The louder the clarification, the deeper the speculation. This appears to describe Maoist Chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal’s statement that he will not form the new government outside his party’s alliance with the UML.

After some NC leaders publicly backed the Maoist supremo as the next PM, Dahal clarified that the people have endorsed left unity and it would be sacrilege to violate it even if he benefitted personally. But NC leaders have interpreted Dahal’s statement as a message to UML Chair KP Oli: I will stay within the alliance only if I am made the PM, or at least the unified party’s Chair.

Maoist spokesperson Pambha Bhusal told Nepali Times that Dahal is not toying with the idea of leading the next government with the backing of the NC and Madhesi parties, but added: “Our party Chair must be given one of the two executive posts. That’s the deal between him and Oli.” Oli, widely viewed as the next PM, has neither confirmed nor denied the deal. He kept mum even after UML General Secretary Ishwor Pokhrel proposed him not just as the PM but also the chair of the unified party. After winning a near-majority, the UML looks confident that it can rule Nepal even without the Maoists.

This has made Dahal insecure, and he is bargaining to secure 50% of seats for Maoists in the unified party. The UML, given its strength, is unlikely to accept that demand. This has given the NC a chance to drive a wedge between the two communist parties.

Mahendra Yadav, Minister for Drinking Water and Sanitation, was one of the first NC leaders to propose Dahal as the new PM. “Given his commitment to addressing Madhesi grievances by amending the Constitution, Dahal is best suited to be the next PM,” he told us. “If Oli becomes the PM, he will create a divide between the hills and Madhes, and the country will plunge into another cycle of conflict.”

Yadav claims that Dahal has not rejected the NC’s offer. “He is just using it to strike a better deal with the UML,” he says. “If the UML does not show flexibility, Dahal will do what he has done in the past: ditch the UML to partner with the NC.”

Although technical issues like choosing temporary headquarters of provinces, appointing the Heads of State and electing the Upper House seem to be delaying the transfer of power, the game of thrones playing out after the parliamentary polls is what is actually causing difficulties in the changing of guard.

Om Astha Rai
The UML swept the local elections in mid-2017, and as a member of the governing party, the Alliance went on to win a near landslide in parliamentary and provincial elections last month. Voters showed that they were attracted by the Alliance’s catchy slogan of ‘prosperity with stability’.

We can’t say much about stability because the democratic persons of Nepal’s never-ending transition are the same. As the month of elections, they have shown no real change in their modus operandi.

We can’t hold out some hope on the prosperity front. Well, maybe not wealth creation as such, but certainly in reducing overall poverty. As the result of the latest wave of the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) survey conducted by the National Planning Commission in 2014 shows, Nepal has seen the incidence and intensity of poverty fall by more than half from 55.3% in 2006 to 28.6% in 2016 (see Guest Editorial above).

The figure of 28.6% is slightly higher than the national rate for income poverty of 23.8%. The reason for this is that MPI takes into account a diverse range of parameters to measure deprivations: it goes beyond just income figures to factor in nutrition, education, child and maternal mortality, household energy use, along with roofing and flooring of a house, sanitation and water supply.

What is surprising is not that poverty has decreased dramatically over the last decade, but that it has decreased despite chronic instability and poor governance under successive regimes since the end of the conflict in 2006. One of the reasons is the $6.1 billion that Nepal receives annually from overseas workers, although the figure is probably much bigger because it is only an estimate based on official bank-to-bank transfers and does not include money the 2.5 million Nepalis working in India bring home. Yes, as the graph below shows, we should not be uncooking the sparkling wine just yet. The 28.6% figure is a national average: a breakdown by newly formed federal provinces shows that although Province 3 (which includes Kathmandu Valley) has poverty headcount of about 12.2%, Province 2 and 6 have MPI poverty rates of 51% and 48%.

Nothing surprising there has always been that the mid-western mountains and the eastern Tarai have suffered from topographical challenges and state neglect. The survey results offer an explanation about which dimension of poverty in each of the provinces contributes to deprivation in that part of Nepal. For instance, Province 2 has the highest number of poor, but is not necessarily as poor as some of the others. The plains region is kept back by housing, energy use, nutrition criteria and chronic floods (see page 14-15).

There are entrenched pockets of deprivation in Nepal, and the largest contributors to national poverty overall is the high dropout rate and nutrition – factors underlined by targets that Nepal did not meet for the Millennium Development Goals. Measuring poverty is one thing, alleviating it is another. Nepal’s poverty rate has gone down in the last decade, despite poor governance. The new government in the new year has a chance to ensure stability so we can augment accountability, improve governance, and address the structural poverty that stems from discrimination and neglect.

Go online for full report: www.npc.gov.np/images/category/Nepal_MPI.pdf

The Nepal MPI follows indicators of the Global MPI, being 3-dimensions and 10 indicators, such as malnutrition, low education or inadequate sanitation. The latest data adapts the Global MPI to national needs, for example in the case of Nepal by including road materials as one of the nine indicators of poverty measurement.

The index explores substantial variations in the rate of poverty across the newly formed seven provinces of Nepal. Provinces 6 and 2 have the highest rates of multidimensional poverty across the newly formed seven provinces of Nepal.

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Fly Turkish Airlines and get Exclusive Discount on the joyful cablecar ride at Chandragiri Hills!

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Who needs fire trucks?

Kobold's unusually titled book offers revealing insights about Nepal society's relationship with foreigners

“...what's your story?” I asked Dinkar Nepal.

He has collected some ‘used but serviceable’ fire trucks in the US, and wants to gift them to the Nepal government, after generating enough pomp about the initiative to create a buzz around the world. He escaped death during the summit the highest mountain in the world, and wants to gift them to the world's celebrities, as well as world-popular mountain climbers, to tug at Nepali populist nerves to tug at Nepali

“...what they did for us cannot be paid back, but I wanted to do something to keep them away from the dangerous lives they lived year after year.”

Kobold had used a piece of rock from the top of the world to make the dial of the watch, ‘Kobold Himalaya’, which he designed himself for Kobold Nepal, a company owned by Namgel and Thundu Sherpa.

Kobold’s book is about the gratitude for the Sherpas, his friends from the Himalayas, who died of a heart attack in 2013, and about the fire truck expedition to Nepal, which he initially planned to undertake with James but now has decided to execute as a tribute to them.

Who needs fire trucks?

Bao Xuan, in Soaltee Crowne Plaza, features authentic and high-end Chinese cuisine.

ZIYU LIN

There are Chinese restaurants, Indian restaurants, and Nepali restaurants. Chinese cuisine is among the most popular worldwide, and a major projection of Beijing's soft power. In South Asia, even the better Chinese restaurants tend not to be the real thing, and that includes most Chinese restaurants in Kathmandu – except Bao Xuan, which has just opened in Soaltee Crowne Plaza, featuring authentic and high-end Chinese cuisine.

Most readers of this paper will know China Garden, which Bao Xuan has replaced with a fusion of exclusive Sichuan, Hunan and Cantonese menus. In November, the restaurant held its first Dim Sum Festival, offering a special menu to provide Kathmandu residents a new dining dimension.

“We were really encouraged by the response, and hope to have more such festivals,” says restaurant manager Rohit Sharma.

Bao Xuan (which means ‘treasure attic’) arrives at a time when the volume of Chinese visitors to Kathmandu is on the rise. The restaurant recently opened a high-end level delegation of government officials from China. “They told us they were really impressed with the authenticity of the ambiance and the food,” recalls Pratiksha Baisnet of Soaltee Crowne Plaza.

“The technique of Chinese food is its ingredients,” explains Master Chef Dhan Kumel Limbu, who has specialised in Chinese cuisine for two decades. The restaurant distinguishes itself from other Chinese restaurants in the Valley by its ingredients, except for fresh vegetables and chicken, all other raw ingredients and seasonings are imported from China.

Says Limbu: “We have six kinds of flours only for Dim Sum. Everyone can make Chinese food with the recipes, but it is the original taste of the ingredients that

Bao Xuan offers a complex society bereft of norms and ideals. The lack of infrastructure and trained human resource in explained cities, Nepal definitely needs to boost this industry, and this expedition made the fire truck stand out.

Turkish Toys

Keeping in line with its environmental policies, Turkish Airlines has revamped its website of flight - all made from natural materials - to provide additional entertainment for kids while simultaneously introducing them to the concept of all endangered species.

Immunity Boost

After calculating The Body Mass Index of 35,500 students, from Bhaktapur, Tansen, and Kathmandu, and drinking cleanest and drinking water facilities of schools, the Dak Lak School Dairy Boom program 2017 ended in December.

Projects evaluated

In December, the NRF Development Fund team held project meeting, on strengthening of water sanitation, hygiene and smoking. Because of health and hygiene awareness, there will be a cash prize of Rs10,000 along with a Hero Duet scooter.

Starring more

Sundhara Development Fund and First Step Enterprises at Kalimati are providing support. The brand also also has Primary storage houses at Civil Mall, Sandhara and Jyoti Bhawan, Jamal.

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make the food stand out.

Chinese tourists are the second largest group of visitors to Nepal, following those from India. Their number for the first half of 2017 grew 38% over the same period the year before. Soaltee now sends some staff to China for six months of language training every year and guarantees that at least two receptionists can speak Mandarin.

The interior décor of Bao Xuan includes authentic Chinese features like wooden fences, with Chinese patterns separating tables into balconies. The wooden tables have neatly folded cloth napkins and Chinese porcelain sets.

“We are targeting Chinese tourists for sure since they are increasing rapidly and we want to provide tourists and businessmen a place to experience their true food culture in a foreign country,” says Sharma. “However, the restaurant is becoming increasingly popular with locals as well.”

Signature Dishes

Soup: Chicken Bamboo Shoot and Hot and Sour Soup
Appetizer: Sharka Style Fried Chicken (Non veg), Garlic Chicken (Veg)
Main Dishes: Given Chicken (Veg), Milk Custard, Roasted Carrot Lamb (Non-veg), Chicken with Sweet Corn Gravy
Dessert: Vegetable Fried Rice
Kathmandu: L-L 002, Soaltee Crowne Plaza
01-4273999 (6540)

#891

Kobold also faced the frustrating instability of the Nepal Government machinery and

Kobold's frantic attempt to launch his dream via crowdsourcing after having failed to get international sponsors. He says he penned it in only 12 days to meet the deadline to release the book in time for Christmas.

A real taste of China

Bao Xuan

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In an office in Hotel Kathmandu, Raju BK bends over a plate of dal bhat, his infant son perched on one knee. A couple of colleagues are scattered around the room intently scooping up handfuls of food from plates on their laps. Raju’s bhanu is crouched on the floor cooking over an open flame and clothes are drying on a short line strung along a wall.

Hotel Kathmandu in Thamshikhel is about six months away from opening. Raju, 25, has been living in this bare, concrete room, about 3m x 3m for a year. His wife and year-old son joined him six months ago.

Scattered throughout the six-storied building are other groups of workers, about 20 in total. Raju’s family is from Barada, but other groups come from Sagari, Sunnari, Sindhu, Katili and even India to work in Kathmandu’s construction industry.

They will work, eat and sleep together in this concrete shell for months, then move down to the next project.

Some workers, like Raju, have been toiling and living in these grey structures for a decade or more to send money to families, and only making quick visits home for holidays.

While the struggle of Nepali workers in the Gulf or Malaysia gets much attention, the plight of Nepalis working in Nepal seldom makes it to the news.

Raju is the leader of the ‘Bardia Group’, which includes his wife Geeta, younger brother Ganesh and two teenagers. He earns Rs500 for his costs. The visa never came, but he has been working ever since.

“It’s tedious but the income is good,” Raju says, standing in a bare corner room with gaping holes in the floor. “I want to go back home to send money to families, and to the next project. He found this work by chance.

While staying in a hotel in Thamel waiting for a work visa to a Gulf country 10 years ago, he ran out of money. Taking a friend’s advice, he worked on a building site to cover his costs. The visa never came, but he has been working ever since.

“A lot of Nepali workers are doing the same work.

Raju’s wife Geeta, 22, also works in the building, mainly cleaning. “I feel better in the village, my whole family is there,” she says. “here I have to clean floors and carry bricks for my husband’s work.”

In a dim, corner room, one story below, Sunita Uran is sitting on the concrete floor feeding her six-day-old daughter. A small wood fire burning in a shallow, metal dish next to her provides extra warmth.

Her husband Mahesh says they wanted to have the baby at his home in India, across the border from Sunnari district, but it takes three days to travel there from Kathmandu. Instead the baby was delivered in the maternity hospital in Thapathali.

 Asked how they feel about living in the half-finished building with the child Mahesh answers: “We are happy, we will have to be here for five or six more months.”

Up on the roof shovelling sand, Rita Uran, 28, says there is work at home in Sunnari but they don’t get paid monthly, unlike here. “I can save some money but back home you finish what you earn. It is difficult, but what choice do we poor people have?”

Standing on the same roof a few days later, owner Sanjaya Parajuli points out the location of the hotel’s future beer garden, on this clear autumn afternoon gifted with a view of glowing, snow-topped Himalayan peaks.

He has been building the 22-room boutique hotel on family land for three years, including an interruption after the earthquakes. Parajuli thinks the location is an advantage, close to the UN and offices of international non-profits. Rooms here will cost $75-100.

He says he is happy with the job the workers are doing, although, because labour is so scarce, occasionally they get transferred to other sites.

Asked how long they plan to keep working in the capital, Raju’s wife Geeta says: “We have the kids to send to school. I think we will stay a little longer.”

A former school teacher Magar says moving up from labourer to assistant site manager is what he wants for his career. “I can save some money but back home you finish what you earn. It is difficult, but what choice do we poor people have?”

People power: ‘Workers deliver a building in a hospitable’... Raju BK, with Geeta and son Ramchandra in an unfinished hotel Kathmandu in Thamshikhel. Celebrated Ruia says the advantage of working at Kathmandu is the easy access to money. (Shekha Gora) Raju and Ramchandra are sleeping in his room by best.

MARTY LOGAN

PHOTOS: MARTY LOGAN

Building Kathmandu

Climbing the ladder

Three years ago, Raju Magar started working as a helper and in one-and-a-half years became a skilled labourer. Today he is the boss of a handful of labourers who construct the houses he has been helping to build.

Magar, 28, says moving up from labourer to construction site manager was “very hard to get his speed up at 6.30am but the work is interesting.”

He says it is hard to find a father for the baby that was born in Kathmandu, where he grew up in a “very humble situation.”

Magar says even though he makes on each job depends on how quickly he learns, and how much time he has for his family engagements, he the amount he earns that rate the best clients of many houses.

He pays his workers Rs1,000 per day, Rs1,500 to the skilled ones. They work 10 hours minus 1 hour for lunch and 30 minutes for tea. Those conditions are a combination of union rules and terms adopted by a group of local builders operating in Nepalgunj Municipality.

‘Workers are hard to find, but I have seen some people who are continuously with me,’ he says. ‘They are from Sindhuli, Rasuwa and Sankhuwasabha. If necessary, Magar says, he hires workers from these areas, often on a daily wage.

A former school teacher, Magar throws party for the workers after each police finished, suggesting that he is really the young man is prospering.

It’s very well,” the builder says. “I am able to send my children to a good school.” His plans include investing future profits in land speculation.
T
he call from Lady June was curt. “Lisa, sorry to wake you but I promised to tell you — Ed just left us. Please come.”

It was 11 January 2008, and life throughout New Zealand passed as the loss was digested. The day had arrived, the shaky hero was gone, his craggy face familiar from the country’s five dollar bills. Sir Edmund Percival Hillary KCZ KBE was not only the conqueror of Mt Everest but a statesman, ambassador and knight of the garter.

Mary’s Church cleaned and wired for many years. Whilst family and friends rallied, the services cranked into gear, and the clergy dusted off their ceremonial vestments. Holy communion and tattooed, small children in white, smart and scruffy, trim cushions, and the ice axe used for climbing. Even the once immaculate chignon. Our citizens had lit lamps beneath the prayer flags decorate the massive mural of Everest across its cupola.

Every inch of the way was lined with people, some wailing, some silent, the blue light laid their a tear, and many spontaneously clapping in admiration of the work of the first New Zealander. Toddlers were lifted by proud parents, and teenagers in the station opposite Ed’s funeral weresalted, old men snapped to attention, and I even saw a woman waving a Pan Pacific flag. The government driver was wrapt, shaking his hand at everyone. As the hearse he steered through the crowds: “In all my years I’ve never seen anything like that.” A Middle Eastern woman waved her dog’s paw. “I’m sure you’ll be with us this morning?”

The service was a blur of speeches. Seated in my black pew, I listened to the music, hymns, tributes and speeches. Seated in my black hat, grandchildren fidgeted in the pews, an eccentric nice lay on healing hands, and Elizabeth Hawley fussed with her walking stick, then suddenly it was all over. The deafening force of the cheering that huge casket onto their uniformed shoulders and their little procession followed, led by June and Helen, with suitably bowed heads. Leaving the church, a light rain matched the mood. Our carriage of black cars followed the hearse through the hushed streets of Auckland. “Delays likely? State funeral?” I muttered, warned for days to avoid the route from the cathedral down Remuera Road to the cemetery. The nation’s standards flew at half-mast; the moon and the starlight of a massive mural of Everest across its portico.

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Sahina Shrestha

Tricked away on a wall on the streets of Beco do Batman, the meeting point of three alleysways in Sao Paulo known for its gallery of murals by artists from around the world, visitors are greeted by gold and silver writings in an 11th century script from halfway around the world in Nepal.

The calli-graffiti, in Ranjana lipi, painted against a black backdrop, easily stands out amidst the dense concentration of wall art that lines the street. It is the latest work of Sramdip Purkoti, a Nepali artist who has set out back packing around the world creating street art.

"It is the pursuit of happiness that makes me do what I do," explains Purkoti, "and I am happiest when I am travelling and creating art." Currently in Brazil, Purkoti has travelled and painted in Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos and Chile after embarking on his global backpacking trip from Nepal.

A self-taught artist, Purkoti painted his first mural in Patan during the Kolor Kathmandu project in 2013, which brought together national and international artists to paint 75 murals representing 75 districts around Kathmandu. He painted a large cat with Dhaka pattern paying homage to Tehrathum, the second largest producer of Dhaka textile in Nepal. Dhaka pattern has since been Purkoti's signature style, the recurring pattern showing up in a majority of his work.

Purkoti, who has had his share of woes travelling with a Nepali passport. When he tried to cross into Singapore from Malaysia he was stopped at the border, while his visa process to Argentina took ages.

"The experience in Malaysia taught me a huge lesson. Now I don't try to go to a country without a visa first, even if it says they have visa-on-arrival for Nepalis," says Purkoti, who has tried to restore his country's image by signing a visa-first, even if it says they have visa-on-arrival for Nepalis, "My art is me, representing my experience, observations, social encounters, my take on the contexts: people, places, nature, history, or it could be the energy of the moment. Whatever touched me in that present moment is reflected in my work. But having said that, I am very much drawn to patterns. I see that in nature and fabrics of different ethnic groups, and that is why you will see plenty of repetitive patterns in most of my work," says Purkoti.

"My inspiration comes in different mediums in every different context: people, places, nature, history, or it could be the energy of the moment. Whatever touched me in that present moment is reflected in my work. But having said that, I am very much drawn to patterns. I see that in nature and fabrics of different ethnic groups, and that is why you will see plenty of repetitive patterns in most of my work," says Purkoti.

Future plans? "To travel to more countries and paint even bigger better murals."
Stylists who made it big on social media open stores to woo more customers

Akash Shrestha and Meena Gurung got to know each other on Facebook, then met face-to-face, and now sell their fashion line on Instagram. They represent a new breed of Nepali millennials who are blending traditional talent with dissemination and sales through the Internet.

While randomly searching Facebook for like-minded people, Akash came across Meena. Four months later, they were collaborating in a clothing design studio called HORAX Nepamode, which serves as a physical shop as well as a workshop in Gairidhara.

When Akash set up the Instagram account for his brand in 2014, he never expected he would be using it to fill orders for fashion items worth Rs55,000.

“This is quite motivating,” recalls Akash, who now deals with more than 100 inquiries monthly on Instagram, replying to every customer query about things such as measurements, price as well as detailed questions about clothes.

With the rapid uptake of smartphones, increasing Internet penetration and the growing popularity of social networking, young Nepalis are ripe for the emerging e-commerce market, which includes dozens of local online shopping platforms. Young, digital native fashion designers started their businesses even before Facebook and Instagram had become a popular platform to stalk products and place orders.

Today, social media provides shortcuts for anyone who wants to commercialise designs, even though...
there is a wide range in quality. Almost 200 local fashion brands are now selling on Instagram and Facebook.

Shreya Shakya Risal says she prefers original designs of local designers: “I will choose to buy them only if they have unique and creative designs with better quality materials.”

Littlethingsktm is another fashion line with a diverse collection of local designs that is chooey about reviewing products pitched by designers and artist. “The review team consists of three persons, including two designers and a social media manager. We review the designs according to several rules,” says co-founder Sabin Bhandari.

“There have been a couple of occasions when our team missed out plagiarised designs and sometimes customers let us know about the sources. We either take down the design or attribute it to the original artists,” Bhandari says.

Unlike traditional businesses where shops turn to social media to market products, new Nepali online sites having established themselves virtually are planning to set up physical stores to promote their designs. Physical presence gives a better sensory experience for customers, and increases the exposure of trending designs.

Littlethingsktm opened its first physical store in Sanepa recently. Displayed through its French windows are badges, cards, totes, mugs and cover sheets with patterns of Nepali designers.

Since last September, the business has launched a start-up to sell products online through a website, and advertise its products on Instagram. “Some of our regulars still prefer to come to our shop to purchase,” says Bhandari, “but there are quite a few new customers who are not active online, and old customers who keep coming back.”

The Local Project Nepal and Timro Concept opened early this year, borrowing the idea of creating co-working spaces where designers rent a space and sell their products. In Local Project Nepal, designers take three-month contracts and pay rent according to the amount of space they occupy, with the store earning commissions on sales.

“Designers want to have more exposure through a physical store but they don’t have enough money to set up their own,” says Binam Shakya, co-founder of The Local Project Nepal.

“If the brand doesn’t sell well, we may suggest they take a break and come back with a new collection,” explains Shakya. “People can get to whenever they want to by motorbike in Kathmandu, and there are customers who still prefer to see the designs and touch the materials and try them on,” he adds.

The Local Project Nepal now has five brands lining up for display, and is planning to open more physical stores in other parts of the city. Meanwhile, Aakash and Meena are working on new collections, managing the Instagram account and setting up the studio at the same time.

Online to Offline

ONE-PERSON ARMY: Meena (left) and Aakash (left, bottom) describe themselves as a one-person army. They manage social media accounts, pick the fabrics, contact the tailors, and sometimes sew as well.

Aakash studied fashion design in Paris for a year, which gave his designs a blend of western and eastern aesthetics.

Littlethingsktm opened its first physical store in Sanepa recently (above). Displayed are badges, cards, totes, mugs and cover sheets featuring the designs of Nepali designers.

My fitness routine is not complete without Dabur Honey

STAY FIT, FEEL YOUNG.
Sadobato; distance of around 34km.
Lalitpur: Satdobato - Dhapakhel - Nagdaha
A 3-4 hour bike tour to the South of Bike Farm,
A LONG WAIT: Karma Tobmo and her mother, Wangmo Dorji (right), showing their refugee ID's in Beldangi I, weeks before their resettlement to Massachusetts, USA.

Devi Charan Acharya and Khina Maya Acharya (left) have waited three years for a departure date for Canada.

JENNA KUNZE

As the resettlement program ends in 2018, remaining refugees from Bhutan who spent 25 years in Nepal are left with two options: repatriation to the country that exiled them, or assimilation in a country whose constitution denies them citizenship.

“Landless, citizenless, homeless, respectable, everything less,” said Kamala Pradam, a 47-year-old teacher in Beldangi II Camp, who is among the remaining refugees facing an uncertain future.

The Lhotsampa are Nepali-speaking descendants of farmers, many of whom had lived in Bhutan for centuries. Nearly 100,000 were forcibly evicted from southern Bhutan by the King Jigme Singye Wangchuk regime starting in 1991, then transported through India to eastern Nepal where they lived in UN-supervised refugee camps. Some 90,000 have been resettled in third countries in the past decade, and 8,540 remain in the camps.

The Lhotsampa account for one-third of the population in eastern Nepal before the evictions. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) ran the camps, and the resettlement was handled by the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

The UNHCR offers three solutions for the refugees: third-country resettlement, repatriation to Bhutan and local assimilation in Nepal. Since 2007, the third-country resettlement program has sent 98% of the refugees from Bhutan to third countries. Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Denmark, Norway, the UK and the Netherlands. Of the remaining 8,540 refugees in Beldangi and Sanischare camps, nearly 1,900 are still being processed for resettlement, which UNHCR is wrapping up by December 2018.

The program was especially appealing for younger refugees who wished to seek education and opportunities abroad. Unfortunately, it almost always meant family separation. For Karma Tobmo, it was from her father. He remains in Beldangi II, while she and her mother resettled in Massachusetts State in the US.

“Shes only going for me,” Karma says before departing, nodding at her mother across the room. Their plan is to stay long enough only for Karma to attend college, and then later to return “home,” whether that be in Bhutan or Nepal.

Among the remaining refugees, there are those, mostly elderly and those with parents or siblings left behind, who still hope to return to Bhutan. Though UNHCR does not have an exact figure, those opting for repatriation is a small portion of the remaining refugees. Those affiliated with repatriation groups claim the number is around 2,000, but Camp Secretary Tikram Rassaily, who also supports repatriation, says it is much lower.

“Until and unless this resettlement will happen, I’ll be here,” said Dil Susha, a member of Bhutan’s Indigenous Peoples Forum within the camp, which fights for return to their motherland. He says only international pressure on Thimphu will make resettlement possible.

Between 1993 and 2003, the Bhutan and Nepal governments held numerous bilateral talks for repatriation of 108,000 refugees, all of which were futile.

Unless they can agree to sit in a meeting, what options do we have?” asks Ram Babu Dhakal of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Kathmandu. The Druk regime insisted during the Joint Verification Process that a majority of refugees were Bhutanese, and had emigrated voluntarily.

“We are refugees, we will get discriminated everywhere, until and unless we are not citizens,” says Rebika Adhikari, a 25-year-old single mother from Beldangi II. She works as a teacher outside of the camp in Damak, earning less than her Nepali co-teachers.

Local assimilation into Nepal has happened over the last 25 years. Since they look the same as Nepalis and speak the language, refugees are able to find work outside the camp, though they are at the will of their employers. But to stay in Nepal, the refugees would need guarantees like citizenship, work permits, ability to open bank accounts or own property.

The majority of the refugees don’t wish to return to Bhutan or remain in Nepal: they had problems with documents and now want to be reunited with their families abroad.

Rebika Adhikari’s family is in the US, and she is virtually alone in the camp because of late paperwork. She says: “I don’t have any reason to go back, and I don’t have any reason to stay here. I want to move forward, not back.”

Devi Charan and Khina Maya Acharya

The Acharyas have been packed and ready to go to Canada for three years now.

Devi Charan Acharya, 85, and his wife, Khina Maya, 83, completed the process for third-country resettlement, including preparing travel documents and getting vaccinations. But they are still waiting for their departure date.

The Acharya’s long wait is an anomaly. The elderly couple have health issues: he is blind and diabetic, requiring insulin injections twice a day, she is hard of hearing. UNHCR says that disabled and vulnerable populations normally receive priority in resettlement, but the Acharyas are still waiting. Of their 11 children, five are resettled in the US, two in Canada and four remain in Bhutan, including one who is in prison for a assault.

“If the UN can send us to our son and daughter in Canada, at least they can look after us,” Khina Maya said.

The couple initially tried to settle in the US, but were denied without explanation.

UNHCR said it doesn’t comment on individual cases, adding that the final decision remains with the resettlement country.

Ram Pradhan

“From tomorrow, don’t come to work, and leave this country,” Ram Pradhan, 63, was told by his superiors in the Bhutan Army 27 years ago. Despite his official position and years of service, his own colleagues turned against him when the regime started evicting the Lhotsampa in 1991.

“The army chased me from my village,” he said, remembering that his wife and small children ran all the way to the Indian border. Today, Pradhan lives with his second wife in Beldangi III, all of his five children have been resettled in Nebraska State, US, but he has no interest in joining them there. He ultimately wants to return to Bhutan, otherwise he is happy to stay on in Nepal.

“We suffered in Bhutan and the government didn’t see our pain,” he says, “but no one saw our suffering. Not government, not people, not any officials.”

n

Camps are closing in 2018, and remaining refugees wait to return or move on.

Ram Pradhan

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The problem with Christopher Nolan’s Dunkirk, right off the bat, is that if you don’t see it on an IMAX screen, as it was intended, the film tends to be a bit of a bore. This is probably sacrilege to those who did see it on the largest of screens, but what can I say: that’s how I felt. A small part of me remains unconvinced that even had I seen it on a gargantuan screen, I would still remain slightly blasé about this extremely serious World War II film that aims to show the gravity of the evacuation at Dunkirk.

The film tracks, excruciatingly slowly, the plight of the men stranded on the beach at Dunkirk, a once Flemish-speaking, now largely Francophone town on the northern-most tip of France, where the allied troops become cornered in 1940, driven onto the beach as the Germans close in. As British and French troops line up in an orderly, but desperate fashion, they are an open target for the Nazi dive bombers who aim at both the men on land as well as those in the Navy vessels deployed from England, just across the channel. At sea, with U-Boats sinking ships that are then finished off by the dive-bombers, the men are in a state of heightened anxiety and there is a palpable sense of fear, which the film conveys, repeatedly, to the now also anxious viewer.

As we follow two soldiers who are trying to make it off the beach, and a father and son team who set off from Weymouth to bring home as many soldiers as they can, the film relies on set action pieces bringing together the destinies of air men, navy soldiers and the infantry to tell the story of a landmark event. The battle left hundreds of thousands of soldiers hopelessly stranded, almost abandoned by a Britain who held back her full support in case it would be needed for a last stand against the Nazis. There is always a sense that we are watching a would-be ‘masterpiece,’ with Nolan intensely at the helm (pardoning the pun) trying his damnedest to bring home an Oscar for making a film about a suitably heavy subject. The sound design, instead of featuring the soaring orchestral score that usually augments these kinds of films, has been replaced by a monotonous, almost maddening track that beats home the stress of war, jarring viewers and making us want to stick our fingers in our ears as well as bite our nails.

War is incomprehensible to those who have never been in it, and while Nolan’s efforts to educate us on its horrors is commendable, another, far more poetic, filmmaker makes a much more memorable point with The Thin Red Line (1998) – the great Terrence Malick’s ode to the American soldiers who fought in the Pacific during the Second World War.

If you have a few hours, find it and watch it: it will never leave you, unlike Dunkirk, which is disturbing but so very nebulous that I can barely recall it a week after seeing it.
Remittance slump

There were signs of distress as early as 2015, when the number of outbound migrant workers began to fall, and remittance growth slowed. But this year, the volume of remittance itself has declined.

“Remittance growth has already reached a saturation point, and it can no longer sustain our economy,” says Nar Bahadur Thapa, Chief of the NRB’s research department.

Gulf countries, mired in a serious political crisis that threatens to escalate into a war, are not hiring as many migrant workers as they were until a couple of years ago. Although the number of Nepalis who went overseas for employment in the first four months of this fiscal year fell by just 1% over the same period last year, the numbers of Nepali workers migrating to Qatar and Saudi Arabia have declined drastically: 23.58% and 49.98% respectively.

After Qatar won the bid to host the FIFA World Cup in 2022, it needed a huge labour force to build stadiums, roads, hotels and other infrastructure. As a result, Qatar emerged as the topmost labour destination for Nepali workers.

However, after a Saudi Arabia-led coalition of West Asian countries began to blockade Qatar last year, the emirate is in trouble. Ram Prasad Bhantana of Nepal Association of Foreign Employment Agencies (NAFEA) says: “We hear that many Nepalis working in Qatar have not received salaries for months.”

Qatar itself is facing an economic slowdown mainly because of a fall in global gas and oil prices. So are other Arab countries where Nepal is work.

Malaysia, the only country outside of the Gulf that hires thousands of Nepali migrant workers every year, is now relying more on Bangladeshi workers.

The NRB has already begun to witness impacts of the remittance slump on the country’s cash reserve and balance of payment. Soon, Nepalis’ purchasing power will decline, and the government will have to deal with a dramatic rise in unemployment.

Separate at birth

Cartoonists in the Nepali media have had a field day ridiculing and casting doubt that the promised unification of the UML and Maoists will actually occur.

Ramesh Kumar in Himal Khabar Patrika, 31 Dec 2017-1 Jan 2018
Ramji Mukhiya lives in a thatched mud hut that may collapse any time if there is another flood. The rising waters in August damaged his house, and he rebuilt this one with loans—not for the first time.

Mukhiyapatti Musharniya village is near one of the lowest points in Nepal along the Indian border, and is hit by recurring floods. Extreme weather events caused by climate change, deforestation of the Chure hills and obstruction of natural drainage because of highway embankments and constricted rivers have led to ever-more destructive floods.

“I already rebuilt my house four times, and I have not only spent all my savings, but took loans to rebuild every time floods washed it away,” says the 55-year-old Mukhiya, who sent his eldest son to work in Qatar while his second son is soon leaving for Malaysia.

Nepal’s overall poverty rate may be going down, according to the Multi-dimensional Poverty Index report released last week by the National Planning Commission (see Editorial, page 2) but here in rural Dhanusha, floods are pushing farmers into ever-deeper poverty.

“My sons couldn’t finish school because of the floods, and now I have to send them abroad to earn so we can repay our house loans,” Mukhiya added. “I think I can survive for a few days without food, but not without a house.”

His neighbour Mohan Yadav, 60, has three sons, one in Mumbai the others in Malaysia. The 2010 floods washed away his house and all his property. He had taken a Rs100,000 loan to rebuild, but before he could pay it back the floods in August destroyed everything again.

“I had to take additional loans to send my son to Malaysia three years ago, my loans have now grown to Rs1 million,” said Yadav, who survives on the money his sons send home, but has nothing left to repay loans or rebuild.

As elsewhere in the Tarai, the floods in Dhanusha have not just washed away people’s homes but also their land and crops. With no home, no crops and the farmlands washed away by the waters, farmers have no option but to migrate.

“We are left with nothing, and I wouldn’t have sent my sons to work in Malaysia if I still had my land,” Yadav told us.

The government has a list of 275,723 flood-affected families in Dhanusha alone from the last 10 years. Nearly 7,000 homes were damaged and some 3,800 washed away by the Jalad, Kamala and Jamuni rivers, which are dry now in winter, but in summer are raging torrents.

Dhanusha today is devoid of young men. Every household has several people in India, Malaysia or the Gulf—most of them on a mission to earn enough to pay back loans. The few men we spotted, were processing their passports and work permits to leave.

Bhikhari Yadav has four sons: two have already left for Malaysia and Delhi while another is waiting for his work visa for UAE. The father has a loan of Rs700,000, which he used to rebuild his house and process his sons’ employment contracts.

Sunil Kumar Jha of the District Disaster Relief Committee, Dhanusa, admits that indebtedness...
Nepali migrant workers are deemed to be ‘loyal’ to their employers, but a new Amnesty International survey suggests that the label reveals their vulnerability as well as their virtue. The survey says some recruiters — who trap workers into bonded labour by saddling them with huge debts — market Nepali migrants to prospective foreign clients by highlighting how unlikely they are to quit jobs.

Amnesty International reviewed and analysed 100 recruitment websites, and found that Nepali workers are frequently advertised using descriptions such as ‘loyal’ and ‘completely dedicated to work even in adverse situations’. The results of that survey rightly point out that workers are loyal by force, not by choice.

In November 2016, Amnesty interviewed four Nepali workers who had been deceived by their recruiters about working conditions in Malaysia. When they quit their jobs, they were not given return tickets, and were able to return home only when their families took more loans to buy them tickets.

Not all migrant workers trapped overseas can afford tickets to freedom, and they have to endure extremely harsh and inhumane working conditions. Their perseverance earns them the reputation of being ‘loyal’ — a label used by recruiters to trap migrant workers into a vicious cycle of debt and deception.


“Migrant workers all too often end up trapped in the soul-destroying situation of working abroad for years simply to pay off the huge, often illegal fees they were charged to take the job. Tackling this exploitative industry is a matter of urgency.”

Amnesty International’s survey included mobile phone surveys with 414 Nepali migrant workers in Malaysia and Nepal.

I agree with many of you irate readers spewing venom at Kathmandu’s newly-elected Mayor for what he is doing to Rani Pokhari. Turning this historic 16th-century pond into a concrete-rimmed swimming pool is a terrible idea. If Mayor Shakya had any intestinal fortitude he would turn Rani Pokhari into a much more ambitious Fun Park with water slides, splash pads, swan pedal boats. If he had any imagination (which he obviously doesn’t) he would also introduce a high-speed hydrofoil ferry to ply between Tri Chandra College roundtrip to Durbar High School, so commuters could bypass traffic jams in the Ratna Park intersection.

Not that The Ass has been asked for any advice by City Hall, but if I was, there is a whole bunch of beautification and modernisation schemes I would propose. These ideas are top secret so don’t go around blurting them out to anyone:

- **Tundikhel**
  This last bit of open space in Kathmandu is the city’s lung. But it is a diseased lung, so we should give it back to the ex-Royal Nepal Army which used it as a parade ground for the cavalry. HQ should be allowed to use the field’s entire length to showcase its ballistic missiles on Phulpati and Shivaratri, and build underground launch silos there.

- **Sano Tundikhel**
  This forgotten little brother of Tundikhel can be recommissioned for the Army’s hush-hush centrifuge facility for making weapons grade plutonium.

- **Dharara**
  The site of the former tower should also be handed over to the Army, where it can rebuild the minaret in the shape of a missile as a decoy to fool spy satellites.

- **Tinkune**
  The Mayor should turn this into Disneyland Kathmandu with Astro Orbitor, Disney monorail, Dumbo the Flying Elephant fantasy ride, and last but not least the Golden Zephyr thrill ride.

- **Durbar High School**
  Nepal’s first school to be converted into Durbar Mall, with Cine 4D and IMAX multiplexes.