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BHUPENDRA RAI

Khotang

Last year, as Nepal went into lockdown, people of Dibrung Chuichumma Rural Municipality of Khotang started streaming back home. But they also brought the virus back to their village.

The municipality's only ambulance was constantly busy, so Chair Bhupendra Rai donned a PPE and went door-to-door, driving the infected to the health centre in his own car. Sometimes he had to carry patients on his back.

The municipality set up a 25-bed isolation centre, ramped up awareness campaigns and carried out antigen tests. Vice-chair Sapana Rai was equally involved. Those who could not be treated were referred to hospitals in

Kathmandu, Biratnagar and Charikot.

This local government team is proof that elected grassroots politicians can be more accountable and are willing to serve constituents. During the lockdown, the municipality deployed over 200 teachers with masks on to go house-to-house tutoring students. It also bought produce from local farmers who could not take it to market and distributed it to needy families. After the Rais were elected, the municipality has a road connection, and every household has electricity and access to drinking water.

"We entered politics for the people. So, when they were suffering, we had to serve them," Bhupendra Rai told us on the phone from Khotang as he awaited word on the date for local elections due in April.

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ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL

As politicians in Kathmandu dither, local leaders in 4 municipalities are ready to face elections and put people first

● Sahina Shrestha



SRIJANA TAMANG

Sindhupalchok

In Sindhupalchok's Jugal Rural Municipality, Deputy Chair Srijana Tamang has been working on improving education after being elected five years ago. As a child, she remembers walking for hours from home to

school and back. In winter night fell quickly, and in monsoon leeches would cover her from head to toe.

"I really wanted to prioritise roads and education, but the pandemic meant there were more urgent issues," adds Tamang, who offered PCR testing and monitored the spread of the disease, turning a local school into an isolation centre.

"The pandemic was the first big challenge for me as a local representative," she says. "But knowing that we are working for our people and our families, there is always a greater sense of responsibility."

In 2020, while Tamang was away on official business, a massive landslide in Lidi killed 39. She travelled overnight to help with the rescue and relief effort and got support to rehabilitate those made homeless. She also got geologists to prepare a disaster risk map of her municipality to prevent and prepare for future disasters.



ARJUN MABUHANG

Tehrathum

Mayor Ashok Mabuhang of Tehrathum had seen rampant corruption in road contracts, so when he got elected in 2017 the municipality bought its own excavators to build roads with the help of local volunteers, cancelling out middlemen.

"Now all the wards have roads and there is ownership amongst the people because they were involved in building them," says Mabuhang.

Mabuhang also introduced a program to support dairy farmers and offer grants for vegetable and fruit farming, poultry, and pig farms. The mayor is proof that it does not really matter which party runs a local government, the people's needs are the same and elections are a way to select the best leaders to fulfill them.

He says: "Because I am from here and have seen the ground reality, I work in the areas that benefit the people most. We made do with the budget we were given, but we need to work more on improving schools."

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Jhapa

Jhapa's Kamal Rural Municipality was declared the country's top four cleanest in budget disbursement this year by the Office of Auditor General – a well-deserved recognition for Chair Menuka Kafle, for whom tackling leakage and corruption was a priority.

For any project with a budget over Rs5 million, the municipality went through a strict tender process. It also stopped giving out advances for projects and kept track of expenditure.

"We had to lead by example," says Kafle. "So we made sure that we were meticulous about accounting."

After Kafle was elected five year ago, the



MENUKA KAFLE

municipality constructed more than 70km of roads and ensured electricity in all wards. She has also worked to increase the income of women. "With economic independence, women can make their own decisions," says Kafle. The municipality offered cash incentives to encourage pregnant women to visit health centres for regular check-ups and registration of new-borns.

When Kafle was first elected, the community would ignore her and seek out her male deputy chair. Now, Kafle is in high demand.

She says: "We elected women representatives have to work hard to build trust in the community to make it easier for the women who come after us."

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Think nationally, vote locally

When the second wave hit Nepal in May 2022, city hospitals ran out of ICU beds and oxygen, and politicians in Kathmandu appeared helpless, local governments across Nepal sprang into action.

In Helambu, village chair Nima Galgen Sherpa set up action teams in each ward to go house-to-house looking for people with symptoms. They were tested on the spot and told to isolate or quarantine. This strategy did not burden overwhelmed hospitals, and helped contain the contagion.

Chair Laxmi Pandey and vice-chair Kopila Malla of Hupsekot of Nawalparasi district worked together to trace, test, and treat Covid-19. Ever since they were elected in 2017, these two women leaders, despite belonging to different political parties, have set a new benchmark for education, agriculture and nature conservation in rural Nepal.

Dhawal Shumsher Rana was re-elected mayor of Nepalganj in 2017, and built on a solid track record of good governance and transparency to upgrade urban infrastructure, and improve service delivery in his border city.

All these local government leaders have one thing in common: serving their constituents. That is what politics is all about, not the mad scramble for power in Kathmandu that has held Nepal back for decades. The mayors and their deputies may be from different parties, but that almost does not seem to matter since the needs of their constituents are the same.

Even as national-level politicians in Kathmandu dither about local election dates, these grassroots leaders have shown in just five years what is possible when the people they serve are put first.

To be sure, not all local leaders have been honest and accountable. A survey in this paper in 2018 showed that more than one-third of elected mayors were contractors. They went on to take corruption to new heights, as illustrated in our investigation of illegal sand-mining in the Tarai (*page 10-11*).

Putting aside these bad apples, there are plenty of examples of responsive and responsible local governments who have now served five years. Local elections cannot be postponed just because some national leaders think they will lose. Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba must over-ride opposition from two of his coalition partners, follow the

Constitution and safeguard the gains of the past five years.

Srijana Tamang is vice-chair of Jugal Rural Municipality, and together with other local leaders we profile in this edition (*page 1*) she best understands what the needs of her people are.

“They know where we live, they have our number, it is easy for people to tell us about their needs. They can come to our homes and complain about the work we are doing or encourage us to do better,” Tamang told us.

Local government elections were the first to be held after Nepal moved to federalism following the 2015 Constitution, so it was up to elected representatives to institutionalise it. It became a learning platform for the other two governments in the exercise of federalism and democracy.

There were also many good practices that came with the 2017 local elections. For one, it was significant in advancing female representation in the political sphere of Nepal, and helped bring minorities forward in local governments. Each local tier of

government could also function on its own, making policies and taking action to answer the needs of their constituencies.

As per Nepal’s Local Election Act 2017, voting for all 753 local units must be held by 19 March. The EC has proposed 27 April and 5 May dates. Leaders of the Maoist Centre

and Unified Socialists are so wary of faring badly in local polls, that they want to use a loophole in the law to have it postponed.

But all the local leaders *Nepali Times* spoke to this week spoke with one voice: local elections should be held

as scheduled. Local government elections are a mechanism that allows Nepalis to vote for the leaders they want: keep the ones who have done good work, replace those who have not lived up to expectations. Or, maybe experiment with a new face altogether.

Pushing back the dates or aborting local elections will be a disservice to Nepalis, undermine the democratic values the nation stands on, and push back development.

Arjun Mabuhang, Chair of Laligurans Municipality in Tehrathum sums it up: “It is written in the Constitution that local elections have to be held on time. Choosing their local representatives is the people’s right. Whether they want to keep us or replace us is up to them. The national parties in government should respect that.”

Sahina Shrestha

Local government elections cannot be held hostage just because two national parties are afraid they will lose



BIKRAM RAI/NEPALI TIMES

The cement factory is gone, but the air quality has not improved. The reason is visible right here below Chobhar hill on any given morning. The factory lies idle, its stack smokeless for once, but across the Bagmati on a picturesque staircase of terrace fields are at least six new brick kilns spewing out acrid black smoke. Across the hill below the swanky new villas at Bhaishapati, and all along the southern outskirts of Patan, a pall of black-grey smog smudges the sky-overnight emission from the furnaces of hundreds of new kilns baking bricks to meet the increasing construction demand of Kathmandu Valley.

The effect of all this smoke is not readily apparent to city dwellers. But in southern Patan residents complain that laundry hanging up to dry, tables and chairs have a veneer of black soot every morning. What this is doing to the lungs of valley residents is anybody’s guess.

There are three times higher levels of particulate matter in the air in villages located near brick kilns compared to villages which had no kilns. Although the brick kilns are not the only culprits, environmental activists say that they are emerging as the single biggest cause of particulate pollution in the valley. Old vehicles, adulterated diesel, construction activity, burning rubbish heaps are the other causes.

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

ONLINE PACKAGES



CRUSHING TALE OF THE CHURE

Illegal sand mining on Chure rivers is displacing farmers across Nepal’s mid-hills and Tarai with worsening floods and landslides while decimating an already fragile landscape. Follow our reports to Mahottari district in the southern plains and see for yourself how the overexploitation has changed the country’s landscape for the worse. Watch the video on our YouTube channel and read the report on *pages 10-11*.

CEMENT EXTRACTION

How many tourists will come to visit your country to look at the cities and towns filled up with polluted air and not pristine mountains and rivers (‘Nepal struggles to balance nature and industry’, Ramesh Kumar, nepalitimes.com)?

Candace Kolb

• We cannot overlook the employment benefits, but we can overlook the environmental impact? The same old story they always try to sell, it’s about jobs, not about the rich getting richer at the expense of future generations.

Zachary Barton

• Because it brings jobs, let’s exploit our resources and bury the country in landslides right? The same concept prevails when it comes to gravel extraction, ring road widening, instead of thinking ahead.

Shirrin Barakzai

• That’s all too familiar nonsense from the industry, of course. They need to learn how to internalise environmental externalities.

Ajay Pradhan

KATHMANDU CIVILISATION

We Nepali are a suicidal lot, we erase our own history and identity, then make random blinded walks in search of identity (The historic Kathmandu beneath our feet’, Sahina Shrestha, #1094). Remember how they tried to destroy Rani Pokhari by concretising it? Our ancestors had made it with such ingenious but simple technology, alternating multi-layers of clay and sand to filter the water. Even after much hue and cry, they wanted to destroy Kamal Pokhari. They have run excavators to destroy the millennia-old terraced paddy fields that are proven to resist erosion, and the Raj Kulos that irrigated them. Similarly, they erased the historicity and legend of Kashthamandap. What did they do with the old wood, make a bonfire out of it? I feel sorry for those experts who are bedazzled by western development, and are hell-bent on deconstructing to destroy our culture and identity.

Lal Bahadur

TARGETED KILLING

It’s really shameful to see the lack of reaction this incident generated (‘Nepal Minister threatens targeted killings’, nepalitimes.com).

Aashraf Pradhanang

NEPAL ELECTION

If some coalition partners are making a case to postpone local elections fearing their weak electoral prospects, how does that change their slim chances of victory (‘Nepal coalition dilly-dallying on polls’, Shristi Karki, nepalitimes.com)? This is exactly the kind of hypocrisy why these parties have lost trust amongst the electorate.

Shyamal Krishna Shrestha

• A clown in a palace does not make it a king, the palace becomes a circus (‘Polls in the time of pandemic’, Shristi Karki, #1095)!

Rajiv Desraj Shrestha

TANG TING

Tang Ting is the next best place around Pokhara (‘Tang Ting’s Winter Wonderland’, Jit Gurung, nepalitimes.com).

Prashanga Pokharel

• Looks beautiful, but my thoughts are with the less fortunate Nepalis that are freezing this winter.

Ben-Erik Ness

• Looks like a great viewpoint and is easily accessible. I will try to visit on my next Pokhara trip.

Sujoy Das

• Tang Ting is a special place with so much to see in that area. I need to trek to this viewpoint next time.

Sara Parker

CLIMATE CRISIS

Most male members have migrated to India for work due to harvest failure (‘How the climate crisis adds to child marriage in Nepal’, Sonam Sherpa, nepalitimes.com). The future looks rather bleak with the climate crisis reinforcing migration and child marriage.

Prashamsha Sharma

OLD AGE HOME

So nice to see that in Nepal there is now a safe and nice arrangement for the elderly without a safety net (‘Home sweet home for older Nepalis’, Anita Bhatwal, nepalitimes.com). Free housing for elderly in need, with access to medical care, community and of course also with its own room for yoga and meditation.

Ingrid Jæger Yoga

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



Thamel's new Art Street

by *Ashish Dhakal*

Thamel is becoming a new hub for Nepal’s contemporary art scene with Kathmandu Art House which provides artists with a platform to work and showcase their creativity in a one-stop shop.

f Most reached and shared on Facebook



Scars of War

by *Sahina Shrestha*

Rabin and Rabina Regmi, two siblings who survived a Maoist attack in 2002 speak of their long struggle and hopes for the future in this powerful story of resilience. Visit nepalitimes.com for the full story.

🐦 Most popular on Twitter

Nepal struggles to balance nature and industry

by *Ramesh Kumar*

The unregulated quarrying by cement plants, lack of safeguards, and overexploitation have led to worsening floods and landslides, as well as air, water and soil pollution. Read the story and join the online discussion.

💬 Most commented



Tsering Sumjok is all right

by *Sahina Shrestha*

Badly injured as a baby in a fire accident, Dolpo native never gave up and after receiving treatment for her horrific burns is now helping her home community. Profile of her journey on our website.

🔍 Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

The guessing game is over: 'Maila Baje' of Nepali Notebook blog is Sanjay Upadhyaya (@SanjuPad).



Sujeev Shakya @sujeevshakya

It’s so interesting @NepaliTimes had many people who wrote under a pseudonym. #MailaBaje #ForeignHand and of course #Arthabeed.



Rabindra Mishra @RabindraMishra

Even back then I was 100% confident that 'Maila Baje' could be no other than Sanjay Upadhyaya (@SanjuPad). Who else could write with such knowledge, insight, objectivity and flair!



Manisha Koirala @mkoirala

Wow!! @SanjuPad is #mailabaje. Me and my parents often talked about his articles and tried hard to guess his real identity as we admired his insights and understanding!!



Kamal Thapa @KTnepal

Wow! Finally, the guessing game is over. Despite some reservations on subject matters, I’ve always remained a fan of 'Maila Baje'. Thank you @SanjuPad for being so consistent, articulate and above all placing your heart in the right place. @dipak_gyawali @kundadixit @PradhanPushpa



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Home Sweet Home For Older Nepalis
“The elderly can live here in peace with minimal discomfort in the latter part of their lives. This is the legacy Astaman Maharjan left behind and what he will be remembered for.”



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20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Then and now



In 2002 January, after two decades of relentless activism, the state-owned Himal Cement factory was finally shut down to control Kathmandu’s air pollution which was making people sick. Diesel Vikram tempos were relocated. But 20 years since, air pollution has only got worse and sources of emission diversified.

In the same period, the number of cement factories operating in Nepal has grown to 55, which collectively extract 11.2 million tonnes of limestone a year. This unregulated quarrying, lack of safeguards and overexploitation has led to worsening floods and landslides, as well as air, water and soil pollution.

Excerpts from the report published on issue #78.25-32 January 2002 20 years ago this week:

Then the cement factory at Chobhar officially shut down on 14 January, everyone assumed the quality of air in the capital would improve dramatically. After all, Himal Cement had for the past 25 years been pumping soot and cement dust into the valley’s atmosphere.



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Diaspora Diaries 1

"I am sharing my story so others can learn about my experience. I prefer to remain anonymous."



PITTABI RAMAN

In this new fortnightly column, *Diaspora Diaries*, *Nepali Times* provides a platform for Nepalis to share their experiences of living, working, studying abroad. Authentic and original entries can be sent to editors@nepalitimes.com with *Diaspora Diaries* in the subject line.

It has not even been three months since I said my goodbye to my family, but I am already back in Nepal from Qatar.

I was promised a job in housekeeping in a five star hotel, but ended up in a construction site where they wanted me to carry around heavy stuff all day. I paid over Rs100,000 for this job, including loans and selling my sisters' jewellery. But it was not what I signed up for.

Even then, I had no choice but to accept my fate. But after a month of physical labour, I fell ill and realised I was not cut out for this work.

My company never once asked about my health while I was in hospital, or recovering in my room.

I wanted to come home, but my employer

was unwilling to let me go, and ultimately I had to escape without letting them know. Employers have been known to file cases falsely accusing people like me of stealing so workers cannot leave the country.

I only made it out because I had the support of some helpful Nepali brothers in Qatar. Not the embassy. Not the employer. Not the recruiter. Just some Nepalis with big hearts.

They were generous with their advice about what to do, and provided me with taxi fare. They pitched in for my ticket. They called me to remind me to keep my spirits high. Even now, in Kathmandu, my stay at this hotel has been financed by a fellow Nepali in Qatar.

In a foreign land, just being Nepali bonds people together and people go out of their way to help strangers — it is an inexplicable kind of brotherhood that I will never be able to forget, or repay.

Despite my bad luck, I have been lucky in many other ways. I am young, I sought help and help came spontaneously from many people. But I know it for a fact that there are many like me who have it even worse, are suffering

silently, and struggling.

It is not bad for everyone. I know other Nepalis who have been in Qatar for years, and are happy with their jobs. It is like a lottery, and I was dealt a bad hand this time. The company I was posted in happened to be the worst of the lot.

I have been lucky previously. I worked in Malaysia in a hotel for three years starting 2011, and earned \$480 a month, which at the time was a huge amount for me. After returning, I worked in a hotel in Nepal. But I needed to earn more, and that would only happen if I found a job overseas again. I chose the Gulf this time, but was unlucky.

As I sat in my room alone in Qatar when I was recovering and my roommates were at work, I used to reflect on many things, as I had so much time in my hand. You leave home for a few extra thousand rupees to a foreign land, but what all do you lose in the process?

My work in Qatar required me to get up at 4AM for the bus that came to pick us up. We packed food that we cooked the previous night, but sometimes it went bad because there was no fridge at the

construction site. You also cannot eat when you feel hungry, you can only eat when you are told to eat.

I even had to ask my supervisor to go to the toilet at the construction site. Our work would end at around 6PM, but by the time we reached our camp, it would be 8PM. We would then have to cook dinner and our meal for the next day. By the time we were done and ready to wind down, it would be past midnight only to wake up at four the next day.

It went on and on like this. We were moved three times in the short period I was there. You don't have a say in any of this, you just do as told to do. I remember looking at fancy buildings in the past and wishing I could work in those. But it took me a terrible overseas experience in Qatar to realise that it is the people inside those buildings that matter. A Nepali in what they call a *wakala* (small shop) was much happier than me.

When I was recovering alone in my room desperate to come home, I told myself I would never consider migrating overseas again. That I would do something in Nepal itself. I cannot explain the rush I felt when I finally held my boarding card in my hand at Doha airport. It was a well-planned escape that could have

gone terribly wrong.

But reality hit soon after I came to Nepal. Where are the jobs? What will I do here? What will I earn? I have to feed my family, and have loans to repay. You make a lot of sacrifices for a job abroad — even your dignity at times. But we also need those jobs.

I am sharing my story so others can learn about my experience. I prefer to remain anonymous. Besides my wife, no one in my family knows about what I faced abroad. I was in so much pain and stress, what is the point getting my ailing mother all worried?

I am beginning a battle with my recruiter to get back my money, and he has shown some willingness to cooperate. I might eventually have to go back overseas one day, and coming public with my story may hurt my chances since I will be viewed as a 'troublemaker'.

A fellow Nepali in Qatar who had not been paid for months was transferred and accused of being a 'ring leader' among camp workers — just because he asked the manager for overdue food allowance.

That is our reality. They want the quiet ones. The ones who can be silenced. 🇳🇵

Translated from a conversation in Nepali.



prabhu BANK

Promoting EVs

Nepalis with electric cars can now install a separate household meter to charge battery vehicles and even opt for a larger capacity meters if the approved load for domestic use is insufficient. NEA is also increasing the load limit for industries, and offering additional meters for tenants on multi-storey apartments, all part of a drive to boost domestic consumption of surplus hydro-electricity from the country's new plants. NEA has also reduced electricity leakage to 9.10%, down from 11.92% last year. Madhes Province has the highest leakage rates: 43.92% in Sarlahi's Malangwa distribution centre, 39.90% in Bara's Simraingadh and 37.61% in Mahottari's Jaleswor.

JICA Loan

Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is providing a loan worth Rs10.39 billion to support Nepal's reforms in economic and financial institutions and policies, strengthen the domestic industrial base and support the poor. This is the first Official Development Loan (ODA) to be approved in six years for Nepal and was signed with the condition of 40-year repayment and 10 year grace period with 0.01% annual interest.

Standard AAA rating

Standard Chartered Bank has received an AAA rating from ICRA Nepal for the highest degree of safety on financial services. The rating factors in strong capitalisation and healthy asset control of a bank despite the pandemic. Standard Chartered reported a capital to risk weighted assets ratio of 16.09% and tier-I ratio of 14.46% in mid-October of 2021, much above the minimum requirements of 11% and 7%.

Cryptocurrency banned

Nepal Rastra Bank has released a directive banning any investment in or transactions for cryptocurrency or hyper funds stating the increased risk of fraud and illegal outflow of domestic capital. Any Nepali or foreigner living in Nepal and Nepalis abroad found to be dabbling in virtual currencies is liable to prosecution.

Tata winners

Tata has announced 43 winners of its Dasain and Tihar lucky draw festive scheme. Customers who had purchased Tata automobiles were eligible to win gift hampers that included 11 units of Samsung Tab S7 FE and LG Double door refrigerators,



seven units of washing machine, Samsung Galaxy Flip 3 smartphone and 65-inch MI 4K TV.

Illegal spare part import

Spare vehicle parts are being illegally smuggled through the open Nepal-India border causing the government to lose millions in revenue. Delayed action from concerned authorities means this malpractice has now spread to other border checkpoints including Pashupatinagar and Bhadrapur.

Covid vaccines

This week Nepal received 1.3 million Covid vaccines sent by France and Italy. Added to the 4.1 million vaccines sent by Germany, this brings the number of doses shared by EU member states to 5.4 million, half of the donated vaccines received in Nepal through the global COVAX facility.



Himalaya QMS

Himalaya Airlines, a Nepal-China joint venture, has become the first carrier in Nepal to achieve the ISO 9001-2015 QMS certification in recognition of its Quality Management System (QMS) corresponding with the ISO's customer service standards.

Euro 6 in Nepal

In response to the Nepal government's proposal to introduce Euro 6 for all vehicles and means of transport, National Automotive Dealers Association (NADA) has requested a phased implementation claiming that it will be difficult to streamline the servicing network otherwise. Furthermore, NADA says the challenges lie in technological adoptions, pricing and availability of infrastructure.



Kent geyser

The sole distributor of Kent appliances in Nepal, EOL, has introduced gas and electric geysers in Nepal for the winter. The geysers have capacities ranging from 6-30 litres and have price tags of Rs8,620-19,330.

Rising imports

In the last six months, Nepal imported goods worth Rs911 billion despite government policies that discourage imports. In the same period, the country has incurred a trade deficit of Rs880 billion and it is estimated to reach another Rs17 billion this year. All this is negatively affecting Nepal's balance of payments, current account and declining foreign exchange reserve. Current imports are mostly made up of petroleum and agricultural goods.



Fibernet dealers

DishHome has awarded its Fibernet dealers from Gorkha, Lamjung, Syangja, Tanahu and Kaski districts for achieving sales targets and maintaining customer product satisfaction.

No country for young men

Remittances fuel Nepal’s economy, but country’s migration policies still do not favour workers

● Shristi Karki

Nepal’s Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE) issued more than 240,000 labour permits for migrant workers in 2021, even as the country reeled under the Covid-19 pandemic.

Since 2008, the DoFE has issued labour permits to more than 4 million Nepali migrant workers. But this figure does not include Nepalis living and working across the border in India, which does not require labour approvals as per the 1950 Nepal-India bilateral treaty. Nor does it include workers who travel overseas through backchannels.

Even the 2020 migration report from the Ministry shows that the number of Nepali workers seeking labour approvals has steadily declined since 2013, with Malaysia followed by countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Qatar, UAE, and Saudi Arabia being the primary destinations.

Conversely, remittances sent by migrant workers are now worth over a quarter of Nepal’s annual GDP, and the conversation is shifting to the varying degrees of access of Nepalis from different backgrounds to destination countries.

‘The tendency is for the better-off to earn higher wages and to be able to send back remittances of a higher value and for the poor to earn lower wages and to be less able to send back remittances to the family members remaining in Nepal,’ write researchers David Seddon, Jagannath Adhikari, and Ganesh Gurung in their book *The New Lahures: Foreign Employment and the Remittance Economy of Nepal*.

‘Those from the more affluent backgrounds are in a better position to gain access to higher pay and more secure employment while those from less affluent backgrounds are in a relatively poor position in this regard.’

The book includes findings of research conducted by the authors from 1997 to 1999 on Nepal’s foreign labour migration and remittance economy, and later studies into the labour migration sector. A new edition of the 2001 book has been updated to include the changing dynamics of migration and the remittance economy in the last 20 years, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The abuse and death of a Nepali domestic worker at the hands of employers in Kuwait in 1998 prompted the Nepal government to ban women from going to the Gulf to work as domestics. The ban was eventually lifted, but similar immigration policies that limit female mobility have been introduced in the years between, including a 2021 proposal requiring Nepali women under 40 travelling to the Gulf or Africa to present consent from a guardian and local government.

In August 2004, 12 Nepali labour migrants led to Iraq for work under false pretences were abducted and killed by insurgents, their execution filmed and released by the extremists for the world to see. Thirteen Nepali security contractors were killed and five injured by a suicide bombing in 2016 while en route to their jobs at the Canadian embassy.

A July 2021 mobile video of a Nepali security guard in Malaysia getting beaten up by his supervisor prompted Nepalis to share



SHANKAR DAHAL/NEPALI TIMES

their own experiences of violence against migrant workers in Malaysia.

The Taliban takeover of Kabul in August 2021 brought to light the plight of potentially thousands of stranded Nepalis working to protect embassies of US and NATO countries, as well as undocumented migrants in Afghanistan.

In Qatar, as many as 1,600 Nepali workers are believed to have died in the past decade after the country won the bid to host the FIFA World Cup 2022.

These incidents are only the highlights of Nepal’s tragic migrant history that made it to the media. Yet, there are many more success stories of workers who have done well for themselves and supported families back home, while at the same time keeping Nepal’s economy afloat.

Yet, over the years, the Nepal government’s treatment of the labour export sector, whether in terms of policy-making, or bilateral discussions, have not brought long-term benefits to workers. On the contrary, many Nepalis have had to resort to taking illegal channels and routes to travel and work overseas, further risking their lives.

This has also made it impossible for Nepal’s authorities to pinpoint the number of undocumented Nepali migrants across Asia and the Gulf, let alone ensure their rights and safety. Preliminary data of the 2021 census released this week shows that there are only 2.6 million Nepali workers abroad, which seems to be a gross undercount (see box).

‘While economic diplomacy has been incorporated into our foreign policy, discussions about labour diplomacy have not moved forward,’ said migration expert Ganesh Gurung, co-author of *The New Lahures*, in his keynote address at the Kantipur Migration and Remit Summit 2021.

Indeed, in recent years experts have pointed out the need to diversify out-migration destinations to include better, higher paying jobs for Nepali workers seeking employment abroad. The need to ensure access to safer and better-paying labour destinations for Nepalis of all socio-economic as well as socio-cultural backgrounds have also been highlighted.

Added Gurung: ‘We are sending Nepalis to the Gulf, Malaysia, and India—countries that earn them the least amount of income but with some of the most human rights records in the world ... We have the strength of the Gurkha reputation in the security sector, but we have not been able to use it to tap the market in Europe, or North America.’

The Ministry of Labour’s 2020 Migration Report prioritised the diversification of labour destinations and employment sectors. The report read: ‘More flexible approaches such as revised time limits on employment contracts for short-term opportunities, employment in emerging sectors ... and innovations in joint partnerships ... should be considered.’

However, into the third years of the pandemic and the third Covid wave, Nepal’s government does not seem to have learnt its lesson and has no clear short-term plans in managing Nepalis leaving for overseas jobs, even as it continues to issue labour permits. Nor has it been able to integrate returning migrants in Nepal with support.

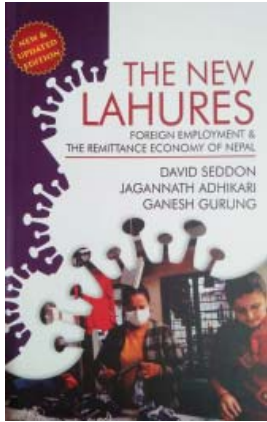
As the highly contagious variant spreads across the world, there is no clear information about when and where migrants can receive booster shots. The paperwork for workers is laborious, confusing and ridden with corruption. Recruiters blatantly exploit workers, and mislead them about jobs and earnings overseas (see *Diaspora Diaries 1*, page 4).

‘I was told that I could get the booster shot here,’ says a man waiting near a crowd of people registering for their first and second doses in front of Shahid Memorial Hospital in Kalanki this week. ‘I have to leave the country soon, but no one seems to know about it.’

The security guard at the vaccination booth asks him what kind of frontline worker he is. He is then promptly told that booster shots are not available for those going overseas.

Reading *The New Lahures* puts the individual everyday hassles of Nepal’s desperate migrant workers into perspective and historical context. How the government benefits by shifting responsibility for finding work for its citizens at home by driving them away, and then props up the economy with the money they send back.

Yet the same government invests so little in making life easier for those very workers, ensure that they are not abused and exploited by recruiters, and getting Nepal’s embassies to look after their welfare while abroad. 🇳🇵



The New Lahures: Foreign Employment and the Remittance Economy of Nepal by David Seddon, Jagannath Adhikari and Ganesh Gurung Adroit Publishers, 2021 Rs1,272 219 pages

Census undercount?



The preliminary data of the 2021 Census that was released this week has interesting new revelations that all point to the country having defused its demographic bomb. However, some of the growth is uneven and there are indications of possible problems in future with an aging population.

- Nepal’s annual population growth rate dropped to only 0.93% from 1.34% ten years ago
- The proportion of Nepalis living in the Tarai grew to nearly 54%
- Two-thirds of Nepalis live in urban areas
- The male-female ratio is 95.9:100, meaning there are 600,000 more women than men in Nepal

- The fertility rate is now approaching replacement level: 2.3 children per mother
- 67% of the population is made up of working-age youth, which is Nepal’s ‘demographic dividend’
- Madhes Province has the most people, making up 21% of the population
- Kathmandu Valley’s population is now 2.95 million

However, the census data shows that there are 2,169,478 Nepalis living abroad, and experts say this is a gross undercount. There are said to be at least 3 million Nepalis working just in India, and the figure for labour

permits show at least 2 million in the Gulf, Malaysia, Korea and Japan. And this does not even include the number of students who have gone abroad. Even the head of the Central Bureau of Statistic Nabin Lal Shrestha said in media interviews he was personally surprised by the low figure. He said there could have been an undercount because households where all members were abroad were not counted.

However, among those abroad, the proportion of women has increased from 12% to nearly 19% in the last ten years. The reason for this could be greater gender equality in Nepal, increase in female literacy, overseas demand for domestic and caregivers.

Nepali blogger who wrote under a pseudonym finally comes out of the shadows in new book

‘Maila Baje’ is Sanjay Upadhya

● Sanjay Upadhya

This is the Foreword and concluding chapter of *Empowered and Imperiled: Nepal's Peace Puzzle in Bits and Pieces* in which US-based Nepali writer Sanjay Upadhya confesses that he is the Maila Baje who wrote the *Nepali Netbook* blog. The new book is a collection of his entries over the years.

Sanjay Upadhya also wrote a column on current affairs for *Nepali Times* between 2001-2003 under the pen name Puskar Bhusal, which are in this paper's online archives. It includes this piece on Sher Bahadur Deuba's second tenure as prime minister which is as relevant today as it was in 2002: Consensus Charade.

NATION

SOMEWHERE IN NEPAL



Consensus charade

Can you really blame Deuba for going ballistic in Butwal?

project his latest call for national consensus as a solution to the current problems, he can't make it sound like anything better than a tired one-scheme to undermine his success.

Just when you were about to give up on Deuba's determination to take on his detractors, the prime minister launched his counter-offensive last week. Affable he may be, but Deuba, too, has to factor in a tolerance level that has its limits. When the prime minister has to learn of his deepening differences with the police on the emergency from remarks by party rivals who are clearly on a fishing expedition, can you blame him for going ballistic in Butwal? When his administration detains editors and publishers for printing what would be considered specious and deep speculation even in normal times, can you expect Deuba to accept charges of exceeding the press by the same politicians he believes sponsored these stories? If the premier has hardened his resolve, may be his because his critics are crossing too many red lines at once.

This is not to suggest that

Surya Bahadur Thapa made that plea in Butwal two years ago, more mainstream politicians have come out with their own versions. Koizuka, who had announced a 14-point agenda during his last weeks as prime minister, was in the process of reconciling it with the main opposition UML's 22 points before he decided to skip a meeting to record his resignation speech. What makes Koizuka's fresh call disappointing, though, is its timing and almost exclusive focus on sharing power. What is disappointing is the easy acceptance of the emergency from remarks by party rivals who are clearly on a fishing expedition, can you blame him for going ballistic in Butwal? When his administration detains editors and publishers for printing what would be considered specious and deep speculation even in normal times, can you expect Deuba to accept charges of exceeding the press by the same politicians he believes sponsored these stories? If the premier has hardened his resolve, may be his because his critics are crossing too many red lines at once.

This is not to suggest that

Koizuka knows better than anyone else how delicate this balancing act can be because he has been in the driver's seat the longest during these 12 uneasy years. But he can't afford to pretend he doesn't. His Deuba who has to go cap in hand around donors who lecture him on the consensus spread of corruption before giving him a fair hearing.

Since the establishment of the military and the promulgation of anti-terrorism legislation have continued constitutionally guaranteed freedoms, they have raised legitimate concerns about the future of Nepal's democracy. Narayanbhai and Singh Darbhans have called the state of emergency a compromise because that's what the constitution envisages in its. Perhaps it becomes tempting to provide Machiavellian twists to transparent assertions when you can't look types in the mirror or disclose your deals. During emergency times like these, even the masters of mendacity must spell out how they expect the military to accomplish its mission while the emergency remains a political football. Discussing a

don't need politicians for such agendas. They expect their balancing act can be because he has been in the driver's seat the longest during these 12 uneasy years. But he can't afford to pretend he doesn't. His Deuba who has to go cap in hand around donors who lecture him on the consensus spread of corruption before giving him a fair hearing.

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Consensus Charade by Puskar Bhusal from #74 28 December 2001-3 January 2002 *Nepali Times*.



Sanjay Upadhya receiving Dasain tika from King Birendra.

Out of the Shadows, Finally

It feels good to finally come out. I've been tempted to do so several times over the last decade and a half. The shades just seemed too soothing. I chose this nom de guerre before I'd decided what I'd call my blog. Relatively new, the blogosphere beckoned with all its breeziness. A notebook on Nepal on the net. Bingo.

King Gyanendra's royal rule was at its toughest. The Seven Party Alliance and the Maoists had signed the 12-Point Understanding but so much was unclear. Geopolitics, public opinion, hope, despair—the imponderables were too many. Powerful as the royal regression narrative was, I never

bought it—and still don't.

Our triangular fight had become too drawn out for anyone's good. I don't think King Gyanendra had any specific plan when he took over on February 1, 2005. He wanted a realignment of forces into a bipolar one, and thought he could pull it off. If not, well, others were free to try. They did and here we are.

I'd been defending the royal takeover in that spirit, drawing all the venom I expected to. There seemed so much going on that seemed so unreal. Yet, a lot of what seemed to be going on seemed too real to discount.

I had used this genre as Puskar Bhusal in the *Nepali Times*. Yes, Kunda Dixit soon found out I was somewhere in Nepal. And Kanak Dixit, although still burdened by my

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EVENTS



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29 January, Rs1555, 9801236991

Music classes
Sign unto learn musical instruments from bansuri, madal, tabla to piano, guitar, Drum, bass, saxophone and violin at Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory.
(01) 5443554, 9813556945


Meditative therapy
Participate in the seven-day meditative No-Mind therapy with Swami Anand Arun. Register at <https://bit.ly/nomind-feb>
1-7 February, Rs2000, 9847807082



Critical Mass
Love cycling? The cyclist meet-up, Critical Mass, gathers cyclists to reclaim the streets through short rides each month.
28 January, 5.30pm onwards, Basantapur Durbar Square

Essay Contest
Submit your best essay to The Writer mag's 2022 essay contest and get a chance to win \$1,000. All non-fiction works with 2,000 words or less are eligible. Visit <https://writermag.submittable.com/submit/213902/2022-essay-contest>
Deadline: 29 February

DINING



Dwarika's
Enjoy a Friday night dinner with a nine-course meal at Dwarika's or special Nepali BBQ and drinks with live cooking stations. Call for reservations.
The Dwarika's Hotel, Battisputali (01) 4479488

ONLINE ARCHIVES



Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya
Browse through the collection of Nepali archived content including manuscripts, newsletters, sketches, and photographs on the Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya database.

Aji's Podcast
Listen to extraordinary life stories from Nepal's elderly. Aji's Podcast can be found on YouTube, Apple Podcasts, or Stitcher.



Virtual street festivals
Google's Colorful Street Fests & Carnivals is a virtual tour of eight of the most vibrant street festivals in the world. It includes the La Tomatina food fight in Spain, Oktoberfest in Germany, and the Mardi Gras in New Orleans.

Minesweeper
Brush up childhood memories with the single-player puzzle game. Google 'Minesweeper' and start playing online.



Shilpee Theatre
Watch the play COMA – A Political Sex, or the adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's Hedda Gabler on the theatre's YouTube channel.

Evoke Café & Bistro
Evoke all senses with the pita bread, juicy and tender pork, chicken and paneer skewers, and more from the multitude of meals offered.
Jhamsikhel, 9851111051



Fire & Ice
One of the first pizzerias in town, Fire & Ice is a delight for the lovers of Italian cuisine. Also try the Lasagna and Penne Al Forno.
Thamel (01) 4250210

GETAWAY

Buddha Maya Garden Hotel
Stroll along the Lumbini world heritage garden and visit the historical Maya Devi Temple during your stay at the picturesque Buddha Maya Garden Hotel.
Lumbini (71) 580219



Gokarna Forest Resort
Once a protected sanctuary, Gokarna Forest Resort is a perfect retreat away from the city life. Head out for a weekend with family.
Gokarna (01) 4450002

Balthali Village Resort
This cosy set up sits atop a hill and offers a bird's eye view of green terrace fields dotted with ochre painted houses and the view of Manaslu, Langtang and Everest in the north.
Panauti, Kavre, 9851087772
bird's eye view of



Riverside Springs Resort
Stop by Riverside on the way to Pokhara or Chitwan and enjoy winter rafting the resort offers.
Kurintar (01) 5544263

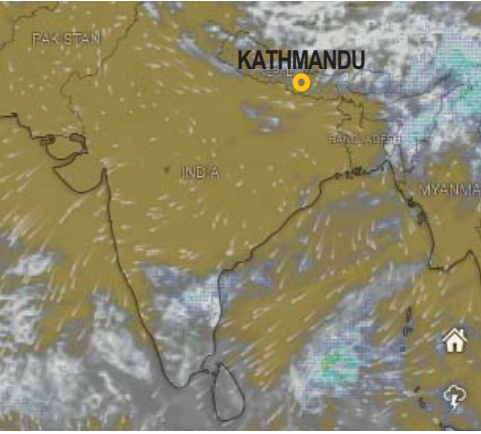
Marriott Kathmandu
The 214-room hotel located in the heart of Kathmandu offers modern design, 5-star service and deluxe amenities including multi-cuisine meals at the Thamel Kitchen or Asian cuisine at Edamame.
Naxal (01) 4443040



Garden Terrace
Pick from the wide range of international cuisine including Nepali, Indian, Japanese and Italian, or from the lavish buffet at the Garden Terrace. Call for bookings.
Soaltee Crowne Plaza, Tahachal, 9801067222

Trisara
Find everything from Indian to continental to baked goodies under one roof at Trisara.
Lazimpat (01) 4416200

WEEKEND WEATHER





We are looking at some pretty cold wintry conditions through the weekend because of extensive cloud cover over Nepal with precipitation in the higher elevations. While the minimum temperature will stay in the 3-4°C range in Kathmandu and will not go down to freezing, the maximum will stay well below average at 14-15°C because of overcast skies. The lack of sunshine will also mean persistent ground fog in the Trisuli and Narayani Valleys as well as the Tarai, and the lack of wind will mean the 'sit-lahar' will persist. Stay warm.


FRIDAY

SATURDAY

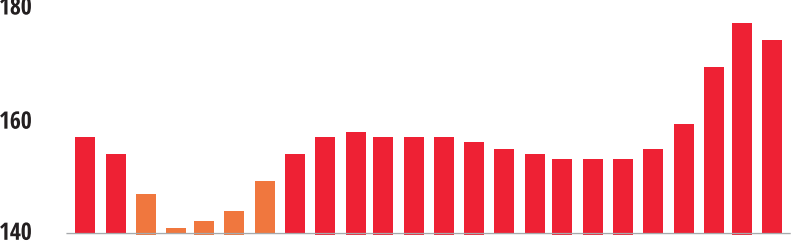
SUNDAY

13°
3°

15°
3°

16°
4°

AIR QUALITY INDEX



12PM 26 January to 11AM 27 January measured at US Embassy, Phora Darbar

The below average temperatures and cloud cover will mean there will not be sufficient sunshine in Kathmandu Valley to burn off the morning smog, and this will affect air quality. Although the drop in vehicular traffic means there is less particulate matter being pumped into the air, inversion and the smoke being emitted from brick kiln chimneys will keep air quality in the hazardous red zone. Masking up, and avoiding outdoor activity during the morning and evening hours is recommended.

OUR PICK



Take a trip down the surrealist lane this weekend to *The House*, the 2022 British stop-motion adult animated anthology film that tells the story of a house across three different eras. In the first, a father and mother make the ultimate sacrifice to give their young daughters an affluent roof over their head, but with a peculiar twist. An anthropomorphic rat has to deal with two squatters who simply refuse to leave in the second while being plagued by pests who live in the eaves and the corners. And then in a not-so-distant future, as the world is flooded and enveloped in a strange mist, a feline landlady faces her past and struggles to move on. The three stories are directed by Emma de Swaef & Marc James Roels, Niki Lindroth von Bahr, and Paloma Baeza. Mia Goth, Matthew Goode, Mark Heap, Miranda Richardson, Jarvis Cocker, Will Sharpe, Susan Wokoma and Helena Bonham Carter star.


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न धुँदा जाने, न रुँदा जाने
त्यसैले कोरोना लाग्नै नदिन
भीडभाडमा नजाने



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AMIT MACHAMASI

Omnipresent Omicron starts to lose its edge

But the pandemic is far from over, Nepal still needs to up vaccination rate and testing, enforce safety measures

● **Sonia Awale**

As elsewhere in the world, the Omicron-led third wave in Nepal is starting to peak, but experts say the pandemic is far from over.

The Health Ministry had previously projected new cases to soar to 20,000 a day, and the Omicron surge to peak in mid-February. But the fact that the variant spread rapidly like wildfire right across the country giving a majority of the population milder symptoms meant that it equipped them with antibodies to fight the infection.

At Nepal's biggest infectious diseases centre at Teku Hospital, virologist Sher Bahadur Pun predicts that the third wave will most likely peak in a few days, or by the end of next week.

"For the past week, I have observed that the number of people coming in for tests and consultation every day in my hospital has decreased by a half," Pun says. "Of course, not everyone is coming to the hospital, but this is the beginning of the end of this wave."

To be sure, the government's daily Covid-19 figures are gross under-estimations. Mostly symptomatic patients are testing, thus registering a very high positivity rate. Infected people with flu-like symptoms are isolating at home without a PCR test. There are also people self-testing with kits available at pharmacies, and these infections are not in the official tally.

Even so, figures from elsewhere show the Omicron surge lasts only for a month or two. South Africa, where the variant was first detected in December, is over the hump. The UK and parts of the US have also passed their peaks. Many countries, including Australia, are now removing restrictions.

The spread of Omicron in Kathmandu Valley is expected to reach an equilibrium soon, with a steep fall in cases, says Bangkok-based public health expert Sushil Koirala. But he warns slower-moving outbreaks may continue outside the valley where the population is thinly spread.

"These next 10 days are critical. It will tell us if the Omicron variant is indeed a quiet pass to a pandemic end-game, or we still have a big human cost to pay," Koirala adds. "There is still little clarity on how severe this variant will be to those who are still unvaccinated and those who had the vaccines many months ago."

Andrew Pollard, of the team that developed the AstraZeneca vaccine is of the same opinion. "The main issue with rapid spread of Omicron is for the unvaccinated who may be at risk of severe disease, particularly if they are older adults and those with other health conditions," he told *Nepali Times* in an email interview from Oxford.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) last week issued an optimistic projection that the pandemic would probably be over during 2022 — provided inequalities in the vaccine coverage and treatment are addressed.

Global health researcher and economist Christopher J L Murray writing for the journal *The Lancet* also said that after the Omicron wave, 'Covid-19 will return but the pandemic will not.'

Pollard also explains that once health systems can cope with Covid-19, the pandemic could be considered over, but that does not mean that the virus will be gone.

"We have a pandemic because of pressure on health systems and deaths. With growing global immunity as a result of vaccination and previous waves of infection, both severe disease and deaths should decline during 2022," he says.

Despite this, health experts in Nepal warn that severe infections needing hospitalisation have a lag of a few weeks after the surge in infections. And despite being a milder strain that primarily only affects the upper respiratory tract, Omicron can still lead to serious diseases in the elderly and people with co-morbidities.

Indeed, ICU admissions and those needing ventilator support in hospital have tripled in one month, although nowhere near the figures in April-May. Also, the seven-day average for daily fatalities have remained below five.

Says infectious disease specialist Anup Subedee: "It will still take some time and a few more variants before the pandemic comes to an end. So our health system should be ever ready for the management and treatment of Covid-19 and with

isolation and contact tracing."

Virologist Pun at Teku agrees: "We are now moving from pandemic to endemic, but this does not mean that we can sound the all clear. We must continue mass vaccinations and safety measures."

The general consensus is that increased vaccine coverage with boosting, more testing, whole genome sequencing to detect variants, and public adherence to safety measures will determine whether there will be a new surge, or if the virus will taper off.

Nepal has 20 million doses of vaccines in stock for those waiting for first and second jabs, and has started booster shots for high risk groups. However, communication on location, eligibility and requirements for vaccination is confusing and inadequate.

With reports from India, Denmark and the Philippines of the even more transmissible 'stealth Omicron' sub-variant BA.2 that can evade PCR detection, Nepal needs to continue vigilance. This is also important to determine if the Delta variant is still circulating and how dominant it is.

"Our Covid figures from the last four days strongly suggest that we have passed the peak," confirms Sameer Mani Dixit of the Centre for Molecular Dynamics. "But we must keep a close watch on next week's numbers to know for sure if the cases are just levelling off, still peaking, or if it was just a momentary decline." 🇳🇵



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Hiding their head in

● **Ramu Sapkota**
in Mahottari

Kantidevi Malar, 40, looks out across her small farm where the top soil has been replaced by sand and boulders brought down by monsoon floods six months ago. The parts where she could plant are still water-logged.

Her husband's family has been farming this small plot for generations, growing paddy, vegetables and wheat and sharing half the *adhiya* harvest with the landlord.

"What do I do now," she says simply, gesturing at the devastation.

Ramchandra Mahato, 45, is a native of this part of Nepal in the plains bordering India, and faces a similar predicament. The floods covered his land under 3m of water, destroyed the standing crops and damaged his house.

Malar and Mahato are just two of the thousands of farming households who have been affected by the raging Ratu River in Mahottari district. The Ratu is not a river flowing down from Himalayan glaciers, nor was the flood this year and in past years caused by any extreme weather event.

The seasonal river that starts in the Chure Range has been mined for sand and boulders by contractors, so there is nothing to check the velocity of the water during the monsoon which overflows the banks and races across farmlands.

In a nearby village, 44-year-old Ganesh Sah also lost his newly-planted paddy. He planted it again, only for it to be washed away again and again.

"After the third replanting I ran out of seeds, and had to stop," he tells us, sitting on the roadside with his chin in his palms to survey his field. "I will stop farming. It is just not worth it anymore."

These fertile farms of the Tarai plains used to be Nepal's grain basket. The surplus crops fed the country, and the farmers prospered. Even if monsoon floods came down the rivers, they replenished the soil with nutrients and made them even more fertile the next year.

But it was when new road embankments in Nepal and India started impounding monsoon runoff, and quarrying in the Chure raised the sedimentation load of rivers changing their hydrology, that the rivers started rampaging through the floodplains.

"Until as recently as ten years ago, we had three crops a year. Wheat, paddy and maize, and we had a good market price for them," says Thakani Devi, 69. "But we have had no harvest for the past few years."

Her husband Deeplal Chaudhari looks worried as he relates how it is a struggle to pay off the loan he took to buy seeds for this year's crop, as well as take care of his 17-member extended family. The only way they have managed to survive is from the remittances sent home by one of their sons who went to Malaysia to work.

The crisis is driving thousands of households across the Madhes Province off farming for good. The younger generation does not want to farm anyway, and now the ecological crisis of the Chure rivers is destroying agriculture.

Besides destroying crops, the raging rivers can also turn deadly as happened in 2018. Bhabichhan Sah, 42, says, "Last year's monsoon wiped out our standing rice crop. The next monsoon on the Ratu will probably wash us all away."

After losing two sets of paddy he planted last monsoon due to floods, 35-year-old Sanjay Sah Sonar has decided to abandon farming altogether. Ironically, he is looking for a job in the sand mining quarry that caused the floods that destroyed his field.

"It just does not make sense to farm anymore," he states matter-of-factly.

After observing the devastation downstream, we travelled up the Ratu to trace the river's origins. We saw sand mining operations (called 'crushers') in Bardibas along the East West Highway, at the foothills of the Chure Range.



We deployed a drone to give us a bird's eye view of how the crusher company was mining the river bed for sand, boulders, pebbles and turning them into raw material to feed the voracious appetite of the construction industry in Nepal and India, and we compared them to before and after satellite imagery.

Besides mining the riverbed, the real estate mafia is also involved in channeling the rivers so that land along the floodplains can be parcelled out to be sold either to developers, or rented to sand mining companies.

Since farming does not make sense anymore, villagers are selling the sand that covers their fields to the sand mining companies. Pure sand fetches Rs100 per tractor, while impure sand mixed with soil can be sold for Rs50.

Bijaya Singh is doing his PhD

on the Chure quarries and how these operations affect downstream river flows and farms. He says the rivers are narrowed by the embankments, and the sediment load on the rivers have increased because of the sand mining, raising riverbeds further south.

"While the mining is destructive, what has compounded the risk is that the rivers have been narrowed by artificially channeling them, it has lost the floodplain which would have reduced the damage during the monsoon," Singh explains.

A satellite image from 2015 shows the Ratu River spreading across a wide floodplain with many rivulets. In fact, images from 2013 show that the Ratu used to flow separately towards Kisannagar and Begdwar of Dhanusha districts. But this distributary has been

blocked with sand barriers, and the crusher company is extracting sand and boulders from the former riverbed.

"The main reason for the destruction of infrastructure and crops downstream is due to unregulated over-extraction of riverine material," says Uttam Babu Shrestha of the Global Institute For Interdisciplinary Study in Lalitpur. "This has not just unleashed disasters, but it has also affected the biodiversity of the entire Chure-Tarai belt."

The Chure is the youngest and southernmost fold of the Himalayan mountains. It is composed mostly of uplifted top soil and boulders, and does not have bedrock beneath. This makes the low-lying range fragile especially during monsoon cloudbursts. Future floods can be catastrophic as the climate crisis

Drowning in sorrow

Children drown by the dozens every year in sand pits abandoned by lawless contractors in Nepal

Despite protests, defiant sand mining and quarry contractors have continued to leave large abandoned pits along Nepal's rivers in which children drown by the dozens every year.

There is no exact count of how many of the children who drown lose their lives in the pits and ditches left by sand mining contractors because police only record these deaths as generalised 'deaths by drowning'.

In Dhanusa district alone, 206 children have drowned in the past two years – most of them were under 15 years and died while swimming in these water-filled sand mining pits.

Sushil Layomagar, 12, of Birendra Bazar could not return to school after holidays in July 2019 because of heavy rains. He was sent out in the afternoon to graze goats, but fell into a 50m deep pit dug by a sand mining contractor, and drowned together with a friend.

This was a doubly severe blow to his mother, Chhalimaya, whose husband Hari Bahadur had died in Saudi Arabia earlier that year. The contractor had extracted sand and gravel to build the Bharatpur-Srirampur road, but left the gaping hole that filled with water after the rains.

There was a strong protest against the



Children who have lost their lives in the pits and ditches left by contractors: (clockwise) Riya Bishwakarma, Sushil Layomagar, Aditya Layomagar, Jasmine Khatun, Suman Mahato, Anil Mahato, Karuna Bishwakarma, and Samma Khatun.

contractor. "We told them to stop digging, the children will fall into the ditch," says Susil's grandmother Madhumaya Layomagar. "But they shouted at us, saying that they owned the land and could do with it as they pleased."

In the adjoining Sarlahi district the same year, Samma Khatun, 6, and Jasmine Khatun,

11, drowned in a pit dug by a brick kiln. The two girls left home to play at noon, but when they did not return for two hours the parents started a frantic search.

Jasmine's grandmother Jahira Khatun recalls, "They used to go to pick grapes, so we went to look over there. A while later, the brick kiln workers saw the children in

the sand

Illegal sand mining ravages rivers, displaces Tarai farmers, and decimates a fragile landscape



UNFOLDING TRAGEDY: (clockwise) Crusher and sand mining industries that have come into operation following the construction of the Ratu Bridge that connects Bardibas with the East-West Highway.

Kantidevi Malar's farm in Mahottari is still water-logged six months after the flood in the Ratu River.

A dozer claws away at a mining site in Bardibas.



ALL PHOTO: HAMRO CHITRAGHAR



unleashes extreme weather events like monsoon cloudbursts that dump up to 300mm of rain in 24 hours on the Chure.

“Destroying the forests in the Chure for quarrying also disturbs the natural recharging of groundwater on which the plains to the south depend to replenish wells,” explains Bijaya Singh. “And after boulders and stones are

extracted from rivers, the floods become more destructive because there is nothing to break their flow.”

Associate Professor Kumudraj Kafle of Kathmandu University's Department of Environment and Engineering says that with the Chure denuded of forests, the rivers now have such high sediment loads that the sand

is deposited downstream, exacerbating flood risks.

“The sand downstream is not considered of good quality for construction, so there is not much extraction,” Kafle says, “the mining is happening more in the northern area where pure sand that is in high demand in India is plentiful.”

The sand and boulder extraction to feed the export

market for construction material to India is ultimately affecting the farmlands and towns across the border in India itself. At Jaleswar on the Indian border, the level of the river has been rising by up to 40cm every year, so there is talk of raising the embankments to prevent future floods.

According to the images taken from satellite and drone in the river bank of Ratu River from Bardibas to Bhangaha Municipality, there are sand mining and processing crushers in operation at 38 sites. Ground level inspections showed that there are two excavators digging up sand along a 400m stretch.

A satellite image taken in February 2018 shows only two small sand excavation pits along the floodplain of the Ratu River. A photo taken only a year later shows that these pits had widened to up to 60m in diameter. The ensuing flood has destroyed embankments in Banchauri constructed to protect 1,600 households in Balawa Municipality.

Still, the extraction is continuing with excavators 50m south of the Balawa-Janakpur road, endangering the bridge. A levee made 200m upstream to protect the bridge was destroyed in last year's flood.

Theoretically, the upcoming local elections would help bring greater accountability in municipal governments and clean up the corruption that drives the crusher contractors. However, locals say that the elections have actually focused the minds of local leaders on raising money for their campaigns, and this means there will be more destructive quarrying.

Local farmers here are collateral damage in the collusion between local governments and contractors who fund and protect each other.

Bardibas Municipality has not granted any permits for sand and boulder extraction from its rivers this fiscal year. But the Municipality's own records show that there are 25 crusher industries running in Ratu River area.

Mishrilal Yadav of the municipality's Revenue Department says that crushers need licenses to extract raw materials from rivers and need to be duly registered in the Office of the Company Registrar or in the Cottage and Small Scale Industries Office under the Department of Industry. None of this has been done.

The quarry owners appear to

be using a loophole about mining and sand processing to continue their illegal extraction without permits. After filing an application under the Right to Information Act, we received details from Bardibas Municipality and Cottage and Small Scale Industries Office that there are indeed 66 crusher and sand processing industries in operation in Mahottari district alone.

Chief of Cottage and Small Scale Office, Mahottari Krishna Kumar Mishra made the startling admission that there is no provision for punishment against the industries if they have not renewed their registration.

“That is why the federal government had to make a rule regarding what punishment to be levied on those not renewing,” he says, “but that did not happen.” So, the municipal and provincial tax offices are collecting revenue from industries that are essentially illegal.

As per guidelines, rivers cannot be mined within two km of towns and forests, and should be at least 500m away from highways, roads and suspension bridges. The Committee has halted river extraction in Arghakhanchi, Nawalparasi, and Rupendehi in the western Tarai, but no such action has been taken in Madhes Province.

The Chure Tarai Madhesh Protection and Management Masterplan warned of serious danger to irrigation canals, highways, new railway lines, drinking water supply and hydropower projects due to extraction along rivers.

Yet, the masterplan remains just a plan. The exploitation and extraction of natural resources is expected to accelerate in this election year. 🇳🇵

(This report has been prepared under the Environmental Crime Series of the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, The Henry J. Umalo Foundation and Oxpexers Investigative Environmental Journalism.)



Illegal sand mining on Chure rivers is displacing farmers across Nepal's mid-hills and Tarai with worsening floods and landslides while decimating an already fragile landscape. Follow our reports to Mahottari district in the southern plains and see for yourself how the overexploitation has changed the country's landscape for the worse.

the water and called us. They had already stopped breathing.”

It is not just in the Tarai that children are drowning in abandoned sand pits. In Nuwakot, 12-year-old Binita Balami fell into a ditch left by illegal sand miners. Laxmi Tamang, 35, jumped into the pond to save her but also drowned. Last year, another 12-year-old boy drowned in similar circumstances by Nuwakot's Likhu River.

There have been many localised protests against contractors and calls for a ban on their activities, but both licensed and illegal businesses have local political patronage and have continued unabated. The rampant sand mining does not just pose a danger to children drowning, but also threatens bridges and other infrastructure.

Residents of Naktijj in Dhanusa have repeatedly complained to the municipality office against illegal gravel extraction along the Aurahi River, which has led to many deaths of children. The practice continues.

It was after protests against illegal sand mining on Aurahi River that Dilip Mahato was beaten and then run over and killed by a tipper truck near his home in Sripur in January 2020. Mahato was a college student in India, and had been outraged by the dangerous pits that the contractors left near his home.

Following his murder, locals formed a struggle committee and waged a losing

battle against the contractors. Dilip's father, Ramjivan Mahato, says the police sided with the owners of the Churiyamai Sand Processing Centre.

The government's rule on sand excavation prohibits sand and gravel mining within 2km of towns, and along rivers with a 1km radius of highways and bridges. The regulation requires contractors to level out ditches after mining so it does not collect water. The rules are blatantly ignored.

Neither the national nor provincial governments have any data on how much sand, gravel and boulders are extracted from Nepal's rivers and streams every year, but the Chure Tarai Madhes Conservation Committee estimates that more than 30 million cubic metres of riverine resources are collected annually nationwide.

Only 20 out of 100 municipalities along the Chure Range which are extracting sand and gravel actually had licenses, according to Prem Nath Poudel, a geologist at the Committee. He adds, “There has been far more excavation than we have allowed. Even within the 20 municipalities that have the approval.”

The government is also seeing very little revenue in relation to the amount of excavation being done. The municipalities generally set a minimum price of Rs211 per cubic metre for the sand and gravel when inviting bids, which means the revenue for

30 million cubic metres should be Rs6.33 billion. “We are tired,” says Ramjivan. “When a child drowns and we lodge a complaint, excavation work stops for a day or two. But the digging soon resumes.”

But according to the National Natural Resources and Finance Commission, the government collected only about Rs4.62 billion in revenue from sand and gravel contractors last year despite one-third of municipalities across the country having signed contracts for excavation. It is clear that most of the mining is illegal, or are licensed in exchange for kickbacks.

The business is being driven by a surge in construction across the country, which has raised the demand for building material. The trade is so lucrative that political party leaders, the local administration and police officials are all in on it. In the 2017 local level elections, 68 among the 616 elected persons from 137 municipalities of Madhes Province had affiliations with excavation contractors.

Dev Prakash Tripathi is a journalist, who after seeing rampant illegal sand mining in his native Malekhu has become an activist with the ‘Save Trisuli Campaign’ in Dhading district. He says, “Leaders and people's representatives of all political parties have invested in the sand and gravel trade, which means their businesses are above the law.”

Some big names linked to sand and

quarry contractors are Krishna Lal Shrestha, chairman of Galchi Municipality of Dhading, Rajendra Pandey, leader of CPN (Unified Socialist), Bhumi Tripathi, and Salikram Jamarkattel, leader of CPN-Maoist Centre.

Bishwa Aryal and Prabhat Kiran Subedi of the Nepali Congress have also been found directly or indirectly involved. A local government chief in Mahottari district, who did not want to be named, admitted that he would not be able to cover his election expenses unless he supported sand extraction.

He says matter-of-factly, “I can't sell my house to pay for the election. What's wrong with selling sand and pebbles that are washed down by the rivers?”

Such criminal callousness angers families like the Layomagars and Khatuns who have lost their children to drowning on sand pits, and to Ramjivan Mahato whose activist son was killed by lawless contractors in cahoots with local politicians.

Here in Dhanusa, the excavators and tipper trucks of the Churiyamai Sand Processing Centre are back on the banks of the Aurahi River, digging up sand and gravel. The company is still threatening the Mahato family.

Says Ramjivan: “They say we already killed one of your children, don't make us kill another one.” 🇳🇵

Mukesh Pokhrel in Dhanusa



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A tongue lashing

One of the benefits of the current pandemic is that it has institutionalised the “Namaste” as a greeting not just in the Subcontinent but all over the world. Here in Nepal, the Namastay has once and for all done away with those awkward moments when, upon meeting female farangs, natives had to decide at the spur of the moment whether they should peck them on the cheek, or just shake hands.

However, is it one peck on one of two cheeks (left one, or right one first?), is it two pecks on one cheek each, or is it going to be three pecks on two alternate cheeks? It was a minefield out there. And what made it even trickier was that these decisions had to be taken within a split second. A slight miscalculation, and things could take an embarrassing turn and create a diplomatic incident.

During pre-Covid days a couple of centuries ago, the Ass once made a complete ass of himself when he tried to land two pecks on the cheeks of the Mexican Ambassador who was expecting only one, and ended up smooching her nostril.

With Covid, all these humiliating faux pas are now a thing of the past. You just namastay folks from a distance of 3 metres with double masks on, and that’s that. None of that messy canoodling, and exchange of virus-laden droplets.

On this matter, our ancients were way ahead of their time. When Prof Vatsayana published his bestseller, the *Kama Sutra*, he already knew through the grapevine that kissing was unhygienic. Which is why while depicting many imaginative positions for carnal wrestling in his anthology of sex, he never included the actual act of

osculation.

Some of the extreme acrobatic moves in his catalogue are now to be found depicted in carvings on the struts and eaves of Kathmandu Valley temples, but in none of them are the protagonists actually administering mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to each other. And that fellow doing doggie style is actually demonstrating the Heimlich Manoeuvre. Jeez, such dirty minds.

It is the realisation about just how unsanitary this filthy habit is that to this day, the Board of Film Censors of India has banned kissing in Bollywood movies. Paying lip service is strictly outlawed, but the censors have no problems at all with tongue lashing.

And since Nepali cinema copies Bollywood, kissing is frowned upon here too. (Although kissing ass is perfectly acceptable in both cultures.)

And that is why modern acolytes of Prof Vatsayana were so aroused when Richard Gere planted kisses on Shilpa Shetty. Even Nelson Mandela could not control himself and smooched Shabana Azmi on stage. It is clear that some foreigners think they can take liberties with Subcontinental womanhood with such unbecoming behaviour.

This reminds me: we have to double the number of personal bodyguards assigned to President Bidya Devi Bhandari next time she is off on a state visit somewhere. Never know which lecherous celebrity lurking out there is just waiting for an unguarded moment to make his move.



The Ass

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