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**EXCLUSIVE**  
**Downsized cabinet**  
It looks like even in this time of crisis, the Deuba cabinet is reluctant to downsize. His "dirty half-dozen" ministers seem to want to be in office for the electoral advantage this will give. Baburstar denies that there is pressure from the king to dump ministers. Meanwhile, the kangresi factions may soon find there is no need to fight over the party symbol and flag. And the UML is so tantalised by election victory that it hasn't thought of fallback options. Reminds you a bit of a frog inside a snake's jaws still trying to catch that last fly.

**Times** nepalnews.com  
Weekly Internet Post # 50  
Q. Does it really matter who gets the tree symbol?  
  
Total votes: 1126  
Weekly Internet Post # 51. To vote go to www.espnepal.com  
Q. Should there be an all party government to take the country out of the present crisis?

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**RAMESH POUDEL IN SANDHIKARKA**  
Two days after the Sunday night Maoist raid on the district headquarters of Argaakhanchi district, government buildings here are still smouldering. There is a pungent smell of rotting flesh mixed with the stench of burnt PVC pipes. Vultures circle overhead, looking for half-burnt corpses in the fields.  
The 9,000 inhabitants of this picturesque central Nepal town are still in shock, and loiter nervously outside their homes. There are spent cartridges everywhere. "Don't walk too far out, there could be unexploded explosives and booby traps," a security official warned us. They are there to comb through the charred ruins, looking for more bodies hidden in the debris, and for mines. One had exploded earlier that day, injuring three soldiers.  
Even Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba had to hop over some unexploded ordnance as he toured the devastation Tuesday. He tried to reassure the locals that the Maoists would be defeated, but the locals wanted relief, which was not forthcoming. He told security officials: "We can't end terror overnight, but we'll do everything to make it easier for our security forces to fight them."  
By Thursday morning, the death toll in Sandhikarka had crossed 110. 60 security forces personnel and two civilians, and 50 bodies of Maoists had been recovered.  
Among the dead was a 72-year-old woman who was shot in the stomach by Maoists who went house-to-house looking for hiding soldiers.  
The Maoists deployed six platoons of hardcore fighters to ring Sandhikarka in a coordinated and meticulously planned attack. Some of the prisoners later freed by Maoists said the rebels admitted that the CP Platoon of 40 fighters had been decimated. The police station, the barracks and the armed police force base were attacked simultaneously. The rebels were supported by paramedics who had established nine field surgery tents outside the

# ENOUGH.

Can we start talking now?

town with equipment and medicines looted from the district hospital. While the fighting raged, Maoist cadres were running back and forth carrying stretchers and resupplying fighters with fresh ammunition, and relieving weapons from dead soldiers and fallen comrades.  
"I spoke in code. I remember someone shouted 'Kalpana Long Rang'; and suddenly there was a burst of machine-gun fire," a local resident told us. Even before the attack, Maoist support teams had already dug graves to bury their dead. They used out-of-date cartridges to ferry ammunition in, and the same ones to carry away their wounded and dead on the way out. For the first time, there is confirmation that senior Maoist leaders Krishna Bahadur Mahara, Nanda Kishor Pun (Paangur), Top Bahadur Rayamaji, and Pampa Bhusal were leading the raid.  
Independent sources discounted earlier reports that there were 4,000 Maoists. They said the actual number was closer to 1,500. "I haven't seen so many people even in the Chure Besi Meba," a local resident told us. "They just sprung up out of nowhere." Most of the Maoist cadres were in their 20s, and bragged to their prisoners that the army's night-vision helicopters were "no match" for them. Learning from past battles, the Maoists appear to have set fire to vegetation and buildings, since smoke blinds the night-vision scopes on the helicopters.



The barracks was housed in a Food Corporation godown, and is littered with the possessions of dead soldiers (above). The wives and children of dead and abducted policemen being evacuated to Pokhara.

## Maoist message: take us more seriously

**PUSKAR GAUTAM**  
The past week has seen a classic Maoist attempt at "strategic rigidity and tactical flexibility". After two deadly demos of strike ability, the leadership has sent out an olive branch with a proposal for ceasefire and dialogue. This has several objectives: to tell the government not to take the movement for granted, to give the impression that it is the government that is against peace, and to prove that "the party controls the gun".  
Maoist leaders Prachanda and Baburam Bhattarai wrote a letter to parliamentary parties recently in which they cited "geopolitical and international reasons" why they wanted a roundtable conference to come up with a political resolution. But 15 days later, they launched the attacks on Sandhikarka and Bhiman killing more than 110 policemen and soldiers.  
It could be their way of saying: "You didn't listen to us. Here is another jolt." But what it did was prove once again that there is no consistency between what the Maoists say, and what they do.  
The comrades have got Internet savvy of late, bombarding mailing lists with statements and posting analyses on their new website. The contents of a recent interview with Badal (Ram Bahadur Thapa) and "Rejoinder on Some Current Issues" by Baburam

Bhattarai prove that ideologically, the Maoists are as hardline as ever.  
And for the first time since the royal massacre, they have lashed out on India.  
Prachanda's 8 September statement calls the Indian government's arrest and deportation of Maoist central committee member Sansiv Chhetri to Kathmandu an indication of Nepal's "Bhutanisation", and pointedly warns New Delhi not to interfere in Nepal's internal affairs.  
There is no doubt that the Maoists are feeling the pressure from India, and despite the this weekend's setbacks the Maoists were feeling the heat in Nepal as well. Some see Chhetri's handover as a move towards talks initiated by New Delhi.  
The army is spread thinly, and the Maoists have exploited this weakness. The security forces need to abandon their solely garrison-based defence for superior real-time intelligence with surgical strikes against command posts and training centres. The Maoists, for their part, appear to have struck a better balance now between their eastern and western regions, and will be expected to spread panic in urban areas with more bombs and arson attacks in the run up to their strike on Monday.

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### VULTURES OVERHEAD

I could be the 11 September anniversary or the news of fresh slaughter here at home, but the combined result is a terrific sense of terror-fate. This is the kind of weariness that comes after talking so much about it, seeing so much of it that you go beyond caring. Or, your staff shrivel off because you can't bear the emotional stress anymore.

We who have not been directly affected by the butchery, are in a sense just spectators. What must be learned is going through family members like Ambar, the widow of sub-inspector Surendra Baskot, and her two boys, Amir and Ajit? What of the relatives of young boys and girls forced to join the militant underground, or who enlisted out of desperation? Do their families know their fate? This week alone, there are tens of thousands of fathers, mothers, wives, sisters and brothers mourning for the 200 Nepalis who died at the hands of other Nepalis this week.

This numbing and mindless bloodshed has gone on too long. It is hard to see who the beneficiaries of it besides arms merchants, their brokers, and those who want to see the extinction of the Nepali nation.

And as the vultures wheel overhead, we catch the repugnant glimpse of a government that has given up doing anything about which. Political leaders who have lost all legitimacy in the eyes of the public, are clinging on to power by the finger nails.

It would be stupid of the Maoists not to exploit this Maoist vacuum and political disarray. They're good at what they do. And ruthless. The powers are simply exploring the chronic weaknesses of the security forces—fatal flaws in every branch, strategy and intelligence-gathering. One side seems to learn from previous battle, the other side seems incapable of doing so. It's not that the Maoists are particularly brilliant, it's just that the government is.

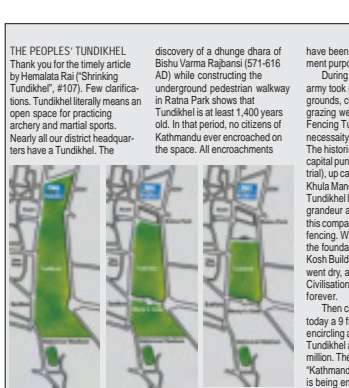
The police and soldiers in Sindhuli and Arghakhanchi fought valiantly this week. But after Mangalvan and Khara, the strategy should have been to prevent such hand-to-hand combat in the first place with early warning, pre-emptive and proactive deployment. Instead, they waited in vulnerable garisons for the onslaught even after Maoists in the village below had been rousing the populace with slogans on loudspeakers hours beforehand.

In attack after attack, the Maoists' tactics have been clear even to its observers: use of overwhelming force, human shields, precise automatic and long-range firepower, surprise and snipe to get the defenders to expend ammunition, before over-running the base.

Not to be prepared with forward defence, pre-emptive intelligence and a contingency plan when you know what is coming is not just being fatalistic. It shows a death-wish. This is ideal terrain for small bands of guerrillas to ravage a conventional army. If the security forces do not upgrade the quality of their intelligence, then this war can drag on for decades more. But you can't fight it when the intelligence budget is used as pocket money.

There has to be a concept of operations from the high command to the brigade and platoon levels laying out broad guidelines for soldiers in the field on the objective and how to get there, how to deal with the civilians, how to counter overwhelming force on isolated garisons.

What needs to be done at the political level is another matter altogether. How can you cover your political failures with an open space for practicing the military to gain an upper hand in the battlefield. How long do we have to wait for that decisive political leadership to break this cycle of violence?



**THE PEOPLES' TUNDIKHEL**  
Thank you for the timely article by Hemalata Rai ('Striking Tundikhel', #107). Few clarifications... Tundikhel is at least 1,400 years old. In that period, no citizens of Kathmandu ever encroached on the space. All encroachments

have been done by or for government purposes. During the Rana regime, the army took good care of the grounds, cultural activities and grazing were not restricted. Facing Tundikhel was never a necessity then, nor is it now. The historic khola that got got capital punishment (without trial), up came the Sainik Manch, Khula Manch and Rana park. Tundikhel lost much of its grandeur and value because of this compartmentalisation and fencing. With the pile driving for the foundation of the Sanchaya Koshi Building, the Sanchaya went dry, another Bagnmati! Civilisation heritage was lost forever.

Then came democracy, and today a 9 ft high metal fence is encircling and enclosing Tundikhel at a cost of Rs 28.1 million. The justification given is 'Kathmandu's only open space is being encroached.' Oh yes?

## Stockholm syndrome

Our comrades can take a lesson of two from Sweden's welfare state.

**STOCKHOLM** — It's selection time in Sweden, but you wouldn't be able to tell. Loudspeakers don't blare election slogans, and there is no visible door-to-door political canvassing. Most of us lazily dressed candidates look down at pedestrians, but they look more like models for designer business suits. Even on the front pages of daily newspapers, election issues do not get as much prominence as other stories. People on the street are aware the elections are going to polls on 15 September, but nobody seems to be too concerned.

The reason for such apathy may be the predictability of the outcome in Sweden. Like most other developed countries, predictions of opinion polls are far indicators of voters' preferences, and nobody is expecting anything new from the general elections next week. The front left by Social Democrats consisting of the Left Party and the Green Party—conserves call them The Red(s) is likely to remain in power, though with a narrower margin. The vote on Sunday would be routine, with no electoral upset expected.

The Swedes are surprisingly consistent in reposing their faith in the party of their choice. With the exception of one brief episode, Social Democrats had been in power for 44 consecutive years between 1932 and 1976. Conserva-

tive conditions do not last long. But sadly, some young Swedes seem to hold a strange fascination for fascism and want a government that is strict on immigrants, conservative about imports from European Union countries.

Rightsists are not yet as significant a force, but given the swings in France and the Netherlands, who knows what will happen as Sweden further integrates with the EU? Swedes are holding on to their Kroner for now, and adopting the Euro is sure to be deeply divisive. This is the fear that haunts committed social democrats here.

The tradition of holding both national and local elections together knowing nothing debated. There are people who hold that local and national issues tend to get mixed up in simultaneous elections. But this Sunday, it will be like any other elections in the past—6.6 million registered voters can vote for local government units and the national parliament. Sweden abandoned the bicameral system in 1971, and the Riksdag with its 349 members, is the single house now.

Perhaps there is a lesson here for us in Nepal—do we really need an upper chamber where the likes of Dipakprakash Shah are members? Even though many members of the Riksdag have complete control over their own vote—theoretically, they can vote against their party directives though such a thing rarely happens—it is the political parties that are at the core of the Swedish parliamentary system. Voters choose the party that they want to represent them. If they have strong reservations against a certain candidate, they have a right to

to the people. **Huta Ram Baidya, Tripureswar**

**ANTI-AMERICAN**  
Just as you have fulfilled your apparent self-love of publishing anti-American articles in the *Nepali Times*, I must fulfil my love of cancelling the delivery of your publication to my home. Do realise that you would be able to accomplish your little if you did not daily enjoy and utilise the global Internet, TV, air flight, etc. How come you do not publish articles thanking the Americans for all you are able to enjoy?

Adjust your worldview to the correct perspective. I will visit our local newspaper distributor today to make sure to immediately discontinue delivery.

**Tim Ackerman, Kathmandu University Medical School**

**BIG BROTHER**  
CK Lal's trust with an unnamed

## Feedback

**N**apolion is not regarded as a great military philosopher of the standing of Sun Tzu or Clausewitz, but he made one astute observation. He said, "Moral is to physical, as three is to one." This universally acknowledged dictum on the rules of war is not only very perceptive, but it also used extensively to reinforce contemporary military teachings worldwide, and in the course of establishing peace in our violence-ridden nation, it may be fully assured that the army is aware and sensitive of the critical need to hold and preserve the moral high ground.

It would be naive to assume that the military is not aware that counter-insurgency warfare is the most dirty and despicable form of conflicts a professional army can get into.

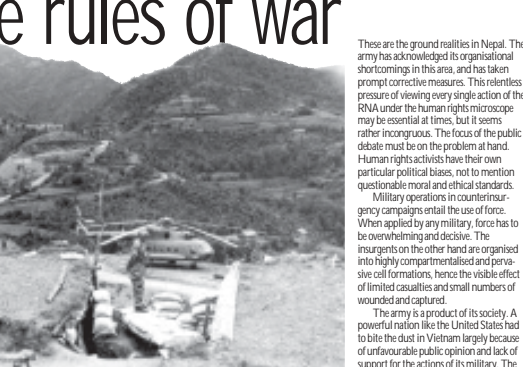
All sensible armies try to avoid it unless, of course, they are pushed into it as has happened in the case of the Royal Nepalese Army. However, once the army deploys, then the criteria to maintain the moral high ground—especially since the "enemy" is one's own people—becomes a conspicuous factor.

The RNA's strategy is not so much to break the back of the Maoists and force the movement into submission, but to try and bring back all the aggrieved parties into the national mainstream and thereby achieve national reconciliation and peace. Breaking the back of the Maoists, as erroneously stated, is not a strategic end, but could be construed as a potent and viable military means. The military actions conducted all over the country are, therefore, a part of the means adopted in pursuit of the strategic end. This is not to say that the means justify the ends.

The fact that the volume of the army's operations are necessarily at a quantum level higher than those of the Maoists of the Five Vils/Min when the American ambassador visited the Balthu Palace. Soon after, Conrad Madhav Nepal invited some buddies/jibs for consultation. The portrait episode was discussed, but someone did suggest that if the CPN (UML) changed its name to Nepal Social Democracy Party, nobody would be able to stop it from coming to power again.

Conrad Madhav Nepal's reaction to that suggestion was typical bourgeois—he defended his party's name by comparing it to Coca-Cola. But if brand-wildness was the issue, then the word "communism" has been hijacked by Maoists. The UML should take a study tour of Sweden to see how the reds did it here. ♦

## The moral high ground and the rules of war



The army is operating in difficult conditions after years of neglect. Military capabilities cannot be built overnight, and security is expensive.

**If the public expects the army to deliver peace then the army also expects the public to provide it the requisite support: moral, psychological or physical.**

opinion is the basis for success and failure. Here I would like to pose a question to all the professed and genuine nationalists of Nepal: is the army receiving the prerequisite public support from all quarters, or is it just being criticised and dragged into unnecessary controversy aimed at covering up for political gains?

Besides, who defines human rights, who makes the rules and who judges whether they are being followed? Violent societies that have perpetrated genocides, launched blood world wars, and exterminated whole peoples have little moral authority to lecture to a peace-loving, compassionate and cultured people.

On the other hand, human rights area late-20<sup>th</sup> century concept encapsulated in the UN charter. It is a concept not easily understood or cared for by an uneducated people working to keep a basic living.

**(Sarna) Rana is the pen name of a military analyst.**

the apathy of the Nepal government in bringing back its stolen property. How can a state that doesn't value its own faith expect others to treat it with respect?

The trade in stolen idols is a bit like drug trafficking. It is driven by greed. There is no point blaming the people who sell the objects, saying they don't value it so we will buy it for 'sale'—knowing that if the temptation wasn't there, no one would steal it in the first place. And the temptation for the Buddha mask. Does he know that some of the things don't have price tags, some things can be priceless, some things are too sacred to trade? The Buddha image is part of Patan's Samyak festival when hundreds of Buddhas from individual guthis are paraded around the town. Their combined sanctity

# It's a Zoo out there



HEMPLATA PAI... call them khairs in our language and mriga in Nepali—they eat our millet harvest and the villagers kill them in anger.



New addition: slaming from Malaysia

The zookeepers are enthusiastic, and visitors can't get over the open space and exotic species. Now if only the Central Zoo had some more cash.

appreciation for living in Kathmandu. The Central Zoo entertains about a million visitors every year, but the high point for workers there is the annual Bhojto Jatra in May or June, when about 35,000 of the people who come to Jawalakhel from all over the Valley to view the vest of Machinrathar also take in Nepal's only zoo. "During Bhojto Jatra we have a tough time controlling the crowd, some years we even run out of tickets," says Chiri Maharjan, a zoo guard. "Nepalis are essentially nature-loving people—they

go wild with excitement when they come here," he smiles. No surprise, for right in the heart of downtown Lalitpur, visitors are confronted with six hectares housing over 800 animals of 126 species—30 mammal varieties, 66 birds, eight reptiles and 22 fish species. There are a number of exotic species too, the most recent additions being a pair of siamang brought in from Malaysia, ostrich from Australia and a hippopotamus from Thailand. This is a much-neglected institution, but don't blame the zookeepers. Most of them are

committed beyond the call of mere duty. Krishna Maharjan has worked at the zoo for 18 long years, and has taken responsibility for the hippos. "People are just awe-struck at the sight of them. Children love to stare at them—some compare the animals with pigs, other think they look like rhinos without their rough outer hard skins," he laughs. Maharjan has seen how close the bond between human and beast can be. "These animals have become my family. I feel sad and worried if they get ill. More than that, Maharjan can

tell whether his charges are happy, depressed or plain old bored. The Central Zoo was established in 1932 by Prime Minister Juddha Shumsher Rana as a private collection of wild animals. Life-size bronze statues of his mother and sister-in-law still look down on visitors to the zoo. With the political and social changes that followed 1951, when the amassed wealth of the Rana prime ministers was nationalised and a number of properties turned into public utilities, the ownership finally came to the government in



Krishna Maharjan (left) takes care of the new hippos (right).

## Keeping the zoo's success story afloat

In 1997, the zoo began a project called Friends of the Zoo under its conservation education program, targeting schoolchildren and their parents. Already, the FoZ is acclaimed as one of the best undertakings of its kind in Asian zoos. For an annual fee of Rs 150, schoolchildren can avail of conservation educational activities, tours to the wild, discounts in various stores in the Valley and free entrance to the zoo, and also participate in tending to and feeding the animals. FoZ presently has over 9,000 members from about 75 schools in Kathmandu Valley. "Children between the ages of 11 and 14 are more keen on our activities; the older ones are already overburdened with preparing for SLCE exams," explains Geetha Shrestha, chief of FoZ. Most of the members are students of private schools, in large part because the Rs 150 is simply too much for children in government schools to pay. Bhawani Raman Subedi, a teacher at the Bhaktapur Adarsha School, who was taking his 54 students around, was disappointed, but not too much. "Our students are not members because their parents cannot spare the cash. But we bring them here and other nearby animal reserves for their project work in

zooology and biology," he said. FoZ would like to subsidise membership fees for government students, but simply cannot spare any of its Rs 1.7 million budget. The fees it collects only total Rs 300,000-400,000. But, says FoZ's Shrestha, they are considering the request of the government schools for group memberships and have started identifying contact people in schools so the children can have more opportunities to participate with their more privileged peers. Another program, under the zoo animal welfare scheme, is getting sponsors for animals. The cost to partially sponsor the feed for an animal ranges between Rs 170 and \$340 annually, depending on the animals and the size of their enclosure. This programme was introduced to lighten the zoo administration's Rs 4 million annual feed bill.

### Become a member of Friends of the Zoo

Nationally	Individual	Family	Student
Nepali	Rs 200	Rs 500	Rs 150
SAARC	Rs 300	Rs 600	Rs 200
Other	Rs 500	Rs 1,000	Rs 300

1956. The management of the zoo has changed hands a few times, but it remains fundamentally what its creator envisaged—a collection of rare wild animals, but with one important amendment to his vision—the right of the public to enter the zoo. The public could enter, but for a long time there was little reason for most people to do so. Mainly because the government lacked the expertise and the motivation to manage a zoo and develop it into an educational institution, it fell into disrepair, and the curators tended to animals and their surroundings were far from attractive. Many Kathmandulis had even forgotten about the existence of the zoo by 1995, when the management of it was handed over to the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation (KMTNC). The KMTNC was given the responsibility for 10 years, and the government agreed to stay on as a facilitator and monitor the zoo activities.

too successful, but the keepers have learnt from their mistakes and are considering the release of a second batch of 25. "This time we are taking serious precautions," says director RK Shrestha. An animal exchange program was also initiated after the KMTNC took over the management—the recent rare additions are courtesy zoos abroad. Animal security is the other major concern of the zoo management, and an area where it could really use some more cash. The six hectares are guarded by just 10 untrained men, and two low-ranking policemen. This is just not enough to repel an attack like the one in 1999, when poachers broke into the zoo, killed two rare one-horned rhinos, and mutilated them, then escaping with the precious horns. Zoning laws are such that there is no buffer patrol zone on the zoo's perimeter. "The land instead there are private houses whose

### DOMESTIC BRIEFS

**The pen is mightier**  
It's true, the media can make a difference, and people still care. Residents of Jogimara VDC in Dhading district were moved when they received \$500 sent by fellow Nepalis living in Washington DC, upon reading the plight of the village, which lost most of its working male population in an army operation. (See "Unfriendly fire," #106.)

"At least there are people who share our sorrow," says Gyan Bahadur Biswakarma who lost two sons who were working on an airport runway in Kailash. The money was raised by the District of Columbia Athletics Club, a group of Nepali amateur athletes, who organise sporting events and fundraise for those in need. Parents who had lost a son, widows, and orphans from Jogimara walked three hours to gather at Majistar. Bazar on the Prithvi Highway Monday to collect the money. Families received Rs 2,250 for each member they lost. Tanka Bahadur Malla, former chairman of Jogimara VDC, says the community is feeling strength not just from the money, but from the fact that someone is listening to them. "Apart from the monetary assistance, we feel that there is someone to share our sorrow. While the army remains quiet over its killing of innocents, it's heartening to see Nepalis living in America extend a helping hand."

**Thais to try two more Nepalis**  
Two Nepalis accused of heroin trafficking are to appear in court on 19 September for trial. The two, Hari Bahadur Gurung and Pore Ghale, are currently at Bangkok's Klong Prem prison, which has six other Nepalis serving sentences. Gurung and Ghale were accused of trying to smuggle 7.5 kg of heroin, but they were framed by smugglers and forced to sign a confession at gunpoint by police. They say the evidence was planted on them. According to Thai law, the two face the death penalty. But activists working with Nepali prisoners in Thailand say that with legal support and consular strength, not just from the Nepali embassy, the sentence can be reduced. There are over two dozen Nepalis in Klong Prem and other Thai jails.

**Nepal in elephant polo meet**  
A Nepali team will compete in the 11th World Elephant Polo tournament next week in The resort town of Hua Hin. The draw for the tournament, which will run from September 17 to 22, was made Monday by Tim Baade of Kimberly Clark and Somchai Jinnovart of Pichwillyhouse Coopers. Drawn in league A were Singapore Polo Club, Mercedes Benz Thailand's German team, Standford Winery from Australia, Chivas and King Power's Thailand B team. In league B are American Express World Elephant Polo Association team from Nepal, Tickle and the Ivories team from Sydney, Sri Lanka's Ceylon Elephant Polo Association team and King Power's Thailand A team.

### HERE AND THERE

# There once was a sea

Flying back—finally—to South Asia this past week, I soon gave up on the horrible films, bland food and general squallor of British Airways economy class and wandered to the back of the aircraft. There, I leaned on the rear door, feeling that peculiar sensation that comes from knowing that simple mechanical failure in the latch would launch me into space for a few minutes of wondrous, freezing terror, followed by the oblivion of impact. But I wasn't there for cheap thrills. I had noticed on the in-flight route map that we were flying above Central Asia, just crossing the Uzbekistan border from Russia. Below us, according to the map, lay a great body of water called the Aral Sea. Once this was one of the world's largest land-locked bodies of salt water. Now, as most people know, it's a testament to howling ignorance about the consequences of our arrogant ineptitude. Instead of a body of water several hundred kilometers across, the Aral Sea is now a series of poisonous ponds, linked by toxic salt flats. Badly rusted fishing boats sit on ridges of corrosive soil, three days walk from the nearest water. The communities where the fisherfolk lived and plied their trade have either disappeared beneath the shifting sands or become graveyards of the victims of the Aral Sea's depollution. It's easy to blame the arrogance of Soviet communism for the fate of the sea and its people, the once-rich fishery and culture on the shores of an once pristine body of water. Engineers from Moscow planned the great diversions of rivers that fed the Aral, urged on by political commissars drunk on the notion of conquering nature. Cotton, the world's most widely grown crop, killed the Aral Sea. The rivers were ripped from their natural courses to irrigate this cotton fields in Uzbekistan, the old Soviet Union's cotton belt. Cotton sucks water and pesticides like few other plants and the aquifers of the northern Uzbek plains were soon drained.

There are scary and depressing lessons for anyone who supports restricting access to information.



will empire the world has known. I wonder if there are any more miserable than the lost citizens of the seas around the Aral Sea. The big plane banked to the right and I could see more clearly the lay of the devastated land below. A long gnarled peninsula protruded into a remnant of the sea—small and no doubt shallow. I wondered if this could be the dreaded "Island X" where Moscow had once developed its deadly biological weapons: anthrax, smallpox, influenza and other dreaded diseases bred to kill people in the name of a twisted state ideology. Intrapud reporters—most of them Russian and citizens of the former Soviet Union—discovered this still walkway and highly mysterious laboratory while foraging through declassified documents and the subsequent outcry had led to its final closure, once and for all. The viruses and compounds within were supposedly made inert and harmless, but we may never know. Supremely, severely ironic, it is, that the commissars of Moscow chose an island in the Aral Sea to plan deliberately an assault on the health of ordinary people in enemy lands, while all around their own policies were killing tens of thousands of their own citizens. That of course by suppressed and hushed up too until the fall of communism. It's funny what you can see from a great height. It's equally stark just what you miss. I can only hope that governments in today's unipolar world, in Washington, Europe, Asia and elsewhere, learn something from the hideous errors of the old Soviets Union. Arrogance and secrecy bred only death and destruction, and the commissars discovered to their cost. To those in America who are closing minds and restricting access to information in the name of security, I say only, remember the Aral Sea. ♦

by DANIEL LAK

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Consider it 'Punjabi', 'Muslim', 'Indian', whatever. The kurtha-suruwal is overtaking the sari as a clothing of choice for Nepali women.



MR. RAJABANDHYA

HEMELATA RAI... You know that old gag about hemlines going up with the economy? Well in Nepal, that's reversed. As the situation of the country gets bleaker, kurthas are getting shorter and shorter, as if in an attempt to add some joy to our lives, and they are also getting more and more common. After all, there are only so many permutations that the traditional six-yard Nepali farjya can take. The kurtha-suruwal strikes just the right balance between modernity and tradition.

The choice to wear kurtha-suruwal is more sociologically complex than might appear at

first (appreciative) glance. To understand what it means to wear the more-or-less knee-length tunic with the loose, gathered trousers is a meditation on geography, religion, history, national identity, the relentless march of modernity, laziness, and the all-too-human desire for variety. "It is convenient, comfortable to wear and easy to maintain. It's versatile, and does not require skill to put on, like a sari does," says an enthusiast Adilee Maskey who works with the International Labour Organisation's Kathmandu office.

Two decades ago, few Nepalis would have believed that the kurtha-suruwal would be the subject of so much fashion discussion. Women don't anymore suddenly stop wearing them when they hit their mid-20s, or get married. Increasingly, older women are also turning to the outfit, if somewhat hesitantly, and even traditional mothers-in-law are accepting the outfit as conventionally appropriate for their daughters-in-law. The sari, that symbol of staunch Nepali Hindu womanhood, is being seen less than ever, only on ritual occasions.

The perception is that the traditional farjya is out of place in most urban settings, and the Nepali mindset is not yet ready to see most western styles gain widespread currency. As increasing numbers of women work outside the home, the kurtha-suruwal allows them to be more mobile—be less fussy when running errand microbuses, sit astride motorcycles, not bother about the sari immediately slipping down. It also reduces the workload of women at home—no more starching or unwieldy ironing in cramped apartments. Kurthas take

less time and energy to be made presentable. The silent concurrence on the kurtha-suruwal among people from different economic and social strata, has granted the outfit a remarkable acceptability. Women in rural communities have taken urban middle class women as their role models as far as the sari is concerned, and are slowly switching their loyalties. And even if they don't wear it, the kurtha is more kind of social code. One of the first groups of women to embrace the outfit were development workers seeking acceptability among rural communities, and yet wanting to move away from the hassles of the sari. "It puts the villagers at ease and helps them identify with the development workers—which makes establishing communication much easier," explains Jasmine Rajabandhy of Save the Children (UK), who frequently visits rural areas.

Practically aside, the kurtha's aesthetic virtue and malleability as a fashion object has helped ensure its popularity. Man Shree Gurung, 49, wore saris all her life—she graduated from high school in a sari, obtained a college degree wearing a cotton dhoti and the sari remained her conventional official wear at the Nepal Banijya Bank, where she has worked for some time now. Recently, she discovered the comfort of the kurtha-suruwal literally by accident—she sustained a fracture in her right ankle and found out that the three-piece outfit required less effort to put on. When kurtha-suruwals—known as

salwar-kameez in India, and shalwar 'sulis' in Pakistan—first started really catching on in Kathmandu in the late 1980s, the rage was styles copied from Pakistani television. Kathmandu mothers and their daughters wanted anything that made them look like slightly flighty, yet modest, belles of the ball. (Wonder if the somewhat disturbing current rage for bleached and otherwise badly coloured hair stems from the same TV shows.) Peshan Lal, a kurtha-suruwal retailer from Bag Bazar, fondly remembers those days. "They all wanted that Pakistani touch!" he exclaims wistfully.

But as video faded and cable caught on, Indian fashion trends spread with the footprint of satellite channels that catered to an overwhelmingly Indian market. Peshan Lal's clientele now inquire more about designs worn by Prema and Kusum, leading female characters in popular Sony and Star soaps, rather than those sported by the Zeenats and Anshas of yore. And because, as we all know, TV viewers Want More Variety and Get Bored Easily, silicom producers have realised that

one way to keep their predominantly female audience hooked is by putting on a bit of a fashion show for them. (And that god for that, who could bear those massive, hideous 1980s shoulder pads anymore.) While 2000 was the year of the floor-sweeping kurtha paired with the tight churidar, a mere two springs later, everyone is wearing super short kurthas with slits on the side up to the very top of the straight pants that go with them, sometimes without even the 'shaw' or

chunni, something Zeenat-of-the-streaked-hair wouldn't dream of doing. Everyone. Whether it suits them or not. In this newspaper's considered opinion, women of medium height and a somewhat well-rounded build are the only people who look good in this style. All this chopping and changing has had a salutous impact on the skills of Kathmandu's tailors, and has led to a spurt of interest in textile design and traditional Nepali textiles, too. Fabrics traditionally produced for saris and blouses are now being made into trendy kurthas. In the mid-1990s, women in Kathmandu stitched kurthas out of Indian silk and imported Japanese synthetic saris. Now, fashion designers are displaying their creativity, and using dhaka fabric, giving a fillip to an art that was stagnating.

Fashion designer Uma Chand says that her boutique in Kuponole gets about 200 orders for kurtha-suruwals each month, and that the modifications her clients request to personalise the outfit are various. Pockets for women like Rajabandhy, higher silhouettes for those who ride two-wheelers, slimmer silhouettes for the summer and less for the winter, better to wear a sweater under, skinny shawls, buttons on the sides, palleets, elastic suruwal-tops, you name it.

Let's hope kurtha lengths come down, if only as signals that times are getting better. ♦

# Kurtha-suruwal invasion



# Wrong on rights

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, My Kohnsson is to be replaced by the Brazilian Sergio Vieira de Mello...

During the last annual session of the CHR, held in Geneva last spring, the vote to ignore severe human rights violations in such places as Russia, Chechnya, Zimbabwe, Iran and East Timor...

This is happening, in part, because countries with high human rights records are being outvoted by China, Cuba, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Indonesia, Kenya, Libya, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, and Vietnam...

Such countries go up to their eyeballs in the chair and then actively work to build alliances with pliable governments...

# Are Islam's values really different?

Since the terrorist attacks of 11 September, questions about Islam's nature, its distinctive identity, its potential threat to the west...

It often claims to be the Islamic world that, because one of the five fundamental duties of a Muslim is to 'help to the poor', Islamic society is less atomistic, which limits inequality and social exclusion...

From the ground so deep to long ago these prophecies, Muslim countries tend to be characterized by lower levels of inequality and crime...

Two studies I conducted with colleagues at the University of London in 1999 and 2001. The first was a comparison between religious and such social/cultural characteristics as inequality, preference for sons, and the degree of female labour market participation...

## There's an anti-human rights lobby at the UN, and they're gaining ground.

cover procedural ploys to undermine the commission. Their resolve is not matched by balancing impulses on the part of the traditional promoters of the UN Commission for Human Rights...

During the past few years, contributions to the general session by the UN human rights monitoring system, it adamantly opposed several important and promising new human rights initiatives...

On the anti-torture protocol, the US sought to exclude the prohibition of a universal system of visits to places of detention...

Uzama Panchal, a onetime activist in Poland's Solidarity movement, represents Human Rights Watch at the UN

## Vague statements about "culture wars" don't tell us anything, but comparative studies do.

Like any other religion, Islam has its own distinctive identity, its potential threat to the west—has been heralded in intellectual and political circles...

Our study of religion and social inequality in Lebanon examined social mobility rather than overall inequality, because societies in which opportunities and inequality are inherited are considered less than those in which family background is important...

The same holds true for female labour market participation, which in Lebanon is low but uniform across religious groups. This suggests that no relationship exists between religion and discrimination against women...

## Al-Qaeda, alive and well

UNITED NATIONS - The head of the United Nations group charged with gauging the effectiveness of global sanctions against Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda group said last week that the measure has failed to deal the organisation a crippling blow...

Michael Chandler, a former British military officer and head of the five-person UN team investigating the blacklisted group, said, "Al-Qaeda has sufficient resources to plan and launch additional terrorist attacks..."

## The fallout in Muslim Africa

The powerful Islamic presence in East Africa—Somalia in Kenya to Tanzania—brought the area under US suspicion as a hotbed of training for fleeing al-Qaeda fighters...

Somalia has suffered the most. "The impact of 11 September has destroyed the micro-economic situation in Somalia, the infrastructure of communal life..."

Sudan, though, has gained, though it has long been on the US list of states harbouring terrorists—the most infamous being bin Laden who fled there from 1991 to 1996...

## Internet wars

PARIS - A report published in Paris last week by Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) lists tightening control on communication on the Internet as among the "collateral damages" of the war against terror...

In the US where spread of information through the Internet is guaranteed by the first amendment of the constitution, the attacks led to a tightening of controls on the Internet, and the US government is now "playing world policeman on Internet..."

## War good for stock market

LONDON - Investors are being urged to prepare for a stock-market rally if the US and Britain decide to launch a full-scale war against Iraq...

Last week, the FTSE 100 index slipped about 3 percent to 4,107, despite rising Friday. However, any rally is not expected to last long and investors should therefore take the opportunity to take a quick profit...

## No peace without rights

COLOMBO - Civil society organisations here and overseas are demanding that human rights monitoring be a central aspect of the peace negotiations between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government starting 16 September...

Since February, widespread violations by the LTTE in the areas of child conscription and recruitment, abductions, and intimidation of political opponents in the North and East have continued...

The agreement signed between the government and the LTTE at the beachfront of Trincomalee, Sri Lanka, is conceptually and practically a mechanism to deal with the civilian predicament under the LTTE's disposition...

Human rights are paramount here not only as a traditional justice question but to counter the hold of the other ideologies in social and political institutions, which will degrade the process unless checked...

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## Conspiracy theories

According to the Malaysian government, Ezz Mohamed Nor is a danger and a man deserving of his detention without trial under the country's infamous Internal Security Act (ISA)...

Exam Nor was arrested five months before Osama bin Laden's men crashed their plane into the World Trade Centre, and the soft spoken 35-year-old is also al-Qaeda's Dr Mahdi Mohamed's...

Exam Nor's crime was challenging the 21-year reign of the Malaysian prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim. He was also arrested and detained for a year in connection with the political secretary to the former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim...

Many respected champions of democracy and human rights are dismissed as extremist if they are not seen to be in the grand pantheon of Terrorism Inc. a status beyond their widest ambitions and capabilities...

## Indonesia cracks down on media

JAKARTA - Indonesia's parliament is set to clamp down on the explosion of new television and radio stations since the downfall of former president Suharto with draconian legislation similar to that in Singapore and Malaysia...

## Pakistan, too

ISLAMABAD - Pakistan's military government says the new press laws it approved this week will make the media more objective and journalistic. It says journalists and publishers could be jailed for three months or fined at least \$850 dollars...

## Not learning from mistakes

NEW DELHI - Monday night's train mishap in Bihar state in India, which has claimed over 100 people, has turned into a full-fledged political squabble. It has also raised the spectre of horrendous accidents in recent years has been due to populist budgeting that has kept fares low and the trains and tracks overcrowded...

## Progressive Pyongyang?

TOKYO - Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi in Pyongyang Tuesday, the first Japanese leader after World War II to visit North Korea and meet exclusive leader Kim Jong Il, 60 years after Japan's colonisation of the Korean peninsula ended its relations with North Korea...

## Left wing and Islamic movements like Abu Sayyaf in south-east Asia are treated with a new suspicion in the rush to subvert Islam

Left wing and Islamic movements like Abu Sayyaf in south-east Asia are treated with a new suspicion in the rush to subvert Islam. Behind hardline elements of an Islamic separatist movement that has been fighting in southern Mindanao province for decades before the world over heard bin Laden by early this year...

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## Where the tales are as tall as the mountains

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40,000 R.L.B.A.R. ... Acculent steaks and burgers bountiful, with a vegetarian variety the friendliest bar between Tibet and Timbuktu. Live band on Friday! RUM DOODLE THAMEL, KATHMANDU, NEPAL. TEL: 414336







Under My Hat

by Kunda Dixit

Larry King interviews God

As is well known to all and sundry (mostly sundry), there is evidence of a certain degree of laziness on the part of God towards this country of late. If the almighty is as compassionate and considerate about our welfare as is reported in the national electronic media from time to time, then how come traffic is so bad on Putali Sadak? How come I haven't yet got a raise? These were some of the



*Q: This must put a lot of pressure on your time, having to take care of the day-to-day affairs in paradise. Is this why you have let the landlocked Kingdom of Nepal go down the tubes?*

*A: Yes, and no. It is true that on any given day, I have to use my executive*

powers to straighten things out not just in your universe, but in parallel universes as well. I am aware that things are drifting a bit in Nepal, and I have sent instructions down to my emissary there, Mr Pashupati Nath, to do whatever he deems fit within the constitutional framework to bring things back to normalcy. He's been a bit tied up with demolitions lately, and putting his own house in order, but he should be getting down to banging some heads together very soon.

*Q: Is it true that you are cooperating with the CIAA to debar corrupt people from going to heaven?*

*A: Yes, we have signed an MoU to that effect under which those convicted on graft charges will spend a transit period at a halfway house in purgatory until their appeal is heard and, if found guilty, will burn in hell for eternity. We think this will serve as a deterrent to others who are tempted to steal from the people.*

*Q: And lastly, on a slightly personal note, are you a man or a woman, or both? This is a question that has bedeviled man since the dawn of history.*

*A: (Laughing heartily) That is a bit below the belt, Larry. And it just goes to show that you are the sum of the earth.*

burning national issues that were raised during a rally outside the gates of heaven recently. In order to find out exactly what is going through God's mind, Larry King recently obtained this exclusive interview. God does not usually give interviews to television journalists (considering them, as he puts it, in his infinite wisdom, "the scum of the earth") but it is an honour even for God to be interviewed by CNN. So, in a rare and exclusive live studio chat, God spoke frankly and freely on a range of issues including regime change in Iraq, the Kyoto Protocol, and the goings on in a tiny and far-flung Himalayan kingdom. Excerpts:

*Larry King: Allow us, first of all, to say how glad we are that you agreed to fit us into your tight schedule. We know you are terribly busy these days.*

*God: Glad to be here, there, and everywhere.*

*Q: Mr God, sir, how many of you are there actually? Some say you are one, while others believe you are member of a divine jumbo cabinet.*

*A: Well, Larry, in the last census in heaven there were 33 million of us, give or take a few hundred thousands. But since then, most have emigrated to New Zealand and sought political asylum, and many have been stolen and are now residing in museums in Austria. So, that leaves just me up here to hold the fort.*