



KAMIKAZE

America is at war. But with whom?

A typo has cost a Norwegian-Nepali joint-venture for BPC its Rs730 million bid.

Whatever the outcome of the BPC drama the government will have a lot of explaining to do at negotiations for the next phase of privatisation support which began last week. □ □

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An unstable tripod

The Maoists, the palace and the Indian connection make for treacherous, confusing realpolitik.

Girija Prasad Koirala has once again caused a tempest in the teacup that is Kathmandu high society. The Nepali elite take pride in its double-standards: while whispering about the links between India, the palace and the Maoist insurgency is de rigueur at private gatherings, you aren't supposed to voice such concerns within the earshot of the *hai polloi*. So it is not what Girijababu said that has raised hackles, but the when, where and how of his statements. By thinking aloud in public, he has questioned the political correctness of the capital's establishment.

You don't have to be a James Bond to figure out that the Maoist insurgency depends on supply-lines from India. Earlier reports that Comrade Prachanda had travelled to London on an Indian passport remain unconfirmed, but the fact that he holds court in Silligan has been verified by a bevy of leftist leaders who travelled to the Chicken Neck for an audience with him just a few weeks ago. Certainly, the Maoists have bases and safe houses south of the border, and training camps to boot.

It would be being grossly disrespectful to the hawk-eyed Indian intelligence units to allege that they have been unaware of plots being hatched right under their noses against the very system of government of a friendly neighbouring country. Direct complicity of the Indian government is not established, and may be too much to claim, but there is no doubt that Indian intelligence agencies have been looking away as the Maoists have gone about procuring weapons in the arms bazaar of Bihar, UP and West Bengal.

Similarly, King Birendra may not have had a "working unity" with the Maoists as Dr Baburam Bhattarai claims, but you do not need another Sherlock Holmes to understand that the palace has played a hand in preventing the army from mobilising against the insurgents, disallowing Sushil Dhar the kind of potential power every government needs when confronted with an insurgency. No thanks to Narayanbhai, the Nepal Police must be the only civilian police in the world to have fought an organised insurgency entirely on its own, without so much as moral support from the Royal Nepal Army.

By assenting to Krishna Prasad Bhattarai that the Royal Nepal Army was his own to employ, King Birendra cut the prime minister of the sovereign people to size, and boosted the morale of the likes of Ram Bahadur Thapa, alas

by CK LAL



Indian establishment and the palace together. Meanwhile, how is it that the Maoists have not attracted a critical reference from either source when even star remarks by senior Nepal Congress leaders creates flutters within Narayanbhai and the mouthpieces of the Indian embassy.

At the height of the Cuban missile crisis, when the sense of danger was just as palpable, John F. Kennedy stayed in Washington, but President Bush only flew back to Washington Tuesday night, escorted by F-15 and F-16 fighters. Leaders of both parties closed ranks behind him and in a brief, earnest televised speech, he said the day had taken "thousands of lives" and generated "a quiet, unyielding anger" in the nation.

He promised that those who harboured terrorists would be treated as harshly as the terrorists themselves.

And even if Washington concludes that the "people's army". When Maoist insurgents went on a rampage in Dhanu, Royal Nepal Army soldiers in nearby barracks heard the carnage but did not lift a finger. When Hoken episode indicated a sudden turnaround with the deployment of the military and a first-time show of force by the government, the army dithered—leading to the resignation of Girija Prasad Koirala the next morning.

While it would be sacrilegious to lay blame on the person of the late or present king, the establishment call the "palace" is a different kettle of fish altogether. Back in 1981, BP Koirala enunciated the difference between the institution of kingship and the palace establishment in an interview to the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*. The palace is a bizarre affair. It isn't a monarchy, so to speak. There is the king and there are also other lobbies in the palace. I shall not be surprised if the big powers also have their own spokesmen in the palace. "Big powers" have become less

flexible in a unipolar world, but there are always aspiring regional powers who want to flex their muscles. And, within the palace, it is clear that the apparatuses are very much there from earlier times, and the days when they would devote absolute power in the name of the Panchayat monarch seem more and more tantalisingly close to the grasp.

While an alliance between the palace and the southern power may seem too far-fetched, it is not unlikely that there is a momentary convergence of interest that comes about as a result of the instability brought about by the Maoist conflagration. Girija Koirala's fears, at the very least, need to be seen more than the rantings of a politician out of a job. And perhaps then we can see what he is pointing at—the extraordinary degree of complacency vis-à-vis the Maoist insurgency shown by the



Fighting an invisible enemy

WASHINGTON—Tuesday's devastating and astonishingly well-coordinated attacks on the World Trade Center towers in New York and on the Pentagon outside of Washington plunged the nation into a warlike struggle against an enemy that will be hard to identify with certainty and hard to punish with precision.

The whole nation—to a degree the whole world—shook as hijacked airliners plunged into buildings that symbolise the financial and military might of the United States. The sense of security and self-confidence that Americans take as their birthright suffered a grievous blow. Recovery will be slow and the aftermaths will be nearly as bad, as hundreds and possibly thousands of people discover that friends or relatives died awful, fiery deaths.

As Washington struggled to regain a sense of equilibrium, with warplanes and heavily armed helicopters crossing overhead, present and past national security officials debated the possibility of a Congressional declaration of war—but against whom, and in what exact circumstances? Warships were manoeuvring to protect New York and Washington. The North American Air Defense Command, which had seemed to may a relic of the cold war, adopted a posture of heightened alert and suddenly seemed relevant.

At the height of the Cuban missile crisis, when the sense of danger was just as palpable, John F. Kennedy stayed in Washington, but President Bush only flew back to Washington Tuesday night, escorted by F-15 and F-16 fighters. Leaders of both parties closed ranks behind him and in a brief, earnest televised speech, he said the day had taken "thousands of lives" and generated "a quiet, unyielding anger" in the nation. He promised that those who harboured terrorists would be treated as harshly as the terrorists themselves.

For Bush the attacks constituted a threat and an opportunity. A minority president just a few months into his term, and derided by many as intellectually inadequate, he is likely to be judged in the months ahead on whether he can take command. Will he prove to be a Jimmy Carter, whose presidency was poisoned by his inability to resolve the Iranian hostage crisis? Or will he enhance his reputation, as Ronald Reagan did after the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger and as Bill Clinton did after the Oklahoma City bombing?

Samuel Popkin, a political scientist at the University of California at San Diego, who worked in the presidential campaign of Al Gore, said: "Many Americans have come to consider politics irrelevant in recent years. Now politicians matter again, and the president, in his role as commander in chief, becomes our focal point." In a statement made at an air base in Louisiana, Bush said that "the resolve of our great nation is being tested" and pledged to meet it. Arizona's Senator John McCain, Bush's sometime Republican rival, said he was confident the culprits would be caught and severely punished and that the president would "ensure something like this will never happen again." These comments set the bar perhaps too high.

The public will rise to the challenge: many in the building, his race, his age, almost supernatural calm. But Bush alone must decide how to retaliate and against whom, and he will be operating in a murky area. "We're better than we used to be at monitoring terrorist activities, but today makes it obvious we are not nearly as good as we thought," a senior intelligence official conceded. Preventing another attack will be very difficult and while identifying malefactors after an attack is relatively easier, experts caution against assuming, for example, that the attacks were the handiwork of Osama bin Laden.

Even if Washington concludes that



A bomber and a helicopter survey the seat of the US military.

Dazed tourists walk past the billowing smoke from the Pentagon.

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his organisation or some other foreign terrorist group was responsible, devising an appropriate response will present complications. For one, bombs and rockets tend to kill the innocent and the guilty. Some strategists suggest that Bush might mount a ground attack on bin Laden's headquarters, believed to be in Afghanistan, much as Woodrow Wilson sent American troops into Mexico before World War I to capture Pancho Villa dead or alive. But they did not get him. And Afghanistan has proved resistant, throughout its history, to foreign forces trying to operate there.

If the US develops solid evidence that any country aided the perpetrators of the attacks, said Richard C. Holbrooke, ambassador to the UN under the Clinton administration, a declaration of war against that country might be needed to protect the nation. I will be up to Bush to make that case. If he makes it well, it will be harder for the Democrats to mount a partisan assault on his plan. It will be up to him as well, perhaps even more important, to keep the country from entering a kind of psychic bomb shelter, reluctant to make

today's events to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. This was Pearl Harbor redux without the face of an enemy. In this anomalous situation, Bush is likely to avail himself fully of the knowledge, experience and prestige of his secretary of state, retired Gen Colin Powell. The president "needs Colin like he's never needed him before," an administration official said.

It appears possible that the attacks will undercut Bush's campaign for a missile defense shield by suggesting that such a shield would concentrate American resources on seeking protection against the wrong kind of threat. People who use the US "I don't need missiles to do this country hard." Professor Popkin agreed, "and we saw that clearly this morning." Or, the attacks might persuade the American public that everything possible should be done to protect the nation. I will be up to Bush to make that case. If he makes it well, it will be harder for the Democrats to mount a partisan assault on his plan. It will be up to him as well, perhaps even more important, to keep the country from entering a kind of psychic bomb shelter, reluctant to make

decisions, take chances, even to fly from one city to another. One of the most important contributions to Londoners' morale during the Battle of Britain was made by King George VI, who calmly toured the city despite the blitz.

Inevitably, the attacks will make daily life in the US complicated. Security will be tightened and airport checks will be stricter. It will be harder to get about. At past moments of national tension, like the Cold War, civil liberties have come under pressure. Senator Joseph R. Biden, a Democrat, warned that "if we alter our basic freedoms, our civil liberties, change the way we function as a democratic society, then we have lost the war before it has begun in earnest."

And what of the nation's economy, the main preoccupation of much of the nation? Although the stock market remained closed Tuesday, the Dow Jones, Bush's counselor, was at pains to state that the rest of the economic system functioned normally. But it was by no definition a normal day, and sooner or later in hellish events are bound to affect the economy in some way—probably not for the better. O (New York Times)

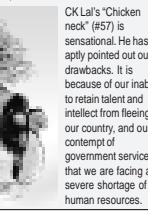
LETTERS

CK Lal
CK Lal's "The power of one" (#58) is poor analysis spiced up with convoluted thinking and double entendre. In his remarks on the 1816 Treaty of Sugauli Lal does injustice to Amrit Singh Thapa, Bhim Sen Thapa, and Damodar Paudyal, among many others, who did not need Shah kings to tell them what was in the Nepal interest. Lal also suggests the threat of a re-assertive monarchy makes the resumption of conflict more menacing than even a breakdown of government-Maoist talks.

Robin Tuladhar
Kathmandu

Mithun Jung
Naxal, Kathmandu

CK Lal's "Chicken neck" (#57) is sensational. He has aptly pointed out our drawbacks. It is because of our inability to retain talent and intellect from fleeing our country, and our contempt of government service that we are facing a severe shortage of human resources.



malevolence to suggest that King Gyanendra's accession to the throne has not been in the normal course of male primogeniture." Primogeniture orders succession to the throne, without restricting it to the firstborn. And finally, Lal's understanding of the constitution and constitutional monarchy is also incomplete. The king is not to preserve and protect the Constitution by keeping in view the best interests and welfare of the people of Nepal" (Article 27.2 of the Constitution). There should be no doubt where the residual power of the state lies in times of political breakdown.

Regarding the comments made by an Indian diplomat, let me just say that during the four years I studied in India I came across this attitude often: "We Indians are doing you Nepals a favour by recruiting your soldiers in our army." But can you blame them if we work there as chowkidars and domestics? And whose purpose do Gorkhas in the Indian Army serve? We have to find more honourable alternatives for Nepals.

Kanchan Adhikari
USA

VIOLENCE
Reading Dr Aruna Uprety's description of her brave work in western Nepal, ("Women are dying in the far-west," #52) I am frustrated. How could humankind feel such self-hatred as to despise the world, the origin of our own continuity? (Where would all the violence of this world be without such hatred? How such self-loathing came to masquerade as the folkie wisdom of religion is perhaps the greatest spiritual mystery of them all. And it is not just the religions of far-western Nepal that are party to such forces. Gloria Steinem says progressivism has come to stop worrying about "being called biased or goddess for opposing politics that are disguised as religion." Dr Uprety is in the graces of any self-respecting worshipper of the dignity of all

forms of life.

Lozang Sherpa
Via email

Speaking of violence against women, ("Silent state violence," #55), what about the sexual advances made on women who travel by night buses? I speak from my experiences when travelling between Kathmandu and Kavaratti. Once when I was repeatedly harassed by a drunk man, no Nepal brother came forward to help me. The Indian businessman who switched seats with me was a godsend. I know I am not alone—this has happened to every woman I have spoken to. Years later, I still have thinking about those incidents. This is how women are respected and helped in Nepal.

Usha Tamang
Via email

WHODUNT
In "Narayanbhai whodunt. Who cares?" (#58) Karan Dixit sounds preachy in his attack against the press and intellectuals. He fails to point out that it is the palace and the government that continues to fail the people. Mr Dixit ignores a long history of the palace's own

secretive ways and corruption within, its extra-constitutional nexus with the army, its dirty intrigues. What about Kot Parba and Shandharat Parba, or the sad end of Bhimsen Thapa? The palace failed to maintain transparency through undoubtedly the messiest episode in modern-day Nepal. Between Kathmandu and Kavaratti, once when I was repeatedly harassed by a drunk man, no Nepal brother came forward to help me. The Indian businessman who switched seats with me was a godsend. I know I am not alone—this has happened to every woman I have spoken to. Years later, I still have thinking about those incidents. This is how women are respected and helped in Nepal.

Akhlesh Upadhyay
New York University

TALE-BAN.COM

Daniel Lak's "Tale-Ban.com" (#58) was an eye-opener, but perhaps biased. Afghanistan may have entered the Dark Ages, but that might be because they are contemptuous of people who came with bread in one hand and a Bible in another.

Dino Shrestha
Via email



Hard labour

Young Nepalis seeking jobs overseas are cheated at every stage of the employment procedure. And once they are abroad, in debt and unsure of their rights, they work in some pretty appalling conditions.

Khabarparka last year estimated that remittances from abroad amount to Nepal about Rs 75 billion annually—more than tourism, foreign aid and exports put together. However, there is no data available about how this is split up between the different kinds of workers or how much of it is taken as 'commission' by the agents. Most importantly, there is no data on the actual number of Nepali workers abroad. The labour department, under the Ministry of Labour and Transport Management, is supposed to monitor the foreign employment sector, but officials could not even tell us how much an aspiring worker pays an employment agency for placement.

Given the widespread unemployment here, it is not surprising that people want to go abroad. More youth are educated and on the lookout for white-collar jobs, but the job creation potential is negligible in this sector. There are around 300,000 new people on the job market every year, and only a scant 10 percent can be accommodated in the formal sector. Data for the Ninth Plan says that while unemployment is at five percent, underemployment stands at a whopping 47 percent. The Plan has other alarming details—unemployment is highest in the 15-25 age group.

The Nepal Labour Force Survey 1999 includes household work like fetching water and collecting firewood under the purview of 'work', which brings the overall unemployment down to two percent. And yet even in this survey,

unemployment is highest in the most productive 15-25 age group. Young people—especially young men—are being pushed to the edge. Despite publicised incidents of fraud and deception by agents, they are overwhelmingly using family property to try their luck. The ineptitude in the Department of Labour, inefficient implementation of laws concerning workers' rights, and double-dealing private manpower agents all maximise the risks. Unskilled workers usually tend to depend on Gulf countries and south-east Asian countries such as Malaysia suffer the most.

Sociologist Ganesha Gurung conducted a study last year on the Persian Gulf, estimates that for a job which should cost Rs 50,000 to organize, a gullible, helpless and desperate worker ends up paying Rs 80,000-90,000.

This makes for many sad individual stories, but it is also damaging the social fabric of this country. Say a hill lad takes on a loan of Rs 80,000 at 60 percent interest from his village moneylender to pay an agent to secure a three-year job assignment in Malaysia. Even the wages substantially through that period, he will lose. If one is to believe newspaper advertisements, a litre Nepali worker without any previous experience or knowledge, can get a job in Malaysia that pays RM 475 (NR 9,500) per month, of which RM 100 will be deducted in tax. If this worker lives on the barest minimum, eating noodle soup once a day and bunking with five other

workers in one room, he will be able to save about Rs 5,000 a month. Which means he needs to work for 16 months to return the principal, Rs 80,000, by which time his debt, with the interest, will have climbed to Rs 144,000.

Although the government recognises that foreign employment is a strategy to address national poverty, the poor do not benefit from the few opportunities presented to Nepalis. A study conducted in 1999 by Jagannath Adhikari, a Pokhara-based researcher, found that the poorest 40 percent of the village could not possibly benefit from foreign employment because they could not raise Rs 60,000, the minimum cash it took to get a foreign job.

The other trap—the bigger one—for workers abroad is the difference between what the employment agencies promise and the actual work conditions they are faced with. Worried and depressed by the prospect of losing their investment and the loss of face, these youths often work in inhuman conditions, just to be able to return having at least broken even.

Perhaps because of this, the death rate among the Nepali workers in the Gulf is shockingly high. The Bhattarai report says that in three years from 1997-2000, 400 hundred young Nepalis in these countries died in accidents or

by DANIEL LAK



Borderlands

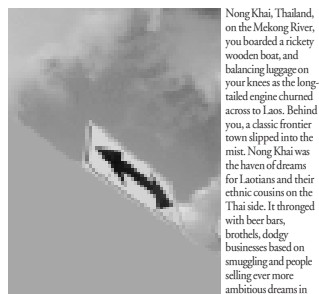
On the frontier, hearts and minds are different from those in the hinterlands in either direction.

NEPALGANI: In this border town, huddled along a road and an invisible line through lush green paddy fields and stands of sal and flame of the forest trees, I feel more at home than in many other parts of the subcontinent. This is a feeling that has nothing to do with aesthetics, good restaurants or nightlife. But it has everything to do with the presence of the border. Now before ultra nationalists leap to conclusions (a ha, told you he was soft India), let me say it is the border itself that intrigues and pleases me, the terrain around it, and the people who make their lives along the frontier.

Nepalguni may not be pretty, but it's full of life and dynamism. Fortunes can be made here, and lost. Ever more opportunist mosques are popping up, and the Muslim property dealer or merchant who builds them has a palatial sprawling home, well within range of the azan. Aficionados of Newari architecture, and I am one, will find little to please them in the style of construction. It is largely of a type known in Delhi as Punjabi Baroque, balconies and bedrooms galore, crenelated walls and terraces, suburban sprawl at its finest. But what I admire is the border-driven energy that generated the wealth behind the construction.

I've been drawn to frontier areas for as long as I can remember. A will distinct impression from childhood is the delicious prospect of crossing from Canada to the United States and making much of the differences from one side to the next. Canada has parlayed its proximity with the world's greatest economy into a pretty successful project. Call it, if you like, border management. A big, sometimes implacably uncaring or unfathomable neighbour, but keep the goods, services and tourists flowing and everything is all right.

So in wanderings over time, I've gone to the borderlands, even if I didn't have to, to marvel and wonder. Some favourites spring to mind. At



Bangkok. The town was an island of relative prosperity in the poorest part of Thailand and the unfathomable poverty of Laos. At night, you could hear the splashes of illegal boats and swimmers, braving the currents and the cops for a taste of prosperity.

Between Singapore and the old pirate capital of Tanjung Pinang in Indonesia, an ultra modern hydrofoil takes from the consumerist paradise of the Lion City to genteel and picturesque decline. Buccanering isn't what it used to be, but smuggling hopeful workers to Singapore isn't a bad substitute. It is a rough business and only the strong survive. Indonesians travel thousands of kilometres and spend their life savings to get to Tanjung Pinang. Usually they fail to realise even a sliver of their dreams. But the first glimpse of the frontier, on land or water, fills them with unrealistic hope, by which they carry on.

Anyone who travels, by necessity or for fun, will tell you that borders are a state of mind, not lines drawn by colonial pens or bureaucrats at negotiating tables. Nepal's border region with India is such a place. It isn't true to say, as the Western guidebooks do, that places like Nepalguni are 'more Indian' or 'less Nepali.' What they are is the frontier where hearts and minds are different from those in the hinterlands in either direction, where people are tougher, less law-abiding, often friendlier and usually wealthier. Those who advocate, in Delhi and Kathmandu, re-imposing tight restrictions on the border should bear all this mind. Open frontiers bother officialdom but generate wealth; closed borders enrich smugglers. Ask the Indians and the Pakistanis how successful they have been on keeping their frontier shut to terrorism, spying, contraband and divided families. Only the latter lose out. □



workers in one room, he will be able to save about Rs 5,000 a month. Which means he needs to work for 16 months to return the principal, Rs 80,000, by which time his debt, with the interest, will have climbed to Rs 144,000.

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committed suicide. In January 2001 alone the bodies of 14 dead workers were flown to Kathmandu.

The government promises to make the foreign employment a secure option for the poor. In 1998, then prime minister Gijya Prasad Koirala said he would appoint labour attachés in countries with over 500,000 Nepali workers, to look after their interests. This never materialised. Promoting foreign employment opportunities is a major component of Nepal's economic diplomacy, but proposals like Koirala's have always come to naught. A proposed labour agreement with Qatar has been under discussion since 1998, but no substantial progress has been made. The 1998/99 budget speech proposed that 200 Nepalis each from the 205 electoral constituencies would be employed overseas via a government agency. In October 1999, the government announced that it would establish a 'foreign employment bank' to provide credit to overseas job seekers. Neither of these promises has materialised.

After the governments in the Gulf allowed individuals to hire foreign workers two years ago, the demand in these countries for unskilled workers has risen sharply. Since Bangladesh,

Pakistan and India, which used to be the main sources of cheap foreign labour, do not send workers there anymore, Nepal has become the new resource. Nepali agents also want to make bigger profits, and supplying workers to meet this demand has become an attractive option. And they do not stop at anything. There have been a number of incidents in which unskilled Nepali workers are sent to the Gulf under demand letters for skilled or semi-skilled workers received through legitimate channels. Once there, these workers, unsure of their legal position and rights, cannot refuse the work that is asked of them. Damani Ballave Bhattarai confirms this. "Smuggling of workers into the Gulf is going on unchecked, Nepalis are being lured into slavery."

Hari Bahadur Sunuwar, who cannot read English, said his agent promised that he had a monthly salary would be RM 475 for work at a construction site in Malaysia, but the paper he was handed before he checked in for his flight at the Tribhuvan International Airport says clearly that he will be paid the Malaysian equivalent of \$3 per day—about Rs 6,000 a month if he works for 26 days.

Sunuwar's case is not only a breach of the understanding between him and his employment

agency, but also violates the 1985 Foreign Employment Act (FEA) that prohibits workers from going—or being sent—abroad for under \$125 per month. The FEA is violated at every stage in such employment processes.

Fraud in foreign employment flourished in the 15 years between 1985 and 1999, because the FEA was not supported by a strong regulation. Before the Foreign Employment Regulation was enacted in 1999, the Act operated on the basis of policy direction, notifications and oral orders from the Department of Labour, all of which created confusion and ambiguities. The Regulation has strict provisions that allow the government to conduct investigations into and even disqualify agencies that violate the law, the problem is still in the implementation side.

Binod Kumar Bhattarai, member-secretary of the Employment Promotion Commission, says he knows why this happens. "The political patronage given to culprits and the involvement of labour officials hampers the implementation most," he says. In Nepal, employment is a political issue. MPs time and again complain openly that they are under great pressure to provide employment to their constituents. So, as the foreign employment sector has grown, many of these 'representatives of the people' got involved in the business themselves or bought favours during the elections. In the still-confused bureaucracy of the agencies meant to guard the interests of workers abroad—the Ministry of Labour and Transport Management and the Department of Labour—the conflict of interest is open. The present labour minister, Paltan Gurung, has a brother, Tek Bahadur Gurung, who runs an employment agency called Himalayan Manpower Agency. The latter is a company for labour, Dev Ratna Tamrakar, is himself one of the main accused in a fraud scandal involving Sampana Overseas Services last year, where 228 people say they were cheated. □

Budhathoki murder

Police are looking for a member of the Bhutan Revolutionary Free Students' Force, a youth organisation that has claimed responsibility for the killing of RK Budhathoki, a prominent leader of the Bhutanese refugees in exile in Nepal.

Budhathoki, the first president of the Bhutan Peoples Party (BPP) was hacked to death in Damak, Jhapa on Sunday. He succumbed to serious neck injuries from a khukuri and died at Ananda hospital in Damak. Budhathoki was attacked by about half-a-dozen young men at the BPP's youth wing office where he was attending a meeting. Police have arrested three people who were at that meeting and are on the look out for six other suspects who are absconding.

Budhathoki, who is survived by his wife and three children, left Bhutan in 1989 and settled down in Biratnagar, Jhapa from where he continued to raise his voice for democracy in Bhutan. He was among those refugee leaders credited with lobbying for raising awareness about the plight of nearly 100,000 Bhutanese refugees living in seven camps in Nepal.

"Though, we've lost an important member of the movement, we will not end our struggle," says SB Subba, president of the Bhutan Refugees Repatriation Representative Committee. There's a certain amount of insecurity prevailing at the moment, but the situation in the camps is peaceful. □

Fr Charles Law SJ

22 September 1931 - 2 September 2001

Fr Charles A. Law, Jesuit educator, noted poet and social worker, passed away last Sunday evening. Fr Law came to Nepal in 1958, when he worked briefly at the newly-established St Xavier's School in Godavari, before heading to Kurseong in India to study theology. After his ordination to Catholic priesthood in 1964, he returned to Nepal to teach at St Xavier's School, Jawalakehi where he was the majority of the science program for nearly 25 years. Although he spent most time in Kathmandu, Fr Law was passionately interested in rural Nepal. He spent six months at a school in Dolakha and four years teaching science in a high school in Parbat district. Fr Law was instrumental in founding St Xavier's College and was principal of its Intermediate in Science program. Under his initiative, the first bachelor's degree programme in social work was started in August 1996, and he was head of that department until he was named superior of the Jesuit Training Centre in Kupondole until a few months ago. Fr Law was also a noted poet and a fluent English writer in Nepal reflects his deep commitment to justice and his concern for the poor and the disadvantaged.

Expect the worst

Here's something to worry about. A report by the Japan International Co-operative Agency (JICA) says that over 20 percent houses in Kathmandu Valley will be destroyed if an earthquake of the same intensity—8.4 on the Richter scale—as that in 1934, hits the region again. JICA prepared the report at the request of the Home Ministry, which wanted to assess possible damage to prepare ways to minimise the impact. The final report is due next year. According to JICA's early findings about 54,025 houses will be completely damaged and another 74,927 of the total 2.56 million houses in the Valley will be slightly affected. It also predicts that Bhaktapur will suffer the heaviest damage and could lose 27 percent of its buildings. Kathmandu and Lalitpur are predicted to lose 20 percent each. Damage of that scale could leave over 17,000 dead and over 50,000 seriously injured. And after the quake will come disease, which could prove even deadlier.

Power schemes

Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) is in a fix. It hasn't been able to collect dues amounting to Rs 2 billion. And it is not people like you and us that are not paying their bills. The defaulters are the government and local government institutions who owe NEA almost all of that money, the private sector and individual subscribers on the rest. Government corporations owe the NEA about Rs 220 million and the home ministry alone owes the utility some Rs 40 million. It is a Catch-22 situation for NEA officials: donors say there will be no money until the authority can prove that its bills are paid, and the largest defaulter of them all is the government, which has to approve all NEA loans.

Baby steps

Finally children from the carpet industry have a chance to go to school—thanks to a committee of carpet industry owners, labourers and the Central Carpet Industries Association (CCIA). So far 1,279 children between the ages of two and five have benefited from eight non-formal education centres managed by the committee with support from GTZ (the German technical co-operation agency). Of the children enrolled at these centres, about 400 have gone on to local public and private schools. Set up between 1999 and 2000, the eight centres in Kathmandu, Sindhupalchowk, Kirtipur and Dolai Valley aim to provide children of weavers a right environment for early childhood development and ensure they don't enter the labour market too early.



Climbing low

HIMALAYAN CLIMBER

RAMYATA LIMBU

It will be quiet at Everest Base Camp this fall. For the first time in nearly two decades there is no autumn expedition from the south side on the world's highest mountain. So is the lure of Everest fading?

"I don't think so," says Ganesh Raj Karki, undersecretary at the trekking and mountaineering section of the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation. "I think a lot of teams are saving their funds and energies for 2003, the 50th anniversary of the first summit of Everest."

Karki does, however, acknowledge that all around this is one of the lowest climbing seasons he has seen in a long time. The Tourism Department has permitted 22 expeditions to climb 15 mountains around the country, about one-third the number that usually comes to scale. Nepal's peaks from 1 September through 15 November.

But Karki remains optimistic. "We expect the number to increase to 45 by the end of the season," he says. But even that number falls short of the average 60-65 expeditions that climb in

the Nepal Himalaya every fall. Despite the fact that spring is the popular season for Everest, as large commercial expeditions feel their chances of negotiating the treacherous Khumbu Ice Fall and reaching the summit with the aid of ropes fixed by climbing Sherpas are better, trekking professionals feel the decrease in the overall number of expeditions is a cause for concern. "If the trend continues the next season, the Ministry should seriously rethink its mountaineering policies," says Ang Tsering Sherpa, chairman and managing director of Asian Trekking, one of Nepal's foremost trekking and expedition companies.

Sherpa's concern is justifiable. As of this week, there are 20 expeditions climbing Cho Oyu via Tibet, with a few more likely to go. "That's the total number of expeditions climbing in Nepal," says Sherpa, whose company is the general sales agent for the China Tibet Mountaineering Association. This fall Asian Trekking is organising two of the four expeditions to Everest, six expeditions to Cho Oyu, and two to Xizapangma—all via Tibet. In Nepal, it is organising just one expedition to Pumori. In

spring this year, in contrast, it organised 24 expeditions to Tibet and 11 expeditions in Nepal. Expeditions have often cited steeper climbing royalties, bureaucratic hassles, paper chases around the finance, tourism, and communication ministries, and the problem of too many liaison officers as reasons that discourage teams from climbing border peaks via Nepal. "We've repeatedly stressed the need for a one-window policy to deal with all the paper work for customs, immigration, communications, finances," says Sherpa.

Nepal has the longest experience in expedition operation in the Himalaya, dating back to 1949. The last major push to rationalise mountaineering activities was in 1978, when peaks were opened in different seasons to accommodate more expeditions on particularly popular mountains, unclimbed peaks were reserved for strictly Nepal or joint expeditions, and 18 peaks were designated "trekking peaks" to support the activities of the Nepal Mountaineering Association (NMA).

Since then there has been nothing except a steep hike in

Mountaineering expeditions are on a downturn, and not only because of political instability.

ministry say they are trying. "The regulations have been reviewed and should be out soon," says Karki. "They focus on the welfare of climbing staff from porters to high-altitude Sherpas, and ensure that teams have to endure less tape. They also address the concept of climbing season," he explains.

When the Destination Nepal 2002-2003 Campaign will coincide with the 50th anniversary of the ascent of Everest and two International Years—the Mountain and of Eco-tourism, it would be an ideal time to open up new peaks and destinations.

The Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation is trying to convince the Home and Defence ministries to abandon their three-decade-old policy and open prohibited areas on Nepal's northern border and also some new peaks. After the Sino-Indian war in 1962, Nepal closed her

Everest and made a traverse of the Tibetan flank and P2 (6,251 m) in the Manali region was climbed for the first by the Ukrainian team that made the first ascent of Manalu's South East Face. This autumn, a six-member Japanese expedition will be attempting Huguishi (7,036 m) in Solukhumbu, while a British duo will try the north face of Tengkaopche (6,500 m), a much sought-after peak. The peaks opened this year are just a fraction of the list of over 60 peaks the department has submitted to the Home and Defence Ministries for perusal. Of the 160 peaks open for climbing, 140 are over 6,000 m. That means that just over 10 percent of the 1,314 peaks over 6,000 m are open to climbers.

Gurung is quick to point out that the peaks selected are concentrated in the east and middle region of the country, the



Climbers at Everest Base Camp.

1996 in the royalty charged by HMG to climb Everest. "While the cost of expeditions in Tibet and Nepal add up to about the same for other mountains, there's a vast difference in the case of Everest," says Sherpa. An Everest expedition via Tibet, including royalty, can be organised for \$70,000, which is what a seven-member expedition via Nepal pays in royalties alone.

Climbers are also exploiting other areas in the region, mainly Pakistan, where a number of unclimbed peaks are now challenges. Apart from having a fair share of eight thousand, since Pakistan is a late starter, expeditions are cheaper there. It is also closer to Europe and the US, from where many climbers come from. "But even many Japanese, avid climbers, are looking at Pakistan," says Tashi Jangbu Sherpa president of the NMA.

While this year's political turmoil may be why some teams cancelled or postponed, most expedition leaders and climbers we spoke with say Nepal needs to spruce up its act. Officials at the

northern borders as a security precaution. China on the other hand, opened its borders in the early 70s and went all out to draw tourists and climbers to the region by adopting a liberal tourism policy and setting up tourism infrastructure.

Dr Harka Gurung, geographer and former tourism minister, has been saying for the last decade that Nepal needs to open prohibited areas and promote unexplored peaks. Based on recommendations made by the Central Department of Geography and approved by the Home Ministry and the Defence Ministry, the mountaineering section of the tourism department opened nine new peaks in spring this year. But, says Gurung, "opening up new peaks is not a deliberate policy of the ministry, it is more a response to external pressure, the demands of the international climbing and trekking community."

Those Middle (8,413 m) in Solukhumbu was climbed that very season by a Russian team that went up to the South Col of

areas that already benefit from trekking and tourism, unlike the relatively unexplored west. This high disparity in the numbers of expeditions by area and by peaks leads to overcrowding in some places. None of the 18 trekking peaks operated by the Nepal Mountaineering Association are in the western region. To decrease the regional disparity, Gurung suggests that mountain higher royalties for crowded peaks and for the high season and low season will lead to regional dispersal and seasonal diffusion of climbing activities.

In the past two decades, over 2,000 mountaineering expeditions visited Nepal—nearly 60 percent of them came in the autumn. Forty-eight teams visited in 1979, and twenty years later this had gone up to 141. Royalties had also increased almost forty-fold. Many say that at least 50 percent of the revenue generated from mountaineering and climbing activities should be given back to these mountain communities. □

23.2 million Nepalis

The early results of the 2001 census: our population is growing and moving.

HEMLATA RAI

The guessing game is over—Nepal's population is just over 23.2 million, says the Nepal Census on Population and Housing 2001. Other than that, the preliminary report mostly reconfirms what we'd suspected—that despite governmental and non-governmental efforts, the population is growing too fast and will double in 31 years at the current growth rate of 2.27.

There are some surprises, though. The population has grown by 25,000 less than anticipated based on the 1991 census—there are only some 525,000 new Nepalis, because the growth rate has actually come down a little from 2.38. There is no official data yet on the composition of the population by age, which makes it difficult to guess at what rate Nepal's population will grow in the years to come.

Still, there is enough in the report to make some educated guesses at how the composition and distribution of Nepal's population will change over the next decades. There will be fewer males in the productive age group. This is mainly because the already high mobility in this segment of the population will only increase as young men continue to move within Nepal and abroad in search of employment and personal advancement. This is why, although the overall female

population is higher, men add up to bigger counts in urban areas. In only 18 of the 58 municipalities does women outnumber men, and even these are municipalities close to larger urban areas or those that have been seriously affected by the Maoist insurgency, like Purni Bazar and Waling of Syangja, Pithurajyauri Nagar of Gorkha, Karamkoti of Sindhuli, Bidur Nagar of Nuwakot or Panauti of Kavre district. There are also fewer men in border towns across from India like Mahendranagar and Dhangadhi in the west and Bhadrapur in the east.

Similarly, the male population is also found to be concentrated in the more fertile and affluent sections of the rural, and in the eastern and central development regions where opportunities for employment and personal advancement are available.

Such high mobility among youth affects development attempts in a very direct way. As the productive section of the population homes in on affluent areas, more backward regions are left with the responsibility of investing in education and healthcare, but left with a population that cannot contribute too much to such efforts.

The infertile mountain regions are home to a meagre seven percent of the population. The rural—only 23 percent of Nepal's land—has 48.5 percent of the population and is under tremendous pressure to accommodate

new migrants. Such uneven distribution of population in the mid-hills, the mountain and the tarai could have disastrous environmental and developmental consequences. Already land in the tarai is decreasing in fertility due to over-farming, and land-holdings are being fragmented.

This is what happens when the concept of equal development fails—it drives these people away from where they are needed," said Dr Ram Hari Aryal, a demographer. And so planners are faced with a paradox: young, able men do not stay in their native regions because of the slow pace of development, but to speed up positive change precisely this segment of the population is a vital resource.

Migration to cities is also high—almost 15 percent of Nepal lives in its 58 municipalities. Kathmandu tops the list with five percent growth over the last decade. The least developed far-western region is a home to only 9.5 percent of the population, about one-fourth the number in the most developed central development region.

Women, in comparison, move around less, and their concentration in less developed areas means they are denied opportunities for advancement. Only 13 percent of the women live in urban areas where the populace has greater access to education, health and other social development



Increasingly, families in less developed parts of Nepal look like this.

infrastructure. The far-western development region has already seen a marked increase in female-headed households and a considerably higher economic dependence on women. The same phenomenon is prevalent, although in less extreme fashion, in the western and mid-western regions, while in the more highly developed eastern and central development areas, men outnumber women.

The preliminary report does not give too much detail about how this imbalance and male migration in less developed areas means they are denied opportunities for advancement. Only 13 percent of the women live in urban areas where the populace has greater access to education, health and other social development

picture will emerge in the final report which for the first time will have data on issues related to women's ownership of land and their contribution to the economy. (See also "Women count," p.35.)

Other matters to look out for in the final report include some more facts that will hopefully give a clearer picture of who lives where and does what, and how migrants assimilate. The 2001 census attempted for the first time to study the social structure of Nepal's populace in terms of ethnicity, religion and language. Radha Krishna KC, deputy director of the Central Bureau of Statistics, declined to share the findings with us, but hinted that the final report might mark a noticeable increase in the

Buddhists and the use of languages that were left out of previous censuses. This is unsurprising, given the efforts of various janajati groups to educate their members to fill in the forms accurately. ("Janajatis want to stand up and be counted," p.42.)

There's more to come, but some things are already clear from the 2001 census: the growth rate of the population and the average size of households have both come down. But we still have quantity and quality problems with our population and bringing it down to a manageable size and mix remains a challenge. □

SOMEWHERE IN NEPAL

Corruption index

Those who rail against graft need to be a little more empathetic.

After complaining for years about how corruption has struck deep roots in the country, Nepalis have suddenly realised how they are contributing to the rot. A recent study by a team of local and foreign experts found that 42 percent of Nepalis who devote from rectitude insist that they are forced to do so by the respect society bestows on the slightest taint of corruption. (Nepal Samachar, 7 September 2001).

For today's much-maligned political aristocracy in particular, the study is the best thing that has happened since the collapse of the panchayat edifice in 1990. Some people have finally put the human turpitude index in its true perspective. The experts ranked development workers and politicians—a classification that itself must be highly comforting to our unfairly besmirched leaders—sixth on the list of seven most corrupt categories of officialdom. Revenue officers, CDOs and LDOs, ministry secretaries and departmental heads, police, and licence-granting officials appear to be far more proficient in and preoccupied with diverse pursuits of perversion.

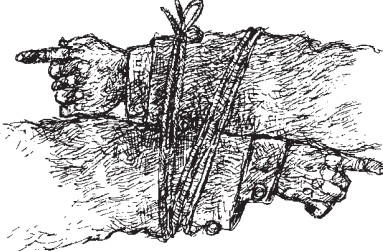
Moreover, politicians are just one percentage point ahead of members of judicial service, who enjoy the protection of diverse varieties of the attorney-client privilege and eager interpretations of contempt clauses. Take into account the three-percent margin of error customary in such surveys and you will realise that politicians demagogically might be the least corrupt Nepalis in public service today.

Incredible as this discovery may sound,

it does force us to ponder for a while and reset our ethical compass. By deciding to enter the public domain, politicians have willingly ceded much of their privacy.

Nevertheless, a couple of questions are in order. Does the fact that politicians are directly accountable to the people mean they should be judged by a higher standard of integrity? Should the model year of their Prados and the up-to-the-minute value of their property come under greater public scrutiny than, say, those of prime ministerial hangers-on? Moreover, why have our custodians of transparency put a 1990 cut-off date on political probity, as if the age of partylessness was sparklingly stainless? And let's not ignore the other side of the coin. For every unprincipled politician we catch, there are others who are noted for their hard graft in their constituencies.

If people don't like the way their representatives make money and flaunt it, they have the right to register their displeasure in the next election. (That would be a double-whammy for graft-stricken politicians, since much of their ill-gotten resources is invested in getting re-elected, a certifiably high-risk venture during these precarious times.) Given the popularity of public interest litigation in this country, we may soon see a spate of class-action suits for breach of trust against our leaders. But what remedies do the



hours from two senior RNAC officials in the Lauda Air case, to show where the muck stops. Another set of findings, however, may enter the public domain, politicians have willingly ceded much of their privacy. Nevertheless, a couple of questions are in order. Does the fact that politicians are directly accountable to the people mean they should be judged by a higher standard of integrity? Should the model year of their Prados and the up-to-the-minute value of their property come under greater public scrutiny than, say, those of prime ministerial hangers-on? Moreover, why have our custodians of transparency put a 1990 cut-off date on political probity, as if the age of partylessness was sparklingly stainless? And let's not ignore the other side of the coin. For every unprincipled politician we catch, there are others who are noted for their hard graft in their constituencies.

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shutdowns over fee structures and the syllabus, to quit hoping for the best education money can buy?

In an economy where traditional safety nets are being systematically ripped apart by politically driven combatants and subsidy-slushing conditionalities attached to macro-economic stabilisation programmes, personal initiative must step into the space vacated by the state. Under any end-justifies-the-means standard, revision for our flourishing tribe of bribe-seekers would instantly transform into an outpouring of public commiseration. However, our failure to see in our public officials a reflection of our stained social and cultural standards, stands in the way of an upsurge of unadulterated compassion. It's perhaps because of this absence of empathy that the louder we rail against corruption, the more entrenched it becomes. □

by PUSKAR BHUSAL

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A ghostly philosophy"

DANIELA BARNETT

Raising the Maoist flag in a Rolpa schoolyard.

In the last three months, thousands of words have appeared in the international press about Nepal. After the 1 June massacre, the focus is now the "people's war." NT has been following these stories as they appear and as a service to our readers, we are excerpting sections from a long essay in American *Outside* magazine's September 2001 issue, *The Last Days of the Mountain Kingdom* is, in large part, an account of a journey to Rolpa made earlier this year by writer Patrick Symmes and photographer Seamus Murphy. Following is an excerpt:



A call to join the Red Army

There are three rules of travel in the Maoist heartland. Sitting in the safe house, we are briefed by the leader of the ragtag squadron, a 42-year-old former school principal who speaks fine English. He goes by the nom de guerre of Sankitmon, after the hero of a cartoon on Indian television. Sankitmon means "strong man," but it's not for his muscles. "It is because I am strong in ideology," offers Sankitmon with a wide grin. He explains the route we will follow and then the rules: (1) No taking pictures without permission. (2) No going to the bathroom without a guard. (3) You must give a speech.

Within hours our photographer Seamus Murphy will disregard the first rule completely; the second one proves deeply problematic; the third rule is one I

immediately reject.

We gloss over these disagreements and seal the deal with an exchange of *lal salams*, a revolutionary slogan that means "red salute" and is always accompanied by a clenched fist. We quickly march off in single file, crossing more paddies and then heading up through a beech forest onto a switch-backing surface that becomes, eventually, the steepest surface I have ever climbed. Hours later we reach a razor-thin, foggy ridge line at 5,000 feet. The slopes are stacked with terraces even here, the paddies no wider than a single ox. Nepal's population has tripled since the 1940s, and the relentless search for arable land has increased deforestation and erosion massively while still not producing enough to eat. Exclusively agricultural, western Nepal is nonetheless a net importer of food. Hungry, impoverished peasants are easy recruits to the Maoist cause, with its promise of a government by, for, and of the small farmers.

Sometime after dark, the sky explodes with rain and we tumble into a puny hamlet where dozens of guerrillas wait in huts. These are real Red Army troops, main force soldiers in neat camouflage uniforms. They carry Lee-Enfield 303 rifles, relics from World War II but state of the art compared to the flintlocks carried by our patrol.

In a dark, smoky room we eat with the soldiers, wolfing down rice and lentils with our fingers. Comrade Strong Man won't answer questions about the movement, its ideology, or his own position within the group—"I am just someone," he says, dismissing my questions. The only foreign correspondent they've seen before, he says, was a dyed-in-the-wool communist from *The Revolutionary Worker*, the weekly newspaper from Chicago, and Strong Man assumes we are here to cheer the revolution on. He is thrilled to host fellow travelers and promises to find two spoons for "the gentlemen comrades" by the next meal. Out here, spoons are still in the future, and metal of any kind is so rare that even ploughshares are made of wood. In the soft light of the cooking fire, surrounded by men clutching ancient weapons, we seem to be regressing toward the Bronze Age.

We sleep packed elbow-to-ass amid a dozen snoring guerrillas. At 2am, I am jolted awake by a shower of blows. The guerrilla on my left is twitching in the grip of a nightmare. I lie on the stone floor, staring at the ceiling until 5am, and then we are hiking again.

In meeting the Maoists, we've achieved exactly what most

visitors to Nepal have been hoping to avoid. Although few foreigners have heard much about the guerrillas—thanks to a suppressed local news media and a secrete-vil tourism industry—the two groups are already beginning to meet on the remote mountain paths that they share. Some trekking groups have been banned into Red Army patrols, who pressed them to "donate" binoculars and sleeping bags to the revolution, but in most incidents the guerrillas and hikers have passed without speaking.

The real squeeze is happening back in Kathmandu. In March of last year, many foreign-owned businesses were opposed by the guerrilla representatives demanding money. Speaking on background, to protect his business, the head of one major American trekking company explained it as "a choice between operating here or holding to your ethical standards." Like several other foreign outfitters, he paid \$1,400 to ensure that the Maoists left his clients alone.

We summit one of Rolpa's iconic peaks, and suddenly we're bobbing down on the side of the rally (we hoped we were being taken up). It is a broad, rounded spur the size of several soccer fields, reaching out over a deep valley. We hike down, pass beneath another Martyrs Arch and find a half-dozen huts and a long schoolhouse—the hamlet of Babhang. A battery-powered public address system is lashed to poles, and a packed-earth platform with chains swains the speakers. After only a few minutes, there is the sound of chanting in the distance.

They come in village by village, spilling down into the rally with unforged hoopla. Sixty from one hamlet, 30 from another, 40 from a third, a stream of desperately poor, excited people waving their fists in the air. The men wear bland homespun skirts or worn-out track suits; the women dress in saris of royal blue, emerald green, earthen reds, and otherwise purple. Within minutes, a second column begins to stream over a high peak in the distance. As they spot the rally site, men discharge their blunderbuses in thundering blasts that echo back and forth in the hills. A third column appears, snaking steadily up from the valley floor, hundreds more carrying banners and blasting off their own guns in reply.

The largest guerrilla rally I've read about featured 700 people; within an hour there are a thousand here, and then twice that, delegations from 52 villages across Rolpa. They chant in crude military lockstep, barefoot or in blown-out sandals, and arrive carrying call-and-response slogans ("Communist Party of Nepal, LONG LIVE!" and "Maoist Leninism-Maoism, LONG LIVE!") Perhaps 200 Red Army soldiers wait, stone-faced. They've got Enfield-like—the canvas sneakers on their feet, captured from the notional police—and wear counterfeit Lowe Alpine backpacks. Comrade Strong Man appears from time to time to shout, "Here are the masses! The masses are coming!"

Village bands arrive, nooting on horns and hanging drums. A group of black-clad boys dances into the rally, bells jangling on their ankles, and girls from the remotest peaks, who walked three days to get here, jiggle and cover their faces at the sight. Every few minutes another black-powder gun detonates, launching a huge doughnut of smoke into the sky.

By noon there are 4,000 people, and still they pour in. A village militia arrives from some other county, clutching box and carrying garlands of freshly felled arrows, chanting, "No to feudalism!" Next is an entire girls' soccer team armed with blue track suits and muskets. Student groups traipse in with neat flags, and associations of untouchables, and women's groups chanting, "Murder and rape must stop!" The Maoists can sound progressive. They vow not only to fight police corruption, but to punish sexual abuse and hunt down rapists, while recruiting women guerrillas and political cadres. I believe, they challenge the ancient caste system, which is nothing but racism, and the untouchables are among their most eager recruits.

In midafternoon, with 10,000 peasants packed onto the spur, the propaganda starts. The main event is the declaration of the shadow government in Rolpa and several adjacent districts, and the new leaders of the revolution's first official government are invited to step forward. There are 19 of them, a cross-section of the movement itself—a few tough Magar peasants from Rolpa, much like the attendees at the rally, but also an ambitious student leader from Kathmandu, and several older professional communist politicians. Comrade Strong Man turns out to be Rolpa's new representative of "the intellectuals." Invoking the name of the almighty Prachanda, he delivers a 30-minute speech about the teachings of the leader they follow but never see; after him the new vice-chairman gives a speech, and after him the district's new top man, Chairman Santosh Buddha, gives an amazingly dull, bourgeois talk. A typical politician, Buddha is lofty and affected, and seems to have practised looking thoughtful in a mirror. Despite the sunshine, he preens about in a grey Gore-Tex coat, the only one at the rally. Seamus and I call Chairman Gore-Tex behind his back.

By first light there is not a single person left on the field. I wander over the barren saddle of the mountain, wondering if the 10,000 chanting peasants were a dream, but the proof is on the ground, the dust still imprinted with the shapes of their missing bodies.

The guerrillas' philosophy too is ghostly. So far we've had a propaganda message without getting to ask any questions ourselves. Finally, at 10am, with cold clouds blowing in, I am summoned to the schoolhouse, where the entire gang is assembled for a press conference. Gore-Tex, Strong Man, some Maoist schoolteachers, and several vice-flunkies are lined up on benches.

I sit on my bench, scuff my feet in the dirt, and finally ask the question I should have asked the crowd yesterday: How many people must die? The guerrillas like to cite the Shining Path as their fellow travelers in the Maoist cause. I point out that 30,000 people have died in Peru, without a Red victory. If that many people die in Nepal, will the revolution still be justified?

Yes, they all nod immediately. The true face of the revolution at last. "To protect a whole thing," a schoolteacher says, "a part can be damaged. It is the rule of nature."

Comrade Strong Man elaborates: "A big part of the people here believe it is not necessary to solve Nepal's problems with violence." He brushes aside this natural reluctance. "We clear their mind of this idea," he says. "The people's war is necessary."

They dismiss offers of peace talks from the government, tricks designed to fool the people, weaken the country, and deliver it to the control of India. Ominously, Gore-Tex vows a "protracted war in rural areas," and "armed... urban rebellion," the first hint of a guerrilla war in Kathmandu.

They descend quickly into jargon. They are for dialectical materialism and against reactionary power. Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution, in which nobles bear "class enemies" through the streets, was good, and will be imitated as soon as they come to power. Colonialism, feudalism, imperialism, capitalism, and revisionism are all bad. Peasants are good and politicians are bad. On this animal farm, four legs are good and two legs are bad.



Clockwise from top left:

- 10,000 Maoists hear an official rebel government declared
- A Maoist cadre displays his allegiance
- Masked rebels guide Patrick Symmes and Seamus Murphy
- Maoist cadre asleep in the barracks
- The Red Army gets festive on the march
- A young revolutionary at the rally
- Above Libang, an island of government control in Maoist country
- A Maoist cadre displays his allegiance
- Masked rebels guide Patrick Symmes and Seamus Murphy
- A Red Army soldier, her rifle, her baby
- Women of the Red Army march to Babhang

ALL PHOTOS SEAMUS MURPHY/OUTSIDE

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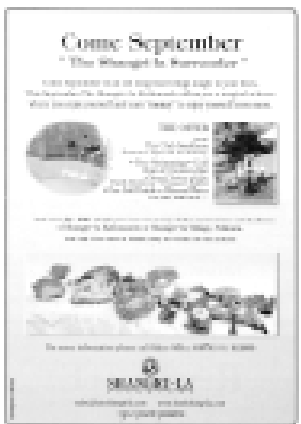
War, peace, economics

COLOMBO—The working one-year arrangement Sri Lanka's ruling People's Alliance (PA) has with the country's main Maoists, the JVP, won't do much for the economy of this war- and drought-stricken country, say observers. Under the memorandum of understanding (MoU), the JVP promises the government support, and the PA agrees to dissolve parliament within a year and hold national polls under a caretaker regime, among other political and administrative moves. The agreement also outlines steps to halt price increases in essential food items, fuel, electricity, gas and water and put on hold plans to privatise public or social property such as water resources, banks, insurance ventures. But the Johan Perera of the National Peace Council (NPC), a Norwegian-backed local peace group, says the battered economy makes it impossible not to raise prices or resort to subsidies. In recent months the economy, devastated by 18 years of insurgency, has taken a further beating through a prolonged drought and a rebel strike on the country's only international airport. Diesel and gas prices have risen by 100 percent in the past 18 months due to rising world prices, triggering price hikes in essential goods. Dr. Nadeem U Haq, IMF representative in Colombo, said good governance should include reducing the budget deficit and proceeding with structural reforms. Sri Lanka received an IMF standby facility of over \$250 million this year to implement key economic reforms including selling off loss-making state enterprises and reducing the budget deficit which has ballooned due to high war spending and related costs. (IPS)

Hunger amid plenty

NEW DELHI—“Our granaries are brimming because people do not have the wherewithal to purchase foodgrain,” was how India's blunt-speaking Agriculture Minister Ajit Singh summed it up. No central or state government has been candid about people dying of starvation even as the grain surplus rises. Media have shown graphic proof of starvation deaths and mass deprivation, and India's Supreme Court, acting on a petition by the People's Union of Civil Liberties (PUC), a rights group, finally intervened. The court observed that below-poverty-line (BPL) families were being given 25 kg of grain per month at four cents each while they were entitled to 75 kg at that rate. India's granaries

are bursting with over 60 million tonnes of wheat and rice and the current crop's bumper harvest is expected to take surplus stocks to over 80 million tonnes. There is nowhere to store that much grain—sacks are being stacked at airfields, covered under flimsy black plastic sheeting. Vast amounts are reported to have rotted in rainy weather or been eaten by rats. Official spats prompted the court to ask the PUC to identify officers in each of the affected districts who have the “spirit, inclination and drive” to prevent further starvation deaths. The court has issued notices to seven state governments to report on starvation. None had estimates of BPL figures, but the PUC told the court that 200 million Indians suffer “chronic hunger.” Unofficial sources say that the death toll this year from starvation is in the early hundreds. (IPS)

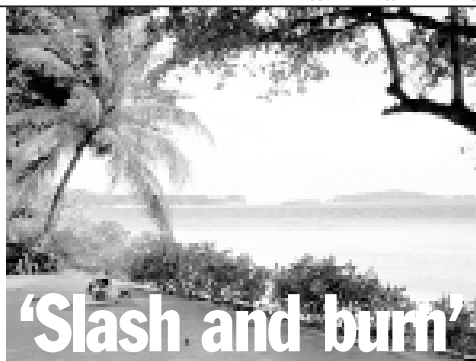


CHAYANIT POONYARAT

BANGKOK—Thailand, in its quest for dollars, plans to develop its strength as a tourist destination in ways that worry locals. The government wants to bring more funds into the country, still recovering from the 1997 economic crisis. It has considered reviewing a logging ban imposed in the late eighties after parts of Thailand suffered devastating floods and mudslides, and lifting a 1998 ban on inland prawn farming, put in place after the practice destroyed 800,000 hectares of mangroves.

It is turning a similar eye to tourism. “Tourism, shrimp farming and logging are all slash-and-burn industries,” said Anita Pleumam of the Chiang Mai-based NGO Tourism Investigation and Monitoring Team (TIM-Team). For example, there is talk of transforming Koh Samui, a popular tourist island in southern Thailand, into the centre for tourism in the area. Koh Samui, a 47 sq km island some 640 km from Bangkok, has 38,000 inhabitants—and gets 860,000 visitors annually. Tourism revenues are about \$200 million every year. This year over 700,000 tourists are expected here.

More than 10 million tourists visit Thailand each year, and this is expected to increase by 10.8 million in 2002. Pradeek Phayakvichien, governor of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), said government wants to “extend tourism seasons to cover the whole year” in Samui, and re-brand it as a “Luxury Beach Resort.” Though the TAT says the number of tourists visiting Koh Samui will be limited to 950,000 a year, it wants to expand port facilities to handle a heavier schedule. Special loans will be given to ferry operators to upgrade



‘Slash and burn’

Thailand needs to be cautious with tourism projects.

standards, more roads will be built to decongest traffic around beaches, and a marina and cultural centre are in the works. The plan would later extend to other islands in the area, Greater Samui.

Activists are urging government to go slow because many Thai communities know the social and environmental price of over-development of tourism. Koh Samui is already grappling with problems like transportation, city planning, pollution and the development of local souvenir products. Many case studies suggest the economic benefits from tourism are highly overstated, and there is simply not enough money for conservation and the improvement of public services. “Ironically, to set up tourism projects, more and

more foreign loans are needed, which add to the financial burden,” Pleumam added. Thailand's public debt stands at \$60 billion, equal to 57 percent of its GDP.

There are many lessons about the social and environmental problems of tourism. All Thai beaches display similar destructive patterns, say experts—costly failure of garbage and pollution with excessive commercial building. Land and goods prices shoot up to unrealistic levels. The TAT recently received letters from tourists complaining the Phi Phi islands are overcrowded and dirty. They suggested that the number of tourists there be curtailed. Local press reports say tourists are disappointed these days because authenticity is often

undermined for quick profits. “The government should improve the situation in deteriorating tourist centres, not open up new areas,” explained Pleumam. But the search continues for ways to boost export earnings and revenues from outside sources. Last month, newspapers reported a new project to make Phuket an outstanding plastic surgery centre so that “when you think of plastic surgery, think of Phuket.” And meanwhile in Bangkok's tourist hub Patpong, Thailand's interior Minister Paruchai Pluamsoobun has been crusading for a moral “social order” since August. Bars must stop selling alcohol after midnight and close by 2am, in the middle of the peak period for visitors, according to bar owners, 1am to 3am. (IPS)

by SUDARNO SUMARTO AND LANT PRITCHETT

ANALYSIS

Safety nets

The accelerating integration of international markets for goods, services, ideas, labour and capital brings risks and benefits. Starting in August 1997, Indonesia suffered a sharp, deep set of financial, natural, and political crises. The initial responses to the social consequences of the crises were tepid, localised, but by July 1998 civil disturbances and President Suharto's fall convinced the new government to quickly deploy large-scale safety nets. There are five lessons to be learnt from Indonesia's experience in designing safety nets during a crisis.

Starting large programs quickly needs institutional commitment, clear objectives and simple design. Despite a strong commitment to the safety nets as of July 1998, while some programs reached millions within months of the new budget, including a rice subsidy and a scholarship program, other programs could not overcome their organisational inertia. One program for urban areas did not disburse a single rupiah until two years after the crisis began.

The program designed to deliver rice to be sold at subsidised prices was rapidly successful because: (1) The logistics agency had the capacity and enthusiasm to deliver foodstuffs nationwide; (2) the program had a clear objective: get rice to those who need it; (3) the program was simple: eligible households got 20 kg a month at 1,000 rupiah per kg. Once the rice was in the villages, however, things were more complex.

Even simple design needs local flexibility. The rice program was theoretically simply personalised. But though the logistics agency delivered 20 kg of rice per eligible household each month to village authorities, social pressures to distribute the rice more broadly were overwhelming—many villages simply decided to give equal amounts to all.

This unofficial and hidden local flexibility was not necessarily bad. Locally, it was a political necessity, and the informal flexibility did reach the poorest households which would have been unfairly excluded. The lack of flexibility within the official design, however, meant that the program could not be monitored accurately. No safety net using static administrative targeting saves households from sudden shocks. Standard administrative criteria for targeting poverty programs don't work when dealing with households whose incomes suffer sudden large shocks. Early research on the crisis' impact revealed that over a quarter of those who were “expenditure poor” after the crisis had expenditures more than 50 percent above poverty as little as three months before the crisis! These people are key targets for crisis safety nets, but unlikely to be on any



Riots in Jakarta, July

Swiftly integrating international markets need programs to deal with the social consequences of such linkages.

official government lists. Some safety net programs need to use self-selection to reach those shocked by poverty.

Some ideas that work well as poverty or development programs fail as crisis safety nets—especially microcredit. Whatever the virtues of development programs, rapid expansion of microcredit as a response to crisis is ill-advised. In a general crisis, the climate for creating new businesses is appalling. Expansion of credit in an “emergency” fashion undermines the painstaking groundwork successful microcredit programs require, and once people realise the credit is really a “transfer,” not a “loan,” the programs are abused through large-scale allocation of credit to the locally and politically influential.

Keep an eye on ALL expenditures a crisis creates, the worst safety nets may be the biggest spends. While safety net programs were scrutinised to ensure good design and effective targeting, Indonesia's government spent three times as much on banking out the financial sector and five times as much on a general subsidy for energy that neither benefited the poor nor the hardest hit households. Whether to spend more on safety net programs depends in part on the alternatives. While governments and donors often jealously guard the funds for safety nets, the much greater sums that are usually in the general budget's fiscal trough are less well protected and often consumed by powerful financial and elite interests. □ (Project Synthesis)

Sudarno Sumarto is Executive Director of the SMERU Research Institute, Jakarta; Lant Pritchett is professor of public/economics at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

Prachanda's family calls

Samacharpatra, 7 September

It is more than 40 years since she took care of baby Chhalal and watched him grow. Today, she knows that Chhalal has become Prachanda. She has heard that he is somewhere, that he is well-known, and trying to become somebody. But she is still in her village, where Prachanda was born. Meet Devaki Dahal, aunt of Maoist leader Chairman Prachanda.

Devaki, a 72-year-old, still herds the livestock to the grazing grounds in the village of Lewade, Dhikupokhari Village Development Committee-2 in Kaski district. When people tease her about being Prachanda's “mother,” old memories of Chhalal come to her mind—the boy who played in her lap, the one who could shut his eyes and rattle off the scriptures. Devaki recalls Prachanda learning the prayers to Goddess Durga from his father and uncle because there was no school in the village until he was eleven.

Since Prachanda's mother Devrani Bhanani was sickly, Devaki was in charge of his upbringing and looked after him until he was six. Prachanda's family continued to visit Devaki even after they moved to Kathmandu in 1962.

“He came here with his wife before the ‘people's movement’ began (in 1996), they even went to see his in-laws in Hemja, Kaski. I haven't been able to meet him since.” Recalling the last time Prachanda was in the village, Devaki told *Nepal Samacharpatra*, “he said, ‘unt, we'll leave everything here and settle down in Chitwan, I'll come to get you.’ I haven't seen a trace of him after that.”

Longing to meet Prachanda, Devaki even sent him two letters. But she never received a reply. “I gave the person who came to see me a letter asking him to give it to Prachanda. He said he would. But now the messenger has stopped coming,” she says, chin in hand and staring into space. “I wonder if he got the letter. If he did, he should have got to touch. He wouldn't abandon us. Maybe the messenger threw the letter away.”

“Meeting? I don't know whether that will ever happen. I'm quite old. I wish things would work out,” says Devaki who's heard of the talks between the government and her dear Prachanda. “If they come to an agreement, there's a chance of seeing him again.” There is hope in her voice.

“Who wouldn't appreciate their children's achievements?” asks Devaki, although she's not happy about the killings. “I wish people weren't killed,” she says, “If we cry for our sons, others will cry for their sons when they die. Everyone's mortal remains are the same.”

After her husband Kul Prasad passed away, Devaki's closest relations are her brother-in-law Murti Ram (Prachanda's father) and Prachanda. At present, she looks after her in-laws family. Although they live very hard to keep up the family name, the branch of the Dahal family which continues to live in Prachanda's birthplace is often boycotted socially.

Close family members recall some neighbours and distant relatives saying they were the family of a murderer. “When the villages around got their first electric lights, we were not connected. They said they'd give us electricity today, tomorrow. Finally our family members raised money and got electricity to themselves,” says Devaki.

“It hurts to say this, but many of our relatives say we have a murderer in the family. We're isolated as they don't interact with us or talk to us.” It is with a heavy heart that Tikaram Dahal recalls talking Prachanda to Chitwan when he was eight. It took eleven days as they herded cattle all the way to Chitwan.

“He's left, gone underground, but people who pass by this village say this is Prachanda's village and shy away from talking with us. Even after his departure, we've been through a lot of trouble because of Prachanda,” says Tikaram.

He continues on a more positive note. “We may have borne a lot but he has kept the Dahal family name. In there were peace, we could meet him. May things work out with the government so we can see him, that's all we want.”

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

“If India has deployed its army in its side of the border, we too must use this opportunity to come up with a solution to tackle the problems caused by the open border.”

Former foreign minister Shaileendra Kumar Upadhyaya in *Budhar Sapthah* of 12 September 2001.



“You're the one dealing the talks.”

Dishit, 11 September.

Koirala phobia

Taran National Weekly, 3 September

A month after he resigned from the post of prime minister Girija Prasad Koirala has begun meeting some very important, politically active people. Sources tell us that he is very disturbed by the events in parliament and how the role of parliament is being compromised. People have been playing guessing games trying to figure out the motive behind his sudden concern. Some say that this is job that this to find ways to go to the (Sher Bahadur) Deuba administration. Koirala has met a lot of people in the past few months but he is keeping quiet about what is going on behind the scenes.

In the 36 days since Koirala stepped down, he has visited his hometown twice. After returning to the capital, he visited the leaders of different political parties, almost all



of them. The first person he met was Ramesh Nath Pandey, who has always been considered an important political wheeler-dealer.

Pandey played a role in ousting Krishna Prasad Bhattarai in March 2000, after which Koirala came to power. Now Koirala wants to strengthen his relation with Pandey. Last Wednesday, the two met at Pandey's residence in Bishahara and discussed matters concerning government and the state of the nation. Koirala later attended a lunch at Pandey's residence, where he surprised a number of people present, including KP Bhattarai, Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba and UML leader Madhav Nepal, with his remarks. Koirala stated that he was meeting political leaders of all hues in an attempt to develop a strategy to isolate the Maoists.

Leftists of Nepal, unite

Budhar Sapthah, 5 September

The central committee of the UML in a meeting last week decided that it had to play a crucial role to ensure implementation of radical reforms and also take care that the agenda was not hijacked by anyone. Madhav Kumar Nepal, Bharat Mohan Adhikari, Anant Bohara, Ishwor Pokharel and Raghupati Pant attended the meeting and agreed that some understanding/working alliance had to be reached between all left parties. Narayan Man Bijyokhe of the Nepal Majdoor Kisan Party, Siddhi Lal Singh of the Marxist Leninists, Prabhu Narayan Choudhary of the Marxists, Bishnu Bahadur Manandhar of the Samyuktika, Prithi Thapa of the Jana Morcha, Krishna Das Shrestha of the Marxist-



Leninist-Maoist party and Anik Sherchan of the Samyuktika Jana Morcha also attended the meeting. Siddhi Lal Singh of the ML proposed that all left parties, including the Maoists should come to some understanding and move forward. The UML leaders said clearly that unless the Maoists changed their ways it would be impossible to work together, let alone form an understanding. Representatives of the Masal and Ekata Kendra (Unity Centre) did not attend the meeting. The UML has put forward a 22-point agenda, which it says is the only way the country can be bailed out from the present crisis. The other left parties have agreed to come up with their own suggestions.

The reactionaries forces. An alliance must be formed and all left leaders and activists must join. Fifty-one percent of the party's central committee should not contest general elections. The general secretary of the central committee and two-thirds of the politburo must not be allowed to file candidature in the general election. We must carry out an investigation every year into the property of all members. If any illegally acquired wealth is discovered, it must be immediately nationalised and people found in possession of such wealth must be immediately expelled from the party. The party will specify an amount within which all its members must make ends meet. Members of the central committee, elected officials and members nominated to the Baripati Parishad must be full-time party workers and cannot belong to the business community. All members must work in the areas the party allocates to them, with no compromises. They should all work for the unity of the left and the formation of a national government. The army and police must be changed radically to be more democratic and transparent. A high-level investigation committee must be formed to control corruption in these bodies.

The united party should be a model for all others in the country. The party's name should be simply the Nepal Communist Party—no initials at the end. That is, we should have a united party. The process of unification should be similar to that of the Marxists and the ML in 1990—it should be based on equality and nothing else. All the party's financial organisations must be treated equally. We need a party campaign and a class campaign to bring about this unification. The new party will have members of both parties. Members of the new party nominated to the Upper House will remain so. Central Committee members of the unified party will be elected by fair means. The unification process should move forward and issues that cannot be resolved easily should be postponed.

the conclusion his group reached at the Second Convention, and now there is a lot of similarity and ours. The Maoists have accepted us as a revolutionary communist force. This brotherly feeling has opened many doors for both of us.

MLs unification proposal

Dishit, 4 September

Long term plans The CPN (ML) could not agree on its program of class struggle. The party did not develop any policy or framework concerning this. From now on, the party must develop village committees to carry forward the class struggle, and the party's policies and opinions must be based on this philosophy.

Armed village committees have to be formed nationally and from this category a volunteer force has to be formed. Class struggle is a continuous process and needs to be sustained. The left parties must unite to tackle reactionary forces. An alliance must be formed and all left leaders and activists must join. Fifty-one percent of the party's central committee should not contest general elections. The general secretary of the central committee and two-thirds of the politburo must not be allowed to file candidature in the general election. We must carry out an investigation every year into the property of all members. If any illegally acquired wealth is discovered, it must be immediately nationalised and people found in possession of such wealth must be immediately expelled from the party. The party will specify an amount within which all its members must make ends meet. Members of the central committee, elected officials and members nominated to the Baripati Parishad must be full-time party workers and cannot belong to the business community. All members must work in the areas the party allocates to them, with no compromises. They should all work for the unity of the left and the formation of a national government. The army and police must be changed radically to be more democratic and transparent. A high-level investigation committee must be formed to control corruption in these bodies.

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ABOUT TOWN

MOVIES

□□ **Nepali and Hindi movies** online ticket booking at www.nepalshop.com

EATING OUT

- **Regal Specialities of Nepal** Chef Govind KC's take on Nepal's culinary heritage, with Nepali cultural programme. Until 15 September. Himalchuli Restaurant, Soleside Crown Plaza, 273999
- **Patan Museum Café** Mixed menu, garden seating. Lunch only, 11am-2pm. 25 percent off with Summit Card. 526271
- **Friday Night Sekuwa (BBQ)** Appetizers, momos, salad, main courses and desserts, one complimentary beer. Rs 699 per head. Throughout the monsoon at Dwarika's Hotel. 479488
- **Saturday lunch** at Restaurant Kirtipur, Club Himalaya, Nagarkot. BBQ buffet. Rs 500 per head. 410432, 414432
- **Sandwiches** Over the Rainbow American Diner with Fifth Avenue sandwiches, full meals at backpacker prices. Opposite Pilgrims Book House, Thamel. 42651
- **Juicy steaks, chilled beer**, Mexican cuisine, great breakfasts, sports bar. All week long. Live band Wednesday, Sunday evenings 6.30-10.00. K-tool Beer & Steakhouse, Thamel. 433043
- **Dinner and concert** Dine with Nepali singers Sapna Shree Panyar and Suresh Manandhar. 8pm-11pm, except Tuesdays. Far Pavilion, The Everest Hotel. 488100

MUSIC

- **Great coffee, live music** by the Heartbreakers. All September Fridays (7pm-10pm) and Sundays (8pm-9pm). Himalayan Java, Thamel. 416692
- **Weekends at The Jazz Bar** The Jazz Commission on Thursdays, Chris Masand's Latin band on Fridays and on Saturdays An Famine. 7pm onwards. Shangri-La Hotel
- **Live Acoustic Music** Dinesh Rai and Deependra every Friday at the Himalatle Café. 9pm. 491234
- **DJ Nell/Live Bands** Every Friday and weekends. Daily happy hour. Rox Bar. Hyatt Regency. 6pm-9pm. 491234
- **Cadenza** Saturday evening live jazz at Upstairs, Lazimpat. 7.30pm-10pm. Rs 200

EVENTS

- **Contemporary jazz dance classes** by Meghna Thapa. At Alliance Francaise Sundays and Tuesdays 4.30pm-6.30pm, 241163, 242632. At Banu's, Kamal Pokhari, Wednesdays 6.30pm-8pm, Saturdays 1.30pm, 434024, 434830
- **World Tourism Day Bike Relay** Biking relays in teams starting from Tridevi Marg. Free for all. 27 September. Call Himalayan Mountain Bike 437437 for more details.

GETAWAYS

- **September at Shangri-La** Swimming and lunch for Rs 600, eam Rs 300. Hotel Shangri-La. 412999
- **Dwarika's two for one package** Two nights accommodation plus afternoon tea, dinner, breakfasts, massage. Cost per couple US\$155nett. Offer valid till end of September. Dwarika's Hotel. 479488
- **Chiso Chiso Hawana** Summer B&B package for Nepalis and expatriates. Rs 1,250 per head. Club Himalaya Nagarkot Resort. 410432, 414432
- **Nagarkot Escape** Weekends in cottages, views of the Himalayas, valleys and forests. Special rates for Nepalis and resident expatriates. Hotel Keyman Chautari. keyman@wlink.com.np 436850

EXHIBITION

- **Charcoal drawings by Chungpo Tsering** 14-24 September, 8am-6pm daily. Indigo Gallery, Naxal. 413580
- **Paintings and sculptures** by Batsa Gopal Vaidya and Shashi Shah. 14 September-17 October, 11am-6pm. 411122 Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal. Revisited. 411122

TALK

- **Tiger Conservation** Nanda SJB Rana and Dr Lalika Rana, British embassy Hall, Lainchaur. Friday, 14 September, 6pm. Organised by the Nepal Britain Society.

MARTIN CHAUTARI

- **Current Nepali Politics** Pandit Prof. Dhruva Kumar, CNAS, Kirtipur. Tuesday, 18 September, 5.30 pm, Martin Chautari, Thapathali. For directions ring or email 256239, chautari@mos.com.np. Open to all. Unless otherwise noted, presentations are in Nepali.

For inclusion in the listing send information to editors@nepalitimes.com

NEPALI WEATHER

by NGAMINDRA DAHAL

More rain, as the satellite picture suggests, with its mass of clouds sweeping across the Bay of Bengal and towards the eastern Himalaya. The low-pressure trough that hangs over the Indo-Gangetic plain for most of the monsoon is weakening and moving towards Pakistan, but it is still linked to the low pressure on the coast along the Bay of Bengal. The result is a trough line, also visible on the picture, which will bring mild rain to much of the country. And then, the monsoon will finally retreat for the year. And this means that the mercury, which dipped by four degrees this past week, will once again rise during the day when the rain starts tapering off.

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- Kathmandu Guest House. 433043
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INVASION

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RECREATION

High fliers

Get ready for the pigeon invasion.

a special diet, so instead of the standard pigeon fare of mustard, rice, wheat and corn, the contestants get peas and gram. Bajracharya says that before noon time even their sex life is controlled, with competing birds isolated to stop them from mating, "to conserve their stamina." They are allowed to have their way at other times though, to breed pigeons that fly better, faster, higher. A young pigeon is ready to fly after it is about 45 days old, when it has moulted and sprouted new feathers.

SALIL SUBEDI

It was a hazy day when we saw Bajracharya's pigeons soar across the sky. There were chances of a drizzle, but he picked them out of their compartments, one by one, and released them anyway. They quickly gather momentum, and flutter in space. They start looping around in circles, higher, and soon they are making their best moves—tumbling (Lava Khar) and rolling (baji khano). "I don't usually fly them in rain, but it is good exercise to do it occasionally," he says, settling down for the two-hour wait. "At times," he says, "they're having such a good time that they take ages to come back."

And that is when he starts to get worried. Because there are lethal enemies in the skies above Kathmandu—hungry (baji) (hawks), or the jama (falcons) who live in the heights of Dharshana. Pigeons have a

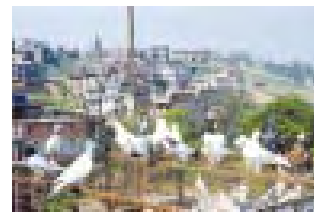
15-degree blind zone at the back, and this is where the cunning predators strike. Gopal Singh, owner of 300 pigeons and winner of second place in the flying contest in May, loses two good fliers a week on average. His birds are hard to replace because they have been bred over the years in his home. Singh is proudest of his female black-eyed karni, one of which flew for 8 hours 31 minutes in May, contributing significantly to his win. Competitors fly five pigeons, their collective timing determines the overall winner. The Best Pigeon Award also went to a home-bred black-eyed karni, a male owned by Ratna Kaji Maharjan of Jyatha, which flew for 8 hours 40 minutes.

If you are now inspired to breed pigeons rather than curse their nesting

habits, it is surprisingly cheap to do so—Rs 1,000 a month to feed 200 or so birds. The expensive part is buying your starter—a pair of common varieties like karni, bhaja, karni, karni, chini, zulu, lala, jagu—costs upwards of Rs 2,000. They're relatively maintenance free, the only thing to watch out for is a disease of the spine that hits without warning which some believe is caused by pesticides in the pigeons' feed. And, of course, you have to clean up their abundant guano.

In return, you get the thrill of seeing these elegant creatures in skillful flight with their air of quiet watchfulness.

To learn more about the pigeon flying competition, visit http://www.geocities.com/nepal_pigeon



HAPPENINGS



HIGH-UP CHILDREN: Temba Chiri Sherpa, the youngest ever Everest summiteer, with delegates at the National Children's Fair organised by the Save the Children Alliance and a consortium of children's organisations in Nepal on Monday, 10 September.



THE FOOTMOBILE: Sudharshan Gautam, who featured in "Look, no hands" (#59), is all smiles, having successfully navigated Kathmandu's crowded streets—with his feet—on Saturday, 8 September.



AAYO GORKHALE: Chefs at the Hyatt, ready for the annual British Gurkha Ball. The Regency Ballroom is ready too, complete with Union Jack-theme upholstery. Saturday, 8 September.

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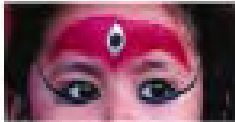
The Regency Ballroom is ready too, complete with Union Jack-theme upholstery. Saturday, 8 September.

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The Regency Ballroom is ready too, complete with Union Jack-theme upholstery. Saturday, 8 September.

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NEPALI SOCIETY

Shiba's healing touch

What Shiba Sharma has done for her village of Sisaniya in Dang district cannot be measured in dollars and cents. Being a trained nurse has helped this elected village leader come up with different priorities. While VDC chairmen in other villages would go for roads and bridges, Shiba's concerns are day-care centres, immunisation programmes for children, or spreading awareness to pig farmers to control the spread of a deadly encephalitis epidemic.

Shiba's medical background makes her passionate about raising the health standards of women and children in this village on the East-West highway. And she strongly believes that the first line of defence against communicable diseases is proper information on prevention. Her community has just finished a cam-

paign to get every villager to construct latrines. Then Shiba got a bright idea: why let the waste go waste? So she has got her own biogas plant at home hooked up to the latrine so that there is more gas production. Following her example, other village families are following suit. This has reduced their dependence on the surrounding forests, and the trees have started growing back.

Shiba finds it much easier to convince the women in her village about health matters: "Women are naturally much more effective in spreading awareness, they take the message to their children and to their husbands." The other aim of this energetic leader is to build enough schools and upgrade the quality of the education so that children grow up with knowledge that is more relevant to their daily lives. "Educa-

tion is no good if you are just cramming all the time from text books to pass exams," she says. Shiba is often called on to deliver babies, treat children, and even make house calls to tend sick water buffaloes.

With local elections due next year, Shiba is not sure she wants to stand again from her Marxist-Leninist party. There are some things you can't do as a VDC chairperson that you can do as a political activist," she says. Like contesting a member of parliament seat, maybe? □

