Khotang

Last year, as Nepal went into lockdown, people of Dhangadhi 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 Shambu Raai dozed a SPO 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 Suparna Rai was equally involved. Those who could not be treated were referred to hospital 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,” Shambu Rai told us on the phone from Khotang as he awaited word on the date for local elections due in April.

Sindulpalchok

In Sindulpalchok’s Fuli 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 teachers would cover her from head to toe.

“I really wanted to prioritise trade 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 Lendi killed 33. 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.

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 Mesaka Kafle, for whom tanking leakage and corruption was a priority.

For any project with a budget over Rs 50 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 years ago, the 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 newborns.

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 to work hard to build trust in the community to make it easier for the women who come after us.”

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

Tehrathum

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

“Now all the roads have roads and there is ownership amongst the people because they were involved in building them,” says Mahashag.

Mahashag also introduced a program to support dairy farmers and offer grants for vegetable and fruit farming, poultry and pig farms. The mayor is proud that it does not really matter which party runs a local government, the people’s needs are the same and solutions are a way to select the best leader 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 as much budget we were given, but we need to work more on improving schools.”

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**Think nationally, vote locally**

When the second wave hit Nepal in May 2022, the city saw a lot of out-of-beds and oxygen, and politicians in Kathmandu appeared helpless. Local government provisions in this edition (pp 8-11) have set a new benchmark for education, agriculture and nature conservation in rural Nepal.

Dhawal Shumsher Rana was re-elected mayor of Nepalgunj 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 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 colleagues play an important role in different parties, but that almost seems like a matter of prestige of their constituencies are the same.

Even as national-level politicians in Kathmandu argue 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 2019 showed that more than one-third of elected mayors were contractors. They want to be in the big leagues, and now have sought council seats, as illustrated in our investigation of illegal sand mining in the Terai (pp 10-11). Politically, these local elections are about the future, but there are plenty of examples of responsive and responsible local governments who have now served five years. Local elections can be postponed just because some national leaders think they will win. Prime Minister Shehbaz Bhutto Deuba will now sit in opposition because the Constitution and safeguards the gains of the past five years.

Srijana Tamaqua is vice-chair of Rural Municipality, and together with other local leaders in the new government, she is working to improve delivery. They know where they live, they have the number, it is easy for people to tell us about them. They can come to our office and talk about what they are doing or encourage us to do better. Local government elections were the first to be held after Nepal moved to federalism following the 2015 Constitution. 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 some 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 helping bring minorities forward in local governments. Each local government could allocate finances on their own, making policies and taking action in line with the needs of their constituents.

As per Nepal’s Local Election Act 2017, voting for all 753 local units must be completed by 19 March. The SC has proposed 27 April and 5 May dates. Leaders of the Madhes, Himalaya, and Unified Socialists are so wary of losing badly in local elections that they want to use a loophole in the law to postpone it. But all the local leaders Nepal Times spoke to ahead of this week agreed that local elections should be held as scheduled. Local government elections are a mechanism that allows Nepali voters for the leaders they want: the ones who have done good work, replace those who have not lived up to expectations. Or, maybe experiment with a new faces altogether. Pushing back the date or altering local elections will be a disservice to Nepalis undermine the democratic values of the nation stands on, and push back development.

Arjan Mahat, chair of Lalitpur Municipality in Kathmandu wrote in the Constitution that local elections have to be held on time. Celebration of any representative the people’s representatives is the people’s right. Whether they want to keep us or replace us up to them. The national parties in government should respect that.

Sahita Shreshta

**ONLINE PACKAGES**

**CRUSHING TASTE OF THE CHURE**

Veggie salad meets Chure Maze is drying farmers across Nepal’s high hills and Tana with worsening floods and landslides make the situation even worse. Follow our report to Mahal Singh district in the southern plains and let us know how the deteriorating situation has changed the local government’s plans to work on the river chure for this topic on our YouTube channel and report on page 101.

**CEMENT EXTRACTION**

How many areas sell cemete at 400 per country to risk the stones and trees filled up with sand and are not producing mountains and new forest challenges global nature and industry. Ramesh Narh, Nepali Times.com

Candace Klob

**WHAT’S TRENDING**

**Thamel’s new Art Street**

Thamel is becoming more a hub for Nepali contemporary art as many young artists showcase their work and showcase their creativity in a one-stop shop.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

**Scars of War**

By Subedi Shankar

Nepal has been a victim of war, and we tend to forget the scars which we bear. A war going on in a certain place can’t be seen and doesn’t disappear. You can’t take a picture of this war, but the scars are there. The pride in the image will not fade away. Most popular on Twitter

**Nepal struggles to balance nature and industry**

The government is balancing between conservation and industry, which are in conflict with each other. Most commented

**Tearing Sunjuk is all right**

Siddhuraj Shakya

Early morning is a key to a fine world. Online news never goes out of fashion and we will make sure to keep our readers updated with our new features. We are providing a new feature for our readers.

Most visited online page
FLY SAFE
FEEL SECURE

Have a healthy journey with all precautions taken to the finest detail for your in-flight safety.

TURKISH AIRLINES
Promoting EVs
Nepal with electric car plan. The government has launched an electric vehicle plan to encourage the use of electric vehicles in the country. The plan aims to promote electric vehicles in the city and the countryside. The government has also announced that electric vehicles will be exempted from import duties and registration fees. The plan also includes the establishment of charging stations and the promotion of research and development in the field of electric vehicles.

Cryptocurrency banned
Nepal Central Bank has banned cryptocurrency trading in the country. The central bank has also warned that individuals and organizations involved in cryptocurrency trading will be subject to legal action. The move is in response to the growing popularity of cryptocurrencies in the country, which has raised concerns about their use in money laundering and other illegal activities.

Covid vaccines
This week Nepal received 1.2 million Covid-19 vaccines from Covax. The vaccines were distributed to seven units of eight vaccines, and 11 units of 10 vaccines. The vaccines were distributed to the seven units of eight vaccines, and 11 units of 10 vaccines. The vaccines were distributed to the seven units of eight vaccines, and 11 units of 10 vaccines. The vaccines were distributed to the seven units of eight vaccines, and 11 units of 10 vaccines. The vaccines were distributed to the seven units of eight vaccines, and 11 units of 10 vaccines.

Himalaya QMS
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Euro 6 in Nepal
In response to the Nepali government's proposal to introduce Euro 6 for all vehicles and to introduce new standards for the country's vehicle industry, the government has announced that Euro 6 will be mandatory for all new vehicles from January 1, 2023. The government has also announced that all existing vehicles will be required to comply with Euro 6 standards by January 1, 2024.

Fibernet dealers
Fibernet has awarded its distributors in Nepal with the top 100 dealers' recognition for achieving outstanding sales and maintaining customer satisfaction levels.

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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 66,000 labour permits for Nepali 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 approval as per the 1950 Nepal-India bilateral treaty. Nor does it include workers who travel across the border through back routes.

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

Secretary, Manoj Basnet by send migrant workers are now worth over a quarter of Nepal’s annual GDP, and the conversation is shifting to the varying degrees of costs 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, Jagadish Adhikari, and Ganesh Gurung in their book "The New Lahari: Foreign Employment and the Remittance Economy of Nepal.”

Those from the most affluent backgrounds are in a better position to gain access to higher pay and more remittances than 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 2003 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 deaths of young and domestic workers at the hands of employers in Kuwait in 1998 prompted the Nepalese 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 2011 proposal requiring Nepali women under 40 travelling to the Gulf or Africa to present consent from a guardian and evidence of remittance.

In August 2004, 32 Nepali migrant workers died in Iraq for work under false pretenses were able to send back large sums through agents, their executions filmed and released by the extremists for the world to see. Thirteen Nepalese security forces were killed and five injured by a suicide bombing in 2016 while on route to their jobs at the Canadian embassy.

A July 2016 mobile video of a Nepali security guard in Malaysia getting beaten up by his supervisor prompted Nepalis to share 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 1.6 million 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 accidents 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 Nepalese 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 Nepali migrants have to resort to taking illegal and dangerous routes to travel and work overseas. Further, risking their lives.

“The 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 understatement of the actual number.”

While economic diplomacy has been Incorporated into our foreign policy, discussions about labour diplomacy have not moved forward,” said migration expert Gyanendra Gurung, co-author of The New Lahari. In his keynote address at the KastriP Migration and Remitt Summit 2021.

Indeed, in recent years exports have pointed out the need to diversify out-migration destinations. This includes 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 worst human rights records in the world. If we have the strength of the Gurkha repatriation 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 innovative 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 push work and tourism despite.

Nepal has also been able to integrate returnee 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 riddled with corruption. Recruiters blatantly exploit workers, and mislead them about jobs and remittance 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 negotiating for their first and second doses in front of Shahid Memorial Hospital inKalbaka 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 Lahari puts the individual everyday hardships 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 prop up the economy with the money they send back.

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

The New Lahari: Foreign Employment and the Remittance Economy of Nepal
by David Seddon, Jagadish Adhikari and Ganesh Gurung
Ashutosh Mathur, 2013
KIP70
210pages

Census undercount?

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

- Nepal’s population growth rate dropped to only 0.93% from 1.34% ten years ago
- The proportion of Nepalis living in the rural area grew to nearly 54%
- Two-thirds of Nepalis live in urban areas
- The male-female ratio is 95.8:100, meaning there are 600,000 more women than men in Nepal
- The fertility rate is now approaching replacement level: 2.5 children per mother
- 67% of the population is made up of working-age youth, which is Nepal’s ‘demographic dividend’
- Madhya Pradesh has the most people, making up 21% of the nation
- Kathmandu Valley’s population is now 2.9 million

However, the census data shows that there are 2,169,678 Nepalis living abroad, and expects to rise to 2.4 million by 2030.

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 Statistics, Nobir Lal Shrestha said in media interview, he was personally surprised by the low figure. He said there could have been an understatement because households where all members were abroad were not counted.

However, among those abroad, the proportion of women has increased from 17% to nearly 19% in the last ten years. The reason for this could be greater gender equality in Nepal, increases in female literacy, overseas demand for domestic and caregiver.
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.

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 shade just seemed too soothing. I chose this nom de guerre before I’d decided what I’d call my blog. Relatively new, the bloggersphere beckoned with all its buoyancy. A notebook on Nepal on the net. Bingo.

King Gyawindra’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, hopes, despair— the imperatives were too many. Powerful as the royal regressive 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 Gyawindra 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 guer as Puskar Bhusal in the Nepali Times. Yes, Kundu Dixit soon found out I was somewhere in Nepal. And Kavan Dixit, although still harried by my
Coming Full Circle

If there hadn’t been so many stakeholders with reservations to hope, Nepal’s political exercise in politics would have been pronounced a failure with the first constitutional assembly’s dissolution in 2013. In the spring of 2006, Nepal did years for change. The royal regime had failed to inspire an initially expectant population, whereas the opposition parties and the Maoists had brought some hope. The alliance struck in New Delhi was aimed more at punishing the palaces than empowering the people. The text of the understanding had to be watered down to accommodate all parties’ basic positions. Even so, the Seven Party Alliance and the Maoists could not issue a united joint statement. Apart from viability, the venue would hobble the scope in ever so wary of the Delhi Compromise of 1951.

For the moment, however, it was enough to recognize the messes, no doubt sorted by a sustained international campaign of vilification of the palaces. By the time the pressures of the streets had receded, Nepal was on its way to becoming a federal and secular republic—something that People’s Movement II had not raised. If the task was arduous enough for Nepal’s new rulers, the process would prove exhausting. Of the three pillars of ‘new Nepal’, Hindu statehood was controversial from the start. How it found a place in the House Proclamation of May 18, 2006—balled as the equivalent of the Magna Carta—remains a mystery. Two years later, the elected constituent assembly voted on what had been previously presented as a fait accompli—the abolition of the monarchy. With no trace of regret or recriminations, Gyaneswar Shah held a news conference before leaving the palace to blend into a life of commoner.

He would be no ordinary citizen. As a former head of state, Shah continued to exercise his successors to recommit themselves to the pledges they made to the people. In the early years, the political class largely spared him. Then they began warning him against attempts to subvert the new order. Over time, the thinking began drawing larger crowds than politicians in its visits across the country, India, and China, among other countries, stopped using its presence as an excuse to mobilize international forces. Politicians recognized they had run out of powder. When Pushpa Kamal Dahal ‘Prachanda’ and Dr. Baburam Bhattarai persisted in their trances, the people began ridiculing them.

Federalism became such a central agenda after the Madhes movement that everyone started proposing models. No structure could satisfy everyone, while Nepal’s northern neighbor would have none of it. While championing inclusiveness and broadened-based representation in general terms, the southern neighbor couldn’t find a model it liked, either. By the time provinces and local bodies got elected, taxes and conspicuous patronage appeared to validate the few early skeptics.

A decade and a half later, it has become impossible to identify what went wrong and why. In reality, it is beside the point. If King Gyaneswar had let his throne on the mainstream parties’ and the Monarch’s inability to unite against him, a section of the Indian establishment— the ones closest to a budding alliance with the West—got enough of itself without any specific in mind.

Every subsequent compromise turned out to be a renegotiation of the previous one. Nepal’s two neighbors became particularly assertive, and were sometimes capable of joint action. The Indians and Chinese, who brought the United Front to power in Nepal, are unlikely to develop into a nebulous ‘peace process’, were also the ones that ensured it left.

Why consensus could be miraculously reached during some problems, including the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, during others was also a largely irrelevant question. The peace process had to proceed at any cost and thus acquired a logic of its own until the promulgation of the new Constitution and the election of representative bodies.

The political process ended, local, regional and international dynamics had shifted remarkably. From being a leader to convincing Nepal as a land bridge to South Asia, the Chinese used security and development as props, depending on the balance of power in South Asia.

More distant stakeholders like the United Nations and European Union member states shared a clear set of concerns but found it harder to deliver game changing results. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic had hit, Nepal was one of the 15 countries of the UN-led Millennium Challenge Corporation compact and the China-India Mutual Benefit Facility had been drawn. Sadly, the security and strategic dynamics and the development activities in the Nepali psyche and politics.

The Nepali political class sought collective action while driving the peace process, including the working party, they seemed ready to shoulder collective blame. When the finger-pointing started, some people for public for the public’s consumption, the politicians coached the discerning. The people have found nostalgia more appealing than any notion of the future. Nepal’s late now indeed stands in their hands.
EVENTS

Batase Hills Hike
Negotiate for the Hiking and picnic program organised by RMC Travel and Tours to Batase Hills. Call for details.
20 January, 16:30
KATHMANDU
OUR PICK

MUSIC CLASSES

Sign up for some musical instruments from banjo, mandolin, ukulele to piano, guitar, drum, bass, saxophone and violin at Kathmandu Jain Convention. (01) 5456364, 9875725662

MEDITATIVE THERAPY

Participate in the seven-day meditation Mind-Body therapy with Swami Anand Aruntas. Register at https://bit.ly/3t8xJzl 01-7 February, 8:00
KATHMANDU

ONLINE ARCHIVES

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

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

GETAWAY

Buddha Maya Garden Hotel
Stay at the luxurious Garden Hotel and visit the historical Maya Birle Temple during your stay at the picturesque Buddha Maya Garden Hotel. (01) 5860729

Gokarna Forest Resort
One of a kind experience, Gokarna Forest Resort is a perfect retreat away from the city life. Book out for a weekend with family. (01) 4403001

Baltali Village Resort
This easy day trip allows you to hike and enjoy a bird’s eye view of the green terraced fields dotted with old painted houses and the view of Manaslu, Langtang and Everest in the north. Parbat, Kaski 0880727727
Bird’s eye view

Virtual street festivals
Google’s Garfield Street Fests and Carnivals is a virtual tour of night 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’s “Minesweeper” and start playing online.

Critical Mass

Love cycling? The city meet-up, Critical Mass, gathers cyclists to reclaim the streets through short ride each month.
20 January, 5:30pm onwards, Bhrikhunath Durbar Square

Essay Contest
Submit your best essay to The Emitter 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://bit.ly/3s67ROt 20 February

Shilpee Theatre
Watch the COVID - A Political Tale, or the adaptation of Henrik Ibsen’s Peer Gynt on the theatre’s YouTube channel.

Dining

Evolve Café & Bistro
Evolve all services with the pizza, salad, fried and tenderloin pork, chicken and burger showers’ and more from the multitude of meals offered.
Paraskot, 301111051

Fire & Ice
One of the first places in town, Fire & Ice is a delight for the fans of Italian cuisine. Also try the Lasagna and Penne All Genova.
Thamel, 01450710

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. Smoke House Pinnace Plaza, Tashchok, 9891010242

Trisara
Find everything from Indian to continental to baked goodies under one roof at Trisara, Liverpool (01) 4410100

WEATHER

AIR QUALITY INDEX

140
KATHMANDU

12PM 26 January to 11AM 27 January measured at US Embassy, Phare Butak
The below average temperature and cloud cover will remove the dust but not sufficient to return to Kathmandu Valley to within the morning range, and this will affect air quality. Although the humidity in vehicular emissions may be lower, it is important to note that the peak emissions from livestock and energy will keep the air quality in the unhealthy range. Making up, and avoiding outdoor activity during the morning and evening hours is recommended.

OUR PICK

Take a trip down this stretch during the week at The House. The 2022 British film is an inspirational and encouraging film that will stir the heart of a house across three different eras. In the first, a father and mother make the ultimate decision to give their young daughter an alternate road to their heart. But a peculiar twist, an assortments mix of accuracy leads back with two strangers passing the 10-foot tall door of the around while being plodded by people whose other voices are in their voices. This film is a bit classic for us, as the world is headed and developed in a strange match, a story that barely fix the past and struggle to mean us. The three stories are followed by Emme de Sousa and Matt James. Nick Church, Simon Calton, Kate Atkin, Matthew Goude, Matthew Kuyk, Miranda Rabbett, Jonas Ceder, Meg Taylor, Susan Molenda and Merce Dabls

THE HOUSE

#SERIOUSABOUTBEER
THE VERY BEST OF GERMAN BEER GINENGING.

Disclaimers
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

Global health researcher and economist Christopher J. 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 leg 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 Subedi: "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 says: "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 inadequately provided.

With reports from India, Denmark and the Philippines of the even more transmissible ‘south 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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NATION

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Sonia Awale

A s elsewhere in the world, the Omicron-fueled 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 throughout 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 disease centre at Tiku 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 being tested, 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 those 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 Sudesh 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 Nepal 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.
Hiding their head in the sand

Ramu Sapkota in Mahottari

K
dekoi Maler, 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 pets 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 half the
year and maize the other half the harvest year with the land.

“What do I do now,” she says simply, gesturing at the devastated
field.

Ramchandra Mahato, 65, is a native of this part of Nepal in the
plates bordering India, and faces a similar predicament. The floods
covered his land under 3m of
water, destroyed the standing crops and damaged his house.

Maler and Mahato are just two of the thousands of farming households who have been
effected 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
events.

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

In a nearby village, 44-year-old Ganga Devi also lost her newly
planted paddy. She planted it again, only for it to be washed away again
and again.

“The third time we replanted the rice plants used to be Nepal’s grain
basket. The surplus crops fed the
country, and the farmers prospered. Even if monsoon floods came down the
river, they replenished the soil with nutrients and made it
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 level of
rivers changing their hydrology,
that the rivers started rampaging through the floodplains.

“Until as recently as ten years ago, we had three dry seasons.
Wheat, paddy, and maize, and we had a good market price for them,”
says Thakuri Devi, 65. “But we have had no harvest for the past four years.”

Her husband Deepal 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 each
of their sons who went to Malaysia to work.

The crisis is driving thousands of
households across the Madhau Province of 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. Babha Ram
Shah, 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 Sabh 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.

“I’ll never take refuge again in farming. But he states matter-of-

factly.

After observing the devastation downstream, we travelled up the
river to trace the river’s origins. We saw sand mining (called ‘crushers’) in Bardhali along the
East West Highway, at the foothills of the Chure Ranges.

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, and gravel into raw material to feed the voracious appetite of the construction industry in Nepal and
India, and we composed them to
before and after satellite imagery.

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

Since mining 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 Rs20.

Rituja Singh is doing his PhD

on the Chure quarter 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 has increased because of the sand mining, mining riverbeds further south.

While the mining is destructive, what has compounded the risk is that the rivers have been narrowed by artificially channelizing it, has cut the floodplains 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
channelized. In fact, images from 2013 show that the Ratu used to flow
separately towards Kisanpur and Bigha are of Shumsherpur 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 riverbed material,” says Utsam Baha
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-Tara belt.”

The Chure is the youngest and southernmost fluvial 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 rive
rages especially during monsoon cloudbursts. Failure of Beals 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 river 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 those deaths as “generalised ‘deadly by drowning’.

In Thamas district alone, 208 children have drowned in the past two years – most of them were under 15 years and died while swimming in three water-filled sand mining pits.

Sushil Layamgar, 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 30-feet deep pit dug by a sand mining contractor, and drowned together with a friend.

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

There was a strong protest against the contractor. “We told them to stop digging, the children will fall into the ditch,” says Sushil’s grandmother Madhumaya Layamgar.

“But they shouted at us, saying that they owned the land and could do what they pleased.”

In the adjoining Battali district the same year, Summa Khanal, 6, and Jasmine Khartu, 13, 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 Jharna Khartu, "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
Illegal sand mining ravages rivers, displaces Tarai farmers, and decimates a fragile landscape

Market for construction material to India is ultimately affecting the freshwater flows across the border in India itself. At Jhakri on the Indian border, the level of the river has been found to drop by up to 40cm every year, so there is talk of raising the embankments to prevent future floods. According to the images taken from satellites and drones in the river back of Barati River from Bardah to Shanghada municipality, there is illegal sand mining and processing crushers in operation at 38 sites. Ground level inspections showed that there were two excavators digging sand along 60m stretch. A satellite image taken in February 2019 shows only two small sand excavation pits adjacent to the floodplains of the Barati River. A similar image taken a year later shows that these pits had widened up to 40m in diameter. The ensuing flood has destroyed embankments in Bardah, constructed to protect 1,600 households in Balawa municipality.

Still, the extraction is continuing with excavators seen 500m south of the Balawa-Gyanapur road, uprooting the bridge. A lorry moved 300m upstream to protect the bridge was destroyed in last year’s flood.

Politically, the upcoming local elections would help bring greater accountability in municipal governments and clean up the corruption that drives crusher contractors. However, locals say that the elections have not focused the minds of local leaders on making money for their campaigns, and this means there will be more destructive quarrying. Local farmers here are collateral damage in the collision between local governments and contractors who fund and protect each such quarry.

Bardah Municipality has not granted any permits for sand and boulder extraction from its river this fiscal year.

The Municipality’s own record shows that there are 25 crusher industries running in Ratu river area.

Mishal Vafa, head of the municipality’s Revenue Department says that crushers need licenses to extract raw materials from rivers and to be registered in the Office of the Company Registrar or in the Central and Small Scale Industries Office under the Department of Industry. None of this has been done.

The quarry owners appeal to the water and called them. They had already stepped breathing.

It is not just in the Tarai that children are drowning in abandoned sand pits. In Nawakot, 12-year-old Birendra Bhatta 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 in Nawakot’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 mining does not just pose a danger to children drowning, but also threatens bridges and other infrastructure.

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

It was after protests against illegal sand mining on Asarhi River that Dilip Mahato was beaten and then run over and killed by a tipper truck near his home in Birgunj 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, Ramchandra Mahato, says the police sided with the owners of the Chiranjimul Sand Processing Centre.

The government’s rule on sand excavation prohibits sand and gravel mining within 2km of towns, and along rivers with a 3km buffer 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 Medicines Conservation Committee estimates that more than 30 million cubic metres of riverine resources are collected annually nationwide.

Only 28 out of 100 municipalities across the Chure Range which are extracting sand and gravel actually had licenses, according to Prem Nath Pokhrel, a geologist at the Committee. He adds, “There has been far more extraction than what we have allowed. Even within the 20 municipalities that have the approvals.”

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 Rs 21/1 per cubic metre for the sand and gravel when selling it, which means the revenue for 30 million cubic metres should be Rs 66.33 billion. “We are lied,” says Ramjait.

“When a child drowns and we lodge a complaint, excise work stop for a day or two. But the digging continues.”

But according to the National Resources and Finance Commission, the government collected only about Rs 6.32 billion in revenue from sand and gravel contractors last year. sand and gravel contractors last year. In addition, 31 municipalities across the country have signed contracts for sand extraction. It has been alleged that most of the mining is illegal, or are licensed in exchange for kickbacks.

The business is being run by mafia using 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 on the lookout for the Rs 400 million of level selections. 68 among the 613 elected persons from 17 municipalities of Madhyapur have affiliations with construction contractors.

Dev Prakash Tripathi is a journalist who, after seeing rampant illegal sand mining in his native Masohi has become an activist with the Save Tibetan Campaign in Dhubra 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 gravel contractors are Krishna Lal Shrestha, chairman of Gaiichi Municipality of Dhubra, Ramesh Pandey, leader of OPL (Unified Socialist), Chitru Tripathi, and Nalikam Jemsati, who are all feared and divided directly or indirectly involved. A local government chief in Mahottari district, who also did not comment when his name was questioned, mentioned that he would not be able to cover his medical expenses unless he supported sand extraction.

He says matter of fact, “I can’t sell my house to pay for the election. Who’s going to sell with selling sand and pebbles that are washed down by the rivers?”

Such criminal collaborations sages families like the Lamgamer and Khutras have turned illegal sand mining into a business, with trucks loaded with sand and gravel, and to Ramjait Mahato whose activist career was ended by lawless contractors in calcium and iron ore mining, he is now an abusive.”

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

Says Ramjait: “They say we already killed one of your children, don’t make us kill another one.”

Mahato Pulabh in Dhanusa
A tongue lashing

One of the benefits of the recent 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 friends,FAA why 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?), or is it two pecks on one cheek each, or is it going to be three pecks on two alternate cheeks? It was a mischieved 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 Aas 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 nose.

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 vens in droplets.

In this matter, our ancestors were way ahead of their time. When Prof. Vatsyayana published his bestseller, The Kama Sutra, he already knew through the grapevine that kissing was subhuman. Which is why while depicting many imaginative positions for manual 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 stones and caves 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 Donchab Mannostu, Jeeet, such dirty minds.

It is the realisation about just how unseemly 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 Nepal’s cinema copies Bollywood, kissing is frowned upon here too. (Although kissing ass is perfectly acceptable in both cultures.)

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

This reminds us: we have to double the number of personal bodyguards assigned to President Bhet Devi Bhandari next time she is off on a state visit somewhere.

Never knew what a licentious celebrity turning out there is just waiting for an unguarded moment to make his move.

The Aas