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THE GEOPOLITICS OF FOOD

WFP NEPAL

● Sonia Awale

Already reeling from child hunger and wars in Yemen and across Saharan and central Africa, the developing world is now bracing for the full impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on food supply.

Nearly two months into this European war, aside from the horrific suffering in Ukraine, experts warn that the long-term impact on energy and food prices will affect the world's most vulnerable people the most.

South Asia is already seeing the economic impact of the Ukraine war turn into full-blown political crises in Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Although Nepal's debt burden is not as serious as Sri Lanka, the

soaring import bill for food and fuel, stagnant exports and the collapse of tourism have depleted the foreign exchange reserves. The only saving grace is that remittance from Nepalis abroad showed a slight increase in February.

Nepal Oil Corporation raised the price of petroleum products again this week to Rs160/l for petrol and Rs1,600 for an LPG cylinder. This will raise the price of food even more. Nepal Rastra Bank verbally instructed CEOs this week to cut LCs for imports of luxury items and real estate loans. The government is mulling a two-day weekend with 9AM start to weekdays, and cutbacks on the government's fuel consumption.

Ukraine and Russia collectively supply more than a quarter of the

world's cereals including wheat. Nepal imports grain from India, which has a stock of nearly 100 million tons and has been sending aid to Afghanistan and other countries in the region. In March, its export of wheat rose to 8 million tons. This is expected to push up food prices in India, and by extension in Nepal.

"We have to quickly establish or identify alternative suppliers for the import of basic food items, maintain a minimum of buffer stocks and implement food or cash-based program that supports and protects the poor who may be affected by the price rise," Bishow Parajuli, the WFP Representative in India, told *Nepali Times*.

The knock-on effect of rising food and energy prices will be

felt most acutely by the neediest (children, women and the elderly) in counties like Nepal. The Covid-19 lockdown had already deprived many Nepali families of income, and surveys had shown that their children were eating less.

Already, almost half of Nepal's children are suffering from some form of malnutrition.

Despite dramatic strides in reducing stunting (less height for age) to 36% from 57% in the 1990s, progress has stalled. Childhood malnutrition predates Covid-19, but income loss due to the economic fallout of the pandemic and rising costs due to the Ukraine war has made the situation more precarious.

The WFP's school lunch program in the remote western mountains of Nepal has helped meet some of the nutritional requirements of growing children (see page 10-11). This program is now being handed over to the government to run in 71 districts.

Under-nutrition is a precursor for a host of ailments and a leading cause of child deaths, retarded mental and physical growth, and compromised immune systems. Child hunger in Nepal was a sign of political failure, misguided state priorities, lack of accountability and corruption. Covid, the Ukraine war and long-term impact of climate crisis all threaten to make it much worse.

With food and fuel prices set to rise even higher, the government needs to prepare for an emergency at a time when it is preoccupied with elections. Elected representatives could help deliver immediate relief with feeding programs for the most at risk. Once they take office, they must launch campaigns for agricultural self-sufficiency, climate-smart farming, and irrigation systems.

Says WFP's Parajuli: "We have to create incentives and encourage farmers to grow their own food especially short-term crops such as the vegetables, and in the medium-term expansion of new season rice plantation, which will start soon." 🇳🇵

Inside

The salt of the earth

Either too little, or too much iodine

PAGE 6-7

Growing appetite for school lunches

PAGE 10-11

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Coalition Calculation

Three days after the Nepali Congress Central Working Committee announced it would leave it up to its local committees to decide on candidates for local elections, the Maoist Centre Chair Pushpa Kamal brought out his trump card: if the Congress did not agree on common candidates his party would re-forge an alliance with the opposition UML.

Like a jilted partner in a love triangle, the Dahal was playing the NC and UML against each other ahead of the 13 May local elections. In this, Chitwan is once more a microcosm of what is happening across Nepal — the Maoists are too weak to go at it alone, some in the Congress do not want an electoral alliance with them, and despite its split the UML still has a strong party structure down to the grassroots, including in Chitwan.



Whenever he does not get what he wants from the Congress, Dahal threatens to join hands with the UML's K P Oli. It was a Maoist-UML alliance that swept the 2017 federal election, and the two formally united to form the Nepal Communist Party (NCP), which got dismantled in 2021 by the Supreme Court after a prolonged power struggle between Oli and Dahal.

With local polls only a little more than a month away, governing coalition partners Nepali Congress, Maoists, Unified Socialist and the Janata Samajwadi Party met this week to decide on common candidates. But the five coalition members all want different things to ensure maximum benefit for their own party.

An electoral alliance means coalition partners agree to jointly select candidates for mayors, municipality chairs and other positions and ensure their wins. The Congress thinks it can win a majority on its own. Dahal has boasted he can do the same, but his party needs the Congress more than the Congress needs him. But Congress is also wary of the UML's strength.

Leaders like Shekhar Koirala who

The Congress vs Maoist feud over Chitwan could determine the fate of the governing coalition

challenged Sher Bahadur Deuba for party chairmanship during the recent the Congress general convention, have urged the prime minister against an electoral alliance. He wants local Congress leaders to decide whether they choose to run independently, coordinate with coalition partners, or with parties outside the governing alliance.

In 2017, the Congress lost the key constituency of Pokhara, where it was defeated by the UML despite an alliance with the Maoists. This is why the Congress does not want to partner with the Maoists.

Similarly, the UML and the Maoists had formed separate alliances against the Congress in local polls, but Congress candidates won both chair and deputy chair in Biratnagar. The Maoists allied with the UML against the Congress in Tanahun, but the Congress still won both chair and deputy-chair.

The 2017 election results indicate that while the Maoists would gain from an electoral alliance with the NC, Maoist support will not guarantee the Congress local wins.

One of these is Chitwan's Bharatpur Metropolitan City. In 2017, Maoist

supporters disrupted vote counting, tearing up ballot papers to secure the mayorship for Dahal's daughter Renu Dahal with Congress support.

Families who fled the Maoist insurgency in the mountains moved down and settled in Chitwan, and

it is regarded as a Congress stronghold. Bharatpur, especially, has a strong Congress base and many there are not happy with the party leadership allowing Renu Dahal to win just because of coalition calculations in Kathmandu. The Congress Chitwan committee has decided to go it alone to contest Bharatpur mayorship.

While the Maoists and Congress colluded to allow Renu Dahal to win Bharatpur, the Maoists went on to partner with the UML for federal elections.

Which is why what happens in Bharatpur during May's local polls is so symbolic. If the Congress does not agree on an electoral alliance with the Maoists in Bharatpur, and the Maoists lose the city, there will be no alliance for federal polls and the governing coalition could collapse.

Ramji Dahal

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

True Devolution

Nepal's noted geographer Harka Gurung was way ahead of his time. This week we revisit an op-ed by him published in 2002 where he pointed out the need for true devolution of power in Nepal. Twenty years down the line, Nepal is a federal republic with three levels of the government, but the true decentralisation is elusive. Nepal's will be electing local governments on 13 May, but only when voters reward candidates who show promise to perform can bring about grassroots development.

Excerpts from an op-ed by Harka Gurung published 20 years ago this week on issue #88 5-11 April 2022 of Nepali Times:

It is clear that the problem of decentralisation has less to do with a legal framework than with economic viability. As a consultant to the Constitution Reform Recommendation Commission in 1975, I had proposed the re-organisation of the 75 districts into 40. The proposal was based on an economic rationale, but was rejected for political reasons. Since then, there has been much extension in roads, airports and telecommunications. These have narrowed the geographic space enabling the administration of a much larger area. The reduction in the



number of districts also seems a logical option to economise administrative cost. The present district consolidation proposal is to reduce the number of administrative districts to 25 from 75.

Districts can function as autonomous bodies only if they have an adequate resource base. This would mean curtailing the present highly centralised budgetary allocation system and empowering districts with more taxation authority. District income could also be enhanced by allocating a certain percent of revenue from the district's natural resource exploitation. There has been much discussion on the legal framework of

the Local Self-governance Act 1999, which endorses the concept of devolution. A realistic approach towards decentralisation needs to first clarify the confusion between delegation of central functions and devolution of authority to local entities. This implies a drastic change in the relationship between the central government and the district hierarchy. The decentralisation effort in Nepal has failed due to the command system and economic fragility of the districts.

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

ONLINE PACKAGES



HUNGRY FOR LEARNING

The World Food Programme's School Lunch Program across Nepal's remote mountains has helped improve nutritional status of growing children while also decreasing dropout rates. Now the Nepal government is taking ownership of the program and has rolled out meals for students in 71 districts. But can it meet expectations? Watch the video on our YouTube channel and read the story on *pages 10-11*.

NEPALI TEA

Sonia Awale has rendered us a wonderful service by promoting Nepali tea ('Getting high on High Mountain Tea', Sonia Awale, #1104). She has rightly pointed out that Nepali teas are superb teas in their own right and represent the truly Asian tea, quite distinct from the colonial legacy of British and Indian teas. The tea tree in the Kathmandu valley from which Edward Gardner collected a herbarium specimen antedates the reign of Jang Bahadur. So it is absolutely right to point out the antiquity of tea in Nepal in the superb video, which I also very much enjoyed.

George van Driem सुरेश 無我

SCHOOL MEALS

School meals well explained. These must be extended to all schools ('Growing appetite for school lunches', Marty Logan, page 10-11). It is important for the government to ensure quality food, and put measures to stop pilferage with a good control system. India runs the largest school feeding with 100 million students who get hot meals daily, and we can learn from India in this area.

Bishow Parajuli

- What a read. Correlation between availability of nutrients and micronutrients, clean water and sanitation among the children and their earnings in their adulthood has been well documented. I hope the meal program sustains and improves at the hands of the government. Happy that we have not ignored the return on investment which is otherwise 'too long a wait'.

Gyurme Sherpa

- Rs15 per child per meal? Each school should probably start with a school vegetable garden, which is also a good life skill opportunity.

Elsa Geilman

UM HONG-GIL

All the best ('Um Hong-Gil's Project Impossible', Sonia Awale, #1098). A person is doing what the Nepal government is not.

Kushal Raj Gurung

- I don't mean to throw cold water on his dedication but I am not aware of anyone building a 'fully equipped hospital in Khumbu' and 'school in Pangboche'. The hospitals in Khumbu were built by Canadian Himalayan Foundation and foundations based in Europe while the school in Pangboche was built by Sir Ed Hillary many decades ago. I hope I am wrong.

Karsang Sherpa

- Meanwhile, people over here are too occupied and busy building view-towers.

Chris Kunwar

CLIMATE GOALS

It's the giant capitalist nations that are the real culprits ('4 months after Glasgow, Nepal's goals look iffy', Angel Li, www.nepalitimes.com). We just happen to be on the frontlines, and as always, the poor suffer because of the rich.

Salman Vegito

LOCAL ELECTION

Positive, competent, effective leadership ('Periphery within the periphery in Nepal', Kunda Dixit, #1105) and governance are prerequisites to achieving peaceful and inclusive sustainable development in any country.

Leadership4SDGs

- An uplifting report from Achham about how local governments can take ownership and partner with a non-profit like Nyaya Health Nepal to provide health care to Nepal's poorest and most neglected people. The Bayalpata model needs to be scaled up nationwide.

Jan Petersen

- Another survey for seniors would be interesting too ('What Nepal's voters most want in elections', Shilshila Acharya, www.nepalitimes.com). Unless that age group does not matter any more.

Netashwa Dixit

VIEW-TOWERS

A totally misplaced allocation of finances ('Nepal's shortsighted view-tower craze', Ramesh Kumar, www.nepalitimes.com). How about spending those billions of rupees on improving decrepit schools, supplying water to facilities and homes, agricultural development, etc? A perfect example of national and local governments completely divorced from the needs of the people.

Roger Ray

CORRECTION

A reporting error in the page 1 story (Deuba's Delhi Déjà vu, #1105, 1-8 April 2022) led to the miscalculation of Sher Bahadur Deuba when he became prime minister for the first time in 1996. He was 49.

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



Still Rising Nepal

by Ass
Nothing is more symbolic of the 'Still Rising Nepal' than the ongoing view tower construction spree. Nepal's should leave no brick unturned in support of our national edifice complex, even as we may soon run out of peaks to put towers on. Read the Ass' creative new view-tower suggestions on our website.

f Most reached and shared on Facebook

Wang Yi's Nepal visit in Chinese media

by Aneka Rebecca Rajbhandari
Without timely reporting, Chinese netizens who are dependent on the official press and social media for news had been largely unaware about Foreign Minister Wang Yi's trip to Nepal. The late media reports could have been deliberate. Join the discussion online.

t Most popular on Twitter



Deuba restores India ties with visit

by Kunda Dixit
At age 75, fifth-time Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba made yet another ritual visit to New Delhi. And while one did not expect any substantial outcome from this trip, the timing carried geopolitical significance — happening two months after Nepal ratified the MCC project, and barely a week after a visit by China's Foreign Minister to Kathmandu.

Most commented

The Andes and Himalaya

by Lorena Gómez Ramírez and Bibek Raj Shrestha
Before the pandemic, the authors, a Colombian anthropologist and Nepali ecologist went on a trek through the Tamang Heritage Trail in Rasuwa that made them realise that we need to rethink trekking tourism. Read about their trip at www.nepalitimes.com.

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

As #Nepal prepares for #localections in May, in the far-western mountains, there is anticipation and hope about grassroots leaders who are more efficient and accountable.



Diana van Dorresteijn @DvDorresteijn

#Nepal has a unique opportunity to shape the new federal structure which is flexible enough towards a different way of local development functioning. #LeadershipDevelopment#GRID@UNDPNepal@UNDPasiapac



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Instead of expanding #healthposts and hospitals, retrofitting school buildings to make them seismic resistant, or ensuring safe drinking #watersupply, elected people's representatives are racing to squander taxpayer money on useless structures.



Forester @kuenvmgt504

Despicable mal-developments



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

#Nepal's Shortsighted View-tower Craze
Corruption is the driving force behind wasteful spending on construction of view-towers on Himalayan peaks, reports Ramesh Kumar (@Raw_Ku).



Saniaa Shah @SaniaaSan

Haphazard spending and poor decision-making by incompetent, corrupt officers is driving the nation to spend all its money on the wrong things, such as ugly and unnecessary view-towers which are an assault on the senses and against the concept of urban planning.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

More than 600,000 unwanted pregnancies a year, 390,000 abortions, many largely unsafe, says a new UNFPA report.



सशी भण्डारी @sashii_b

People still think sex education isn't that important.

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AMIT MACHAMASI

Post-disaster lessons for Nepal

Experts analyse why country was not prepared for disastrous unseasonal post-monsoon downpours in October 2021

On 11 October 2021, Nepal's Department of Hydrology and Meteorology declared that the southwest monsoon had officially exited the country. Paddy fields across Nepal were golden with ripening rice, and farmers were preparing for the Dasain festival.

On 15 October, the Met Office forecast a westerly system had become active, and there was likely to be some rain. Indeed, the frontal system lashed the Indian state of Uttarakhand, triggering landslides and causing flash floods.

Nepal is used to localised rains

even after the monsoon ends, but this was the first time in 12 years that there was widespread nationwide rain in October. And it was not just ordinary showers, the cloudbursts dumped more than 500mm of rain in Dadeldhura on 17-19 October. Sunsari got nearly 400mm in just 24 hours on 19-20 October (*see map, above*).

Landslides and floods killed over 120 people across the country, 28 are still missing. Nepal's Ministry of Agriculture had predicted paddy harvests to exceed target because of a healthy monsoon, but the

unexpected rain in October caused nearly Rs12 billion in damage to the rice crop, reducing Nepal's GDP by 0.6%. Sudurpaschim Province alone lost up to one-third of rice that was ready for harvest.

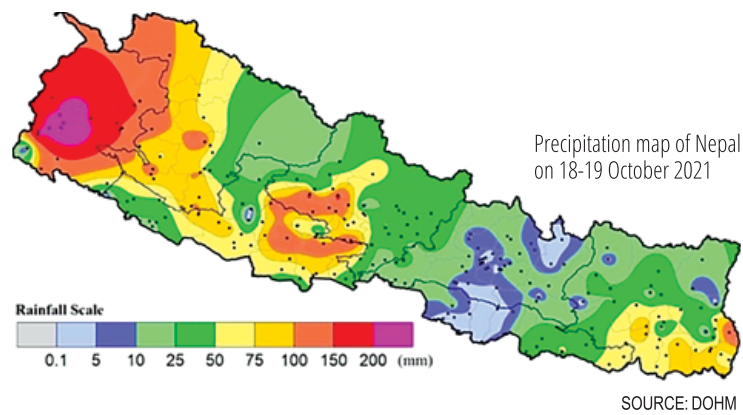
Roads, bridges, irrigation schemes were damaged or destroyed. There was \$85 million damage to 26 hydroelectric schemes. The repairs will take years.

Since then, climate scientists and meteorologists have been scratching their heads to figure out what happened, and why more accurate weather forecasts about

the severity of the unseasonal precipitation were not available.

A new paper 'Missed Opportunities in Utilisation of Weather Forecasts: An Analysis of the October 2021 Disaster in Nepal' by risk reduction experts Dinanath Bhandari and Ajaya Dixit investigates what happened, if it could have been foreseen, and how it can be prevented in future.

The authors look at the challenge of predicting post-monsoon and winter precipitation, and how the global climate crisis is affecting rainfall patterns that used



to be fairly regular in the past. The paper analyses precipitation data since 1971 to show that total post-monsoon rains have gone down all over Nepal except in parts of the trans-Himalaya.

'Existing meteorological stations are inadequate to cover the diversity of Nepal's microclimates, and the high mountain and remote regions have fewer stations than required for climate trend analysis,' the paper notes.

The authors also look into why there was widespread damage and human casualties despite weather alerts through media. Although the Department of Hydrology and Meteorology did predict rain, the messaging did not include location and time-specific impact-based forecasting, they say.

The National Disaster Risk Management and Mitigation Authority (NDRMMA) also issued early warning through social media platforms, including daily situation reports, but the paper says that these tended to focus on post-event rescue and relief, and not enough on early warning.

Even when the correct forecast was available, there was not enough coordination with various other agencies of government like the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Local Development, local governments, as well as the security agencies for emergency rescue.

This could have been due to the impending Dasain holiday mood, but the authors also blame 'location specific impact-based rainfall forecasts'. In other words, the early warning was too general.

The authors imply that the Department of Hydrology and Meteorology should not just be in the business of issuing forecasts, but also work with local authorities for preparedness and timely action.

'The argument that the frequency of extreme rainfall events in the post-monsoon has increased seems to be valid,' the paper says. 'In 2009, the post-monsoon high rainfall was concentrated in west Nepal. It was the same initially in 2021, but the widespread and unseasonal rainfall last year seemed to catch everyone by surprise and there was not even some semblance of preparedness for rescue and relief to be dominant in disaster management response.'

prabhu BANK

More power to India

India has agreed to allow Nepal to export 364MW more power to the Central Electricity Authority of India from the Kali Gandaki, Middle Marsyangdi, Marsyangdi and Likhu 4 hydropower projects. Last month, New Delhi had limited imports to only 39MB from projects it built 50 years ago. India says it will not buy power from plants built with Chinese investment or contracts, and this has put projects like Upper Tamakosi out of bounds. Nepal is currently buying power from India to cover the dry season shortfall, but will have 600MW surplus in the monsoon. The development comes following Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba's Delhi visit last week where he announced the Joint Vision Statement on Power Sector Cooperaton with Indian PM Narendra Modi.

Turkish vaccine cargo

Turkish Airlines Cargo carried 335 million Covid-19 vaccine doses to 61 countries around the world in the past two years. The carrier transported the doses with specific temperature requirements. Turkish Cargo carries pharmaceutical products to 132 countries around the world with its TK Pharma service, with 8% market share in medical products category during 2021.

Turkish Airlines Chairman said: "By establishing a corridor between over 400 international destinations, we ensured that vaccines remained accessible for all, especially to make sure people of Africa could have access to vaccines."



Inter-province flights

Nepal's domestic airlines have started offering inter-province flights. Passengers will no longer have to fly via Kathmandu when they want to go from one end of the country to another. Buddha Air already connects Pokhara with Bhairawa, Simra,



Bharatpur, Nepalganj and Janakpur, and now has added Bhadrapur. Buddha Air says it is responding to demand from domestic tourists in the hot season as well as businessmen. Airlines are also finding it difficult to get parking space in Kathmandu and want to relocate their planes.

Shinta Mani Mustang

Sherpa Hospitality Group, a subsidiary of Teri World, have signed an agreement with HMD Asia to develop Moksha Mustang Resort as the first Shinta Mani hotel. Room, spa, food, beverage and air transfers will all be included in the resort's package which starts from \$1,500 per night when it opens.

Himalaya to Chittagong

Himalaya Airlines has become the first Nepali airline to connect Kathmandu with Chittagong (Chattagram), the second largest city in Bangladesh where there are many Nepali university students. The carrier will operate biweekly service besides its existing flights to Dhaka.

Tata AMC package

Tata Motors Nepal has launched an annual maintenance service package called Care+ which is a maintenance plan regarding protection and savings for a vehicle. Currently the package is only offered on the Tata Nexon petrol but will be extended to other models. The package can be purchased for 365 days and is available in all Siprodi service centers.

DishHome Offer

DishHome has launched the 'In one year 24 months' offer for its customers who can watch 24 months of television with the 12 month rate when they recharge. Customers can also be part of a weekly lucky draw and win Rs100,000.

Surya Nepal golf

Double gold medalist at the South Asian Games, Subash Tamang took a two-stroke lead on the first day of the Surya Nepal Western Open. The top three



of the 54-hole tournament organised by Nepal PGA and sponsored by Surya Nepal will be awarded Rs135,000, Rs88,000 and Rs65,000 respectively.

Global IME

Global IME bank has opened a new extension counter in Lamjung's Hile Bazar. This will be part of the banks 50 other branches.

Summit Women 2022

Open Space Network (OSN) has recognised seven Nepali entrepreneurs below the age of 30 for social impact and business sustainability. Among the seven, The Summit Woman of the Year 2022



recognition was given to Kritika Lamsal of Sweet Fix which makes popsicles from natural fruits and locally sourced ingredients that are a healthier and delicious alternative to packaged frozen treats. The award event on 31 March was supported by ING Group, Turkish Airlines, Nabil Bank and others.

Samsung scheme

Samsung has announced a new year discount offer on its digital appliances. QLED TVs, Crystal 4K UHD TVs are available at more than 20% discount and Smart TVs at 25%. Samsung's Convertible French Door refrigerator has 22% cashback and washing machines have 17% cashback. The offer is valid till 15 May.



The Qatar job mirage

“With a job in the Qatar Police, I dreamed of taking a selfie at the World Cup with Lionel Messi”

games ever, I would think.

But as luck would have it, just when everything was close to completion we found out that the process would not move forward. I was gutted.

The fact that people were being charged very high, especially for a police job, came out in the media. The whole process was under heavy scrutiny. We were told high level government officials and politicians were involved. The Qataris were also said to be in on it. People with insider knowledge said that up to 40% of what we paid as fee for the jobs were cuts for politicians.

The exposure and scrutiny meant the safer route for all crooks involved was to cancel the whole deal. No one really thought of us who had been selected.

I am well aware that the manpower company was cheating me. But when it all blew up, it did not solve the problem, did it?

The solution would have been if I would have got to Qatar as per the free-visa free-ticket policy, and be employed. Even half the market rate in recruiter fee for this job would have helped.

I did not get to go. Am I better off here without that job? Surely not. I am earning a tenth of the salary I could have earned in the Qatar Police. In fact, by now I would have already paid back the loans I would have taken to pay the recruitment

costs, and started saving.

Have you ever wondered why those of us who made it through the process are not out in the streets protesting about the high costs we were being demanded, or how devastated we were when the job order got canceled even after all our paperwork was complete?

Because deep inside, we are still hopeful that it will work out. We have not given up the hope that the visas will come. This hope rose again when we heard that Nepal’s new Labour Minister went to Qatar. Perhaps this deadlock will be addressed.



DIASPORA
DIARIES 5

I know a few fellow aspirants who have paid the recruitment company a fee for the jobs that never materialised. Asking for all of it back makes them fear that they will lose the offer if it ever does come.

Leaving a small portion of the money as a security deposit gives them an assurance, perhaps a false one, that they will be in the priority list if the job offer is ever revived.

Sometimes, I feel cheated by the state when I think about all that happened. Politicians at the highest level are not just failing in their duty as protectors of us citizens, they are snatching away even the few opportunities from us. Just so they can fulfill their own greed.

They are not fixing the high recruitment cost problem, but trying to benefit from it. Or the Qatari

authorities who were allegedly trying to get a cut too. The amount of profit that they lost because of the job cancellation, and because people like me could not go, did not make even the slightest dent in their wealth. But imagine what we lost.

The job orders got cancelled. It was not the cost that got cancelled, but the job itself. And who lost? We did. Not those in power. Not the manpower companies. Not Qataris. Just us, who were willing to work hard and do everything it took to improve our lives.

Many of us who go through the interviews were former police and army folks. When the recruiters asked for payment in exchange for jobs, we were being cheated. We know that. We are not naïve, we weighed our options. Against all odds stacked against us – our poverty, low salaries that make living in Kathmandu challenging – we decided to take the risk. The Rs1 million that the manpower agent, who represented all the powers that be, asked for the job seemed like our only way out.

I agreed to pay what was demanded. Only a fool would be willing to pay, if not paying was also an option. I know I deserved the job. The Qataris were impressed with my credentials. The fee I was paying was not to buy myself into a job that I was unqualified for, but simply to get a foothold for an interview to prove my worth.

I still have hopes of joining the Qatar Police. I hope it will be under fairer circumstances in which we are not demanded exorbitant recruitment costs, and the process is transparent. 🇳🇵

Translated from a conversation in Nepali.

Diaspora Diaries is a regular column in Nepali Times providing 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.

I am a Lionel Messi fan. When I applied for this job in the Qatar Police in 2020, it was of course for a better salary than I am getting in Nepal. But a small part of me also relished the possibility of seeing Messi in Qatar during the FIFA World Cup.

During one of my flights of fancy, I would picture myself taking a selfie with him. I know that is far-fetched, but just watching him play in one of the stadiums that our Nepali brothers helped build did not seem impossible. You never know, I used to tell myself.

A friend with ties to a manpower company told me about job openings for Qatar Police. At first, I was not interested because I did not just want to go to the Gulf or Malaysia. I had my sights set on Australia or Canada, where I could migrate with my wife and children.

But I could earn up to Rs300,000 a month with other perks, including a pension. It was of course going to come at a cost. The recruiters wanted Rs1 million.

As someone who is familiar with the inner workings of foreign employment, I was aware of two things: not paying the recruiter fee could mean the job could go to someone else, but there was also the prospect of being cheated by the manpower company.

So, I made an arrangement with the recruitment agency that I would only pay once I had the tickets in my hands so there would be no room for any hanky-panky.

Others took loans and paid a large portion of the fee the recruiters demanded upfront.

At the interview, it was evident that the Qatari evaluators liked me instantly. I am pretty well built, and can look strong and athletic, just what they were looking for. My hunch was correct, and I was offered the job the same day.

I completed all the required paperwork, including the medical exam. With every successful step, I felt closer to a better future and if I was fortunate, to watch Messi play. Just a glimpse to cheer for him, possibly in one of his last

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The salt of the earth

How the end of the trans-Himalayan rock salt trade led to the decline of Nepal’s Himalayan communities

Jag Bahadur Budha

While it is unclear when and how salt was first introduced to Nepal’s culture and cuisine, what is clear is that Tibetan rock salt was once the foundation of our Himalayan economy and livelihood.

From the Walung, Lhomi, Bhote, Sherpa, Byasi Souka, Mugali, Nyinba, Dolpo, and Nisyangba, the ethnicities on Nepal’s Himalayan rimland from Taplejung in the east to Humla and Darchula in the far-west have historically shared socio-cultural and religious ties with Tibet.

The relationship between the southern flanks of the Himalaya with the Tibetan plateau extended to trade at a time when agriculture and livestock were the main means of livelihood on both sides of the mountains. Before 1850, Nepal imported rock salt, wool, powdered gold, horses and yaks from Tibet, and exported grain, spices, knives, fabric, handicrafts and more.

By 1774, Prithivi Narayan Shah’s Gorkha expansion had led to the annexation of regions controlled by Darjeeling as well as the Limbuwan region then ruled by Sikkim.

This angered the Tibetans and brought trade to a standstill, causing a shortage of salt in Nepal. Some was still smuggled by traders crossing the high Himalayan passes.

Nepal and Tibet fought wars in subsequent years over minting coins to trade disputes. They finally signed a treaty in 1856 to officially resume cross-border trade.

Historian Baburam Acharya in his journal China, Tibet and Nepal notes that Nepali merchants exchanged rock salt bought down from Tibet for grain from Nepal’s south. Barter was the main form of trade, and remained in place until 1959, writes Wim van Spengen in his book Tibetan Border Worlds: A Geohistorical Analysis of Trade and Traders.

The people of Tibet’s Changthang Plateau were largely nomadic, while Nepal’s ethnicities were more settled into farming and pastoralism in the upper reaches of the Tamor, Arun, Dudhkosi in the east, to Budi Gandaki, Marsyangdi, Kali Gandaki, and Bheri, Karnali and Mahakali in the west.



Low agricultural yield in semi-arid trans-Himalayan valleys meant communities traditionally depended on cross-border trade with Tibet. And because merchants would have to be away for long periods, they divided roles, particularly among brothers — some tasked with transporting and trading salt, while others stayed behind to manage homes.

For this reason, polyandry was convenient and accepted in Himalayan cultures. One woman married to all brothers meant the family remained together with centralised resources, and the women did not become widows if one brother died during the perilous Himalayan traverses for trade.

Austrian anthropologist Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf spent much of his life in Nepal, studying Nepal’s cross-border trade with Tibet, publishing his book Himalayan Traders in 1988. He explores how the market for Tibetan salt extended from Nepal’s high mountains to the foothills and the plains.

From 1850 to 1959, Indigenous peoples of the Himalaya engaged in the ‘salt economy’ — trading Tibetan salt with the Nepalis across

the central hills and the plains.

The Walung along the Tamor, Yangma and Ghunsa regions transported salt from Tibet down to Maiwa Khola, and exchanged it with the Limbu who would then take the salt down to Dharan to barter for grain and cloth.

Meanwhile, Nepal’s Bhote and Sherpa put down roots where the Arun river originates in Sankhuwasabha’s Thudam, Ritak and Topkegola regions. A little further downstream lived farmers from the Lhomi community. The Bhotes and Sherpas would barter salt for the potatoes and grains grown by the Lhomis. Similarly, the Sherpa of the Khumbu bought rock salt in Tingri in Tibet, crossed the Nangpa La and traded it with the Rai people from the Dudh Kosi.

In western Nepal, Mustang’s Lowa tribe settled along the Kali Gandaki and carried Tibetan salt to Thak Khola, where they bartered it with the Thakalis who took it down to Pokhara and Kathmandu.

Meanwhile, the Nisyangbas of Upper Manang used to trek even lower to trade salt in Pokhara and Baglung, expanding to



Calcutta and the British East India Company, and later to even Burma via Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Gangtok.

So impressed was King Mahendra with the entrepreneurship of Nisyangba traders that he issued them special passports in 1960, allowing them to expand their business to Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore.

After Prithivi Narayan Shah’s conquest of Kathmandu Valley in the 1770s, Sankhu also became a major trading post, and would remain one until 1967. Tibetan salt from Sankhu Customs was traded in Kathmandu from where it would reach the Tarai.

Indigenous groups in Upper Mugu used to travel to Tibet twice a year to import salt and wool. The salt was then exchanged for grain in the Lower Mugu and Jumla from where it went to Jajarkot and the Tarai. Communities in northern Humla also traded salt for grain with the Thakuri in Bajhang and Bajura to the south.

The Dolpopa transported salt and wool on sheep, mountain goats and yaks to exchange for grain in the Tarali Magar village as well

Sonia Awale

Goitre was once so endemic in Nepal that it was considered a sign of beauty. Entire villages across northern Nepal that relied on Tibetan rock salt (read story above) suffered from iodine deficiency, and cretinism was widespread.

Unlike sea salt which contains adequate iodine, the micronutrient mostly evaporates from rock salt, and people who used it were affected by iodine deficiency. Those suffering from it had throats disfigured with large growths.

A successful public-private partnership between the government, Salt Trading Corporation and aid agencies iodised salt under the brand आयो नुन and this all but eradicated visible goitre — it went down from 55% in 1965 to only 0.4% in 2007. This is one of Nepal’s public health success stories.

However, in solving one

problem, we may have created another. The country is now facing thyroid disorders caused in part by excess iodine intake. Recent studies show an increasing prevalence of thyroid disorders, even among younger Nepalis.

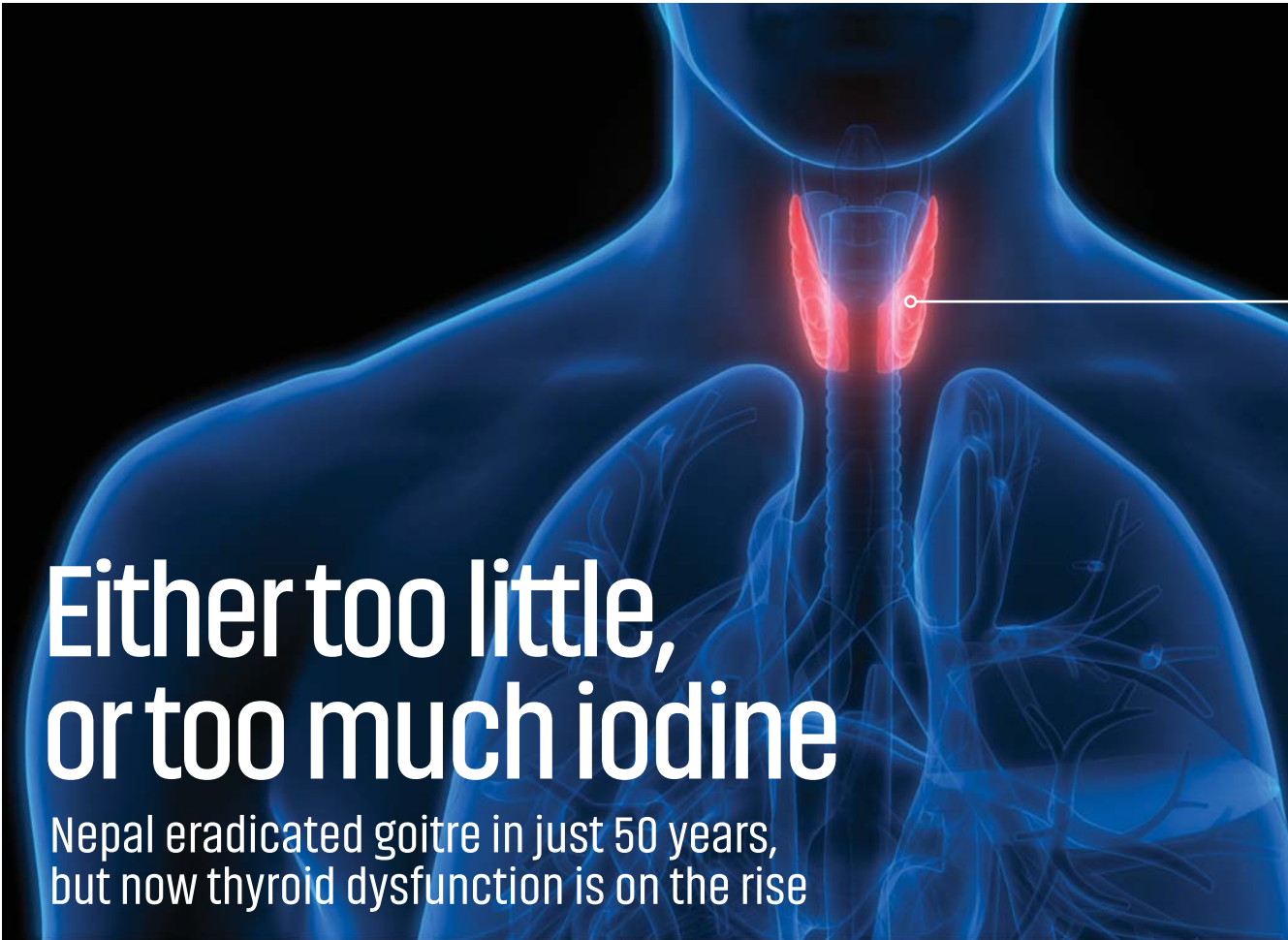
A 2019 community-level survey in five districts found the prevalence of thyroid disorders at 4.32%. Nearly three-fourths of those were subclinical hypothyroidism, 13.7% primary hypothyroidism and another 13.7% were hyperthyroidism.

Hypothyroidism is when the thyroid gland does not produce enough hormones. In hyperthyroidism, on the other hand, the gland is overactive and produces too much hormones. Subclinical conditions do not need immediate treatment.

The figures for hospital-based surveys are much higher. In a paper published in 2015 based on 5,230 cases from Teaching Hospital in Kathmandu, 29% were diagnosed with thyroid disorders. Higher prevalence was found in the 31-45 age group.

However, experts are cautious about pinpointing excess iodine in the diet as the only cause for thyroid disorders.

“The prevalence of thyroid disorders has indeed increased in the last 10-15 years, but this could also be a result of better diagnosis even in rural areas,” says endocrinologist Ansumali Joshi.



The recommended daily intake of iodine is 150 micrograms, but is higher for pregnant and lactating women.

A 2016 survey showed that

67.5% of households in Nepal have excessive iodine intake in food. School-age children were classified in the ‘excessive’ range, pregnant women in ‘adequate’ and

women of childbearing age in ‘more than adequate’. Iodine intake was higher in the central and western parts of the country and the Tarai.

“Iodised salt has reached every



SOURCE: JAG BAHADUR BUDHA

as to the Hurikot and Kaigaun villages in the Tichhurong region. Some of the last of these yak caravans were depicted in Éric Valli’s Oscar-nominated film, *Himalaya (Caravan)*.

In the far-west, the Khas Thakuris of the Byasi Sauka, Hikila and Sunsera communities brought salt from Taklakot in Tibet, trading it across Baitadi, Doti and Bajura.

The salt economy strengthened ties not only between the people of Tibet and the Nepal Himalaya, but also fostered personal relationships between individual Nepalis and Tibetans, so much so that the exchange of कोसेली presents between Nepalis and Tibetans was commonplace.

The salt trade also cemented lasting bonds between communities of the high Himalaya and the mid-mountains.

But by 1959, with China’s annexation of Tibet and later with the Panchayat system in Nepal, the salt trade went into steep decline. Khampa guerrillas based in Nepal were attacking the Chinese in Tibet, and this led to tighter controls at the border.

The popularity of Tibetan salt also waned

VITAL MINERAL: (*clockwise*) Two women trade buckwheat for salt as was common in the Himalaya before 1959 when Nepali merchants exchanged rock salt bought down from Tibet for grain from Nepal’s south.

A caravan of yaks carrying salt heads south.

Toni Hagen’s map of the principal rock salt-trade routes before (*above*) and after (*below*) the Chinese annexation of Tibet. Now, iodised salt from India reaches the northern-most parts of Nepal.

when awareness spread that the lack of iodine in it led to goitre and cretinism among Nepalis (*see report, below*).

The Salt Trading Corporation was established in 1963 which coincided with the spread of new roads and airports. Gradually, salt imported from India replaced Tibetan rock salt. Indeed, sea salt from India started to reach Nepal’s mountains and was cheaper than rock salt, its transport by road and even aircraft subsidised by the state.

The loss of the salt trade dealt a heavy blow to the economy, and ultimately changed the socio-economic status of the trans-Himalayan regions. Traders and their families were forced to migrate or take up alternative occupations. The salt trade disruption caused a mass exodus of Nepal’s Himalayan communities to Taplejung, Dhankuta, Kathmandu and even Darjeeling.

The Thakalis of Mustang moved to Kathmandu and to international trade. The Sherpas of the Khumbu found alternative employment in mountaineering and tourism, while some communities in Dolpo and Mugu still clung to the waning salt trade.

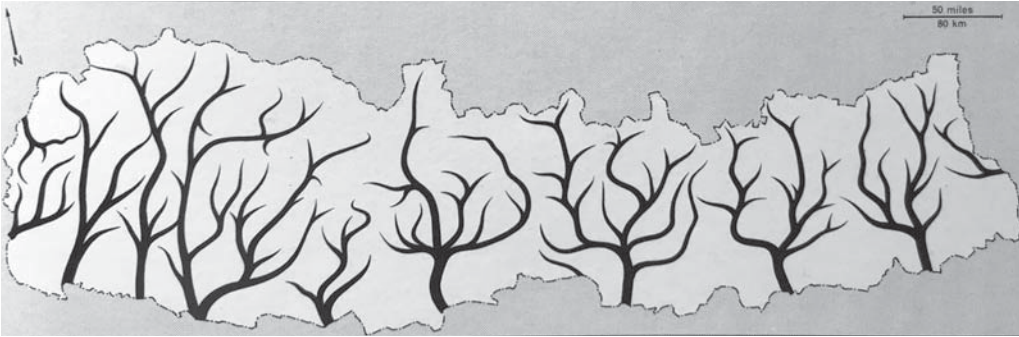
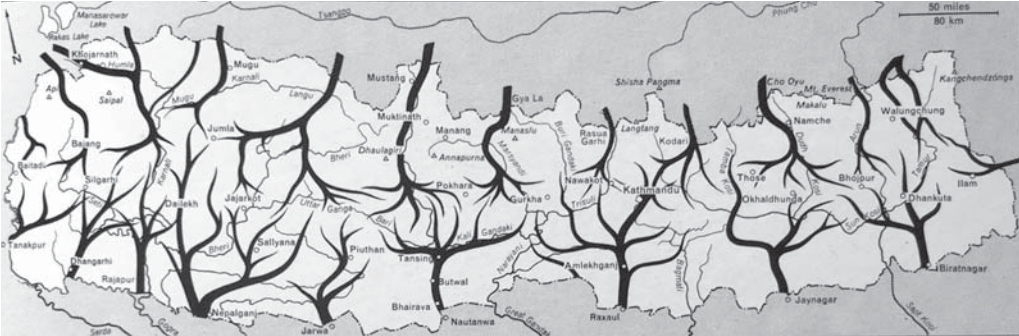
The end of the Nepal-Tibet salt trade also stopped cross-border community and family links, leading to a loss of skills, livelihoods and traditions like the salt-carrying yak and sheep caravans. Now, there are motorable roads in most places where the caravans used to traverse.

Some former salt traders now rear livestock, but the closure of pastures in Nepal and Tibet have affected herders on both sides of the border. This in turn has resulted in the decline of wool production and traditional apparel like *bakkhu* and *docha*, leading to a loss of knowledge, skills, craft, art forms and festivals, particularly among younger Nepalis.

The Nepal government could have introduced alternative livelihood programs to offset the effects of the termination of the salt trade, made worse by the Himalayan barter economy being affected by monetised trade. Communities have not had time to adapt as these changes came within a generation.

The Himalayan region, which once exported grain to Tibet, is now importing rice and other food items from China. Himalayan self-reliance has been replaced by dependency and hyper-consumerism. Gone are vestiges of the salt-economy and the socio-cultural ties it fostered.

Jag Bahadur Buda is a student of anthropology. Adapted from the original in the March issue of Himal magazine.



TONY HAGEN

THYROID GLAND

The thyroid is a butterfly-shaped gland that sits in the front of the neck. It produces 3 hormones: Calcitonin, T3 and T4. Iodine is the main component of T3 and T4, but the body does not produce the micronutrient, and it needs to be a part of the diet.

Thyroid Functions:

- Metabolism
- Brain development
- Bone formation, growth and maintenance
- Heart function
- Muscle control
- Digestion
- Mood regulation

Hypothyroidism Symptoms:
(thyroid does not produce enough hormone)

- Fatigue
- Weight gain
- Increased sensitivity to cold
- Slowed heart rate
- Constipation
- Hair fall
- Muscle ache
- Joint stiffness and pain
- Impaired memory
- Depression
- Irregular menstrual cycle
- Increased cholesterol level
- Goitre

Hyperthyroidism Symptoms:
(thyroid produces more iodine than required)

- Weight gain
- Increased appetite
- Sensitivity to heat
- Palpitation
- Irregular, rapid heartbeat
- Tremors
- Sweating
- Hair loss
- Muscle weakness
- Changes in menstrual patterns
- Loss of sleep
- Skin thinning
- Anxiety
- Frequent bowel movement
- Goitre

corner of Nepal and because there is excessive use of salt in food items, logically people are overdosing on iodine,” says cardiologist Prakash Regmi. “Excessive salt intake is

already a leading cause of heart and kidney diseases. And excess iodine is now adding thyroid dysfunction which can affect the brain and the nerves.”

After the 2016 assessment, the government reduced iodine content in salt from 50PPM (parts per million) to 30PPM. Experts say it might be time to reduce it further,

or even add the micronutrient in some other food item.

Misinterpretation of iodine ‘overdosing’ could also send out the wrong message, they warn, leading to the public avoiding iodised salt, and thus reverse Nepal’s successful eradication of iodine deficiency.

Other factors affecting thyroid glands include viral infections and endocrine disrupters like plastics and certain chemicals. Thyroid disorders can also be hereditary. Covid-19 has also been associated with thyroid inflammation, resulting in hyperthyroidism or thyroiditis.

Untreated hyperthyroidism can lead to ‘thyroid storm’, a very rare but life-threatening condition in patients often referred to Kathmandu hospitals due to lack of treatment facilities elsewhere.

“We know either too much or too little about thyroid disorders. But there is a general lack of clear understanding, I have a lot of patients who visit me all panicking about their thyroid test results,” says endocrinologist Jyoti Bhattarai. “But there is a spectrum to thyroid diseases, and many do not need treatment. Subclinical hypothyroidism is one example.”

There are groups more at risk: pregnant women and those planning to conceive who should take thyroid function tests to prevent possible premature birth, miscarriage and even stillbirth.

Women unable to conceive should also be screened.

And ideally, all newborns should also take a test because early diagnosis of a congenital hypothyroidism can almost entirely prevent mental disability. Another risk factor is obesity.

“Growing up in the mountains I had several family members afflicted with goitre. We have made much progress since then, but it is time to change our focus and study the prevalence of thyroid disorders today,” says Pokhara-based physician Bikash Gauchan. “It affects multiple systems and patients experience a wide range of symptoms with implications on both mental and physical health.”

Endocrinology and the study of hormones used to concern only the well-to-do. Public health in Nepal was all about preventing infectious diseases which afflicted the poor. Today, the lines are blurred, and Nepal needs treatment for chronic diseases of the vital organs like the lungs, heart, kidney and stomach for all sections of society.

Says Jyoti Bhattarai: “The field of endocrinology in Nepal needs much more commitment and investment. While hormonal dysfunctions including thyroid disorders are often not immediately fatal, they can significantly affect one’s quality of life.” 🇳🇵

EVENTS



Film Southasia

The 13th edition of the biennial festival is back with 55 documentaries from in and around South Asia.
21-24 April, www.filmsouthasia.org

All Ears

Attend the first podcast festival of its kind in Nepal and listen to podcasters from Nepal, Philippines, Australia and Myanmar. Sign up now.
9-10 April

Nepal Cloud Summit

Participate in the Nepal Cloud Summit in-person or through live-stream. Learn from cloud leaders, trainers and experts through sessions about Azure. Register now.
23 April, 1pm-5.30pm, Yellow Pagoda Hotel, Kantipath

Day Hike

Enjoy the Dandagaun to Padagaun danda day hike this weekend. The hike covers 16km over 8 hours. Call for more details.
9 April, 6.40am onwards, Rs600, 9846190957



Free health checkup

Get a free health check up at the health camp organised by Crystal Diagnostic on the occasion of World Health Day.
8-13 April, 7am-8pm, Sinamangal, Kathmandu

DINING



Mezze by Roadhouse

Mezze's menu boasts of a wide array of International cuisine, a great view of the palace museum and a perfect atmosphere to enjoy food with loved ones.
Mercantile Plaza, Darbar Marg (01) 4223087

MUSIC

Free Birds

This weekend, Hard Rock café brings live music by Free Birds.
9 April, 7:30pm onwards, Sherpa Mall



Gone Elvis

Enjoy a live band performance by Gone Elvis only at Sherpa Mall.
8 April, 7.30pm onwards, Sherpa Mall

On Acid

Attend On Acid's new album launch 'Teen Saya' at Beers N' Cheers and take a free copy of their album home.
8 April, 7.30pm onwards, Rs500, Beers N' Cheers



Jerusha Rai w/ Jaira

Jerusha Rai and Jaira's music with a special guest performance by the TREES. Tickets are available at TicketSansar and Beers N' Cheers.
9 April, 7.30pm onwards, Rs500, Beers N' Cheers

Tasty Trio

Enjoy the weekend with traditional jazz music by Tasty Trio.
10 April, 7.30pm onwards, Rs500, Beers N' Cheers



Momotarou Restaurant

Enjoy a Japanese meal at Momotarou restaurant. Don't miss out on the soft tofu, pork cutlets and don varieties and the mouthwatering bento box.
Sanepa Chowk, Lalitpur (01) 5537385

Ageno Bakery

Order from Ageno for the best cakes, pastries and baked goods in town. Must have: their mini tarts.
Dhobighat, (01) 5438106

About Town

GETAWAY



Hotel Barahi

Located just beyond the banks of Phewa Lake, Hotel Barahi offers stunning views and luxury rooms decorated with rustic pieces and earthy tones to keep one relaxed.
Lakeside, Pokhara, (61)460617

Bandipur Kaushi Inn

A small, homely place to stay in the idyllic village of Bandipur, replete with cultural diversity and traditional architecture.
Bandipur, Tanahu, (065) 520083

Himalaya Hotel Lodge

Located away from the cluster of guesthouses in Ghandruk, Himalaya Hotel Lodge offers accommodations unlike any other. Guests can dine overlooking scenic views and experience the quaintness of the village life.
Ghandruk, (01) 4435686

Hotel Country Villa

Placed atop Nagarkot hill, Hotel Country Villa offers the best view of the Himalayas. The Hotel also serves scrumptious Indian and international delights among other services for guests.
Naldum Road, Nagarkot (01) 6680127



Tiger Palace

Tiger Palace Resort offers a wide variety of recreational facilities from six different restaurants to an International Casino for entertainment. This place is a must visit place for those venturing South.
Bhairawa, (071) 512000

Anatolia

Anatolia's Indian and Turkish dishes are packed with an assortment of spices and flavours. Start with their mouth watering mutton curry and finish off with their special Baklavas.
Thamel (01) 4258757



Baan Thai

Baan Thai serves delicious Thai dishes and seafood. Don't forget to try the hotpot.
Ekantakuna, (01) 5000614

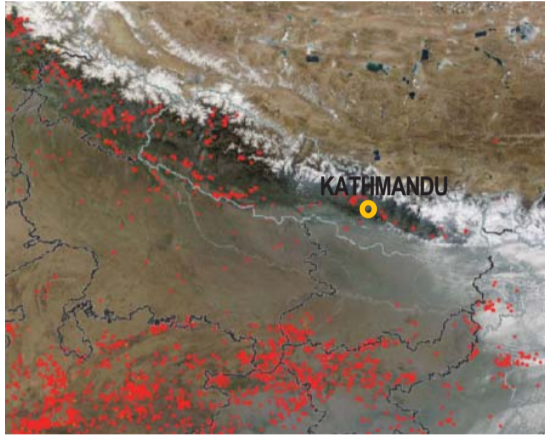
WEEKEND WEATHER



Although the temperature has dropped compared to mid-March, the western Tarai will have a heatwave. We could do with some rain. The good news is that there is some precipitation in store on Friday and over the weekend. This may come in the form of afternoon and evening storms with up-valley winds kicking up a convection system in some parts of the Himalayan foothills.
It may get windy, with dust storms accompanied by lightning and thunder. The downdrafts accompanying these systems will cool things down in Kathmandu Valley on Sunday. As the summer storm season gets underway, this might be a good time to check on roof material, weak tree branches, and any objects on balconies that could fly off.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
26°/16°	26°/16°	24°/16°

AIR QUALITY INDEX



The nationwide smoke haze from undergrowth fires continued this week with no respite. As this NASA FIRMS infrared image for Thursday shows, there are fires (red dots) burning mainly in western Nepal and smoke is also being transported across the border from India. There might be some relief with rain forecast this weekend, although the thunderstorms could light more fires and the winds will fan them. The wind can also whip up a lot of dust, so the Air Quality Index is likely to drop. If there is enough rainfall, it could wash down suspended particulate matter, and fingers-crossed that we will get some temporary respite from the haze in Kathmandu this weekend.

OUR PICK



Writer-director Joanna Hogg's deeply personal and autobiographical films *The Souvenir Part I* and *II* are together the enigmatic and luminous self-portrait of an artist as a young woman. The first part follows the shy and ambitious filmmaker Julie discovering her voice while navigating a turbulent and draining courtship with a charismatic but untrustworthy man. The second part is the aftermath of the relationship, and Julie begins to untangle her memories and emotions, making the manipulative man into her graduation film for film school, sorting fact from fiction. In a slow, meditative pace, the films combine memoir and fantasy in a lush narrative of creative adolescence and first love, providing an inspiring and strengthening look into the life and mind of a young filmmaker coming of age. Stars Honor Swinton Byrne, Tom Burke, Joe Alwyn, Harris Dickinson, Jaygann Aye, Ariane Laped, Richard Ayoade and Tilda Swinton.



कोभिड-१९ विरुद्धको खोप सरकारले निःशुल्क लगाइरहेको छ ।

अबैध रुपमा खोप बेच्ने र किनेर लगाउने दुवैलाई प्रचलित कानुन बमोजिम कडा कारवाही हुनेछ ।

कोरोना विरुद्धको खोप बेचबिखन भएको थाहा पाउने जो कोहीले स्थानीय प्रशासन, प्रहरी कार्यालय, पालिका वा स्वास्थ्य कार्यालयमा यथार्थ जानकारी गराउनु हुन अनुरोध छ ।

बजारमा लुकिछिपी बेच्न राखिएका खोपहरु नक्कली हुन सक्छन् ।

कोभिड लाग्नबाट बच्नका लागि खोपको प्रयोग गर्नु

घरमै बस्नु

खोपको साथै मास्क पनि

खोपको साथै हात धुनु



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Growing appetite

But can the government that has rolled out meals for students in 71 districts meet expectations?

● **Marty Logan** in Bajhang

In Bajhang's Bithadchir Rural Municipality nobody is happy that school meals now being managed by the World Food Programme (WFP) will be taken over by the Nepal government starting next year.

"It's the best program I've seen in 32 years," says education coordinator Madan Bam, sitting in his office in the new municipal building in Deulekh from where he looks out over valleys on two sides.

Students do not go home for lunch, and stay there in the afternoons. They are more positive about learning, and the high dropout rate has fallen.

A five-minute walk down the hill and across the street that bisects the tiny bazar *en route* to the district headquarter of Chainpur, an unpaved road leads to Shivbhawani Primary School. A dozen parents of the School Management Committee (SMC) crowd into an office with teachers and guests.

"If the program becomes cash-based, the money can be misused and everything costs more in local markets," says SMC Chair Suresh Mahar. "We would have to buy food from outside. Then we face issues of quality and sustainability."

WFP has been delivering rice, dal, salt and oil for school meals in various districts of Nepal for 45 years. The Nepal government has been gradually assuming responsibility for those districts and has expanded into 71, since a separate cash-based program was launched in 2008.

Today WFP operates in just six districts, with half of management costs shared by the government, and will be handed over by 2024.

The WFP project is referred to as 'in-kind' because it delivers the staples, sometimes procured overseas, to districts, where they are picked up and taken to schools to be cooked.

The government program is 'cash-based' because it provides money (Rs15 per student per meal, Rs20 in five remote districts in Karnali) to municipalities, which transfer the cash to their schools to buy ingredients and prepare lunches for students from early grade learning to class five for 180 days a year.

According to WFP, 99% of 163 countries have school feeding programs. Between 2013 and 2020 the proportion of school children receiving meals in low-income countries rose from 13% to 20%, adds its report, *State of School Feeding Worldwide 2020*.

In that period, the proportion of low-income countries that had a school feeding policy increased from 20% to 75% and the share of domestic funding in overall spending for school feeding went from 17% to 28%, 'reducing reliance on international donors'.

One reason for the rise in school meal programs is simply the return on investment, says

WFP. 'Efficient programmes yield returns of up to \$9 for every \$1 invested, creating value across multiple sectors, including: education, health and nutrition, social protection and local agriculture,' states *The State of School Feeding*.

While there has been a strong focus in recent years on a child's development during the first 1,000 days, researchers now believe crucial development years extend longer than that.

'It is also important to support health and nutrition for the next 7,000 days to sustain the early gains, provide opportunities for catch-up, and to address phases of vulnerability, especially puberty, the growth spurt and brain development in adolescence,' the report says.

Nepal's School Sector Development Plan (2016-2022) calls for 'midday meals in schools to reduce short term hunger among school children, and address micronutrient deficiencies through multi-fortified foods and diversifying the food basket, including with fresh and locally produced foods'.

While the country has made dramatic progress in reducing childhood malnutrition in recent decades, it has stagnated in the past few years. For example, the 36% rate for stunting in 2016 was greater than the developing country average of 25% and the Asia average of 21.8%. And there has been no assessment of the impact of school meals on child nutrition.

A series of 10 school meal menus developed by the government and WFP to match availability of food in different parts of the country lists amounts of energy, fat and protein per meal, along with vitamin A, zinc and iron. Each midday meal is supposed to deliver 30% of a child's daily nutrition needs.

The Nepal government has also shown its financial commitment to school feeding. From 2017 to 2020 the program's budget almost quadrupled (from \$20 million to nearly \$70 million), and external support fell from \$4.2 million to \$2.8 million in 2020.

Between the Nepal government, the US Department of Agriculture and WFP, 7.2 million children have been fed since 2017.

In the neighbouring district of Baitadi, WFP handed over school feeding to the government in 2019.

A two-hour drive from district headquarters Gothalapani, along a rutted, jouncing dirt road where groups of men and women heft rocks in place to repair retaining walls meant to stop landslides, is Dasharath Chand Municipality's Shivshakti Nagarjun Basic School.

Covid-19 delayed the start of the locally-run program in the school of 111 students. But since then the results have been positive, says headmaster Dev Bahadur Chand.

"Students are more satisfied now because the meals change daily. With the WFP system there was only one item," he says, sitting in front of the chalkboard in one of the school's handful of classrooms. The new menu has also translated into more consistent attendance.

Asked about the Rs15 budget, Chand says it is sufficient for now. The school can afford to feed the children meat two or three times every couple of months, but he says the amount should keep pace with inflation.

Across the courtyard, in a much smaller room used as a



kitchen, eggs are boiling for the daily meal. Students attend school for a half day only on Fridays, so today's lunch is smaller than usual.

There have been no issues with the quality or availability of items for the lunches, says the headmaster, which was one of the main concerns in Bajhang.

In another classroom, students sit in front of green and white laptops for digital learning, one of the 'components' included in the

WFP school meals program.

Others are early grade reading, and instruction on nutrition and health and WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene), digital learning is the students' favourite, says Chand.

"When they are graduating and moving to a new school for Grade 6 they ask me if their new school will also have laptops," he says.

But the status of digital learning seems unclear even in school that have recently transitioned from the

WFP program.

The chief of Bajhang's Education Development and Coordination Unit, Surendra Kathayat, says digital learning was a pilot program and has been phased out.

In Bhaktapur, the Nepal Government office that manages the expanding school meal program country-wide, the Centre for Education and Human Resources Development (CEHRD), Director

for school lunches



ALL PHOTOS: MARTY LOGAN



FOOD FOR LEARNING: Roads now connect remote villages of Bajhang district, making them more accessible to the outside world (*left*).

Students sit for the school lunch program which does not just raise nutrition level of children, but has also kept the dropout rate low (*left, below and above*).

WFP is handing over the scheme to the Nepal government, but the continuation of its digital learning component is uncertain (*above*).

Ganesh Poudel says, “Yes, we have a digital learning program but it’s not directly connected to daily meals. Definitely the government is focused on ICT-based education.”

A 2021 evaluation notes that WFP’s remaining school feeding program needs to be gradually turned over to the government so it can become sustainable.

“Budgetary constraints, especially in terms of provision of learning materials, infrastructure development, capacity building of school staff, poses one of the sustainability risks,” it notes.

Poudel acknowledges that the Rs15 limit is the main challenge. “This amount is very low, prices are increasing day by day and there are management costs,” he says. “How can we survive?”

The other challenge is human resources. Nearly 1 million people are involved in preparing and delivering the school meal program, directly and indirectly, and this adds to the cost.

In WFP’s global strategy, Nepal is classed as a ‘type 2’ country. That means in its next multi-year plan WFP-Nepal will move from implementing programs to providing capacity-building and technical assistance to the government.

Says WFP Representative and Country Director Robert Kasca: “While the government has really invested a big chunk of money over the past years ... but the nutrition

requirements, sanitary conditions in the schools and related infrastructure and also training of the cooks will improve the quality of the meals. Another possibility is expanding the school meals program beyond Grade 5 up to Grade 8, which we think would be a great investment.”

A 45-minute drive from the WFP office, through the Kathmandu Valley, is Tokha Municipality. Guided by recent training and orientation sessions that WFP gave to local government representatives from 48 districts, officials there are considering expanding school feeding through Grade 8, says Manoj Kumar Sah, a WFP Program Policy Officer who is working with the government’s CEHRD.

Municipal officials would like to link school feeding to local agriculture. Says Sah: “I asked them, ‘what kind of little support can we give you?’, they said ‘we don’t want any support, we have enough budget. The only thing is we need a strong, legal policy.’”

In Baitadi’s Nanigad Basic School, one of a handful of officials, teachers and visitors sitting in a semi-circle of chairs outside the one-storey school building, headmaster Deepak Raj Pant says he wants to run an early grade reading program but teachers need training, as does the assistant who cooks lunch.

“We are told to go to the local

government for help but they don’t show any interest,” he says.

Kasca says the participation and dedication of communities to school feeding is essential. “The (central) government’s funding commitment is one thing... the most important thing to me is that we get complete buy-in from the local communities ... they have money, it is how they allocate and spend it.”

In Baitadi, Patan Municipality Deputy Mayor Saraswati Koli says officials are committed to school feeding but funding is a concern because so many schools are requesting money beyond the Rs15 per child, for training, cooking and serving equipment.

Still, all 60 schools in Patan are running the government program and attendance is up. “It helps students to develop the habit of going to school,” says Koli. “Ingredients are sourced from markets and schools are growing their own vegetables. Everything is easily available and we include meat and eggs from time to time.”

The politician is worried that the school feeding budget could be cut after the May elections (for which she hopes to get a ticket from her party, Nepali Congress). “But even if funding is reduced, the program will continue,” she predicts, “schools are demanding it. Organisations like WFP are only showing us the way, we need to build the road ourselves.”

experimenting with HGSF in various districts. It started in 2017 in Sindhupalchok and Bardia, then expanded to Nuwakot, Jumla, Dhanusha and Mahottari, in one or two municipalities in each place.

One analysis found that HGSF ‘increased the frequency of meal provision and meal quality in terms of dietary diversity and nutrient content.’ But rolling out the approach would require a 20%-33% increase in the Rs15 allocation to pay for non-food costs like fuel, transport and a cook, it added.

The most concrete result of the pilots has been the creation of 10 regional menus, to correspond with the foods available and local tastes, in various parts of the country.

“For now, when the government says homegrown school feeding program, it’s basically the scale-up of these menus,” says WFP School Meals Program Manager Neera Sharma.

“Each school will select six menus for six days, and based on that menu’s ingredients they will calculate how much is required on a monthly or annual basis and do an agreement with the local farmers or cooperatives to sell those products in that school so the money will remain in the community itself,” she adds.

Officials in Tokha Municipality recently told WFP-Nepal staff that they would like to link school feeding to local agriculture but are waiting for the central government to issue legal guidelines. Other localities are planting seeds without an official policy.

In Dasharath Chand Rural Municipality in Baitadi, farmers have started raising chicken because they see that schools have put eggs on the weekly menu since taking over school feeding from WFP. Other schools in Patan Municipality that have land are growing their own vegetables.

Unsurprisingly, in the fertile Tarai district of Kailali HGSF is well advanced in some municipalities. At Janajagriti Basic School on the outskirts of Dhangadi, the school invested Rs15,000 of its own money and got support from WFP to clear and fence land for a kitchen garden, which it is planning to expand, says Head Teacher Shanti Chaudhary.

“Before, if we ran out of something we’d have to run to the village and buy things. Now we grow everything here. It’s fresh and organic — no pesticides, no fertiliser,” she adds. What it cannot grow, the school purchases from local women farmers.

At the Centre for Education and Human Resources Development in Kathmandu, Director-General Ganesh Poudel says HGSF is included in government policy, but they are waiting for results from these various local initiatives before developing national guidelines. 🇳🇵

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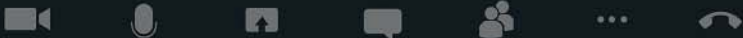


HUNGRY FOR LEARNING

The World Food Programme’s school lunches across Nepal’s remote mountains has helped improve nutritional status of children while also decreasing dropout rates. The scheme has now been handed over to the Nepal government, and has been rolled out in 71 districts. But can it meet expectations? Watch the video on our YouTube channel.



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