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Kathmandu Valley with the Jugal Himal Range in the background on 10 May 2020 (*above*), and on 6 April 2021 (*below*).



PHOTO: ABHUSHAN GAUTAM SHAKYA

The Air Quality Action Plan requires the government to declare an emergency if the Air Quality Index (AQI) crosses 300, and close schools, reduce traffic and control open burning. As far back as 6 January, AQI had already gone up to 400 in Kathmandu Valley as smoke from wildfires combined with vehicular exhaust. No one heeded the warning signs. On 26 March, as the fires spread nationwide, AQI crossed 632. The government closed schools for four days, but

there was no emergency response to control fires. All this week, AQI has been between 300-400. The exceptionally clean air during the lockdown last April allowed people in Kathmandu Valley to see Mt Everest, 200km away. It proved that most pollution in Kathmandu is from vehicles. This year, on top of the diesel exhaust, there is the smoke from wildfires. This is the fire season when farmer burn the undergrowth in forests to allow green shoots to


grow for their livestock. But with a dry winter in which central Nepal received only 10% of its normal precipitation, and the dry spell continuing into spring, the fires spread rapidly. The fires have been unprecedented. What is worrying is the extent and duration of this year's fires. Scientists are reluctant to make a direct correlation between climate crisis and individual weather events, but there are indications that there is indeed a link.




BEFORE AND DURING THE FIRES

Abhushan Gautam Shakya went back this week to the exact spot where he took stunning photographs of the Himalaya from Kathmandu last year during the lockdown. **Page 8-9**


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Untangling the knots

There are just so many layers of party and factional interests, alliances and dalliances, marriages of convenience and messy divorces, egos, ambitions, and personal vendetta involved, that it is difficult to delve beyond daily headlines about who stabbed whom in the back today.

We must start with the central protagonist, the man everyone seems to love to hate, Prime Minister K P Oli. He has proved all pundits wrong by surviving both medically and politically. This does not look like a man who has two kidney transplants—he appears stronger than ever.



He has outlasted relentless pressure from the combined strength of rivals within the NCP and a constant media broadside, to unseat him. When cornered, he has used nationalism, divided and ruled, used and discarded former comrades, and even dissolved the House and threaten elections to get his way.

Oli is wily, but a statesman he is not. Had he been, he would have found other ways than full-frontal attack on rivals, concentrating instead on providing leadership on issues that really matter to Nepalis – jobs, inflation, education, health and Covid impact. He has spent all his time and energy running in circles around Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Madhav Kumar Nepal.

If anyone wanted to dismantle Nepal's Communist movement, no one would have done a better job than Prime Minister Oli. He cracked open the NCP, then he got to work on his own UML, weeding out the disgruntled Nepal faction. Oli might have been seeking revenge on Nepal, but by sidelining him, he has effectively splintered the UML as well.

Oli has become such a central figure that as factions of the four main parties jostle to find coalition partnerships they are all divided depending on whether they support the prime minister or not.

First, his UML itself is divided, with the Nepal faction behaving like an opposition party. Oli's strategy now is to woo away Nepal loyalists like Jhalnath Khanal, whom President Bidya Devi Bhandari went to meet at his home last week.

The Maoist Centre has also lost its senior comrades to Oli's Cabinet: Ram Bahadur Thapa, Top Bahadur Ryamajhi and others. The party removed them from MP-hood on Tuesday, but cannot seem to decide what to do next.

A Nepali Congress (NC) Central Committee meeting this week called for the resignation of Prime Minister Oli. But the meeting started five hours late because of a disagreement between Sher Bahadur Deuba and Ram Chandra Poudel whether or not to join a coalition government led by Oli.

This indecision in the main opposition NC has put the third and fourth parties, the Maoist Centre and the Janata Samajbadi Party (JSP), in a bind. They do not have the numbers by themselves to challenge Oli.

However, there is discord within the JSP also. And the cause is, once

again, whether to support Oli or not. Party chair Mahantha Thakur and Rajendra Mahato have publicly stated that they are inclined to work with Oli's UML. But the JSP's other leaders Upendra Yadav and Baburam Bhattarai are vehemently opposed.

Because of the JSP's swing vote in the House, Thakur has emerged as the kingmaker in coalition negotiations. The Maoist Centre and the NC need the JSP to unseat Oli, and Oli himself needs the JSP to form the next government if the UML loses the support of the Maoist Centre.

However, even though Dahal threatened last week to pull the rug from under the UML, his Maoist Centre's Standing committee meeting decided that time was not ripe to do so. The Maoists have 54 MPs, and if they withdraw support for the UML which has 121 seats, Prime Minister Oli will have to seek a vote of confidence in the House.

Oli will need 138 MPs on his side to win the vote, and will court the JSP with 34 seats or the NC with 63 seats. Dahal knows that if he withdraws support there is every likelihood that either Deuba or Thakur will side with Oli to form an election government. And Maoist leaders know that early elections will be disastrous for them.

With all four parties tangled over their support and opposition to Prime Minister Oli, therefore, Nepali politics is hopelessly knotted up.

ONLINE PACKAGES



More Nepalis die in highway accidents every year than in all natural disasters combined. Report on pages 6-7.



Dhan Bahadur Rai (Tamang) shot down a Pakistani fighter plane in 1971 India-Pakistan war. He went on to be awarded for his bravery by the Indian government. Full story of how he shot to fame on page 5.

KAMALPOKHARI

It's really deplorable rapid urbanization is encroaching on KTM's intricately engineered hydrological civilization ('Our Kamal Pokhari', Sahina Shrestha and Alisha Sijapati, Issue #1055). People in the ancient kingdoms era recognized the necessity of three types of ponds in their land which needed flood and drought control. They still tell us a lot.

Himalayan Night

- Our forefathers had an idea of how much water bodies and open spaces are required for a healthy community of people. They accordingly built ponds for recharging, rainwater harvesting, temperature moderation, and kept the living with fish and lotus; the pond beds were layered with black clay and sand for filtration. Roads were paved with similar stones to allow water to seep through and recharge.

Lal Bahadur

- After winning the legal battle of 17 years while Saptapatal Pukhu is preparing its restoration plan along with Lalitpur Metropolitan City, the people of Bode and Madhyapur Thimi Municipality are dragged to second cycle of litigation against their attempt of saving their lotus pond from land mafias. I do not know what is needed to open the eyes of KMC that ponds (in the real sense of traditional ponds) that are created by our ancestors not for beautification but to nurture moisture to the nature and thus to human beings. Of course beautification is the bonus.

PS Joshi

- No to concrete ponds with no aquatic flora and fauna!

Vani Rana

CARBON FOOTPRINT OF NEPAL'S TOURISM

Employ the young to design small water catchment systems and half buried greenhouses in higher locations, people giving a hand to natures solutions, building carbon rich soil and contained from washing away, yet with steady water systems and plants will be the local food and resource blessings ('The carbon footprint of Nepal's tourism', Sonia Awale, Issue #1055).

Nathan Hagen

- Just what we visioned 3 years ago when we began the GCC Resort Retreat for Conscience in Deumadi, Pokhara! It's sustainable tourism respecting nature biodiversity community and environment!

Akku Chowdury

RESTRICTIONS ON TOURISTS RELAXED

Perhaps this is a concession to lobbying from the official Nepalese trekking agencies. The goal is probably the most possible money from the fewest possible tourists, like Bhutan.

Van Williams

- They could have done a more rational approach to conditions and accounted for people who are visiting family and friends. Some conditions should apply. Until there is less uncertainty about pandemic risks, maybe hard to compare now to pre-pandemic freedom of movement. Sri Lanka also has opened with conditions - it makes sense.

Darlene Foote

- A strange decision considering that they've run out of vaccinations.

Cat Munsel Smith

HERITAGE ALIVE

In March 1982 I walked from Danghadi upriver to Bajhang, Bajura, Mugu etc. and came upon a few impressive historical structures that were overgrown by vegetation ('The sun rises in Nepal's Far West', #1054). When mentioning these to Puraatwa Bibhaag staff they were apologetic, claiming that there were no funds for their travel, let alone for cleaning and preservation of any historical buildings or even lapicides found in many fields. My point is that if with the recent facilitation of travel and expectation that tourism could benefit the area, there must be, along with a "tourism increase plan", also conscientious tourism and archeological plans so that historical sites are not overrun, damaged or looted. This is Nepal's history, and if lost it cannot be regained.

Iván G. Somlai

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING

Delayed dreams for Korea-bound Nepalis

by Upasana Khadka

Korea is the top overseas job destination, but the pandemic has thrown the job prospects of hundreds of those who passed South Korea's Employment Permit Scheme (EPS) in limbo. Read online.

f Most reached and shared on Facebook

Nepal's e-economy rapidly goes digital

by Saniaa Shah

If you have not jumped on the mobile wallet bandwagon already, or if you have dipped your toes but want to know more before diving into the digital payment lifestyle, this article is a quick recap of the top five e-wallet platforms in Nepal. Available on www.nepalitimes.com.

t Most popular on Twitter

Our Kamal Pokhari

by Sahina Shrestha and Alisha Sijapati

Kamal Pokhari's reconstruction has been halted because of a row over the way the historic pond was being rebuilt using concrete. Water heritage conservationists say that valley's ponds need to be revived and not just restored. Full story on Nepal Times.

💬 Most commented



Nepal relaxes entry for tourists

by Nepali Times

After much criticism about unnecessary hassles for tourists, the Nepal government has relaxed entry formalities for foreigners arriving by air. Visit our website for full details.

🔥 Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
#editorial Nepal's leaders are too busy in political firefighting to fight actual fires that are ravaging the country. It took some rain to douse the flames, when will it rain on Nepal's desiccated politics?

Mahavir Singh @MahavirSingh66
Internal fight in the government is costing Nepal much... This surely needs to end so that they may shift their focus to development of nation!!

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
The loss of Kathmandu's ponds is the effacement of indigenous knowledge in a world, that is fast being lost to invasive urban development. Ask Me About Nepal @askmeaboutnepal Why run boats in these small ponds?

pigreen @pigreen1
Please also recognise Janakpur's ponds and the immense effort of the movement to clean and green Janakpur, and its ponds. All over Nepal, traditional water use systems need to be reconstituted and rehabilitated.

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
We should be doing a lot more to reduce vehicular exhaust, brick kilns and open garbage burning.

Mark Pickett @DrMarkPickett
The only obstacle is lack of desire on the part of those with power. It's been the same for 30 years now. All who exploit the powerless for personal gain must repent.

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Police arrest environment activists who staged a demonstration in front of Singha Darbar demanding that the government implement climate or health emergency.

Sib Kumar @SibKumar16
Peaceful protests aren't crime. Environmental justice is crucial for the future of this planet. Young Climate activists striving to seek climate justice aren't criminals.

Aachal Dhital @AachalDhital
So much for freedom to speak. Why is it always that peaceful protests are handled with such violence in Nepal?

Fridays For Future Bangladesh @FFFInBD
Peaceful protests and activism aren't crimes! Environmental justice is crucial for the future of this planet. Young Climate activists striking to seek climate justice aren't criminals.

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Nepali migrant workers have been waiting for more than a year to join jobs in Korea.

कमल गौडकार @kamalKThapa
Nepal Govt should take it seriously. It's not only putting mental pressure on the people in the waiting, but it's a huge loss to Nepal because our country is losing valuable remittance too.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

20 years ago this week, the Maoist conflict that was in its fifth year took a bloody turn when the insurgents killed 31 policemen in Rukumkot, took 23 hostages and left 14 wounded. The same week they murdered five more police in Maina Pokhari in Dolakha and another two in Mujung, Palpa. There were blasts in Kathmandu Valley and Dhading.

In the aftermath of the Rukumkot massacre, a question lingered: are we headed to the negotiating table or more bloodshed?

This Nepali Times report from issue #376-12 April 2001 correctly predicted that Nepalis, caught between indecisive and fractious political leaders in Kathmandu and Maoists on the offensive, will have to witness many more Rukumkots before a ceasefire takes hold.

In fact, at least 15,000 more lives were lost in the next five years, several thousand were disappeared following the Rukum slaughter.

Now two decades later, the unrest is long over, the country is supposedly at peace, but the scars of war remain. Conflict-era crimes have gone unpunished, which is not surprising given that the former rebels until recently were a part of the government and continue to hold powerful senior positions.

Excerpts of the report from 20 years ago:

A little part of Nepal died on Sunday night. Newas, Magars, Chhetris, Bahuns, highlanders and Madhesis, from different parts of Nepal



were among the dead on that remote hilltop outpost in Rukum. Some of the policemen were apparently butchered execution-style, after they had surrendered. Nepal's political history does not have a recorded parallel to Sunday night's death toll. Only the infamous Kot Massacre of 1846 saw more deaths on a single night.

An upside in Maoist activities was predicted, but the Chaite Dasain carnage surpassed all expectations. Also unexpected was the frontal assault on the fortified barracks—the first major offensive since the Dunai attack last September prompted the police to pull back from hotspots. The dispirited policemen manning Rukumkot were sitting ducks. It was a week of bloodshed.

Nepalis from almost every ethnicity and caste group have been killed in the five years of violence. Chhetris head the list, with Magars following a close second, and then Bahuns. But most of those killed have something in common—class. Those on the frontlines are poor village youth promised better lives by the Maoists, and policemen who can't find any other jobs and don't have the clout to prevent a posting in insurgency areas. The official death toll in five years now stands at over 1,600, and tens of thousands of others are internal refugees.

From archives material of *Nepali Times* of the past 20 years, site search: www.nepalitimes.com

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JSP as Nepal's king-maker party

"I have given my word to Oli that I will not turn against him"



The man of the week in Nepali politics is Mahant Thakur of the Janata Samajbadi Party. He is being courted by both the Maoist Centre, the Nepali Congress and the K P Oli-led UML.

The country has been mired in political games, ever since the Supreme Court restored the House of Representatives on 23 February. However, after the Supreme Court delivered its verdict to resuscitate NCP (UML) and NCP (Maoist Centre) on 7 March, there has been an impasse.

The UML is the largest party in the House with 121 seats. In order to attain majority, it needs the backing of one of the other parties in the house-- the NC, Maoist

Centre and Janata Samajbadi Party.

The Parliamentary arithmetic is such that the UML needs the JSP to form a new government, or to survive a possible no-confidence vote. The Maoist Centre can only withdraw its support for the UML if it can get the numbers from the NC and the JSP.

The NC itself requires the JSP MPs on its side to ally with the Maoist Centre. Which is why various political leaders have been making a bee line to the Mahant Thakur residence in Sano Thimi this past week.

The UML is not in favour of forging a partnership with NC, the chief opposition

in the House, with 63 seats in the lower house. The Maoist Centre which has 54 MPs, have repeatedly stressed on withdrawing their support to the government at any given time. In this scenario, the 34 seats held by the JSP will be enough to bail out the government.

The leaders of the Oli faction say the possibility of forming a government with the JSP is "highly probable". As per the demand by the JSP for the release of Resham Chaudhary, the government has not just constituted a dialogue team, but the team has already started deliberations. So, is the JSP all set to form a coalition with the UML? Mahantha Thakur spoke to Nepali Times about his preference.

Nepali Times: You said recently in Janakpur that talks with Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli are progressing positively. Are the UML and the JSP inching close to an agreement regarding formation of a new government?

Mahant Thakur: We have held several rounds of discussions with Oli. He has said he will not resign and if the motion of no confidence comes up, he will face it and if the result does not favour him, then he will go for a fresh mandate. We have put forward our demands. The Prime Minister has sought the opinion of the Attorney General. He is seeking legal advice to decide on what procedure to adopt. This is why I said the dialogue was positive, but no decisions yet.

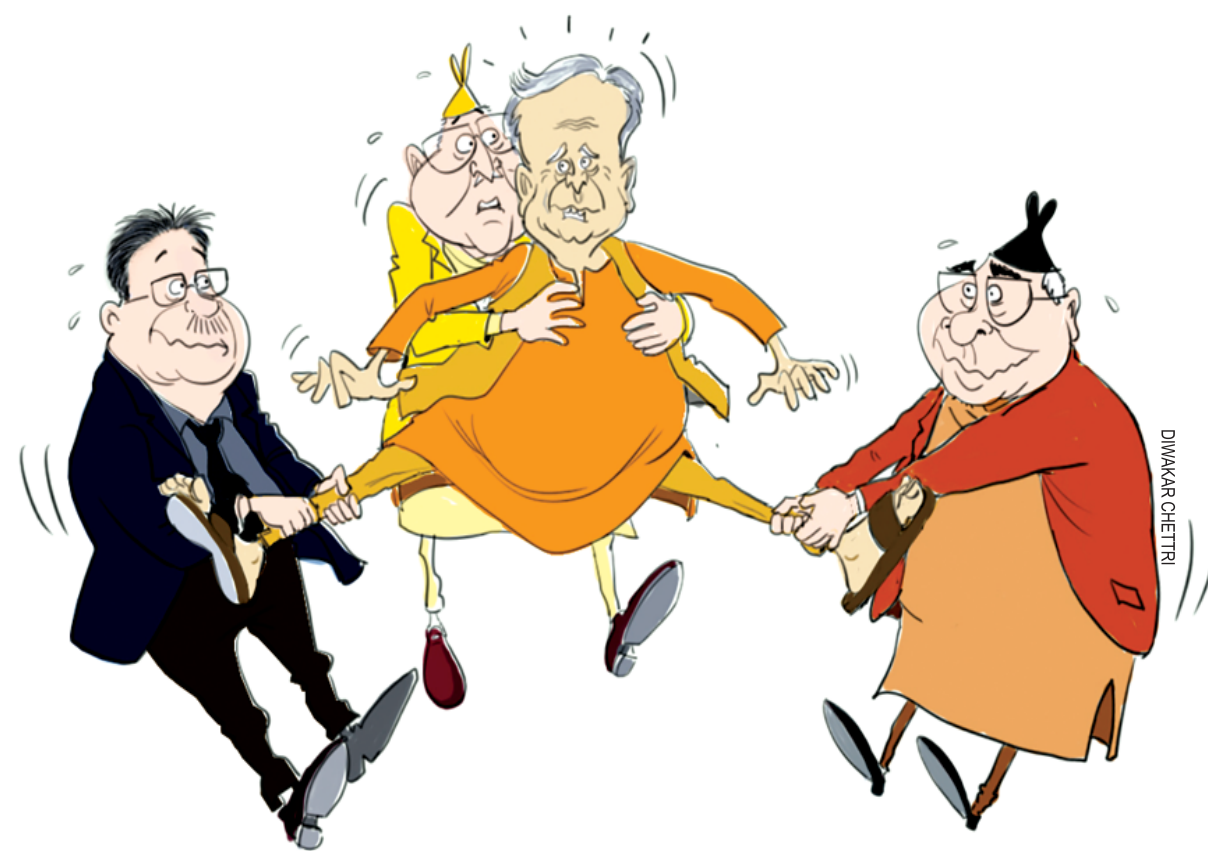
The Prime Minister has not given assurance to fulfill your demands?

PM Oli has said he will do his best regarding our demands. He gave us three options. First would be participating in the government. Second, would be to support the government from outside, and third, if we do not go with them, then we should not go anywhere. Our friends lost lives in jail, fighting for their rights. They were injured and even physically disabled. We will decide what to do after these issues are resolved.

What are your demands?

Release of prisoners, Constitution amendment to address citizenship-language issues. Most of the leaders of today have either made it by taking up arms or have been through prison sentences. All of them have already received clean chit. Our politics has never been for power. Cases have been filed against us because we were demonstrating for our rights. In just 13 districts of Madhes, there are 292 registered cases against more than 1,200 people.

Prachanda himself admits there are many cases against him, but



those cases do not affect him. On the contrary, we are facing punishment for merely protesting to demand our legitimate rights. We had reached an agreement in writing with both Oli and Prachanda in the past on amending the Constitution, so that our demands could be addressed. But it was not implemented.

Can Resham Chaudhary and others who were convicted by courts also be released in the name of political consensus?

Resham Chaudhary was not present there on the day the Tikapur incident happened. He is not involved. The ones who were responsible for the massacre fled. Everyone is aware of the fact that Resham Chaudhary is innocent.

He was victimised because where the incident occurred is a Tharu settlement.

Which of the parties do you think will more likely back your demands?

So many things are best left unsaid until the time is right. In the present context, the Nepali Congress who was expected to lead the government has stepped back, so it is not possible for them to address our demands. The House constituted for five years was dissolved by PM Oli within three years. Even though the Supreme Court has reinstated the House, Prachanda is protesting against Oli. Technically, they still have not separated from Oli. So there

is no ground for us to be confident regarding support.

Has this indecision itself split your own party?

It has been less than a year since our party was unified. We had to reorganise the ranks during the merger. When a party unifies, it is not possible to keep the posts from the previous parties intact. Some positions might be annulled. That causes tension in the party. But whatever the decision, we have agreed to forge ahead as a unified party. We had agreed on every individual providing their own inputs during deliberations and making unanimous decisions when the merger happened. We will not back unilateral decisions.

Your name has also come up as a possible Prime Minister.

Madhesis are remembered only when there is a major crisis. People from the Madhes are brought to the forefront only when a mass is required during protests. During the premiership of Baburam Bhattarai, after Nepali Congress and UML declined to head towards the poll under his leadership, my name was suggested. Even now, the circumstance is dire and there seems to be public support, as well. But to actually be nominated as a Prime Minister, an agreement has to be reached in the House.

Oli has not offered you to become the Prime Minister?

No, he has said he will not resign.

Have Nepali Congress and Maoists offered the JSP leadership of a new government?

Both Congress and Maoist have sought our support. But they have not asked us to take leadership. During a meeting with us, Sher Bahadur Deuba said he would not table a no-confidence motion, but that if the offer of Prime Minister comes up, he would think about it. He offered to make a coalition government with our support, but we said that we would not form a coalition until our demands were met.

By when will your party decide whom to support in the government?

The first executive committee meeting scheduled for March could not be held due to inadequate preparations, as the political report to be presented at the meeting had not been finalised. More work is being done in the context of adjustment, so the meeting is yet to happen. Now that Holi is over, we will soon be fixing a date for the meeting. It will discuss our stance on the current political stalemate, among other things. 🇳🇵

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Golchha and NEA Sign Agreement

Golchha Group has signed an agreement with Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) for the production of 2MW solar energy through Power Purchase Agreement (PPA).

This proposal was signed by the Managing Director of Nepal Electricity Authority, Hitendra Dev Shakya and Chairman of Golchha Group, Shekhar Golchha.

NIBL Ace Capital appointed

NIBL Ace Capital Limited has been appointed as Debenture Registrar of Nepal Credit and Commerce Bank Limited (NCC Bank). The Debenture Registrar Service Agreement was made between the two companies on 25th March as they agreed on the matter. The agreement was signed between Rajesh Raj Dhungel and Sachindra Dhungana.

Non-Resident Nepali Coordination Forum Expands

The Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry has expanded the International and Non-Resident Nepali Coordination Forum. Under which, three

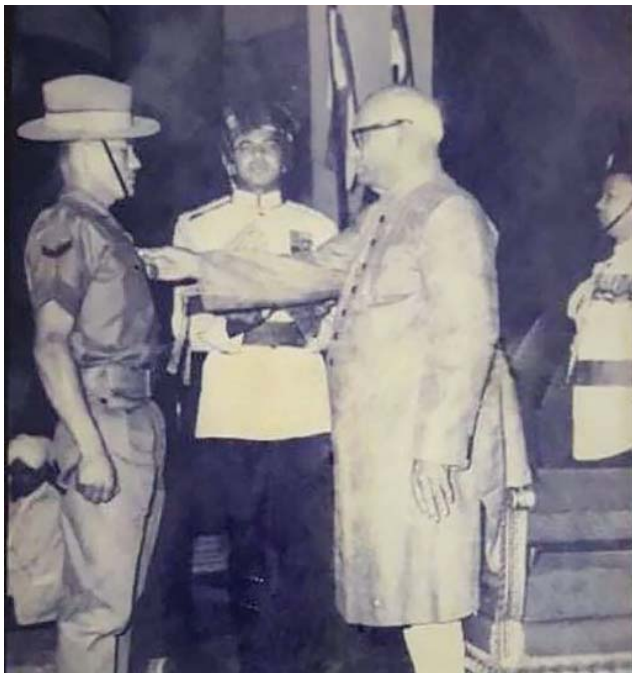


vice-presidents have been selected regionally in the forum expanded by the federation. FNCCI Senior Vice President, Chandra Prasad Dhakal said that the role of the facilitator should be played to attract investment of non-resident Nepalis for the economic growth of the country.



CG Inauguration in Sipradi

The Jalpadevi Vehicle Repair Workshop in Melamchi, Sindhupalchowk has been recognized as a Certified Garage by Sipradi Private Ltd. with the objective of providing vehicle service and maintenance facilities to the customers of Tata Commercial Vehicles at their place of convenience.



He shot down a fighter, then shot to fame

Nepali soldier in the Indian Army recalls bringing down a Pakistani jet in the Bangladesh War

● Gopal Dahal

It was a hazy December morning in 1971 at the strategic Chicken Neck frontline between India and what was then East Pakistan. Dhan Bahadur Rai had been watching a squadron of five Pakistan Air Force F-6s circle above his position.

Suddenly, one of the planes peeled off and dropped a bomb that landed close to his bunker. The sleek jet then looped back and started strafing the Indian Army positions.

Dhan Bahadur was at his 7.62mm LMG (light machine gun) position, and took aim at the plane as it swooped low for another pass.

"I fired at it in bursts, and I saw it pull away trailing smoke. Soon, it caught fire and crashed. We saw the pilot parachute out, and the plane was buried in a crater about 1km way," Dhan Bahadur recalls.

The pilot was captured, and became a prisoner of war. Within a week on 16 December 1971, Pakistan had surrendered, and Bangladesh was born.

Dhan Bahadur, now 77, grows cardamom in his ancestral village of Nundhiki in Sankhuwasabha high in the mountains of eastern Nepal where as a child he herded the family's livestock, without an opportunity for schooling.

At age 19, he walked across the border to Darjeeling with other boys from his village to be recruited into the Indian Army's Gorkha regiment. He was shortlisted, and assigned a number for 11 months of military training.

Dhan Bahadur is actually a Tamang, but the Indian Army recruitment officers presumed he was a Rai like other Nepalis who had joined up. So, when he went to Delhi with his wife and grandfather to receive the Vir Chakra medal from Indian President V V Giri in 1972 his name was given as Dhan Bahadur Rai.

Like many of his compatriots, Dhan Bahadur is a modest man, and underplays his role in downing the plane. When other units of the Indian Army also claimed to have shot down the Pakistani plane, he did not press his role.

In the end, it was the Pakistani pilot Flt Lt Wajid Ali Khan who as prisoner of war provided the evidence to prove that it was indeed Dhan Bahadur's bunker from where the shots were fired that brought down the plane.

This is considered one of the rare occasions in which a supersonic



fighter jet has been brought down by small arms fire. The F-6 was the Chinese-made version of the Soviet Mig-19 fighter jet.

Dhan Bahadur was with an advancing column of the 7/11 Gorkha Rifles which on 6 December, 1971 had entered 80km into what was then East Pakistan. The Chicken Neck is a narrow strip of Indian territory between Nepal and Bangladesh that connects India with its northeast. It was strategically important for the Indian military to defend this 'Siliguri Corridor'.

"We had dug a bunker, expecting a counter attack from Pakistan," Dhan Bahadur recalls. "They did not retaliate, but they kept sending planes on reconnaissance."

A cheer went up from the Indian troops when the Pakistani plane went down. And till today, the 7/11 Gorkha Rifles of the Indian Army carries the cockpit of the F-6 and Dhan Bahadur's Vir Chakra medal as souvenirs wherever it is deployed.

Dhan Bahadur was congratulated by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and was promoted to Lance Corporal. He wanted to retire, but a decorated soldier was not allowed to. So he went on to serve in Jammu and Kashmir, Darjeeling and Ladakh.

When he did retire in 1980, Dhan Bahadur returned to his village in Nepal where he now lives. He tried to change his name to Dhan Bahadur Rai so that his sons could also join the Indian or British armies, but he could not do it.

Regardless, his seven sons and

a daughter have gone on to build their careers and now have their own businesses in Dharan that they have named after their famous father.

Dhan Bahadur now uses a cane as walks in his cardamom field, and says he is enjoying retirement in the village where he was born. "I like village life. I grow cardamom, and I want to live here for the rest of my life," he says.

He does travel down to Dharan once in a while to check up on his sons and daughter, and to collect his pension which has grown from IRs 50 in 1980 to IRs48,000 today.

Of the Nepali men who were awarded by the Indian government for their bravery, only Dhan Bahadur Tamang still lives in Nepal. Some stayed back in India and some have died.

He is invited back to his battalion in India for events, and that is when for old times' sake, he checks up on his medal, the wreckage of the plane he shot down and looks through framed photographs of that fateful day at the Chicken Neck that propelled him to fame. 🇳🇵

East to west Nepal in a wheelchair

Rambahadur Tamang-Gole wheels himself 1,000 km across Nepal to raise money for charity

● Surendra Phuyal in Dhangadi

After surviving a deadly road accident 10 years ago, Ram Bahadur Tamang-Gole is still on the road – this time in a wheelchair.

On Wednesday he set a new Nepal record for the longest wheelchair ride, from the eastern end of Nepal to the west, a journey of 1,028km in 26 days. He braved rough patches of highway and fumes from trucks, but for him the scariest part was traversing Bardia National Park where a man-eating tiger was on the loose.

"The bad road in Daunne was difficult, but we were really afraid when we heard that a man-eater tiger was loose in the jungles of the Bardia National Park. Luckily, we got an army escort up to the Karnali Bridge," Gole recounts.

Earlier, 39-year-old Gole had done warm-ups by making trips on his wheelchair from Namo Baudha to Lumbini and from there to Bodh Gaya in India. He was accompanied by his relative, Man Bahadur Tamang.

After setting off from the Mechi Bridge on the Indian border on 27 February, Gole

crossed towns and cities and the Kosi, Kamala, Bagmati, Narayani, Tinau, Rapti, Baba, and Karnali rivers to finally reach the Mahakali Bridge on Nepal's western border with India.

He broke his spine in 2011 when his bus fell into the Bhothe Kosi in Sindhupalchok while on his way back from the Chinese border at Kodari. Rescuers had left him for dead, but he survived. Gole has been paralysed from the waist down ever since, and was treated at the Spinal Injury Rehabilitation Centre in Sanga.

He now works at the Centre as a counselor for other patients like him, where his message is never to lose hope and to always aim higher. In that spirit, he now hopes to complete a journey across the Subcontinent to the southern tip of India.

"We got a lot of help and generosity along the way, I am really happy to have completed it and hope to make even longer journeys in future," Gole told Nepali Times at Dhangadi airport before flying back to Kathmandu.

His message to others with similar injuries is: "Never give up. It doesn't matter if I cannot walk, I can still travel, and carry on with my life." 🇳🇵



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Nepal's other pandemic: road fatalities

More people die on Nepal's highways every year than in all natural disasters combined

सग्लो समाज

● Anita Bhetwal

On 12 December 2019, residents of Khadichaur of Sindhupalchok district woke up to a loud crash. It was 5AM. A bus had careened off a hairpin bend and plunged 500m down the mountain, killing 17 passengers and wounding 18 others.

They were pilgrims on the way back from the Kalinchok shrine. A little over a year later, the tragedy has become part of the deadly statistics of Nepal's highway accidents in which an average of seven people die every day.

"There was a pile of bodies, some with their limbs severed. I had never before seen such a horrendous sight," recalls Mithu Mijar. "All we could do was help lift the bodies and place them in ambulances."

Tara Bahadur Karki is still traumatised by the memory, and cannot walk past the site without recalling that fateful day: "The entire slope was covered with

bodies and there were more under the bus. After a while, we lost count, as we kept pulling them out of the wreckage."

Most of the accidents are preventable, and the causes are mainly poor road condition and reckless driving. The pandemic of highway accidents kills as many Nepalis every year as all the natural disasters combined. In fact they are so common that most Nepalis are desensitised by the numbers.

From July 2014-July 2019, there were a total of 54,000 road accidents in Nepal resulting in 12,000 deaths of people mostly in the age group 15-40 years.

This number went down sharply during the Covid-19 lockdown. Highway fatalities declined by half to less than 700 in March-August 2020, compared to the same period the previous year. By the Dasain-Tihar festival in November 2020, with restrictions removed, the number of deaths on the roads again spiked to 242 after falling to 52 in May.

"In developing country like ours we have fewer accidents but more casualties because of our mass transport. But we often forget about those wounded, they are sentenced to a life of economic hardships and trauma beyond our imaginations," says former Superintendent of Police Jagat Man Shrestha.

On average, 40 people are injured on roads across the country

each day.

In 2019, there were nearly 13,000 highway and road accidents in which 2,736 people lost their lives and 10,731 were seriously injured. Those who survive often have traumatic brain and spinal cord injuries, requiring long-term or life-long rehabilitative care.

Journalist Gajendra Budathoki was on his way home one rainy night when the blinding headlight of an oncoming bus from the wrong side at Bhadrakali turn caused his motorcycle to skid off the road. A spinal cord injury has paralysed him from the waist down.

"I would never go faster than 50km/hour and my friends used to poke fun at me for being slower than a bicycle but now I'm forced to live the rest of my life bound on a wheelchair," he laments.

According to the WHO Global Status on Road Safety 2018, only 8 in 100,000 people die of highway and road accidents in developed countries, but the number soars to 27.5 in low-income nations like Nepal.

A Ministry of Physical Infrastructure and Transport study has found that 76% of highway accidents are caused by drivers who do not follow traffic rules, or are speeding.

"Tipper truck drivers get Rs1,000 per trip so they try to make as many roundtrips as possible. I have seen them make five per



night, driving even as they doze off at the wheels. If they don't kill people, who will?" asks the chief of Lalitpur Metropolitan Police Sitaram Hachhethu.

Traffic police have now deployed speed guns to check speeding at the accident-prone Satdobato-Gwarko road. They penalise up to 100 commuters a day, many of them in motorcycles that are going at 90km/hour in the road with a speed limit of 50km/hour.

Road maintenance or lack thereof is another major cause of traffic accidents. Local governments

need to wait for the budget to maintain road safety while the Department of Roads is unable to add crash barriers on highways.

"Our roads are narrow, bad, and frankly not the kind we should have built," accepts Arjun Thapa, head of the Department. "Priority on road construction without proper infrastructure planning is to blame."

Roads are synonymous with development in Nepal. Every election, politicians promise highways to boost their vote banks. There are excavators clawing away at the mountains all

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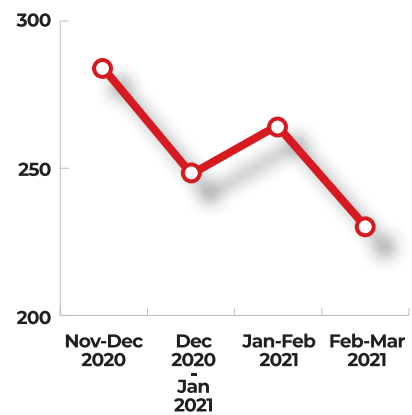
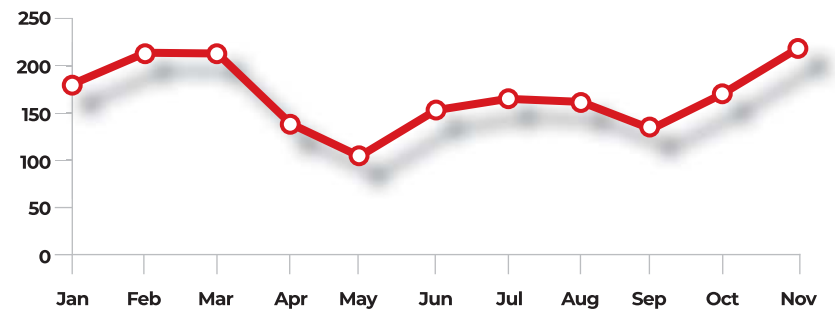
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PAWAN PAUDEL

Lives on the line

Roads traffic accidents from Jan 2020-March 2021



over the country.

Says road safety analyst Kamal Panday: "Well-constructed roads prevent accidents, but we have made ours ignoring technical and engineering aspects because new roads bring in votes, and maintenance doesn't."

All automobiles are subjected to mechanical inspection tests every six months. Those that fail are not allowed on the streets. But testing centres across the country are not functional as vehicles are certified based on manual (visual) inspection alone.

The design of vehicles can

also factor in crucial life and death situations. For example, tipper truck drivers have blind spots on the sides which prevent them from seeing motorcyclists. Moreover, the bumpers of these heavy load vehicles is 1.5m above the ground making them lethal in a collision. Many countries including China, Brazil and Japan have now added 360degree cameras for tipper drivers.

"Our tippers are not fit for highway and city traffic, their only purpose is to carry raw material from mines to construction site," says Namraj Ghimire of

the Department of Transport Management.

An important aspect when it comes to traumatic road traffic accidents is the transportation of the wounded to the hospitals without further aggravating their condition. "We have seen many cases of careless handling leading to unnecessary damage to the spine resulting into deaths," says Raju Dhakal of the Spinal Injury Rehabilitation Centre in Sangha.

The departments responsible to ensure road safety all pass the blame to on another when questioned.

Traffic police complain that they do not have enough human resources. The Department of Roads states that most roads in Nepal are now under the purview of local governments. The Transport Service Department simply does not bother about vehicular inspections.

It is therefore up to the public to make their voice heard, and make government agencies feel more responsible.

"Civil society, media and investigators must start a discourse to wake up the uncaring state to wrench this calamity from its roots," says activist Anandaraj

Joshi, who used to be a truck driver in Western Nepal.

There is a consensus among experts that road engineering suited to the geography of the place and mechanical knowledge is crucial to reducing road accidents. Similarly, traffic education goes a long way in preventing road fatalities and must start at homes and schools.

Says former SP Jagat Man Shrestha: "Traffic enforcement gives us a quick result but it will be temporary. To prevent as many road accidents as possible, we must revamp our education system and upgrade engineering." 🇳🇵

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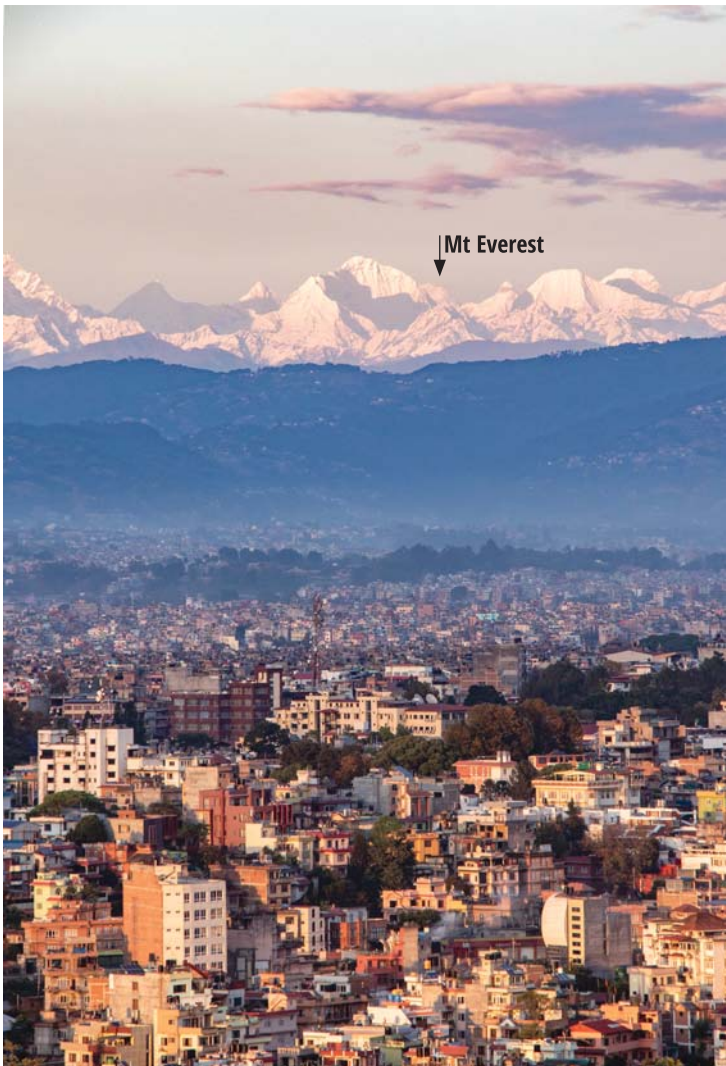
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Closeup of Gurkapo Ri (6,891m), Dorje Lakpa (6,996m) and Lonpo Gang (7,083m) and Gyalzen Peak (6,151m) just before sunset last year, and the view from the same spot in Chobar this week.



This series of photographs of Kathmandu Valley were taken by Abhushan Gautam Shakya on 10 March last year. Mt Everest was visible last year from 200km away in Kathmandu (left). On Tuesday (right).



Himalchuli (7,893m) and Manaslu (8,156m) loom over the western edge of Kathmandu Valley in this photo taken last year. And the view from the same place on 6 April.

NEPAL'S SMOKY

Views of the Himalaya from Kathmandu during lockdown

After all traffic in Nepal and India came to a halt during the coronavirus lockdown last year, photographer Abhushan Gautam Shakya posted proof that if the air was clear enough, Mt Everest could be seen from Kathmandu.

On Tuesday, he went back to the exact spot in Chobar from where he had taken the photograph last year at 5-6PM just before sunset pointed his camera in the general direction of the original shot, and clicked the shutter. The visibility this week was less than 2km.

"Last year, I was super excited to document the panoramic views of Kathmandu with the Himalayan backdrop," Shakya recalls. "I did not feel like leaving the spot till nightfall."

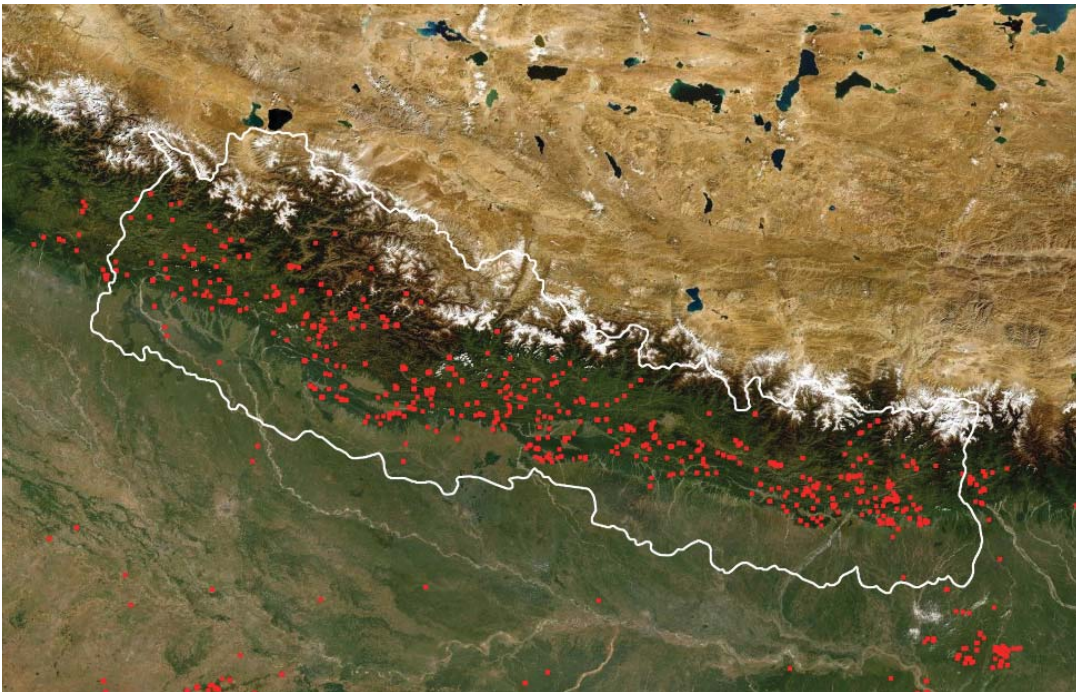
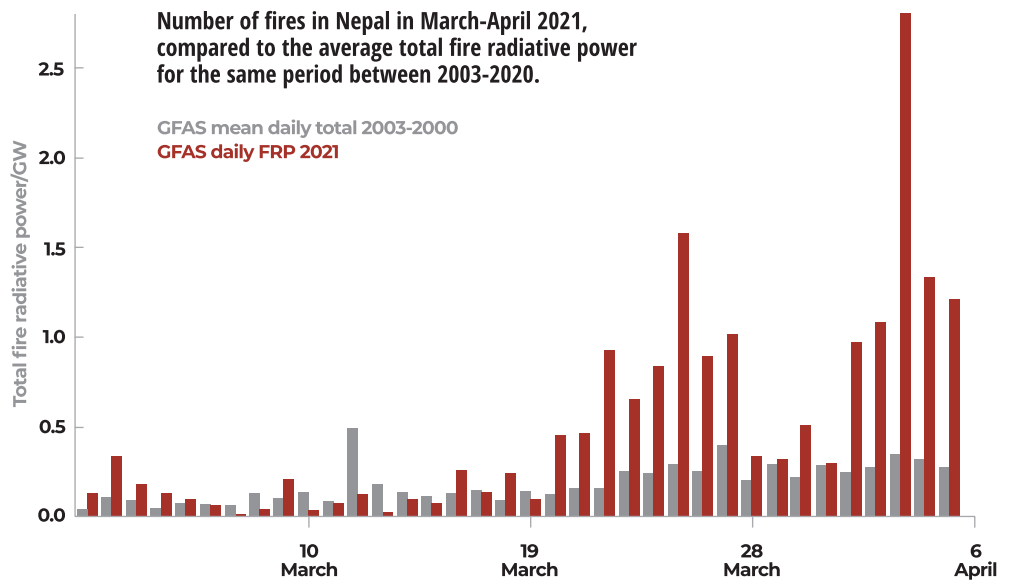
In the past four months, as wildfires continued to burn, the whole country

has been shrouded in thick smoke that has not lifted for weeks. After some rain on 2 April, there had been a short respite, but Kathmandu's Air Quality Index (AQI) has gone back to above 300 for the past five days.

"This year, the poor visibility felt both alarming and suffocating because of the smoke, I just took the photographs and left the spot," Shakya told *Nepali Times*.

With no references of mountains in the backdrop, Shakya missed some of the vantage points where he had stood last year. The air was so bad the city had disappeared and only some of the high-rise apartments in Jhamsikhel were faintly visible through the dirty yellow haze.

"Capturing the panoramic images seemed seamless last year, the camera easily focused on Kathmandu landmarks and mountains beyond due to clear weather and soft light from the golden hour. This year the



A NASA Fire Information Resource Management System (FIRMS) satellite image detected hundreds of fires all over Nepal on 7 April. Notice there are not many fires in neighbouring countries.



10 May 2020, and on 6 April 2021 from the same spot in Chobar at the same time just before (right).



Patan with Phurbi Ghyachu (7,083m) in the backdrop last year, and this week with the camera pointing in the same direction.



KEY MOUNTAINS

During the lockdown last year, and this week.

camera struggled to find those landmarks, and taking the panorama was even more difficult because I could not identify the common frames for stitching later,” he said. The results can be seen in the before-and-after images by photographer Shakya on this centrespread: photographs last year were crisp and saturated, but this week they are blurry and dull. The reason the air quality has remained so poor for so long is that there are thousands of fires right across western and central Nepal, as well as parts of Uttarakhand in India. Deficient precipitation in winter and spring, possibly a result of climate change, had dried up the forest floor, making this year’s fire season the worst in living memory. The fires have been unprecedented in extent and duration. They have added to the already serious pollution from

vehicular emission, brick kilns and open garbage burning in Kathmandu Valley. In mid-March there was also a lot of wind-blown sand from the Arabian and Indian deserts. There have been years like the winter of 2008-2009 when there were huge fires in the high mountains blowing plumes of smoke over Kathmandu. But these lasted only a few days after the rains arrived. The Department of Meteorology and Hydrology says there are no signs of a major westerly system to bring rain or to blow the smoke away. There have also not been local convection systems along the mountains during this spring’s storm season so far. The scale of the blazes is too extensive for local firefighters, and there has been no effective national effort to douse the flames. This means the fires are likely to continue until they burn themselves out. 🇳🇵



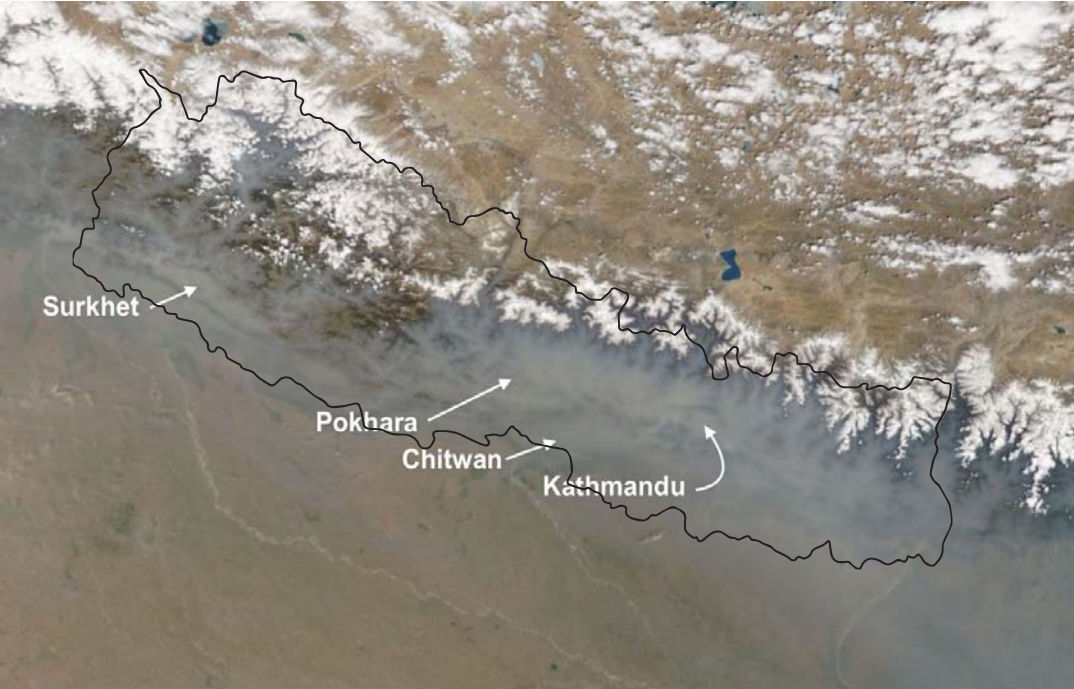
Fire burning through the dry underbrush along the East-West Highway in Rautahat this week.

MUKESH POKHREL

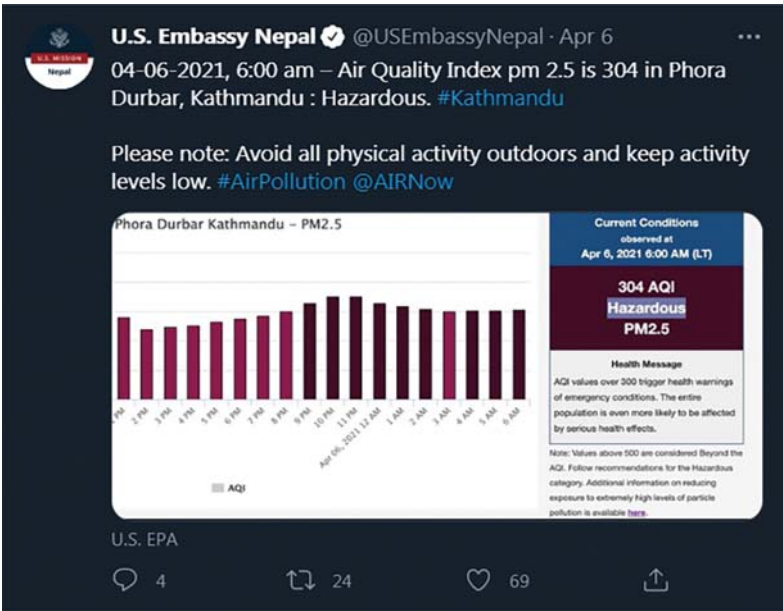


KUNDA DIXIT

The US AQI reading of the concentration of particular matter up to 2.5 microns in Kathmandu air on 6 April at 4PM.



Another NASA Worldview image in the visual spectrum on 6 April at 10AM shows the extent and spread of the smoke all over Nepal.



A Tweet from the US Embassy (@USEmbassyNepal) showed that its air pollution monitoring station at Phora Darbar in Kathmandu on 6 April at 6AM measured an AQI of 304. It warned that air quality was too hazardous for all physical activity outdoors.

EVENTS

Musical Eve & Chef's Special at Utpala

In association with Project Sarangi, Utpala is organising a Musical New Year eve special. This comes with a five-flavour Chefs' Special. Support upcoming and learning artists with exceptional talent at Utpala.
13 April, 5:20 am, Utpala



Bhaskar Swar

An initiation by Artlab to witness where street art meets indoor gallery. Here's a wholesome blend of artistic indulgences & cravings as an Art Bar & Café.
10 April, 6 pm, Vidroha Art cafe and bar

Saturday Labim bazaar

From soaps to essential oils to sel roti, there's something for everyone at this biggest local market in Kathmandu, so far. With more than 80 local vendors, the goal is to encourage interaction with farmers, artists & designers.
10 April, 9 am, Labim Mall

Kholo 2.0

A seven-month-long exhibition, Tulikaa's Kholo 2.0 – A Cycle Of Life, is the longest exhibition in Nepal displaying artworks of 28 upcoming, established, and legendary Nepali artists in seven different genres of Nepali art. This week, work by Samir Maharjan's is being exhibited.
12 February - 27 August, Van Gogh Gallery, Dhokaima Cafe



Nepal x Impact Marathon 2021

Childreach Nepal and Impact Marathon are harnessing the simple power of running to raise funds for different campaigns. Run for a cause at the 5th Nepal Impact Marathon in Batase is your opportunity to support those in need. Register online to participate.
November, Sindhupalchowk

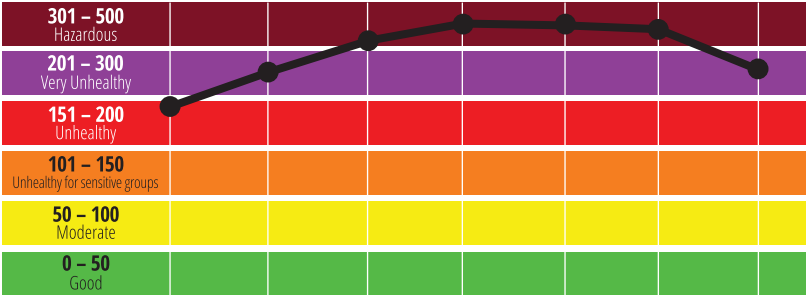


Since a national emergency has not been declared to fight the fires, there is nothing to do but pray for rain to douse the flames. Aside from sporadic local convection systems along the mountains, there is no sign of any westerly disturbance into the weekend. This is bad news for Nepal's forests and the air quality. Kathmandu's already notorious air pollution has been made worse by the smoke. Maximum temperature will be 2 degree below normal because of the filtering action of the smoke.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
28° 13°	28° 12°	28° 13°

AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU, 2 - 8 April



FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY
April 2	April 3	April 4	April 5	April 6	April 7	April 8

It's no surprise that Kathmandu's Air Quality Index stayed in the hazardous zone all week after improving a bit on 3 April after the rains in Central Nepal. The smoke covers the whole country, but is concentrated along Himalayan valleys where it is trapped by terrain. This adds to the vehicular emissions and cross-border industrial smog. There might be a slight easing due to prevailing winds, but that will also fan the fires. Keep your masks on against both pollution and Covid.

ONLINE ARCHIVES

BOJU BAJAI



Boju Bajai
Listen to Itisha Giri and Bhrikuti Rai as they talk from across two continents about politics, media and feminism in South Asia.

Journeyman Pictures

Watch groundbreaking award-winning factual films about some of the most burning issues across the globe including politics, the environment, and the current pandemic. Find Journeyman pictures on YouTube.



Seeker

Seeker tells award-winning stories about the natural forces and groundbreaking innovations that impact lives, the planet, and the universe. Look for their videos on technology and medical advancement. Find Seeker on YouTube and Instagram TV.



Free Netflix documentaries

Netflix has released some of its documentaries for free on YouTube for educational purposes in light of the global coronavirus pandemic. Watch the award-winning documentary Our Planet from Sir David Attenborough, for a start.

Global flea markets

Experience 9 of the world's most iconic flea markets including France's Les Puces de Saint-Ouen, India's Anjuna Flea Market, and London's Portobello Market with this Google Earth virtual tour.

DINING



Tamarind
Unwind at Tamarind, a multi-cuisine restaurant housed in a retro architecture and separate glasshouse. Worked on extensively by a team dedicated to innovation and finesse, the menu is redesigned every six months, keeping in mind the patrons' preferences.
(01) 5522626, Jhamsikhel

Pho99

Enjoy a wide variety of Vietnamese food prepared with fresh herbs, including cold noodles, deep-fried spring rolls, Vietnamese salads and curries, as well as Vietnam's national staple, the delicious Pho.
Boudha, 9803203119

Roadhouse Cafe

Enjoy a myriad of woodfire pizzas surrounded by the décor of Mediterranean colours, wooden furniture and mosaics on the walls, that give the café an earthy feel and sets the tone for a getaway.
(01) 5367885, Thamel



Around the Corner

With the restaurant theme of 'Dine in Nature,' this nursery dining space builds its ambience on the natural sounds of chirping birds, the swooshing of bamboo trees and the rustle of leaves-- all but a tapestry to showcase here in Kathmandu.
9861631197, Bansbari



Jazz Upstairs

Jazz has an unfussy rooftop hangout with outdoor seats offering cocktails and pub snacks. Have a game of pool or groove with jazzy live music every Wednesday.
(01) 4416983, Lazimpat



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OUR PICK



In Fabrice Gobert's 2012-2015 supernatural drama series *The Returned* (*Les Revenants*), a small French mountain town grapples with the reappearance of its dead residents— including a teenager killed in a bus accident, a young boy killed in a burglary, and a serial killer. The town begins to experience more strange occurrences as those who have returned try to readjust to life with people who have already moved on. Based on Robin Campillo's 2004 film of the same name. Stars Frédéric Pierrot, Anne Consigny, Clotilde Hesme, Guillaume Gouix, Yara Pilartz, and more.



Kholo 2.0

A CYCLE OF LIFE



(DIGITAL ART)

SAMIR MAHARJAN

APR 9 - APR 14

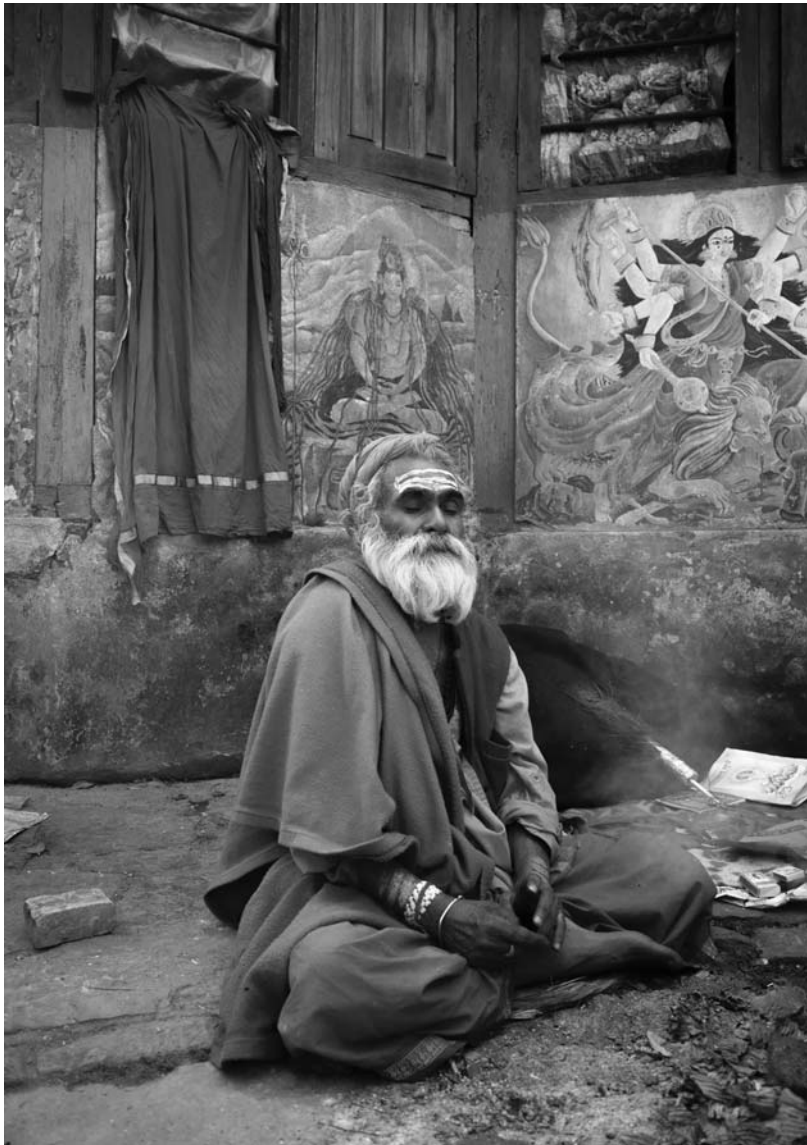
Van Gogh Gallery

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GALLERY TIME 12 PM TO 7 PM





into that meditative headspace and being out in the world, is the fun part.”

What role is there for a photographer when everyone with a mobile and Instagram account can take pictures and show them to the world? Allam admits it is easy to be lazy and click the shutter aimlessly to capture the ‘decisive moment’.

“You can easily fall in the habit of just taking random photographs and hoping one of the shots will have the right composition, exposure, etc, whereas with film

photography since you are limited to 36 shots per roll, and since it has become increasingly expensive to develop film, there is much more awareness of what is happening within the four corners of the frame when I look into the viewfinder,” he says. “Everything is more considered.”

Allam has two exhibitions opening in Cairo next month, and a long-term photo project in Egypt. Some of the photographs will be from Nepal. 🇳🇵

Instagram: @amorallam



Kathmandu in monochrome

Photographer captures the duality of Kathmandu through the black and white

● Shristi Karki

At 29, Omar Allam is already a world traveller: born in Vienna, he has spent time in Cairo, Istanbul, New York, New Delhi, Dubai, and the past three months in Kathmandu.

A childhood passion for cameras meant that he was filming everything from family holidays to friends skateboarding. Growing up as the son of an Egyptian diplomat, he completed a degree in photography at the Pratt Institute in New York, transitioning from film to stills. It seems photography fit his personality more, since it was a more solitary art form.

“Compared to all the places in the world I have been to, Kathmandu is a joy to photograph,” says Allam. “Because other than the landscape and culture, it is the people who define the city. I have been blessed to have had all these magical people cross my path.”

Like most visitors to Kathmandu, Allam was drawn to Pashupati during Shivaratri to photograph the holy men who congregate there to smoke their

chillums and pose for pictures.

Taking photographs of sadhus (or with them) at Pashupati has become something of a tourist selfie cliché, but Allam’s black and white images have an ethereal quality, perhaps because one is not distracted by the vibrant colours of the face-paint or the backdrop.

“I am always following the light, and I see photos in the real world in black and white,” he says. “It lends itself nicely to my visual language. It has a timeless quality to it, and black and white captures ideas of duality, light and dark, good vs evil.”

Allam says he has always been fascinated with things considered ‘old world’, like ancient Egyptian occult practices, and he has a love for vintage cars. He thinks that is why he is drawn by black and white photography, because it plays into nostalgia.

“Photographing in Kathmandu has been a deeply rewarding experience,” he says. “Taking photos for me is not about the final product, it is a process of discovery. It comes from being open and vulnerable to fleeting situations, and the physical act of going out

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AYSHANIE MEDAGANGODA-LABÉ/TWITTER

UNITED WE STAND: South Korean ambassador, Park Chong-Suk and UNDP Resident Representative for Nepal, Ayshanie Medagangoda-Labé discuss green startups and agriculture on Monday.



FELICITY VOLK/TWITTER

WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT: Australian ambassador, Felicity Volk with Nepali women entrepreneurs during the South Asian Women's Development Forum in Kathmandu on Tuesday.



NONA DEPREZ/TWITTER

HAND IN HAND: EU Ambassador to Nepal, Nona Deprez (*centre*) participates in the weekly Bagmati River clean up campaign in Kathmandu.



PARAS KHADKA/TWITTER

YOUNG GUNS: Former national cricket team captain, Paras Khadka during the BaliWyo Nepal Cup Inter-school Cricket Tournament in Dang.



AMIT MACHAMASI

THUMBS DOWN: Student unions stage a protest against a hike in petroleum products at the premise of Nepal Oil Corporation on Monday.

Shamed for bleeding

Nepali women still have to deal with period shame



How many of you have slept in a menstrual hut? The idea of a ‘menstrual hut’ might sound ridiculous to many but it is a real thing.

In some parts of western Nepal, women are made to sleep in huts and even cowsheds away from their home during menstruation. In addition to being a clear

and drink what is given to them.

The rules prescribed to girls during menses is much worse in other parts of the country, all of them clearly boiling down to the patriarchy and society’s need to control women.

It has always been extremely frustrating to me to witness a society that chooses to be advanced in some areas and traditionalist in other ways. Being selectively progressive and conveniently conservative does have strong undertones of cruelty.

Most Nepali women have said that menstrual taboo is mostly enforced by older family members and religious leaders because they probably grew up watching the same thing repeat itself in every generation.

Nepal’s patriarchal society plays a huge role in enforcing such rules. But as women, some of us still follow aspects of it because it can be hard to change them if you grow up in that environment even if it does not make sense.

I ‘violated’ some of the menstrual taboos when I went away for college because if I did not cook for myself during my periods, no one else would. However, the practice has been so deeply ingrained in me, that despite living abroad for 20 years I am still unable to light the incense and pray to deities during the four days.

The belief is so deeply instilled in my psyche that I still feel a slight awkwardness buying tampons at drug stores. Every morning, I still light an incense to three Hindu deities in my house except for the four days of *na chune*. I do not want to force change; I want to evolve naturally.

I understand now that it is difficult to completely change your ways, but it is not impossible to try to see things from another’s perspective. But most people never try. If a person who is having her period chooses to follow the rules, it is entirely up to her, but the problem is when you force it upon them, which is the case in many families.

Growing up in a Hindu family in Nepal, I learned to acknowledge and accept that periods were ‘dirty’. During a cousin’s wedding in Kathmandu, I was not allowed to participate in the religious

ceremony-- one of the worst experiences. It was aggravated by the fact that every aunty was telling me how sorry they felt for me. It made me feel like it was a bad thing to have periods and that it was bad to be a woman because I would not be in that situation if I was a man.

Growing up, I used to see commercials for sanitary pads where women would be dressed in all white running around fields or deciding to take on a sport looking extremely happy. I wondered when I would be like one of them, only to realize years later that it was all a lie because the story was completely different in people’s homes.

Girls and women are made to feel ashamed for this natural process and then treated like outcasts at home and in social settings-- discrimination in the name of religion.

Rejecting social banishment is not meant to disrespect any culture or tradition, but a means to address the levels of awkwardness and discomfort experienced by women. Haven’t we moved forward enough in the world to not analyse and judge women who may be having their period?

The other side of the story is that if a girl or woman, never gets her period, she is considered ‘barren’ which also does not have a positive connotation. Either way, women are not allowed to win.

Girls need proper guidance and mentorship when they are growing up so they can understand that having periods is natural. It is not necessary for every girl to announce her period, but is important to teach all girls that this is not something they should be ashamed of. 🇳🇵



LIFE TIME

Anjana Rajbhandary

violation of human rights, there are numerous cases of horrible experiences women have while observing this practice, known as *Chaupadi*.

Practiced by Hindu families in Nepal and some places in northern India, *Chhaupadi* is a menstrual taboo which considers periods to be dirty and impure.

Women are at risk of physical and sexual assault during the time they spend in *chau goths* every year, coupled with cold temperatures and snake bites.

The practice was banned in 2005. In 2018, it was criminalised. But the practice still exists in the absence of severe penalty. Currently, anyone who is charged and convicted for forcing a woman to observe *Chaupadi* is subject to a three-month sentence and/or a fine of a few thousand rupees. But the consequences slapped by the government on the guilty have done little to deter people from giving up the practice altogether.

Lack of proper hygiene, safety and privacy during periods is one of the main concerns for women living in such shelters.

But the practice of *Chaupadi* is not confined to western Nepal. A muted version of the practice is observed even in progressive cities like Kathmandu.

In some households in Kathmandu, girls are not allowed to touch books during and after their period for three to seven days, making it harder for them to compete against boys in school.

In cities, many families still do not allow the women in their families to go to the kitchen, touch the water tap or the refrigerator. Menstruating women can only eat



LIFE TIME

Watch the video accompanying a new installment of Anjana Rajbhandari’s column *Life Time* in which she talks about how it is important to educate boys about the way they should treat other genders, to ensure the safety of women.

The coronavirus surge in India has increased the risk of the spread of the virus to Nepal

● **Sonia Awale**

Nepalis had started to heave a sigh of relief with the start of the vaccine drive, but the latest surge in infection rates show there is much to be vigilant about. On 7 April 2021, Kathmandu Valley reported 163 new Covid-19 cases, against the 298 cases across the country.

At a first glance, the numbers look insignificant but this is 300% increase compared to the figures from a month ago. Many of those who have tested are school children, teachers and students going abroad-- with most of them showing the UK strain B.1.1.7., which was first detected in Nepal back in January.

"The UK variant among students point to the community spread of the new strain in Nepal and given that it's more infectious as it is deadlier, we must look into this immediately," says virologist at Teku Hospital Sher Bahadur Pun.

Despite surpassing the US to become the fastest vaccinating country in the world, India is reporting an excess of 100,000 new cases per day now. On Wednesday, the country recorded over 126,000 cases with 630 deaths. India has been registering higher cases of the B.1.1.7 variant, which is 64% more lethal than SARS-CoV-2.

The increasing infection rates in India has put Nepal on high alert



AMIT MACHAMASI

and experts warn of a repeat of the trajectory last year, when imported cases from the southern neighbour led to rapid community spread. Nepal usually tracks India in health trends, and there are already signs of the second wave.

"There are three things working in favour of a possible second surge: our own cases, those being imported from India and the rise of the more contagious UK strain," says Pun.

Nepali migrant workers are already arriving in large number at the 1,770km long porous border between Nepal and India, as the most affected states including Maharashtra, Karnataka and New Delhi announce lockdowns and curfews.

Officials have deployed tests at the Indian border, and those testing positive are recommended to self-isolate. However, returnees could easily bypass the official border

checkpoints as they did last year. Sameer Mani Dixit of the Centre for Molecular Dynamics agrees: "It is not possible to test everyone at the border so we should deploy local government to test and observe the returnees."

Health Minister Hridayesh Tripathi told the Parliament this week that Nepal was likely to see a surge in new cases by May, while he has also turned down the possibility of another lockdown.

The Covid-19 Crisis Management Center (CCMC) has decided on antigen tests for everyone with symptoms entering the Kathmandu Valley. The government has meanwhile, instructed all local levels to set up isolation and quarantine centres. The Health ministry has also urged businesses to close after 9PM and for schools to increase safety measures.

While the government has

drawn flak in the past for not doing enough to control the spread of the virus, it is the public that seems to have flung all caution to the wind this time. People have continued to crowd malls and restaurants and participate in celebrations and even attend political rallies-- often unmasked and with no regard for physical distancing.

"Nepalis have all but forgotten how a year ago, pregnant women couldn't go to hospitals and how there was food insecurity and the crushing burden of economic fallout. Now, they are back to ignoring safety measures," says epidemiologist Lhamo Yangchen Sherpa.

Hazardous levels of air quality in the past two weeks following wildfires across the country has added to the challenge. With a dry spell ahead of us, respite from the bad air does not seem anywhere near in sight.

For most of this week, Kathmandu has been recording an average of 200-300 in Air Quality Index (AQI) measurements, aggravating the condition of people with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), other respiratory illness and Covid-19.

The government has started to inoculate frontline workers, teachers, hotel staff, Himalayan traders, among others in the age group 40-59, with 'Vero Cell' vaccines donated by the Chinese government. Nepali students leaving for China are also eligible for the jab.

Nepal got an early start in the vaccination drive with 1.6 million inoculated in the first and second stages of the campaign, with India's support. But with only 500,000 doses of Covidshield in the stock and 100,000 more with the Nepal Army, uncertainty persists over when the second doses will happen for all those who have taken the first.

With the European Medicines Agency concluding that there is indeed a link between AstraZeneca vaccine and a rare but lethal blood clot case detected in the EU, countries including the UK and Germany have either restricted or have found alternatives to the Oxford University developed jab for younger age groups. This could mean that countries like Nepal suffering from a shortage could be supplied with more doses of the Covidshield shots sooner than later.

After inoculation began in Nepal, many districts stopped testing. There are only about 3,000-4,000 tests happening in a day, mostly for people going abroad, and there is virtually no contact tracing.

"Vaccination is important but so is testing and contact tracing. And we must continue to communicate about safety measures, there is no other way around wearing masks, hand washing and maintaining physical distance," says Sherpa. 🇳🇵

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Nepal's 1st hydroelectric



Reservoir pond of the Pharping hydropower project in Pharping, 12km south of Kathmandu Valley, was built more than a century ago and is now used to supply water to parts of Lalitpur.

AMIT RAJBHANDARI

Raj Kumar Shrestha and Kanchha Balami live near the power plant. "Our parents told us not to touch the pipes," says Kanchha Balami. "Back then, there used to be a caretaker here who rode a horse and patrolled the compound day and night."



Rusted penstock pipe lies abandoned by the reservoir.

PHOTOS: RAMESH BHUSHAL

Built in 1911, the Pharping power plant is now a neglected part of Nepal's heritage

● Ramesh Bhushal

It was 6:30pm on 22 May 1911, and the sun had just set in Kathmandu when King Prithvi Bir Bikram Shah arrived at Tundikhel to turn on a switch to light Nepal's first electric lamp. Nepal was the second country in Asia to install a hydroelectric power plant, commissioned by

Prime Minister Chandra Shumsher Rana, who named the project after himself: Chandra Jyoti. Chandra Shumsher had visited England eight years previously, and this was part of his grand plan to modernise Nepal with technology. Besides electricity, he established Nepal's first college,

built metal suspension bridges all over the country and commissioned a cargo ropeway from Kathmandu to the Tarai. He sent architects to Europe, and engineers and horticulturists for training to Japan. Construction of the 500kW plant in Pharping 12km south of Kathmandu began in 1907 with

British engineers, and took four years to complete. All the turbines and penstock pipes were shipped to Calcutta, brought overland to Bhimphedi and then had to be carried on porter back over the mountains to the site. Under supervision of the prime minister's clan, the power plant



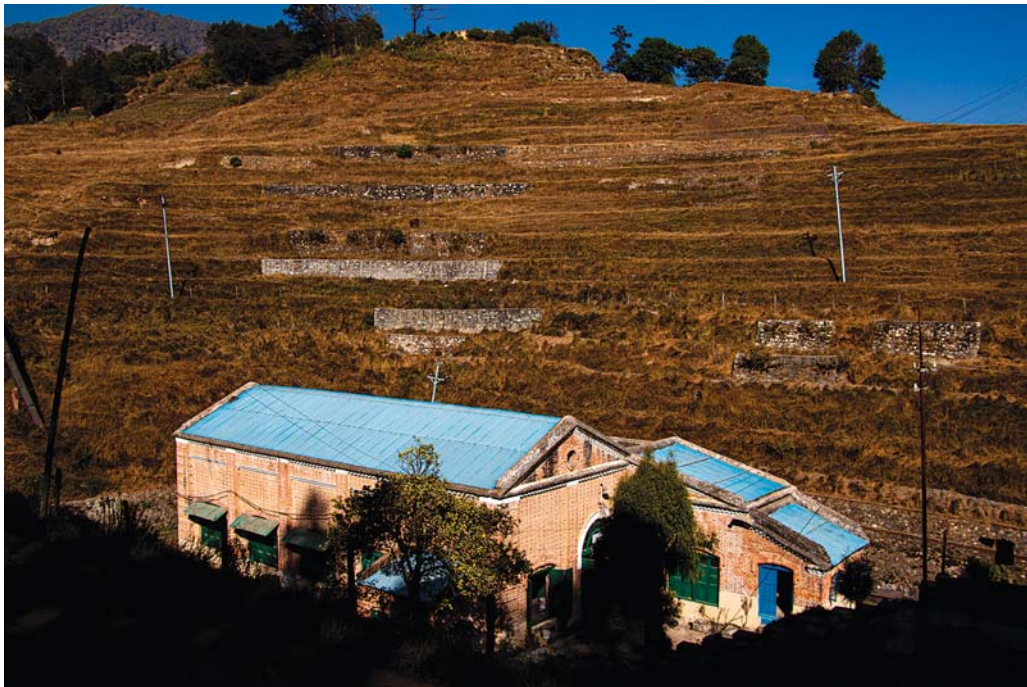
Kumar Acharya, 55, is a guard with the NEA at the Pharping site.



One of the generators and electrical parts will part of the exhibit at the museum. The other generator is not in operation, but will also be preserved for visitors.



plant is a museum piece



The Pharping power house was built 110 years ago, and is supposed to be turned into a Live Energy Museum.



The first house in Khokana that was connected to electricity generated by the Pharping power plant.

was built by Tilkikram and Bakhat Bahadur from the Nepal Army, the main engineer for the power house was Kishore Narsingh Rana. Two engineers from England, 'Barnau Puwante' and a certain 'Mr Linzale', were also involved in the construction.

Built to light the palaces of the Ranas, homes of courtiers and some street lights, the power station stored water from two springs, in Satmule and Sesh Narayan, in a circular reservoir. The Ranas first tested the electricity in a house in Khokana before connecting the wires to their palaces, to ensure it was safe.

In 1911, it had been only three decades since the world's first hydropower plant had been installed on the Fox River in Wisconsin in 1882, and a year after China built its first hydropower plant in 1912 in Yunnan province.

Despite this early start, Nepal got around to setting up its second hydropower project only 28 years later, a 640kW plant in Sundarijal in 1939. For a country with such a vast potential for hydropower, it would take Nepal another half-century to produce just 1MW of electricity.

Since 1911, Nepal has

managed to produce only 1,400MW of power from its rivers; not even 2% of its total potential. Since most of the plants are of the run-of-the-river type, electricity production fluctuates with water level of rivers. This spring for instance, due to a long winter drought, Nepal has been forced to import nearly half its peak hour demand from thermal power plants India.

Sadly, the history of Nepal's oldest hydropower plant has now been almost forgotten. Although the government declared the power plant a 'living heritage' site in 1911, not much has been done

to preserve the area. The power plant could be brought back into running condition, even as just a demonstration unit.

The power house, the royal guest house and other buildings here are part of Nepal's heritage, but are crumbling. Two 250kW generators have great historical significance, but are not properly preserved. Metal pipes more than a century old, lie rusting near the reservoir.

For most of its functioning life, Pharping generated power for only three hours every night. Later, even when the reservoir started being used to supply drinking water

to Lalitpur, it was generating electricity for one hour every evening.

There is a masterplan to preserve Pharping as a Live Energy Museum with the old building renovated to house a centre for hydropower development, as well as research into renewable energy sources like solar and wind.

None of that has taken off, but 22 May is still marked as National Energy Day to pay homage to Nepal's hydropower potential. 🇳🇵

The story was first published on The Third Pole.

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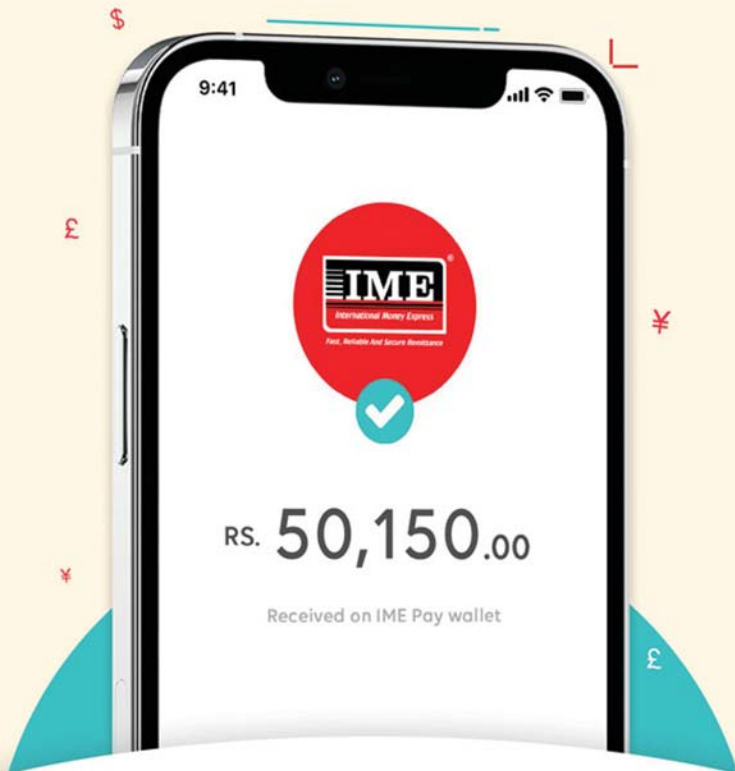
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Making asses of ourselves

Fed up with all the dismal news? Bored with politics? Irked by nosey parker journalists? Then we have good news for you in 2078.

Under the new guidelines of the Ministry of Information and Communism (Motto: 'No news is good news.') the media will undergo a paradigm shift by playing a "constructive" role in covering news of new view towers, and the one bridge in Gulmi that did not collapse.

The following content has been vetted for veracity and is certified by the new office bearers of the Federal Democratic Union of Nepalese Journalists as fit for human consumption. It is a self-evident truth that the mass media plays an important role in our Feral Republic, so we can present the news without fear or favour, and let the potato chips fall where they may.

We take our adversarial role seriously to comfort the afflicted, afflict the comfortable, hold power to account and publish every hearsay that is fit to print. We make quotes up as we go along, and we think 'off the record' has something to do with the Guinness Book. So, forgive us our press passes.

However, we should not take for granted the freedom guaranteed to us in the Constitution. If we are serious about defending press freedom, talk show hosts should not waste time in small talk, they should henceforth challenge studio guests to hand-to-hand combat. Talking heads should also be breaking heads, because we are taught that if it bleeds it leads.

We hear the Gandaki Government has decided not to blame messengers anymore, it will lock them up since we are now a Lock Tantric country. From now on, Nepali journalists don't have to think twice about saying how awesome Comrade Awesome is. They only have to think once.

There is a nasty rumour going around that we prostitutes are not

free anymore to be sycophantic and hypocritical liars. Just surf the tv news channels: our aforementioned freedoms are perfectly intact and us hacks have never been freer to lick or kiss ass. It is true that there is complete freedom of press in Nepal for the media to transmit live on Facebook a blow-by-blow exclusive breaking investigative news, and publicly lynch anyone who disagrees with us.

Yet, we must not take our freedoms for granted and let complacency get the better of us. We must not forget to kowtow when asked only to bow. We must always be prepared to print handouts in exchange for handouts. But unlike some other professions, we are not the type to take the envelope and run. Our journalistic code of ethics does not allow that — we take the cash out, return the envelope, deduct 13% VAT and provide a receipt, and only after that, make a dash for it.

We hacks solemn swear to be true to the salt and toe the party line, but only once adequately compensated. There are jobs in media for watchdogs and lapdogs, we are equal opportunity employers.

As you can see for yourself in the pages of our newspapers, and indeed in this column, our aforementioned freedoms are perfectly intact. There are no curbs on vowel movements in Nepal, and even if there was, we ignore them as we go about adding our bylines to headlines on deadlines.

We are free to report any and all political pronouncements in excruciating detail, leaving no item out, however trivial. Thanks to laws guaranteeing the freedom of expression and the freedom to make complete asses of ourselves, Nepal's media today is more self-reliant, self-important, self-righteous and self-censored than ever before.



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