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COALITION COLLISION

● Shristi Karki

A loudspeaker cut through the early morning silence in Chandragiri Municipality on Wednesday as a pickup bounced along an alley, blaring election slogans. With less than a fortnight to go, there is sound and fury as campaigning gets into high gear for the 13 May local elections.

But there is also consternation in the ruling 5-party coalition because many local cadre are dissatisfied with the way the party brass has chosen common candidates. Some 40% of candidates from Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba's Nepali Congress (NC), for example, are defying the party edict and

standing as rebels.

An electoral alliance between the NC, Maoists, the Unified Socialists and JSP have running mates for mayors and deputy mayors, as well as municipality chairs and vice-chairs from a combination of parties. This has left many local politicians disgruntled, with some even threatening to break away and run as independents.

Matters have come to a head in the all-important Pokhara and Bharatpur Municipalities. The former president of NC Pokhara, Bimal Bahadur Karki is contesting as an independent candidate after his party's decision to give the mayoral ticket to Dhanraj Acharya of the Unified Socialists.

"I will not be withdrawing my candidacy under any circumstance," says Karki who has accused Prime

Minister Deuba of offering Pokhara on a platter to the Communists. The coalition members are also facing public wrath for giving tickets to family or close cronies with money, and not to capable and popular local leaders.

In the 2017 local polls, the Maoists tore up ballot papers and forced the NC to withdraw its mayor candidate in favour of Renu Dahal, the daughter of Maoist chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal. The NC's powerful leaders in Chitwan are determined not to let that happen again, even though Renu Dahal has once more been given the ticket in a NC-Maoist deal.

Other candidates with insider connections include Srijana Singh who is up for mayor of Kathmandu. She is the wife of NC leader Prakashman Singh. Elsewhere, Biratnagar's deputy mayoral candidate Amarendra Kumar Yadav is the son of JSP chair Upendra Yadav.

The expediency of the electoral alliance has meant that the coalition is circumventing the Local Government Election Act 2017, which requires at least one female candidate from a party for mayor and deputy mayor, as well as chairs and deputy chairs of rural municipalities.

Many tickets have gone entirely to male candidates because they are from different parties. This has incensed the NC's Pramila Subedi Acharya, who is running as an independent for deputy mayor of Madhyapur Thimi.

"The top party leadership never discussed our candidacies, they are forcing voters and the party to support the Maoists, and making a mockery of inclusion by selecting both male candidates," rues Acharya.

It is Deuba's NC that is bearing the brunt of the brewing dissent. Coalition leaders met on Wednesday and took a tough line, saying that if their rebels did not withdraw their candidacies, they would be subject to disciplinary action. A statement after the meeting read: 'Concerned Parties will take necessary action to withdraw the candidature registered by the party members within the alliance as independents.'

Even in Deuba's home district of Dadeldhura, the party has ousted its local leader Karna Bahadur Malla for registering his candidacy in an alliance with the opposition UML. Senior NC leader Shekhar Koirala and others who have all along been against the 5-party electoral alliance are livid about Deuba appeasing the Communists in the coalition, in ticket distribution, and eliminating opponents in his own party.

"This is a conspiracy to commit political assassination of loyal members of the Congress," Koirala said in a statement.

For Deuba, the foremost priority is to keep the governing alliance intact, even it means sacrificing constituencies like Pokhara, Bharatpur or Dadeldhura. ■



Mirage of migrant rights
EDITORIAL PAGE 2

Between home and the deep blue sea
PAGE 4-5

Our notes count, but our votes don't
The power of workers working together
PAGE 10-11

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Mirage of migrant rights

Another year, yet another May Day. As Nepal emerges from the ravages of the pandemic and the economic crisis created by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the role of remittances in supporting families and indeed the country's economy is more vital than ever.

On this year's May 1 Labour Day, Nepalis are also preparing to vote in local elections. But not the country's estimated 4 million workers abroad who prop up the economy. They are still not allowed to exercise their Constitutional right to vote, even after the Supreme Court ordered the government in 2018 to make arrangements to facilitate absentee ballots.

Political leaders have ignored that ruling. Nepal's main parties have made such a mess of governance that they sense (probably correctly) that the diaspora vote will be anti-incumbent.

And, as Tilu Sharma argues from Qatar (*page 10-11*), Nepal's migrant workers know only too well the hurdles the government puts on their path, while using the money they send home to keep the national economy afloat.

The fight to be heard is even more challenging abroad where our workers, despite filling jobs not wanted by locals, in what are known as the 'D3' (Difficult, Dangerous, Dirty) are treated as invisibles.

In this Labour Day Special edition, Madhusudhan Ojha (*pages 10-11*) walks us through the struggle of the Migrant Worker Union in Korea to gain legitimacy. The pioneers of that labour movement included Nepalis who risked deportation and detention for better rights in a foreign land. Ojha's experience shows the importance of collective bargaining, while also demonstrating how it is an ongoing and often thankless process with some of their demands the same as what it was decades ago.

If this is the situation in one of the better-run bilateral migration programs, it is not difficult to imagine how Nepali workers are treated in other destinations like Qatar, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, or India. In most of these places, migrant workers are banned from unionising.

UAE resident and journalist Umakanta Pandey is currently in detention, not for criticising the Emirati government but on a complaint by the Nepal Embassy for posting about visit visa misuse that put workers at risk. When a Nepali citizen is serving time in the UAE at the request of a Nepali state

organ, how can we expect Singha Darbar to be more vigilant about protection of our overseas workers?

It is a tragic irony that while Nepal prepares for local elections, not only are our overseas workers not allowed to vote, but their sacrifices get barely a mention. In fact, the government is only worried about how falling remittances have further reduced Nepal's forex reserves. Politicians are even calling on migrants to send money through legal channels to help out in this time of crisis.

Then there is the much-touted Prime Minister's Employment Program which has failed to deliver as promised. The lesson here is to empower local governments for decision-making, provide them with resources and promote seamless coordination with the federal government.

A more honest way to mark Labour Day would be to under-promise and over-deliver, have more work and less talk. But with parties on the campaign trail, all we hear is lofty talk and more empty promises.

May Day coverage this week and over the last 21 years in this paper have time and again demonstrated the role of the 'remittance senders'. One such story is that of Prakash Gurung who worked as a safety adviser at an off-shore oil rig in Qatar (*page 4-5*) and has returned. His is a story of wasted potential, wasted opportunities.

Gurung's story is an example of how Nepalis can also fill high-paying jobs in the Gulf, but have been largely unable to do so. Despite having workplace safety monitoring skills and experience that would be critical for our economy, the returnee has turned to agriculture in frustration.

Migrant workers like Tilu Sharma, Madhusudhan Ojha and Prakash Gurung in this edition of *Nepali Times* have called out state complacency and neglect. And elections this year are not likely to address these issues faced by migrant, especially since they cannot even vote.

Remittance inflows decreased 1.7% to Rs631.19 billion, and 3% to \$5.28 billion in the eight month review period ending mid-March. The number of Nepalis taking labour approval including renewals bounced back to 406,162 in the same period.

Nepali migrant workers will continue to chart their own paths, test their luck overseas and silently contribute to the economy with the state doing nothing more than putting hurdles every step of the way before they leave, while they are abroad, and once they return.

constant cash inflows, we have to accept the virtual impossibility of raising funds without venturing into the realm of shadiness

This intrinsic compulsion of organised politics has understandably constricted the CIAA's room for manoeuvre. Nevertheless, the commission has succeeded in setting strict standards. Take the Lauda Air investigations, for instance. By demanding millions in bonds from two accused at the oddest of hours, the CIAA drew scathing criticism for arbitrariness. But look at the subtext here. If either man had managed to raise that sum, wouldn't that have been kind of self-incriminating?

Many people are worried that by granting the CIAA the authority to scrutinise ministerial policy decisions, the new legislation dilutes our grimy democracy. Will the CIAA commissioners be emboldened to re-write the country's media policy? A lot would probably depend on the personality and peccadilloes of the commissioners. It wouldn't take long, though, for those

tempted to slap gag orders on certain stories to discover how censorious the press can become when the news peg is the CIAA's own abuse of authority.

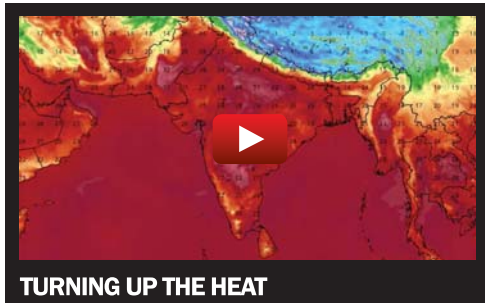
From archive material of *Nepali Times* of the past 20 years, site search: www.nepalitimes.com



LABOUR DAY

Nepalis chart their own path by migrating to prop up the economy, while the state puts up hurdles along every step of their way.

ONLINE PACKAGES



TURNING UP THE HEAT

After sweltering through record March heat, Kathmandu's average temperature this week was at a 53-year record. Dharan registered 35.7°C in mid-March, another record. People in Nepal's Tarai are used to heat waves, but not in March and April. But there is more searing heat in store. Watch video and read story on *pages 10-11*.

POLICE LYNCHING

I witnessed this horrific event as a child ('Mob, movement and mayhem,' *Nepali Times*, www.nepalitimes.com). Kalimati Police station was ransacked, the policemen were beaten mercilessly and paraded around the town in *Thela Gada*. The dead bodies lay on the street till late evening, eyes gouged out, beaten to pulp and too feeble to even react to those still kicking. There were rumours of Mandaleys attacking people against the democratic movement so people were patrolling all night and forming vigilante groups to secure their localities. And the police brutality seems to have led to this really tragic and unfortunate incident.

Kalyan Nemkul



• The world needs more love and forgiveness.

David Wang

• They did not deserve this. They were sons, brothers, husbands—people. Nobody has the right to kill.

Pan Chy

• They could have been saved but, they were ignored by the ruling class.

Ashish Sharma

HEATWAVE

There are few places in Tarai, when you walk past them, even during heat wave, it feels like walking through an air conditioned road ('North-Indian heatwave hits Nepal', Sonia Awale, *pages 10-11*). You know why? Those places have trees—thick plantation of trees. Do plant more trees, you will see a dramatic change in weather.

Sifat H Ansari

• This is perhaps the March and April! Sweltering summer! Climate change has its own meaning in Kathmandu, because what happens in KTM does not happen in the rest of the world.

Udaya Sharma

• This reality is manifested today in the Sub-Sahara. We will need to collaborate to tackle issues of common interests.

Hashimu Attahiru

HERITAGE

Yeah, we built up again ('The history of heritage', Ashish Dhakal, #1108). But this time unfortunately, they wiped out the history of Nepal with Kasthmandap. The old structure carried the legend that it was built with wood of single tree. But they rebuilt it with new wood from varied trees this time around. They tried to spoil Rani Pokhari and succeeded to some extent, repeated the same with Kamal Pokhari, tried to spoil the Basantapur area. Have we Nepalis become so desperate and suicidal, that we seek to find the identity, as we ourselves attempt to wipe it out?

Lal Bahadur

LOCAL ELECTION

Politicians are to be blamed for allowing illegal quarrying ('Thinking locally, acting locally', Sagar Budathoki, #1108), or have they gone along with this destruction for some reason?

Alan Roadnight

EARTHQUAKES

Every side of the tectonic plate has moved in last few months ('Concrete planning', Editorial, #1108). We find it is much more complex under the earth and it is very much linked to solar activity in the uptick.

Nathan Hagen

We also need to develop sustainable financing tools for disaster risk management and to reduce risk. Complex problem, but it must be solved.

Mark O'Donnell

ELECTRIC BUSES

We should replace all old Indian made diesel buses with new electric public vehicles which will be very advantageous for a country like ours with huge electricity generation capacity ('Nepal's journey to electric public transport', *Nepali Times*, #1108).

Aayo Gorkhali

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



Thinking locally, acting locally

by Sagar Budathoki

Local elections are only weeks away, but villagers in outskirts of Lalitpur do not have high hopes. Rural municipalities of the district have become notorious for elected contractors who serve not the people, but their own interests. Go online for full story.

f Most reached and shared on Facebook

Nepal's journey to electric public transport

Sajha Yatayat is set to operate 40 Chinese-made electric buses in Kathmandu soon. Three battery-powered buses drove past the Upper Bhote Kosi hydroelectric project on Nepali New Year's Day to be tested in the capital, while other 37 will arrive later this year.

t Most popular on Twitter

Mob, movement and mayhem

by Nepali Times

The people's movement in 1990 ended the Panchayat system and ushered in multiparty democracy in Nepal. But residual anger from the brutality during the Panchayat era led to protesters killing six policemen on the streets of Kathmandu on 24 April of that year. Read this eyewitness account of the events on nepalitimes.com

q Most commented



The history of heritage

by Ashish Dhakal

Kathmandu has rebuilt itself every century after a major earthquake but which building style deserves protection changes with time. Read full sotry for details only on our website.

r Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

North Indian heat wave hits #Nepal
#Kathmandu sweated through hottest March on record, but there is more searing heat in store. Details in this report by @SoniaAwale.
#HeatWaves #WeatherForecast #India #ClimateCrisis



Akhilesh Upadhyay @akhileshU

Kathmandu experienced the hottest March. What are the city's mayoral candidates saying, if at all, about climate change and your plans?



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

As we mark 7th anniversary of 2015 earthquake after the completion of reconstruction, the question of saving lives and infrastructure from future disasters is even more urgent. Rebuilding disaster resilience Nepal | Anil Pokhrel @anilpokhrel @NDRRMA_Nepal



madhukar upadhyay @madhukaru

Hope we don't have to face such earthquake again!



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

On this day in 1990, soon after the restoration of #democracy, six policemen were lynched. An eyewitness who was with the police at the time recounts the event 32 years later.



Satish Pandey @SatishKTM

This was gruesome. Still living in our memories.



Mark Pickett @DrMarkPickett

I was an eye-witness to this myself. Evil.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Winners and Losers of the Fossil Fuel War
Russia's invasion of Ukraine also offers the chance of a the #greenenergy transition. Humberto Márquez for @ipsnews



Jehudi Blom @Mesmaeker

Is #nepal the ideal country to fast track to green energy? Sun, wind and hydro?

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Watching the Watchdog

The following paragraphs by 'Puskar Bhusal' now revealed to be blogger Sanjay Upadhyay published in *Nepali Times* in 2002 turned out to be prophetic. The column discussed the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA)'s increased crackdown on corruption while posing an important question: but who watches the watchdog?

Years later, the CIAA under Lokman Singh Karki indeed violated the rule of law arbitrarily directing the cancellation of hydropower licenses, interfered in the medical education sector, and mercilessly hounded and extorted civil society activists and lawyers who opposed his appointment.

Karki was finally impeached in 2017 after a reign of terror lasting nearly four years only because the very leaders who appointed him risked becoming his next targets.

Excerpts from the column from #9126 April – 02 May 2022, twenty years ago this week:

During the last years of the Panchayat regime, there was a clear distinction between a 'commission' and a 'bribe'. The tolerance level for the former was greater. Since our current polity presupposes the existence of political parties that rely heavily on



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BETWEEN HOME AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA

The highs and lows of working on and off-shore oil rig in the Gulf and coming back to business as usual in Nepal

● Prakash Gurung

I worked overseas in Qatar for 13 years as a safety adviser in an oil and gas company followed by two years in the UAE. The Gulf states are rich because of their oil reserves, but as an employee for many years in this sector with direct experience, I was able to develop a unique understanding of this business.

The company I worked for produced 500,000 barrels of crude oil per day. I was stationed on an off-shore rig in the Persian Gulf, and this was a high-risk, high-reward job. Offshore assignment is organised around a unique work-leave schedule in which I was on duty for six weeks, and got paid home leave for six weeks after that.

During the 54 days of work on the rig, we did not even have a single day off, and being in the middle of the sea was mentally taxing at times. We did not get to see the land at all, except on very clear days when we could make out the brown hills of the Iranian coast far away. Gazing at land through binoculars was a source of entertainment and comfort during those six sea-bound weeks.

Despite the risks, the job was a sweet deal because it gave me

the best of both worlds: to work in Qatar with higher pay but without losing touch with my family whom I got to be with every other month.

This was a blessing because I knew my Nepali compatriots in Qatar were unable to see their families for years on end, and missed all important milestones in their children's lives.

As safety adviser, my job was to ensure that workers on the offshore rig were safe. The safety protocols in the oil drilling business are very strict, since even a small mistake can cost lives and cause damage worth millions of dollars.

Just as an example, we were required to wear H₂S gas detectors at all times in case there was a leakage, which could be instantly lethal. There were many other precautions that always kept us on our toes. And we had a persistent and gnawing fear about things that could possibly go wrong. It is a kind of fear that I was not used to, and had never felt before.

When you are on land, there are many escape routes in case of fire. But in case of an emergency in an off-shore rig, with only the horizon in all directions, our sole option is to jump off the rig into the shark infested sea.

Thankfully, there were life boats, rafts and helicopters on

PHOTOS FROM: PRAKASH GURUNG

Turkish Airlines Green Class

Turkish Airlines has introduced a specially liveried Airbus 321 that uses biofuel on its flight TK1795 from Istanbul to Stockholm this week (*pictured*). The carrier flies to more passenger destinations worldwide from Istanbul than any other airline, and this is part of its strategy towards sustainable transport by switching to renewable fuel and zero-waste.

The airline says it will further lower its carbon emission and expand the use of bio-fuel on flights to Oslo, Gothenburg, Copenhagen, Paris and London. Besides this, the carrier is also minimising the use of onboard plastic and other non-recyclable material.

Says Turkish Airlines Chair Ahmet Bolat: "With the bio-fuel on our aircraft, we wish to emphasise the significance of using sustainable aviation fuel as it is one of the biggest hurdles of the aviation industry's struggle against carbon emissions. We aim to increase our flights which use bio-fuel during their operations."



prabhu BANK

Nepal scores better

An International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) safety audit has increased Nepal's overall compliance rate to 70.1%, up 3% from the previous inspection. Director General Pradeep Adhikari of the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAAN) says this will help Nepal to be taken off the EU safety list because Nepal's score is above the world average in ICAO's air safety audits.

Daayitwa fellowship

Non-profit Daayitwa launched its Public Administration Fellows this week under which 23 youths have been placed at 23 local levels across 6 provinces to support elected officials and representatives in formulating and implementing local policy and programs. The fellows, chosen from 160 applicants, will have courses on leadership, public administration and social research. They will be in their placements for four months.

CAN Infotech 2022

This year's CAN Infotech last week showcased the latest software, networking and cloud solutions, mobile phones



and electronics and security systems. The fair also had in display solar power systems, inverters, laptops and desktop computers, printers, power systems, computer accessories, robotics and other technologies.

NIU Scooter launch

Exo Infinity, the sole distributor of NIU Electric scooters in Nepal, launched NIU UQIGT and MQIGT last week with prices starting at Rs255,000 and Rs435,000. The scooters will be available at NIU showrooms.



Marriott turns 3

Marriott Hotel Kathmandu marked its 3rd anniversary last week with a gala dinner. The hotel has won many awards since its launch.

Upaya Expansion

Upaya City Cargo, Nepal's first online logistics platform available in Kathmandu and Lalitpur has expanded its services in Biratnagar. Upaya uses online technology to connect clients with service providers.

IME Airline scheme

Customers using the IME Pay app for the first time to book airline tickets can receive Rs300-worth discounts. IME Pay users can also receive from 50% discount to free tickets to some of the destinations.

Zen Booking

Zen travels, the only USA-Nepal booking engine, is offering reasonable ticket prices to Nepal through their website zentravels.com. The booking engine provides fares, meals and transit hotels at request. A person can communicate directly with the website while booking.

Pepsi campaign

Pepsi has started a new campaign targeting youths with brand ambassador actor Pradeep Khadka. The new TVC will be amplified through a 360-degree campaign in TV, digital platforms, outdoors and on social media.

Ncell combo

Ncell has launched 'Endless Combo Packs'. Day combo having validity from 5AM-5PM at Rs25 comes with 100 MB data volume and 200 min of net talk time. Customers who prefer night-time service can get 250 MB data volume and 250 min of net talk time also at Rs25 valid from 10PM-7AM.



Surya Nepal Winner

Bhuwan Nagarkoti has won the Surya Nepal challenge, the sixth event under the Surya Nepal Golf Tour. Jayram and Sanjay Lama finished second and third. Subash Tamang won in the amateur section. The tournament saw participation of 60 golfers, 38 of them pros.



SEA AND LAND: The oil rig in the Persian Gulf (*left*) that Prakash Gurung worked on as a safety officer monitoring workers perched precariously on scaffolding (*above*).
Back home in Nepal after 13 years, Gurung has not been able to use the skills and experience he gained in the Gulf, but has invested his savings in an agriculture business and refrigerated warehouse on the outskirts of Kathmandu (*below*).



standby for rescue if something did go wrong.
Even then, I cannot explain the rush of relief I used to feel at the end of every six weeks when we were choppered out of the helipad to shore, and on to Nepal to be with

the family. Six weeks later, we had to be back, and I used to whisper a little prayer before boarding the helicopter that would drop me back on the rig again.
For 13 long years, my life was a cycle every 54 days that alternated

between the longest six weeks on the oil rig that felt like eternity, and the shortest six weeks in Nepal that went by in the blink of an eye.
A big part of my job entailed training workers to be safe, but it was difficult to guarantee that they implemented all that was being taught. As workers, it is natural for many to look for shortcuts, but in this sector, shortcuts can cost lives.
So, I tried to use as many personal stories as possible to humanise the consequence of such accidents that are common in the oil business. Showing a picture of someone's daughter unable to hold her father's fingers who lost them during a workplace injury communicated the need for precautions more than me giving a dry lecture, for example.
The kind of risks rig workers including Nepalis had to take such as balancing high on off-shore scaffolding were beyond comprehension. But I am grateful that during my time as a safety adviser, there were no fatalities in the projects I oversaw.
I never thought I would apply for a job in Qatar given my educational background. I had dreams of going to a Western country, until I got cheated by an agent who had promised to send me to America and fleeced me of Rs700,000.
It was completely by chance that I was interviewed for a safety officer job in the Gulf by a European company that showed promise for professional growth and good earnings. That was what led me down this career path.
That is when I realised that I had misunderstood that earnings in the West would be more. I was actually paid more in Qatar than I would have been able to earn elsewhere, and I could also save more because

accommodation and food were covered, and there were no taxes.
We Nepalis have still not been able to take up the higher paying jobs in the Gulf which are dominated by Filipinos and Indians, among others. We see the Gulf just as a place offering low-salaried jobs and start primarily as helpers.
There are many missed opportunities we could be benefiting from. But there are increasing numbers of Nepalis who are earning handsome amounts and serve in key positions in the Gulf. Over the course of my stay abroad, I must have remitted back to Nepal Rs50 million or more. I am really proud of this, especially given my humble beginnings in Lamjung.
However, I have not been able to use my skills and experience after I returned, although I am sure it would have a lot of use in Nepal. As someone who has amassed so much experience as a safety officer, I saw red flags everywhere on my return -- at Kathmandu airport, along the roads, at construction sites, in ongoing infrastructure projects, and even within homes.
And yet, there is no space for those of us with the Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) skills to use the knowledge we have gained to address these lapses. I have seen my friends who have similar experience as me from the Gulf in occupational safety and health topics fail in their attempts to do something in this sector both individually and collectively in Nepal after their return.
There is a clear need for these skills and knowledge in our country but the recognition and ability to utilise them are missing. Meanwhile, these very skills have

been instrumental in contributing to the rapid transformation of countries like the UAE and Qatar.
I have instead resorted to starting an agriculture business in Nepal where there is space to intervene even though it is not exactly my area of expertise -- I have started a cold storage with a capacity of 18 tonnes.
I buy produce from farmers in Dolakha, Ramechhap, Bhaktapur and sell the produce at better market rates during the off season. I also provide higher prices to farmers who otherwise are compelled to sell their produce at lower rates out of fear of them getting spoiled.
Both my experiences here and in the Gulf allowed me to directly interact with workers engaged in back-breaking work and to look for ways to minimise the risks they face, albeit very different kinds of dangers. The financial rewards are indeed better abroad than here where many struggle to even make ends meet.
But I cannot also help notice the overall contentment in the faces of farmers here in Nepal, which they seem to lose when we are in the Gulf away from family, toiling in the heat. We turn ourselves into income generating machines with a singular purpose of maximising our earnings during our stay abroad.
It is as if the desert heat sucks the life out of the workers, many of whom lack proper nutrition and adequate sleep. It is also evident that regardless of the location, it is always the most hard-working individuals engaged in back-breaking, strenuous jobs who are compensated the least while being employed in the riskiest jobs.



DIASPORA DIARIES 7

Translated from a conversation in Nepali with Prakash Gurung.
Diaspora Diaries is a regular column in Nepali Times providing a platform to share experiences of living, working, studying abroad. Authentic and original entries can be sent to editors@nepalitimes.com with Diaspora Diaries in the subject line.

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It is getting hotter on the roof of the world

A rapidly melting Tibetan Plateau spells disaster for people across Asia

● Kunda Dixit

The Tibetan Plateau is heating up faster than the global average due to climate change, and scientists say this will ultimately reduce the flow of Asia’s mighty rivers originating there.

The plateau has an average elevation of 4,000m, is rimmed by the Himalaya, Karakoram, Pamir and Tien Shan mountain ranges, and is called the ‘Third Pole’ because it has the largest store of frozen water on the planet after the polar regions.

But the glaciers, snowfields and permanently frozen ground on the ‘roof of the world’ are thawing, making Tibet’s lakes bloat by 58.5 cubic km just in the past 40 years.

“The plateau is filling up like a goblet. Its cryosphere is already undergoing catastrophic and irreversible ecological shift, and the current direction of climate change in the next 50 years will directly impact the region and the world,” warns Martin Mills of the Scottish Centre for Himalayan Research.

Mills prepared a paper for the Scottish Parliament titled ‘Climate Change on the Third Pole’ that lays out the process and consequences of uncontrolled global heating on the plateau and regions downstream.

The Tibetan Plateau is a hot spot in more ways than one — besides the effect of the climate crisis, it is also a geopolitically sensitive region with territorial disputes that erupt into frequent border skirmishes. There is little cooperation between countries that share the Himalayan watershed to study and mitigate the impact of climate change.

The plateau is the source of the Indus and its tributaries that flow into the Arabian Sea, the Ganga and Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) that flows down to the Bay of Bengal, the Burmese rivers, the Mekong and China’s Yellow and Yangtze Rivers.

When glaciers on the Tibetan Plateau and the Himalaya melt in spring, their waters keep the rivers flowing in the dry season. However, because of climate change there will be less and less ice to feed these rivers in future.

The plateau is warming 2-4 times faster than the global average, and its impact is already being seen in shrinking glaciers and expanding lakes. While those changes are visible, there is also the hidden thawing of the permafrost — the ‘underground icebergs’ beneath the plateau. When the frozen ground melts, it destabilises mountain slopes, leading to destructive landslides.

“As snowfall turns into rain, the Tibetan



KUNDA DIXIT

Plateau is becoming progressively warmer and wetter,” Mills told the Dialogue for Our Future conference convened by the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala last week.

He said the impact of these changes in the next 50 years will include increased flooding south of the Himalaya, desertification of river headlands in Tibet, loss of fresh water sources to mountain communities, and damage to infrastructure from permafrost melting.

The main driver for these changes is warming of the planet’s atmosphere because of fossil fuel burning, but that is exacerbated

by the deposition of ‘black carbon’ pollution particulates that makes the ice lose its reflectivity and melt even faster.

The location and elevation of the Tibetan Plateau means there is a fragile balance in its water cycle — the accumulation of winter snow, melting ice in spring, and rain in the lower reaches during the monsoon. This process regulates water in the rivers so there is consistent flow through the year.

More importantly, Himalayan glaciers keep rivers flowing in the dry season when water is needed most downstream. Nearly 20% of

the annual flow of the Indus, for example, is glacier-fed, and it is 9% in the Ganga — but this is vital for agriculture and household because it comes down during the dry pre-monsoon months.

‘The mean temperatures on the Tibetan Plateau are increasing at between 0.28-0.61° Celsius per decade, and this will significantly destabilise its capacity to regulate water supplies across the year, undermining regional water security of the wider continental area,’ the Scottish Centre for Himalayan Research says in its report.

...and Kathmandu sweated through the summer

Nepal went straight from winter to summer, skipping spring

● Sonia Awale

This spring, northern India saw the hottest March since records started being kept 120 years ago, and this week people in the Indo-Gangetic plains are bracing themselves for maximum temperature to hit 50°C. All this hot air is also affecting next-door Nepal.

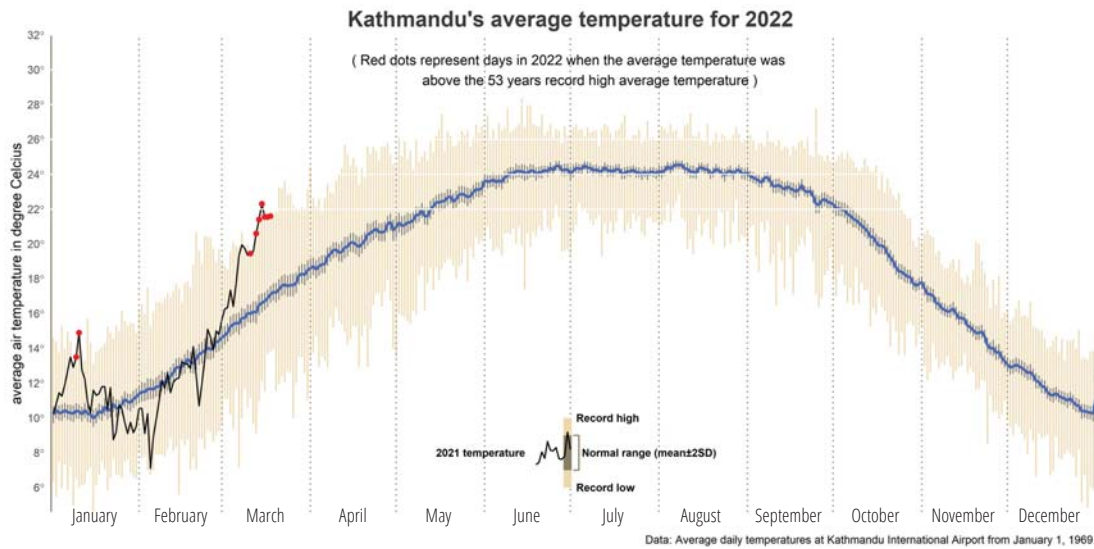
After sweltering through record March heat, Kathmandu’s average temperature this week was at a 53-year record (*see chart*). Dharan registered 35.7°C in mid-March, another record. People in Nepal’s Tarai are used to heat waves, but not in March and April.

All this makes Kim Stanley Robinson’s

2020 climate fiction *The Ministry for the Future* seem hauntingly prophetic. The facts of climate change induced heat stress are imitating fiction, and a dystopian narrative is becoming our new reality (*see review, above*).

“Heat, temperature and moisture combined will be the killers in South Asia, and if there is anything that will genuinely force people to respond to the climate crisis it is frequent heat waves, because unlike other episodic extreme events it is widespread and will impact everybody,” Ajaya Dixit of the Institute for Social and Environmental Transition (ISET) Nepal told us from New Delhi where the maximum temperature was 44°C on Tuesday.

A recent study from 2000-2019 found that over 5 million people around the world died each year in that time due to extreme temperatures, with some 2.6 million in Asia – with most of the fatalities in South Asia. Heat waves in 2010 killed more than 1,300 people from dehydration and stroke in Ahmedabad alone. Another severe heat wave in June 2015 during which the mercury hit 49.4°C caused the deaths of 2,500 people in northern India and 2,000 people across the border in Pakistan.



Yet another heat wave in India and Pakistan in 2019 was the hottest and longest since the British started keeping temperature records, with the maximum at 50.8°C in Rajasthan. A similar but slightly less intense heat wave in Europe in 2003 killed between 35,000-70,000 people.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) Climate and Health country profile for Nepal predicts that under a high carbon emission scenario, heat-related deaths in people above 65 years are projected to increase to about 53 deaths per 100,000 by 2080 compared to the estimated baseline of approximately 4 deaths

roof of the world...

across Asia



HIROKI OGAWA

HIMALAYAN MELTDOWN: The Kharola Glacier at 5,600m below Noijin Kangsang in Tibet has receded 400m up the mountain in the past 50 years. The retreat of the icefall is visible even in the decade between when this picture was taken in 2010 (*left*) and in 2020 (*above*).

The Tibetan Plateau (*relief map, right*) is warming 2-4 times faster than the global average due to climate change, and there has been a 15% decline in ice mass in the past 50 years, lowering dry season flow of rivers that flow down from it to densely populated plains in India, Pakistan and China.

The report estimates that up to 1.4 billion people in northern India, Pakistan, south-east Asia, and 23% of the population of China depend on dry season meltwater from the Tibetan Plateau before the rainy season starts.

‘The thawing of the cryosphere on the Tibetan Plateau presents a fundamental threat to human carrying capacity in many parts of Asia ... and the impact of these hydrological shifts will be most strongly felt in the upper



sections of those rivers,’ the report warns.

Nepal’s main rivers mostly start from glaciers in southern Tibet, and their flow will also be impacted -- adding to the danger of trans-border glacial lake outburst floods.

Climate change models suggest that dry season flow of Himalayan rivers will actually increase as ice from ever higher elevations begin to melt, but with the glaciers all but gone, it will eventually slow to a trickle.

Chinese scientists studying the plateau have estimated that the area under permafrost will be reduced by half between 2030-2050 if current warming trends continue. With the underground ice melting away, it is easier for surface water to seep into the soil rather than drain into rivers, further reducing dry season flow. “We can foresee water scarcity leading to food insecurity in Asia, as well as increased flood risk during the monsoon,” Diana Liverman, a professor at the University of Arizona who was co-author of the IPCC’s *Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5° C*.

She told the Dharamsala conference: “The good news is that we have seen increasing action on adaptation, but there are limits to adaptation for people in countries that are dependent on glacier and snow melt.”

Experts at the conference said that this means there is no option but to take drastic steps to halve global carbon emissions by 2030, eliminate the use of coal, further expand the shift to renewable energy, and reduce consumption. 🇨🇳

Tip of the iceberg



In a symbolic commemoration of Earth Day on 22 April, environmentalists from Ladakh brought down a block of glacial ice and presented it to the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala. They cut it out of a glacier at 6,000m in Khardung La, and carried down in bicycles, public transport and electric vehicles over four days across the hot Indian plains.

To prevent the ice from melting, it was packed in an insulated drum lined with pashmina fibre, and presented to the Tibetan spiritual leader in exile in the presence of delegates to an international conference on climate change.

“This is more than a piece of ice , it is a message that the Himalaya is facing an unprecedented emergency due to climate change,” said Ladakh-based activist Sonam Wangchuk (*left*).

As the ice melted and dripped on a table in front of him, the Dalai Lama said: “Water is going to be very precious commodity because of climate change , and as we know water is needed by every living being. The Tibetan Plateau is the source of many rivers. The ice reminds us time is running out.”

Wangchuk is the developer of the ‘ice stupa’ in Ladakh where he has found a way to freeze water and release its melt in the dry season for irrigation.

He said: “What we do in Ladakh is not going to change the planet, but it can serve as an example.”

The glacier from which his ice block was taken has receded 300m up the mountain in the past 20 years. Wangchuk has set up the ‘Live Simply’ initiative to spread the word about consuming less, and switching to renewable energy.

He says: “The world has to learn to live simply so that we in the mountains can simply live.”

through its hottest March

per 100,000 annually.

While dry heat is still bearable because the body cools with perspiration, it is humid heat that is more lethal. And climate change is not just making the world hotter, but also wetter. For every 1°C rise in temperature, there is 7% more moisture in the atmosphere.

This is called ‘wet-bulb temperature’ that measures both ambient air temperature and humidity level to determine how hot it actually feels. For example, if it is 30°C with high humidity, it will feel much warmer.

A wet-bulb temperature of 35°C is considered the maximum limit of heat and humidity that humans can handle. Beyond that, the body can no longer effectively cool itself via perspiration. A couple of hours of exposure to this without artificial cooling will mean that people will start dying of heatstroke and dehydration, with children and the elderly being the most at risk.

“The climate crisis in the Himalaya is the water crisis. Heat stress is manageable as long as there is access to water, but that is not the case for the poorest in the

Tarai,” says climate scientist Binod Pokharel. “Luckily, this week’s heat wave is mostly dry heat with lower humidity.”

The rain that is forecast for Nepal from Thursday will cool things down, but it will also increase the humidity.

The other factor making heat waves more intense are densely populated cities with their vehicle exhaust, concrete and asphalt -- forming what are called ‘urban heat islands’. Ironically, the air conditioners city dwellers use to cool themselves indoors, is making it hotter still outside.

There is a significant temperature gradient between the outskirts and Kathmandu’s city centre even in winter, which means the Valley does not have its characteristic winter fog anymore. On any given day, there is a temperature difference of 1.5°C between Chobhar and Teku, even though the two places are only 3km apart.

As more and more open spaces are built over and the greenery disappears, Kathmandu’s ‘heat bubble’ is going to get bigger. Warns Dixit: “The fast pace of urbanisation in South Asia is a serious threat and we are a witness to an unfolding disaster. Business as usual means higher

cost of response, both financially and institutionally.”

He says the only solution is to start designing climate smart cities that restore open spaces and building houses with insulating material and use or block sunlight, reducing the need for energy-intensive heating or cooling.

The impact of increased heat in the Tarai, city centres and now even in the high Himalayan valleys is not limited to public health but will have consequences for agriculture, energy generation, migration and the glaciers.

The hot and dry conditions this week have already fanned wildfires across the Indian Himalaya and in western Nepal. Although not as bad as last year, Kathmandu has been shrouded in smoke haze for more than a month.

Having a good forecasting system in place will help with preparedness, and save lives. But Nepal does not yet have its own standards to determine heat or cold waves, and relying only on the World Meteorological Organisation has limitations when it comes to localised projections.

“Nepal needs to study its historical

Future furnace

The irony was not lost on Kim Stanley Robinson as he flew into New Delhi last week just when northern India experienced a record-breaking heat wave -- exactly like what the protagonist in his 2020 climate fiction book *The Ministry for the Future* witnessed.

The first chapter begins with the American aid worker named Frank in a small town in Uttar Pradesh in which almost everyone dies in a killer heat wave when the heat plus humidity ‘wet bulb’ temperature becomes unsurvivable.

India has regular heatwaves, but this is unusually early. *The Ministry for the Future* may therefore have to be relocated from the fiction section of book stores to the non-fiction shelf.

In his previous ‘Mars’ trilogy humans establish colonies on the red planet, and Robinson predictably dwells on scientists and world governments relying on geo-engineering solutions to cool down an over-heating planet.



The Ministry for the Future:
A Novel
by Kim Stanley Robinson
Orbit Books, 2020
\$ 20.10 on Amazon, 576 pages
ISBN 10 -0316300136

The Ministry for the Future, has a completely opposite take to the recent Netflix release *Don’t Look Up*. Here, governments come together to set up a Ministry of the Future in Switzerland that is headed by a former foreign minister of Ireland named Mary Murphy, a cross between Mary Robinson and Gro Harlem Brundtland.

In real life this week, a heat wave baked New Delhi even as a Buddhist American self-immolated himself at the steps of the US Congress building in Washington to protest against the lack of action on climate change. It is not just a bit eerie that Robinson’s climate fiction book has an eco-terrorist group that uses drones to down airliners to protest fossil fuel burning.

Despite its dystopian tone, *The Ministry of the Future* has an uplifting message throughout its 106 chapters, spiced with snarky humour. Overall, there is optimism that humanity can and will come together to act when faced with climate oblivion. The fiction comes closest to fact when dissecting the corporate greed that drives climate denial, petro-state profiteers stuck in the fossil age, or despots who want to cash in on the chaos.

Mary Murphy eventually finds a way to coax central bankers to pay for decarbonisation and solutions like pumping water underneath Antarctic glaciers, or dyeing the Arctic yellow to reflect solar radiation.

Robinson was in India to deliver a keynote at a climate change conference, and admits: “In person, I am not as hopeful as I am in the book. I am terrified about mass extinction. I start with a heat wave in India because I wanted to wake people up. I have tried to stick to the reality of the present, not something way into the future. But this is a work of utopian fiction.”

Kunda Dixit


heat and cold waves and come up with its own standards and adjust it for the changing climate for better forecasting and preparedness at local levels,” says Pokharel.

The Department of Hydrology and Meteorology (DHM) in Kathmandu is monitoring the heat wave this week, and despite projections of higher solar intensity the smoke haze has also been filtering the sunlight, lowering the maximum temperature slightly.

“The heat wave conditions in the Indian plains this week is affecting us, and we expect more and more extreme heat events and anomalies made worse by the climate crisis,” says Archana Shrestha at the DHM.

She adds, “Average temperatures will continue to rise and we have no other recourse than to be prepared. This means we have to rethink our development pathways, I’m genuinely worried about how concrete structures are coming up, this is turning our cities into hot spots. We must prepare this and future generations for even hotter summers. This means the the health, finance, agriculture ministries should all be prepared, not just the environment ministry.” 🇨🇳

EVENTS



Blood Donation
Help save a life, donate blood in this health camp by RSTCA foundation this weekend.
30 April, 12pm onwards, Nil Saraswati temple, Lazimpat

Parallel History
Check out the opening of the exhibition 'Parallel History' featuring ten eminent artists of Nepal.
29 April, 5pm onwards, Gallery Mcube, Chakupat

Remote Sensing
Nepal Environmental Resources Organisation and SpaceAppNet has a training on Remote Sensing and Geographic Information system for those interested. Details: shorturl.at/bnpAQ
15 May, 3pm-5.30pm, Price: Rs6,000, 9843397501

Chhaya Bazaar
Take a break this Friday and enjoy the art, the craft and food with live music that the bazaar has to offer.
29 April, 2.30pm-7.30pm, Chhaya Center



Book Launch
Attend the book launch and reading of 'An Archive' by Itisha Giri this Saturday.
30 April, 4pm onwards, The Yellow House, Dhobighat, (01) 5536974

DINING



Taza Treats
Get the perfect Syrian treats and delicacies at Taza. Don't miss out on the baklavas.
10am-6pm, Bakhundol, 9801114002

MUSIC



K-Pop Night
Enjoy K-pop performances by Celestial, Drektop, 4Ever1, Nineties and Sumit Karki with soju and Korean food.
1 May, 5pm onwards, Hankook Sarang restaurant, Thamel, (01) 5356615

Cobweb X Space
Spend Friday night with loved ones to the tunes of Cobweb with Space.
29 April, Beers N' Cheers, (01) 5524860



Jhuma Limbu
Hear Jhuma Limbu's Raithanu music with Ser O Duo at Moksh.
29 April, 7pm onwards, Jawalakhel, (01) 5443554

Live music
Let your hair down and enjoy live music with Sabin Rai, the Pharaoh and Simma Rai.
30 April, Beers N' Cheers, (01) 5524860

Jazz Day performance
Enjoy the closing jam to the Kathmandu Jazz festival by the Gon Navarro trio and SH4IKH 9.
30 April, 6pm onwards, Jawalakhel, (01) 5443554

Kunga
Kunga Hotel has some of the best Chinese in town. Try the hotpot, peanut chicken and shredded potatoes.
8am-9pm, Booudha (01) 4915117

European Bakery
Is a loved one's birthday coming up, or need a just-because cake? Order from Baker's Den. Or get freshly baked doughnut, muffins, and bread.
6.45am-8pm, Baluwatar, (01) 4422047

Baan Thai
Baan Thai serves generous portions of healthy and scrumptious Thai dishes.
Darbar Marg, (01) 4231931

GETAWAY



Meghauli Serai
Leave the worries behind and plan a stay this luxurious safari lodge at the heart of Chitwan National Park. Overlooking the Rapti river, this lodge not only offers scenic views but accommodation that integrates local culture and art.
Chitwan National Park, 9851218500

Hotel Annapurna View
At 1,600m atop Sarangkot, this boutique hotel offers breathtaking panoramic views of the snow-capped mountains and Phewa Lake right from its dining area.
Sarangkot, Pokhara, (01) 443566



Hotel Country Villa
A natural and relaxing retreat for those wishing to escape the pandemonium of the city, Hotel Country Villa also offers breathtaking views of sunrise and sunset.
Nagarkot, (01) 4700305, 9851192106

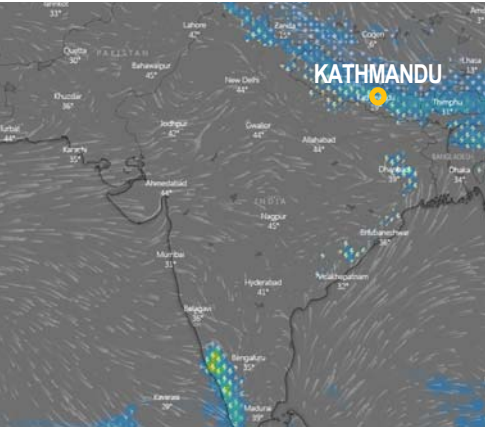
Bandipur Kaushi Inn
A small, rustic place to stay in the idyllic village of Bandipur, replete with cultural diversity and traditional architecture.
Bandipur, Tanahu, (065) 520083

Peacock Guest House
Housed in a World Heritage Site, this three-storied guest house with Newa-style buildings provides splendid views of the Dattatreya Square and the Bhimsenthana temple.
Bhaktapur (01) 6611829






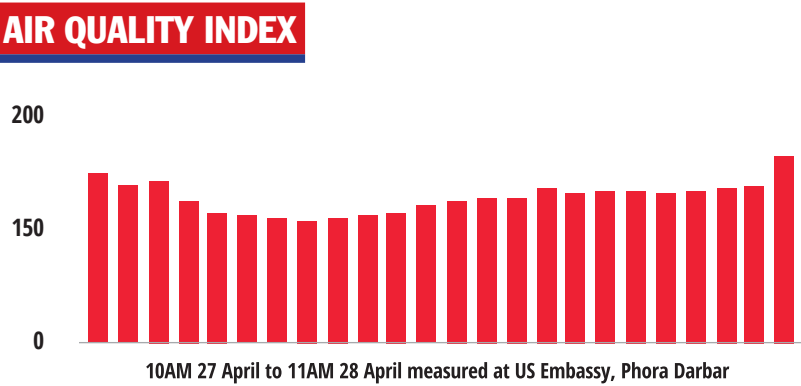
Achaar Ghar
Don't want to make lunch? Head to Achaar for the assortment of pickles prepared from recipes handed down the generations.
10.30am-9.30pm, Jhamsikhel, Pulchok (01) 5541952

WEEKEND WEATHER




The Tarai and lower valleys will get some respite from the heat wave on Friday-Sunday, as a westerly system crosses central Nepal. The moisture will rise along the flanks of the Himalaya, condensing into afternoon storm clouds. There is therefore a 20-40% chance of sharp afternoon thunder showers accompanied by wind and some hail on all three days. This will bring down the maximum temperature considerably, dropping to 25°C Celsius in Kathmandu Valley — five degrees below what we experienced last week. However, the rain will also raise the humidity level, making the weather sticky when the sun is out. Afternoon storms will be more pronounced in the higher trekking routes.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
 27° 18°	 26° 17°	 26° 17°



The poor air quality this week in Kathmandu was caused by prevailing wind transporting smoke from massive wildfires in central and western Nepal. Combined with wind-blown sand from the Thar Desert and the city's own vehicular exhaust, Kathmandu Air Quality Index exceeded 200 some mornings this week. AQI will improve somewhat this weekend since storms are forecast, even though the wind and lightning strikes could ignite more forest fires. Still, best to be cautious and wear mask outdoors to counter pollution, and indoors as prevention against Covid.

OUR PICK



High up among the feel-good Miyazaki films, *My Neighbour Totoro* is set in post-War Japan and follows two sisters, Satsuki and Mei, who with their professor father move into an old house in the country to be closer to the hospital where the girls' mother is recovering from a long-term illness. There, they encounter and befriend the delightful forest spirits who live in the neighbourhood, and what follows is a moving story of magic and imagination with strong influences of animism, Shinto mythologies and environmentalism, set in a joyous rural landscape. The animation is beautiful, hand-crafted, and backed by Joe Hisaishi's impeccable soundtrack. This universally acclaimed film is an experience, warm and funny, a reflection on the wonders of life, filled with potent imagination. Featuring the voices of Chika Sakamoto, Noriko Hidaka, Hitoshi Takagi and Tanie Kitabayashi.

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 ।





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BACKSIDE

Working our asses off

The wellbeing of every country on Earth can be measured by how much leisure time its citizens have. Industrialised nations are so productive that they allow their taxpayers to laze about, take long vacations, and fully enjoy the fruits of their labour. In poorer countries, however, donkeys like us have to work our asses off.

In fact, you can accurately gauge how well-off a country is by how many national holidays it has in any given year. Which is why it is good news that the Grabberment of Nepal is going boldly forth to announce a two-day weekend from Jest First, and the only last minute hitch is whether to also keep the official Friday half-days.

The long weekends will mean that Nepal will not just be graduating from Least Developed Country to Middle Income Country by 2025, but also leap-frog into becoming Fully-Developed in the process. Yay!

Taking a country's Gross National Holiday Index (GNHI) as metrics, Nepal already ranks right up there with OECD member states in terms of annual holidays per capita. Despite our laid-back attitude, we have still managed to mine all our rivers of sand and boulders, dug unnecessary roads, and built view-towers atop all our mountains.

Even before the 5-day work week, Nepal already held the world record as the country with the most national holidays. We give holidays for five different new year days every year. Communists in government commemorate the opium of the asses to celebrate all the holy days in every major world religion. Even Holi Day is a holiday.

We are now a proud Lock Tantrik Republic, which makes it mandatory to have holidays for Praja Tantrick Diwas (the day we threw off the Rana yolk), Lok Tantrick Diwas (when we broke the Shah yolk), Gun Tantrick Diwas (the day to demonstrate that political power indeed comes out of the barrel of a gun), and Sambidhan Diwas (to remind politicians that the laws of the land are written to be broken).

With a 2-day weekend, holidays for solar and lunatic eclipses, and a day off to mark the International Day for the Preservation of the Ozone Layer, Nepal will have 312 holidays in a year. And we are not even counting 2020 and 2021, when we all got two whole years off.

There are some workaholic spoilsports who bemoan this. Relax. First of all, having more holidays will reduce petrol and diesel consumption, not just lowering Nepal's petroleum import bill, but also improving air quality. It will also mean that there will now be more fuel available to smuggle across the border to India, allowing Nepalis a chance to earn valuable Indian currency, and reduce the country's widening trade gap.

Also, government offices going down from a 42-hour week to 35-hour week will have a direct impact on reducing corruption. Fewer bribes will be given and taken if there are fewer hours in a week to do so.

Nepal's position in the Transparency International ranking will then improve from being the second most corrupt country in South Asia to the third most corrupt country in the Subcontinent.



The Ass

Nepal in the new world order

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has now turned into a battle between two powerful global forces: liberal democracy and authoritarianism. A new world order is emerging.

Unlike the 20th century's ideological clash between communism and capitalism, recent global events show complexity, volatility, unpredictability, and multipolarism.



COMMENT

Dhirendra Nalbo

In this new world order, too, strategically located countries like Nepal will face intense pressure from the two mighty political forces: countries led by the US and its allies, and China, Russia & Co.

In such hyper-polarisation, a win-win will be difficult, particularly for less powerful countries like Nepal. Nevertheless, the new 21st century world order also offers an opportunity for countries with important geostrategic positioning to advance their interests and gain leverage among the giants.

Financial integration, technological connectivity and human mobility today have turned the world into a global village, albeit with constant threats and instability.

Over the last 30 years, China has become a global factory, it enjoys economic growth at home while fulfilling material demands globally. The rise and fall of demand for goods inevitably influences its stability.

The world also faces instability from dependence on global markets. The Covid-induced supply chain disruptions, particularly due to Beijing's 'zero-covid' policy, have created high inflation around the world. The shipping cost for a 40 ft container jumped from \$1,400 in January 2021 to \$20,000 by September.

From households in the foothills of the Himalaya to the suburbs of Houston, the fluctuation of oil and gas prices hits us hard, sparking protests and instability.

Donald Trump is no longer in the White House but the supposedly liberal statesman and champion of democracy President Joe Biden continues to advance Trumpian hypernationalism.

During January's State of the Union address, Biden said: "When we use taxpayer dollars to rebuild America – we are going to Buy American: buy American products to support American jobs." Such insular and self-serving American nationalism resembles President Xi Jinping's desire for "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's increasingly intolerant India.

Put simply, Russia under President Vladimir Putin and its ongoing onslaught in Ukraine to assert itself in a new global power equilibrium is the kind of hypernationalistic aggression we are likely to see more of.

Extreme climate change events will further destabilise the 21st century global world order. According to a report from the International Panel for Climate Change

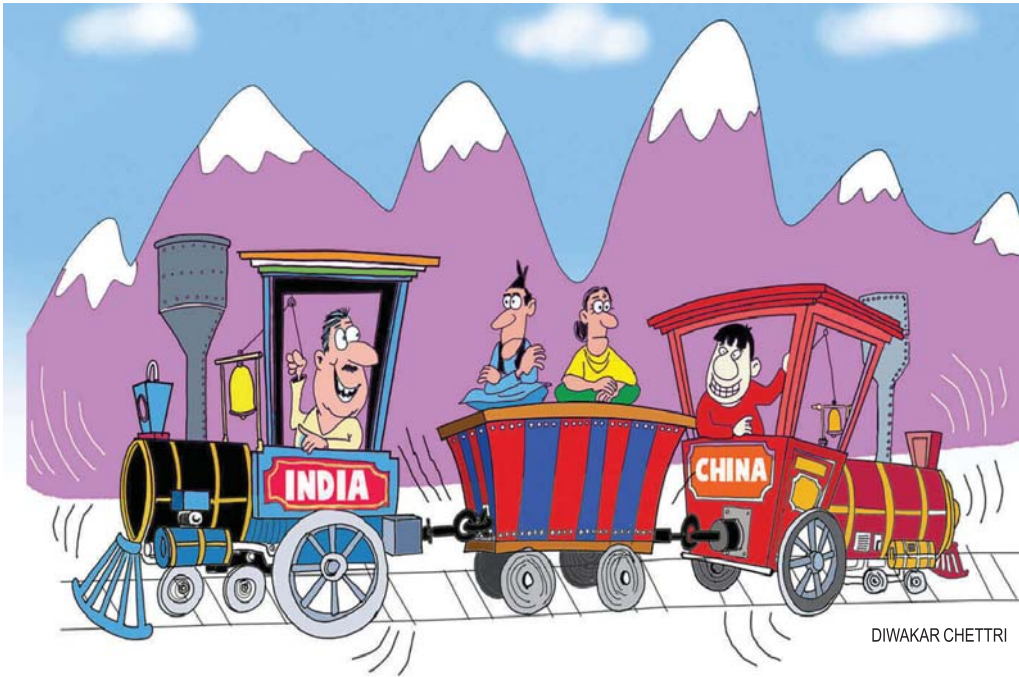
(IPCC), competition over water and food, made scarce because of climate change, will increasingly turn violent.

Nepal's 'freak' rain in October 2021 shows how a climate event can trigger civil strife. The downpour not only destroyed nearly \$60 million of rice and killed dozens of people but also pushed peasants further into poverty and hunger.

One such way for them has been to farm wheat. But a shortage of wheat seeds pushed frustrated peasants to launch a protest, which prompted a violent response from the police along the East-West highway.

This incident demonstrates the non-linear but complex interplay between extreme climate change events and social, political and economic dimensions, and how quickly it can escalate to violence.

Migration adds to this complexity. An anti-refugee sentiment has given rise to anti-democratic forces across Europe and North America, upending democracy. Such forces are getting traction amidst the clash between liberal democracy and authoritarianism.



DIWAKAR CHETTRI

Migration, whether due to climate change, war, poverty, or labour, helps harden state boundaries. This, in turn, promotes intolerance and bolsters ultranationalism and xenophobia – some of the key features of the new world order.

But Nepal and strategically positioned countries can take advantage of this multipolar volatile and unpredictable world order. With shrewd diplomacy and strategic planning, the countries can use their location to not only spur economic development but also strengthen cooperation promoting stability and peace. Take Bangladesh as an example.

Bangladesh has met its own interests amidst the new order and recently surpassed India's per capita income despite its inherent vulnerabilities to climate change. Its economic prosperity combines strong remittance, a vibrant garment

industry, and prudent economic governance.

Most impressively, through 'balanced' diplomacy, it advances its economic interests while maintaining the two clashing mighty powers: liberal and authoritarian forces.

In June 2021, the World Bank canceled a \$1.2 billion investment to build the Padma Multipurpose Bridge project, citing corruption. But Dhaka secured the funding to build a bridge from China as part of the BRI. Yet, when Beijing proposed the Sonadia deep-sea port project, Dhaka rejected it, instead preferring Japan's similar project at Matarbari.

Most importantly, Bangladesh actively avoids Chinese projects that pose concerns, particularly to India. It shrewdly focuses on economic interests while maintaining power asymmetries stemming from a new volatile multipolar global order.

Nepal ratifying the US's \$500 million MCC aid is strategically a positive step. Beijing's objection or the US pressure should not surprise anyone.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's

visit in March despite the MCC ratification indicates that Beijing wants to build closer ties with Kathmandu. Above all, Nepal should expect intense pressure from liberal democracy and authoritarian forces and prepare itself for it.

Be it a US-led Indo-Pacific Strategy driven fund or China's Belt and Road Initiative or the EU's 'Global Gateway', strategically located countries do have leverage that they can use to push their financial interests while carefully handling the competing political powers.

In doing so, Nepal can achieve economic prosperity and contribute to stability and peace not just at home but also regionally and globally. 🇳🇵

Dhirendra Nalbo has PhD in Conflict Analysis and Resolution from George Mason University and is the co-founder of the Open Institute in Kathmandu.

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NT ARCHIVE

Our notes count, but our votes don't

● Tilu Sharma

During the 2017 election, overseas workers like myself consoled ourselves that in the next one, we would be eligible to vote. After all, the Constitution guarantees us the right.

Nepalis in Nepal are voting on 13 May in local polls, but once again we are not allowed to. Nor can we cast our ballots in general elections later this year. We may not be allowed to vote in the next polls in five years, either.

I had recently engaged with fellow Nepalis in Qatar about what their expectations from the government back home regarding the upcoming elections were, and despite the Constitution guaranteeing the right to vote what they thought about being prevented from exercising it.

The sentiment among Nepalis were broadly similar. Not being allowed to vote means we do not have a say in matters that directly impact us or our families back home.

This, is despite the Constitution guaranteeing us our rights and a subsequent 2018 Supreme Court order to the government to make all the necessary arrangements to ensure us our voting rights.

Many countries allow absentee voting, and if our leaders had been willing, Nepal's embassies could be easily mobilised to facilitate it. But there is no interest, conversation or movement in that direction.

There should at least have been discussions on the how's and why's, and not the present demeaning radio silence.

The lack of interest shows that it is not just the practical challenges to facilitate overseas voting that the government does not want to entertain, but also the principle of allowing us to vote.

At a time when frustration towards politics is at an all time high regardless of where Nepalis are based, it is a pity that those of us abroad cannot channel our frustration through the ballot box.

Nomination filing is underway in Nepal, and candidates have started campaigning in an attempt to influence voters. Amidst the frenzy, despite being a significant chunk of the population, we are not in anyone's radar.

It seems as if we overseas Nepalis do not need to be influenced — not even with empty promises — which also means the issues that concern us do not get their due attention.

It is ironic how on the one hand, public discourse has been dominated by the upcoming election in which migrants are not given much consideration, while on the other hand, falling remittances sent by migrants has become an issue of grave public concern.

Those in power are even calling on us to send money legally to help the country. Our notes count, but our votes don't, as the saying goes.

The sole focus on remittances without a second thought for those sending money home is tragic. If the officials back home only understood that the two cannot be separated.

If they realise that remittances are indeed critical for our economy and gets nervous when there is a dip, why do they do nothing to ease the lives of the senders?

Instead, we are grossly inconvenienced by a system designed to make our lives difficult even before we migrate, during our time abroad, and when we return.

Worrying about falling remittances alone is not meaningful. Remittances are linked to both quality and quantity of the overseas jobs. Emphasis by the Nepal government on capturing well-paying, available jobs abroad is

limited. Instead, even the lucrative jobs that could be channelled to Nepalis are lost because of our complex labour approval system.

Workers, for example, cannot take on assignments if the duration of the contract is less than two years under Nepal's labour approval system, no matter their benefits. How many jobs have we lost to other countries because our approval system is so complicated and time consuming that employers would rather look elsewhere so they can fill the vacancies on time?

Has anyone compared how much more time it takes to deploy one worker from Nepal compared to other countries? These concerns are especially pronounced after the pandemic when many lost their jobs and returned, or many like me had to compromise on our salaries during the business downturn due to Covid-19.

There are many restrictions and hurdles for those of us who are overseas, and who send or carry money home. Amid concerns regarding illicit transfers of money or gold smuggling, it is us migrants who get scapegoated and punished. I cannot easily bring home gold for my sister's wedding, or an iPhone for my wife without getting severely punished.

Every few months there is a new boss who introduces a new set of rules regarding what we can and cannot bring to the country, many times without any sound reason, and we get penalised accordingly. The rules change and are confusing even for me as a journalist who keeps track of all these regularly as part of my profession. How are others expected to keep up?

I understand the concerns regarding illicit transfers that drive such decisions. But claiming to tackle these informal transfers by harassing migrant workers lets the real criminals off the hook. We workers get victimised even when we have nothing to do with the smugglers, even while

the problems at hand remain unaddressed.

Any action taken is just for show or a bare scratch on the surface. It is as if the broader message from the government to us is that we should toil hard in the desert heat day and night, and send money home — but we cannot decide how to use it.

Nepal's remittances are falling. But have the leaders and those in power ever done anything concrete to better understand why people use the informal *hundi* channel to send money and what steps can be taken to compete with this transfer?

When both the commissions for transfer and exchange rate is better than formal rates, while being more convenient for both the sender and recipient who engage in phone transactions for home-based pick up and delivery of the amount, should we be surprised that many, especially those who earn very little and have very long working hours, should opt for this informal system of money transfer?

What has been done to ensure easy digital transfers of remittances? What has been done to reduce the cost of transfer of remittances? What incentives are there for a normal worker to opt for formal transfers?

It is just not about foreign employment or remittances, but issues that concern us as citizens being prevented from having a say in the elections. Even when we are disenfranchised from our voting rights, the election and state of affairs in Nepal remains an important part of our discourse and concern.

One overseas Nepali shared with me that being away makes him understand the importance of having good leaders and representatives for economic growth and development, which he got to witness directly in ways that one may not have had a chance to back in Nepal.

Another said that not being able to vote despite being on the voters list is a wasted opportunity to influence election outcomes and choose strong candidates. We are instead relegated to just sending remittances for our incompetent leaders to waste, they added.

We sit here in a foreign land and helplessly watch our family members back home being repeatedly failed by our leaders. The election is also tied to our own futures back home. Many of us were compelled to migrate even for very low paying jobs with very little reward because of the government's inability to provide jobs back home.

One of my colleagues who has been in Qatar for the last 25 years has never once voted, and there is nothing he can do about it.

I cannot speak for all, but for us sweating in the Gulf, our ultimate destination is always Nepal. We may stretch our employment until either our employers or our bodies allow it, but we will all come home eventually.

However, the decision to return is never easy. What will we come back to, especially as returnees who could be potential entrepreneurs or jobseekers?

When I talk to my colleagues here from the Philippines, it is evident how their government recognises their value, not just in words but in action.

She shared how she recently cast her ballot for elections in the Philippines from Qatar. This makes me question: Would they care more about the senders and not just what is sent if we had the provision to exercise our constitutional right to vote?

I am afraid we will not find the answer during this year's election cycle either. ❏

Nepali trade union leader in Korea on the struggle for migrant workers' rights

● Madhusudhan Ojha in Seoul

When I was studying for the competitive Korean language test for migrant workers while in Nepal, I never imagined that I would one day be working as a labour activist here in South Korea.

My sole intention to migrate overseas was to work and earn, just like the 8,000 or so other Nepalis who join Korea's Employment Permit Scheme (EPS) every year. But my initial experience in the country was not pleasant.

On my very first day, even before I started work, I was scolded by my employer. I later realised that it was just a psychological tactic to show me who the boss was. I was verbally, and sometimes even physically, abused.

He would stand behind me and push me to do things quicker. After enduring this for some time, I sought help from the Nepal Embassy, labour counsellors and work centres set up to help migrant workers like me.

I was unable to change my job because my employer would not give me the mandatory release paper. One of the agencies I approached did not want to take a secret audio recording as evidence of abuse, saying it needed video proof.

Finally, I reached out to Korea's Migrant Trade Union (MTU) which served a warning to the employer, and even threatened a demonstration in front of his office if he did not give me my release paper. He obliged — and I had just witnessed the power of a workers' union. Before long I had become an office bearer of the MTU.

Korea's EPS is a huge improvement to the previous labour system, the Industrial Trainee Scheme (ITS) that brought in foreign workers as 'trainees'. Workers had to pay exorbitant amounts to get these jobs that were mediated by the private sector, which meant it was not merit but ability to pay that decided the fate of job-seekers.

Landing in Korea as a trainee meant you were also vulnerable to exploitation. Employers paid migrants at their discretion and got away with exploiting them. Workers who had paid high fees (sometimes up to Rs1 million in the case of Nepali workers) would escape abusive employers or overstay their visas as they could not change jobs. The system itself was designed to encourage undocumented workers.

In 2003, there was a nationwide crackdown and deportation of workers, and migrants protested and demanded the legalisation of undocumented workers for over a year. Activists of the movement were arrested, detained and deported. This united migrant

power of workers working together



PHOTOS FROM: MADHUSUDHAN OJHA



RIGHT IS MIGHT: Madhusudhan Ojha is the general secretary of the Migrant Trade Union in Korea, and is seen here participating in various street demonstrations for rights for foreign workers.

workers and laid a foundation for the formation Migrant Trade Union.

While it was founded in 2005, the registration of MTU with the Ministry of Labour as a legitimate trade union was at first rejected on the grounds that it included illegally employed foreigners who do not have the right to join labour unions. It filed a lawsuit against this decision and it was only ten long years later that Korea's Supreme Court in 2015 finally ruled in favor of the MTU.

By the time I came to South Korea in 2014, the struggle by my predecessors, including workers from Nepal, was already decades old. I never forget that I am standing on the shoulders of giants who laid the foundation for us to fight the good fight.

And for us, the good fight is primarily for a Work Permit System (WPS) in lieu of the EPS. The EPS is indeed significantly better than the ITS, as workers are hired based on a limit and all workers can recuperate the standard recruitment fee within a month of employment. But although the system allows workers to change jobs up to three

times legally, it requires permission from the employer which gives them disproportionate power.

The WPS would allow workers to change jobs without employer consent and give more power to workers. Many workers continue with jobs they do not like because of the fear of repercussions – recruitment fees may not be a big investment for Korean jobs like elsewhere in the Gulf or Malaysia, but workers invest an immense amount of time, money and effort to pass the language exam to qualify for the EPS.

Aside from our fight for WPS, we continue to shine the light on key migrant issues. Most recently, we demonstrated in front of the office of President-elect Yoon Suk-yeol calling for the elimination of discrimination via a comprehensive law, and for the introduction of the WPS.

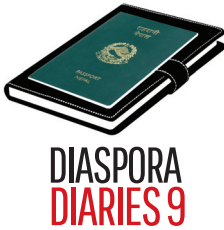
During Covid-19, we advocated for workers' rights to ensure the visa extension of current workers and against discriminatory testing requirements for foreigners and locals that was recalled soon after

its announcement.

Similarly, the Korean government has passed a decision that it is illegal for employers to place workers, especially in the agriculture sector, in 'containers' (temporary accommodations such as perforated plastic houses, warehouses). But the ban has still not been enshrined in the law which is what we are fighting for, so employers can actually be held accountable.

We look at other countries where Nepalis are working, and realise how much more privileged we are in Korea to have a recognised trade union. In many countries, unions for foreign workers are banned.

We are also fortunate to have the backing of the powerful Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) and others which amplify our voice and also provide us with resources to continue our work, especially as membership fees alone are not sufficient for the work we do.



abusive employers. They had paid exorbitant recruitment fees, were heavily in debt, and faced unpaid salaries and abuse. They escaped and prepared for protests with the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions since there were no unions for migrants back then.

Such scattered protests by migrant workers including Nepalis have taken place in South Korea. Many foreign workers got deported in the process, but did not let this fear dissuade them from the struggle. Their efforts laid the strong foundation for the Korean Migrant Trade Union that has provided an important platform for us to fight freely for positive, durable reforms for foreign workers here.

Collective bargaining is a privilege we can enjoy because of the sacrifice and vision of our predecessors. We are simply continuing their struggle. 🇳🇵

Madhusudhan Ojha is the General Secretary of Korea's Migrant Trade Union (MTU).

In the preceding year, there were nine undocumented Nepali workers who escaped

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