With normal life coming to a grinding halt because of non-availability of fuel and unrest in Terai on the increase, the GP Koirala government seems to be left with a limited choice—go for a farcical election in April or call it off once again.

The PM cut short his stay in Biratnagar by a few hours on Feb 17 as he received messages from the election commission that it was not going to hold ‘any type’ of election, and that the commission wanted to be sure about ‘reasonably’ safer climate for the movement of officials and equipment for election.

The election commission’s concern was conveyed to the PM after the returning officers including some district court judges who were deployed in the western region repeatedly asked an accompanying election commissioner, “Are we going to be safe?”

There are speculations that in case the Terai groups, mainly the United Madhesh Democratic Front (UMDF), refuse to submit the ‘list of candidates under the proportional representation system’ by Feb 20, the stipulated deadline for the purpose, the EC will either be forced to extend the date as it did in October or review the whole scenario. “Of course, the law and order situation in the country, Terai situation and availability of fuel - it all will have an impact on our decision, but the present situation is just not predictable,” the official said.

An election commission source told newsfront, “Although some ministers have unofficially suggested two-phase election, it has not been officially discussed.” While the commission is capable of holding elections, it prevailed that it is for the government to ensure a situation conducive for polls.

No atmosphere for polls Yet again?

 nf correspondent

Developments and facts collected by various agencies, national and international, suggest that the law and order situation, mainly in Terai and the activities of the Young Communist League outside Terai, were posing major threats to the conduct of smooth election. “We are concerned by the Maoists’ announcement to deploy 200 YCL activists in each booth,” an ambassador from one of the European Union countries told newsfront, adding, “We are keeping our fingers crossed.”

Besides, Chief Election Commissioner, Bhojraj Pokhrel has already told the government that any obstruction in the movement of election officials and equipment to the constituencies as per schedule, and later the movement of political leaders cutting across party lines, may hamper the polls. Despite the promise made by the government that the fuel availability will be normal soon, and that it will not affect the polls in any manner, the supply has not yet been normalised.
Koirala’s ‘no’ to Terai leaders
Too late

Prime Minister GP Koirala is not known for honouring what he says or saying what he means. Yet, his most candid statement on some key demands raised by Terai groups led by his former colleague, Mahanth Thakur, came on February 16 from Biratnagar soon after the Madhesh group had formed a team to negotiate with the government.

Koirala said he will neither accept the demand for ‘Ek Madhesh Ek Pradesh’ (single State status to the entire Terai area comprising 22 districts adjoining India) nor will he grant the ‘right to self-determination’ to any State. The two are on the top of six-point demands that the Terai Madhesh Loktantrik Party (TMLP) and the recently formed United Madhesh Democratic Front (UMDF), an umbrella body of the three Terai outfits including TMLP, have raised.

“Let any power on earth put pressure on me, but I will not accept these demands,” Koirala said. There are speculations that Koirala was responding indirectly to the government of India which has been saying that Terai’s demands must be addressed for the polls. “No demand that goes against the unity and integrity of the country will be fulfilled,” he said, asking the Madhesh groups to come for a dialogue so that all ‘genuine demands’ could be met.

Koirala is apparently unhappy with India’s message that his failure to hold elections this time around will take away his government’s legitimacy. This was Koirala’s first response to the demand for the State’s right to self determination although it was first raised by the Maoists for the first time in January 2007, as the universal movement put Shekhar Pundit, a priest and the deputy head priest of the Narayanhiti palace, along with Pande and other former senior priests and the Narayanhiti tradition put Shekhar Pundit, a priest and the deputy head priest of the Narayanhiti palace, along with Pande and other former senior priests and the Narayanhiti tradition on that day. Both the palace, where King Gyanendra occupied the chair that Kings used to sit on before, with hopes that there would be a battery of Hindu scholars reciting Saraswati mantra. But he felt humiliated and undermined when he noticed that the head priest, Janardan Raj Pande and his deputy Madhav Bhattarai were both missing.

The long distance surface movement has also suffered as transporters are charging at least 300 per cent more than the normal bus fare to Pokhara, Dharan, Birgunj and Chitwan.

The health and education services have come to a grinding halt. On February 17, an emergency meeting of the Private and Boarding schools Organisation of Nepal (PABSON) announced indefinite closure of the schools because of lack of transport facility. The 46-hour load shedding per week coupled with shortage of diesel and cooking gas has already triggered panic anger in many places.

A state of emergency
Crippled

Elsewhere in the world, the situation in Nepal where essential services have come to a halt, would have merited a state of emergency across the nation. Nothing seemed to be moving at its normal pace except the vehicles of the Prime Minister, Ministers and those occupying the constitutional posts besides the high-level officials.

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Koirala – how sane?
Sacking retired officials

Prime Minister GP Koirala was in an ecstatic mood when he occupied the chair that Kings used to sit on before, with hopes that there would be a battery of Hindu scholars reciting Saraswati mantra. But he felt humiliated and undermined when he noticed that the head priest, Janardan Raj Pande and his deputy Madhav Bhattarai were both missing.

Arrogant Koirala apparently had no idea that the post of the head priest and the deputy head priest (Bada Guruju and Nayab Bada Guruju) had been abolished soon after the interim constitution came into existence in January 2007, as Nepal then had ceased to be a ‘Hindu country’ and was declared a secular state. But why did Koirala, supposedly an atheist, who refused to follow the norms and the rituals when his father and mother died, now choose to be seen as a ‘Hindu’ CEO of a secular Nepal now?

Theories abound. Possibly, because the constitution and parliamentary declarations say that the prime minister will continue to discharge the role and duties that the King had been performing earlier. Koirala took upon himself the role that the King used to perform as Head of the ‘Hindu State’. So Koirala moved to Basantapur Durbar for Basant Shrawan on the day of Saraswati Puja. And the missing priests, it is learnt, had gone to Narayanhiti Palace, where King Gyanendra observed the family and institutional tradition on that day. Both the former senior priests chose to go to the palace. Since the priests have not received salary from the State for more than nine months, they are no longer bound by the government order.

A source in the PM’s office said that he has already instructed Army Chief Rookmangad Katawal to remain on stand by for deployment of the army in sensitive polling areas as well as for the transportation of fuel to the capital and different parts of the country. Koirala is also believed to have told the security officials that he would first try to form a political consensus on the issue, and if he failed to secure one soon, he would issue the instruction himself.
Prachanda - president for 20 years? Megalomania

What has the 12-year old ‘insur- gency’ (or people’s war) come to mean for Prachanda, the Chairman of the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN-M)? It has now boiled down becoming the first president of Republic Nepal and holding on to the post for 20 years.

Prachanda’s public announcement of his grandiose dreams, that he will be 55 years old (that is in the next few months) when he becomes the first president, and after that, within 20 years, he will make Nepal the world’s most prosperous and richest country, smacks of megalomania. He also announced that his government’s first treaty or agreement will make Nepal the world’s richest country, smacks of megalomania. He also announced that his first formal courtesy during his visit to the then in June. Prachanda also met Nepal’s Prime Minister when he was here recently.

The CPN-M activists, in clear defiance of the instruction of the Election Commission, have gone around painting Kathmandu’s walls with the slogan that projects Prachanda as Nepal’s first president. “Becoming a president is not my personal wish. But I had to accept it after the party leaders, Baburam Bhattarai and Mohan Vaidya proposed it,” he said in a gathering recently.

But his declaration to be president now and occupy the post for 20 years gives a clear signal that it will be an entirely one- party authoritarian rule that will be imposed on the country. In his interaction with students organised by political science students union in Pulchowk Engineer- ing campus on Feb 16, Prachanda said his government will seize property of the ‘feudals’ and end their political and cultural hegemony. He also announced that alternative east west highways would be built and hydro projects given priority.

Prachanda’s announcement that he will rule the country as its president for 20 years far exceeds King Gyendendra’s declaration in Feb, 2005 in which he had said that he wanted to restore peace and normalise situation and hand it over to the parties in three years time.

EU’s concern

The European Union embassies in Kathmandu are likely to hold a meeting to review Nepal’s crisis ridden political situation soon. The meeting is going to take place this week at the initiative of the embassy of France who chairs the EU embassies.

The meeting scheduled on a short notice, is likely to assess the situation and EU’s possible stance in view of the worsening law and order situation, and acute shortage of fuel that will have much larger ramifications on economic and political situation of the country. Besides, the prospects of elections scheduled for April 10 are also likely to be assessed in the meeting.

Distant UK

For Nepalis aspiring for UK visa, this could be good as well as bad news. Good news is that they do not have to stand in long queues to submit their visa application form, and ‘having to be refused’ visa sometimes at the whirms of immigration officials. And the bad news is that the visa section of the British embassy in Kathmandu is going shut down soon. Nepalising UK visas will need to apply at the British High Commission in Delhi, effective from February 18.

Mitra Pariyar, Political Officer in the British Embassy said that this is being done as part of the ‘Hub and spoke’ policy of the British govern- ment in which one centre in the region will be catering to visa services; and visa services, as in Nepal will be terminated in other countries of the region gradually.

Nepalis can directly apply in Delhi through the VFS Global, a service agent, or its local office in Kathmandu which will take the responsibility of two way delivery of the passports. Visa section of the high commission in Delhi will decide on the case based on information provided without the applicant having to face interviews, Pariyar said. The visa section of the British consulate in Calcutta will also be closed soon.

The closure of the visa section by the British government in Nepal is being viewed by Shital Nivas quarter as a treatment of diminishing importance that the UK is giving to its oldest ‘friend’ in the South Asia region. In the past few years in Nepal, British influence is eroding while India, China and the United States are increasing their presence and activities.

Andrew’s retreat

You may well have to be a diplomat or a VIP if your vehicle is still moving out on the roads these days. But even that will not ensure that you will reach your destination.

British Ambassador, Andrew Hall had to abandon his journey halfway through and get back to Kathmandu as transporters on strike did not allow him to proceed beyond Baneeta. Dr Hall was on his way to Charikot on February 17 to study the political and general situation, but the transporters said he could not move forward in defiance of their strike call.

“We will not allow any vehicle to move on the road until and unless diesel and petrol are made available in the country,” the transporters told the ambassa- dor. As a result, his plan to interact with the villagers and then spend a night in Drukhel had to be abandoned. Being a diplomat does not always pay.
UNMIN says

Dear editor,

I regret having to express concern about persistent misrepresentation of facts regarding UNMIN in the pages of Newfront. The following are examples:

1. In “Deficient UNMIN” (4 June), Siddharth Thapa writes that both UNMIN and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights “trust that the systematic abuse of political opponents and human rights abuse perpetrated by the state and primarily the Maoists over the last two years.” This absurd statement is contradicted by successive Reports of the United Nations Secretary-General to the Security Council, by reports of OHCHR-Nepal (including a 14-page report on abuses by the Young Communist League), and by numerous public statements of SRSF Ian Martin and successive Representatives of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Mr Thapa and anyone else can readily find these on the respective websites: http://www.unmin.org.np and http://www.ohchr.org.

For several weeks (3 December, “UNMIN and the Peace Process”), by Editor Yuburaj Ghimire, 19 November, “Tussle”, 5 November, “No Transgression”, 20 October, “Class”), Newfront persisted in wrongly reporting that UNMIN officials (including Ian Martin himself) had met with leaders of armed groups in the Terai or in India, and this had been taken up by the government with UNMIN. Newfront ignored the corrections given to the media, including specifically to Newfront itself.

In the editorial “Accountability” (3 December), Newfront wrote that UNMIN had “rejected some seeing candidates against many vacancies just because they belong to certain castes.” This serious allegation, which is entirely baseless, was made without any attempt to put the allegation to UNMIN.

UNMIN has made and will continue to make efforts to ensure that its recruitment of qualified Nepali staff includes broad representation from Nepal’s diverse population, and equal representation between women and men.

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Apart from his being found in possession of foreign currency, beyond the legal permit, he had traveled with a fake passport to Nepal.

The Indian authorities were coercing their Nepali counterparts not to hype up the event of Dr. Amit Kumar, the alleged kingpin of clandestine kidney trade, who was arrested in Chitwan, first week of February. The Indian authorities were constantly monitoring Dr. Kumar’s movement and activities and passing on the relevant information to Nepal police. And once the alleged kingpin of the clandestine kidney racket was in the police net, Indian authorities advised Nepal side to follow some past trend and instantly hand him over by showing record that the arrest took place somewhere in Raxaul, only 60 km away from Sauraha in Chitwan.

But the initial set-back to the move came from the newly appointed Minister of State for Home, Ram Kumar Chaudhary, who confirmed to the vigilante media worldwide that included several Indian TV channels as well as the BBC, that Nepali police had achieved a breakthrough by nabbing Dr Kumar. Indian embassy in Kathmandu instantly put in a request that he was deported. There are several similar cases of “hand-over” by Nepal, and few by India, without following the provision and process of extradition treaty that still exists, although India has long been insisting that it should be replaced with a more practical and effective treaty.

According to Indian authorities, since there was a red-corner notice issued against Dr. Kumar, Nepal was obliged to deport him immediately. But even in Interpol case, the courts come into the picture. CP Gajurel, a senior Maoist leader was arrested in Chennai when found traveling with a fake passport, and he was in jail there for more than two years. There was a red-corner notice issued against him. Treaty demands consistency and equality in spirit and practice by its signatories. Gajurel was handed over to Nepali authorities with the court’s order as the extradition treaty demands.

The urgency expressed by Indian side for handover of Amit Kumar was understandable. But Nepali authorities, especially the Prime Minister, need to explain if the alleged Nepali victims of this clandestine kidney business have a right to justice? An investigation in Nepal based on interrogation of Kumar could have only provided input to the investigation in India. But the apparent high-handedness on the part of Indian authorities undermines the right of the Nepali victims, besides the normal duty of the state authorities who were keen to pursue this case for a brief period and handover Kumar at an earliest possible date.

In the famous Sucha Singh case, a district court headed by Janakiram Shrestha took three months to extradite him to India in the late 80s. Singh, wanted in the murder of Punjab Chief Minister Pratap Singh Kairo, had been arrested by the Indian police from Nepal territory, but they were stopped by the Nepalese government. The extradition process perhaps took a little longer as the Nepali side was not happy with the manner of arrest. A very constructive and positive role of the then Indian ambassador, Sirman Narayan helped to bring the bilateral cordiality back to normalcy.

Between early eighties and now, Nepalis authorities have apparently handed over cases which might run into hundreds to India; as suspected Sikh, Tamil and Kashmiri militants were found using Nepal’s link to the world outside and poor surveillance as a preferred passage. In most cases, they were either put in the Delhi bound flight to be arrested on arrival, or shown as having been arrested in Indian territory.

The most famous case in the second category was that of Yakub Memon, wanted in the serial Bombay blasts in March 1993. Memon, arrested in Kathmandu, was taken to Gorakhpur by the Nepali authorities, and India’s then Home Minister SB Chavan, announced in parliament that Memon was nabbed in India. However, given the high profile that Mamon case attracted, faking the venue of arrest was perhaps not possible. But the manner of the handing over can set a precedence that will have a bearing on such issues in future.
The stage is almost ready; the finale for power battle in Kathmandu is about to begin. With less than two months left for elections, power players in Kathmandu are all hopping from one party office to the other and from one VIP residence to another in a last minute effort to bridge needy alliances. Unfortunately, what is most lacking among the politicians in Kathmandu is the political will to conduct elections for the convergence of the Constituent Assembly.

Former prime minister and NC leader Sher Bahadur Deuba who campaigned wholeheartedly in the Terai braving repeated bomb blasts during his mass rallies commented after his arrival in the capital, “elections are impossible under the present law and order situation.” What is clearly evident is that although the SPA keeps reaffirming its confidence in holding timely polls, the parties in reality are well aware of the challenges in conducting credible elections.

Behind the backdrop of the political crisis, there is another crisis that poses a major threat to the stability of the transition phase and the peace process which is economic crisis. There is an urgent need to address the crisis the country is currently facing. Inflation rate is on the rise, fuel shortages have affected not just the industry sector but also the service sector, and worse the structural and that solutions can be found by addressing the problem at the grassroots rather than issuing bonds to clear government debt. Both Vladimir Putin and former Brazilian President Fernando Henrique would agree economic problems are the real problem that invites further problems. Both Putin and former Brazilian President Fernando.

The radical ethnic groups are fast gaining popularity amongst their people. The Russian Financial Crisis and the Brazilian Financial Crisis in the 1990's both demonstrate perfectly how governments sold their debt as government bonds to ease the budgetary pressure on the government. However, the policy to sell government debt as bonds is only a short term measure that invites further problems. Reports have it that the ethnic divide there is so strong that some of the radical ethnic fronts have erected landmark pillars banning non-Hil people from entering the hilly area. The aim of course is to prohibit Madhesis from entering the hill region. But can we Nepali's afford a greater social conflict?

The radical ethnic groups are fast gaining popularity amongst their people. The answer of course is, no. But the social challenges are real and escalating. The Maoists have provided a perfect benchmarking model that espoused sentiments of self determination and violence. The only real solution is devolution and structural adjustments in the social hierarchy of the country. There are no shortcuts. However, with such a weak government in place, the presence of government has been only limited to certain areas of the country. And due to lack of government authority at all levels throughout the country, the radical ethnic groups are fast gaining popularity amongst their people. This is a worrying aspect.

The total damage done to the infrastructure of the country by the Maoists during their 10 year war crossed 15 billion rupees. The human loss was also equally great. But the continued social divide and the looming economic crisis the country will inevitably face in the next two months in the absence of a consensus developed economic and social policy will be far more violent and difficult to solve than the Maoists’ rigid dogmatic war.

Every one knows elections won’t probably happen. The chances are very slim. Despite the fact that elections are difficult to hold and unsafe to campaign for, the politicians are reluctantly optimistic about the possibilities of the polls happening, because no one at this stage wants to be the bearer of the universal truth. However, what is interesting to observe is the changing dynamics of Nepali politics. The King has broken his silence and this time the condemnation has only come from the side of the Maoists.

The Maoists and all the political actors know the last two months are the most crucial months that will invariably alter the power dynamics of Nepali politics. Given the precarious situation of the country, the communists and the democrats are in their last round of preparation to strike yet another power deal that will shape the future power structure of Nepali politics much before the elections.

The Prime Minister is engaged in talks with the Maoists and the democrats are in their last round of preparation to strike yet another power deal that will shape the future power structure of Nepali politics much before the elections.
Creating a song would ordinarily mean tapping into one’s emotions, expressing it in words that correctly describe the feelings, labouring over arrangement of words, creating a melody to suit the words and then singing it just right to convey the intention behind the words that were created in the first place. But for ANUPAMA DAHAL, it was a different story.

Well structured moving poems and highly poignant melodious songs that all have an essence of the Buddha’s teachings in it, began emerging from her consciousness about three years ago. She has written down around 270 songs and poems so far. For someone without any singing or literature background, this amazing outpouring of words that touches the core of your heart is a unique phenomenon indeed. Anupama shared her amazing story with SUSHMA AMATYA recently:

When did it all start?
I started singing soon after I completed my Samadha practice. When it happened, I shared it with my spiritual guru, Sridhar Rinpoche, who advised me to sing during the pooja on every Dwasa and later in the Sangha gathering. Everybody liked it and since then I’ve been singing for the past three years.

I still recall vividly my first experience that was so touching. I used to practice Tara, my favorite deity a lot then. As I was walking outside, a song called Utha Dakini emerged suddenly in my mind and I was inspired to write it down there and then. I did not realise till I had completed writing the song that tears were streaming down my face. While writing, I surrendered completely to Tara, looking upon her as my mother. Another song, Jyaure, emerged when I chanced upon a beggar and felt great compassion for him. I fed him and experienced the strength of Dharma practice, I’ve been practicing Buddhist was so happy when I told him one day that life has suffering. You released a CD recently. What plans do you have for the future?
It is my 1st CD called Pagala Badal with eight songs of mixed category. Each and every song carries some teaching of the Buddha, only in different forms. The music arrangement is done by Pema dai, a Tibetan musician. I had no knowledge of music but since the past two years, I’ve been learning harmonium, Tanpura and practice vocals.

When I write songs or poems, I transcends this present boundary.

Excerpts from Anupama’s English poems

1. Ecstasy:
.....I can a song of joy and sorrow
I myself am Nairatma, I myself, yogi...
.....a beautiful picture of nothingness!
What a song of no voice!
How rich I am today with these hands full of emptiness...

2. Test of voidness:
.....This is the song of evening time
the test of voidness is like drinking a glass of wine...

3. I caught:
.....This is what I have caught it is always beyond the thought
The voice of singing birds
Yes! I caught it...

Not being a professional, I have many weak areas in this field that was unknown to me earlier. So, for all the mistakes I commit, I wish to ask forgiveness from the experts in this field. My only intention is that my songs benefit everybody. That is my sincere feeling I wish to share with my listeners. I will improve my vocals and continue with these songs as long as they continue to emerge. At the same time, I will continue to teach classical dance.

The voice of singing birds makes me very happy. I always pray that in future lives, I am never far away from my guru.

How did your family react to this?
My husband, son and the rest of my family love my songs and appreciate the messages they convey. Most of those who listen to my songs get so touched that tears well up in their eyes. Although born into a Hindu family, my parents being very broadminded, they had no objections to me practicing Buddhism. My husband, a doctor, also a practicing Buddhist was so happy when I told him one day that life has suffering. You released a CD recently. What plans do you have for the future?
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The joy of twisting herb
The voice of singing birds

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Avifauna is an integral part of the ecosystem and also indicates status of the ecosystem. Ecosystem is dynamic; but at times, some of its changes go unnoticed until any scientific testimonials alert us with hard evidences. Vulture is a common bird; we have seen them in our locale scavenging carcasses of dead animals or hovering in sky as a harbinger of the dead. Many of us even run away or hovering in sky as a harbinger of the dead. Many of us even run away from such unwholesome sightings of vultures sniffing pieces of dead animal’s interior, but we fail to reckon the ecological significance of such event, where vultures help to maintain the ecological chain and sanitation in the area.

In the last decade, Indian sub-continent witnessed sharp decline in White-rumped vulture (Gyps bengalensis) and Slender-billed vulture (Gyps tenuirostris). Their number even went down to zero in some areas, whilst other parts struggled hard to maintain their scant populace. Both the species were then categorised as ‘Critically Endangered’. The species were common in lowland of Nepal, but recent trend shows their fleeting population even in their stronghold areas.

The scientific community started to keep track of these vulture species in pocket areas in Nepal and the campaign at community level for the conservation of the species. Hardly any data were available prior to 2000 AD, when there was less concern towards these species. It all then started with the rigorous documentation by the researchers from Bird Conservation Nepal (BCN), Institute of Forestry (IOF) and others with financial support provided by int’l organisations deeply involved in bird conservation and sundry issues throughout the world. Researchers have revealed that the vultures could be seen in Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve (KTWR), Suklaphanta Wildlife Reserve (SWR), and around Banita National Park (BNP), Rampur Valley and Kapilvastu area. White-rumped vulture started to decline at an alarming rate since 1997 in Nepal, whilst Slender-billed vulture, once common in India and Nepal till late, started to decline sharply in the last few years.

Faster rate of decline was observed in eastern than in western part of Nepal. India and Nepal have lost almost 95% of their population. They were almost wiped out from Chitwan as a breeding bird, and merely a few sightings have been reported in some sites of Chitwan. Such sharp decline has been attributed to loss of habitat, food scarcity, detrimental effect of pesticides and poison, and parasitic infection. The species carry out their nesting and roosting in Sal, Sisho, Saj, Simal and Boldhyno trees. An investigation suggested that the monsoon floods in KTWR often uproot old trees, which are best suited for the vultures’ habitat. But there were cases, when the birds were not seen in areas that retained sufficient number of nesting trees. So, the decline in their number cannot be solely attributed to the habitat loss. As regards food availability, the two species have been recorded short even if there was ample food supply of dead animals in KTWR.

Meanwhile, studies carried out in India have shown the toxicity of pesticides in vultures. The Terai districts of Nepal have been witnessing an increasing usage of pesticides with improper handling and disposal. The persistent compounds undergo bioaccumulation and biomagnification in food chain. However, the correlation in between the pesticide usage and their population decline in Nepal has not yet been strongly established. There are some underlying contentions within the presumption.

In India, researchers have found the cases of poisoning of the vultures from livestock carcasses containing residues of Diclofenac, a veterinary drug. Such intentional as well as unintentional poisoning of vultures in parts of Nepal have also been documented. Poisoning could wipe out substantial number of the species at one go. Similarly, a research study carried out on parasitic infection and diseases in vulture has suggested helminth parasites as one of the possible causes for their decline.

Numerous evidences have already established link in between their decline and the factors. Vultures have been affected by one or the other aforementioned causes. Habitat loss could be a reason for such sharp decline in an area, whereas it could be poisoning in another case. The long-term impact of pesticides on birds inter alia vulture cannot be kept at bay and therefore, more research is needed in order to find the nexus along the chain. Meanwhile, society has to be made aware of such ‘critically endangered species’, which are on the brink of extinction.

There are places in South Asia, where vultures are revered as a symbol or part of their culture. Such practices could be strengthened which in turn, would help to maintain the viability of the two species. Amidst the growing bleak scenario in Nepal, lately almost three dozens of vulture and their habitat were sighted in a jungle in Dhanagadi. According to BCN, the flock comprised of White-rumped vulture and Slender-billed vulture. BCN has also been carrying out vulture-breeding in Kawasoti and Banita Ghat areas.

The breeding center at Chitwan has also been initiated lately. The dismal picture of the population could be enhanced by raising awareness, campaigning, research studies, and conservation efforts from each tier of society. We can still recover the dying population of the two vultures through our tireless endeavors to conserve nature’s precious gifts.

(Bijan works in WWF Nepal.)
**From the region**

**Playing with fire in Pakistan**

By Eric Margolis

Pakistan’s national elections on Monday are critically important for this strife-torn country’s future. They are just as important for its Western backers. Unless honestly conducted — and this seems highly unlikely — the vote will ignite further violence, plunging the strategically vital nation of 163 million into new dangers.

Only one thing is certain about Monday’s vote. If President Pervez Musharraf and his PML-Q party do well enough to retain power or lead a coalition, almost everyone will charge the election was rigged. Musharraf has manipulated every vote since seizing power in a 1999 military coup. Polls show only 15-20 per cent of Pakistanis support him. A recent World Public Opinion voter survey found 63 per cent believed conditions in Pakistan would improve if Musharraf resigned.

The majority of Pakistanis backs the late Benazir Bhutto’s People’s Party, and former prime minister Nawaz Sharif’s Muslim League (PML-N).

But Musharraf’s powerful friends are determined to keep him in office. In spite of Musharraf’s having muzzled the media, jailed thousands of opponents, purged the judiciary, and stuffed the electoral commission with henchmen in Washington and London still support his dictatorship and continue to hail him as a “democrat.”

Adding to the hypocrisies, while claiming to be waging war in Afghanistan to bring it democracy, the Western powers have been encouraging dictatorship in Pakistan.

The reason is clear. Musharraf has rented out much of his army and intelligence service to battle Taleban in Afghanistan, and tribal militants at home. The fee: up to $1 billion monthly in secret and overt US payments. Without the steady inflow of cash from Washington, Musharraf would not last very long.

Musharraf and his US and British patrons are hoping the opposition will split the vote and leave the former general as last man standing. The opposition, by contrast, is talking about ending the war against Taleban and reasserting Pakistan’s traditional interests in Afghanistan and Kashmir.

The powerful military still supports Musharraf, though for how long depends on the level of post-election violence.

Gene Ashraf Khan, the new armed forces chief, was selected by Musharraf and Washington as a loyal anti-extremist who would follow America’s lead. But this capable general remains an enigma. Intelligence sources say he opposed the US decision in early 2007 to ease the founding of Musharraf from power and make Gen Khaliq Pary’s new government strong.

If Pakistan is rent by widespread protests and violence over brazen electoral fraud, if it suffers political deadlock, the military may overthrow the widely unpopular Musharraf and seize power.

Gen Khaliq is said to be reluctant to see the military re-engage in politics, but there could be no alternative.

The best outcome would be for the military to remove Musharraf and impose temporary martial law until the independent judiciary can be restored, the electoral commission made fair, media un gagged, and political repression ended.

Then genuine elections could be held and Pakistan returned to parliamentary government. But once soldiers take power, they are often reluctant to give it up.

Until Pakistan gets a legitimate government representing its national interests, rather than those of the Western powers, the country will remain in turmoil.

Pakistan is facing spreading civil war, and possible secession by two of its four provinces, Balochistan and Northwest Frontier. The Pakistan Taleban uprising ignited by the US/NATO occupation of Afghanistan is now spreading into Pakistan, risking a full-scale uprising by that nation’s 25 million Pashtuns. Any of these earthquakes could provoke an invasion by India, met by a nuclear riposte from Pakistan.

The war in Afghanistan and heavy-handed efforts by the US to bend Pakistan’s military regime to its will ignited much of the current turmoil. A majority of Pakistanis don’t want their soldiers to be Western mercenaries, or their leaders Western yes-men. They support Taleban and the struggle for Kashmir. But the US is so consumed by its war of revenge against Taleban it cannot see any of this.

Pakistan is one of the Muslim World’s most important nations and its sole nuclear power. By treating Pakistan like a banana republic, arm-twisting Islamabad into battling its own people, and ignoring the wishes of Pakistan’s people, the US and Britain are playing with fire.

**Philippines**

**MILF denies role in bid on Arroyo**

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) has said it is “offended” by Armed Forces chief General Hernogen Esperon’s assertion that it was behind a plot to assassinate President Gloria Arroyo.

The MILF stated that it had never entertained the thought of assassinating Arroyo.

“This is an insidious lie and a preposterous claim by one who is less than the highest military officer of the country against a partner in the peace process,” said Mohammad Ameen, chairperson of the MILF Secretariat.

Ameen criticised Esperon “for making sweeping and irresponsible statements against the MILF, in direct and utter disregard of the primacy of the peace process and the ceasefire in Mindanao.”

“This should not be left unanswered even in the form of a formal protest,” Ameen said.

Esperon said on Friday that the intelligence arm of the police and the military had uncovered a supposed assassination plot against Arroyo.

The plot had reportedly been accidentally discovered by a security guard in an establishment in Metro Manila. Reports on the purported attempt on the life of the President had forced Presidential Security Group Commander Brig Gen Romeo Prestoza to call off Arroyo’s scheduled trip to the hilltop resort of Baguio City yesterday to attend the Philippine Academy of Sciences’ annual homecoming.

MILF committee on information and peace panel chair Mohagher Iqbal, branded Esperon’s statement as a “virtual invitation for war.”

Iqbal, in an interview with Manila-based DZXL, said changing a partner in the peace process with planning bombing and assassination “is a very serious pronouncement that violates the very spirit of the peace process.”

Iqbal denied the existence of an MILF breakout group.

“The MILF Central Committee is in control and at every man and woman in the organisation is boeing the line the moment a decision is made,” he stressed.

Iqbal called on his counterpart in the government Peace Panel, Sec Rodolfo Garcia, to have a serious look into allegations against the MILF. Prior to Esperon’s statements, Prestoza also revealed that the plot against Arroyo also involved the communist New People’s Army (NPA).

Prestoza said right after Arroyo had announced an intensified drive against the NPA less than a month ago, the communist insurgent group had already drawn up a response to the government offensive.

The reason, According to Prestoza, would be in the form of bomb attacks in various parts of the country. The reports over the alleged plot to kill Arroyo came amid renewed allegations of corruption in Manila.
Violence against women is a serious problem in our society. Due to dominant patriarchal systems, structures, social norms and values, women are not getting enough women-friendly space to raise their voices for justice. Most often violence against women happens within private spheres, inside homes, against women happens within women-friendly space to raise their dominant patriarchal systems, a problem in our society. Due to age-old outdated home and by changing...

There is violence in public space as well and women find it difficult to resist these forms of dominations. One can easily blame women for their ignorance, illiteracy, cowardice and so on but the structural factors leading to create such situations are so vicious and systematic in nature that women are rendered helpless. The culture of violence is sustained within the vicious frameworks of patriarchy in our society.

Violence against women indicates different kinds of physical as well as psychological abuse that women suffer primarily because of gender discrimination prevalent in Nepali society. According to Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, “The term violence against women means any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”

The numbers of cases of violence against women are increasing day by day.Poverty, gender discrimination, illiteracy, lack of knowledge and systems of patriarchy are known to be the major factors responsible for violence against women. Many cases of violence are not reported out of fear of the society and doubts regarding the affectivity of the existing laws.

There are women who are tortured because they belong to lower castes; and there are thousands of dowry cases where women are burnt alive or beaten severely. Likewise, there are cases of migrant women suffering due to lack of proper policies and support systems.

There are only few cases that come into public notice. Unfortunately, there are thousands of such cases, and the women remain as silent sufferers. There are cases of such violence even within educated and rich families. In our society where rules, regulations and social customs are made differently for males and females, there exists severe gender inequality which is one of the prime reasons for violence against women.

In Nepal women have less control over their own marriage, age of marriage, marriage partners and sexual and reproductive life after marriage. Men impose unconditional power over women’s body and sexual relations, making women more prone to violence.

Different researches and reports show that forced sexual initiation through child marriage, domestic violence, marital rape, rape, and trafficking and conflict increases women’s vulnerability to HIV/AIDS too. In Nepal, the culture and religion dominate women so much so that they do not seem to have power over their own bodies! These are bitter realities of our society where women are forced into a culture of silence.

These issues need to be addressed urgently at all levels of our society through education and awareness at the grassroots levels and ensuring each and every girl child completes her education. Strict laws need to be implemented that act as effective barriers against early marriage, forced marriage, trafficking, sex trade and other forms of exploitation of women. Women’s rights need to be protected by all sections of society, beginning at homes by changing age-old outdated mindset. And women need to empower themselves and speak out and fight for justice when their rights are violated, no matter where or by whom.

Nepali women and domestic violence

In the United States, according to the Family Violence Prevention Fund, on an average, more than three women are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends every day. In 2000, 1,247 women were killed by an intimate partner. Asian Task Force against domestic violence reported that 44% of South Asians (Indians, Nepalis, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Sri Lankans) surveyed said that they know a woman victim of domestic abuse. 5% of respondents said that a woman should tell no one that she is being abused.

Dr. Bidya Ranjeet, President of Nepal Women’s Global Network and a professor at University of Connecticut said that a significant number of Nepali women are victims of domestic violence in the US. Although data on actual number of victims is hard to get because of lack of reporting and also because compared to other immigrant groups, Nepalis are a small community so usually they are categorised under “South Asian.” Bidya said that in the past few years has met and tried to help a couple of Nepali women victimised by their husbands and in-laws.

Dr. Ranjeet noted that because of cultural barriers and religious norms, Nepali women find it difficult to seek help in case of domestic violence. They try their best to reconcile and look at outside violence. They try their best to reconcile and look at outside violence. They try their best to reconcile and look at outside violence. They try their best to reconcile and look at outside violence.

Ms. Goswami said that the US law protects victims of domestic violence and they cannot be deported just for reporting violence and also police officers who respond to call for help never ask for your immigration status, so women need not fear reporting.

Neha Gill, Supervising Legal Advocate with Apna Ghar in Chicago also echoed Meghna Goswami’s sentiments that they too are having trouble reaching out the local Nepali community. They have a volunteer who speaks Nepali and in past year have helped four women from the community who were victims of domestic violence.

The Nepali women who sought Apna Ghar’s help had at least a high school diploma; some had bachelor’s degree. But they had very little work experience and were first generation immigrants with dependent visas.

There are more than 30 Nepali organisations across the US, from student groups to cultural associations, but domestic violence and women’s issues have received very little attention. Nepal Women’s Global Network and Nepali women’s association in Washington DC are so far the only organisations championing for women’s issues, even though none of them have programs to target domestic violence.
This kind of insight gained by remembering one’s own past lives or the past lives of others is a prominent feature of Buddhist literature. It is illustrated in the Jatakas and the life stories of Buddhist Arhats, Mahasiddhas and lineage masters. Memory of past life can also be achieved by other techniques, one of which is past life regression through hypnosis and the other is a technique called Jati smarana gyana. This is the technique of tracing events backwards.

One tries to trace back the events of the day then slowly extend it to two, three hundred days, one year, ten years, 20 years and back to birth and onwards to next life. This method can be used without attaining Samadhis. Certain individuals, generally children remember their past lives, but generally such remembrances are feeble and sometimes not fully accurate and also they tend to fade away.

Dr. Ian Stevenson (MD), the Head of the Department of Parapsychology of Virginia University has four huge volumes of records of such children from all over the world – from Alaska, Lebanon, Turkey to India, Sri Lanka etc. And as I said before these are well researched, scientifically shifted materials that cannot be denied easily as the research method applied by Dr. Ian Stevenson (MD) is impeccable.

The Purvanivasanusmriti gained by meditation has practical benefits in many ways. With this knowledge one can realise the truth of rebirth, the operation of the law of karma, the history of the macro cycles and micro cycles of evolution and involution of world systems. It is of the greatest help for cultivating Maitri (loving kindness), Karuna (compassion), Mudita (empathy) and Upekshya (equanimity).

These are called the Chatur Brahma Viharas and are a very important meditational group within Buddhism – especially in Mahayan / Bodhisatwayana. This group of meditation has been copied wholesale in the Patanjala Sutra. According to the famous scholar Dr. S. N. Gupta the Patanjala Sutra is nothing but a rehashing of the Buddhist Astangika Marga. Today almost all Hindu meditation methods link themselves with the Patanjala Sutra.

Purvanivasanusmriti also helps a lot in gaining insight into phenomenal existence (Dharma) which is the main objective of Vipassyana because someone that can see all these can clearly see the changes of time, he can see nations arising and ceasing, civilisations arising and ceasing, world systems (Lokadhatus) and bigger world cycles (Trisaahasra mahasaahasra lokadhatus) arising and ceasing; just as a Vedanaanusmriti vipasyin can see his micro level Vedana arising and ceasing. And indeed that is what Vipassayana is all about. (To be continued)
It was only possible to cross this bridge with our noses well protected by handkerchiefs.

While visiting Kathmandu earlier this year a few things struck my heart with incredible sadness. One of them was the Bagmati River, particularly when I viewed it from the bridge connecting Patan with Kathmandu.

It was only possible to cross this bridge with our noses well protected by handkerchiefs. The smell from the raw sewage was overwhelming and the view, disgusting. I wondered how people could pass over this bridge daily, let alone the poor who have to live along its banks. How do they manage to exist next to this dirty stream without becoming sick? Not to mention the poor small children who have no other place to play but on the sides of this seething repository of human and other wastes.

Although the river might flow during the monsoon season, at that time it was stagnated with all sorts of debris, hanging on the edges of rocks and blocking the passage of faeces. It seems that whatever people don’t need anymore, must be accepted by the Bagmati. Somewhere along the banks I spotted a cultivated vegetable garden. A welcome sight indeed!

Is the Bagmati not a holy river for the Nepalis? Is it not mentioned in the religious texts? Is it not the dearest wish of most Nepalis to be cremated on its shores?

There are several shrines along the banks of the Bagmati River. About 15 years ago, I went with my Nepali Aama, Sita-Devi to one of these shrines for Puja. In front of us, the river flowed silently. There was no noise from the city. The Himalayas rose majestically before us. Peace flowed over me at that moment and the wonderful memory is still fresh in my mind. But look at its terrible state now!

I was forced to ask myself if the Nepalis truly believe in the holiness of this and all other rivers. How can they have so little respect and connection to them? Water is not just a gift, but also a necessity. Without water, there is no life. Humans, animals, plants cannot survive on this earth without water.

Three years ago, I attended the presentation of Saphalya Amatya’s book, Water and Culture. People were excited and charged up then, conscious of the need for change in the system of managing the Bagmati. “Save the Bagmati” was the slogan. What has happened to this movement, this energy for saving rivers? I see nothing of it now. There is not a slightest change in the condition of the river and quality of water in Kathmandu.

People are always saying, “With another government, things will change.” Why do Nepalis wait for the ‘other’ government? Why don’t they do something, each and every one of them, to change their personal view of the river, to protect this dear natural resource? Why are they not complaining in a loud voice, or organising community clean-up groups to pick up the trash along the sides of the river? Why can they not see the value in protecting these important bodies of water?

Today, Bagmati and the Vishnumati and other rivers flow like sewers through the landscape. What will they bring to the country? Only terrible sickness and death. Clean, fresh water is a life-giver and the basic necessity every human being is entitled to. Where will the Nepalis especially those in the valley go to fetch clean water? During summers I watched with pain the long endless queues of people with their buckets and plastic containers waiting for a tanker and the mad rush when it arrived. Why is there such severe shortage of water in this country that is blessed by so many rivers originating in such pristine reservoirs of the Himalayas?

Why are not the policy makers and the common people working together to address this problem before it gets out of hand? Surely, there are ways to tap the water sources and reviving these rivers! It is not high time all Nepalis focus on this problem that is so important to their lives and the future generation’s lives? My appeal is please save the rivers, save your lives!

Elisabeth Wetzel

How can they have so little respect and connection to them? Water is not just a gift, but also a necessity.