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EVENTS



Hira

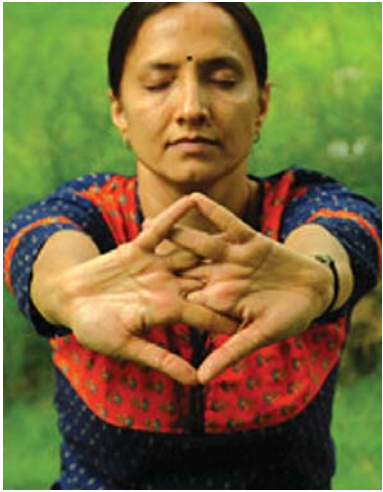
The first solo art exhibition by Meena Dangol, daughter of late artist Hira Lal Dangol, showcases 35 vivid paintings of birds. The exhibition features a variety of owl species, her signature bird. 3 August, 11am-5pm, Hotel Annapurna, Darbar Marg, 9851099350

Life in Analogueexhibition

Siddhartha Art Gallery presents *Life in Analogue*, a series of photographs from 40 artists. The exhibition will open on 4 August at 5:30pm. 5-21 August, 8am-7pm, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal, (01) 4218048

Clown Show

Above from Above, a professional duo of French clowns, will present their clown show, “Au dessus d’en haut”! With absurd and burlesque acts, this show is enjoyable for both kids and adults. 2 August, 5pm onwards, Alliance Française de Katmandou, Jhamsikhel (01) 5009221



Sri Sri Yoga

Energise your mind and body, rejuvenate your spirit, improve your flexibility and become more self-aware with a relaxing yoga class. Sri Sri Yoga pushes the boundaries of traditional yoga practice by providing a holistic approach to improving yourself mentally and physically. 5-9 August, 6am-8am, Rs1,000, Art of Living, Mitra Park, Chabahil, 9869062643

Charity Concert

Association of St. Mary’s Alumnae Nepal (ASMAN), is organising a charity concert to raise money to build libraries in government schools. The concert features Abhaya and the Steam Engines, Salil Maharjan, Kutumba and more. 10 August, 3pm onwards, Rs1,000, Chhaya Centre, Thamel (01) 4245726

Meet the Khyaa

Durga Lal Shrestha’s Nepali children’s songs turned illustrated books, include lively characters, like the Khyaa, Maaka, Junkiri and more. Celebrate these characters with puzzles, mazes, face painting, a read-aloud session and crafts. 3 August, 10 am onwards, Le Sherpa, Lazimpat, 9818268006



El Mercado

Enjoy a Saturday of live music, cocktails, handicrafts and a selection of hors d’oeuvres including Bruschetta and Crespelle Alforno. Table reservations in advance is recommended. 3 August, 2pm onwards, Sierra Kathmandu, Uttar Dhoka, Lazimpat, 9811190600

Teej Mela

Celebrate Teej and support more than 125 women entrepreneurs at this year’s Teej Mela. Various jewellery, clothing, food and electronics stalls will be present. 10 August, 10am onwards, Alice Receptions, 9841296593

Painting Exhibition

Dalai-La Art Space presents *Volume IV: Structural Beauty* by Bidhata KC. The painter presents a series of works inspired by her tour of Mustang a couple of years ago. The exhibition opens on 2 August at 5:30 pm. 3-31 August, 10am onwards, Dalai-La Boutique Hotel, Thamel (01) 4701436

MUSIC



Kathmandu Blues

The 19th series of Kathmandu Blues presents Riding with the King. The event features Ashesh Dangol, known as the Himalayan Hendrix, back from his US tour. 2 August, 6:30pm onwards, Ride Thru, Maharajgunj, 9851199699

Sugam Pokharel

Listen to Nepali pop sensation Sugan Pokharel sing his greatest hits. 2 August, 7pm onwards, Rs1,500, Privé Nepal, Soaltee Crowne Plaza, Kalimati, 9818123232

Triplets Live

Nepali folk trio The Triplets will be playing a medley of songs on the tabala, flute and guitar. 2 August, 5pm onwards, Ka:shi Cafe Lounge & Bar, Kirtipur (01) 4333636



Pariwartan

Listen to the dynamic and versatile songs of Nepali rock band Pariwartan. 2 August, 7:30pm onwards, Rox Bar, Hyatt Regency, Boudha (01) 5171234

Meditation Vibes

Listen to the calming vibes of the singing bowl and learn about its history, as Aman Shahi releases an album and Salil Subedi launches his book on the subject. Special performance by former Trikaal band. 2 August, 5pm, Moksh, Jhamsikhel, 9818179313

DINING



Monsoon Special

Enjoy the monsoon season with a 3-course menu at Patan Museum Cafe and authentic Nepali Barbecue every Friday at the Dwarika’s Hotel. 7am-7pm, Patan Museum Cafe, Rs1000, (01)5526271/ 6pm onwards (Every Friday), Dwarika’s Hotel, Battisputali, (01)4479488

Villa Everest

With some of the best handmade Korean noodles, Bibimbap, Korean BBQ and Kimchi Jigae, Villa Everest is the perfect place for Korean food lovers. 9am-10pm, Thamel (01) 4441593



Kairos Cafe

With a customisable breakfast, variety of juicy burgers and an assortment of Italian, Spanish and English cuisine, Kairos Cafe is a must for foodies. It’s rustic, minimalistic setting also provides the ideal background for food photography. 7am-10pm, Jawalakhel, 9813493902

Red Mud Coffee

Red Mud, a casual eatery in Jhamsikhel, is the perfect place to grab some coffee, sandwiches and one of the best chicken sizzlers, with your friends. 8am-10pm, Jhamsikhel, 9861665829



La Casita

With a direct view of Boudhanath Stupa, La Casita is the ideal place for taking pictures and eating tacos, burgers and tapas. 11:30am-9pm (Except Saturday), Boudhanath, 9818539003

GETAWAY



The Old Inn

This bed and breakfast offers a cosy getaway with a scenic view of Annapurna, Langtang and beyond. With its traditional Newa architecture, the timber and brick design is reminiscent of old Newa houses. Bandipur, Tanahu (065) 520110

Tiger Tops Tharu Lodge

Get up close and personal with nature as you enter the heart of Chitwan National Park. Immerse yourself in the local Tharu culture as you experience village life, the beauty of the jungle and the diverse wildlife. A three-night stay is recommended to have the full experience. Kawasoti, Nawalparasi (07) 8690721

Dahlia Hotel

The hotel combines traditional Malla architecture with modern designs and includes a pool with numerous restaurants to choose from. In celebration of their 4th anniversary, special discounts are available for Nepali nationals this August. Rs3500 (Single Room), Rs4500 (Double Room), Pokhara, (61)466505



Himalayan Front Hotel

Sarangkot’s Himalayan Front Hotel is located atop Sarangkot, overlooking the Annapurna range and Phewa Lake. With luxury rooms, breathtaking sunset views and one of the best restaurants in Pokhara (The Summit Restaurant) this is the ideal place to unwind. Sarangkot, Pokhara, 9801166370

Peacock Guest House

The guest house is a 700-year-old UNESCO heritage building that represents true Newa architecture. Take a stroll around the Old City of Bhaktapur, indulge in local cuisine and join the Himalayan Wood Carving Masterpieces Workshop. Tachupal Tole, Dattatreya Square, Bhaktapur (01) 6611829



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OUR PICK

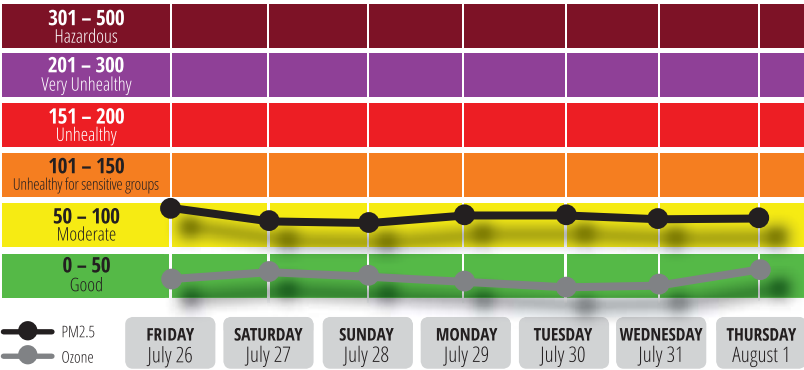


Opened in Kathmandu on 2 August

In *Fast & Furious Presents: Hobbs & Shaw*, the two sworn enemies, Hobbs (Dwayne Johnson) and Shaw (Jason Statham), must cooperate to take down cyber-genetically enhanced villain Brixton (Idris Elba), who might just be badder than them. Directed by David Leitch, this spinoff of the *Fast and Furious* franchise also features *The Crow*’s Vanessa Kirby as a rogue MI6 agent.

AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU, 26 July - 1 August



With the monsoon taking a break, this week saw a rise in the Air Quality Index (AQI) into the orange 'Moderate' band. The vehicular emissions, as well as roadside dust, is drying in the daytime streetside heat. The AQI could have been even worse, but luckily there has been a fresh afternoon breeze from the east to blow off the pollution. This time of year, Kathmandu Valley’s western suburbs get most of the windblown dust and pollution. Ozone levels were also the lowest we have seen so far this year. <https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/>

Resurrecting Rani Pokhari right

Activism gains ground in heritage conservation, but falls short of filling the tank

King Pratap Malla built *Nhu Pukhoo*, the 'new pond,' on the northern outskirts of Kathmandu in the 17th century CE to console his grieving wife. To sanctify Rani Pokhari, as the pond was eventually called, he toiled four years to bring water from 51 holy rivers, ponds and oceans of the subcontinent.

Now, more than four years after the desecration of Rani Pokhari by Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC) in the name of 'beautification', the pond remains unfilled. All is not lost, however. The ongoing rebuilding process is to some extent fulfilling.

The 2015 earthquake damaged the Bal Gopaleswor Temple in the middle of the pond. The water body itself and the embankment walls remained intact, but KMC misguidedly drained all the water, demolished the centuries-old brick embankment and replaced it with reinforced concrete in an effort to 'modernise' the pond.

Despite public uproar over the vandalism of this holy site, Mayor Bidya Sundar Shakya refused to back down from the project, vowing to build a coffee shop and recreation facilities in and around Rani Pokhari. Outraged activists finally threw the construction workers out and locked the premises in December 2017. Mayor Shakya was forced to remove the concrete he had poured.

The National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) stepped in, taking responsibility for the reconstruction. It formed a local group to oversee the process and manage funds, and enlisted the technical expertise of Bhaktapur Municipality, which had recently revived several ponds on its lands that had dried up.

A team of 40 workers from Bhaktapur are now hard at work at Rani Pokhari every day. After clearing the overgrown vegetation, women are levelling the ground and lining the pond with a layer of impermeable black clay. They are also building an embankment wall on the sides of the pond, using bricks specially manufactured



ALOK SIDDHI TULADHAR

with lime-and-brick-dust mortar.

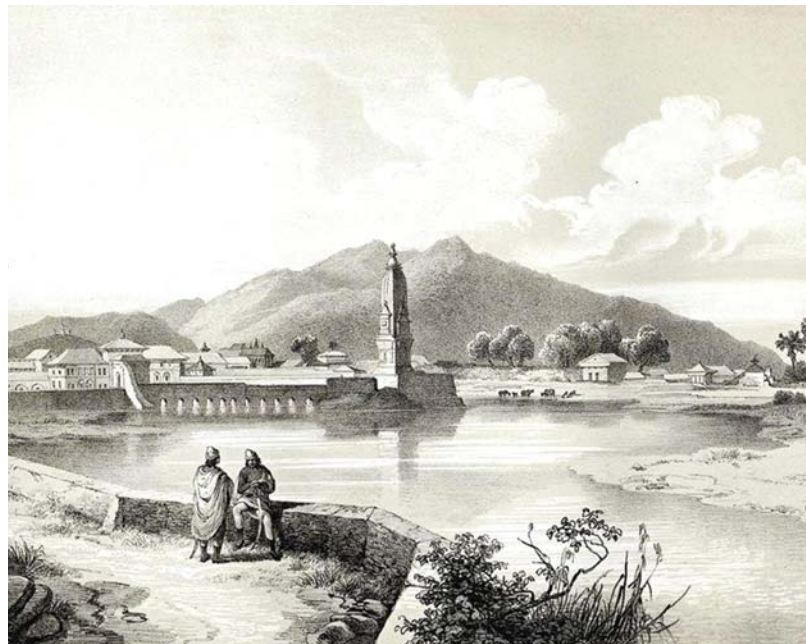
Subhadra Dhoju from Bhaktapur says the black clay (*dyo cha*) has been chosen for its water retention capability. Dyo cha means 'god soil' in Newa. The large surface area of Rain Pokhari poses a challenge not faced elsewhere.

"We have brought in 40 truckloads of black clay so far from Sankhu and Bhaktapur, but we need another 3,000," says Ajay Sthapit, who heads the local group overseeing the project. Even though the NRA wanted to use cheaper ordinary bricks for the walls of the pond, Sthapit insisted on high

quality, custom-made ones.

For now, Rani Pokhari reconstruction is progressing steadily, using appropriate technical knowhow and following ancient pond construction methods. But this is true only for preventing the pond water from seeping into the ground. Getting water into the pond will be another story altogether.

In addition to rainwater, the NRA is thinking of drilling a deep well and a dedicated pipe from the Melamchi drinking water project to fill the pond. But the long-term sustainability of this method is contested by Sudarshan Raj Tiwari, a historian and member of the expert committee formed by KMC in 2018 to guide Rani Pokhari rehabilitation.



QUEEN'S POND: More than four years after the earthquake, Rani Pokhari is finally being refurbished to look like it did in 1845 in this drawing by a German artist (*above*).

Women from Bhaktapur are using traditional methods using clay and bricks to rebuild Rani Pokhari's banks (*left*).

"According to Vastu principles, Pratap Malla must have dug separate wells to fill and to drain the pond in the northeast and southeast corners respectively," says Tiwari. "This was the ancient, proven and sustainable way of keeping the water flow under human control. The present reconstruction method is not investigating this method."

Cultural preservation activist Sudin Manandhar feels Rani Pokhari is being turned into a traditional swimming pool. "If the ancient system of natural water flow is not revived, the valuable engineering knowledge of our ancestors is lost forever. That lowers the value of the historical pond," he says.

Tiwari's committee had also recommended that the Bal Gopaleswor temple be rebuilt in Shikhara style keeping with king Pratap Malla's original version. The Department of Archaeology, however, ignored that advice and went on to rebuild the temple with

a dome roof following the Rana-era reconstruction model. Once more, sustained public pressure forced the government to correct its mistake, and the NRA has now published a design to rebuild the temple in the Shikhara style. This is another major win for heritage conservation.

Maharshi Prasad Rajbhandari, a young heritage enthusiast from nearby Asan, sums up the resurrection: "We were about to forget what we stood on. But sustained activism prevented that from happening. From the Rani Pokhari episode, we have learnt that if we raise our voices and are persistent, we can bring even the most powerful government to heel and set things right." 🇳🇵

REBUILDING RANI POKHARI



After much controversy, Rani Pokhari is finally being rebuilt using traditional methods. Watch a team of 40 workers from Bhaktapur hard at work at Rani Pokhari every day, clearing the overgrown vegetation, levelling the ground, and lining the pond with a layer of impermeable black clay.

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GG MACHAAN / FACEBOOK

Continuum

Artist Sunita Rana’s imaginary locations transfer the viewer to a dream world: ethereal light shines through trees with red, yellow and pink leaves, and the water in ponds gives a sense of tranquillity. Rana’s exhibition, *Continuum*, at GG Machaan, captures her artistic vision of nature.

“I think art has no boundaries, and neither do nature and life. We all come from nature, and go back into nature. That is why my art is mostly focused on this subject,” says Rana, who is also president of the Women Artists’ Group of Nepal (WAGON).

Rana’s series on nature is a visual delight, with surreal landscapes that blend imagination

and reality. In one, we see a wide plain full of colourful trees, reminding one of the hills of Nepal, but the glittering golden and lavender leaves are more imaginary than real. In another, a lush forest is shown near a pond, but only the forest’s airborne elements are reflected on the water surface, not the actual trees.

There are green trees in the forest, and white trees made of lightning in the sky. Rana has rendered all the elements of nature – trees, rocks, water – with the precision of a realistic painter, but added her own fantasy elements to beautify them.

Her other favourite theme is women. She has drawn them in exotic locations like Mustang, or

framed them in contrasting colours to highlight their features. In one piece, a woman wearing peacock feathers stands out from the background of men milling around.

“Women have a large role to play in society, but they are often shown in the background. I wanted to change that by bringing them out front and highlighting them,” says Rana.

A visual artist who works in multiple mediums, Rana has also done installations and sculpting, but this exhibition showcases her various styles of painting. It includes monochrome pieces and some abstract works in dark browns and black. Rana’s work is notable for its cheerful use of colours that also impart a sense of serenity.

Sewa Bhattarai

Continuum
GG Machaan, Jhamsikhel



KRISHNA PAUDEL

WELCOME ON BOARD: Prime Minister KP Oli congratulates Yogesh Bhattarai, newly appointed Minister for Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, in Kathmandu on Wednesday.



AMBASSADOR RANDY BERRY/TWITTER

GREEN GROUP: Environmental journalists, activists and experts from South Asia attended an Air Quality TechCamp hosted by the US Embassy in Kathmandu this week.



WSDC

SMOOTH TALKERS: Team Nepal celebrates after winning in four categories in the World Schools Debating Championships (WSDC) 2019 last week in Bangkok.



MONIKA DEUPALA

FRIENDLY DEMON: The Newa Community in Bhaktapur celebrates the Gathamunga festival on Tuesday by burning an effigy of a demon and praying for good fortune.

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“लैङ्गिक हिंसा विरुद्ध १६ दिने अभियान:
हिंसाविहीन समाजको हाम्रो आह्वान ।”

“लैङ्गिक हिंसा विरुद्ध हाम्रो आवाज:
निर्माण गरौ सभ्य र समतामूलक समाज ।”

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Migrants abroad left in lurch

Hom Karki in *Kantipur*, 29 July

कान्तिपुर

The Nepal Government banned labour permits aiming to block women from going abroad as domestic workers without actually meeting any women in that role. Though members of the International Relations and Labour Committee of Parliament visited Gulf countries, they only met some of the women at Nepal's embassies.

The government stopped issuing work permits for domestic workers on the committee's recommendation, which impacted hundreds of thousands of men and women already working as domestic help in the Gulf.

About 139,000 domestic workers abroad have not returned to Nepal in the past 2.5 years, because they are afraid of losing their livelihoods. Those who have returned have not been able to go back because of the ban. They have asked the committee to revise the decision. The National Human Rights Commission has also said the decision is not fair.



KANTIPUR

The seven-member parliamentary committee, led by Prabhu Sah, visited Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and UAE in March 2017. On 2 April, it directed the government to ban domestic workers going to Gulf countries. Ashok Kumar Mandal, Premkishor Shah Teli, Binod Shrestha, Radhadevi Timilsina, Rajya Lakshmi Shrestha and Lalit Kumar Shrestha were the other members of the Committee. They reached Saudi Arabia on 18 March, and met 24 women migrant workers who had taken refuge at the embassy in Riyadh after being taken there from Kuwait.

The committee met Saudi Arabia's Labour Minister Ali Bin Naseer Ghafis, and held discussions with the Nepali community in Riyadh and Dammam. According to the report, the discussions were attended by Nepali businesspersons in Saudi Arabia and agents of recruitment companies.

Nepalis working as farm hands, cooks and drivers — classified as domestic workers — were not invited to the discussions. "I have been working in Saudi Arabian farms for the past 15 years. I earn 1,500

riyal (almost Rs15,000) a month," Umesh Raya from Rautahat says. "Everything is going good for me, except that if I go back home on holidays, I cannot come back here. What did the parliamentarians see when they were here? Who did they meet and how did they come to that decision?"

The committee went to Kuwait after four days, and did not meet any domestic workers there, either. The government issued 19,564 permits for domestic workers in Kuwait, while the committee met 25 women who were about to be deported back to Nepal.

"I have been working as a security guard for the past eight years. On paper, that counts as a domestic worker, too. We are not able to leave this job and go back home," says Ramesh Gurung of Nawalparasi. "The committee made its decision based on the accounts of people abused and mistreated who it met at the embassy. It assumed that everyone in Kuwait is going through the same plight, and this has created hassles for us."

The committee members then headed to Qatar, where they visited the Qatar Maid Service, a company run by a Nepali that employs mostly Nepali women workers. There, the women told the committee that they were paid less than Filipinas who did the same work.

More men than women work as domestic help in Qatar, most of them in camel racing. But the committee did not meet any Nepalis working with camels. "It's a little difficult to work in camel races," says Umesh Karki, who has been working in the Sahaniya region for the past 17 years. "My boss is good. I earn Rs40,000 every month, and my food is paid for. But why was the labour permit banned? My wife and children keep calling me back home. But I cannot leave everything behind and go home."

In UAE, the parliamentarians were told that Nepali workers had started coming to the country through legal channels, and the committee was advised to let this continue. There are 130 legal domestic workers in UAE, and they face no problems since the laws there are designed to protect the rights of home workers.

There is one Nepali couple who both work for an Emirati employer. "I drive for my boss while my wife is a domestic worker," says Raju Bhattarai of Gulmi. "We have not been able to return home."

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His last journey

Bishnu KC from Piuthan becomes a mere statistic in the grim saga of migrant labour

Shankar Dahal
in Piuthan

Keshar Khatri was pacing up and down the arrival area of Kathmandu airport one recent morning, frequently glancing up at the Arrivals monitor. It had been more than two hours since the Doha flight landed, yet there was no sign of his brother-in-law, Bishnu KC.

Finally, he saw them – three grim-faced men pushing two baggage trolleys with a red box. Ten months after leaving his home village of Okharkot of Piuthan, Bishnu KC was coming home in a coffin. A few minutes later, another coffin arrived containing the body of a Nepali who had died in Saudi Arabia.

Other happy returning workers rolled heavy, cellophane-wrapped suitcases as they emerged from the arrival concourse where relatives who had been waiting waved at them from behind the glass partition. There were happy reunions in the parking lot. They barely noticed the two coffins being strapped to nearby pickups.

Bishnu KC was now a statistic: just one of 670 Nepali workers overseas who died in the last 12 months, and 6,921 in the past decade, among them 1,367 in Qatar alone. At the nearby Departure area, other Nepalis were lining up at the special gate for overseas workers to check in for flights. At least 900 are still leaving every day, yet this number is down due to a freeze on Malaysia work permits.

Ram Bilas Yadav, KC's roommate in Qatar, accompanied the coffin and handed Khatri a bag with his brother-in-law's belongings, including his remaining salary of 4,052 Qatari Riyal (\$1,113). The certificate in Bishnu KC's name from the public health department of Qatar stated the cause of death: 'Died in sleep of natural cause. Heart failure.' There was no post-mortem report.

The pickup then left on the 450km journey to Okharkot. Driver Rabin Shrestha, from Ramechhap, works as a hearse driver for the Foreign Employment Promotion Board. He exits the Valley at Thankot, driving at top speed. He says he

has to return to Kathmandu to collect another coffin the next day. (See box.)

Occupants of the pickup reach Bhalubang off the East-West Highway past midnight, and decide to catch some sleep in their seats. They have timed their arrival in Okharkot in the morning so KC's family can immediately perform funeral rites. Although tired after the long ride, no one can sleep. Khatri thinks of Bishnu, who was 27 and had only his mother at home. His brother lives elsewhere, and his sisters are married, one of them to Khatri.

"He was promised work in Global Link Food Service in Doha, but ended up working on a high rise construction site in 50-degree heat," Khatri recalled. "He used to write home to his sister that he was finding the work very difficult."

There was a big crowd of relatives and neighbours when the pickup reached the village the next morning, accompanied by loud wailing as the coffin was taken out. Bishnu's mother whispered 'mero babu' when she saw her son's lifeless face, and fainted. Relatives draped the body

LIFE AND DEATH:

Bishnu KC took this selfie in Qatar recently (above).

His death certificate from the Qatar Public Health Department gives his death as 'Heart Failure Natural Causes'.



Dignity in life and death

Sonia Awale

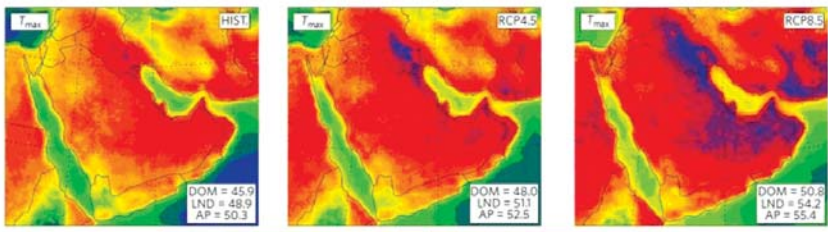
Appalled by the sloppy treatment of dead overseas workers, Nepali activists petitioned the Supreme Court two years ago to demand autopsies to determine cause of death, and to provide a more dignified return home at Kathmandu airport.

The NGOs, Pourakhi Nepal and Law and Policy Forum for Social Justice, filed the public interest litigation writ demanding the right of migrant workers to a post-mortem and more respectful handover of bodies in a separate section at the airport. They won the case, but implementing agencies have been slow to act.

"We are heavily dependent on remittance from migrant workers but where is our respect for the individuals who make it happen?" asks Manju Gurung of Pourakhi Nepal. "We do not care for their working conditions, we mistreat them and we do not even respect them after they have died. The cause of death goes uninvestigated and their bodies



GOPEN RAI



Heat maps of the Gulf (from left to right) showing current average temperatures, under a 1.4-2.6°C increase in global average temperature, and 2.6-4.8°C increase by 2100. The shallow Persian Gulf is the fastest warming sea in the world.

are unmanaged."

Activists claim that doctors in the destination countries are aware of the actual causes of the majority of these fatalities, but are often bribed by employers to pass them off as 'natural deaths'.

In addition, many workplaces do not meet even the most basic standards of safety and minimum working conditions, they say, which often leads to occupational hazards that can result in death. If the real cause of death is revealed, employers are liable to pay hefty compensation and hence to try and cover up the true causes. Most deaths are described as 'heart failure', 'natural', or 'cardio-vascular disease'.

Rising average temperatures in the Gulf region due to climate change have also increased the incidence of heat stress among those who have to work outdoors. Experts say many of the deaths of Nepali workers are due to heart failure cause by heat and overwork.

Apart from the daily average 2-3 migrant workers who arrive at Kathmandu airport in coffins, many others remain in morgues



ALL PHOTOS: SHANKAR DAHAL

home to Nepal

in yellow, sprinkled vermilion and carried it to the banks of the Jhimruk for the cremation.

This is the second body to be returned home to Okharkot from overseas, while Piuthan district recorded five fatalities of migrant workers last year. There is no record of the number of Nepalis working in India, although the estimates vary between 2.5 and 3.5 million. If a person from Piuthan dies in India there is no official record, and the bodies are usually not brought home.

Although research on Sudden Death Syndrome is sparse and autopsies are rarely performed on dead workers, the causes are thought to be hard work in hot and humid conditions, excessively air-conditioned living quarters at night, worry about low pay, stress because of cheating by middlemen, and homesickness. Rising temperatures due to the climate emergency are also making working conditions harsher in the Gulf (*see adjoining article*).

Although the Nepal government offers the family of every worker who dies abroad Rs700,000, the ones whose deaths are categorised as ‘natural’ are

not eligible. In the past decade, the government has paid out Rs1.67 billion to the families of dead workers.

Here on the banks of the Jhimruk, the cremation is done. Khatri finally looks through the content of his brother-in-law’s handbag. There is his passport, some letters and the death certificate that says his death was ‘natural’. “It is going to be most difficult for Bishnu’s mother,” he says. “He was the only one taking care of her.”



Follow the body of Bishnu KC as it is taken off the plane in Kathmandu and transported 450km to his home village in Piuthan district. He is now only a statistic, his dreams of a better life dashed, and his sacrifice forgotten by an uncaring state.

nepalitimes.com



Delivering death

Rabin Shrestha’s job as a hearse driver is year-round. The reason he drove so fast from Kathmandu to Piuthan with the coffin of Bishnu KC in the back of his pickup was because he had to return to Kathmandu airport to collect another body of a dead worker the next day. Shrestha says he alone delivers 12 coffins every month all over Nepal.

The task has taken Shrestha to 69 of Nepal’s 77 districts. “I have really seen the whole of Nepal on this job,” he said on the long drive to Piuthan recently. “Rain, landslides, bandhs; I have to

get the bodies of the workers home one last time.”

Shrestha and his colleagues mostly do the Kathmandu-Central Tarai route. That is because the highest number of fatalities of Nepali workers overseas is among those who come from the six districts of the central and eastern Tarai. Last year alone, Morang registered 35 deaths, Sarlahi 35, Dhanusha 33, Siraha 29, Mahottari 27 and Dang had 21.

At the Foreign Employment Board in Kathmandu, an overworked civil servant says he is waiting for a transfer from his depressing job. He said: “My job is to keep track of which coffins are arriving on which flights, and make sure there is a hearse to receive them and take them to their home districts. It is like working in a funeral home.”

in the Gulf and Malaysia. Some are workers who ran away from their first employers after being dissatisfied with their pay and working conditions. Under the *kafala* system, they lacked passports and became undocumented workers. Without legal documents to verify their identity, the bodies have not made it back home. No one has an exact figure of such cases.

Lately, the Foreign Employment Board has updated its mandatory pre-departure orientation for migrant workers, making them more country-specific and relevant. They now include information on legal issues, working conditions and pay, cultural sensitivities and heat stress and the need to keep hydrated.

Gurung blames a lack of political will for the continued apathy, because it is ordinary citizens who are affected. She adds: “It is the poorest who suffer, so it is not a priority for the government and our embassies in destination countries. Workers should be cared for, even after death.”



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Nepal is not so bad

Haven't you had enough yet of complaining about how bad things are in Nepal? Are you naysayers waiting for things to get worse so you can moan and groan some more?

Sorry, but let's face it, it is not original any more to grumble about muddy roads, dusty air, smelly water and a rotten airport. It is healthier to have a positive mental attitude, and look at the brighter side, see the silver lining, and quaff down the G&T so the glass is half full. The grass may be greener on the other side, but our grass gives a better high. So, stop whining and dining already. If you don't like it in Nepal, leave. Go back to where you came from. Bye. Wait, take me with you.

If you are dissatisfied here, and think Nepal is not corrupt enough, our government could be more incompetent, the police are not racist even when provoked, or that our immigration lines could be longer, then why didn't you stay in your own country?

You have problems with our Right Honourable Prime Minister saying Kathmandu is not polluted? Well, at least he does not think climate change is a hoax. None of our leaders have grabbed any pussies of late, at least not that I know of. Our leaders may be a lot of things, but none of them was fired earlier in their careers for making up a quote. You think the next in line to be our country's leader should not have met a foreign intelligence operative last week?

Also, when it comes to personal scandals Nepal's leaders are (ahem) under-performing. Yes, our Minister of Vermiculture once groped women live on nationwide NTV during the paddy planting festival, a leader of stature is known to indulge in late-night Skype sex.

But, really, the most disgusting thing our politicians have ever done in public is Comrade Awesome picking his nose during a book launch.

Did I hear someone complain that Nepal is politically unstable and has frequent changes of government? Australia has had 7 prime ministers in the last 10 years. Nepal could only muster 5. Yes, our Parliament did descend into chaos once when a bored lawmaker threw a speakerphone at the Speaker just to keep awake.

But we are way behind the times compared to the Ukrainian legislature which recently broke into hand-to-hand combat. Or the Japanese Diet where MPs punched each other in their noses while debating the country's post-war pacifist constitution.

You have problems with the quality of life in Kathmandu? Get a posting in Khartoum. You think Kathmandu pollution is bad? You think we cheat in our vehicle emission tests by bribing the inspector?

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LABOUR PAINS

Nepal's politicians are prone to hyperbole, and every decade or so they have a habit of declaring that no Nepali will have to go abroad to work.

A more realistic goal would be to make migration as safe as possible, eliminate exploitation and abuse by fellow Nepalis and unscrupulous employers in destination countries, and upgrade migrants' skills so they earn more. Migrant workers need to be treated with respect at the departure and arrival desks at the airport, as befitting their vital role in propping up this country's economy.

Only after we do that, and start generating infrastructure and manufacturing-driven employment through investment-friendly policies back home, can we start boasting that Nepalis don't have to leave the country anymore to find work. Alas, we don't see signs of that happening any time soon.

We are stuck with labour migration for the foreseeable future, and we have to make the best of it. There are signs that under Labour Minister Gokarna Bista, economic diplomacy has moved into high gear. Nepal has been playing a leading role on migration matters in South Asia, starting with the declaration at the 2015 SAARC Summit in Kathmandu of Article 21, which enjoins regional countries to collaborate for the welfare of migrant labour in destination countries.

The SAARC Plan of Action on Labour Migration was adopted in May 2016, and a ministerial declaration of the 'Colombo Process' was made in November of that year. South Asian countries also started working together under the umbrella of the 'Abu Dhabi Dialogue among the Asian Labour Sending and Receiving Countries'. Nepali diplomats and activists have also been active in the Global Compact on Migration, adopted last year, which seeks to ensure 'safe, orderly and regular migration'.

Experts at a recent roundtable organised in Kathmandu by SARTUC (South Asian Regional Trade Union Council) and the Hri Institute, and attended by advocacy and labour policy gurus, reaffirmed the natural weakness of sending countries because of competition and lack of political will to coordinate. Destination countries therefore shop for the cheapest labour, for example playing off Bangladeshis against Nepalis.

To a greater or lesser degree, all South Asian labour exporting countries face the same problems of exploitation by middlemen, cheating by employers – as in the recent case of 44 Nepali women tricked into sewing jobs in China, and others rescued from a night club in Mombasa. Although Nepali workers seem to be disproportionately affected by Sudden Death Syndrome because of heat stress, all South Asian workers have higher fatality rates

for young men in that age group.

Despite the hardships, Nepalis have a good reputation for hard work. Perhaps because of this, they are assigned to dangerous work on high-rise scaffoldings. Increasingly, Nepalis are also moving into the service sector and managerial positions, taking over from Filipinos.

Yet, the challenges for countries heavily dependent on migrant labour, like Nepal, are growing. They include trafficking of women, and men, as in recent cases in Kenya and Libya. Tensions are brewing between Qatar and the UAE/Saudis, as well as the Saudi-Iranian conflict, an 'Emeritisation' happening in the UAE, and East and West African labour are displacing traditional Nepali jobs in construction and security in the Gulf. (The Kenyans come across as smarter, better-dressed and with English competence.) All these events serve to remind us that dependence on remittances is fragile, and we must have a Plan B.

The idea of developing skills for Nepalis before they go overseas has been limited to rhetoric, despite tens of millions of dollars spent by donors and the government.

Media coverage of issues related to overseas migrant labour tends to obscure the millions of Nepalis, the poorest among the migrants, who go to India. Exact figures are

lacking, with Indian diplomats pointing at a high figure of 7 million. But during the Eminent Persons' Group negotiations a more realistic 3 million figure was presented. The Pew Research Institute has placed Nepal as the seventh largest country sending remittances to India, thanks to migrant workers from Bihar, West Bengal and Odisha.

In this issue, we examine Sudden Death Syndrome, and how the climate crisis will make heat stress a matter of life or death for Nepali workers in the Gulf (page 14-15). Sudden death

is classified as 'natural' and not 'workplace related', preventing workers' families from collecting insurance. The Nepal government must insist on autopsies of dead workers to pinpoint cause of death, or perform them on bodies when they arrive in Kathmandu. The coffins are also not handled with respect when they arrive via the regular baggage channel at Kathmandu Airport.

The group Paurakhi has won a writ petition at the Supreme Court ordering the government to create special facilities at the airport for arriving coffins. But there has been no move to implement this.

The Foreign employment Board has now upgraded its curriculum on pre-departure training to make it more relevant and country-specific. That is a welcome step to making migration safer. Let us also make it more worthwhile.



SHANKAR DAHAL

Media coverage of overseas migrant labour tends to obscure the fact that at least 3 million Nepalis work in India's informal sector.

10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

In *Nepali Times* 10 years ago (issue #462 of 31 July - August 6) we are reminded that there is nothing new about the annual emergency Nepal faces during the monsoon. The only difference is that it is getting worse. Excerpt from the page 1 report:

'When it rains it pours. As if the political crisis wasn't bad enough, Nepal is going through a multi-layered economic and development emergency.

But roaming the corridors of power in Singha Darbar, you wouldn't know it. There is a cholera epidemic in western Nepal, the winter drought that destroyed the wheat crops was followed by a delayed monsoon that decimated maize and rice.

This is bound to make inflation of essential food commodities even worse. It is already running between 20 and 50%, defying all economic theories, and despite the open border with India where inflation is single digit.'



ONLINE PACKAGES



THE LAST JOURNEY

Follow the body of Bishnu KC as it is taken off the plane in Kathmandu and transported 450km to his home village in Piuthan district. He is now only a statistic, his dreams of a better life dashed, and his sacrifice forgotten by an uncaring state. Story: page 14-15.



REBUILDING RANI POKHARI

After much controversy, Rani Pokhari is finally being rebuilt, using traditional methods. Watch a team of 40 workers from Bhaktapur hard at work at the historic site, clearing the overgrown vegetation, levelling the ground and lining the pond with a layer of impermeable black clay. Story: page 11.



DECONSTRUCTING SNAKEBITE

David Williams of the Global Snakebite Initiative and anti-venom expert Diana Barr are in Nepal to attend this week's international conference. Watch them explain treatment challenges and why Nepal is well equipped to reduce deaths and disability due to snakebite by 2030. Story: page 7-8-9.

JUNK FOOD

Actually, there is a bigger problem hidden here, which the research doesn't touch on: The problem of town-dwelling young children becoming stunted because they 'refuse to eat' ('Could junk food be making Nepali children shorter?', Marty Logan, #970). Asking around young parents in Kathmandu, it seems that more than half the mothers cannot make their children eat.

Gerda Pohl

WATER STORAGE

Excellent idea ('Nepal must keep water on its land', Anil Chitrakar, #970). Kathmandu Valley can be a demonstration prototype project if we all take part. It can then be replicated in the rest of the country and beyond.

Gauri Rimal

GIRL GURKHAS

This is just not fair ('Girl Gurkhas', Monika Deupala, #970). The British Army should reconsider as it is an opportunity for many women to not only show that they can do it but are better at it.

Akku Chowdhury

■ It's so shameful for every Nepali to be a citizen of a country that boasts of exporting hit-men (women) as a commodity!

Prakash Manandhar

EDIFICE COMPLEX

I don't understand the obsession with the view towers. ('Edifice Complex', Editorial, #970) Must be all about kickbacks.

Binija Dhital Goperma

WHAT'S TRENDING



Girl Gurkhas

by Monika Deupala and Narendra Shrestha
Nepali men have been serving in the elite British Gurkhas since 1815, earning a reputation for bravery, and enjoying income, pension and possible settlement in the UK. Young women, too, now aspire to join them, but their dreams were recently dashed. Join the online debate about Gurkha recruitment.



Most popular on Twitter



Most commented

Junk food is making Nepali children shorter

by Marty Logan

A recent report showed that infants in Kathmandu were getting 25% of their daily calories from junk food. But these children weren't getting fatter, they were shorter. Go online to catch up with this in-depth report on stunting and junk food that was the most shared on the *Nepali Times* Facebook page.



Most reached and shared on Facebook

Nepal must keep water on its land

by Anil Chitrakar

Monsoon rains cause great destruction today, but it was not always so. Our columnist takes us back to the time when Kathmandu's Newa civilisation knew how to harness rainwater, using it to wash streets, fertilise fields and recharge groundwater. Chitrakar's description of this traditional approach was the most read article online this week.



Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Britain's @CambridgeMaskCo is selling military-grade anti-air pollution masks to Nepal's traffic police. The company claims that its masks cuts out 99.6% of viruses, 99.7% of bacteria and 99% of harmful gas and suspended particles. #Airpollution #Nepal



Puspa Raj Pant @Puspa_RPant
Good for their health and safety but this business of using masks rather than managing emissions will take us nowhere!



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Our goal should be to ensure that as little #water as possible leaves #Kathmandu Valley at Chobhar & across #Nepal-India border each year. Our ancestors knew how to store #monsoon runoff for year-round use, we must learn from them, writes Anil Chitrakar.



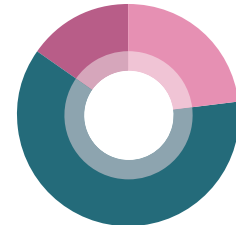
Vivek Kumar @hansyvivek24
For this, Nepal has to recreate the ancient system of pond, well, & underground water reserve systems every 10 km in valley.



Weekly Internet Poll #970

Q. Do you feed your children junk food?

Total votes: 130



Often: **23%**
Sometimes: **61%**
Never : **15%**

Weekly Internet Poll #971
To vote go to: www.nepalitimes.com

Q. Is climate change affecting your life?



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Nepal Airlines has new planes, but no new plans



NAYA KHOJ

Sharad Ojha

The woes that plague state-owned Nepal Airlines Corporation (NAC) are not new: mismanagement, political interference, incompetence and inability to compete internationally. Instead of improvements after the addition of four new jets in the past two years, however, the crisis has worsened.

The airline's two Airbus 330s and two 320s added a whopping debt burden of nearly Rs30 billion, forcing the carrier to look for government bailout. Most of its domestic fleet is grounded, the airline has not been able to sell off its two Boeing 757s, and air route permits to Incheon, Kansai and Guangzhou have all been delayed.

Last month, Prime Minister KP Oli warned management: "If the airline is not run properly, the government can step in. We cannot keep pouring Rs37 billion into a bottomless pit every year."

Oli appointed loyalist Madan Kharel as executive director of NAC in October last year, but there was confusion over his responsibilities and those of Managing Director

Sugat Ratna Kansakar, who later resigned. Kharel promised to make the airline's domestic fleet airworthy in three months, launch flights to Guangzhou by March, and use the 330s on other long-haul routes.

Nearly a year later none of that has happened. NAC is three months behind on payments of Rs3.39 billion to Citizen Investment Fund and Provident Fund, on loans.

PM Oli summoned Kharel to Baluwatar two weeks ago, asking him to present a plan to take the carrier into profit. But Kharel begged for a subsidy, and Oli was said to be livid, stating that the government would rescue the airline only if it came back with a new business plan.

Kharel went into panic mode. NAC senior management recently spent two days at a retreat in Godavari to come up with a break-even strategy, and Kharel has issued requests for proposals to contract out the operations and engineering departments.

But even the airline's own employees have doubts. Achyutraj Pahadi, a member of NAC's operations committee, says staff will not cooperate with outside contractors, and a better option would be to find a strategic partner.

Kharel argues that putting in place a strategic partner would take too long. Indeed, Lufthansa was selected as a strategic partner in 2016 but the Finance Ministry sank the deal. There has been no international interest in a new call for proposals made in December.

Buddhisagar Lamichhane of the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation says a strategic partner is not a panacea: "Bringing in an airline with expertise in the aviation sector would help, but only if the airline was on a sounder financial footing already."

In his defence, Kharel says he was saddled with huge loans for the new planes: "When I took over, we had new planes but no plans to fly them. Now we are ready to fly new routes, but we need capital injection from the government."

Kharel has submitted his breakeven plan to the ministry, which includes starting flights to Osaka, Riyadh and Guangzhou and increasing the fleet utilisation. To be fair, it is not entirely the airline management's fault that long-haul routes have not panned out. Nepal is still on the EU black list, (*see box*) and some countries are reluctant to allow flights.

This week, airline staff saw a glimmer of hope in Oli's appointment of Yogesh Bhattarai as Tourism and Civil Aviation Minister (*pictured, left*). He is seen as a can-do politician in the mould of his predecessor Rabindra Adhikari who died in a helicopter crash in Taplejung in April.

"My goal is to make Nepal Airlines profitable, I have heard it is mismanaged and will have to study the company. But I want to make it an airline Nepal can be proud of," Minister Bhattarai told *Nepali Times*.

NAC has announced discounted promo fares for its thrice-weekly direct flights to Osaka from 29 August, revival of a route Nepal Airlines used to operate. But proposals to fly to Seoul are delayed because the Koreans are insisting on a safety audit.

Amidst much fanfare, China this week announced it was expanding bilateral air services from 70 to 90 flights a week, and adding one more destination to 8 Chinese cities. However, there is no word from the Chinese on Himalayan Airlines' proposal for direct flights from Kathmandu to Shanghai and Beijing, as well as Nepal Airlines' plan to connect to Guangzhou.

On the domestic front, only half of NAC's two Chinese-made MA60s

and four Y12s are flying. Two of the four aged DHC6s are being cannibalised. And things have gone quiet on plans to add six Vikings.

"The government has no clear strategy, that is true," admits Bhagwan Krishna Singh, a former director. However, although political interference is at the root of the airline's malaise, the government cannot be blamed for the company's gross mismanagement over the years.

The saving grace for the airline has been its main cash cow: ground handling at Kathmandu Airport which brings in Rs2 billion year.

However, other international airlines that fly into Kathmandu have complained about expensive but sloppy service, dilapidated ramp buses and inefficient check-in, which will need to be upgraded ahead of Visit Nepal 2020.

Suresha Acharya, deputy secretary at the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation, agrees that things must change: "The government has two options: either invest in shares, or invite foreign investment. But with the corporation's financial situation so dire it is unlikely foreign partners will be interested." 🇳🇵

prabhu BANK BIZ BRIEFS

Turkish to Congo

Turkish Airlines has added Pointe-Noire, Republic of Congo's second biggest city, to its flight network as its 58th destination



in Africa. The carrier will operate three weekly flights, with a connection in Libreville. Turkish Airlines now flies to more destinations in Africa than any other international airline.

Yeti adds 5th ATR-72

Yeti Airlines has added a fifth ATR72-500 aircraft to its fleet. With the new twin turboprop, Yeti will increase flight frequencies to trunk route destinations and also add new ones. The airline says it is gearing for additional traffic expected during Visit Nepal 2020, when 2 million tourists are expected.

Aloft Kathmandu

Marriott International has announced the opening of Aloft Kathmandu Thamel, marking the debut entry of this design

lead, social experience brand in Nepal. Urban-inspired design, accessible technology and innovative programming centred on music and F&B make Aloft unique in Nepal's traditional hotel landscape.

Etihad to London

Etihad Airways has added a fourth daily flight to London Heathrow starting 27 October. The new service uses Boeing 787-9 with convenient connections at Abu Dhabi from Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, as well as a late evening departure from London.

Air Quality TechCamp

A two-day South Asia Air Quality TechCamp organised by the US Embassy was held in Kathmandu 30-31 July providing participants with state-of-the-art innovative tools and technologies to help amplify their voices to address air quality issues in the region, improve the ability of civil society, media and other influencers to engage governments.



WHY STILL BLACKLISTED?

The European Union (EU) and the International Civil Aviation Authority (ICAO) blacklisted Nepali carriers from flying in European airspace after a series of crashes, including a flight to Lukla from Kathmandu airport that killed 19 people, including seven Britons.

After a safety audit that suggested reforms, in 2017 ICAO removed Nepal from its list of countries with Significant Safety Concern. However, the EU has maintained its ban, citing structural and safety concerns.

The main EU complaint is that the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAAN) is both a regulator and an operator, because it also manages Nepal's airports. The cabinet last month last week agreed in principle to separate CAAN's regulatory and service functions, and instructed the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation to draft a law and present it to Parliament for debate.

New Tourism Minister Yogesh Bhattarai (*pictured*) said on Wednesday: "I will work to reform civil aviation safety in Nepal."

The government has been working on unbundling CAAN since 2012, but sceptics say the EU is naive to insist on this provision since the two bodies will still be under the purview

of the ministry, with one chaired by the minister and the other by the secretary at the ministry.

Around 5 years ago, Spanish company Ineco presented to the ministry a \$4.2 million strategy with funding from the Asian Development Bank, which included restructuring of CAAN, a business plan and employee training. However, all is on hold until the new legislation is passed.

The EU's other concern is frequent helicopter accidents in the past four years. Aviation experts say these had to do more with Nepal's terrain and weather, noting that none of the accidents were caused by technical malfunctions. In fact, most domestic air crashes in Nepal have happened during flights to remote airports, there have been no fatal crashes on trunk routes since 1999.

One retired senior CAAN official puts it bluntly: "Nepal Airlines has bought new Airbus, there is no reason the EU should still blacklist us. We are being punished for Nepal Airlines being forced to operate Chinese planes."

The EU ban has had a direct impact on Nepali carriers, especially NAC, as it has been unable to operate the recently bought widebody Airbus A330 aircraft on long-haul flights.





JOHNNIE WALKER
**JOHNNIE
& GINGER**
Enjoy Together



Chitlang, Chitwan and Children

Finding the Rana-era elephant stables in Bhimphedi in between changing nappies

Our second son Rinchen was only six weeks old when we bundled him into the red Range Rover in a cosy basket cot wedged in the back, surrounded by all the clobber required at that age, and headed for the Tarai.



SO FAR SO GOOD
Lisa Choegyal

The roads were slow, with the vomit-marked buses and garishly painted trucks belching fumes as they strained up into the Kathmandu Valley, and made slower by two-year-old Sangjay fretting in his constrained car seat. I couldn't wait to leave town, back to nature (back to work more like), and away after all the baby focus of the past weeks.

As an older mother in my late 30s, by the time Rinchen arrived the whole baby routine was a triumph of juggling unscheduled nappy changes, feeding, tiredness and joy. Sangjay delighted in his new little brother, but the simplest tasks of daily life – staying clean, dressed, fed and rested – seemed to take up all my energy and planning.

We returned to Kathmandu with our new bundle of 'limitless preciousness', Rinchen's name in Tibetan. Life in Alpine Cottage settled into a baby routine that I soon came to resent. Our tiny A-frame glass and wood home in Bansbari was nestled amidst a fig, mango and lychee orchard, full of sylvan charm but now bursting at the seams. Hodgson, the highly-strung street dog with a perpetually diseased, liver-coloured coat, named after the erudite 19th-century British resident by an optimistic anthropologist who rescued him from the gutter, accepted the new arrival with distracted disdain.

In 1985 it had been only Hodgson and I sharing the house, rented for Rs4,000 a month from my laconic landlord Prem Singh, who lived with his family in the



ALL PHOTOS: LISA CHOEGYAL

THE ROAD TO KATHMANDU: (From top left, clockwise) Stupa on the heavily forested Chitlang Pass at the entrance to Kathmandu Valley along the trail that peasants, traders and kings took between Kathmandu and the Tarai. Rest houses along the way built in the Newa style still dot the old trail through Chitlang. Howrahs for elephant-back hunting by Nepal's nobility are still stored in Bhimphedi, frozen in time. The Hatisar in Bhimphedi is like a living museum for elephant safari paraphernalia.

adjacent garden, lovingly tending flower beds whilst nurturing his trees and two young sons. It was a relief to have my own place after the hectic 'staff house' in Sanepa.

Owning nothing but a few Tibetan carpets, several paintings and a couple of mattresses, living at floor level on a heap of cushions suited the wood floors and huge window of the minute sitting room. Its cramped sleeping gallery had a pitched plywood ceiling and was accessed by a nifty spiral staircase, treacherous during night time bathroom visits. Hodgson and I were joined by my husband Tenzin in 1986, and not long after by Sangjay, born in January 1987. We had built a bedroom and new

bathroom onto the back of the cottage, but the space still felt small and confined.

The dog Hodgson famously slept through the 1988 earthquake that had us sloshing around in our newly acquired waterbed, a trendy addition to the house swapped for an antique Tibetan rug with an American friend from USAID.

"How frightening it must have been in the middle of the night!" worried my mother on a faint telephone line from London. "I'm sure you rushed Sangjay outside to safety!" Five months pregnant with Rinchen I had struggled to extricate myself from the waves of the waterbed, Tenzin lurching helplessly beside me. Trusty Sunita

had Sangjay safe, and the waterbed craze did not last long in an earthquake zone.

Itching to get back to some distraction from the stifling baby scene, I occupied myself between feeds verifying National Geographic articles and editing travel brochures on the polished table in our miniature dining room. Sangjay had been an engrossing novelty, but the second baby turned out to be a more manageable routine. After a few weeks of domesticity, a work visit to check on Tiger Tops and the proposed Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge site presented itself as the perfect escape plan. Packing the car with the baby gear, we all set off for Chitwan.

Bhimphedi's Hattisar

Bumping through Valley potholes unrepaired since the previous monsoon, we passed the temple at Thankot that marks the start of the historic walking trail through the Chitlang valley to Bhimphedi, the lifeline linking Kathmandu to India that threads through villages past shrines, stupas, chaityas and patis.

Prior to the Raj Path opening in 1956, this was the only route south to the outside world along which porters carried everything, including chandeliers and cars. For those rich enough to ride, Bhimphedi was where the ruling Ranas and other privileged travellers swapped their horses for elephants to navigate the Tarai. Winter was the only safe time to cross Nepal's lowland, rife with malaria and other notorious maladies that protected the kingdom from uninvited visitors.

A few years ago, after some trouble locating the key, I found the old elephant stables in Bhimphedi, a strangely shaped Rana period building with lofty doors and tall brick walls on the edge of town near the river. The dusty old howdahs and faded decorations were recognisable from sepia hunting photographs of visiting viceroys and maharajahs. Stacked on racks above the elephant stalls were the rolls of white cloth that had been used by beaters to drive the tigers towards the waiting guns, the tweed-clad sportsmen safely perched on elephants.

"No one ever comes here," smiled the wrinkled old chowkidar sadly, motes of dust and straw caught by the sunbeam slanting through the high windows.

Decaying but intact, encrusted with dirt and spotted with blood, these relics lay where they had been stacked at the end of a long day hunting in the jungle many decades ago. Closing my eyes I could almost hear the clatter of chains, the thump of saddles, murmurs of long-dead elephants, and ghosts of their keepers calling softly to each other. 🇳🇵



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फोन: ५००५६०१-०५, फ्याक्स: ९७७-१-५००५५१८, पोखरा: ९८५६०४५८६३



The monsoon took a rest this week, but is getting its second wind, as it were. An enormous low pressure surge is moving towards Central Nepal from the east, overloaded with water vapour. This warm, moist air will inevitably rise because of terrain and condense as it mixes with colder air. There will be squalls, some of them stormy, in Kathmandu Valley, with most precipitation falling at night through Friday and the weekend.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
25° 18°	25° 19°	24° 18°

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David Williams grew up in rural Australia among all kinds of creepy crawlies. He kept lizards and snakes as pets, even venomous ones. He has been bitten six times, but that has not put him off research into finding a cheaper and more effective anti-venom to treat bites. Williams now heads the Global Snakebite Initiative and has been helping in snakebite management in Cambodia and Papua New Guinea. He is in Kathmandu for the first international conference on snakebite this weekend, and spoke to *Nepali Times*.



DIANA BARR

“Snakebite is treatable, no one need die from it.”

Nepali Times: Why hold a snakebite conference in Kathmandu?
David Williams: One of the main reasons the conference is being held here is that Nepal has got a lot of expertise, doctors who are very interested in research and want to fix the problem and initiatives like the motorcycle volunteers. There are many diseases that have no cure or treatment, but snakebite is something that is eminently treatable, nobody should have to die from it. So with a reasonably modest amount of investment by health ministries and supporting organisations, we can solve the problem of snakebite. Nepal has all the elements necessary to tackle its snakebite epidemic, and save lives.

What are the main challenges?
There is a solution to snakebite problems, but it is largely a matter of investment. Production of anti-venom requires putting the money into establishing manufacturing facilities, having a proper quality control and a regulatory agency that is able to provide oversight of manufacturing. The same goes for collecting venom. So it is a matter of

commitment, and spending the money to do it in the right way. The things that hospitals need to have in order to effectively treat snakebite patients are often the same types of medical consumables that are needed for a lot of other diseases. So if you have a strong health care system that is functioning well with the right drugs and treatment, then we are likely to achieve better outcomes.

But are these interventions possible in Nepal?
It is a lot easier and cheaper to prevent snakebite than to deal with consequences, so community education and awareness for behavioural change is probably the most important aspect. Another is having sufficient stock of effective anti-venoms. Countries have to ensure that reliable supply, and one way to go about is to ask for World Health Organization (WHO) assistance. The good thing is that there has been some strong research in this area with which Nepal should be able to take an initiative to be able to make anti-venom within the country and not rely so much on India. It is especially important to have addition supply of anti-

venom this time of the year, when snakebite becomes an epidemic.

The WHO wants to halve snakebite deaths by 2030. Is this realistic?
It is fairly easy to achieve and there is good evidence to back this up. In Ghana it was found that if you introduce effective treatment, train nurses and doctors who deliver the treatment, and educate the community to come to the hospital sooner, fatalities can be reduced by as much as 80% in a very short period. It took Ghana only 18 months. So I think having 12 years from now to cut the fatality and disability by 50% is quite a reasonable target. At core it is about effective treatment, health workers who know how to give treatment and communities that prioritise getting that treatment.

Is climate change pushing venomous snakes up the mountains?
If the world keeps warming, yes. As the weather warms up here in Nepal with climate change, you will start finding venomous snakes in areas where they

were never found before because it was too cold. Another aspect that can contribute is changes in the habitat. For example, with deforestation you create open habitats that a lot of venomous snakes, such as the cobras and the Russell vipers, actually find more conducive to their lifestyle.

DECONSTRUCTING SNAKEBITE

David Williams of the Global Snakebite Initiative and anti-venom expert Diana Barr are in Nepal to attend this week's international conference. Watch them explain treatment challenges and why Nepal is well equipped to reduce deaths and disability due to snakebite by 2030. Full coverage on [page 8-9](http://page-8-9).

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Know Your Snakes

Snakes look similar but their colour, scales, eyes and head shape can be useful in distinguishing dangerous species from harmless ones. Some snakes found in Nepal:



Green Snakes (*Orthriophis hodgsonii*) have a few large scales on the top of the head and round pupils. These snakes are non-venomous and harmless. Cat-eyed Green Snakes (*Boiga cyanea*) have no pit organ between nostril and eye, which distinguishes them from venomous pit vipers.



Green Pit Viper (*Trimeresurus septentrionalis*) are the only venomous species of green snakes in Nepal. They have a pit organ between the eye and the nostril, which is an infrared detector used to find prey in the dark. Bites are painful but not fatal.



Russel Viper (*Daboia russelli*) is one of the most dangerous snakes in Nepal, found in the Tarai only. Its head is covered by numerous small symmetrical, oval scales, it has a long tail and long venom fangs that fold back into its mouth.



Sonia Awale

Like every monsoon, this year has also seen a spike in snakebite deaths across the country. In the Tarai, emergency wards are crowded with patients as doctors try to cope. At least 15 people have died so far in Saptari, Sarlahi, Morang and Rautahat, districts that were also hardest hit by floods last month.

There are at least 40,000 cases of snakebite every year in Nepal, with some 3,000 fatalities in the Tarai alone. But a recent epidemiological study found the

death rate from snakebite has come down from 18.7% 20 years ago to 6.62%, largely because of awareness and anti-venom treatment.

Globally, 5.5 million snakebites occur every year, with up to 138,000 deaths. Another 400,000 people require amputations and suffer severe injuries. Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka together account for 70% of global snakebite mortality. But it was not until 2017 that the World Health Organisation (WHO) recognised snakebite as a neglected tropical disease, and came up with a

roadmap to reduce risk.

In Nepal too, snakebite never received the attention it deserved. It is not communicable or infectious, is rare and tropical and affects the poorest people.

"Snakebite is a severely neglected public health burden in Nepal. There is so much we don't know about snakes and their venoms,

Motorcycle volunteers to the rescue

One of the major barriers to snakebite treatment is the delay in getting victims to a health centre with anti-venom. In many cases, patients die on the way due to an inefficient transportation system.

In 2004, a group from BPKHS in Dharan, in collaboration with the University of Geneva, tested a Motorcycle Volunteer Program in four villages in the eastern Tarai with a high incidence of snakebites.

The pilot project mobilised motorcycle volunteers in all four villages, which had a total population 62,000. They helped transport snakebite victims to a specialised treatment centre in Damak that had anti-venom and staff trained in snakebite management. The motorcycles

combined with community health education sharply reduced the mortality rate from snakebite.

Before the experiment, there were 502 bites/100,000 population with a case fatality rate of 10.5%. After the intervention, the incidence decreased to 315 bites/100,000 and the fatality rate fell to 0.5%.

'Simple educational messages and promotion of immediate and rapid transport of victims to a treatment centre decreased the mortality rate and incidence of snake bite in southeastern Nepal,' stated a study published in *The American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene* in 2013. It recommended that the test be replicated elsewhere.



SANJIB K SHARMA

TWO-WHEELS GOOD: Snakebite victim held firmly between motorcycle volunteer driver and relative and being rushed to hospital. The fatality rate fell by ten times in this pilot project in the Eastern Tarai.

Tibet Pit Viper (*Trimeresurus tibetanus*) can be found in oak and rhododendron forests on Phulchoki, Helambu and in Tibet, up to 3,200m. Bites can be painful, but not dangerous.



Himalayan Pit Viper (*Gloydius himalayanus*) has a few large scales on the top of its head, like some non-venomous viper lookalikes. But it has a pit organ and a dark stripe from eye to mouth. Found at 1,600-3,000m in the mountains, it is active in the daytime hunting rodents. Bites can be painful but not fatal. Has been found in Mustang.





Tawny Cat Snake (*Boiga ochracea*) are widely distributed in the Tarai and mid-hills. They are often reddish brown and active at night, but unlike Kraits are not venomous.



Coral Snake (*Calliophis beddomei*) are rare and found up to 2,200m. If cornered, it responds by flattening its body and lifting and curling its tail. Bites are rare, sometimes fatal.



Common Wolf Snake (*Lycodon aulicus*) is a small snake that often enters homes at night to hunt geckos and mice. Unlike more dangerous Kraits, it has scales of the same size all over its body, and is harmless.



Kukri Snake (*Oligodon arnensis*) differs from Russell Pit Viper in having pupils that are round, large scales on top of the head and no pit organ. Unlike Kraits, it has scales on the back that are all of similar size and shape.



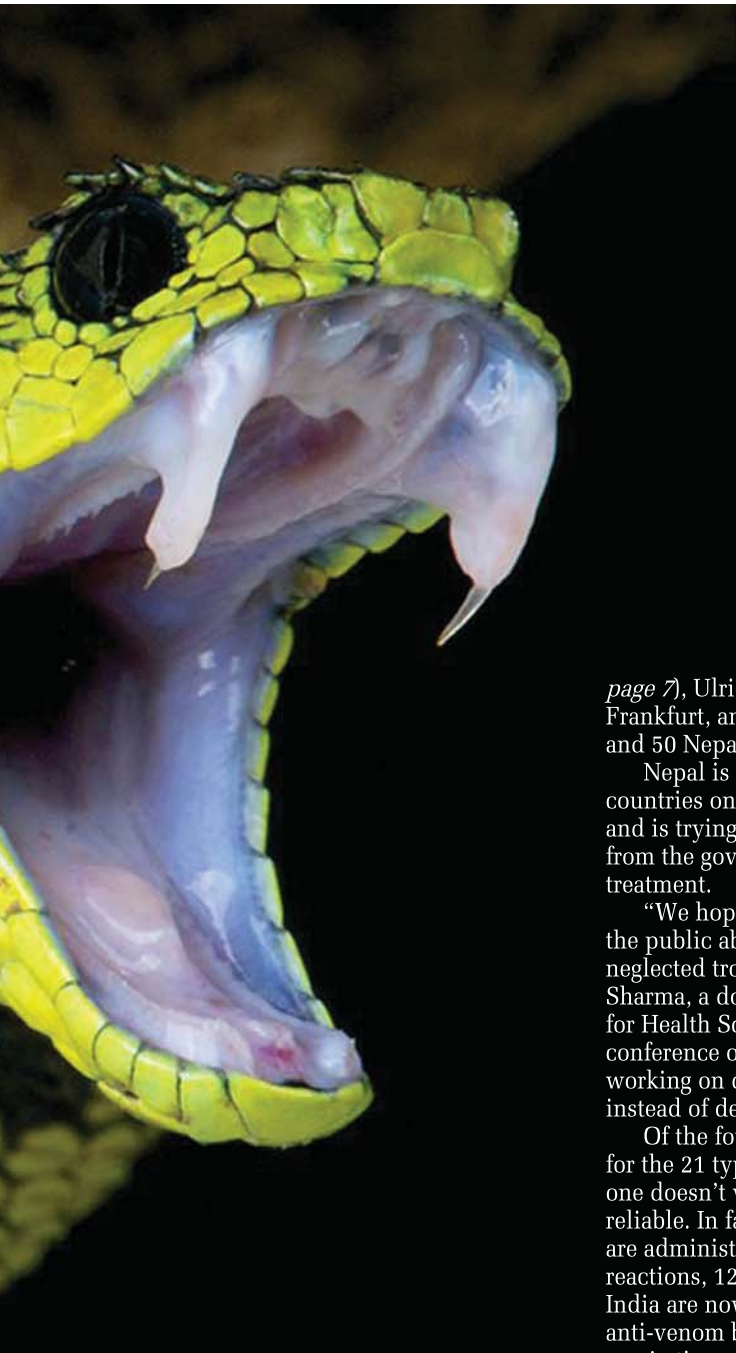
Himalayan Krait (*Bungarus bungaroides*) found at higher altitudes, their bites cause death due to asphyxia. **Banded Krait** (*Bungarus fasciatus*) are also highly venomous and found in the Tarai. **Cat Snake** (*Boiga trigonata*) look like most Kraits but differ in having laterally compressed bodies, unlike Kraits, which have rounded or triangular cross-sections. Mildly venomous.



Common Krait (*Bungarus caeruleus*), Greater Black Krait (*Bungarus niger*), Lesser Black Krait (*Bungarus lividus*) and Wall's Krait (*Bungarus walli*) are the most common and dangerous causes of snake envenoming in Nepal. They differ from all other snakes in having one row of hexagonal scales along the middle of their back from neck to tail, which are much larger than other scales. Active at night, some victims do not know they have been bitten while asleep. Respiratory paralysis can kill even after 12 hours. Found up to 1,450m.



Python (*Python molurus*) have no venom but kill prey by constriction. They can bite if disturbed. Found mainly in the Tarai and low valleys.



HISS

The first-ever international conference on snakebite seeks antidotes to the epidemic

page 7), Ulrich Kuch of Goethe University in Frankfurt, and Priyanka Kadam from India, and 50 Nepali scientists are taking part.

Nepal is aiming to be one of 11 member countries on WHO's roadmap for snakebites, and is trying to muster serious commitment from the government for research and treatment.

"We hope to sensitise policymakers and the public about the hidden burden of this neglected tropical disease," said Sanjib K Sharma, a doctor at the BP Koirala Institute for Health Science in Dharan, one of the conference organisers. "We also want to start working on developing anti-venoms in Nepal instead of depending on imports."

Of the four types of anti-venom imported for the 21 types of poisonous snakes in Nepal, one doesn't work and three others are not reliable. In fact, 80% of people here who are administered anti-venom suffer from reactions, 12% of which are fatal. Activists in India are now lobbying to stop the export of anti-venom because of unmet domestic need.

Anti-venom is produced by injecting donor animals such as horses and sheep with venom, and then extracting the antigen from the blood. But the procedure is expensive – a vial of anti-venom costs up to \$2,200. Since snakebite requires between 20-25 vials to neutralise the venom, the pharmacy bill alone would total \$30,000 per patient. Global production is limited, and most snake bites can only be cured with anti-venom from that particular species.

WHO's target is to halve the numbers of deaths and disability from snakebite

by 2030, and the Wellcome Trust and UK Department for International Development (Dfid) have announced £80 million and £9 million respectively for the development of a universal anti-venom. However, clinical trials will take decades.

Nepal's challenge is at ground level. Awareness about preventing snakebite is still low, people prefer to visit traditional healers if bitten, and many patients get to anti-venom centres too late. Even so, snakebite fatalities fell from 10.5% to 0.5% after motorcycle volunteers were deployed in a pilot project in 2013. (see box)

Diana Barr of the Australian Venom Research Institute at the University of Melbourne says Nepal and Bangladesh are best equipped to take the WHO strategy forward. "You've got some of the key things, like local expertise, your health ministry is pushing for change, and there is support from outside organisations," she told *Nepali Times*. "Nepal can easily implement the WHO strategy and get dramatic results in a couple of years."

Experts attending the Kathmandu conference this weekend believe the WHO target of halving snakebite deaths is doable. All it needs is effective treatment, trained nurses and doctors who deliver that treatment, educating the community to take simple precautions, and come to hospitals sooner if bitten.

Said Sharma of BPKHS: "The universal vaccine is the holy grail for snakebite treatment, but until then we have to work on anti-venom epidemiology within the country and educate people about snakebites." 🇳🇵

and there are signs it is going to get worse with climate change," warned Sher Bahadur Pun of Sukraraj Tropical and Infectious Diseases Hospital in Kathmandu. (See box)

High Level Meeting and Workshop on Snakebite in Nepal on 2-3 August in Kathmandu, is the first international conference on snakebite in the country. Taking part are 20 of the world's foremost authorities on snakebite including David Warrell of Oxford, David Williams, head of the Global Snakebite Initiative (see interview,

Snakes and ladders

As global temperatures go up, so do snakes, insects and plants. Not only are venomous snakes now found at altitudes where they were not present before, experts say even their venom may be getting more poisonous.

Kathmandu Valley used to experience snake bites, but they were never fatal. Now, there are cobra sightings on the Valley rim, and even in Langtang National Park. And last year, a patient admitted for snakebite at Sukraraj Hospital in Teku died while undergoing treatment.

Poisonous snakes may have come up hitchhiking on cargo trucks carrying logs from the Tarai, but health

experts say there is evidence climate change may be allowing venomous snakes, and other tropical wildlife, to move to higher areas of the Himalaya.

"Elsewhere we are starting to see the movement of various species with the warming of the earth, so the case of snakes should be no different," explains Sher Bahadur Pun of Sukraraj Topical and Infectious Disease Hospital in Kathmandu, which has seen a rise in the number of patients from the Valley and surrounding districts with severe snakebites.

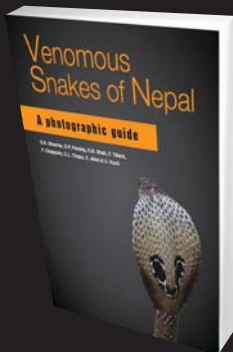
Pun adds that more research needs to be done to find the exact correlation between venomous snakes

and climate change.

In addition, snakebites that were previously poisonous only in the immediate tissue surrounding a bite can now be more venomous or even fatal. A warmer climate appears to affect the physiology of the venom glands and the chemical composition of snakes' secretions.

"When people got bitten by snakes in the past, they only developed swelling, but now I see cases where victims are bleeding from bites by the same type of snake," says Sanjib K Sharma of the Department of Internal Medicine at BPKHS in Dharan.

Cobra and King Cobra are common and dangerous causes of snake bite envenoming in Nepal. Most bite at dawn, injecting a large quantity of venom that leads to paralysis of the peripheral nervous system, and then death by asphyxia. Raises forebody, displays extended neck skin hood and hisses when disturbed. Found in the Tarai and up to 3,500m.



Adapted from:
Venomous Snakes of Nepal: A Photographic Guide
by SK Sharma, DP Pandey, KB Shah, F Tillack, F Chappius, CL Thapa, E Alirol and U Kuch

BP Koirala Institute of Health Sciences, 2013
ISBN number : 978-9937-2-6003-9

IF A SNAKE BITES

- 1 Reassure victims, lay them down sideways
- 2 Identify snake if possible
- 3 Immobilise bitten limb with splint
- 4 Do not cut, use tourniquets, ice on wound
- 5 Wash wound with soap
- 6 Transport victim quickly to a health centre with anti-venom

Symptoms

Envenoming due to cobra and krait bites lead to neuromuscular paralysis with the following effects:

- Inability to open the eyes on looking up
- Inability to open the mouth
- Inability to protrude the tongue from the mouth
- Inability to swallow
- Paralysis of the muscles of the hands and feet
- Difficulty breathing