Hitching our wagon

Venezuela is in the news worldwide for US-backed attempts to bring down the Nicolas Maduro government, but it is making headlines in Nepal because of conflicting statements by the ruling party and the government on a country on the other side of the world.

NCP co-Chair Pashupati Kamal

Dahal issued a harshly worded statement condemning US ‘imperialism’, and he did it while Prime Minister K P Oli was in Dares trying to make the West forget that Nepal has a Communist government. Asked for a clarification by the US Embassy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs fell back on more diplomatic language.

The Venezuela controversy exposed a fault-line between, ex-UML and ex-Maoist elements within the NCP. It also brought into sharp focus Nepal’s need now to balance not just its northern and southern neighbours, but also the West. The pre-1990 bipolar world has turned into a multi-polar Cold War, and analysts say Nepal needs to be more careful about not being dragged into any of the alliances.

Nepal’s location makes this new geopolitics much more sensitive than ever before. China is a rising global power, India is aspiring to be the same, and America is trying to rope New Delhi into its geostrategic alliance. Nepal has to take advantage of the economic powerhouses in the north and south by hitching its wagon to the Indian and Chinese locomotives, and try to get them to pull it in the same direction. For this it needs a new coherent foreign policy strategy that does not allow outside powers to back protest in Kathmandu.
Nepal must forge a united and coherent foreign policy strategy that does not allow outside powers to back one or other party in the ruling party’s push to redraw their strategic agenda.

Oil looked uncharacteristically subdued when asked about Dahal’s missing three in 2016, and returned from Davos. The statement also came less than a month after Foreign Minister Pradhan meets with a US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Washington DC during which the implementation of America’s $500 million assistance through the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Nepal Compact for road and power connectivity.

The two are also understood to have discussed America’s Indo-Pacific Strategy which, together with the MTC, are seen as a counter by China, as a challenge to its Belt Road Initiative (BRI) which Nepal has signed on to. Gyawali tried to tighten a trilateral to bolster the geostrategic interests of the three global powers, and clarified that Nepal was not going to join any US-led alliance in the Indo-Pacific.

The resumption of the US-India Command was the US-led Command last year, designating India as a Major Defence Partner, the joint Malahar 2017 exercise in the Indian Ocean involving the navies of India, Japan and the US, the revival of the Quad Alliance of Japan, Australia, the US and India as an effort to contain China, and all indications that US- India cooperation is heating up in the region.

Asian countries may be nervous about China’s growing economic power and market potential, but Beijing feels it is being encircled by the two alliances and its allies. Still, many Southeast and South Asian countries do not want to be forced to choose between America and China. What will make oil’s statement on Venezuela so damaging for Nepal at a time when the Foreign Ministry is trying to steer a neutral course that would benefit Nepal’s trade, investment and infrastructure. The Ministry’s foreign policy stance for the week was with a much more balanced statement saying the USA was the democratic will of the people of Venezuela, and opposed foreign interference.

During the war, as Christian Franks Dahal famously paraphrased King Fritjof Niven’s book to shun that Nepal-Dahal was dynamic between two boulders. It seems he has not outgrown his penchant for hyperbole. There was a time when Nepal was just about to worry about balancing its giant northern and southern neighbours, but the world is now multi-polar and global conflicts have made more complicated place. Our neighbours are drawn into a global power struggle, and being a yawn between three boulders, Nepal has to be careful about how America’s increasingly erratic behaviour will impact the equidistance between India and China. A place to start would be to forge a united and coherent foreign policy strategy that prevents outside powers from using one or other party or faction in Nepal to push their strategic agendas.

10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Just as the issue of Nepal’s rights, needs with Nepali population overseas, a key issue in a year ago in 2013, in 2013, the New York didn’t have a well-publicized policy to work with in Nepal’s political crisis. Today, Maram believes India is getting more concerned about the role of the Nepal, but doesn’t worry a policy shift yet. Indian officials admit that they are unhappy with the Maram’s. They have not delivered in their promises. other officials told, “Their overstatement is alarming. They are proving you are out of sight.”

We should insist India continues to support the peace and constitution writing process and not wear down the present arrangement. We will get good and broad ambition and pressure on the Maram. But we need not wait for the Nepali government to agree to our UN and Oil talks.”

Winter wonderland

The killing season in the Himalayas is no longer a problem by year and earlier. Winter killings continue to go and now possible natural because of newvish and guest houses and facilities along the road. Both, Nepal and India are on a warfooting at Maram and Bani Gang. See page 52.

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TURKEY
Nepal trekking industry in damage

The Tourism Ministry cracks down on fake rescues, plans to counter negative publicity

Sharad Ojha

Responding to a slew of reports in the international media about insurance fraud in the trekking industry, the Nepal government says it is cracking down on perpetrators, while planning action against an insurance investigator said to be behind the sustained negative coverage.

Reports this week in The New York Times and The Independent quote a letter written to Minister of Tourism Rabindra Adhikari by Jonathan Bancroft, Managing Director of Traveller Assist, in which he has threatened to get his clients to cut coverage if Nepal does not press charges against 17 trekking agencies, helicopter companies and hospitals it says are involved in claiming insurance for fake rescues.

Both stories quote Danny Kalce of Traveller Assist, who is said to have personally delivered the letter to the ministry in which Bancroft bluntly writes: “To be clear, this is an ultimatum! If our clients stop issuing travel insurance policies in Nepal...[then] there will be a disastrous effect on the tourism industry in Nepal, and your country’s reputation.” (See box, opposite)

The government appears to be taking the damaging media coverage seriously, and called an emergency meeting in Singha Durbar on Tuesday with Tourism Minister Rabindra Adhikari, representatives of the Ministry of Finance, the Central Bureau of Investigation and others.

Adhikari told Nepali Times: “We are committed to cracking down on insurance fraud, and set up a Committee last year to investigate. After that, the number of cases of helicopter rescues, especially unnecessary ones, had actually started to drop. Which is why we are concerned by the continued loans to the international press, and the threatening tone of this letter.”

The Ministry of Tourism says its statistics show that there were only 166 helicopter rescues in the autumn trekking season last year, a sharp drop from the 1,532 between March and May of 2018. (See graph.)

In the letter to the minister, Bancroft says his company had issued the 13 February deadline since “not a single charge has been brought on the companies named in the ministry’s report, which it said were still in business.

The incidence of fraudulent rescues claiming insurance has risen in the past four years, as reported by this newspaper and others. Some trekking companies, in collusion with helicopter charters and hospitals, entice trekkers to sign for medical evacuation at an inflated fee, and share the profits. There have even been rumours of guides deliberately spiking the food of trekkers so they fall sick.

Stung by the flurry of reports, the Tourism Ministry set up an investigation committee which issued its report in August. The Ministry then drafted new rules governing search, rescue, and treatment of trekkers to check fraud.

However, Tourism Ministry officials themselves admit that the rules have not been enforced because of a lack of manpower. Says Secretary Krishna Devkota: “We are committed to investigate and take action against the guilty. These scams are having a negative impact on the industry ahead of Visit Nepal 2020.”

A source at the Tourism Ministry disclosed last August, after the investigation committee presented its report, a delegation led by Namgyal Dhali of Trekkers and Climbers Association of Nepal met the co-Chair of the ruling NCP Pushpa Kamal Dahal who then put pressure on Minister Adhikari to let those named off the hook. Some of the unscrupulous companies involved in the scam enjoy high-level political protection because they are party donors, offer free helicopter rides during elections, or provide complimentary hospital treatment.

Prakash Ch. Limbu of Alpine Rescue Service which represents half the foreign insurers says: “The rescue business needs to be better regulated. We need to punish the guilty, and stop aligning the whole trekking industry.”
**What is Traveller Assist?**

This jailed British company works on behalf of international travel insurance providers and, after paying out insurance claims, makes large payments to local trekking agencies and trekking leaders. It is a highly profitable business that has expanded rapidly in recent years. The company employs a large number of skilled workers and has developed a strong brand reputation.

*Photo: Responsible Adventures*

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**Istanbul to Lusaka**

Turkish Airlines adds Lusaka to its expanding network as its 50th destination in Africa, with two flights per week with stopovers in Durban and Salam.

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**NMB Bank and One to Watch signed a MoU to jointly meet the financial needs of the enterprises.**

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**Transit spa**

Cathay Pacific's 'The Sanctuary' by Purelogic in its Business Class lounge at the Four Seasons Hotel in Hong Kong to practice yoga and meditation through edgy guidance, which is also available in digital format. Additionally, Donald and Donald Marco Polo Hotel members arriving in Hong Kong are offered complimentary baggage service access to any spa. The spa provides all new features, including a variety of services that offer a range of spa treatments up to 12 hours a day.

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**General**

In an interview with Kathmandu last week, Kaine described writing emails to trekking agencies and hospitals to obtain their support. He said, "I don't have a personal interest in this, but it's important to us. I need to get in touch with the companies and ensure that we can reach them."

***control mode***

Those involved in fake rescues play on the grey zone in which even physicians are not able to tell if a patient suffering from altitude sickness or severe diarrhoea needs immediate evacuation or will get better by simply descending and taking medicines. Many trekkers themselves agree to be evacuated at the slightest sign of trouble.

Ram Sapkota of Himalayan Social Journeys says the real problem is unnecessary rescues rather than fake rescues. "Some trekkers get seriously sick, others pretend to be more ill than they are. Up in the mountains one wants to take a risk," he adds.

After the investigation and new rules, the Tourism Ministry says the number of unnecessary rescues have gone down. Strict enforcement of the guidelines, setting an upper limit for helicopter rescues, a fixed price for hospital treatment, and monitoring compliance would prevent price gouging.

"All have to do to control fraud rescues is to enforce existing rules," says Ram Jindal, vice president of Mountain Helicopters, who knows of rescues in which cluster companies evade more than one trekker, but bill them separately. There is also conflict of interest: some travel and trekking agencies represent insurance companies, and approve final compensation payments to themselves.

Says mountain guide Kaj Shahra: "This scam has tarnished Nepal's image, and that of the many upright companies here. There should not be a cover up, we should correct ourselves and stop the guilt."
John R Edwards, a life in the shadow

Eclipsed by his dominant elder brother, JRE was the unsung hero of the early Tiger Tops

The skinny brown-haired Englishman with tattooed arms, soft eyes and an engaging smile at times made me down the Chitwan forest trail, a small white dust trail at the base of the end of the day with a Khushi run and coke in hand. There was little choice of brand in 1970s Nepal. “We are deep in the national park and one day a leopard will get you,” he used to say, and sure enough it did. His strutting pet peacock, Hemanta, went the same way. The unsung hero of the early years of Tiger Tops, John R Edwards (JRE as we called him in inter-office memos, although Raymond was a well kept secret) was a master at selecting camp sites deep within the jungle or the Park perimeter. His building background enabled him to construct galigers, decks, blinds, shelters, bridges, landings and test platforms from wood, bamboo, grass and river stones blending seamlessly into the landscape. He taught by example, developing teams of talented locals and establishing what became widely celebrated as the Tiger Tops style. Rather than expand the main treetop Jungle Lodge in Chitwan, the eco-philosophy was to restrict impact with small satellite camps around the Park. It was JRE who made it happen. Recount from a self-confessed drifting life as an occasional bachelor and seaman, John was summoned from his London flat by his older brother AV Jim Edwards soon after he and Chuck McDonagh had acquired the management of Tiger Tops in 1972. John’s practical hands-on construction talents were deployed at the guest root level, his love of adventure blossoming in the wild places of the Nepali Tarai throughout Jim’s conservation tourism ventures. John became an invaluable operations manager, Jim’s trusted lieutenant and right hand man. He recorded river trips, jungle treks and felting opportunities, quietly working his magic, stamping his gentle humour on Tiger Tops lodges, camps and wildlife activities.

Fresh from UK and sensitive to his humble background, it took John time to assimilate into jungle life. When I first arrived in Chitwan, he could be found leading a group of tourists armed like a sahak on stikas with a shotgun that only we knew was for show. After a few right sessions at the Lodge bar, he survived a close encounter with George the resident rhino, who was not as tame as he looked.

Our amusement was not appreciated when John led a group of guests, creeping silently through the night to the hide where tigers were viewed on their kill. Only tonight it was a false alarm, no tiger in sight and the buffaloes very much alive and moaning.

One evening he left a little old American lady behind in the grass blind – we were only alerted by her plaintive “coon-ee” which were in danger of attracting a curious tigress. Escorting the British royal family on one of their many visits, he broke all taboos by grabbing the unsharched Queen to lift her over a flooded ditch.

John secured the vitorious glamour of tiding elephants and hanging out in the hiratier but needing four elephants at six o’clock for a morning guest safari he never lived it down when six elephants appeared at four o’clock. However when the kitchen caught fire, John was on the thatched roof attempting to douse the ravaging flames with a tallisent of all, thrust up the buckets of water poured down the line from the Khosi river throughout that dramatic night. John developed a rare empathy with the Tarai locals, spoke their language and passed on his building craft. He honoured their woodland spirits, appreciated their local wisdom, sympathised with their traditions, and was respected in return. One night he bravely attempted to sleep in an alleged dlibo-been buned room at the Lodge, only to be violently disturbed by its male species. Often his forehead would be smeared with rice and colour, relics of a shika ji puja, blood sacrifices deep in the forest. And he never lost his passion for a good fish curry.

John had British humour, and could always be relied on for an irreverent story, dreadful joke or witty one-line. My favorite was the Kolka, a car that “wills down the hills but can hardly get up them”. At his wedding to Ozara, a spee winding Naga lady swathed in red, white and black hand woven in a dusty bangaus garden now long build over, my inadequate Nepali vocabulary resulted in the bemused houseboy bringed cooked rice with which to shower the happy couples. Their first child was named “John Paul” in “John Paul”.

John would grin, soon followed by a mellow cherishing daughter, Anu. Eclipsed by his dominant elder brother, it was inevitable that the acolyte role would eventually pull. “John needs a bigger vision - I’ve given him India,” Jim told us with typical brevity, although it seemed more like imballishment from his beloved Nepal jungles.

Whatever the irony, John was denounced to the peak Mountain Travel India, and left Nepal in 1990. The complexities of Jim’s Indian operations with its sensing partners and labyrinthine bureaucracy would have presented a difficult task for anyone. John’s strengths were hands on and in the red, not so much in New Delhi, but he stuck it out for a decade before settling back in London with his long term partner Deborah.

During his time in India, John not only managed camps in Ladakh, Kashmir, Himachal, Madhya Pradesh and Karntaka, but found fulfillment in pioneering trips into remote parts of India’s unexplored Northeast. John’s family’s Nepali family’s family of Nagaland his local knowledge came in handy – the tribes were reputed to be headhunters.

Travelling with rhino specialist, Andrew Lawson, to check out Kaziranga in Assam, he managed to get them both thrown into the Indian jail. Hitchhiking on the back of a lorry, John had insisted on snapping a ‘No Photography’ sign outside a military installation on the West Bengal border. That evening they persuaded their jailers to escort them to a restaurant, two nickahs, them in one and two armed guards in another. Released the next day by the District Magistrate, they were entertained to tea on his lawn and ceremoniously presented with a set of engraved his father’s time at Cambridge.

The poor truck driver was not so lucky, stuck in Zimbabwe without a permit to carry his grain, having been directed by the prison. Leaving town next morning by taxi on the orders of the District Magistrate, they saw their stranded driver. “We gave him some rupees, can’t remember how much, but we kept adding notes until he started smiling.”

Mithila representations of Kathmandu’s metamorphosis

Sewa Bhattachar

In his 16th solo exhibition, Mithila Converse: Songs of Innocence and Experience, artist SC Suman depicts his experiences in his signature Mithila style. The exhibition at the Siddhaththa Art Gallery brings southern Nepal’s popular art form to Kathmandu.

Mithila paintings are a renowned art style practiced by women of Nepal and some parts of India. Traditionally, women used to make the two-dimensional images on the walls of homes with natural colours, and they were compulsory during festivals and celebrations. The sketches of daily life and mythical stories are now fast disappearing from homes, but making a reappearance in art galleries and craft shops.

SC Suman (Swar) Singh, one of the pioneers of expanding the boundaries of Mithila art in Nepal, has incorporated his experiences of living in Kathmandu into this exhibition. So not only do we see the sketches, flat images in vibrant colours that characterize Mithila art, there are also Kathmandu landmarks like Swayambhunath, Pashupatinath, Kirtipur, and Newar architecture in the paintings. One can even find paintings of the evergreen and five Buddhhas that the Newar community paints on doors.

“Though I am from Southern Nepal, I have lived most of my life within these doors of Newar huts,” Suman says, showing us details of wedding rituals and daily life in the paintings. “I have observed so many beautiful things and I have captured them.”

Indeed, Suman’s paintings capture the melting pot that is Kathmandu. We are Kathmandu evolving through the window of Mithila art from historic rural life of fields and trees, to a crowded milieu of buildings and more buildings.

Suman’s spiritual and environmental concerns are also reflected in paintings like the one of Dashavtar, containing all nine avatars within the colossus of the Buddha, implying that the tenth avatar is a composite of every idea that came before. Through a Hindu, Suman puts the Buddha foremost in this work. Some paintings touch the roots of Mithila philosophy with a tree of life, and the cosmos.

In a panorama of Nigad forest (left, below) which is now threatened by a proposed international airport, Suman gives umbrellas to the monkeys, birds, and elephants that live there.

The umbrella is a symbol of protection. Everyone needs them, even animals and trees. But who will speak for them as we speak of rapid development that will fell the oldest trees first?” he asks.

The Kathmandu style of line work, and Bhawan which means colouring are both reflected in Suman’s rendition of the Mithila style. Most of his paintings are fusions of line work, or colours filled in with intricate precision, while some have broad washes of background colours as before the mood.

Suman’s work widens the traditional range of Mithila paintings to depict a whole spectrum of emotional and spiritual ideas, while still retaining the basic art form. The exhibition also gives visitors an artistic representation of Kathmandu’s metamorphosis.
“It is hard to describe the pleasure of walk
on a snowy trail with just the sound of your
heavy breath, friction of your jacket, or boots
crunching through the snow,” says Lee Chul
from Korea, at Machhapuchre Base Camp.
After Kathmandu Valley did not meet his expectations about Nepal, Chul headed
off to Pokhara and the ABC trek despite
the snowfall. He went without a guide, and
says that although he had to cough it, the
adventure was worth every minute. He adds
bravely: “The cold cannot keep us away from
the Himalayas.”

At the Annapurna Conservation Project
checkpoint in Chhomrong (2,177m), Sutika
Pun shows us the entries for January which have
numbers that are almost the same as for
December.

“After this week’s snowfall, some trekkers
have turned back because of ice on the trail,”
she tells us, while many trekkers are waiting
out in Ghandrak for the snow to start
melting on the trails above Bumbuk, which is
at 2,340m.

Unique Gurung, 21, is a cook at the
Annapurna Sanctuary Lodge at ABC (4,130 m)
and says the temperature hit 20 this week. He
has headed down to Deurali (2,020 m) along
with his team to shovel the snow to keep the
trail open for trekkers.

Gurung says October is the peak season at
ABC with 70 guests a day, and although the
number is lower in winter, there has been an
unusual surge of Nepali trekkers venturing up
through the snow.

Almost as adventurous as the Nepalis are
Koreans, and tourists from China have started
getting for the Chinese New Year Holiday.
Some 46 of them had to be evacuated by
helicopter from Deurali after heavy snow
blocked the path down this weekend.

Nabin Bhatt from Bhaktapur is a new
breed of Nepali trekker who has been
exploring different parts of Nepal. Although
he finds October the best time for treks in
Nepal, be is always open to adventure and
was in ABC in mid-January.

“It is actually more expensive to trek in
winter because you need extra heavy-duty
gear to keep warm, but it has its rewards in
mountains that are crystal clear and empty
trails,” he says.

Rana Roka of the Eastern Light Trek in
Pokhara recommends From TIB and Sonam
as the best bet for winter, although he does
not rule out ABC once the snow on the trails
has thinned.

Says Roka: “You have to be careful about
avalanches and sickness, but trekking in
winter is challenging and exciting at the
same time.”
ABCs of mountain trek
in the Himalaya is no spring and autumn, but of global warming.

ALL TERRAIN TREKKING:
1. Hikers on their way from Machapuchre Base Camp (3,700m) to Annapurna Base Camp (4,130m). The part of the trail is closed due to heavy snowfall this week, and may reopen in about 10 days.
2. Annapurna South (7,219m) from the entry point to the Sanctuary.
3. Mt. Machapuchre (6,995m) and its imposing double summit from the Mardi Khola walk in.
4. An uncharacteristic view from the north end of Mt Machapuchre Trail down (2,500m).
5. Snowbound trail at Machapuchre Base Camp.
Boson Uphill
Farm and support a local adventure festival of uplift running and cycling challenges for a distance of Seen from Changri Hotel in Kathmandu, you can enjoy Boson gaum. Prizes for the winners.
Other attractions include: national bird watching, elephant watching, Tara at sunrise, and dance.}

GETAWAY

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Object in Focus

The first exhibition, “Project 1336,” from a series “Object in Focus,” focuses on one object. An ancient Terracotta and his one big idea, which is his form of a knitted rope representing the elevation of the Himalayas. Art enthusiasts are welcome to look, discover and think contemporary art in a different light.

Himalayan Outdoor Festival
The 36th edition of the adventure sport festival is back with plenty of activities for everyone to enjoy. Bring your own tent/hammock or book a room at Kathmandu Resort. Challenge yourself or watch others challenge in different categories of riding, rock climbing and running.

Book reading

Aside from being a film, “Dark Star of Kathmandu” by Rob Thapa, it is also a conversation with Ramayana tells the story of a nobleman and his family in Kathmandu. The book is not a novel but more a part of a conversation between the author and the characters.

February 1st and 2nd

GETAWAY

Dwarka’s Resort
A luxury hotel at the banks of Pheim Lake with tranquil surroundings, this is an excellent place to relax and unwind.

Dahlia Boutique Hotel
A luxurious hotel at the heights of Pheim Lake with tranquil surroundings, this is an excellent place to relax and unwind.

Club Himalaya
Amazing mountain views refreshing, weekend getaways.

Milla Guesthouse
If you prefer the quiet and simple mix of old and new, this is the perfect place.

Lake View Resort
This resort’s private lake, featuring hand crafted wooden furniture, local stone exterior and a veranda, offers a great weekend escape.

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Crime and politics

Nirmala Panta’s unsolved rape and murder divides activists and prolongs the family’s grief

Namrata Sharma
in Kanchanpur

Six months after the unsolved rape and murder of her 14-year-old daughter, the stress is beginning to show on Durga Devi Panta. Her face is thin, her wrinkles deeper, but there is the fire of determination in her eyes.

Nirmala was a studious 14-year-old and the second of Durga Devi’s three teenage daughters. After her husband left her for another woman 12 years ago, the four lived in a simple house amidst fields on the outskirts of town in Kanchanpur.

The crime has become a national issue because of Police bungling the investigation, not being able to find the guilty. It has become the focus of country-wide protest by human rights activists, was featured in the international media and has now even got a Wikipedia entry.

“My daughter is gone, but I want justice for her, and also my remaining two daughters to have a safe and good life,” says Durga Devi with a faraway look.

As protests over the crime escalated last year, Durga Devi’s estranged husband Yagya Raj, her second wife and their son also joined the campaign for justice, raising some eyebrows. Yagya Raj has shown signs of psychological instability, and Panta said he had nearly strangled her recently.

Laxmi and Yagya Raj, ostensibly under pressure from the opposition Nepal Congress, do not want Durga Devi to take the compensation of Rs1 million from the Central Government and Rs500,000 from Province 7. Durga Devi herself does not want to be tangled in the politics, and says the compensation money would at least help her take care of her two daughters.

A source close to Yagya Raj says they do not want Durga Devi to take the compensation for Nirmala’s death because they do not want it to affect the fast-until-death by Govinda KC, saying their demand is justice for Nirmala.

Women’s groups and homemakers from all class and backgrounds campaigning for the case in Dhangadi, Kalalai and Mahottari say last week showed their frustration with the police’s inability to solve the crime. The protests have also become politically polarized, with the opposition NC and other parties using it to embarrassment the NCP government.

Nirmala Panta had joined a study group in the house of her classmate Roshani Ram after school on 26 July last year. When Nirmala did not return home, Durga Devi became frantic, and went to Roshani’s house to look for her daughter. Her body was found the next day 500m from Roshani Ram’s house in a sugarcane field owned by police inspector Jagadish Bhattacharya, who has now been suspended for tampering with evidence.

Province 7 Chief Minister Trilochan Bhatta denied that Police had destroyed evidence. He told Nepali Times “All the evidence, including the vaginal swab of the victim, are safe with us. It will take time but we will crack this case soon in coordination with the Centre.”

Meanwhile, the Women Human Right Defenders of Kanchanpur and Kailali districts with other activists and independent women’s groups are continuing with their relay hunger strike at the Chief District Office in Kanchanpur.

Sitting under the tent last week was Nirmala’s step-mother Laxmi Panta with activists from Kathmandu, including Sabtiri Subedi, who staged the “pocket campaign” in Kathmandu. There is much mutual suspicion even among the activist groups and questioning about each other’s motivations.

“Nirmala’s case is now so muddled that we do not know what will happen to the investigation,” says Nirmala Bagchha of the Women Human Right Defenders.

Sabtiri Glimaire of the Dalit Women’s Right Forum in Kailali accuses the Police of deliberately destroying all evidence to protect powerful interests.

The rights groups appeared to be fatigued by infighting and frustrated by the lack of progress in the investigation. Conspiracy theories swirled about a cover-up by senior officials of the provincial government and Police officers allegedly involved in the crime.

Why else would the Police destroy evidence, delay the investigation, frame an innocent man, detain the Ram sisters, then take them to Kathmandu, and now seek the father and mother to provide DNA samples?

Superintendent of Police Kuber Khadka claimed there had been eight cases of rape and five of attempted rape since the Nirmala case, and all had been solved.

He said Nirmala’s case happened before he took office, and stated confidence it would be solved soon.

The infighting amongst activists and the politicization of the human rights groups help the government, which can now blame ‘politics’ for its failure to find the culprit. However, the real victims here are Nirmala’s mother and sister who need the truth and justice.

Namrata Sharma is the Chair of the Centre for Investigative Journalism Nepal.

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Children on stage

At Kathmandu’s Russian Culture Centre a half-hour of children watch, with bated breath as a Russian folklore unfolds on stage. As the story poetically presents the affection between a father and son, the son’s building romance, and his eventual adventurous journey to a mountainous kingdom, the children close widely at the right scene. It is obvious that they enjoy slapstick comedy that adults may be bored with, and are deeply touched by the basic portraits of love and separation that governs may find clichéd.

The play Matsuko Fuka was presented by Shailine Theater as part of its week-long Children’s Theatre Festival. In its tenth edition, the festival showcased 25 plays by schools around the country and also awarded prizes in six categories. While some of the plays were written or directed by adults, all plays were acted out by children from different schools in Kathmandu, Lalitpur, Bhaktapur, Kavre, Sindulpokh, and Lamjung.

In these playschildren explored themes that are important to them which may or may not be portrayed with the same urgency in regular theatre - child marriage, child rights, child labour, sexual abuse, education, and even cultural practices like Dukhi where girls children are offered to temples. One of the plays explored child psychology, depicting what happens when children are put under pressure by excessive parental expectations.

This year’s event is the Children’s Theatre Festival is an example of rising interest in theatre in Nepal, where children are acting, writing, and directing plays. “Two years ago when we put out a call for children’s plays, we only received 12 entries,” recalls Nihara Budhathoki of Shailine Theatre. “This year we got more than 40, and selected the best 10 out of them. That is a sign of how far we have come.”

The festival’s goal is to help children develop their personality, educate them about their rights, and aid the growth of theatre by involving children from a young age. Indeed, after many such outreach programs, it has now become normal for private schools to have a drama teacher and hold theatre activities in schools. There is even some interest from community schools which usually lack resources for such extra-curricular activities.

As the theatre scene grows, Nepal’s children’s theatre is also getting a boost offering children age-appropriate entertainment as well as opening up possibilities of artistic expression.

Sewa Bhattarai

Nepal National Children’s Theatre Festival
Kathmandu Cultural Center
22-27 Jan

HAPPENINGS

UP IN ARMS: Leaders of Nepali Congress including Gagan Thapa protest after the passage of the Medical Education Bill by Parliament last week. Mhaumali, Godawa KC’s health is deteriorating as he is on a fast unto death to protest the bill and other demands.

GRAIN PICTURE: Officials of Accident Investigation Committee submit a report on the US-Bangla Airlines crash last March to the Minister of Tourism and Civil Aviation Radhika Adhikari in Kathmandu on Sunday. In the report, it said the Captain had psychiatric issues.

LOVE THY NEIGHBOUR: Vice President Nanda Bahadur Pun being welcomed by Indian Ambassador Manjeev Singh Puri, at a ceremony to mark the 76th Republic Day of India in Kathmandu.

BAD AIR: Locals wash clothes and carry water from a pond as a brick kiln nearby spews smoke in Lalitpur on Tuesday. The furnaces contribute 25% of toxic suspended particles to Kathmandu’s air pollution.

CHINESE DELIGHTS: Artists perform cultural dances during the Chinese Food Festival at the Fun Cafe, Radisson Hotel in Kathmandu last week. The event promoting Chinese culture will run until 8 February.
Doctors solidarity with Govinda KC

Nagarkot, 31 January

Doctors across the country have taken to the streets to protest the government’s inaction on Govinda KC’s demands and his deteriorating health. The House of Representatives passed the Medical Education bill on 25 January, amidst opposition, without addressing KC’s demands of reforms in medical education. Doctors, united under the leadership of Nepal Medical Association, have begun a relay hunger strike to pressurize the government.

KC is on his 16th fast unto death at the TU Teaching Hospital in Maharajgunj. His health is said to be critical after not eating for more than three weeks and he has difficulty breathing due to chest pains. Decreasing white blood cell count has put his life at grave danger. The amount of oxygen, glucose, and potassium in KC’s body has also decreased, he has trouble sleeping and is vulnerable to infections. KC needs to be treated in an Intensive Care Unit (ICU) but has refused to go to there.

KC has been fasting since 10 January, asking the government to implement the agreement made with him after his 103-day fast. But after the government prepared the Medical Education bill in contradiction of the agreement, KC began his current fast. The government claims that the bill fulfills KC’s demands.

Nepal Medical Association says that doctors in major cities like Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, Jhapa, Bhumiharpur, Butwal, Pokhara, Nepalgunj, Dhangadhi and others have carried out protests in support of KC, and medical professionals working in Primary Health Care Centers have joined them.

On Wednesday, former Chief Justice Sushila Karki visited KC and expressed her solidarity with his movement. “Not fulfilling Dr. KC’s demands would be a loss to the entire nation, and his victory is the victory of 30 million Nepalis,” she said as she asked the government to fulfill his demands.

A conflicting stance

Dhrupaksh Tripathi in Ghatana ra Bichar, 28 January

NCP Co-chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal recently expressed strong support for the sovereignty of Venezuela’s elected communist government, and denounced foreign intervention, particularly that of the United States. This is ironic because his own political trajectory has depended on foreign intervention and support. As a rebel, Dahal sought shelter abroad while perpetrating violence in his home country. His signing of national agreements while in foreign land was already an open invitation for interference. Even when he was in power, Dahal pursued the agenda of foreign powers to support his own power. Historically, Dahal has shown no respect for Nepal’s sovereignty. He was involved in demolishing statues of Prithivi Narayan Shah, was involved in all of the Bhimsinh Chaudhary and other figures regarded as Nepal’s national heroes. Yet, Dahal is in effective admiration of Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao who in no way contributed to Nepal’s development. Dahal’s statements are hypocritical, and inconsistent with his own past.

There is speculation that Dahal issued the statement to regain China’s diminishing trust in him after his visit. This was evidenced in the way the Chinese snubbed him on a recent trip to China. This latest statement calling for international support of Venezuela’s communist government may be intended to convince China that his communist stance is still intact.

Communist internationalism

Jana Aesth, 30 January

Venezuela’s political crisis has divided world opinion into two distinct categories. The opposition has the backing of the United States, while the ruling government under Nicolas Maduro has Russia’s support. This political upheaval in a country so far away from Nepal raises some questions about governance here: what will happen if a powerful foreign country tries to count our democratically elected communist majority government? Should Sheh Bahadur Deuba follow the footsteps of Venezuela’s opposition leader Juan Guaido and ignite street protests? NCP leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal recently released a statement strongly supporting Venezuela’s Communist government. Since Communists are internationalists, it should not come as a surprise that Prachanda, a prominent member of an elected communist government in one nation, stands up for another such government — especially when the United States decry the ruling Venezuelan government because it is communist.

Dahal is not the prime minister, so his statement cannot represent the entire nation, but only that of the Nepal Communist Party. NCP’s political manifesto clearly portrays it as a Communist party, and thus Dahal’s support for Venezuela’s ruling government under his party’s political framework should not be considered unusual.

“खुनरो बोलो विद्रोह रोको”
“महिना हिंगा विषंद शुष्क सहिष्णुता कायम गरौ”
“समन्नो प्रतिवाद गरी महिना हिंगा अन्त्य गरौ”

नेमाल सम्बाद
सहायक सम्बादर सहयोगी सम्बादक सहयोगी
सङ्गठन तथा संबोधन प्रतिष्ठा साधनकर्ता
Nepal now has to balance not just Nepal finds itself unwittingly in the middle of a new global power game to Delhi to expiate for their sins and start a fresh page of cooperation based on the rhetoric of historical ties and cultural affinity. Nepal’s elite and their Indian counterparts ended up with a deal as usual. It is noteworthy that neither Nepal nor India have made any attempt to stabilise Nepal’s economy, and ensure prosperity. The main preoccupation of Nepal’s politicians has been to remain in power as long as possible for which they sought Indian blessings. New Delhi, for its part, was happy as long as Nepal remained a source of soldiers and doormen. For this arrangement to work, Nepal was expected to pay deference and remain aligned southwards. This marriage of convenience lasted nearly six decades through absolute monarchy, the Maoist uprising, a royal massacre, and the writing of a disastrous constitution that threatens the nation’s very existence.

But this status quo has changed with the awakening of the sleeping dragon, China. The monumental significance for Nepal since it is now no more self-locked, Article 3 has become redundant. But in a multi-polar world, Nepal has to tread carefully. Barely a month after Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali met US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Washington DC and discussed the Indo-Pacific Strategy, Co-Chair Dahal dashed off a statement supporting the beleaguered Venezuelan regime which the West is trying to bring down. An Indian Army Chief recently said Nepal’s ‘geography’ required it to tilt towards India, like Bhutan.

Nepal now finds itself squarely in the middle of these two once bitter enemies, and now competing economic giants. The West has made common cause with India and other Asian countries in an attempt to contain China’s rise. Oli unwittingly finds himself in the middle of this widening power game – now he does not just need to balance India and China, but also the West. How well he handles these competing interests will determine whether Nepal will remain at peace with its territorial integrity intact, and whether Oli’s own political career will remain on track.

Nepal’s politicians used to spout anti-India rhetoric at election time, and then undertake their very first official trip abroad.

Eminently beneficial for India and Nepal

The real reason why, six months after it was finalised, India is sitting on the EPG report

The Eminent Persons Group (EPG) mandated to review past bilateral treaties between India and Nepal and provide recommendations completed its work in June last year. But it is still under wraps. Why was the eight-member Group formed in the first place, and so much money and time wasted?

It was Nepal’s idea to set up a group made up of notable people from India and Nepal to come up with a mutually acceptable plan to root bilateral ties in keeping with the times. Nepal has for a long time wanted to revise some of its treaties with India, particularly the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship. Signed 70 years ago, the Treaty of Peace and Friendship needs revision because it was signed by Prime Minister Mohan Shumsher Jung Bahadur Rana whose sole intention was to perpetuate his clan’s hold on power, rather than protect the national interest. The protocol was also a step, since it was signed on India’s behalf by its ambassador to Kathmandu and not Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

Nepal also had issues with Clause 7, which states: “The governments of India and Nepal agree to grant, on a reciprocal basis, to the nationals of one country in the territories of the other the same privileges in the matter of residence, ownership of property, participation in

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India and China, but also the West

reconfiguration of regional and global power, if handled well, could bring considerable economic benefit to Nepal. Failure to manage it may spell mortal danger. Prime Minister Oli is also at the crossroads of his political life, and given fragile health, his focus will be on the legacy he wants to leave behind.

Ideally, India could swallow its pride, accept that fact that the 2015 Blockade was a mistake, recognize China's influence in Nepal as inevitable, and work with Beijing to fill New Delhi out of poverty for a win-win-win situation for all three sides. This is the best, yet least likely, outcome.

Indians, like the Nepalis, are an emotive lot and logical long-term thinking is not their forte. New Delhi is currently playing Oli off against Delhi, and wants a more favourably aligned government in Nepal which they can easily executed in the past and know they can repeat. Oli thinks (wrongly) that he can get China, India and Nepal to work together for the benefit of all, even though New Delhi abhors the idea of Nepal as an intermediary between India and China.

For Nepal, India is a known entity. China is an unknown quantity. We do not know if China will come to Nepal’s rescue in times of need, and many Nepalis feel more comfortable with India (despite shortcomings) than with China. There are lessons here for India too, and it cannot be business as usual. New Delhi has got to be more serious about the promise it makes to Nepal.

The Indian focus on the Terai region since 2015 has raised whatever was left of trust between Kathmandu and New Delhi. ‘One Madhes One Pradesh’ would have divided Nepal horizontally, triggering unimaginable problems. Both sides made a complete mess of it, and it is time for India to let Kathmandu handle this problem to the best of its ability.

India’s policy on Nepal has been to keep it at the level of ‘controlled anarchy’ so Nepali leaders have to keep shuttling to New Delhi. But history has shown anarchy cannot always be controlled. And instead of blaming China for trying to encircle India, it would behove New Delhi to be magnanimous towards its smaller neighbours and nudge them along on the road to development.

A stable and economically vibrant Nepal will contribute to the success of both economics, and help stabilizes the region as a whole. Spheres of influence are obsolete, it is time to come to terms with the living of the lives of our people.

Bhairav Pandey a former UN official and he is currently MD of West Nepal PA, Ltd.

trade and commerce, movement and other privileges of a similar nature.

Being a much smaller country, Nepal wants this changed and also wants to ensure that its gigantic and militarily stronger southern neighbour respects the Treaty. India has blocked its border with Nepal several times, using ambiguities in Clause 5, which states: ‘The Government of Nepal shall be free to import, export or tranship the territory of India, arms, ammunition or warlike material and equipment necessary for the security of Nepal. The procedure for giving effect to this arrangement shall be worked out by the two Governments acting in consultation.’

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Nepal first proposed the formation of an Eminent Persons Group in 2011 when Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai visited India. According to the Indian media at the time, New Delhi welcomed this idea, but there is reason to doubt it. India has always wanted to maintain the status quo in its relations with Nepal. If it indeed was supportive, India would not have dragged its feet and taken three years just to propose the terms of reference for the EPG, and two more years to actually form it.

But in February 2016, the formation of the EPG was suddenly expedited because of New Delhi’s need to mend its ties with Nepal after the blockade. This should offer us clue as to why India is now reluctant to receive the report painstakingly negotiated and drafted in nine meetings over two years.

If the members of the EPG are apolitical, they are hiding it well, saying that Indian Prime Minister Modi has not received the report “owing to his busy schedule”. Some members of the EPG are former ambassadors and are trained to be diplomatic in their language, but it is clear they are getting fed up of telling it like it is.

Nepal had wanted the report submitted to Narendra Modi when he was in Nepal for the RIMESTIC Summit in August last year, but India refused saying that it would not discuss any bilateral issue during a multilateral forum.

The suspicion is that Modi’s government does not agree with some of the content of the joint report which recommends that the 1950 Treaty be replaced with a new one proposing a “smart and regulated” border and consider the proportionate sizes of the two countries on the issue of national treatment for citizens. These “concessions” to Nepal apparently have displeased hawks in India’s ruling BJP, who fear they may be used against India by the opposition ahead of India’s 2019 general election.

But this argument is untenable. The recommendations are not binding and the Modi government could have easily glossed over them if they really undermined India’s national interest or were expected to have negative repercussions on the 2019 elections. Moreover, the Indian contingent in the EPG was led by Bhagat Singh Koshyari, a senior BJP leader and RSS veteran, who would not have agreed to recommendations that the Modi government would have objections to.

India thinks Nepal can be made to work and, with this, it could be the mildest prompting Modi to naughtily ignore the report. This dangerous, colonial-era mindset of not giving a sovereign country equal respect has had, and will continue to have, foreign policy consequences for India in its neighbourhood. India surely does not want such an image as it advances towards becoming a regional superpower.
Transparently corrupt

Not everything happening in Nepal is bad. If you just looked at the glass as half full, the news that Nepal has dropped another two notches to now rank #124 among the most corrupt countries in the world is in fact the best news we’ve had so far this year.

Corruption is good for business, it spreads the wealth around through an alternative tax regime. It greases the system so the bureaucracy moves faster, it raises Nepal’s GDP. Without corruption this country would grind to a halt.

What’s that? Didn’t quite catch you. You are saying that the country is already at a standstill, how can it grind to a halt? That is exactly the problem with this country. It is full of cynics like you. Don’t blame corruption for the country’s stagnation, how can we get anywhere if we still have honest cops who refuse to let you go on a traffic violation even if you offer them a cash incentive?

Then there are tax officials at the airport who stubbornly insist on confiscating the extra bottle of whisky you brought from Bangkok, and to rub salt on the wound, they give you an official receipt for it. And there are ministers who want to actually punish bureaucrats extorting money from contractors on National Pride Projects instead of rewarding them. How will this country ever attain Middle Income Status at this rate?

Finally, we are able to get Don Manange sworn back into Parliament. Populating our federal legislature with members of the mafia, representatives of crime syndicates, cartel owners, the medical-industrial complex, knaves, goons, and mass murderers is the only way we can have a can-do law-making body that will restore Nepal as the proud and glorious nation it once was.

Instead of banning corruption we must find ways of making it work in the national interest. One way to do that is to make misfeasance contribute to Nepal’s macro-economic stability by taxing vice. A service surcharge on golf and bribes would help us redress Nepal’s balance of payments deficits so we can hit the 7.8% growth target for fiscal 2018-19.

Once we legalize corruption, we will become more transparent as a nation. Every time someone from the Ministry of Poultry and Livestock pilfers from the coffers, or a tycoon passes out a hefty hukkaheesh they will be slapped 13% VAT on the spot. Investors keen to start joint ventures in Nepal can be given a one-year tax holiday on all bribes they have to pay to lubricate the labyrinths of officials. Foreign diplomatic missions and international agencies, will of course have duty-free status, since their presence in our country is governed by the Vienna Protocol.

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