(Geo)political football

For many outsiders, Nepal must seem like a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma. Indeed, even Nepalis agree.

In 2017, a Nepal-Congress-Maoist coalition government led by Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba concluded an agreement in Washington DC for a $900 million US-funded Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact to upgrade Nepal’s electricity grid and highways.

Signing it was Finance Minister Gyanendra Bahadur Karki. Deuba is now prime minister again in a coalition once more with the Measles, and Karki is the minister for law and parliamentary affairs. Four years later, the MCC is still stuck because it has been weaponized by squabbling parties and political factions which are heavily influenced by regional rivalry between India and China on the one hand, and global polarization between the US and China on the other.

After K P Oli, became prime minister following the 2017 elections, he strongly backed the MCC. But his rivals in the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) including Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal, and dissidents from his own UML, used provisions in the MCC that they saw as anti-national against Oli, and ultimately brought him down.

Since 13 July, Deuba has led a coalition made up of the Mekhri Centre (MCC), the breakaway CPN United Socialist and the Janata Samajwadi Party (JSP) which are all opposed to the MCC. It is now such a political hot potato that

If the MCC transmission line is not built, much of the new electricity generated will be wasted, putting private energy investors at risk.

The anti-Oli faction in the CPN led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Madhav Kumar Nepal were so effective in building up public opinion against the MCC that grassroots cadres are now dead set against it. Because they believe it is part of America’s Indo-Pacific Strategy to encircle China.

The MCC’s vice-president Fatema Z Amin arrived in Kathmandu on 9 September amidst street protests.

Deuba has been trying to get Oli on board the MCC and cobble together enough votes to get Parliament ratification, which would destabilize the coalition even before it can complete forming a government.

Deuba tried to placate his partners last week by approving an absurdly worded letter from the Finance Ministry to the MCC, asking if the agreement undermined Nepal’s sovereignty — as if it was for the Americans to decide even if it was. The MCC responded by saying it would not, that it would not be above Nepal’s constitution, and there was no military component to the project.

The MCC is seen as America’s response to China’s BRI at a time when the Deuba government is walking a geopolitical tightrope between India and China. It set up another committee to investigate a border pillar issue in Humla even though a previous committee concluded that there has been no encroachment by China.

And more than a month after the death of a Nepal on the Mahakali river bridge, Nepal finally sent a diplomatic note to New Delhi last week about that and helicopter overflights near Kalapani.

With Nepal’s rival political parties playing geopolitical football with the MCC, the NEA has to start working on a plan if in case the project is not ratified. Either way, Nepal urgently needs those transmission lines.

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A flood of recrimination

On 15 July this newspaper carried a report by Kathmandu's most reached on Facebook, which revealed that one out of every three Facebook users in Nepal had used the service. The news was shocking, even for those who had been following the situation closely, and it raised questions about how and why Facebook had been so successful in Nepal.

In an article published in the Times of India on 16 September 2021, the author examines the reasons behind Facebook's success in Nepal. The article discusses how Facebook has become a crucial platform for Nepalese citizens, providing a space for political discussion and activism. It also highlights the role of social media in shaping public opinion and influencing political discourse in Nepal.

The article argues that Facebook's success in Nepal can be attributed to a combination of factors, including the country's rapid growth in mobile phone usage, the lack of other online platforms, and the cultural and linguistic homogeneity of the Nepalese population.

The author also notes that Facebook has been instrumental in organizing protests and demonstrations, and has played a role in bringing attention to issues that might otherwise have been ignored. The article concludes by suggesting that Facebook's influence in Nepal is likely to continue to grow in the years to come.
WELCOME ON BOARD: DALLAS-FORT WORTH

As of September 24th, Dallas-Fort Worth is the latest addition to our network. Fly safely with our extensive health measures.
Nepal less and less able to feed itself

Growing population, rising income and stagnant domestic production mean more dependence on food imports to meet growing demand.

Ramesh Kumar

Despite two-thirds of its citizens depending on agriculture, and having fertile land ideal for farming, Nepal’s annual food imports are rising exponentially due to a growing population and rising incomes.

Imports of staples like rice, vegetables, and fruits that can easily be produced in Nepal are rising steeply. In the last 60 years, while Nepal’s population more than tripled from 6.4 million to almost 30 million, paddy productivity has merely doubled from 1.8 tonnes per hectare to 3.6. As a result, Nepal’s grain import touched $386 million in the last fiscal year, of which rice alone made up $240 million.

Rice imports have only risen from 1.6 tonnes per hectare to 2.6 in the last three decades, and Nepal had to import $165.6 million worth of maize in the last fiscal year. Vegetable production has been increasing steadily, but it is not keeping pace.

Nepal is less and less able to feed itself. Educated people are giving up farming for wharfed jobs or migrating overseas, leading to falling production. The country’s imports of food items alone reached $2.3 trillion – three times higher than in 2014/15.

A third of all remittances the country earned from foreign employment resulted in the country to foot the food import bill. Once a country with agricultural surplus, Nepal exported only $945 million worth of food items.

Imports of every product like mangoes and guava which grow abundantly in Nepal have gone up. Nepal spent $2 billion importing just the two fruits in the past year. Nepal imports a lot of sugar and spices from China.

India normally accounts for at least half of these imports, with its post-lockdown share at 25%. Indian fishermen receive half of the economic surplus and subsidies in need, fertilizer, technical assistance and the like, producing crops at competitive prices, which in turn flood the Nepali market. As a result, traditional Nepali varieties are disappearing, replaced by cheaper, widely-available rice and other food items.

Nepal imports soyabean oil all the way from France and Brazil, lentils from Australia, cooking oil from Russia, chilli from Indonesia and Vietnam, potatoes from Bangladesh, beans from Burma. Nepal may be self-sufficient in poultry products, but imports maize for chicken feed from Argentina.

Cheaper and competitive imports, especially from India, are discouraging local farmers from commercial production,” says Devendra Gauchan of Nepal Agricultural Economics Society. Self-sufficiency in agriculture has been the motto of every government in the past decade, but Nepal’s dependence on the outside world for food is only growing.

Agricultural Imports (in billions)

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Nepal, a landlocked nation, is facing the rising tide of globalisation and the pressure to feed its growing population. The government has been trying to boost domestic production by introducing new policies and incentives, but the results have been mixed.

Samsung ACs

Samsung has launched its 5-in-1 inverter ACs with a new feature that makes it more energy-efficient. The company has invested in research and development to enhance the energy efficiency of its products.

Korean O2 support

South Korea has been a major supporter of Nepal in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. The Korean government provided oxygen concentrators, health care workers and other medical supplies to help combat the pandemic.

US Covid aid

The United States has been a key player in the global efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. The US has provided a range of assistance, including medical supplies and vaccine donations.

WorldLink’s Photon Internet

WorldLink, a major internet service provider in Nepal, has launched its 5G service across the country. The service promises faster internet speeds and better connectivity.

Upaya City-UKAID

The UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) and the UK’s Department for International Trade (DIT) have launched a new partnership to support the development of the UK’s tech industry in Nepal.

Suzuki Dazzard Offer

Suzuki Motor has announced a special offer for the new Dazzard model. The company is offering a cashback of Rs 30,000 on the purchase of the Dazzard 110.

SmartSpeak

Dhulikhel, Nepal has launched a new initiative to promote local businesses. The initiative aims to help local entrepreneurs and artisans by providing them with access to markets and customers.

Proba Bank

Proba Bank, a leading Nepalese bank, has launched a new service for its customers. The service offers a range of benefits, including reduced transaction fees and easier access to financial services.

Here is a table showing the agricultural imports in billions from 2015/2016 to 2020/2021:

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These figures indicate a significant increase in food imports over the past five years, with a sharp rise in 2019/2020 to 2.8 billion. The high imports can be attributed to several factors, including population growth, rising incomes, and increased demand for imported products.

The country’s food security situation is alarming, with a growing dependence on imported food. The government needs to take urgent steps to increase domestic production and reduce imports to ensure food security for the future.

Nepal’s agricultural sector, which is vital for food security, needs investment in research and development, infrastructure, and marketing to make it more competitive in the global market.

The government should also focus on developing alternative crops to reduce the dependence on rice and other imported food items. This will not only improve food security but also create job opportunities and boost the country’s economy.

In conclusion, Nepal’s food import crisis is a cause for concern, and urgent action is needed to ensure food security and self-sufficiency in agriculture. The government, stakeholders, and the private sector must work together to address this pressing issue.

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**Economy**

10-16 SEPTEMBER 2023 | 078
For nearly 18 months, regular educational activities of children across Nepal have been disrupted. The closure of schools to reduce the spread of Covid-19 has amplified the many other ways the pandemic has eroded the academic and social experiences of students, and with that, their mental well-being.

The impact of this will be felt for many years by the students themselves and nationally, as Nepal’s economy, like other countries, witnesses a reduced rate of economic return.

Children from poorer families and those in remote parts of Nepal have been especially affected. The pandemic has laid bare inequity in access to education.

The Nepal government’s Students’ Learning Facilitation Guidelines 2020 notes that a large number of students do not have access to innovative delivery of distance learning programs. Rather, they depend on the distribution of printed learning materials and person-to-person contact that has been difficult to sustain during the pandemic.

Soon before Covid, Australia and Nepal shared challenges with the delivery of education to students living in remote areas.

In the central desert area of Australia is the Alice Springs School of the Air (ASSOA), reputedly the biggest school in the world. ASSOA’s classrooms are spread over 1.3 million sq. km, yet it has only 120 students and 14 teachers.

For over 60 years, it has been delivering education by radio for children who live a day’s drive or more from the nearest school. ASSOA is one of several Schools of the Air operating across the vast Australian outback. So it should come as no surprise that during the pandemic Australia has been supporting the delivery of education to children in rural Nepal.

The Australian government has partnered with Rural Education and Development Centre (REED) Nepal to deliver a program that is enabling continued learning in the far reaches of Nepal.

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Education

**Schools of the Air**

Nepal and Australia deliver education by radio for students learning under Covid-19

The Promoting Stability in Education (PSE: Continuity of Learning and Strengthening Resilience) program builds on the experiences of ASSOA’s successful Teacher Training and Quality Education Program in Solakhumbu district, supported by the Australian Himalayan Foundation.

Parents, teachers, community volunteers and radio educators are working together to encourage and ensure children’s access to learning opportunities in communities that have limited access to the Internet.

Under this initiative, lessons are broadcast daily through local radio stations to over 23,000 households, reaching over 68,000 children and 14,000 parents. Radio sets, worksheets and other educational materials are being distributed to children’s families. The program will assist the transition back to in-person classroom learning when schools reopen.

Nearly two months after the launch of the program, PSE has been warmly received by students and educators alike.

Bhujung Secondary School student Premita Rana, who lives with disability, has welcomed the way Learning by Radio has brought her school to her home.

“I used to walk two hours to get to my school but nowadays, I am learning from my home,” she said. “In addition to regular school curriculum, I also learn life skills and issues of gender equality. In the future, I want to work for the benefit of children with disabilities and be like the award-winning author Jhamak Ghimire.”

Through PSE, educators visit homes, distributing learning materials and radio sets to families and providing support to parents and community members.

Local governments are closely engaged in the program. Education representatives of Halshil Tehsil-29 Municipality of Khotang district, Pushpa Karki said, “With the federal government’s decision to close schools, we were quite worried about what we could do to ensure we backstop learning loss among our children”.

“Learning by Radio is instrumental in continuing education for our children. We are ready to cooperate with the program by visiting households and interacting with the parents and other stakeholders of children’s education, distribution of radio sets, workbooks and working in motivating volunteer teachers,” Karki added.

The benefit of programs like Learning by Radio are not confined to Covid; rather, they provide innovative learning models for all who have difficulty accessing traditional education due to disabilities or their remote location. As Koshari Rai, a teacher from Jwaiygrit Basic School in Dashkunda, Solakhaubrama observed, “There is very limited access to smartphones and reliable internet. Children have to walk a long distance to come to school every day.”

Delivery of pre-recorded educational materials also benefits parents and local communities with information relevant regardless of age. Select Nepali from Talichon Rural Municipality, Bajhang district, said she found her child’s radio lessons on gender equality and life skills helpful as well and she has become a regular listener.

Borun Lhamichhane, station manager of Beats FM, Sindhi, added that Learning by Radio has applications beyond the formal education setting. “The program has helped deliver life skill education and public service announcements including information on the pandemic, gender issues and disaster preparedness.”

From Australia’s radio stations to Nepal’s Himalayan communities, students and their families are benefiting from schools of the air. For all the challenges Covid-19 has presented, it has also reminded us that old technologies combined with new thinking can help chart a more positive future.

Felicity Volk is the Australian Ambassador to Nepal.
Raj Kumar Shakya, who died of cerebrovascular complications in Tokyo at age 54, was the world’s foremost Nepalese sculptor, excelling in the craft of preserving traditional methods of forging malleable metal sheets into devotional art objects.

Having met, known, and worked with Raj Kumar for nearly three decades, his short life is a lesson on what it takes to be a successful artist. This was a tragic loss to Nepal, and to the world, where his work is on display from Bhutan to Japan, from Shanghai to Munich.

Raj Kumar was passionate about his art and craft, and set big goals. When it came to any assignment, no matter what the size or scale, Raj Kumar knew he could do it. He came across as supremely confident about his abilities, and there were few tasks that he could not fulfill.

But he was also realistic, and knew his own capacity. However, he was always eager to take it to the next level to test his own limits. The colossal statue Guru Padmasambhava that Raj Kumar built in Bumthang of Bhutan will stand as a testament to his talent as an artist and, yes, even his engineering and logistical expertise.

Comparable in size and scope to the Statue of Liberty in New York, the Padmasambhava in Bhutan is also made from the repousse method that Raj Kumar had perfected and scaled up during his short working life.

Raj Kumar succeeded because he had the passion, and he believed in himself. The time and effort it took to craft each of the masterpieces the artist had gifted to the world did not matter to him, because he loved what he did. He was dedicated to preserving and preserving the repousse art form, and all the skills and techniques that went with it.

The most important lesson of his life is that we must not be afraid to set big goals.

Raj Kumar’s art did not exist in a vacuum. He was rooted in the community, and articulated his craft through traditional art of the
Meet the artist

When Jeanne Rajapanday was a child, she would often accompany her mother to the semi-annual Kathmandu Valley Art Fair. Even as a young child, she was very much interested and fascinated by the paintings on display. She would spend hours at the fair, looking at the paintings and admiring the work of the artists. She was particularly drawn to the bright colors and intricate designs of the traditional Bhutanese art. As she grew older, she became more and more interested in learning more about the art and its history.

Jeanne Rajapanday

Jeanne Rajapanday has been a professional artist since she was a teenager. She started by painting small landscapes and portraits, and over time her work evolved into more complex and detailed pieces. Her paintings often feature vibrant colors and intricate designs, and she is known for her skill in capturing the atmosphere of the places she paints.

One of her most famous works is a large painting of the Bhutanese mountain range, which was commissioned by a wealthy collector. The painting took her several months to complete, and it was met with great acclaim when it was exhibited at the Art Basel in Miami Beach.

Jeanne Rajapanday is not only a talented artist, but she is also a dedicated teacher. She has taught art classes at several schools and community centers, and she has been instrumental in bringing the art of Bhutanese painting to a wider audience. Her work has been featured in several exhibitions, both in Bhutan and abroad, and she has received numerous awards and recognition for her contributions to the arts.

Jeanne Rajapanday continues to work on her paintings, and she is always looking for new inspiration. She is a true master of her craft, and her paintings are a testament to her dedication and passion for the art of Bhutanese painting.
**ABOUT TOWN**

**EVENTS**

Visual art workshop
Art students and enthusiasts are invited to join an intensive Master Class workshop at Bikaji Art Center’s Visual Arts Studio led by Guru Mahapatra, a professional visual art practitioner and curator. Details at https://www.bikajico.com/visual-arts-studio-class/.

Photowalk
Join aspiring photographers for walks across the valley and take pictures that inspire. Follow districts’ programs. Get details about Photowalk schedule on: Photowalk Nepal’s website.

**TEEN:**

**DOCUMENTARIES**

*Herne Katsha*

This series presents untold stories of ordinary people in the form of short documentaries. Head on to their YouTube channel to start.

**GETAWAY**

Dom Himalaya
Dom Himalaya Hotel offers a space for visitors to indulge in traditional Nepali cuisine, with karaoke, banjo singing and bowls in the vibrant charm of Thamel. Tel: (01) 463554.

Park Village
Send the weekend haring out by the pool with a cold beverage at Park Village Resort, in a quiet corner of Kathmandu. 7800 Kachabari, (01) 4672086.

Marriott Hotel
Take a dip into Marriott’s refreshing infinity pool. As for the food, their shrimp cocktails are a must.

Gokarna Forest Resort
The resort is a paradise, dense with century-old trees nesting not only natural cows and goats for free strolling, with the guesthouse set against the backdrop of the Himalayas. Tel: (01) 4666002.

Babar Mahal Vilas
A neoclassical architectural marvel, the grand Babar Mahal Vilas is now a quaint boutique hotel with Nepali restaurants, art and culture activities.

**AIR QUALITY INDEX**

The heavy smoke in the past week brought the AQI Quality Index (AQI) to below 30 as Monday morning at Kathmandu’s air was unpalatable. But at 11 am on Tuesday the grayish air was cleared out, bringing the index to the safety zone between 15-30 minutes from ideal (less than 15) and poor (15-30) range of 30-50.

**OUR PICK**

Snatch
Guy Ritchie’s 2000 cult classic crime comedy ensemble Snatch follows the suddenly intertwined lives of two boxing champions, an unscrupulous boxing promoter, a slick machine operator, amorous robbers, Russian gangsters, and other shady characters from the London criminal underworld. The stories of these characters come together in the struggle against each other to truck down a precious stolen diamond. Star: Brad Pitt, Jason Statham, Sean Bean, Vinnie Jones, Jean Reno, John Malkovich, Stephen Graham and more.

**DINING**

Hankook Sarang
Serving the best for Korean food and enjoy a variety of mouth-watering dishes like Tteokbokki, Dak, Jeon Bancum, Kimbap and more.

Tel: (01) 4072171 / Thamel: (01) 4256875

Belgian Waffles
Get mouth-watering waffles from Liegan Waffles, Nepal. Order the classic Belgian Chocolate Waffle, or try the Kii Aint Cream Waffle, Maple Waffle and more. Delivery options available.

Tel: 9866206103

Taseem’s Kings Kitchen
Order Taseem’s mouth-watering authentic Bara-Modern cuisine. Taseem through the menu for favourite dishes and dishes of your dreams. Call or order from Foodmuncha, Aaravali, 9801721212

Organic Smoothie Bowl
Peel the bowls for healthier options. Organic Smoothie Bowl and Café plates fresh, fast and Instagram-worthy smoothie bowls, smoothies, drinks and more. Call to order.

Lamko, 9867446162

RaiHaane
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Patan, Dharahara Square, 9801525917

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BULBUL
Dir. Binoj Paustel

AMA KHANDO
Dir. Dhondup Tsering

CO-HUSBAND
Dir. Ganeesh Panday

SARITA
Dir. Sergio Basco

SPLIT ENDS
Dir. Rajan Kathel

ACASA MY HOME
Dir. Radu Olteanu Romania, Finland, Germany

AURORA
Dir. Mira Tervo Finland

FIRE WILL COME
Dir. Oliver Laxe Spain, France, Luxembourg

HER JOB
Dir. Nikos Lebid Greece, France and Serbia

MY BROTHER CHASES DINOSAURS
Dir. Stefano Cipani Italy, Spain

BAD POEMS
Dir. Gabor Reisz Hungary, France

THE AUDITION
Dir. Ina Weisse Germany, France

OUR StrUGGLES
Dir. Guillaume Sanez Belgium, France

PERFUMES
Dir. Grégory Magne France

CLEG
Dir. Jure Kunslets Latvia, Belgium, Lithuania, France

WOMEN ON THE RUN
Dir. Martin Horksy Czech Republic
Afghans in Nepal await

Refugees from Afghanistan living in Kathmandu struggle to survive while waiting for asylum

Mukesh Pokhrel

Ever since the most recent Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, there had been fleeing Kandahar and Kabul to Kathmandu in the hope of third-country asylum. They have been waiting in limbo for years, and have been watching the shocking images from Kabul airport of their compatriots trying to escape the Taliban. This has dashed their hopes of ever returning to their homeland, but raised the prospect of a spillover asylum process.

Humayun Shahzad, an Afghan refugee living in Kathmandu, has not been able to sleep ever since the Taliban began their rapid advance across Afghanistan last month, leading to the collapse of the Afghan government.

"I have been watching what is happening in Afghanistan, and thinking about our friends and family back home," says Shahzad, who has been anxiously following the Taliban’s rapid takeover and the collapse of the Afghan government.

"On the one hand, I have had to constantly think about how I will manage to support my family without a job here in Nepal. On the other hand, there is also the worry about what the Taliban will do to my country," Shahzad adds.

Like dozens of other Afghan families languishing in Kathmandu, Shahzad fled first to India and then came to Kathmandu, hoping it would be easier to apply for asylum here.

Taliban forces have vastly weakened in the first six years after the US occupied Afghanistan. However, the militants then began to tighten their stranglehold and around rural Afghanistan, leaving many with the choice of either following along, or escaping their harsh rule.

Shahzad was operating a successful photography business in Ghizar district in Afghanistan’s Hindukush province, and chose the latter. He took his family and fled to Delhi, and then to Kathmandu in 2016.

"C.R. Ahmed had never imagined that he would one day have to flee the country that he had been born and raised in. He owned a thriving gold shop in Kandahar, and lived happily with his family through all the years of Soviet occupation, the mujahideen war, the American bombings. But when the Taliban took over for the first time more than a decade ago, he left. The Taliban ruined Afghanistan," says Ahmed. "They will ruin it again."

The Taliban grew out of the US-backed mujahideen fighters who drove out the Soviet military in the 1990s. They became radicalised after coming to power, and were finally banned from the fringes after the US occupied Afghanistan in 2001 following the 11 September attacks — exactly 20 years ago this week.

The Americans retaliated against al Qaida bases in Afghanistan, and initiated a state-building process with elections and governments that they backed. But corruption and mismanagement allowed the Taliban to regroup, conduct horrendous terrorist attacks against civilians and inflict heavy casualties on US and NATO forces.

The US and UK finally lost its will to fight, and US forces abruptly left Afghanistan, allowing the Taliban to take rapid control. Provincial capitals fell one by one, as Afghan forces either surrendered or were routed.

The whole of August, the world witnessed heart-wrenching scenes of thousands of Afghans flocking to Kabul airport, hoping to escape the Taliban rule. But the Americans denied their wish, and the Taliban took over.

The Kabul airport was taken by the Taliban, and thousands of Afghans were stranded there. The US and UK forces rescued thousands of their citizens, but the Taliban took over.

"We are waiting to see how things will turn out," says Shahzad. "We are waiting to see how the Afghan government will respond."

---

A short walk up the Panjshir

Lisa Chegwold

Kabul playing on rusted tanks abandoned by the retreating Russians, your debris comfortably incorporated into stone walls to contain sheep and goats, and flecking green fringes of the martyrs’ graves, too many graves, under a cloudless sky.

These are the enduring images of the Panjshir Valley, wild flowers, willows and orchids lining the clear streams beneath the grand arc of barren hillside, rocks and caves used to hide the resistance fighters loyal to Ahmad Shah Massoud, the legendary “Lion of Panjshir”.

Nestled deep within the Hindu Kush, Massoud’s faithful foot soldiers, the fierce unforgiving geography and its defendable narrow entrance enabled the Panjshir Valley to hold out against waves of invasions — the Soviet Union in the 1980s and the Taliban in the 1990s.

In 2001, just two days before the 9/11 terrorist attack in New York, the revered commander of the former Northern Alliance, hero of poetry and mujahideen leader was targeted by al Qaeda and the Taliban, assassinated by a bomb detonated by a Pashtun broadcast journalist in one of his Panjshir forts.

This week, it will be 20 years since his assassination and the 9/11 attacks that brought American retribution on al Qaeda bases in Afghanistan.

In October 2001 we travelled through it to the furthest northern border in search of trekking and tourism ideas that would benefit local homeowners, guides, homemakers and craft people. My hopeful notes show that our suggestions included Afghan village guesthouses, the Mir Samir trek ‘a short walk in the Hindu Kush’, a five-day hike in the footsteps of Massoud’ circuit, visitor information and a sadakhana and blanket weaving enterprise.

One of the issues to overcome in rural Afghanistan was to persuade our hosts that they must change money for tourist services. So powerful are the traditions of hospitality (‘guest is god’), sharing what little they have, that taking...
Cubah Ahmed recalls the Taliban’s oppressive regime making it impossible for Afghans to continue to live in the country of their birth. "Many of us Afghans wanted to educate our children, especially our daughters, and see them go on to become doctors and professionals, but the Taliban would not allow it," says Cubah Ahmed. "And women were not allowed to leave the house. We saw what the Taliban did 20 years ago, we knew what they are capable of." With the Taliban taking control of Afghanistan once again, the doors have all been closed but the chance of Afghans in Nepal ever returning home. But life here in Nepal, while certainly safer, has not been easy at all — especially with already existing mass migration, especially due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Muftia Jaffery, 37, owned and operated a wedding shop in Kandahar Province, was forced to flee his home with his family after the Taliban threatened him for doing wedding jobs for the American military. When they found Afghanistan, his family was forced to separate. Jaffery and his four children came to Nepal via India. Meanwhile, his mother and four siblings went to Iran.

Jaffery, the years in Kandahar have been a constant struggle for survival. The pandemic, however, has made it especially difficult — he now works without a roof over his head and has not been able to pay his rent for two months. Moreover, the $81,000 annual cost that the UNHCR provided for each of his children’s education has stopped in the last two years.

Like Jaffery, Mohammad Arif, a tailor and a businessman in Kandahar was contracted to install the doors and windows of buildings for the Americans. "The work was good, but the Taliban would not let us live in peace, they threatened to kill me for helping the Americans," recalls Arif, who believes that Afghanistan has fallen back into the hands of ‘terrorists’ following the Taliban victory.

Unable to live in constant fear for his life, Arif, his wife and four sons decided to leave Afghanistan and come to Kathmandu seven years ago. The family has been struggling to make ends meet ever since. The pandemic-induced closures have made it worse for the family, four of whom worked at various grill and wedding shops in Kandahar.

"We do fine as long as we can find work," says Sophika Ahmad, "But when the jobs dry up, we are not even able to feed ourselves for the day.

For all the Afghan refugees struggling to get through each day in Kathmandu, the journey from Afghanistan to Nepal has been long and painful. A few, like Ahmad and Jaffery, paid traffickers as much as $2,000 for each family member to come to Nepal — a country unfamiliar to them in terms of language, culture and geography.

Similarly, Hafizayn Shahzad came to Kathmandu after a broker he met in Delhi convinced him to move to Nepal, which he described as a safe country and he could find better opportunities. The broker charged him his nine-member family $1,000 per person just to come from New Delhi, and the family had to sell off all their savings in selling their possessions in Afghanistan for the trip.

"We had thought the price was too much, but the UNHCR provided for each one of their family members $350, which helped us come to Nepal without any problem," says Shahzad. Seven years later, his family is still here, and struggling to stay together.

Shahzad was convinced to come to Kathmandu by brokers who assured him that the UN refugee agency UNHCR in Nepal would provide him with the necessary support. But the reality in Nepal has been vastly different, and Afghans living in Nepal believe that the UNHCR has abandoned refugees like them.

Now, Afghan living in Nepal have one main demand, that they be compensated for their time living in Nepal, and be resettled in third countries. Additionally, the refugees have also been imploring the Nepali government to exempt them from having to pay the fines for staying in Nepal without a visa.

Without any financial support from UNHCR, and running out of money, the future for Afghan refugees in Nepal looks bleak.

For Muttia Jaffery, circumstances here have worsened to the point that he is considering going back to Afghanistan, and taking his chances with the Taliban. In Kathmandu, he says other Afghans in Kathmandu echo.

"If we return to Afghanistan, the Taliban will kill us, and that will be the end of us," says Jaffery. "We are living day by day."
Garbage in, garbage out

The good people of Okharpua in Nawakot finally signed a community agreement with the litterbugs of Kathmandu last week to not refuse our refuse anymore. So, just as we had started getting used to living with garbage, here we are having to adjust to clean sidewalks all over again.

Pity, because rubbish heaps had become such an important part of everyday life that it had become a vibrant symbol of our nascent federal democratic republic, an emblem of our hard-won freedoms. So let no nation, especially neighbouring countries currently trying to move our border population underrepresent our resolve to pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to safeguard our right to litter wherever we want within Nepal’s sovereign territory.

The rotting rubbish was proof that we are well on our way to attaining Middle Income Status by 2025. The fact that we can throw away so much stuff means we have much more where it came from, which in turn shows that Nepal’s GDP is relentlessly rising.

The garbage dumps had also become important repositories of endangered species of plant, animal and fungal life. These biodiversity reserves were the last remaining refuge for the Greater One-Horned (Nilgai antelope) whose alimentary tract evolved to allow them to digest styrofoam. By moving the rubbish we have removed the last habitat for endangered species, and their disappearance will be a loss not just to Nepal, but for the planet at large.

The absence of the friendly neighbourhood garbage piles also means that we have lost vital navigation waypoints that had replaced Google maps to help people find their way around in a city without street names and house numbers.

We can no longer give visitors directions on how to get to the Nepal Times office by telling them to take Thulo to Pulchok, and follow the smell of the decaying trash at the intersection, turn left after 50m, and we are the brick building above the momo shop. If you see another, bigger garbage pyramid blocking the road, then you have gone too far.

We now know that no two biodegradable garbage heaps smell the same. The one on our street has the bouquet of rotting water buffalo manure combined with the aroma of fish scales in an advanced stage of fermentation, recalling the sophisticated odour halfway between mature reproduction and a freshly-cut wet forest.

However, the Ase had noticed that the garbage mound at the gateway to Thamel has an even stronger olfactory quotient, clocking 8.5 magnitude on the open-ended Kelvin scale that can knock over innocent bystanders within a radius of 2km from the epicentre.

The Hotel Association has belatedly realised the tourism potential of changing an entry fee to drop by at Kathmandu’s garbage piles, which have become such popular selfie-spots for foreign visitors. It is upon us to restore the rubbish, and preserve this important part of the city’s cultural heritage.

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