

Challenge of the millennium

The most tangible collateral damage of Nepal's chronic political instability is going to be the effort to streamline Nepal's electricity grid. Politicians have weaponised the US-supported Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) infrastructure grant, and the much-needed project is stuck.

An agreement for the \$500 million project was signed by the Nepali Congress (NC) Finance Minister Gyanendra Bahadur Karki in Washington DC four years ago. But since then, it had become a political football in the great game between prime Minister K P Oli and his nemeses Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Madhav Kumar Nepal.

The first hint that the MCC controversy was carrying over to the new government was that it was not included in the 'common minimum program' agreed to between the five coalition partners on 9 August.

The Maoists and the Nepal faction have used the MCC so effectively to bludgeon Oli's government that the rank-and-file are dead against the project. They are convinced it will allow the US military to build missile silos in Nepal aimed at China.

The MCC was launched by the US government in 2004 as an innovative way to end poverty in least developed countries. Nepal met the eligibility criteria and was selected as a partner, and planning for the MCC started during the government of Baburam Bhattarai in 2012. Bhattarai is now in the five-party alliance as a part of the JSP.

Critics have used ultra-nationalism and populism to portray the MCC as a form of US neo-colonialism and imperialism. The Americans fuelled the fire themselves when a US undersecretary of state admitted in 2019 that the MCC was a part of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy aimed at encircling China.

Washington back-pedalled, but the damage was done. There are many who do not need convincing that the MCC in Nepal is America's geo-strategic response to China's Belt-Road Initiative.

But because of this political impasse, work on urgently needed electricity transmission lines and highway upgrading has not started. The cost of not having this infrastructure in place will be much more than the \$500 million outlay of the project.

The main objective of the MCC is a

315km transmission line between Hetauda-Damauli-Butwal. This power line is critical for the east-west distribution of the 3,000MW of electricity that will be added to Nepal's national grid in the next three years, nearly double the current generation capacity. Another 2,500MW worth of projects are awaiting power purchase agreements with the NEA and will depend on the MCC transmission lines being in place.

Nepal's current power need is 1,500MW at peak hours, and despite suppressed demand due to shortage and cost, it is not expected to increase by much in the next three years. Which means Nepal will have a monsoon surplus that can be exported to India, and for this, the cross-border 400KV transmission line from Butwal to Gorakhpur will be necessary.

At present, Nepal imports electricity from India through the Dhalkebar-Muzzafarpur power corridor that has a capacity of handling only 800MW. The MCC line would increase this to 2,600MW, but if the Butwal-Gorakhpur transmission line is not built in the next few years, much of the surplus electricity generated in Nepal is in danger of being wasted, or 'spilled' in technical parlance.

Even if the MCC is never ratified by Parliament because of the political deadlock, Nepal needs to immediately start building these transmission lines by itself. Private power producers in Nepal have signed agreements with NEA on the understanding that the transmission lines will be in

place to evacuate the electricity they generate.

Because of the nature of the monsoon and Nepal's east-west territory, there will be surplus electricity in the east while there is a deficit in the west, so the transmission lines are even more critical to balance the national grid.

This is too serious a subject to be left to politicians, or to geopolitics. The NEA's new head Kulman Ghising needs to sit down with the MCA's Khadga Bahadur Bista and resolve this one way or another right away.

In the 1960s, at the height of the Cold War and despite sensitivities after the India-China war, King Mahendra went ahead with the Kodari Highway linking Kathmandu to Lhasa. That is the kind of leadership we need now, one that will not be terrified about what one or the other neighbour will say, but decide what is in the national interest and just do it.

Ramesh Kumar



BIKRAM RAI / NT ARCHIVES

Even if the MCC is not ratified by Parliament, Nepal needs to urgently build transmission lines by itself

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Make and break

The ego clash between K P Oli and Madhav Kumar Nepal finally reached its height this week and culminated in Nepal trying to split from the mainstream Unified Marxist-Leninist (UML) and forming a new party, UML (Socialist).

This is however not the first time the party split. In 1997, just seven years after it was established in 1990 following the unity of two communist factions, the UML split only to be reunited three years later. In fact, 20 years ago this week, the main opposition UML and Marxist-Leninists (ML) were debating reunification ahead of proposed elections that never happened. And the prime minister then was (who else?) Sher Bahadur Deuba.

There is no reason why they cannot do so once again, especially with polls scheduled for 2023. But for true unity Oli and Nepal may need to bow out, since the fight is not ideological but personality-driven. Excerpt from the report from issue #57 24-30 August 2001:

One of the defining characteristics of the Nepali left has been its propensity to split into factions. They fragment easily, but it seems they can re-unite just as easily. The differences are personality or power-driven rather than ideological, and are easy to patch up.

On the extreme left are the Maoists, with whom the rest have



ideological differences. But its meteoric rise into the national arena in the six short years of violence and threats has forced everyone else to take them seriously. That is why all the leaders of the moderate left trooped over to Siliguri in India for audiences with Chairman Prachanda over the past ten days. On return, they have been tight-lipped about the discussions, but it is clear that the moderate left now sees two options: unite, or be picked off one by one.

So the main opposition Unified Marxist-Leninist (UML) is now trying to get remarried to the Marxist-Leninists (ML) after a four-year divorce. A monolithic left party would be a formidable force in next year's local elections, and it could also woo back some cadres who've strayed into the radical fold. Since there are scant ideological divisions, it may be fairly easy to achieve.

On the national front, the UML is also cosying up to the Nepali Congress government of Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, and managed to get him to push for a freeze on land sales prior to a land reform law. Both the Nepali Congress and the UML appear to be hoping that this will take some of the wind out of the sails of the Maoist agenda at talks.

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

ON THE WEB

TALIBAN'S SECOND COMING

Very interesting historical reading. Currently it is my hope that all Nepali citizens return home safely and others who are desperate to leave find safety. We shall see if the Taliban will rule more kindly than in the past. Just wish the world could live in peace. ('Nepal and the Taliban's second coming', Kanak Mani Dixit, #1075)

Janis Randles

• There are ways to establish relationships with Afghanistan but it is not advisable to remove or ease off the visa requirement until they have shown by their consistent actions their sincerity to work and live harmoniously with the rest of the world.

Gerald Fernando Heng

• Really enjoyed this history lesson and linkage between Afghanistan and Nepal. Thank you! So sad Afghanistan has gone through so much destruction and suffering over the years.

Bishow Parajuli

• Great historic perspective in the context of current realities and the need to ensure the safety of Nepali citizens in Afghanistan.

Gabriele Mallapaty

• Well written account of Nepali involvement in Afghanistan in the past highlighting the need to get citizens home.

Stewie McLean

TRANSPORT

Safa tempo was an incredible success story. Our mechanics bought just the motors, bearings and such parts, assembled and built the body. It carried us through the Indian blockade. It provided employment to many including women. Instead of encouraging the manufacturers to build cars to carry a family of five and even buses, all of this is to be abandoned, and electric cars need to be imported at high price. ('The road to electric transportation in Nepal', Diya Rijal, nepalitimes.com).

Lal Bahadur

• What about the ecosystems that the international airport will wreck? ('Pokhara paragliders to relocate', Krishnamani Baral, #1075).

Marc McConnell

• Great thoughts. It can be funded by carbon trade. ('Nepal needs weather stations in the Himalayas', Rijan Bhakta Kayastha, nepalitimes.com).

Bryan Hitan

POLITICAL STAGNATION

There are no Political Leaders here - just a few Old Mafia Dons. ('Game of Thorns', Shristi Karki, #1075).

Alex Ferguson

• That ain't wine, more like vinegar or something worse.

Shirini Barakzai

• Same here in Malaysia.

Tong Elyn

VACCINATION WAIT TIMES

Scientists can invent vaccines faster than ever, political scientists will find answers to the problems of #vaccine denial and inequity, but when will Nepalis learn to make a queue and wait for his/her turn? ('Dying to get vaccinated', Buddha Basnyat, #1075)

NirGhiSha

LESSONS FROM HISTORY

The king was well advised to either establish relations with China or seek Bhutan-like status, but it was King Palden's blind trust and overreliance on Nehru and betrayal by own kinsmen that led to Indira Gandhi annexing the kingdom. A sad ending for the Himalayan kingdom. ('Letting go of Sikkim's ghost', Ajay Pradhan, nepalitimes.com)

Desh Ratna

SUMMIT HOTEL

It seems like Summit is a lost cause, and I'm wondering why the call for support comes now, probably too late to have any effect. How on earth could CG Hospitality be granted permission (corruption?). Why not look into the whole process leading to Summit's demise? ('The Summit is more than a hotel', Anne Goldie, nepalitimes.com)

Marit Bakke

CLEAN ENERGY

Eloquent piece of writing, calling for all to begin transitioning to a greener future. Just to add that the Paris Agreement doesn't envision a 'specific' timeline for reaching 1.5°C limit in the next few decades. The latest report confirms that the 1.5°C limit agreed in Paris is still within reach if countries act upon it. ('Decarbonisation needs to begin today', Ajaya Dixit and Monirul Q Mirza, nepalitimes.com)

Manjeet Dhakal

FLASH FLOODS

We invited this. In the name of the Bagmati corridor, we made the river channels so small that it cannot hold the monsoon rains. I wonder what kind of hydrologist would give permission for such a project. Meanwhile, all the urbanised areas have been topped with concrete in contrast to earlier brick-and-stone roads that allowed water to seep into the ground. ('Kathmandu's 'flash floods' are 4 decades in the making', Tom Robertson, nepalitimes.com)

Lal Bahadur

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



Nepal and the Taliban's second coming

by Kanak Mani Dixit

Kathmandu and Kabul share a difficult history of warriors meeting numerous times on battlefields. Read Kanak Mani Dixit's recap and report on Nepal's central role in as SAARC Chair to reintegrating Afghanistan with South Asia.

f Most reached and shared on Facebook

Photojournalism looking for solutions

by Min Ratna Bajracharya

Photojournalism has the power to be an agent of change and impactful messaging. Photographers need to shed their negative news bias and seek innovative solutions and adapt with technology. Min Ratna Bajracharya's piece on International Photography Day on 19 August on nepalitimes.com.

t Most popular on Twitter

Game of Thorns

by Shristi Karki

Prime Minister Deuba's ordinance last week proved it is business as usual in Kathmandu's corridors of power. Visit nepalitimes.com for the analysis of the events leading up to and after PM Deuba's decision that made way for Madhav Kumar Nepal to split from K P Oli's UML and form his own UML (Socialist).

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Pokhara paragliders to relocate

by Krishnamani Baral

While a major boost to tourism, the nearly completed Pokhara International Airport will displace Pokhara's iconic paragliding business to other districts. Krishnamani Baral reports from as the aviation and air-sports sectors scramble to find alternative jump-off points.

🔥 Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Rishi Ram Koirala was a quiet modest man, but his healing skills, diagnostic expertise and extraordinary knowledge were widely respected throughout the world. Lisa Choegyal pays tribute to Nepal's most celebrated Ayurvedic doctor.



Ask Me About Nepal @askmeaboutnepal

Homage to the Good Doctor Dr. Rishi Ram Koirala @koirala_dr
#askmeaboutnepal wishes a smooth transition of the departed soul and sends condolences to the family members on the 11th day of his demise. Don't miss out on a beautiful article on Dr. Koirala by @lisachoegyal



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Game on Thorns
Prime Minister Deuba's ordinance move just proves it is business as usual in #Kathmandu's corridors of power.



Dr. Reet Poudel @ReetPoudel

Game of Thorns or is it the Game of Throne?



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

#editorial Ever since the restoration of multiparty #democracy in 1990, #Nepal's personality-driven politics has split because of personality clashes. The need to buy loyalty to divide and rule, or to keep parties together, contributed to the rot.



Pigreen @Pigreen1

Nepal suffers from a chronic democracy deficit - instead it has a narrow form of oligarchy driven by personal self-promotion to which the mainstream media pander by continually reporting the minutiae of this puppet show.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Members of Tharuhat Tharuwan Rashtriya Morcha staged a sit-in at Maitighar on Thursday. The group is demanding for the investigation report of the Tikapur killings to be released, and the discharge of those still imprisoned after the incident.



Srijan Basnet @SrijanBasnet3

Murder cannot be forgiven not then not now. Why Narayan Wagle of all people, who even wrote a somewhat anti-conflict book, would support such a repulsive demand is beyond me. My disappointment is immense and my day is ruined.

Times

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Publisher and Editor: Kunda Dixit

Audience Engagement: Sahina Shrestha, Associate Editor: Sonia Awale, Layout: Kiran Maharjan

Published by Himalmedia Pvt Ltd | Patan Dhoka, Lalitpur | GPO Box 7251 Kathmandu

editors@nepalitimes.com | www.nepalitimes.com | www.himalmedia.com | Tel: 01-5005601-08 Fax: +977-1-5005518

Printed at: United Multi Printers Pvt. Ltd. Hattiban, Lalitpur Tel: 01-5950517/01-5950518





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Nepal needs weather stations in the Himalaya

This year's monsoon floods highlighted the urgent need for more high-altitude weather monitoring stations

● **Rijan Bhakta Kayastha**

This year's monsoon season showed that precipitation is moving higher up the mountains to the trans-Himalayan valleys, creating a whole new dimension of flood danger downstream.

More rain is falling where it did not use to in rain-shadow regions like in Manang, Mustang, Dolpo. Heavy precipitation on loose glacial deposits have unleashed catastrophic debris flows like what is happening on the Melamchi watershed this season.

Some of these extreme weather events can be attributed to climate change, and underlines the need to be prepared for even worse floods in the future. For this, we urgently need weather forecasting systems at higher altitudes, hazard mapping and early warning systems.

Heavy rainfall since June and the ensuing floods clearly showed that we lack high altitude weather stations above 3,000m. And even the monitoring stations at lower altitudes did not analyse the recorded data in time and transmit them in a timely manner.

The Department of Hydrology and Meteorology has installed only 12 weather and precipitation monitoring stations above 3,000m, out of 282 such stations across the country. Mustang district has 6 precipitation stations, Gorkha and Manang each have two stations, and there are only one in Doti and Jumla.

These numbers are insufficient given Nepal's topography and the rapidly changing global climate. The lesson from this year's floods is that every hydropower or infrastructure project needs to install its own automatic precipitation station in its upper catchment for real time data and early warning.

The rainfall station at Sermathang of Sindhupalchok did record 110.2 mm rainfall in 24 hours on 11 June, but this data was not analysed in time to transmit a warning and prevent floods. If it had, we would have known that a cloudburst of that magnitude in terrain weakened by the 2015 earthquake could spell disaster. Precautions could have been taken downstream in the Melamchi-Indrawati valley, lives saved, and damage reduced.



The vast glacial debris field at Bhurmathing in the headwaters of the Melamchi River, which is being constantly washed down by heavy rains this monsoon. NDRRMA

Nepal has four main glacier-fed river basins: Kosi, Gandaki, Karnali and Mahakali, and 19 other sub-river basins. The catchment areas of these rivers also stretch across the Himalaya into China. There are 3,808 glaciers and 2,070 glacial lakes in Nepal. And then there is also permafrost above 5,000m.

Nepal's rivers are fed by groundwater discharge, monsoon rains, and glacial melt. However, the hydrological responses of snow-covered and glaciated zones are distinct from other areas. Debris deposits from past glacial advances behave differently when exposed to heavy rainfall, as we continue to witness in Bhurmathing region of the Melamchi River since June.

Climate change is now affecting both the monsoon dynamics and the state of snow/glacier in the Himalaya, and we have to be aware and prepared for the consequences.

Besides extreme weather events, the geological structure of the watershed also needs to be taken into account so that a detailed risk assessment can be made before embarking on expensive water supply projects like Melamchi, and deciding on the location of future hydropower plants, bridges and roads.

Past studies had already declared many areas of the Melamchi watershed as a hazardous zone and not suitable for construction of houses and other infrastructure. If such warnings had been heard and timely precautions taken, the damage this monsoon

would have been considerably less.

Based on the Department of Hydrology and Meteorology, all Nepal maximum and minimum air temperatures increased by 0.56°C and 0.02°C per decade from 1971 to 2014. The warming is higher in the Himalayan region than elsewhere. This means that even under the best-case scenario, the Himalaya could lose up to one-third more of its permanent ice during this century.

This means increased hazard from snow and ice avalanches, flash floods due to the discharge of supra-glacial lakes, or Glacial Lake Outburst Floods (GLOFs). There is a danger that these disasters will be more intense and frequent as weather systems change.

In October 2014, the power cyclone Hudhud which measured 2,000km in diameter spun out of the Bay of Bengal and made a direct hit on Central Nepal, dumping rain and snow in the Annapurna region, killing 43 people (including trekkers) in blizzards and avalanche.

Indian and Nepali meteorologists had sent out warnings and forecast heavy precipitation, however due to the lack of proper risk reduction mechanisms and safety management skills, casualties were high.

In January 2020, four Korean trekkers and three Nepali guides were swept away by an avalanche at Deurali on the Annapurna Base Camp trek. Although there has always been risk of avalanches in the Himalaya, very heavy snowfall with warming trends have

increased the objective danger.

Proper local forecasts could have warned trekkers in the area of the heightened risk.

In two of the worst disasters in recent times, 42 people, including 13 Japanese trekkers, were killed in November 1996 when the Gokyo region near Mt Everest was hit by an unprecedented blizzard. In October 2005, 18 people including trekkers were killed in snow storms and avalanches in Manang.

These and many other disasters show that post-monsoon cyclonic storms hitting Nepal at the peak of the trekking season must be more closely monitored and their local impact forecast accurately so early warning for specific areas can be issued. Fatalities can be reduced by finding ways to warn local communities, lodge owners, local governments, trekking outfits and guides, and build local capacity in search and rescue.

The importance of having high altitude weather and snow monitoring stations was also shown by the sudden increase in snow depth (1.65m) on the Rikha Samba Glacier in Mustang (5,200m) during the Hudhud cyclone on 15 October 2014.

A similar snow depth sensor on Yala Glacier in the Langtang Valley also showed 0.5m increase in snow depth on the same day. Although the purpose of these stations were for scientific research into the impact of climate change on snow depth, and not for hazard prevention, the data could have

been used for early warning about storm hazards in the high mountains.

The lesson for us is that it is essential and urgent to strengthen the capacity of snow hazard risk reduction by letting local governments and communities have access to real-time data.

The Himalaya has seen historic GLOFs, and these debris flows are expected to be bigger and more frequent with climate change. On 4 August 1985, the Dig Tso glacial lake overtopped after an avalanche and swept down the Dudh Kosi, killing three and destroying a hydropower plant, 14 bridges and 35 houses.

The disaster prompted the government to start studying glaciers and glacial lakes in Nepal, and major GLOF events have been recorded. Risk reduction has also involved lowering the water level of Tso Rolpa glacial lake in Rolwaling by 3m and Imja glacial lake in Khumbu by 3.4m.

A recent study by the International Center for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) classified 47 glacial lakes in Nepal, China and India as potentially dangerous. Of these, 25 are in China, 21 in Nepal and 1 in India. Of the potentially dangerous lakes in Nepal, 17 are on the Arun River basin, out of which only 4 are in Nepal and 13 upstream in China.

Most of the immediate risk to infrastructure and settlements in the Arun River, therefore, emanate from across the border and this calls for trans-boundary cooperation in early warning.

On 18 June 2021, heavy rainfall-triggered landslides blocked the Rongsi River in China, a tributary of the Tama Kosi. The Chinese authorities informed Nepal about the possibility of a flash flood in case the landslide dam was breached.

Fortunately, the Chinese safely drained the lake averting the possibility of a flood. In such events also, a high altitude weather and snow monitoring station would have provided early warning so that precautions could be taken downstream. 🇳🇵

Rijan Bhakta Kayastha, PhD, is a glaciologist at the Himalayan Cryosphere, Climate and Disaster Research Center of Kathmandu University.

prabhu BANK

Nepse CEO resigns

Fallout from the controversial Sarbottam Cement shares scandal has prompted Nepal Stock Exchange (Nepse) CEO Chandra Singh Saud to resign. Investigations by Himalkhabar and carried in this paper this month



had exposed the alleged involvement of Saud and Nepal Securities Board Chairman Bhishma Raj Dhungana in insider trading on Sarbottam stocks just as the IPO was being launched. Meanwhile, FNCCI Senior Vice President Chandra Dhakal also resigned from his position as a member of the Securities Board of Nepal (SEBON) on Wednesday.

More bank accounts

Nepal Rastra Bank has revealed that 67.34% of Nepalis have deposit accounts, up from 60.9% in mid-July 2019. Of the total accounts, only 67.7% are currently active, with 81.5% account activity across rural Nepal. Additionally, Bagmati province has the highest concentration of bank accounts while Karnali province has the lowest.

Coke it is

Coca Cola owes Rs532.5 million in unpaid capital gains tax following the company's ownership change in December 2014, the Auditor-General's 58th annual report has disclosed. The report states that regulatory bodies in Nepal were not informed of share transactions performed overseas, as capital gains tax payments were evaded. The Department of Revenue Investigation has launched an inquiry.



Oil prices up and up

Nepal Oil Corporation (NOC) has once again increased the price of petroleum products by Rs2, while liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) prices have gone up by Rs25. Meanwhile, the price of international aviation fuel is up by \$16 and stands at \$770 per kg. Prices were hiked after an Indian Oil Corporation report estimated losses of Rs1.15 billion and jacked up prices, said NOC spokesperson Binit Mani Upadhyay.

Everest Bank contactless payment

Everest Bank has set up contactless QR code-based payment facilities at various Sajha Sewa petroleum outlets to promote digital banking. This follows the government's declaration of the new fiscal year as the year of economic digitisation.



Covid-19 relief efforts

Caterpillar Foundation has partnered with Assist International to provide Covid-19 relief



materials including essential medical supplies like oxygen concentrators, non-invasive ventilators, ICU ventilators, patient monitors, nebulisers and related accessories to four hospitals in Pokhara and surrounding areas.

DishHome Fibernet

Customers in Banepa can now access DishHome's Fibernet internet service--available from 10mbps to 100mbps--and get



FIBERNET

free subscription to Dish Home TV, free Dish Home Go App, an XVID membership, and other discounts. The service will soon expand to other major Nepali cities.

City Express TapTap Send

City Express Money Transfer and international money transfer app TapTap Send have collaborated to facilitate remittance transfer from the UK to Nepal. Payments can be received from 12,000 City Express payout locations across Nepal.

● Aunohita Mojumdar

Gut-wrenching images and stories have flooded the media sphere over the last few days. Hundreds flocking to the airport, clinging to the undercarriage of aircraft in desperation, journalists in hiding or seeking visas to leave, people in streets and in camps fleeing the violence that has preceded the fall of province after province to the Taliban.

The rapidity with which the Taliban have been able to take control over the entire country has surprised everyone including the Taliban themselves. However, while the speed may not have been foreseen, the collapse of the government had seemed inevitable for some time, especially after the steps taken by the US in rapid succession since the Doha deal they struck with the Taliban in 2020.

Ironically called the 'Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan', the deal ensured the unconditional withdrawal of American troops. Desperate to leave, the US administration acceded to the Taliban insistence of talks without the presence of the elected Afghan government — thus de-legitimising the leadership that President Joe Biden is today blaming for the collapse of the government.

So what of the 20 years of international support? The entire nation-building project led by the Americans, regardless of what President Joe Biden now says, was based on an American view of what a liberated Afghanistan and Afghans should look and sound like, often with little understanding of the ground reality.

Unfortunately, American military and financial power outstripped that of other nations several times over, and this coupled with the belief in American Exceptionalism ensured their overweening dominance. More nuanced approaches were run rough-shod and complex perspectives that could address the complicated realities were jettisoned in favour of the black-and-white you 'are with us or against us' approach.

While there is much to blame on the Afghan government and the leaders, it is worth looking at how the security paradigm and the political leadership were instituted. In the initial period following the 2001 invasion, the US prevented the expansion of NATO in order to keep complete control of the security sphere, and subsequently blocked all attempts at allowing even the negotiated surrender of the Taliban leadership, thus driving them underground.

Over the years, international forces killed a large number of civilians, an unacceptably high rate of 'collateral damage' that turned a 'collateral portion' of the Afghan population against them as well as against the Afghan government they were supporting. While 'introducing democracy' to Afghans, the US railroaded Afghans into accepting a governance structure that concentrated all powers in the presidency — far more extreme than any presidential style of governance in existence — and also forced an electoral system that kept out political parties — the building blocks of any democratic polity.

Leaders of militias were rearmed and empowered despite the fact that some of them had a track record of extreme brutality and predation on the local population. In later years, groups directly under the control of the US —and outside the ambit of the local army and police forces —

Afghanistan abandoned

The US abandoned Afghanistan, we must abandon the American notion of Afghanistan as a nation to be lost or won



Election meeting in Nangarhar in 2009.

PHOTOS: AUNOHITA MOJUMDAR

were armed, often with little checks and control resulting in more for violence against civilians.

Finally, in order to meet an artificial timetable of 'Afghan owned' security, an Afghan army was built in a hurry despite obvious evidence of its weaknesses: the lack of adequate command and control structures, and inadequate training. Reports of high rates of recidivism, and drug addiction in the ranks were ignored in pursuit of the goal of filling the numbers.

Over the years the Taliban regrouped and began to expand its footprint, enabled in some measure, by local discontent, access to safe spaces across the Pakistan border and the 'live and let live' deals struck in many areas.

In the past several years large parts of the country have been under the control of the Taliban or only nominally under the control of the government. In many areas, deals had been brokered for a holding pattern whereby neither side would engage in operations, thus leaving the local population the space to lead relatively peaceful lives.

All of this was known to the US administration as it prepared to leave. What they had not counted on perhaps was the speed with which the government would fall. A more convenient gap would have allowed them to distance themselves from the disastrous political fallout a little better, and made their efforts to gas-light an entire country appear a little more tenable.

As it is, the rapidity of events has left the emperor with no clothes, its usurpation of Afghan airspace to remove its own citizens while holding Afghan civilians at bay at gunpoint is now the last lingering image.

The uncertainty that has come with the Taliban taking power is fearful, and the fears very real. But the truth is that no one yet knows what kind of governance will emerge under Taliban 2.0. Will women be allowed in the public space? Will they have to adopt diktats on a dress code that will force them back into burkha? Will independent media be allowed to function? Will the Taliban seek to replicate the image of the state that they created between 1996 and



Looking up at one of the Bamiyan Buddhas from the fields.

2001 when they controlled almost the entire country? Will they, as they have stated publicly, respect the rights of women including their right to education?

Already these rights are being caveated by talk of 'within Islamic law' which is open to wide interpretation. What will the Taliban attitude be towards the minorities, especially the Shi'a Hazara communities, some of which were massacred when they were last in power?

For a section of the media, 'the terrorists have arrived'. And while the desperate images from the airport tell an important part of the story about the arrival of the Taliban in power, they do not tell it in its entirety. Most Afghans did not want the return of the Taliban, but many

urban, educated Afghans used to freedoms are staying on, deliberately and consciously, willing to consider and find ways and means of navigating the new realities.

They are willing to unpick the issues and tackle them to try and create the space for living their lives, and all of us should be doing that too rather than treating Afghanistan and its people as a lost nation, or the situation as 'game over'. The Americans have abandoned Afghanistan and the Afghans. It is time we in the region abandon the American approach towards Afghanistan as a nation to be lost or won, to be inducted into the empire of allies or rejected as an 'enemy' country.

With the fall of the Afghan government and the takeover by

the Taliban, much of the strategic discourse in the national media of the neighbouring countries has been an accounting of winners and losers, a zero-sum game that tallies the increasing influence of one country and the reduction of another's. One popular narrative suggests that the return of the Taliban will lead to an Afghanistan-China-Pakistan nexus and that India has lost out.

It might be more pertinent from the viewpoint of strategic policy to look not just at the convergence of interests but also at the divergences. China would like to see stability that will allow it economic engagement with Afghanistan. It has already invested heavily in the country's mineral wealth and has been waiting to reap it.

Neither China nor Russia would like to see unrest on their borders/near borders. China's boundary with Afghanistan borders Xinjiang, and China has been critical of the way the US has withdrawn troops rather than happy about the exit of its strategic competitor. Russia has been deeply concerned about the problem of drugs flowing from Afghanistan, and even collaborated with the US in counternarcotics measures.

Iran and Pakistan will both bear the brunt of the exodus of refugees from Afghanistan and while Pakistan has provided safe sanctuary to the Taliban, allowing them to grow in strength and capability from the safe havens, the Taliban in power in Afghanistan may make it more difficult to operate against their own home-grown terror networks.

Until now, regional political power has been exercised at the behest of the Americans with countries it considers to be inimical kept out of the way. That template will have broken down with the American departure, and political change in Kabul.

But a regional approach based on common interests, short, medium and long-term can be found only if the countries do not look for the zero-sum approach. And, what about all of us in the region? Can we leave it to our governments? ■

Aunohita Mojumdar is a Southasian journalist. She lived and worked in Kabul for 8 years.

How to prepare for the 3rd wave

● Nepal-Johns Hopkins University Covid-19 Vaccine Advocacy Group

The second wave ravaged most South Asian countries and was noted for its severity and transmissibility. It was more devastating than the first, with increased hospitalisations and deaths.

It was no longer a disease that led to fatal outcomes in the elderly and immunocompromised, but could have severe life-threatening complications in healthy, young people as well. The highly infectious nature of the virus that hit South Asia the second time was later found to be a new strain called the Delta variant, first identified in India.

A recent study in China reported the Delta viral load to be 1,260 times higher than the original virus thus causing the higher transmission rates. Although the infections by the Delta variant seem to have slowed in South Asia, it is currently ravaging many Southeast Asian countries. This variant is known to be the dominant strain circulating in many countries and newer variants of the Delta called 'Delta plus' have been detected in Nepal.

One thing is clear — vaccination against Covid-19 has been shown to reduce serious illness and death even against the Delta variant. But as vaccines trickle into Nepal, another question to ask is: what can be done to prepare ourselves to mitigate a potential third wave?

Some positive outcomes of the deadly second wave through the help of government agencies, foreign aid, non-profit organisations and individual donors/volunteers to fill the void in the overburdened and fragile health system are as follows:

- Secure enough oxygen cylinders and oxygen generators and improve the hospital infrastructure to manage surge in hospitalisations
- Increase hospital beds
- Set up new isolation centres in both urban and rural areas
- Rapid antigen tests to be widely used in places where the PCR test cannot be implemented.

The rapid surge in Covid-19 infections in the second wave instilled new fear in many people resulting in mask wearing and social distancing being more strictly followed and anecdotal evidence suggests that vaccine hesitancy has also reduced.

We need to further strengthen the capacity of health facilities to deal with surges in cases by establishing Covid-19 wards at primary health care centres (PHCC) and higher level health facilities, and supplying skilled health workforce, enough oxygen cylinders and hospital beds to such facilities.

The next clear gap is testing volume and capacity. Compared to other countries, Nepal is not testing enough and needs to ramp up testing nationwide.

For instance, the daily Covid-19 tests per 1,000 people as of 4 August was much lower at 0.34 in Nepal compared to 1.27 in India, 2.83 in the United States, 6.92 in Australia and 11.18 in the United Kingdom.

PCR testing services need to be expanded in the rural areas as such facilities are disproportionately higher in Bagmati province and

urban areas. It has been a year and a half since the start of the pandemic, and yet PCR lab services have not reached all districts.

If not PCR, at the least rapid antigen testing services should be made continuously available in every district until such PCR labs can be set up to prepare for a potential third wave. Data from testing is vital to understand the epidemiology of the virus and its transmission — person, place and time are the data points required consistently to track this virus.

It is also essential to address testing hesitancy that is driving individuals with Covid-19 like symptoms to stay home without being tested. Addressing the social stigma associated with Covid-19 positive status via trusted members of the community can help reduce testing hesitancy.

Although the government has increased quarantine measures for unvaccinated travelers entering through international flights, its enforcement remains an issue. Monitoring air travelers, and not allowing for exceptions is important.

A collective sense of responsibility by citizens and travelers to be accountable and follow government protocols is equally imperative. Evading entry points without providing proof of vaccination or having gone through screening is no longer acceptable. We have to put forth the larger health and well-being of our communities and societies that we will enter post travel.

Just as important are case contact tracing efforts which the local level wards are given the responsibility to implement and oversee. Local municipalities struggling with contact tracing efforts should increase their human resource capacity immediately and be strictly monitored by the province health directorate. It is vital to actively inform the close contacts of the previous week about being tested positive and ask them to quarantine and get tested as well.

When in doubt, it is important to get tested and self-isolate, so as to prevent spreading the infection to your close and loved ones. Local municipalities who are responsible for contact tracing also need to enforce masking, discourage crowding and provide hand washing services in public spaces.

As Covid-19 vaccine supply slowly increases, the government needs to ensure equitable vaccine distribution, and at the same time clearly communicate the importance of getting vaccinated as well as the risks associated with them.

At the vaccination sites, staff or security personnel should screen those in queue as to whether they meet the eligibility criteria. This would prevent those not meeting the eligibility criteria for the specific vaccination drives from wasting their time and avoid misunderstanding and conflict.

While efforts are being made by the government to add new sites for distribution of vaccination proof certificates

for migrant workers, it should immediately digitise this process bearing in mind that such certificates can be the passport to access public spaces and indoor activities in many countries.

(See page 7)

To prevent a third wave, local governments need to ensure that every Covid-19 positive individual is safely isolating at home or institution by following appropriate guidelines. Every individual should consult the nearest healthcare providers or government Covid-19 hotline numbers on how to safely isolate at home and avoid risking other family members.

More importantly, local governments need to consider re-establishing community-level institutional isolation centres to ensure that low-income individuals who do not have access to a single-use bedroom or bathroom at their homes do not put others in the family or community at risk.

On the research front, more work is needed to understand the evolving nature of the virus within Nepal. Regular genomic sequencing of SARS-CoV-2 virus is now being done at the National Public Health Laboratory, which increases the national capacity to detect and monitor the type of virus circulating in the country.

Regular large scale serological surveys should be conducted to provide a snapshot of the disease burden and track how infections progress through the population over time. India has already conducted four rounds of nationwide serological surveys within a span of little over a year.

Although small, the proportion of the fully vaccinated population is growing, so it is very important to actively investigate and report the breakdown of cases and hospitalisations by vaccination status. This is important for public health experts to monitor the effectiveness of the vaccines to prevent severe illness and contribute towards the research and monitoring of 'breakthrough' infections among the fully vaccinated.

Until the majority of the population nationally and globally gets vaccinated, Covid-19 will endure. In the meantime, we must maintain and strengthen public health measures that work: proper masking, physical distancing, frequent handwashing, respiratory and cough hygiene, ensuring good ventilation and avoiding crowded places or closed settings.

With only 12% of the Nepalis fully vaccinated as of 22 August, and the highly transmissible Delta variant circulating in the country, it is critical now more than ever that each of us individually need to be accountable. 🇳🇵

Tsering Pema Lama, PhD, MSc – Johns Hopkins University (JHU)

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Binita Adhikari, MSPH, RN – JHU and Health Foundation Nepal

Bijay Acharya, MD, MPH FACP, America Nepal Medical Foundation, Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School.

Molly Fitzgerald, DrPH, MPH – JHU

Angela KC, MSPH – JHU, Acumen

Dinesh Neupane, PhD, JHU

Santosh Dhakal, PhD, JHU





AMITMACHAMASI

JAB, MASK, DISTANCE

● Sonia Awale

Recent studies have shown that an individual infected with delta variant even if vaccinated can have a high viral load -- as high as that of an unvaccinated person. This means they can be carriers of the virus just like unvaccinated people.

The real surge in Covid cases last year took place after the festivals when millions of Nepalis travelled from Kathmandu to their home villages and took the virus to the remotest corners of the country.

This resulted in higher fatalities, especially in rural Nepal with limited health care facilities. A recent report found that despite fewer cases, Dolpa, Mugu and Humla districts had fatality rates of 7%, 6% and 5% respectively -- compared to only 0.9% in Kathmandu.

The delta variant and its higher transmissibility despite vaccinations have made the situation worse this time around. Covid-19 is here to stay, and managing it requires behavioural change and taking safety measures such as hand washing, physical distancing and masking a necessary part of our lifestyle.

Earlier this year, researchers at Yale and Stanford University ran a large-scale randomised controlled trial to identify a precise combination of strategies that are successful in changing mask-wearing habits.

They found their NORM strategy worked well. NORM stands for:

- No cost masks distributed at scale
- Offering information about mask-wearing
- Reinforcement in public places by intercepting non-mask wearers
- Modelling and endorsement by trusted leaders

After a successful pilot trial in Lahore with 5 million people, NORM is being scaled up to cover the whole of Pakistan. The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) is aiming to reach 81 million people with NORM methods. In India, the program is being tried out in Gujarat and other states by the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA).

How to get QR coded vaccine certificates

Vaccine certificates are now the new passports for international travel, much like in the past when passengers from certain countries were required to present the WHO-approved yellow cards at airports.

This month, there were long queues of migrant workers at Teku hospital waiting for rubber-stamped papers to certify vaccination before they flew off to destination countries. The letter did not have a digitally-registered QR code, and risked being invalid.

This finally prompted the Health Ministry to set up an online application with photo, ID, vaccination card and a self-declaration form for a scannable digital vaccine certificate accessible with encrypted link and QR code acceptable internationally.

The QR code is linked to the officially-authorized database hosted and managed by the Health Ministry so the system is authenticated.

WHO Nepal has been helping the Health Ministry with technical support on the digitisation of vaccination records to ensure that no one is left behind from accessing the Covid-19 vaccination and facilitating the equitable allocation of Covid-19 vaccine.

The WHO support includes training, design and development of the ministry's software system and IT equipment, and electronic vaccination



Locals in Melamchi participate in NORMalizing Mask Project this month

NORMALIZING MASK PROJECT



Graph from IHME for Nepal showing reported total fatalities from Covid-19 (orange line) and the estimated actual deaths counting excess fatalities including unreported cases (green line). For example, on 25 August, the reported total was 10,614, but the excess deaths from Covid-19 including unreported was projected at more than 37,000. If 90% of the population started wearing masks (green dotted line), nearly 6,000 Covid-19 deaths would be prevented by 31 December (red dotted line). Go to IHME site for interactive Nepal graphs.

SOURCE: THE INSTITUTE FOR HEALTH METRICS AND EVALUATION (IHME) AN INDEPENDENT GLOBAL HEALTH RESEARCH CENTER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

Mask-wearing rates have tripled where NORM methods have been implemented, helping save thousands of lives. The campaign was launched earlier this month in Nepal in the densely populated urban centre of Thimi, Sunsari's rural areas, and Melamchi which has been battered by earthquakes and floods.

The plan is to distribute up to 450,000 masks through volunteers who go back to the community every 10 days to monitor progress in uptake. The pilot will be scaled up across the country with one million masks donated by Hanes, a US clothing brand arriving in Nepal shortly.

The NORM pilot in South Asia is being funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Covid-19 Crisis Management Centre

(CCMC) has endorsed the campaign in Nepal.

"We hope that the NORM mask-wearing approach will enable behaviour change throughout our nation and help to curb the negative effects of Covid-19," says Brig Gen Arun Neupane, who heads the medical division of the CCMC.

Preeti Adhikary of the NORMalizing Mask Project in Nepal says the campaign has been received well, with many more local governments willing to participate.

She says: "Despite the vaccine rollout there is still a lot of uncertainty. So we must educate the public that even after vaccination we must follow safety protocols, which only comes with behavioural change which is what we are trying to do." 🇳🇵

registration system in seven selected municipalities in seven provinces.

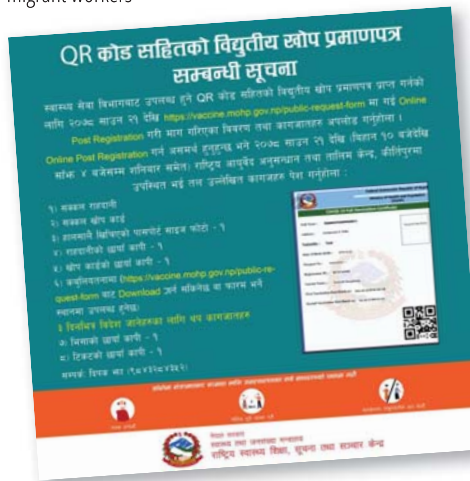
Vaccination digitisation can be done in three ways: pre-registration, on-site registration and post digitisation. Pre and on-site registration are used for digitisation of new vaccination records whereas post digitisation will be used for the digitisation of people who are already vaccinated and have certificate cards.

"Recordkeeping is important to ensure that there is no duplication but measures must be taken so that there is no crowding at the vaccination centres, turning them into breeding grounds for the virus," says a virologist at Teku Hospital Sher Bahadur Pun. "We need more vaccination centres and safety protocols must be implemented strictly at every booth."

Public health experts say the digitisation can help control the pandemic in the long run if properly implemented, since the documentation will assist in vaccine equity as the inoculation drive gains pace.

Epidemiologist Lhamo Yangchen Sherpa says that online registration is important in reducing crowds at vaccination centres. But, she adds, "Since this is more applicable in areas with Internet access and for people with a smartphone, SMS with individual inoculation timing might be more effective."

To register for online vaccine certificate, visit: <https://vaccine.mohp.gov.np/public-request-form>



EVENTS

Body and Data discussion
Body and Data's August *Internet Swatantra Sambad* (ISS) session will bring together moderator Dovan Rai and speakers Shreyasha Paudel and Shubha Kayastha on a discussion about 'Feminist Perspectives on Data'. Register at https://bit.ly/ISS_DataFeminism to participate.
27 August, 6pm-7:30pm

Language Exchange
Learn languages from across the world while making friends with native speakers online through BlaBla's Kathmandu Language exchange. Get access to a host and plan your lesson, text chat rooms and more.
29 August



Kimff 2021
Final few days to fill in the Kimff 2021 entry form and send relevant films produced after 1 January 2019. Go to <https://kimff.org/kimff-21/> for more details.
Deadline: 1 September

La.Lit contest
Send in an English language short story of 2,000 to 5,000 words for the 5th edition of La.Lit magazine's Writing Nepal: A Short Story Contest. Details on La.Lit magazine's website.
Submission deadline: 15 October

Boudha market
Buy fresh and organic fruits and vegetables, fresh baked goods, and other delicious goodies. Support local products and businesses, and follow physical distancing guidelines.
Saturdays, Utpala Cafe, Boudha

DINING



Chez Caroline
Chez Caroline is the go-to for authentic French and continental cuisine in Nepal. The restaurant offers catering and takeaway services too. Try the Profiteroles au Chocolat and Choux pastry filled with vanilla ice cream and hot chocolate sauce.
Barber Mahal Revisited (01) 4263070

LEARNING RESOURCES

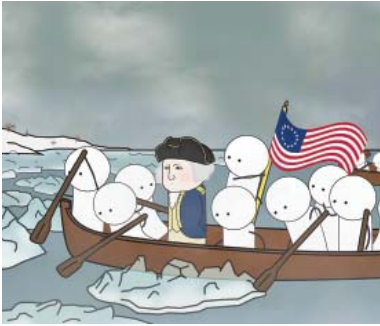


TED-Ed
Find hundreds of animated lessons on topics ranging from visual arts to mathematics. Go to the website for details, or go directly to TED-Ed's YouTube channel and start watching.

JSTOR
Need resources for a thesis or research project? JSTOR has hundreds of ebooks and academic journals on its platform as open access content.

Kurzgesagt
Kurzgesagt - In a nutshell creates animated educational content on scientific, technological, political, philosophical and psychological subjects. If teachers, parents, or casual viewers are looking for creative educational material, head on to the Kurzgesagt YouTube channel.

Martin Chautari
Watch Martin Chautari discussion sessions on topics ranging from feminism to parenting to Nepali infrastructure. Sessions available on the Martin Chautari Facebook page. Or look for resources at <http://www.martinchautari.org.np>.



Oversimplified
On OverSimplified, history is not as contrived as it seems. Head on to YouTube and watch historical events, both widely known and unknown, get explained with depth and humour. Start from the detailed breakdown of World War I.

Dechenling Restaurant
Dechenling is among the best for Tibetan and Nepali food in Kathmandu. Look at the menu for Tibetan specialties, including Ting momo and Pork Dapao, Phing Sha rice noodles, and set dishes.
Thamel (01) 4412158

Le Mirch
At Le Mirch, bold and exciting flavours of Indian cuisine are subtly influenced by the refined and sophisticated French fine-dining. Gluten free and vegetarian options are available as well.
Labim Mall (01) 5527437

Pho99
Enjoy mouthwatering Vietnamese food including fresh Banh Mi Sandwiches, Vietnamese salads and curries, along with Vietnam's national staple, the delicious Pho. Check out the menu on Foodmandu.
Boudhanath, 9802043330

ABOUT TOWN

GETAWAY

Green Valley Resort
Located 5.5km away from Budhanilkantha Temple, the resort is a perfect getaway for the weekend. As the first ray of sun warms up take a stroll around the Tamang Valley.
Shivapuri National Park (01) 5248091



Peacock Guest House
Housed in a World Heritage Site, the 3-storied Newa-style building provides splendid views of the Dattatreya Square and the Bhimsenthana temple.
Bhaktapur (01) 6611829

Mystic Mountain
Situated amid the forest of Nagarkot, the resort is exquisitely built using ultra modern designs and world-class comfort.
Nagarkot, 9851277701



Summit River
The Summit River Lodge is an expansive property that boasts an infinity pool, semi-tropical vegetation and authentic Nepali cuisine made from local organic produce. The rustic lodge incorporates traditional wood designs with minimalistic accents.
Kurintar, Dhading, 9801151166

Mirabel Resort
Perfect for families, Mirabel Resort offers comfort, continental cuisines and views of Kathmandu Valley. Take a walk around Dhulikhel before tucking into a Nepali lunch. Get details on the Monsoon offer on Facebook.
Dhulikhel (01)490972



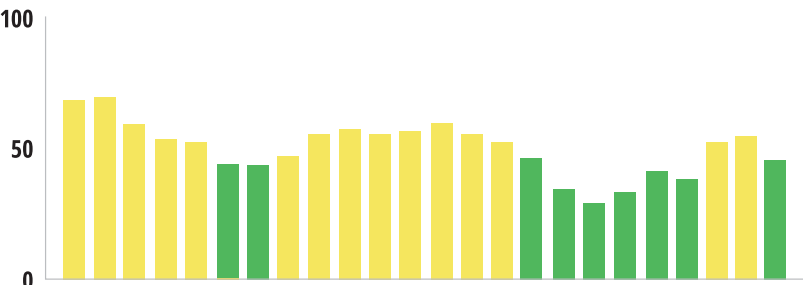
Lhakpa's Chulo
From Nepali dal bhat, Newa khaja, Swiss Rosti, Italian Risotto and Thai green curry, Lhakpa's Chulo has a variety of cuisines to offer. The garlic chilli prawn is to die for.
Jhamsikhel (01) 5542986



FRIDAY	25° 19°
SATURDAY	25° 18°
SUNDAY	26° 18°

A large monsoonal trough is sitting right across Nepal's border in Bihar, threatening more heavy rain over central and eastern Nepal over the weekend. According to the Dept of Meteorology and Hydrology, some of the showers will be particularly heavy, which is not good news for Sindhupalchok, Lamjung and other districts where the slopes are already saturated and destabilised by landslides. The rains should be easing a bit next week, but the long term forecasts are for another pulse pushing through.

AIR QUALITY INDEX



11AM 25 August to 10AM 26 August measured at US Embassy, Phora Darbar
The heavy rains for the past week and into the weekend mean cleaner air for Kathmandu Valley. The Air Quality Index (AQI), which measures the concentration of harmful suspended particles in the air less than 2.5 microns in diameter, will be less than 50 ('Good' Green zone) on most days. However, we see an inverse relation between precipitation and pollution levels, so that no rain for even a few hours means a return of bad air. Keep track of hourly AQI on the Nepali Times home page: www.nepalitimes.com

OUR PICK



Netflix's *The Old Guard*, the 2020 comic book adaptation directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood, follows four centuries-old immortal mercenaries who have fought battles across history. But a betrayal by a former associate threatens to expose their identity as well as misuse their power. Meanwhile, the four find evidence of a new young immortal through shared dreams and embark on a journey to train her. Stars Charlize Theron, Matthias Schoenaerts, KiKi Layne, Marwan Kenzari, Luca Marinelli, and Chiwetel Ejiofor.

अविरल वर्षाका कारण हाल विभिन्न स्थानहरूमा बाढी, पहिरो र डुबानले धनजनको क्षति भइरहेको छ। यस्तो अवस्थामा भनाडापखाला, आउँ, ढैया, टाढाफाइड जस्ता पानीजन्य रोगहरू लाग्नसक्ने ठूलो सम्भावना रहन्छ। त्यसैले नयाँ महामारी फैलिनबाट बच्न र बचाउन पानीलाई शुद्धिकरण गटेर मात्र पिउन गर्दा।

पानी शुद्धिकरण गर्ने विधिहरू

- पानी धमिलो छ भने सुरुमा पानीलाई थिगाएर छान्ने
- पानीलाई एक मुल्को उमालेर मात्र पिउने
- उपलब्ध छ भने पानीलाई फिल्टर गर्ने
- पियुस वा अब्बा ट्याम्ब्स टाखेट शुद्धिकरण गर्ने
 - पियुस प्रयोग गर्दा एक फिल्टर पानीमा तीन खोपा पियुस जोड्न सक्ने वा
 - 23 मिनिटको अन्तर ट्याम्बेट प्रयोग गर्दा १० फिल्टर पानीमा एक खोपा अन्तर ट्याम्बेट हालेर राम्ररी पुलाउने
 - पियुस वा अब्बा ट्याम्बेट हालेर पानीलाई राम्ररी राक्दा पीढोले छोरेर अन्तर घण्टामा राम्रोचि मात्र प्रयोग गर्ने

कोभिड रोगजनकबाट बच्नका लागि उपचारपद्धति हालै प्रकाशमा आएको छैन।

साम्बन्धीत
कोभिड रोगजनक
कोभिड रोगजनक

नेपाल सरकार
विज्ञापन बोर्ड

#SERIOUSABOUTBEER

WE PUT SERIOUS HOURS IN YOUR HAPPY HOUR.

Drink responsibly

A few months ago, a friend of mine finally left an unhappy marriage after years of struggle. Her husband was emotionally and mentally abusive, but she was expected to be patient and tolerant like a good Nepali wife and daughter-in-law. She also had to put up with his wandering ways.



LIFE TIME
Anjana Rajbhandary

When she mustered up enough courage to tell her parents about it, they told her he would change if she worked on her marriage. When her in-laws found out about her son, they blamed her, saying she was not a good enough wife. But after years of working on her marriage unsuccessfully, and with support from her parents, she decided it was time to call it quits. But this decision was met with harsh criticism, people called her an “embarrassment to the family” for leaving her husband. How is her walking away from an unhappy union and an abusive husband a disgrace to our culture, but not his cheating? Why is she being called names, but her husband’s philandering does not even raise an eyebrow? Our society accepts these double standards with closed eyes. Men and boys get away with doing whatever they want, no one bats an eyelash. But if a woman or girl chooses to prioritise her well-being over ill-treatment in her own family, it is everyone’s business, she is labelled immoral



Nepal’s unequal marriages

Men cheat and get away with it, while women are blamed for shaming the family

and disrespectful of our culture or traditions. When her husband’s cheating and abuse of her was exposed, no one questioned him about disregarding the sanctity of the marriage or his lack of morality. But when she decided to pursue her happiness, she was called out for her lack of respect in ending a relationship after years of trying. How is this ethical or even logical? When men choose to stray, our society stays quiet and looks the other way, but when women try to stand up for themselves, they are met with societal threats and shamed. If it is strength and courage to tolerate injustice and abuse, why does anyone not talk about how wrong it is to cheat and mistreat others? What is more shocking is how some women choose to blame the

woman instead of the man in these matters. How can they not feel the pain and suffering of women living in hell, but pretending to be happy? It was not easy for my friend to walk away, she knew her choosing to do so would be met with more obstacles and malicious rumours. So the least we can do if we do not support the women is to not make it harder for them. The Tij festival is approaching and soon, women will be fasting for the long lives of their husbands. They are taught to treat their husbands like gods. But this is not how a god would behave. If we give that level of respect to men, they need to live up to it. Men are raised like they can do no wrong, and from a young age are taught that they are better than women. This is not the Middle Ages, and men need to learn to act responsibly. They need to

control their egos, and learn that their actions and choices have consequences. Men might have got away with mistakes in the past, but not anymore. The world is changing and women are speaking up. Of course, not all men are like that and our society knows right from wrong, but the selective discrimination between men and women is hypocritical and shameful in today’s time and world. The foundation of a strong and respectful society is not based on lies or hidden truths. We have to go a long way in terms of equality for all genders, but acknowledging the person at fault for the breakdown of a marriage instead of a default setting to blame a woman is a good start. Society must learn to be kind to the women who have suffered.

Do not berate them in the name of culture and tradition, but support them. Stand by them when they are standing up for themselves. Encourage them to seek happiness instead of continuing to suffer in an abusive relationship. Every woman who suffers in these loveless marriages is someone’s daughter, sister and friend. Everyone deserves to be happy, and it is their life to live. My friend left her husband, and her parents supported her decision. She is a strong woman, she continues to struggle with unkind treatment. But I am proud of her, for her courage. I know it has not been easy on her, but she is happier. 🇳🇵 *Anjana Rajbhandary writes this fortnightly Nepali Times column Life Time about mental health, physical health and socio-cultural issues.*

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Migrants are victims of mistreatment and exploitation by their own relatives and friends in the heart of Europe

Nepalis abused by

● **Namrata Sharma**

The Nepali restaurant is located in the richest country of the European Union, and its Facebook page is full of recommendations from guests lavishing effusive praise on its cuisine and service.

The page also contains a post from its owner saying that the restaurant's chefs and staff prepare all meals with great care so that guests leave with satisfaction and good memories.

What the Facebook page does not say is that the chef and staff had been made to work more than 18 hours a day as virtual slaves with their bank accounts, and in some cases passports, in the hands of an abusive owner.

Luxembourg is Europe's smallest country, and has the world's highest GDP per capita. It is one of the founding members of the European Union, is one of its four capitals, and is also the seat of the Court of Justice of the European Union.

Some of the restaurant's regular customers could have been rich Europeans and those who worked on human rights. However, they were oblivious to the mistreatment and abuse of the restaurant's Nepali staff by its Nepali owner.

"I arrived in Luxembourg

in October 2015 with a work permit sent to me by the owner of the restaurant," says Shyam from Baglung, who paid for his own air ticket. "I wanted to live a decent life and save enough to provide for my family. But what a disappointment it has been."

In a series of phone calls from Luxembourg, Shyam spoke of chronic beatings, abuse, withholding of salary, and substandard living conditions. Unable to bear it any longer, he and some other co-workers lodged a complaint with the Luxembourg police in July.

The case will now be further investigated by the Police Judiciaire, and based on its verdict the prosecutor's office will decide whether there is enough evidence of human trafficking to file charges.

After several attempts to contact the restaurant owner, he finally responded via an email from his lawyer denying all accusations. He says he had neither mentally nor physically abused his staff, or forced them to work for free for 16 months or work extra hours.

"All the claims made by my ex-employees are false. They might have received a better offer from competing business and hence they fled from the restaurant housing overnight leaving a resignation letter in my

mailbox," he states in the email. "This is nothing but a stunt to defame my image and damage the reputation of my very well-established business."

Luxembourg law does not permit naming of the restaurant and the owner, unless convicted, but Shyam's story has been corroborated by two of his colleagues as well with depositions he made with the local Nepali community and the police.

When he arrived Shyam was given space above the restaurant to share with two other co-workers. The toilets were rudimentary, and they were allowed to take a bath only once a week and that too, very grudgingly.

The restaurant's cook, Binod, left soon after Shyam arrived because he could not tolerate the injustice of the owner, who happened to be his relative.

Nepali Times tracked down Binod in Chitwan this week, and he confirmed that the owner was physically abusive and exploited his employees from Nepal. Binod is an experienced chef, having worked for 12 years in India and seven years in Qatar before spending €3,000 of his own savings to go to Luxembourg to work for his relative, who sent him a work permit.

He also agreed to work for

12 months without pay in lieu of his work permit. He was hired as a chef, but was asked to also do all the shopping, carrying heavy goods into the store, cleaning and other chores. He had been promised a four-hour working day, but ended up doing 18-hours a day.

Binod's passport was taken away from him, and his phone calls were monitored. After he found the abuse intolerable, Binod asked his relative for his passport and money, but he lost his temper and beat him with anything he could lay his hands on.

His employer opened a bank account in Binod's name and would deposit about €2,000 every month. But the restaurant owner kept all the passwords himself and Binod could not have access to his account. The owner then withdrew most of the salary he had deposited, and gave only €500 to him. At first, Binod says he did not complain because he thought that was the way things were done in Luxembourg.

Binod's unwritten agreement with his relative was that he would work for free for one year to repay him for the work permit. But he ended up working at the restaurant for no salary, no leave and no weekends for most of the 3.5 years.

"When I did not do as asked, he hit me with a metal tandoor skewer or a ladle," Binod recalls. "There were many nights when I could not

sleep because of the pain from the beatings, and the pillow would be soaked with blood from wounds in my ears."

Binod would plead with the employer to take him to hospital to get stitches, but was not allowed. After nearly four years of this, Binod's father died and he asked his employer for leave. When the owner refused, Binod got relatives back home to buy a one-way ticket back to Nepal and never went back to Luxembourg.

Both Binod and Shyam thought the prospect of a job in Europe would change their lives, and trusted a fellow-Nepali employer. But while Binod returned to Nepal because he could not bear the mistreatment, and did not want to turn against his relative, Shyam lodged the complaint with the authorities.

Binod and Shyam talked to us separately, and one did not know the other was in touch with *Nepali Times*. But the pattern of abuse and the method of exploitation they described unprompted were identical in both cases.

In July, three of the Nepali workers complained to the Non-resident Nepalese Association (NRN) Luxembourg, and a section of the interaction was recorded by someone there. Shyam also said he had to work 16 hours a day without holidays, not allowed breaks or to meet with other Nepalis "I was



(clockwise) Scars of injuries sustained by Shyam in his scalp and fingers, and by Binod on his ear and face when their Nepali employer in a restaurant in Luxembourg allegedly beat them with a tandoor skewer, ladles and other objects.

Nepalis in Luxembourg

imprisoned for seven years,” he said in the audio clip.

Like Binod, Shyam’s verbal deal with the employer was that he would work without pay for the first 16 months to compensate him for arranging the work permit. But because that is not allowed under Luxembourg law, the employer would deposit €1,600 every month in his account, and he would withdraw the amount every month and hand it to the owner. He was sometimes allowed to keep €150 for himself as an allowance.

For the first six months he was treated well by his employers, and he did not complain about the bad accommodation and poor food as the other employees were in the same predicament. But after that he started facing physical violence – being hit by skewers and boxed in the ears, like Binod.

After 16 months, the owner made him sign an official contract as required by law. But even after that, he kept most of Shyam’s salary himself. In addition, the owner only gave the workers leftovers, vegetables and a thin gruel to eat.

“Sometimes we used scrap bones to make soup, and he would beat us up calling us thieves,” Shyam said on the phone. “At other times he would summon us in the middle of the night to massage his legs.”

Shyam says he tolerated the beatings and abuse because he did not want to lose face back home, and wanted to protect his mother from social stigma. He sold his land in Nepal, and brought his wife and two children over to Europe as well, and for this he needed his employer’s help. When he visited Nepal for the first time since leaving for Luxembourg, family members asked him about the scars on his face. He told them it was work related.

Finally, unable to bear the abuse any longer, Shyam and three other staff – one of them another relative of the owner – decided to tell their story to the NRN. In the audio recording of their deposition, the relative of the owner is heard saying that although he and his wife were also mistreated, he could not come out openly to lodge a complaint because of his family ties to him.

Another staff member is overheard in the clip saying he was forbidden even to drink water or take a toilet break while in the kitchen. Shyam explained that after meeting the Nepali community, the three of them got the courage to file a complaint with the Commissariat Luxembourg on 25 July 2021.

The NRN Chair in Luxembourg Hari Khatri and his family own a restaurant and grocery. He was shocked by the revelations of the four Nepali restaurant owners.

“In my 23 years living here, this has never happened before in the Luxembourg Nepali community. We all lived together as one family,” Khatri said on the phone. “The case is now with the police, they will investigate and we will soon know the facts. I will try to help the staff as much as I can.”

There are about 450 Nepali residents in Luxembourg and some 120 households. Many of them have come as cooks to work in Nepali restaurants, and earn enough in about six

months to bring their families over. Luxembourg law allows restaurant owners to import cooks if a citizen who qualifies for the job cannot be found.

That is how Khatri himself brought his brother over in 2006, who is now well settled with his family in his own house. “But I had never heard of any Nepali not paying 16 months salary to a fellow Nepali,” he added.

Like other countries in Europe, Nepalis also try to come to Luxembourg on student visas by paying agents in Kathmandu up to Rs1.6 million. He warned Nepali youngsters not to get duped, since the cost of living is very high, and it is difficult to pay living costs and school fees by working. With the pandemic, there are also fewer jobs in the service industry. Most are now working on home delivery and take away.

After the interaction with the NRN, the restaurant owner’s mother and father pleaded with Shyam and his colleagues not to press charges against their son. In an audio recording of a telephone conversation that *Nepali Times* was provided, they can be heard apologising to Shyam about the way their son treated him.

Shyam then asks them why they did not speak up even though they knew that their son was abusing employees. The restaurant has remained closed since the four employees left and filed the complaint.

Many Nepalis in Europe have said in interviews that they are not surprised by this story from Luxembourg. The practice of friends and relatives misusing the work permit in restaurants to engage in human trafficking is said to be rife.

But such is the desperation of young Nepalis for jobs that they are willing to risk all for a decent income to support families back home. Many of them tolerate the

Dark shadow of the European dream

During my reporting trip to Europe in 2019 I visited many Nepali restaurants, interviewed their Nepali owners, and met with employees. I also met government officials and visited police departments.

In Luxembourg, it was not easy to get information. After the initial chit chat restaurant workers suddenly went quiet when asked about their working conditions and seemed intimidated. Owners liked to highlight how they were helping fellow Nepalis attain their European dream.

I soon found out that the reason was that many of them are victims of physical and mental torture, not aware of their labour rights in Europe because of lack of education or being unable to speak the local language. They trusted the employer who was often a relative or friend from back home.

It was in Luxembourg, the country where the Court of Justice of the European Union is situated, that migrant workers were facing some of the worst violations of their human rights at the hands of fellow Nepalis.

Outwardly, the restaurants looked spic and span, the guests were all well-groomed, and seemed to be from the higher echelons of society. The Nepalis all said they were happy. But behind this veneer, I had a nagging feeling that it was all too good to be true.

Sure enough, after some digging, I found a similar story to what I had uncovered in Helsinki earlier. Together with Helsingin Sanomat, we at *Nepali Times* had covered the story on human trafficking of Nepali workers by a Nepali restaurant owner in 2019, after which the Finnish

government took action on the perpetrator.

Like in Finland, some migrants who had entered Luxembourg legally were being abused and denied basic human rights, including the right to decent working hours and salary as per the labour laws of the country, right to safe housing and good food and the right to live with dignity.

The stories of Binod, Shyam, and their colleagues prove that there are Nepalis who themselves rose up the ranks to be restaurant owners who are now preying on vulnerable and desperate people from the home country.

There is no other label for this but human trafficking — anyone who is made to work in a different place than their home country without a fair salary, housing, food and health services are victims of human trafficking, even if they are not subject to physical, verbal, mental and sexual violence.

Shyam and Binod’s Nepali employer has all the legal paperwork for their contract and bank accounts. Still, they were exploited. It is now up to the authorities there to find out how such violations could occur in a country which has such strict safeguards.

Namrata Sharma



Namrata Sharma is former chair of the Centre for Investigative Journalism Nepal. This article has been developed with the support of the Money Trail Project, Journalism Fund EU, and Finance Uncovered.

abuse and exploitation, and are also not aware of their rights in European countries.

Service Info Traite, which supports victims of human trafficking in Luxembourg says that the investigation and judicial process could take up to three years. It says the restaurant owner using a bank account to get around labour laws to exploit his employees is not new.

Says Frank Wies, who is a lawyer with Luxembourg’s Human Rights Commission: “The police, the courts and the prosecution often lack the necessary sensitivity to recognise and treat human trafficking. I have often seen cases where victims are given a settlement and deported back to their countries.”

That is not likely to happen with Shyam and his two colleagues who have work permits. But they have gone to the police in one of the world’s richest countries in the hope that justice will be served, and maybe set an example to other Nepali employers in Europe. 🇳🇵

Some names have been changed. Luc Caregari of Reporter in Luxembourg collaborated in this investigation. This report is published simultaneously in English in Nepali Times, in German in reporter.lu and in Nepali by onlinekhabar.com.



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Flying during the pandemic

Now that human beings are learning to fly again after being locked down for two years by the pandemic, we have the opportunity to re-discover the romance and thrill of swooping through the air like an eagle, a crow, or Superman.

Thanks to vaccine passports, air travel is much safer now. We now have the chance to once more relive the exoticism of airline travel, with an added sense of adventure. Rock Bottom Airlines, for example, is struggling to stay airborne through this crisis, so they have cut peanuts and Sprite on domestic flights. (Motto: "If you pay peanuts, you are a monkey.")

The austerity measures mean you no longer get cotton ear plugs because hungry passengers have been known to eat them. Barf bags are also gone, and you can throw up into the seat pocket in front of you in case you are so inclined. In case of overbooking, the restroom cubicle has been converted into executive class with the toilet seat for one extra premium passenger.

The great thing about travelling on Air Thrombosis or Fly By Night Airlines during the pandemic is that one has to wear masks, which means one is protected from having to inhale body odours of a fellow passenger on the bulkhead aisle seat whose armpit can be detected from the cockpit.

Since the price of aviation fuel has been hiked again this week, Nepal's domestic airlines are reducing cost by replacing turboprops with gliders. This allows airlines to cut unnecessary fuel costs, lessen cabin noise, and help Nepal become carbon neutral by 2050.

Air Hawadari, for instance, just

conducted a successful Jomsom-Kathmandu test flight that had to make an emergency landing in Ulaanbaatar because of a sudden change in wind direction.

Because every second a plane is on the ground means it is not earning revenue, they have designed jets that can stay in the air longer. In fact, long haul flights now have geriatric wards since passengers will get old in-flight.

The pandemic has made life stressful, resulting in a dramatic rise in air rage. Which is why in addition to masks, it is advisable to board your next flight wearing a padded boxing headgear and a groin guard — you never know what kind of person will be sitting next to you and how they will react if you tell them they are not supposed to take the mask off while sipping their bloody mary.

Passengers arriving at Kathmandu airport these days will also have noticed the health desk where folks in PPEs will aim laser-guided thermal guns at your head. Further along, there are armed guards to apprehend any suspicious-looking microorganism trying to sneak into Nepal without filling out the CCMC form.

We must remember rude immigration officials are there for our protection — it is their job to make any spike protein feel unwelcome in Nepal. Downstairs, everyone has to go through aggressive antibody searches to see if you are trying to sneak in an imported mobile device infected with NSO spyware virus.



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