No closure

Just as the government was defining one crisis by getting Madhesi activist CK Raut to announce separation last Sunday, it was faced with another explosive situation created by breakaway Maoist radicals.

The ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP) is made up of ex-UML and erstwhile Maoists, but the faction that enforced a nationwide shutdown on Thursday calls itself the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN).

Its leader Neeta Bikhram Chaud (Biplav) was monitored by NCP co-Chair and Maoist supremo Pushpa Kamal Dahal, and was once comrade-in-arms of Prime Minister Ram Bahadur Thapa. Biplav is just taking the same violent tactics he was taught in the mid-1990s.

Thursday’s shutdown affected movement on highways, closed schools and industries, although the impact was not felt as much in Kathmandu Valley (above). The final bombing at Ncell earlier this month had already convinced the public that Biplav meant business. The terror also worked in the party’s extortion of businesses and local governments across Nepal.

Security sources told Nepal Times they had shared intelligence about CPN recruitment drives and militia training, and warned the government about the group’s preparations for the round-union and bombing spree. The NCP is finally taking the CPN seriously.

On Tuesday, the Cabinet outlawed the activities of the party, saying that it was a criminal entity, not a political party. Ministers said they were forced to take the step after the semi-underground group refused the government’s offer of talks. Dabali even declared that he faced a threat to his life from his former protege.

Biplav brushed off the ban, calling it ‘ridiculous’ and adding in a statement on Wednesday that ‘extension was a fundamental right … necessary for the nation and people’. Security forces have in the past month seized assault rifles and other weapons from CPN cadre in Dhawal and Rupendahi, tracing them back to former guerrillas who absconded from UN-supervised camps with weapons after the ceasefire.

By attacking a Malaysian telecom company and threatening Indian hydropower projects in Nepal, Biplav has thrown a direct challenge to the government ahead of the Nepal Investment Summit 28-30 March, during which the government hopes to attract foreign investments.

With the CK Raut deal and the warning on Biplav, the government is trying to show that it is willing to negotiate, but will not tolerate violence. But some in the ruling party are asking why it Prime Minister Uli can bring a separatist force to the negotiating table, it is taking so long for him to cannot tame the NCP.

After mainstreaming Raut, the government now needs to expedite political devolution in Province 2. The root cause of extremism is exclusion and inequality, and Nepal will continue to stumble as long as these injustices are not addressed.
TWO EXTREMITIES

After being lampooned for extravagant, but empty, promises and criticisms for having nothing concrete to show for his first year as prime minister, K P Oli has moved quickly to address two lingering legacies of the conflict and the constitution-writing process: sign a deal with C K Rastri to get him to abandon secessionism, and outlaw the band, a member of Nepal Rikshu Dashain (Dahain) faction of the Maoists. Despite miscalculations and counterattacks, the Oli administration has also won applause for its new assertiveness and a renewed sense of purpose.

In the 11-point agreement signed with Himu, March 24, Rastri has committed to accept Nepal’s sovereignty and unity as well as enter the democratic mainstream. That declaration has removed the threat of ethnic separatism from the equation and put it on the back burner. The movement of the southern Madhesi parties will now no longer hinder on NCP’s secessionist rhetoric or bring a new crop of Maoists to the forefront.

The agreement on Sunday was not only a blow to the opposition NC and other parties who accused him of a sellout. But the most vocal critic of the 11-point agreement were Oli’s rivals within the NCP: party co-chairs Pushpa Kamal Dahal did not see it, but was privately mooted that Oli had not kept his promise, and Bimal Dahal’s main gripe was also that he was not consulted.

However, we give Oli a thumbs up on this front. It is only for keeping the sensitive negotiations under wraps in the hectic corridors of Sunanda Bhakta. Oli has shown the party’s resolve to surprise people by pulling rabbits out of their hats. For example, the pre-election alliance between Oli and the UHP, and the UHP, was also a bold move when announced.

Once the agreement with Rastri followed on the heels of the Katwal District Court sentencing Rehman Chaudhary to life imprisonment for the massacre of policemen in Tikarhat in August 2015, and his party the RJP-N was subsequently pulled out from the governing coalition in protest. Thus, there seems to have been some behind-the-scenes winks and nods within both Salwarkar and the Supreme Court for Rastri to be released from jail a day prior to the agreement.

The weak Oli seems to have killed several birds with a single shot at the same time: he has now shown his public image of being only talk and no walk, neutralized the final fall of RJP-N leaving his government, and depending Rastri’s future role will be for the next election which will be won or lost in the Madhes.

On Oli, although the government quit after saying it was not a ban on the party, only on its candidates, the action essentially drives the Maoist faction underground. There could have been two reasons for this: the ruling NCP wants to keep the door open for negotiations, or six Maoists in the ruling party need to be buddies of Oli and Bhairi just to pretend to go after him. After all, Bhairi is now using if same tactics of extortion and violence they used at the beginning of the process. Even so, by publicly calling the Bhairi party a "gang of looters" Prime Minister Oli has that against the Maoists.

The Maoists were already semi-underground, and owned up to three bomb attacks in the capital last month that killed one person, and setting fire to more than a dozen Nepal cell towers across the country. The government was challenged, and there was no other way for it to respond but warn that criminal activities will no longer be tolerated.

With both the Rastri deal and the warning to Bhairi, the government now needs to show that it means business. A ruling party that can bring a separate faction to the negotiating table should easily be able to convince former comrades to come back to the table. While doing that, the government should also try to win the hearts and minds of people of the province, expedite political and civic mobilization and remove grievances that feed extremism. As far as the Maesters are concerned, they are existing in disaffiliation among the people with the NCP’s poor government and reputation. The root cause of extremism is extreme inequality, and unless there are moves towards social justice, Nepal will continue to be unstable.


dy

SOARED WAVES

SANDAK RUT

Visit Nepal in January in Sandak Rut. It is now open for bookings. The first day of January Weather in Nepal is not that bad, And it is a good time to visit there. Sandak Rut is located in the central part of Nepal, surrounded by mountains.

US-BANGLA CRASH

A tragic sequence of errors that should never have been allowed to happen (1 year after US-Bangla crash, fingers point to pilot, Kunda Dixit, #50). Not only the Banglai Captain, but TIA Air Traffic Controller were severely at fault.

Andrew Duncan

Great article on a completely avoidable tragedy. On international Women's Day it's a reminder that we need to do more to counter (not cause) sexism. It's deadly.

Sascha Fuller

Failings of the ATC be more assessible and leading clarity are badly but probably would have made no difference. Will lessons be learnt?

Marcus Cotton

Even if there was no crash, that sort of erratic and abusive behavior is terrifying. Can you imagine having to work with someone like that? Are there no checks or recourses for female pilot to report harassments? 

Michaeu Ann Jenkins

Allowing a pilot who is mentally unfit to fly an aircraft... a question is will Nepal government take any action against this carelessness shown by the US-Bangla?

Ranvah Shah

I can't imagine how much trauma the survivors and passengers went through. Not just right after such a horrific incident like this but for years and years after. (Individual tragedies, an 'international' one)

Sonika Sareen

I was shocked to know the brave faces they tried to portray. They just put up the faces of their lives despite all their inner struggles.


dy

10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

The ten-year anniversary of the Muzaffer University massacre was held on the campus, and the ten-year anniversary of the Muzaffer University massacre was held on the campus, and.

The continuing events were, however, dominating strong groups demanding self-determination, a movement which eventually was imposed. The situation is now in a state of constant change and issues are being swept away by the new and emerging forces.

The event on the anniversary of the Muzaffer University massacre was held on the campus, and the ten-year anniversary of the Muzaffer University massacre was held on the campus, and.

The setting on the wall

HELEN EKINLAW

This restrained me from the rest of the government delivering in Anappal of Gorkha just after the earthquake (Learning about teaching - Paakrit Kanoji, Raikes). I came across a medical centre and I was quite impressed with its level of care is generally unheard of in such a rural setting. I remember being very thankful to the doctor who started it. Now I know it was Mr Ekim van’s parent’s and the two others.

Ram Chandra

WHAT'S TRENDING

Individual tragedies, a national loss

Sanam Pyakurel has survived the 2015 Gorkha Earthquake, but a doctor was not available to treat her. She is bleeding for her countrymen with a dream of being saved. Go online for the story and support her.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS

Nauli Times @NauliTimes Daily marks the one-year anniversary of the US-Bangla crash in Kathmandu, about 1 year before. Most Nasiapres who perished were younger students. @sniperadikarhep is still using the cover of his fake persona. @cppf

Aarikka Thakuri @aarikka Thakurir There was no witness that could take our lives, but there was. Their story is not that bad, but no one sees us writing our parts. But now there’s life in the body of nepal has gone after our own hearts. US-Bangla Crash! Thank you for sharing the (@sniperadikarhep)

Nepal Times @Nepal Times The earthquake destroyed her home, cannot bring back her husband, but she can keep a dream. @SNaturalhealer Rupa Malal and a rename of the one that is going to go to make her life. Watch @sniperadikarhep

Sudik Manali @Kathmandu I have never met a woman who is not strong. @sniperadikarhep I am looking forward to hear her. They are both special to me.

Nepal Times @Nepal Times Sirah Tami is a medical student, Helen Ekim van grew up as a medical student and taught in a medical school. Now she is an assistant professor of medicine at the University of Bergen in Norway and in doing the same she is leaving behind her two mother.

Nama Subedi @nsharma She was the one who named the Nepal’s dominical village when Helen was a little. We were really looking forward to get a chance and to ask her the questions of her village.


dy

1 YR AFTER US-BANGLA CRASH, FINGERS POINT TO PILOT

By Kunda Dixit

In a conversation with the Kathmandu Post's Kunda Dixit, #50, the crash of the US-Bangala Airlines flight that hit the Tribhuvan International Airport on March 13, 2015, killing 51. The transcript has resulted in a discussion about the pilot’s role towards his female colleague and his mental state. Not results can come to the investigation report, and the online discussion.

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Why we climb mountains

Disenchantment with the material world pushes us to the Himalaya to reconnect with Nature

Damien Francois

Mountains have been climbed for as long as big mountains have been climbed. But for Himalayan and other Native people around the world, the question is ‘Which deity flies up there?’

Many mountaineers are not as spiritual as they are, and their relationship with high mountains is more ambiguous. The ancestors of Western civilisation in ancient Greece imagined that gods lived on mountain tops. Also, sacredness today is a bit outdated.

Although traditions linked to mountain spirits are still alive, many of us have lost the connection to that specialness of some sacred places. And we are missing a bit of the divine and the mystical has become a bit complicated. Could it be that the earth's highest elevations have somehow become the playground of not just alpinists and geologists but also spiritual beings?

Reading on board

Turkish Airlines, in association with Phuket Life, is giving passengers digital access to thousands of newspapers and magazine titles from all over the world. Phuket Life offers over 7,000 titles from 120 countries.

Golf Tournament

Golf International Pte Ltd will organise the annual Singapore Open Golf Tournament on 15-16 March at Sentosa Golf Club. Some 135 golfers will participate in the tournament, and the winner of the ‘Players’ Choice’ prize will be awarded the new Samura.

Qatar women fly high

Qatar Airways selected 15 women to fly high on 10 March in an Airbus A350 flying from Brussels to Doha. The women were flown by Qatar Airways women’s football team.

Ethihad, too

Ethihad Airways marked International Women’s Day with an all-female flight crew for the first time. More than 95 Ethihad Airways women cabin and cockpit crew operated Flight EY167 from Abu Dhabi to London.

God’s own cuisine

Verdant, rich and husl Kerala is often uttered in the same sentence as God. The southern Indian state was made famous by Anand Neelakantan’s novel A God of Small Things, and it is called God’s own country because it was not the Samsara created by Lord Parampara for his devotees.

Added to all that, it is Kerala cuisine that is actually divine. Many in Kerala will be familiar with dosa through the Indian restaurants in the capital, but they may not have heard of appam, its cousin from Kerala. Appam is a round bread half the size of dosa, crispy on the sides and soft and fluffy in the center. Unlike dosa, which is made of rice and lentils, appam is made of raw and cooked rice purée. At Sasi’s Kerala Food Festival, which began on 12 March, you can try out this unique staple that is hard to find in Kerala’s Indian restaurants.

The festival offers many other novelties from Kerala state famous for its place palm fringed backwaters, Patti and littifyappam, other dishes which substitutes for rice and roti are available, as many chicken, fish, and vegetable dishes. Chef Rejimon P R from Kerala is making the dishes, so you can be sure of their authenticity.

“Malai is the main ingredient in Kerala dishes is coconut,” explains Chef Rejimon. “We use coconut in most vegetables and most dishes. Coconut milk is used in gravies, and even if coconut is not obvious, it is usually present as oil.”

Indeed, the green vegetables and mushroom trees and covered in coconut flakes, which give them a mild, creamy flavour. Coconut milk goes well with the non-vegetarian dishes like chicken and fish, which melt in the mouth. They can be mixed with plain rice, or Kerala’s special red curry which has an invigorating green colour.

Keralas itself has a variety of cuisine, but there are three distinct types: Malabar, Travancore, and Kochi. Chef Rejimon cooked up an amalgam of all three types at the festival, and has also created other, newer dishes.

“Regional cuisines use typical spices which may not be palatable to everyone,” says Chef Rejimon. “So we have experimented with new spices and flavures.”

Kerala is known as a capital of spices, with pepper, cardamom, cloves, vanilla, etc. grown in abundance. Kerala reflects this abundance, and nearly every dish is flavorful and rich. The hotness and spiciness have been toned down for the festival, so as to appeal to all palates, which lets the deep and rich flavors of the spices shine through.

Seya Bhattacharri

Khabar, States Guerrero Nasa, 8th of March
also of philosophers?

After all, Nietzsche wrote: ‘Philosophy, as I have understood it hitherto, is a voluntary retirement into regions of ice and mountain peaks’. Being a philosopher and mountaineer, I attempt perilous climbs that lead to Julius Froehlich’s ‘meditations on the peaks’. Jack Kerouac and the Beat generation’s ‘urgency of life’ comes to mind where ‘it is the world within this phenomenal world I am living in, body and mind.

That is what I am looking for, up there, a world-ambient made of simple things that stand in contrast to the sublime majesty of the surroundings. A gigantic natural theatre, where I feel every fibre in my body like nowhere else. Grateful, what I feel is mostly pain. But no pain, no elevation, and no gain. The physical and mental efforts I have to make up there are immense, magnified by hypoxia, exhaustion, varying temperatures from super hot to super cold. Yes, I actually turned around at 7.800m on Everest on 17 May last year because of the heat.

But it is not just the body that suffers, but the mind which is on edge. Yet, as much as climbing at the highest elevations is physically exhausting, it is equally rewarding mentally. The higher you get the more a certain terror brings out deep feelings. A paradox? No, this shaggydarness leads not only to a simplicity of actions – one foot in front of the other – it is also a mental simplicity, or reduction.

‘When I’m up above 8.000m... all desire vanishes, the anxiety, the dissatisfaction that I experience down there are gone,’ writes Marco Bianchi. A state of am not through medication but action.

The more fear and danger are part of the experience, the longer the feelings will remain. Robert McFarlane in Mountains Of The Mind: A History Of A Fascination. We had talked about how much pleasure the fear had brought afterwards. And we talked as mountaineers always do, about how strange it is to risk yourself for a mountain, but how central to that experience is that risk and the fear it brings with it.

Then, this song by Luc van Acker: ‘I want to feel the fear that’s in my heart, the fear in my heart that keeps telling me which way to turn’. It is the good fear, the one that makes me do the right thing at the right moment.

Mountaineers are not enamoured with danger, we are not suicidal. High-altitude mountaineering is actually the art of moving through danger and avoiding it. But sometimes it goes wrong. I survived the big 25 April 2015 earthquake at Everest Base camp that killed 18 people.

‘Time doesn’t stop or slow down when you are in danger. Everything happens as fast. It’s just that – provided we survive them – we subject these periods of time to much intense retrospective scrutiny that we come to know them more fully, more exactly. We see them in reverse-frame,’ writes McFarlane.

Yes, everything is more intense, up there, especially the hardships. Yet, the body ‘uplifts’ the mind, and vice versa. Body and mind, this is what the humanism really is. The paradigm may be defined by the human ability to displace oneself mentally in space and time, but it is ‘conquisters of the useless’ (Lionel Terray) who are actually climbing where no other will venture. Only the fiercest animal on the planet, the infamous wolverine (gulo gulo), seems to share this passion for climbing big hills for no other reason than hard-earned pleasure.

Unlike speed climbers I do not seek to set new records and certainly do not climb to deconstruct the laws of elementary physics. I rejoice in the simplicity of life and of what I do, but I am not interested in faster, faster, faster. This is a Western illusion which is rooted in the false notion that ‘progress’ is linear and always leads to something ‘better’.

Maybe the real reason why we venture up there is to ‘systematically reorganise the senses’ to paraphrase Rimbaud. Fear and danger dynamically existences, you live more consciously there where there are no machines and buttons, no double-clicks. It is back to fundamentals, as Friedrich Nietzsche wrote: ‘To live at all means to live in danger’.

Photography: Damien Francois is a climber and author of the Holy Mountains of Nepal. The Everest attempt this group will do in 2020 as part of their 7th expedition in the Nepal Himalayas.

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HATTIBAN - LALITPUR - NEPAL

Stellar Lifestyles!
Out of the ashes
The Pathibhara helicopter crash was a repeat of the tragedy in Ghunsa in 2006

Those of us concerned with conservation in Nepal remember vividly when we were on 23 September 2006 when news hit about the missing helicopter that disappeared into the clouds above Ghunsa.

I was at my desk overlooking a deceptively calm and normal Kathmandu Valley, my stomach churning at the fearful facts unfolding. Details of the disaster took two full days to be corroborated, but it gradually emerged that all 24 people had died in the far eastern corner of the country when the chopper collided with cliffs above the village and crashed in feminism, wiping out most of Nepal’s conservation leaders including a government minister, the Finnish charge d’affaires and Russian pilots.

“Is my so sorry, yes, I’ll be sure to let you know when we have anything.” Bad news travels and with a sinking heart I was fielding landline queries from all over the world. Gauging through the window I prayed the story would end differently, the icy fingers of disbelief, the terrible finality of the words “No survivors.”

The tragedy of Pathibhara on 27 February was horridly similar, although these three news travels fast and the dreadful details were quick to be confirmed. This time it was tourism leaders who vanished into a blizzard and exploded into the cabbage, leaving a sickening void in Nepal’s hospitality and aviation industry. Along with technical personnel, we lost two fine men, the trailblazers, leaders, and Nepal’s most visionary and courageous tourism entrepreneur.

Last week’s Ghunsan Shyam Gurung reflected on the tragedy that now brought back my memory of 2006. No one should challenge weather. In 2006, most of the incinerated bodies were unrecognizable in their seats and crumbled into ashes to the touch. Ghuns had told me. Only Mingma Norbu Sherpa was thrown clear on impact, lying as though asleep on the ground a few feet from the burnt-out wreckage.

Once Ghuns’s rescue team was eventually able to access the area, hampered by driving rain and wind, it was late the day after the crash before they reached the site after a four-hour climb in the dark, and another day passed before news filtered through to us in Kathmandu.

Ghuns should have boarded the stalled helicopter but was off-loaded to wait in Talchupchok to save weight. The Kangchenjunga Conservation Area had been handed over to local indigenous managers the previous day, and the passengers consisted of the cream of Nepal’s conservation community, WWF staff and international supporters. It should have been a celebration of yet another success in the history of Nepal’s innovative protected areas.

It was hard to accept the chill reality that they were not coming back. Never again would we be infected by Chandra Gurung’s restless energy, enjoy Tikamsera Maskey’s environmental zeal, admire Harka Gurung’s measured thought responses, or appreciate Mingma Norbu Sherpa’s calm focused determination — all dedicated to making a difference to the environment, development, and wildlife conservation.

One of those telephone calls came from Lincoln University in New Zealand where so many of Nepal’s natural resource practitioners had received their education. Prof. David Simoons’s voice was still with shock at the loss of so many friends: “I’ve talked to my colleagues and we want to offer a national park scholarship in memory of Mingma Norbu, one of our distinguished alumni, to help rebuild the conservation capacity in Nepal following the loss of so many highly skilled specialists.”

Khem Jung Sherpa was in Ghunsan and a star pupil at Sir Edmund Hillary’s

TRAIL BLAZERS: Environmentalist Mingma Norbu Sherpa (right) was among 24 who died in the helicopter crash in Ghuns in 2006, Anemoral in Talchupchok honours him and other conservation leaders who died in the tragedy.

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A director from Kathmandu
US-based film-maker Pema Dhondup chooses to set his new thriller in Nepal’s capital

Sewa Bhattarai

Given his multinational background, it was perhaps inevitable that it would be Pema Dhondup who would make one of the first truly global Nepali movies. Dhondup’s family moved from Tibet to Japan after the Chinese annexation, and from there to Himachal Pradesh and cities across India. He has been living in the United States for the past 15 years.

His movie, The Man from Kathmandu was shot in Nepal and Los Angeles, featuring a stellar cast of Nepali actors like Karma, Neer Shah, Mithila Sharma, Anju Sharma and international stars including Gulshan Grover from India, and other actors from Puerto Rico and Spain.

“Many people from across the world travel to be a part of the terrorist group ISIS, even educated men from Western countries. But so far not a single one of them has been from Nepal,” says Dhondup, “I wanted to explore the story of that one man among thousands. I wanted to find out what is it about Kathmandu that brings about this phenomenon.”

The theme of his film is interaction between man and city. how Kathmandu changes the outlook of a radical half-Hindu-half-Muslim protagonist. Terrorism is just the backdrop to the plot, the real story is of a man’s journey. To be sure, making Kathmandu the setting for this action drama seems unusual, since Dhondup is not Nepali and does not speak the language. The film itself seems to be an effort on the part of the director to come to terms with his own identity and the definition of “home”.

“You can say the quest has ended in a way for me, in the form of my American passport. But does that really define who I am?” he asks.

We interview Dhondup in the Lahim Mall office of the film’s producer Nishkumar Uddin of QFX. Despite his globe-trotting, the director says Kathmandu was the only city he could have filmed his story in. He has fond memories of Kathmandu from his childhood when he came here to visit family members, and in those days it was an exotic as visiting a foreign country.

“This is a place where identities and cultures are always in flux. In any other city, you immediately know who is who, what a particular person’s origins are. But in Kathmandu, walk down a street and you cannot figure out people.Temples, monasteries, churches and mosques flourish side by side. The city has accepted and absorbed all kinds of identities,” he adds.

The theme of The Man from Kathmandu actually follows on from Dhondup’s earlier movies where he explored the question of identity. His 2004 film We Are No Monks was about a group of Tibetan boys coming out of their secluded existence to face the world. His documentaries have profiled members of the Tibetan diaspora scattered all over the world.

“It is very hard to make it in American filmmaking, and not because of the reason you may be thinking,” Dhondup explains. “Being brown, or of any race, doesn’t matter as much as you might expect. But it matters how well you fit into the capitalist, money machine of Hollywood studios. If you fit, you can make progress. If you don’t, and you want to experiment you will have a hard time.”

Still, years of working in Hollywood has given a certain rigor to his work which he feels is necessary for Nepali cinema to make it on the global stage. Many Nepali films are still formulaic stories, but Dhondup says that is not the real problem.

“No matter what kind of film you make, it has to be up to international technical standards, of sound, visuals, selling, otherwise we have everything in Nepal to make world class cinema, from good actors to good equipment. Using these, we can tap into huge markets like India and China just next door,” he says.

Whether or not The Man from Kathmandu will be ‘world cinema from Nepal’ and if of international standard remains to be seen. But Dhondup says it is already global in the sense that it meets technical specifications, and is set to be released in 64 countries after Nepal’s premiere this week. Dhondup hopes to continue working in Nepali cinema with producer Nishkumar Uddin, growing and helping a new generation of Nepali filmmakers.
Gosain Kunda’s 6 lakes in spring

Sikuma Rai
in Rasuwa

Gosain Kunda is a place to visit in July-August when tens of thousands head to the holy waters at 4,384m for the Janai Purnima festival. But now is the time to go as the winter snow starts melting, the rhododendrons start coming out in full bloom, and the trails are relatively deserted. You will have the mountains, and the lakes, all to yourself.
Sewa Bhattarai
in Myagdi

The Ghorepani-Poon Hill Trek? That is a last century. Now that road access makes the scenic viewpoint easily reachable with a night stop, more and more trekkers venture up the ridge to Ghorepani, Khopra and the hidden holy Khayer Lake.

This extension to the traditional Poon Hill hike is worth it even for those who have done Ghorepani-Ghandruk Ridge before. Strike off the path through rhododendron forest at Ghorepani to Muddy Peak for an overnight stop, and then it is another 2 days’ walk to Khopra. An alternative route from Ghorepani is to descend to Swanta and up again to gain the ridge.

The only warning to trekkers is to make sure there is a tea house at night falls, and to keep your eyes on the narrow trail because the views of Annapurna, Machapuchare and Chamlang are so dramatic. Muddy Peak itself is about 700m higher than Poon Hill and beats the view from there by leaps and bounds. The view of a full moon rise from behind Machapuchare is an out of world sight.

Khayer Lake with Annapurna I peering over the ridge (Anh) is a further 5-6 hours walk away with a small temple of Khayes Bhairani sacred to the local Magar community. Hindu pilgrims from the down valley also walk up to the lake on Jana Pumcha festival in July-August. During the monsoon, the slopes are alive with fresh flowers and you do not want to step on them and spoil the beauty. Shepherds graze herds of sheep on the fresh young grass, and people buy sheep from them to sacrifice at the Khayer Bhairani shrine.

At this time of year, the lake is partly frozen and the ground is still brown and barren. The trekking season has not started yet, so the treks are deserted.

About twenty years ago when this area was uninhabited, we used to see big groups of foreigners trek up to the lake to camp and bring their own food and we saw the potential for a lodge,” says Bhakta Tulis, who operates the lodge at Khopra Ridge. Word about the ethereal beauty of Khayer Lake is now spreading and in the trekking season the decent rooms at Khopra are full, and so are the enourmous made for porters and unsuspecting Nepali guests.

Social entrepreneur and rural internet pioneer Mahabir Pun founded the lodge in 2007 with prize money from his Ramon Magsaysay award. The proceeds from the lodge go to a school in the nearby Paudharw village. He has set up a string of eight other lodges in the area, including in Mohare Danda.

“We know that we need to expand the facilities, and we are looking for funds to build another lodge,” Pun tells us. “Mostly, tourism does not benefit the local community so much. We try to get the community to run the lodges and plough the profits locally.”

Proceeds from the lodges have been invested in building a 50KW micro hydropower, which supplies electricity to the lodges for lighting, heating and wifi services. “Eventually we intend to make the lodges smoke-less zero carbon,” says Pun.

As the better travelled destinations become passé and remote ones become more attractive, Khopra Ridge (pictured, above) is poised to rival the more popular ABC Trek. And with the road access now making the Annapurna Circuit less remote, Khopra and the neighbouring Mardi Ridge to the east will be attracting more visitors. The question is how soon the facility will manage to keep up with the influx.

The timing seems just right, and if you are wondering what to go. View our reporters to feature on Kandab Khayar and Khayer Lake of Myagdi. If you want to beat the crowds of trekkers and monsoon, going is the best time to go to these holy lakes.

Being so close to the city, the Gosain Kunda trek is a quick getaway for trekkers and pilgrims. The forest path may look easy at first, but it can be a grueling two-day climb from Dhunche at 2,300m on the highway. Gosain Kunda can be either a destination, a stopover, or a traverse. As a destination, it can be done in a relaxed way in five days, giving oneself enough time to acclimatize and take in the views. It is better not to rush it.

Trekkers can also just stopover in Gosain Kunda and continue along a narrow path around a steep spur and descend to Langtang Valley two days away. As a traverse, hikers from Dhunche can cross the path and descend to Jisamullu and back to Kathmandu. Or, if you really want to punish yourself, you can do that route counter-clockwise. The trek is now more much safer after the earthquake four years ago.

The simplest itinerary is to take a 5-7 hour bumpy jeep ride to Dhunche, and if you want to get away from the sound of trucks, board off immediately to Deurali for the night.

Those relatively more fit can climb on to Sing Gompa at 3,250m, a small settlement with tea houses and a monastery. It also has a government dairy outlet run by Chatra Durbur Tamang where you can stock up on yak cheese.

After morning breakfast in Sing Gompa the trail goes up and up to Larki Bihani (3,700m). More and more of the mesmerizing vistas of Ganesh Himal, Langtang Lirung, and Manaslu become visible as you gain altitude, and the somber energies exhausted walkers. This time of year, rhododendron buds are popping open all over the forest.

The really steep bit comes after Larki Bihani, and this is where the pace will get slower on the endless uphill. The tea shops at Gosain Kunda look deceptively close, and it is still another few hours of hard slog to reach the ridge to look down at Saraswati Kunda.

When you get there, you find that Gosain Kunda is not one but a series of lakes at over 4,500m. The air is thin and crystalline, and the mirror surface of the lakes reflect the sunset in all its hues. The stunning views, the sacred energy of the spot, and the exhilaration of the climb will make even the most non-religious person slightly spiritual. For true Hindus, Buddhists or Animistic believers, however, this is a pilgrimage of a lifetime.

Those still not satisfied by the view can trek on to Lauritha La (4,810m) to inspect six other lakes, and the trip is rewarding and therapeutic as the alpine hidden lakes glitter like jewels in the sun.

There are 198 lakes in the Langtang National Park region but more are popping up due to global warming, and many do not even have names yet.

DIVINE REFLECTIONS: Many people do not know that besides the main Gosain Kunda (far left) there are six sacred lakes in the vicinity. They are (from left to right): Sherpa Kunda, Sarda Kunda, Raka Kunda, Tundra Kunda, Ama Kunda and Surya Kunda.

HOLY WATERS
**Japanese Film Festival**
This film festival brings selected Japanese movies with English subtitles. Entrance to Pakistan showings are free, while tickets are necessary for Kathmandu shows. But are available free for Embassy of Japan or the JALAN office.

**At Kathmandu Chamber of Commerce and Industries, Gaiwa Patan Pakhara.**

**Kafam**
**Performances** throughout the night will celebrate classical as well as contemporary dance forms prevalent across Nepal.

The event is also a fundraiser to support Shreeya, which is working to develop arts education in Nepali schools.

17 March, 6:30, 500 and 1000; Bastian New Hotel, 68000, 708152

**WAKE UP**
An awareness raising early morning action against climate change and the destractive impact of development on nature.

19 March, 5am, Jawalakhel Ground

**Kadham**
**Alpine Dweller**
A pipe dreamer is an international film with experiments with a variety of musical styles. With the visual costume range of puppet, Ghibli, jaw harp, violin, hyper and percussions, the film creates beautiful tunes that promise to be a delight for children.

15 March, 7:30am, Modh, Jawalakhel, (980) 6126997

**Rap, Rhythm and Rhyme**
Nigerian American poet and rapper Amanda Lile and spoken word poetess from Ward Warriors will perform their poems/songs. Enjoy the beauty of words said out aloud.

15 March, 5:30pm, Roo Camp, Outdoor Activities, Jawalakhel, (980) 6126997

**The Elements Band**
The Elements Band will perform live at this Hotel to make it a memorable and enjoyable festival. Call for tickets.

20 March, 11:30pm, Afro Boutique Hotel, Bahundanda, (980) 6126997

**Bricks Café**
A multi cuisine restaurant in the heart of Kathmandu offering delicious dishes in a pleasant surrounding.

Kasandra, (980) 5527796

**Kings Lounge**
A highly recommended place to enjoy great food, drinks and super sound.

Garun Mag, (980) 4227110

**Echoes in the Valley**
A free annual music festival that strives to revive Kathmandu’s triangular heritage. Small neighborhoods are transformed into grand stages for musical conversations and performances across genres, styles of Nepali musicians, and between international artists.

16 March, Noon

**Moviemonday**
Movies thrown together continue honouring women in films with this week’s selection: Broken English

19 March, 7pm, Roo Camp, Outdoor Activities, Jawalakhel, (980) 6126997

**OUR PICK**

**Pescado, dolita, boy, who goes around in an air buffalo suit, and two guys visually in love with him.**

With his obbligato dolita boy and Loveloffen girls who love him, he emanates honey from Goose, he is called the best falafel and friends. The music picks up a late classical story of a philemanson who challenges the elusive Makeshift. Directed by Bihan Ki, features Guapo, Bizman Shah, Sanev Shikhar, Sanev Shikhar, and amat Khula

**Tasneem’s Kings Kitchen**
Visit us for an authentic Indian (Rajasthani) food. Call and book before you go.

32 Jhown, Patan, (980) 6296710

**ARRIVAL**

KATHMANDU, 8 - 14 March

**AIR QUALITY INDEX**

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On some arrival afternoons, we told the local guest that the Air Quality Index dropped to the Green ‘healthy’ level. This is a virtual mystery because the time of Kathmandu, sunny velocity as a car is a major reason. However, because the morning and evening levels were a sign, the daily average came to be slightly below or sometimes even very slightly above. However, the four hours for the period ended online at www.realisquest.com. The graph above represents the average values as of the existing data base, and hence the AQI.

https://epa.gov/air/quality/index.html
Only genuine devolution will douse separatism

Demands for greater and more rapid federalisation will persist despite C K Raut renouncing Madhes secession

The dramatic announcement in Kathmandu on Friday by C K Raut of the Alliance for Independent Madhes in a joint press conference with Prime Minister KP Oli that he was abandoning secessionism has thrown considerable uncertainty over Kathmandu’s relations with Province 2 under the new federal set-up.

Raut’s announcement followed close on the heels of the RJP-N deciding to withdraw its support to the NCP government following the Kailali District Court sentencing lawmaker Rashid Chaudhary to life imprisonment for the killings in the district in 2016 that sparked the Madhes movement.

However, here in Province 2 many people were surprised and privately in interviews in Janakpur, Birgunj and elsewhere during a recent visit that if the process of decentralisation and devolution did not accelerate, then there would still be support for another C K Raut.

As an ex-official separatist, Raut had been subject to considerable attention over recent years, and was recently detained and chided to appear before the courts on several occasions. On 7 March he was released from detention by the Supreme Court which thereby effectively overturned previous decisions by the Rastahat District Court, the Birgunj bench of the Janakpur High Court, and by the Supreme Court itself on 3 December. Despite his release, the Supreme Court had also told the Rastahat District Court to continue its investigation into his activities.

Raut already has a significant following in Province 2 even if he has now renounced his commitment to separatism. Further delays and impediments to the genuine democratic transfer of power and resources to the elected government of the province risks increasing the demands of those with more extremist views and consequently the likelihood of violent protest.

It is clear now, nearly two years after the elections for the federal, provincial and local assemblies, that federalisation ‘paves major challenges in Nepal. However it also provides new opportunities for genuine decentralisation and for the devolution of powers, resources and responsibilities – if the central government is really prepared to pursue this agenda.

As one who was always opposed to the idea of ‘state restructuring’ to create a new layer of political representation and bureaucracy, while effectively diminishing the existing structure involving districts, village development committees and municipalities, I am not surprised by the difficulties involved in such radical transformation.

Most of the provinces and many local authorities are currently complaining that, not only have financial and material resources not been effectively transferred as promised, but the necessary re-employment of personnel required to provide the human resources has not occurred and, even more importantly, the legislation required to implement the necessary changes to the structure of government and administration has not been passed.

In Province 2, this concern is robustly expressed by both provincial and local authorities. Local journalists, businessmen and academics in a series of public discussions and private informal interviews in Birgunj and Janakpur expressed similar views.

There was some sense of rivalry between the two communities of the new Province 2, in part regarding the allocation of powers and resources as between Birgunj and the Magar-speaking areas in the west and Janakpur and the Maithili-speaking areas of the south. The name of the Province is not yet decided, although most concede that it is likely that Janakpur will be officially named the capital or headquarters of Province 2.

There is surprising enthusiasm here regarding the greater responsibility at a more local level for the development of the Madhesh economy and society, even if all were agreed that the region remained politically marginal and economically underdeveloped, with generally poor access to health and education facilities, poor human development indicators and major issues of inequality and social discrimination.

There seems to be a determination on the part of those in office to make the most of the new powers and resources they still hoped would be made available to transform the region and achieve improvements. But there is also a recognition in the slow progress of decentralisation and devolution. This is the only province which has a government and assembly dominated by politicians who are not linked to the newly created CPN and they are proud of this distinction.

David Seddon is Director of Critical Faculty, author and co-author of many publications on Nepal, and recently edited a three-part book on ‘Nepal and the Great War’.
Wed before birth

The play Gadhlu Chaishya, staged by Kathmandu Arts Centre at the Nepal International Theatre Festival 2019 starts with young, unmarried women in white gowns and skin-tight jumping dresses. The play is written, directed, and acted by theatre artists from the Karnali, and is a rare opportunity for Karnali to observe the culture of this remote mountain district.

The life Gadhlu Chaishya refers to the practice of arranging the marriage of children even before they are born. Pampa is one such woman, whose wedding was fixed by her father at a very young age, and the marriage took place when she was still in her mother’s womb. Her father, who is a nun, arranged the marriage again after the birth of the child, and the girl was married to his niece’s husband.

The focus of the play is how Pampa’s life is going to be. She wants to go to Sauraha, where she can enjoy the festival with her friends, and she even plans to go to Sauraha for the first time after her marriage. The play ends with Pampa singing along with her friends, and the stage is filled with a lot of noise and music. The play is a reflection of the lives of the young and the not-so-young women who live in the Karnali region.

HAPPENINGS

INSTANT STORY: Prime Minister KP Oli and his wife Radhika Shakya participate in a workout organized by Teaching Hospital in Kathmandu on Thursday to mark World Kidney Day.

UNITED NATION: President Bidya Devi Bhandari met UN Secretary-General António Guterres in New York on Tuesday and exchanged views on Climate Change, Sustainable Development, and Nepal–UN cooperation.

KUMUSTA PO: Philippines Ambassador to Nepal Trestina C. Gapa paid a farewell call on Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali at Singhbahar Bhalu Bar on Wednesday.

NUN THE LESS: French Ambassador to Nepal François Ouvrard at an event marking a course on meditation and personal hygiene with 32 nuns at Kunung Chado monastery in Kathmandu on Wednesday.

GOOD MOVES: Indian Ambassador Manjeev Singh Puri at the Sushila Shrestha Festival Palace in Kathmandu on Sunday.
Biplav is just following the footsteps of mentors

Milan Timilsina in @yopular.com 12 March

Ujjwal Chaudhary

XP Oli rose to prominence with the ‘Japal’ movement. Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda) gained political clout with the Maoist war. Ram Bahadur Thapa (Buddha) and Netra Bikram Chand (Biplav) at one point were the drivers of the Maoist movement under Prachanda’s leadership.

In short, all our leaders in power today have violent political pasts. They became rulers by taking upon arms – Biplav is just following the footsteps of his comrades.

In his heyday, Prachanda had used the same tactic as Biplav today. But he eventually realised that war was a dead-end, and he could attain his political objectives through peaceful means. After the ceasefire, he championed the peace process and won the 2008 Constituent Assembly election with a landslide. The ballot won over the bullet. It was proof that non-violent struggle is more effective.

After the electoral alliance in 2017 and party unity, Oli, Prachanda and Biplav are now part of the ruling Nepali Communist Party with a two-thirds majority in Parliament. Rabahare Bhattarai and Mohan Baidya (Kiriji) broke away from the Maoist party earlier, but are following peaceful politics their own way.

Biplav, however, is the country back to armed struggle, reminding Nepalis of a bloody war many had forgotten. Rumbles are going off again because Biplav now wants the same power and the privileges as his comrades, and is using the same methods they employed.

He has ignored the government’s frequent calls for dialogue, and the ruling party on Tuesday banned its violent activities. But it is unclear what kind of activities and under which law they are going to be prosecuted. It was this ambiguity that prevented the police from taking action against Biplav’s cadre. The ruling party is acting like an older brother miffed at the younger sibling for disobeying him.

The former comrades are trying to outsmart each other, and the conflict is particularly worrying as the people and the country await the promised stability and prosperity delayed by the miserable 10-year-long war and equally long peace process.

As former aides, Prachanda and Biplav should have a good knowledge regarding the strength of the faction and how to treat them. Oli himself should have an idea or two to bring the opposing communist party to mainstream politics.

If they can convince Oli to give up Madhes separatism, they can change in insider who shares their ideology. It is vital they bring Biplav in before the situation gets out of hand.

For his part, Biplav needs to give up violence. If it does not work. No one has stopped them from joining mainstream politics.
Nepal is an international leader in eye care, but it needs state support to sustain the work into the future

Sonia Awale

Despite a decade-long conflict, the balance of local government for 20 years, instability and bad governance, Nepal has taken dramatic strides in improving the health of its citizens. And it is in eye care that the achievement has been most impressive.

Three years ago, the Nepal Blindness Survey showed that 6.8% of the population was blind. Nepal’s population then was 15 million, which means 118,000 people were blind. Cataract was the cause in 72% of the cases, and trachoma, a bacterial infection of the eye, was the second leading cause of blindness. Poor eye-sight and blindness due to Vitamin A were also prevalent. Most of these were preventable or curable.

Women were found to be 1.35 times more likely to get cataracts. The rate of blindness due to the detailed nature of their work including farming.

Today, the prevalence of blindness has decreased to 0.3% of the population of 29 million, which means only 67,300 people are visually impaired. But most of them are blind still because of cataracts. Last year Nepal became the first country in South Asia to eliminate trachoma. Cataract and other preventable cases can now be treated much earlier with modern medicine.

“The quality of community cataract surgery here is one of the best among developing countries and people are coming forward for treatment because they trust us,” said Sanduk Ruiz, Nepal’s world-renowned eye doctor who pioneered small incision cataract surgery. (See adjoining article.)

But modern lifestyles and changing dietary habits have brought new dangers: diabetic retinopathy is on the rise, so is glaucoma. An ageing population also means cataract is still common, as is incurable degeneration of age-related macular disease.

The most challenging achievement, however, is visual impairment due to refractive error which is increasing alarming among school children, and at a much higher rate in urban areas. A 2008 study found that one in five school-going children in Kathmandu were short-sighted and need to wear glasses. In remote rural areas, many do not even know they need spectacles or cannot afford them.

Ruiz’s team at Tilganga and the group Nepal Netra Jyoti Sangh are now trying to test and treat the eye-sight of school children district-by-district. Free spectacles are provided, and complicated cases are referred to Ruiz.

“Our goal is to reach all school-going children in Nepal within five years,” said Saleesh Misra of Nepal Jyoti.

While there has not been a study in Nepal to directly link the increased incidence of visual impairment with the use of mobile phones, computers and reading, research in other countries have shown a correlation.

Nepali eye specialists and institutions have not just addressed blindness in Nepal, but have been world leaders in innovative interventions. Sanduk Ruiz’s Tilganga Institute of Ophthalmology has been exporting intracocular lenses for cataract surgery at $50 apiece since 1993. Elsewhere in the world it costs $280. Tilganga is now equipped to also perform retinal transplantation.

Eye hospitals in Kathmandu, Hetauda and Kathmandu now treat not just patients from Nepal, but also provide affordable cataract and other eye operations for patients from India, and even Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

Tilganga is an international centre of excellence for ophthalmology training, and its surgeons have been conducting camps in Bhutan, Mongolia, North Korea, Bhopia and Kenya. Many of this is credited to non- governmental initiatives by the likes of Sanduk Ruiz and pioneer activist Ram Prasad Pokhrel.

“One of our most important achievements was to provide eye care outside the government, creating high quality community hospitals at the grassroots that run on the social entrepreneurship model with highly motivated professionals,” said Ruiz, whose community eye centers and hospitals are autonomous and self-sustaining.

But with its 2020 vision to eliminate avoidable blindness now only a year away, Nepal needs to develop more specialists and infrastructures. Some experts say the non- profit have done all they can, it is now time for the government to step in for the last push.

“Nepal is far ahead of others in the region, in term of eye care, we have reduced blindness, have sound modern surgical technology that has been recognized internationally,” said Hukum Pokhrel of Netra Jyoti.

“It is now time the government included eye care into a more equitable health package that is sustainable into the future.”

Ozone and eyes

The same layer in the stratosphere filters out harmful ultraviolet rays of the sun from reaching the earth’s surface. These have a destructive effect on the ozone, especially over the Southern Hemisphere, due to which it is called UVB or ultraviolet B. This is a known carcinogen. This has caused a rise in the incidence of skin cancer, but is not eye diseases. Nepal being part of the Southern Hemisphere has been shown to be more prone to UVB radiation.

A 2004 study by the American journal of Ophthalmology found that uncorrectedopia would result in a 20% rise in the number of cataracts cases UVB. A cataract is also responsible for the great deal of visual impairment. The risk of cataract increases with the level of UVB radiation. People with fair skin tones, and those with more than 12% of the susceptible people that live in high altitude areas like the Tibetans, Nepalis and Tibetans are more at risk.

Tilganga Institute can also cause photophobia (irritation of the eye) eye damage, conjunctivitis, pingueculosis, conjunctivitis, atopic dermatitis, and a variety of eye infections and neoplasms. The increased exposure to the harmful rays can cause permanent damage to the cornea, lens and retina.

As a result of the 1996 Montreal Protocol to phase out CFCs, the ozone hole over Antarctica has started to shrink, but exposure to UV radiation at the top of the earth will probably remain for several more years. Air conditioners are very potent greenhouse gases that contribute to the global warming. Doctors say, minimizing the time spent outdoors especially in the southern hemisphere at high altitudes is a good prevention.
Shut up and shut down

My latest assessment is that at least some of you are reading these words, as we speak. There is no proof. How else does one explain that three weeks after this very Backside Column bemoaned the fact that Nepal’s revolutionaries were going soft, Comrade Big Phat starts setting bombs off and declaring bands to show that he still has fire in his belly?

The country is finally back on the right track. We have restored our commitment to radical transformation, let 100 flowers bloom, smash the four olds, show that a journey of 1,000 miles starts with a single step, and ensure that political power comes out of the barrel of a whiskey cask. After all, as the Comrades said, “Proletarians is a fundamental human right.” (You think I just made that up? Think again.)

When jaw-droppers band together and red-fists don’t work, then revolutionaries throughout history have had to resort to bunda, clucka jams and hurt-all. The whole idea is to bring the whole world to a standstill as Big Phat did on Thursday by shouting down Nepal, Facebook and Instagram. The idea is not allow any work to be done. Why? That is a very good question.

The government makes up everything it does, so by forcing it to not do anything the Maoists have reduced the chances of it doing something wrong. By the same token, the chances of our rulers making correct decisions are so remote that the semi-underground comrades have rightly concluded that it is a much better idea to have them just sit at home and not lift a finger. That way the likelihood of someone somewhere wrecking something is greatly diminished.

Imagine the number of blunders that were avoided, kickbacks that did not transpire, losses that were not taken, just by shutting down the country for a day. The savings to the earthquake runs into the billions.

Through trial and error over the past 50 years we in Nepal have finally hit on the right formula for governance in our country: it is better to allow our rulers to go off than to have them make decisions of national importance. The thing is, though, there are still workaholics out there who refuse to sit idly by, and need to be forced to desist from decision-making. It is every Nepali’s patriotic duty to find creative ways to do nothing in the coming months. Some ideas:

- Owners of cans older than 25 years who are banned from the event can protect the rising concentration of seepage in the Valley’s ai and demand reserves get their annual daily dose of adult content in the 2.5-5.5 morgen range.
- The share of those residing students unable to change the day Valley landlords are the ones that the government make available more green for their farming street bartenders.
- Fuel tanker can block all highways to claim a 15% increase in expiration compensation due to plain warning.
- The government can also shut down Kathmandu by ensuring that main roads are no longer maintainable. The sidewalks are sunny stacked with spent matches.