italian built twin turboprop will be added next year. The



planes will be used on Yeti's trunk routes to Biratnagar, Nepalganj, Dhangadi and Bhadrapur. Yeti is also issuing Boarding Passes to raise public awareness in Nepal of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (*see page 12*).

JICA scholarships

The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has increased its grant

Holidays on Qatar

Qatar Airways is offering 40% discounts on flights to popular holiday destinations across the globe, including recently



launched routes to Nice and Dublin. The airline is also starting a new direct daily service to Kiev starting 28 August.

Joyful purchase

Hyundai is launching a 'Joyful July Offer' for customers to get cash discounts, free comprehensive insurance, free road tax for the year and a chance to win an additional discount worth up to Rs 100,000.



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Being taken for a ride



Jan Schmidt-Burbach is an adviser at World Animal Protection (WAP) and recently completed a detailed study into the conditions of elephants used in tourism in Nepal and other parts of Asia. He spoke to **Lucia de Vries** about his findings.



PICS: KUNDA DIXIT



Nepali Times: What is the general condition of elephants in tourism?

Jan Schmidt-Burbach: There are close to 3,000 elephants used for tourism and entertainment in Asia, and 3 out of 4 are in poor condition. This includes chaining, no social interaction, limited veterinary support and an inadequate diet. In Thailand we saw a 30% increase in tourism elephants over a five-year period, but there has been a decline in elephant ride acceptability by 9% in just 2 years in 12 other countries. Over 160 of the largest global travel companies are moving demand away from riding towards more humane conditions for elephants.

Can elephants be domesticated?

It is widely suggested that domestication occurs only after about a dozen generations of selectively managed captive breeding. This would take over 100 years, and even then you'd be left with a 3,000 kg animal that could injure or kill people and damage property easily in stressful situations. Restraint and control lead to a poor quality of life for the elephant.

But elephants in captivity is supposed to be good for conservation?

It is a misconception and it increases incentives to capture elephants in the wild. People start thinking it's better to have an elephant in captivity, as it can

be used to generate profits, than in the wild where it may cause conflicts. To conserve elephants we need to better manage human-elephant conflict, understand the elephant's value in the wild for the eco-system, and step away from exploiting them in captivity.

But most tourists think captive elephants appear happy enough.

The conditions captive elephants face may look idyllic to the casual visitor, but are a far cry from what elephants need. In the wild they would be living in large herds, constantly interacting with each other and building life-long ties, while roaming long distances and browsing a large range of plants and fruits. In captivity they are mostly kept in isolation, offered

food with very limited variation and their independent movement is restricted. An intelligent animal like an elephant is psychologically affected by this.

What is wrong with riding and bathing elephants?

Both activities rely on being able to control the elephant in situations that can quickly become stressful. Such control can only reliably be achieved through cruel training that leaves a mark on the elephant for all its life. The experience for the visitor is also very different: while elephant riding or bathing gives a short glimpse of an animal that is being controlled by a human, the alternative of observing elephants in the wild or in a sanctuary

allows a better understanding of these amazing creatures and the need to protect them.

What has been the impact of your campaign in Nepal so far?

We have seen wonderful progress in Nepal, also thanks to groups such as Elephant Aid International, which is developing large-scale elephant enclosures. Many tour operators that operate in Nepal have signed our elephant-friendly tourism pledge. They are now moving away from offering elephant rides and seek out more humane alternatives, such as offered by venues like Tiger Tops.

Can Nepal set an example?

Time is up for offering elephant rides. To really protect elephants in captivity and in the wild we need to shift demand towards humane, observation-based alternatives. Nepal has a real opportunity here as it has comparatively few captive elephants. Local authorities, communities and the tourism industry could team up so that Nepal becomes the first country to completely end tourism elephant riding and an example for all of Asia and the world. The positive impact on the country's reputation would be immense.

Nepal recently passed an Animal Welfare Directive: how important is such legislation?

Improved animal welfare legislation is crucial to help the shift to provide better treatment for captive elephants. Tourism-led incentives to improve conditions are important but this needs to be followed by such legislative changes that ensure conditions don't fall back to how they were before.

I very much hope to see the time when elephant riding and performances have disappeared as tourist attractions and we are allowing elephants to be elephants, either in high-welfare sanctuaries that take care of existing captive elephants, or in the wild. Eventually this is where they belong: in the wild. Not in entertainment.

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FIRE FIGHTERS: Actors Sunil Thapa and Michael Imperioli with SP Police Superintendent Bipin Regmi, Kathmandu Fire Chief Kishor Kumar Bhattacharai and Michael Kobold of Soarway Foundation at Boudha on Monday. They were making a plan to drive 10 fire engines to Kathmandu in November.



boost the economy and create jobs that will discourage young Nepalis from heading abroad for work.

“We want people to know Nepal is open for business,” Kobold said. “It’s safe, beautiful and breathtaking.”

Kobold originally partnered with former US Ambassador to Nepal Scott Delisi and his close friend, actor James Gandolfini, on the project. When Gandolfini died of a heart attack in 2013, Kobold put his passion project on hold for a year and a half. In 2015, he founded the Soarway Foundation with Delisi to focus on disaster preparedness in Nepal – and three weeks later the earthquake struck, killing nearly 9,000 people. Kobold threw himself into Soarway, setting everything else, including his watch business, to the side.


“You can find ways to make customers happy,” he said. “You can’t delay helping Nepal.”

Celebrity friends like actor Malcolm McDowell and explorer Sir Ranulph Fiennes called Kobold to volunteer for the fire truck expedition. But even as the logistics fell into place, politics took a turn for the worse. India's blockade came five months after the earthquake and lasted another five. It took Kobold 21 months of daily meetings to gain the necessary permits for the vehicles.

Barring further complications, six fire engines, one ladder truck, one command vehicle and two Volvo track steers will arrive in Kathmandu this autumn to be handed over to the municipality. Soarway is also designing a \$2-million fire station for the capital.

Soarway will fly engineers to Kathmandu every six months for the next five years to inspect and service the donated vehicles, provide spare parts and train local mechanics. It will also bring firefighters and US Navy SEALs to train Nepalis. As of now, Bhattarai is the only professionally trained Nepali firefighter in the valley; his other colleagues simply learn on the job.

Kobold says this is a pilot project, and the impact of the first 10 vehicles will determine whether more donors join the effort to improve Nepal's firefighting capacity.

“Nepal spells adventure,” says Kobold, but sometimes adventure means danger. He hopes investment in emergency training and infrastructure will change that. 

The road to a safer Kathmandu

A unique project to augment Nepal's fire-fighting capacity, while boosting tourism

KATE RYAN

Fire Brigade Chief Kishor Kumar Bhattarai drives cautiously through the narrow streets of Basantapur that wear the scars of the 2015 earthquake. This donated Japanese fire truck has been in need of a spare part for seven years, and he does not expect a replacement any time soon.

"In order to serve the Valley, I need at least 50 trucks," says

Bhattarai. "Right now, we have five."

This November, the beleaguered fire brigade will triple its fleet with the help of 75 Hollywood actors, Nepali celebrities, political leaders, army generals and philanthropists from around the world. The international team will drive 10 American firefighting vehicles from Birganj to Kathmandu.

The expedition is seven years in the making for Michael Kobold, the German watchmaker-

mountaineer-philanthropist behind the effort. After personal and international setbacks, the death of a friend and a border blockade, Kobold has all the permits and a target date.

In the last month alone there have been two major fires in the valley: the Yeti Carpet Factory in Bhaktapur and a fire in Gokarna in which 52 dairy cows perished.

Gas leaks and electrical shortages are the two primary causes of fires in the Valley, says Bhattarai. Fires occur more

frequently after an earthquake, because pipes and electric wiring systems are damaged. While Kathmandu is still rebuilding, fire risk is high and evacuation routes are unreliable.

Kathmandu's population of 2.5 million requires 62 fire engines and 3,000 firefighters, but there are only 50 firefighters serving the Valley with 5 antiquated trucks. Their ladders only extend 10 storeys, putting most of Kathmandu's new high-rises beyond their reach.

And while the dispatch time is less than two minutes, response time is never a guarantee. The trucks have no GPS system, and when they get lost Bhattarai says he sticks his head out the window and uses his nose.

Kathmandu needs emergency resources, but it also needs tourists. Kobold hopes the celebrities driving the trucks will raise Nepal's profile, attract tourists with deeper pockets,



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SANJEEV SHARMA in CHITWAN
PHOTOS by **BIKRAM RAI**

When the 36km Mugling-Narayangad Highway was completed in 1982, after four years of Chinese engineers dynamiting sheer rock, it was regarded as an engineering feat.

The highway sliced through the cliffs on the left bank of the Trisuli River, connecting Chitwan to the midhills of Nepal. A journey that used to take five days on foot was suddenly reduced to a 1-hour drive.

Buses and cargo trucks between Kathmandu and the rest of Nepal preferred this 200km detour via Mugling to the other serpentine roads through the mountains. But as traffic volume grew, it was clear that the narrow road either needed to be widened, or alternatives found.

There are now other routes connecting Kathmandu to the central and eastern plains, but the Sindhuli Highway is too narrow for trucks, and alternative roads to Hetauda via Kulekhani and the Bagmati corridor are delayed. The widening work on the Mugling road had just started in April 2015 when the earthquake struck. The work was further pushed back by the blockade, and only 55% of the World Bank-financed Rs 3 billion project to make it a 11m wide, double-lane highway has been completed so far.

This monsoon, slopes already weakened by the earthquake have failed repeatedly. More than 99 people have been killed in the past year alone. There are gigantic traffic jams, with horror stories of people taking 14 hours to get from Kathmandu to Bharatpur. The highway has now been closed at night to prevent further accidents, as well as to expedite construction.

The most dangerous part of the highway is the first 5km after Mugling, where a rockfall on Wednesday took 19 hours to remove. "We have to be on emergency duty 24 hours with our rapid response team: we never know when the landslides will hit next," says Chitwan SP Dipak Thapa. On 23 June, four policeman working to remove a previous rock fall here lost their lives when a landslide swept them down to the Trisuli.

Prabhu Joshi of the civil contractor Shrestha Construction admits the reason for the frequent landslides is that the original



DANGER SIGN AT 14KM



EXCAVATORS REMOVING AN OVERNIGHT LANDSLIDE AT KALI KHOLA



DANGER SIGN WARNS DRIVERS NEAR MUGLING

design doesn't have preventive measures to protect the slope and reduce landslide risk.

Project in-charge Chandra Naryan Yadav says the fragile rock structure of the Trisuli Gorge makes it difficult and expensive to have 100% protection from landslides, but he is confident the slopes will stabilise in the next few years. 🇳🇵

UNBLOCKING



TRUCKS AND BUSES ON THE LANDSLIDE-PRONE SECTION ABOVE THE TRISULI RIVER

Highway of Death

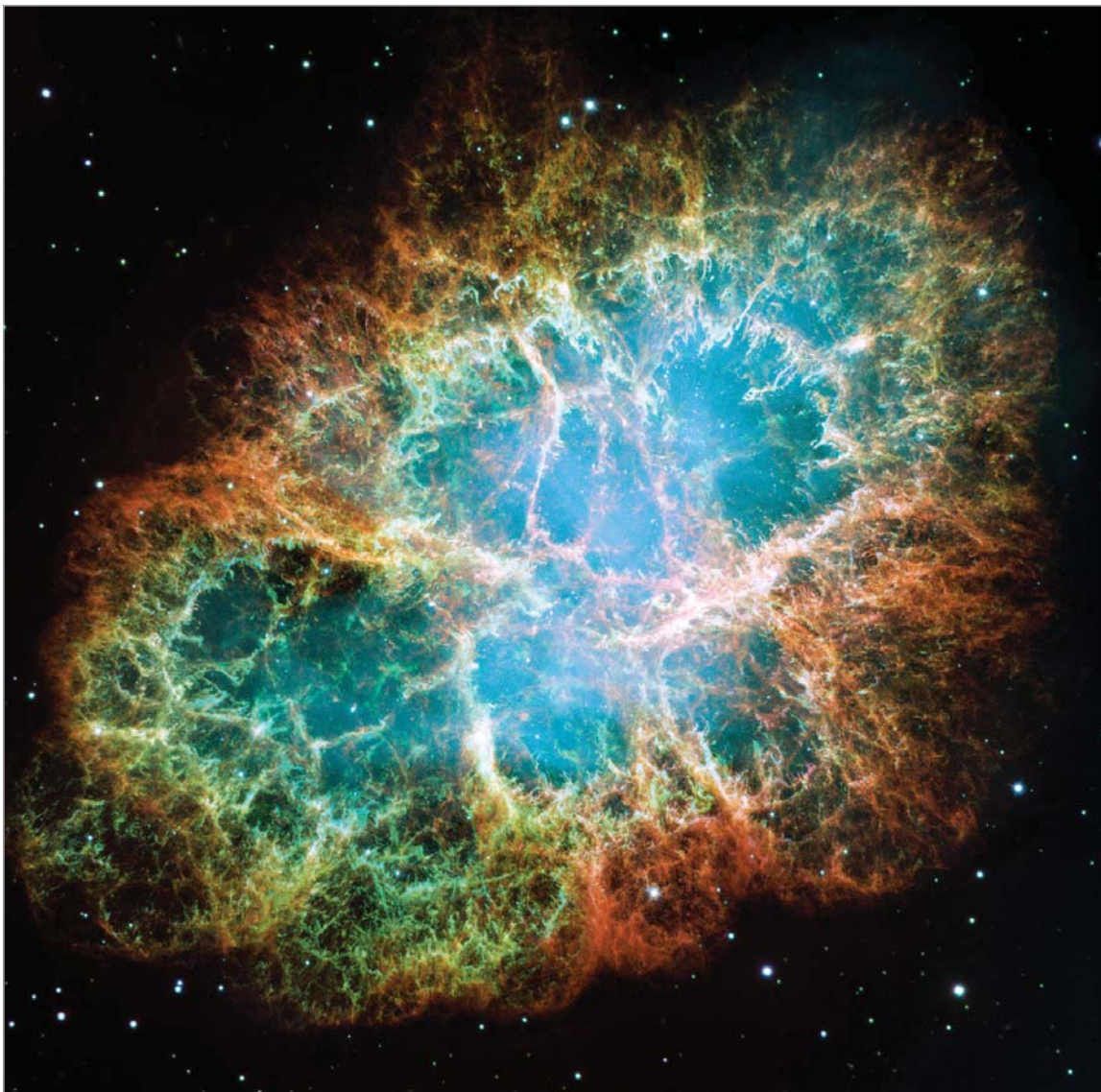


The number of accidents, total fatalities and wounded on the 36km stretch of the Mugling-Narayangad Highway



Join us on a road trip down the Mugling Highway along vertical cliffs above the raging Trisuli River, skirting excavators and wrecked vehicles. See for yourself just how perilous the journey can be.

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VER AS SEEN FROM MUGLING



	2014 -15	2016 -17
Number of Accidents	142	156
Fatalities (wounded)	15 (351)	99 (401)

SOURCE: CHITWAN POLICE



SOUTHBOUND BUSES PLY SINGLE-FILE AS EXCAVATORS REMOVE DEBRIS AT KALI KHOLA



ONE OF MANY VEHICLE WRECKS BY THE ROADSIDE AT SETI DOBAN



"The geology of these mountains is weak ... but in about two years the slopes will stabilise."

Chandra Narayan Yadav
Project In-charge



"We have to be on emergency duty 24 hours with our rapid response team: we never know when the landslides will hit next."

Dipak Thapa
Chitwan SP

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EVENTS



Kathmandu kora,
Join hundreds of cycling enthusiasts and ride 50, 70 or 100 km to raise funds for a cycling trail in the Bungamati area of the Kathmandu Valley.
15 July, 7 am onwards, Patan Darbar Square
<https://www.facebook.com/ktmkora/>

True stories project,
An art exhibition to raise awareness about and against gender-based abuse, exploitation and human trafficking.
14-31 July, 10am-6pm, Patan Museum, Lalitpur, (01) 4218048

Inviting submissions,
Hurry and submit documentaries for the 11th edition of Film Southasia to be held in Kathmandu, 2-5 November 2017.
Deadline: 15 July
<http://www.filmsouthasia.org/>

Bonjour,
Register for three-hour weekend courses or 1.5 hour online classes every week and you'll soon be sounding like a native French speaker.
22 July, Alliance Française de Katmandou, Pulchok, 9am-12pm, Rs 11,190 for 45 hours of classes, 9808418422



Open mic for Parkinson's,

Vocal workshop,
Learn singing techniques from renowned jazz vocalist Diandra Danieli, hosted by Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory.
5 July-30 August, Registration: (01) 5013554, <http://www.katjazz.com.np/vocal-teacher-diandra-danieli/>

Attend an event dedicated to Parkinson's: you can choose to show your talent, share your story or just be an audience member.
22 July, 11 am onwards, Moksh, Jhamsikhel, Rs 1,000 (welcome drink and snacks included) <https://www.facebook.com/parkinsonsnepal/>



Life in colour,
A photo exhibition showcasing the work of French-Mexican videographer and photographer Susana San Juan Lopez.
26 June-17 July, Image Ark, Patan, (01) 5506665

Hold my hand,
Join the pilot session of the five-day Hold My Hand Nepal Feminist Summer School, which will discuss the politics of NGO Feminism in Nepal and beyond.
22 July, 12:30-2:30 pm, Yala Maya Kendra, Patan Dhoka, holdmyhandnepal@gmail.com

Kids camp,
Children 5-12 years old can join this five-day camp to enjoy music theory, games, guitar workshops, yoga and meditation, wall climbing, photography and much more.
17-21 July and 23-27 July, 10am-2 pm, Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory, Jhamsikhel, (01) 5013554

MISS MOTI-VATION **KRIPA JOSHI**



MUSIC



Night light,
Spend your Friday night listening to the beats of the Light band.
14 July, 6 pm, Hunger Ground Restaurant & Cafe, Darbar Marg, 9843415210

Food and music,
Enjoy a three-course meal and select a pint of beer while enjoying live music by Priyadarshani Shrestha and Aabhiskar KC.
14 July, 7-10 pm, Empire Restaurant & Bar, Kupondol Heights Road, 9813967032

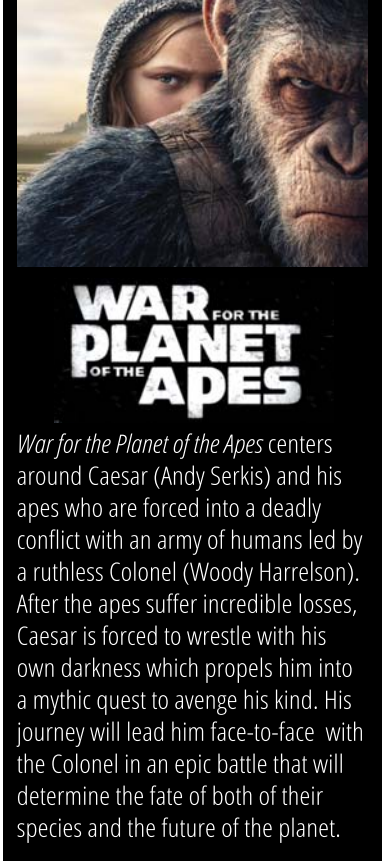
Friday night live,
Sway to the rhythms of the Render band and spend your weekend with friends and family.
14 July, 6:30-10 pm, Laptey Newari Cuisine, Jhamsikhel, (01) 5548968



Zephyrtone,
The Zephyrtone duo 'Shooting Stars' will be rocking the stage with their exceptional soundscape of covers and original tracks.
14 July, 8 pm onwards, Karma Lounge and Bar, Tripureswor, Rs 1,000, (01) 4117148

Phatcowlee,
Catch bass guitarist Rajan Shrestha perform electronic numbers during the EP launch of his new project Phatcowlee.
15 July, 5-6 pm, RS MOTO, Gahanapokhari, Kathmandu, 9865135937

OUR PICK



War for the Planet of the Apes centers around Caesar (Andy Serkis) and his apes who are forced into a deadly conflict with an army of humans led by a ruthless Colonel (Woody Harrelson). After the apes suffer incredible losses, Caesar is forced to wrestle with his own darkness which propels him into a mythic quest to avenge his kind. His journey will lead him face-to-face with the Colonel in an epic battle that will determine the fate of both of their species and the future of the planet.

DINING



Embers,
A large and cosy place serving a blend of continental dishes and Nepali favourites.
Krishna Gali, Pulchok, (01)5534766, embers.ktm@gmail.com, www.embers-restaurant.com

Pauline's Garden,
A perfect place to enjoy the sunset and sip on a happy-hour cocktail. Buy one cocktail and get one free on Thursdays.
Baluwatar, Aaneek Marg, (01) 441537



Alice Restaurant,
Step in for a spread of Thakali, Chinese, Continental and Japanese cuisines.
Gairidhara, (01) 4429207, Darbar Marg, (01) 4429207

Embassy,
Away from the hustle-bustle of the streets, find here a variety of multi-cuisine dishes at a place ideal for business meets and casual rendezvous.
Panipokhari, (01) 4424040

La Bella Cafe,
Italian cuisine to tease your palette this weekend.
Chaksibari Marg, Thamel, 01-4700078



Fresh Cup,
This coffee-culture café is the place for aromatic Americanos and mochas. Try the grilled chicken sandwich, among other selections.
Kamaladi, Kathmandu, (01) 4428040

Tasneem's Kings Kitchen,
A charming restaurant proposing the unique flavours of Bohra Muslim Food.
Jhamsikhel, 9801282727, (01) 2239532

Taza,
Middle Eastern restaurant featuring a Syrian chef. Offers free deliveries within Patan. The shawarmas are succulent.
Pulchok, (01)5541592, 9860960177



Café Déjà Vu,
Spend an evening at this budget restaurant that offers more than six types of momos. Tip: try the chicken kurkure.
Naxal, (01) 4428829

GETAWAY



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

Balthali Village Resort,
A small, cosy retreat with a bird's eye view of green, terrace fields of Kavre dotted with traditional ochre houses.
Balthali, Kavre, 9851075818

Jhule Mountain Resort,
At 2,050m elevation, this eco-resort has a farmhouse stretching across hills covered in fresh pine. Enjoy an organic homestay experience.
Shivapuri-Nagarjun National Park, Lapsipedi-3, Jhule, (01) 6212399

Dwarika's Hotel,
A little slice of paradise hidden in the middle of the city. Start the day off with complimentary yoga classes in this award-winning heritage hotel.
Battisputali, Kathmandu, (01) 4470770



Milla Guesthouse,
If you enjoy the quiet, and admire a mix of old and new, this is the perfect place to stay in Bhaktapur. Not too far from the city, yet miles away.
Bhaktapur, 9851024137

Tiger Mountain Lodge,
Situated 1,000 ft above Pokhara valley, the resort offers spectacular views of Machapuchhre, Dhaulagiri, Annapurna and Manaslu.
www.tigermountainpokhara.com, (01)4426427, 9849194874

Famous Farm,
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Nuwakot, (01) 4700426, info@rural-heritage.com



Mum's Garden Resort,
Head to Pokhara for a peaceful and comfortable stay in beautifully designed cottages surrounded by a lush green garden with great views of Phewa Lake and the Annapurna range.
Lakeside, Pokhara, (06) 1463468, www.mumsgardenresort.com

Landmark Forest Park,
Eco-friendly resort that offers safari packages. Bed and breakfast at Rs4000 plus taxes per person.
Chitwan, (056) 580311, 9851059096



Chure denudation and floods

Himal Khabarpatrika, 9-15 July

हिमाल

Every monsoon it is the same old story. The rains trigger landslides and floods, roads and bridges are washed off and villages in the plains get inundated. The media likes to call them ‘natural disasters’, they are indeed natural but are disasters only because of man-made interventions. Urban encroachment into the floodplains of rivers, deforestation of the Chure, haphazard road excavation along slopes, growth and lack of priority for drainage, have turned what should be a predictable annual phenomenon beneficial for agriculture into a calamity.

Since April, 40 people have been killed in floods and landslides this year alone. Last year 257 people died, and more than 1,000 have perished in the past five years. August is the worst month for monsoon-related deaths because by then the soil is saturated with the previous month of rain. Due to the early rains this year there are major landslides in July already. In fact, Baitadi saw a deadly landslide in April which used to be unheard of. The Met Department has explained the cloudbursts as being part of a westerly system that brought early rain. In other parts of the country the monsoon behaved erratically, after heavy pre-monsoon showers, the real rains started late and there haven’t been the prolonged light drizzles characteristic of monsoon precipitation. Such rain distributes rainwater more evenly, reducing landslide risk. Some scientists say this could be due to

climate change. The other risk factor is Nepal’s topography where cloudbursts channel runoff down narrow valleys, the slopes of these young mountains are inherently unstable, and the most fragile are the Chure Hills which are made from sand and boulders with thin topsoil. Once the vegetation goes on a Chure slope, the hills can be eroded very quickly by downpours. The silt is then swept downstream to the Tarai, raising river beds and forcing them to frequently change course. Increase in logging, indiscriminate sand and boulder mining has meant that these delicate slopes have been made even more precarious.

The Chure makes up 12.5% of Nepal’s area and stretches from Ilam to Kanchanpur, spanning 36 districts, with 164 rivers that are dry most of the year but turning into raging torrents in the monsoon. One of the reasons for the destructive floods in Saptari last week was the denudation and mining in the upstream Chure watershed. The other reason is inappropriate road and urban construction which have blocked natural drainage for these rivers in the monsoon. Eighty per cent of the total flow on Nepal’s rivers are derived from monsoon rains in three months. Till a decade ago, the monsoon floods on Chure rivers were a boon for agriculture. Today they are a bane.

Destruction of the Chure puts more than 10 million Nepali plains-dwellers and millions more in India at risk of floods. This is not a natural disaster, but a man-made environmental one.

Editorial in *Nagarik*, 12 July

नागरिक

There hasn’t been enough thinking about how the new federal structure is going to manage local natural resources. This has to be done immediately to avoid future conflict.

There is already a brewing disagreement about who should manage Nepal’s community forests, which has been cited as an international success story. The Federal and Local Development Ministry used constitutional provisions to decide on 8 July to hand over the rights for the conservation and management of community forests to local government units.

The decision gives municipalities, village and ward committees the responsibility to run community forests and protect biodiversity. There are 19,000 community forests within the boundaries of the new 744 local governments. Nepal’s forest cover has gone up from 39% to 45%, and much of that is due to the



sacrifice and effort of community forestry user groups.

However, just like local mafias have taken control of local quarry contracts and sand mining along rivers, there is now a danger that the community forests will also be plundered. There is also the added complication that the community forests of one village or municipality falls in the jurisdiction of another. Community forestry management should therefore be handed over to provincial governments when they are formed. Till such time as local government units have the capacity to do so, conservation and management of community forests should be the responsibility of the district forest offices.

Nature does not have boundaries. A tree cut today will take 100 years to go back. We do not want our forest cover to shrink while restructuring the state. On the subject as sensitive as environmental conservation, it is best to tread carefully so that we do not wreck the achievements of the past.

CAREER OPPORTUNITY

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- Efficiently process the recruitment / resourcing / transfer of staff from all levels, ensuring that the best are selected. Ensure Recruitment Process Operating Instruction (RPOI) is followed and adhered to at all times.
- Training & Orientation: Co-ordinate internal and external trainings.
- Job Descriptions: Ensure that job description of every staff is revised in a timely manner and as and when required actively liaise with department heads.
- Performance Management: Ensure Performance Evaluations are conducted on time. Support the performance management and reward and/or incentive process.
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- Staff Attendance: Monitor staff attendances on a daily basis and on staff request adjust the attendance as appropriate.
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- Staff Wellness: Look after staff wellness in a proactive and creative manner.
- Staff Satisfaction Surveys: Conduct staff satisfaction surveys in-house or liaise with external HR Consultant as and when required.

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- Facilitate Compliance Administration and ensure that social compliance policy has been adhered to and complied with by all vendors. Ensure timely advice to senior management.
- Efficiently process the factory visit/ documentation/ draw corrective action plan and follow up accordingly so that it is followed and adhered to at all times.
- Assist in Social audit activities.
- Prepare report.
- Identify and evaluate the sustainability and compliance workflow.
- Prepare the metrics for factory inspection and make corrective action plan accordingly.

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Gate: Three Phases of Elections
Tunnel: Extension of Parliament

नागरिक

Dewan in *Nagarik*, 13 July

QUOTE OF THE WEEK



“ We have claimed 10 ministries. We can settle for less if RPP and Federal Socialist Forum Nepal join the government.

Pampha Bhusal in *Naya Patrika*, 13 July



The Bad Batch

When was the last time you watched a film where you didn't know what the heck was going to happen? After *Get Out* (reviewed last week in this column), my answer is *The Bad Batch*, breakout Iranian American




MUST SEE
Sophia Pande

director Ana Lily Amirpour's love story involving cannibals, released in theatres last month. Amirpour made her name with 2014's *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, an Iranian vampire film with oodles of style, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and immediately created enough of a buzz that it allowed her to write and direct *The Bad Batch*, starring model Suki Waterhouse and the likes of Keanu Reeves, Giovanni Ribisi, Diego Luna, and Jason Momoa in other significant roles. Shot expertly by Lyle Vincent,

with the cinematography playing a key role in creating the mood of the film, *The Bad Batch* begins with a young, seemingly clueless Arlen (Waterhouse) being tattooed on the neck and placed outside of a menacing looking wire fencing: she is joining the 'Bad Batch' a group of outcasts deemed unfit to live in society and expelled into the harsh desert to make their own way. What happens next is gruesome, but artfully so, when Arlen is captured by cannibals. It is her pluckiness and escape that really suck us into this weird little film, making us want to understand what motivates this odd heroine who lives by her own rules. Amirpour's script is patchy, her characters, aside from Arlen, and Miami Man (Momoa) are somewhat archetypal, somewhat self-indulgent, making for moments of puzzlement, and some eye-rolling. Fortunately, Waterhouse's surprisingly strong performance keeps us

with her as she shoots some cannibals, faces down a creepy cult hero, and falls in love with an interloper in the strangest of circumstances. The love story is the main arc of the film, though it is not the only reason for watching it. It is far from a conventional tale, and while the chemistry between the leads is sparkling, the union is bizarre and intriguing, leaving us wondering what in goodness is gonna happen next. Mainstream cinema is at a crossroads: English language films financed in the hundreds of millions by big studios can continue to be sequels and spins-offs of older material (*Spider-Man* is currently in its second reboot with *Spider-Man: Homecoming* in theatres now) or risks can be taken on original screenplays, pushing the language of cinema into newer territories, and not just the throwbacks and remakes that we've seen over the past decade. *The Bad Batch* is a fun, funny, imperfect film with moments of genius and lots of misses. You never know what turn it will take, and that in itself is a particular pleasure in these days of hackneyed formula. The key is to give the Amirpours of cinema a chance so that we can see more mind-expanding, crazy little films like this in the future instead of lugging ourselves to the theatre to see *Spider-Man* (as good as it might be) again and again and again. 



[Watch trailer online](#)
[nepaltimes.com](#)

HAPPENINGS



BIKRAM RAI

MONEY TALKING: Nepal Rastra Bank Governor Chiranjibi Nepal speaks about a new monetary policy for the next fiscal year at the Radisson Hotel in Kathmandu on Sunday.



NEPAL ARMY

BIG GUNS: Chief of Army Staff General Rajendra Chettri with the 19th Regiment Royal Artillery of the British Army on Wednesday. Chettri is on a six-day visit to UK at the invitation of the Chief of the General Staff General Nicholas Patrick Carter.



BIKRAM RAI

DEAL SEAL: Laxman Risal of NIC Asia Bank signs on Bollywood actress Manisha Koirala as the bank's brand ambassador at Hotel de l'Annapurna on Wednesday.



GOPEN RAI

POEMANDU: Students at a rally to celebrate the 204th Bhanu Jayanti, the birth anniversary of Bhanu Bhakta Acharya, at Kamaladi on Thursday.



YETI AIRLINES

READY TO BOARD: Yeti Airlines CEO Umesh Chandra Rai and UNDP Nepal Country Director Renaud Meyer during the launch of new boarding passes that promote the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

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Tulsiapur : 082-562575

Sun and water

Irrigating rain-fed farmlands will curb migration and cut poverty



SUNNY FUTURE: Hira Chaudhari (*right*) and Astuni Chaudhari (*below*) in Fulbari village of Kailali harnessed solar power to pump water, irrigate their fields and lift their families out of poverty.

PICS: SHREEJANA SHRESTHA



SHREEJANA SHRESTHA
in KAILALI

When they used to run out of money, Hira Chaudhari and her husband would cross the border into India in search of work. They don't have to anymore.

The family now grows surplus food thanks to a solar-powered irrigation pump that has freed them from dependence on the annual monsoon. They can eat vegetables that they grow year round, sell the rest to pay school fees for their children, and even have savings left over.

Hira used to be a *kamalagi*, but being freed from bonded labour did not free her from poverty. She used to earn just Rs20 a day in India. Today, her family makes Rs80,000 annually from the farm.

It has all been possible because of support from the Poverty Alleviation Fund (PAF) for photovoltaic panels rigged to a water pump to irrigate their fields. The whole system costs Rs70,344 and is supported by PAF's small scale infrastructure program.

"The solar pump allows me to grow vegetables and crops thrice in a year, our income has risen and we no longer have to go to India," says Hira who hated leaving the children behind.

Astuni Chaudhari is also doing much better after she was able to irrigate her vegetable farm with water from a solar pump. She has leased more land to grow chillies, seasonal beans and bitter gourd. "It was risky to depend on rainfall, and we had to go to India to work when the money ran out," says Astuni, who now earns Rs70,000 a year from the farm.

Hira and Astuni are among 45 of the poorest households in Kheda village of Dhangadi Sub-Metropolitan City near the Indian border who grow surplus food to sell in the market at Dhangadi. And the solution was a simple water pump running on free sunlight.

"Kailali's subsistence farmers no longer have to wait for rainfall to grow crops, they grow enough to feed themselves and have savings," says Nahakul KC of the PAF.

Kailali has one of the highest out-migration rates among Tarai districts, and the lack of young men has reduced agricultural production. The PAF's solar

Financial freedom on two wheels

When the government banned the bonded labour system known as *kamaiya* in 2010, Man Bahadur Dangora (*pictured, above*) started a bicycle repair business. Today, he is a sought-after motorcycle mechanic in Suklapanta municipality of Kanchanpur, and an inspiration in his community.

"There was a time when I worked as a slave, today I am my own master," says the 33-year old, who took a Rs15,000 soft loan through the PAF to start his motorcycle repair and spare parts shop. The PAF has supported more than 32,000 community-based organisations in 58 districts with a Rs15 billion revolving fund. It assists 146 such organisations in Kanchanpur, mostly targeted to former *kamaiyas*.

It wasn't easy at first. There was never enough money saved up to expand the business, but the PAF revolving fund gave him the break he'd been

looking for. He now earns enough to educate his two sisters and send his son to an English school. He tells us: "Who would have thought a *kamaiya*'s children would ever go to school?"



Former bonded labourer Man Bahadur Dangora has taken a two-wheeled approach to business success. Go online to watch video.

nepalitimes.com

pumps have returned many to the land: instead of earning cash in India, they are growing food at home.

Agriculture and food security expert Yamuna Ghale explains: "The solution to food deficit and lack of jobs is irrigation. It's as simple as that."



A solar-powered irrigation system in Kailali is the solution to poverty, food deficit and out-migration. Go online to view multimedia story on how this simple idea helps farmers grow surplus food.

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Remittance, rice and real estate

FADING GREEN: Samjhana Regmi and her neighbours (*above*) plant paddy seedlings last week in Lekhnath, as Pokhara's rapid urbanisation engulfs what used to be fertile fields that grew a rich diversity of rice varieties.



PICS: YUBARAJ SHRESTHA

YUBARAJ SHRESTHA
in POKHARA

Lekhnath Municipality is a vivid example of how a remittance-based economy can wreck thriving agriculture in one of Nepal's most fertile valleys.

When Samjhana Regmi got together with women from neighbouring households to plant paddy here last week, it was on a tiny water-logged patch hemmed in by new buildings.

Regmi is planting rice even though her husband, Hari, who has been working in Dubai for two years, told her it doesn't make sense to work so hard in the fields anymore: she should just buy rice in the market from the money he sends her.

But even though Samjhana feels tied to the land and enjoys growing food for the family, there are only women and older people to help in the fields.

Another effect of out-migration is that most families here invest savings from the money they earn abroad to build new houses on their

Rice self-sufficiency

Nepal is one of the most diverse countries for rice in the world, with paddy growing from the heights of the 3,000m Sinja Valley to the plains of Ilam, at 100m. However, many of the estimated 1,700 varieties of rice that have evolved to suit the country's micro-climates and soils are now in danger of becoming extinct.

Scientists say this would worsen Nepal's already precarious food security situation, and the country would be much more dependent on imported hybrids. Nepal's rice varieties are also threatened by climate change and rapid urbanisation of fertile valleys, as well as the out-migration of young men (*See story, left*).

"The educated stay abroad, only us elderly farmers remain in the village. A lot of terraces are now fallow, they have turned into jungle," says Surya Prasad Adhikari from Sundari Danda near Pokhara, who has been at the forefront of a farmer-driven effort to preserve the genetic diversity of rice seeds by cross-breeding rice varieties to make them more resilient.

"Local strains of rice are being abandoned not only because farmers have left, but also because some are attracted to higher yields of hybrid varieties. Local strains can better resist climate change, and if they are preserved

maybe some farmers would even return to their land," says Adhikari, who has worked closely for the Pokhara-based group, Local Initiatives for Biodiversity, Research and Development (LI-BIRD) that helps cooperatives practice sustainable agriculture.

"The farmers protect quality seeds so they can breed improved varieties, and planting them in turn protects the soil," explains LI-BIRD's plant breeder, Rajeev Dhakal.

Nepal has an annual rice deficit of about 1 million tons even during years with good monsoons. Rice production is averaging about 5 million tons because only 18% of the land is irrigated, and productivity is low. This year, only 40% of rice fields have been planted because of late monsoons and elections.

However, hope may be at hand. Three irrigation projects that will divert water to huge tracts of the Tarai are about to launch in the central and western plains. This means farmers will be able to plant spring rice as well. New techniques like System of Rice Intensification (SRI) and cross-breeding by farmers like Adhikari have improved yields, and these techniques need to be scaled up.

SRI is now being practised in 12 districts and has doubled the yield in many places,

while using half the amount of seedlings and much less water. SRI combined with mechanisation has boosted productivity in Tarai farms from an average of 3 tons/hectare to 9 tons/hectare at a lower cost. Power tillers, automatic paddy planters and harvesters are replacing manual farming even in the hills.

Says Rajendra Uprety at the Regional Directorate of Agriculture in Biratnagar and a strong proponent of SRI: "We need to grow more rice to achieve food security, and need a new methodology for local seeds for higher yields. SRI is suitable to achieve that objective."

Sean Shoemaker in Pokhara

PRICE OF RICE



Hear Surya Prasad Adhikari describe his life's work to preserve the diversity of rice varieties in Pokhara Valley, which are in danger of becoming extinct, and how the out-migration of men has affected rice production in what used to be Nepal's grain basket.

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HIGH BREED: Women planting paddy at the 15th annual Paddy Festival on 29 June in Pokhara.



fertile farms. Lekhnath was wide open paddy fields till as recently as 15 years ago, today it is a jumble of houses on either side of the highway as Pokhara expands its tentacles eastwards.

Farmers from the surrounding mountains have abandoned their terraces to buy roadside property here, which is slightly cheaper than in Pokhara itself.

"Most of the urbanisation was in the last three years, now more than 70% of paddy fields are gone, and even the remaining land has been bought up by real estate developers," says Ward Committee Chair Kamal Bahadur Thapa, who blames the lack of local government for the unplanned growth.

The irrigated fields of Pokhara and Lekhnath used to be famous for their rice diversity, with famous varieties like Jetho Budo, Jhinua, Ramani and Sili, but many of them are now on the verge of extinction.

"Even on the remaining fields, most of the rice is of the hybrid or imported varieties, our own rice is being lost," says farmer Sabitri Bhandari, 54, whose father sold all the family's land to property developers.



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A parliament of owls

The last time Lion Heart was PM, during the reign of **Gyanendra the Great**, he expanded the council of ministers to have a jumbo cabinet. During his current tenure, **Dubya the IV** is trying to break his own record and put together a dumbo cabinet. The wearing-in is on Sunday after PKD returns from BKK at the National Stadium since there is no other venue big enough for so many ministers. Just like there is a ‘parliament’ of owls, a ‘knot’ of toads, or a ‘murder’ of crows, the PMO has decided to call the expanded cabinet a ‘mob’ of mantris.

What is holding **PM Dubya** back is the selection process, since the wrong person could cost the country dearly. The idea is not to appoint people who are sticklers for rules, and to avoid those who can take quick decisions. The best ministers are yes-men of various kingmakers and brokers, and since the chance of a minister making mistakes is so high, the strategy is to appoint politicians who cannot make any decisions. That way, nothing can go wrong because for anything to go wrong a decision has to be taken that is not right. We have an idiot-proof system of governance: our movers and shakers don’t move at all, and rarely shake.

But we agree with critics who have serious misgivings about the size of the proposed new cabinet. With 41 ministers, it’s just not big enough. The bigger the cabinet the bigger the multiplier on the economy: they will create new

jobs, new bomb-proof limousines with outriders have to be bought, helicopters have to be rented, and the kickbacks generated on purchases will all boost Nepal’s GDP per decapita.

There is, however, a serious problem: we are running out of ministerial berths and need to give birth to new ones. Ideas:

- Ministry of Distortion & Extortion:** One window office for mis-information and mis-appropriation.
- Ministry of Illegitimate Affairs:** All kickbacks to be sanctioned by this ministry in interest of transparency.
- Ministry of Adultery:** All plastic rice dealers register here first.
- Ministry of Physical Therapy and No Works:** Simple arm-stretching exercises under the table for atrophied muscles caused by prolonged periods of inaction while not repairing roads.
- Ministry of Home:** Minister works out of home to mess up elections and extend tenure of parliament.
- Ministry of Junkets and Aviation:** Secretaries can cash frequent flier miles while in transit in Kathmandu between trips just before fiscal year ends. Chief Sec can go to the ADB without quitting govt.
- Deputy Prime Ministers without Portfolio:** These posts are cunningly left vacant to accommodate new parties to build the numbers for constitutional amendments if, and when, they are going to happen.



The Ass

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