

# Red alert

Alarmed by the Nepal crisis, Euro MPs urge a return to democracy

KUNDA DIXIT in STRASBOURG

One year after King Gyanendra's takeover, European parliamentarians here are set to step up pressure on him to call off controversial municipal polls on 8 February, restore democracy and begin a peace process.

In interviews here, MEPs from across the political spectrum were unanimous that the king is taking the country down the wrong path and he must roll back his move before it is too late for the country and himself.

"We are very concerned about what has happened in Nepal this past week and we see a return to democratic values and respect for human rights as an essential step in restoring peace," Eneko Landaburu, head of the EU's department of external relations, told us.

To mark one year of the king's takeover, the Sub-committee on Human Rights of the European Parliament has called for a hearing on Nepal on 20 February that will be attended by top officials and may issue a strong resolution against the royal takeover.

On 1 February itself, the lobby group Euro Step is organising a highlevel discussion in Brussels titled 'The Future of Democracy, Peace and Human Rights in Nepal' to be addressed by Swiss and British delegates, senior Commission officials and the human rights adviser to EU Council secretary general, Javier Solana.

Here and in Brussels, European officials are sufficiently alarmed to step up consultations with rights groups and governments. They see it as a positive sign that Nepal figured in talks between senior Indian and Chinese officials in Beijing earlier this month. China's expression of concern and calls for reconciliation this week were also seen by European Nepal-watchers as a significant departure from Beijing's previous position about not commenting on Nepal's internal affairs.

In Brussels, the Commission's Nepal handlers are preparing the Country Strategy Paper for 2007-2013. While not wanting Nepal to suffer from aid cuts, they say future outlays will hinge on how fast the country returns to democracy. "We will maintain some money for Nepal but it will only go to support the democratic process, human rights and conflict mitigation," one official said.

European officials are also scathing about the Maoists' return to conflict, saying it jeopardises the party-Maoist pact. Said one senior adviser at the EU parliament: "There is just no way Europe will back an obsolete ideology that uses violence, it will be difficult to explain it to our citizens."

Europe recently signed a 'strategic partnership' with India to coordinate foreign policy more closely and officials said this would include Nepal. Socialist MEP from Britain, Neena Gill, who is also chair of the delegation for relations with SAARC, says: "We regard India as a key country with influence in the region and on Nepal we will consult them closely." ●



IN FLAMES: Deputy Auditor General Ghanashyam is forced to walk after protestors torched his official car in New Baneswor on Sunday.

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Q. Do you agree that having a constituent assembly election would solve the current crisis?

Total votes:7,600

Yes 47 %

No 50 %

Don't know 3 %

Weekly Internet Poll # 284: To vote go to: [www.nepalitimes.com](http://www.nepalitimes.com)

Q. One year after February First, have the goals of the royal takeover been achieved?

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# Outside looking in

## After 10 years, why wait for more deaths if there is no military solution?

### REGIME CHANGE

The government is once again embarking on a confrontation course with everyone it doesn't agree with.

It let the Maoists' unilateral ceasefire lapse without making any move to reciprocate. It has refused to entertain suggestions that municipal elections be postponed to create a conducive environment for talks. Going against the societal consensus that there is no military solution to insurgency, it wants to battle it out. This is a short-sighted, misguided way to tackle an insurgency.

The Maoists have displayed tactics that prove they can hit and run anywhere. The government ignored the death and destruction in Thankot but the sound of booming guns is coming nearer.

Possible Maoist infiltration in mainstream parties' demonstrations has been cited to justify the arrests of political parties. This just exposes the regime's insecurity and shows it is running out of options. What it should do is cancel the meaningless municipal polls, invite the rebels to join it in another truce and begin the process of peace building.

As the first anniversary of the February First coup and the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the conflict approach, the country is careening headlong to the edge. Maoists threaten more attacks. Mainstream parties vow to defy a ban on demonstrations. The government is determined to hold municipal polls. The international community isn't softening its stand on a kingdom it perceives to be on the Burma Road.

Such disarray can't last long. A long overdue convulsion in Nepali society and polity is now inevitable. If the regime doesn't change, there will be regime change.



SUBHAS RAI

**W**e international observers and friends of Nepal agree there will be no military solution to the crisis in Nepal. Why should we then wait for more deaths, refugees, abductions and massive human rights violations?

It makes no sense to tolerate a deepening humanitarian crisis throughout the countryside if

**GUEST COLUMN**  
**Günther Baechler**



and when the crisis can and should be avoided politically in Kathmandu. In Geneva, the resolution passed by the UN Human Rights Commission in 2005 created momentum for human rights monitoring. Let us

build on this by adding a well-coordinated international effort to foster a meaningful peace process.

Just peace has to come from within the country. Only an alliance of non-armed democratic forces will be able to constructively handle the present polarisation and overcome the political impasse. Only a democratic movement made up of trustworthy personalities and innovative institutions can urge the two extremes to the mainstream. In the past, bilateralism was equal to confrontation: the palace and the parties boosted the Maoist rebellion. Together they launched a repressive and militarised answer by the palace. At the end of the day, the victims of both strategies are the democratic forces and rural Nepalis.

The Maoists have already declared their interest and political will to join the mainstream. I believe them: the cadre don't want to grow old as hermits in the Himalaya. The 12-point understanding is a necessary but not sufficient manifestation of this will. Further proof is needed during a second and third round of talks. Details have to be nailed down as precisely as possible.

If there is no military solution to Nepal's civil war, we have to recognise the Maoists as a political party at the negotiation table. However,



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to require rebels to give up their weapons before beginning negotiations is tantamount to asking them to surrender prior to an agreement and therefore essentially the same as supporting a military solution.

The king is crucial to a peace process. It is in His Majesty's hands to use his absolutistic power for a responsible and constitutionally correct solution. He might offer the political parties a 12-point understanding in which all the major steps for a peace process are addressed: framework conditions for a ceasefire, sovereignty of the people, civil and political rights guarantees, human rights, elections to national and local bodies, the role of a constitutional monarchy.

The seven parties will be in a position to compare the two understandings, one on the armed conflict and one on the

## LETTERS

### THUGS

Kudos to the Nepali government for its restraint, despite attempts by political saboteurs to destroy the state. These are just political thugs who defied a ban on rallies in Kathmandu to continue an illogical protest to waylay elections. I am surprised that only 300 people were arrested and 50 injured as I had expected far more. The irony was that the rioters were shouting "Down with autocracy, we want democracy!" Freedom for what: to burn tyres, hurl stones and destroy buildings and vehicles, force the closure of businesses, indirectly sidetracking and destroying the economy of the state that depends so much on tourism? I was in Kathmandu in December for the fifth time and witnessed the abuse of these political rascals who under the slogan of democratic reforms deprived people of their freedom. We can't have western styled democracy that is being exported all over—there are enough examples from South America to the Middle East to show its failure. Why can't Asia or others have their own form and concept of democracy carved out of their own domestic culture and interpretation? We were sad to see how students were manipulated by corrupt politicians and others causing public disorder and putting tourists in harm's way. His Majesty King Gyanendra had to take power because the previous administration failed to fight corruption or contain the long-running communist insurgency. I believe it when the army says the communist rebels planned to use

Friday's rally to launch attacks. I support Home Minister Kamal Thapa ('Back to February First', #282) who stated quite rightly that they had to act to protect the people and maintain peace and tranquillity. What many in Nepal are not aware of is that there is far more democracy there today than in many other countries that call themselves democratic.

**Dr Jacob George, Malaysia**

### HOPE

I deeply appreciate Kanak Mani Dixit bringing out hope and enthusiasm in these darkest times (Southasia Beat, 'Country in vernacular', #283). We all want to be a part of Nepal racing to its promising future.

**Prabin Gautam, email**

### ART OF GIVING

I really liked reading Rita Thapa's 'The art of giving' (# 268). I admire your strength of coping with your single hood by finding your own way.

I would love to meet with you someday.

**Deepti Bhattarai, email**

### TOUGH ENGLISH

When I read any English language newspaper or magazine from Nepal and compare it with yours I find it very, very difficult to understand. The titles are complex and distracting. For example, BBC, CNN or AP are far more readable and understandable for me because of their simplicity in expression. Otherwise why would I understand 100 percent of the story in other papers and only 50 percent in

yours? My English proficiency by CBT TOEFL test for Passage Reading is 27/30, Structure and Grammar is 28/30 and writing is 6/6. So, I just want to know if other readers of *Nepali Times* also find its English difficult or is it only me? If it is, then I think it's a matter for you to consider.

**BP Gurung, Hong Kong**

### HELP NEEDED

Kunda Dixit should see a shrink!

**Kapil Rana, email**

### LITTLE BUDDHA

I beg to differ with JK ('Cancha Hajur's' letter to the editor (#282) regarding the Little Buddha of Bara article (Nepali Pan, 'The little Buddha of Bara', #281). JK points out the dying state of Ram Bahadur Bomzon and says that we should salvage him. Sorry



Mr JK, it is not Ram Bahadur Bomzon who needs saving, it is us the Nepali people who need to be saved. At times of grave crisis it is great comfort, solace and hope that this "Little Bodhisattva" provides to the Nepali people, regardless of his intentions. He provides much needed solace psychologically, sociologically and spiritually during a tumultuous period in our history. We should be thanking him for showing us the way of peace—first look within.

**Subarna Bhattachan, email**

● Only 24/7, 365-day closed-circuit camera surveillance would convince most of us that the meditation is genuine meditation. Otherwise, we can assume that the whole affair is another crafty David Blaine show.

**Yagya Khaling Rai, UK**

### SAFETY

I read with interest the comments of Stephen McClelland, head of DfID's Asia Directorate and Jean-Marc Mangin, Canada's first secretary (development), concerning staff security in the delivery of development activities. As someone who implements development projects, I welcome the priority given to employees' safety. However, one important question arises: while donors accept responsibility for the safety of their own staff, who is responsible for the safety of partner organisations' staff?

**Nawaraj Upadhaya, Jawalakhel**



constitutional crisis. They might further facilitate in a democratic way those points in which the two understandings diverge. This constitutes a major step forward towards a more comprehensive peace process. Early in the process there must be an understanding about a ceasefire, disarmament and reintegration. International security guarantees might also be needed.

What if the democratic forces do not succeed and the palace remains adamant? The parties are well advised to continue their dialogue about the next steps with the Maoists. In case the latter are not serious about giving up arms? At that point a democratically mobilised society would then be both willing and able to marginalise the warriors completely.

Although peace has to come from a strong democratic platform in Nepal itself the on-going armed conflict can't be handled without external support and peace-building. The three rounds of talks between 2001-2003 have clearly highlighted the difficult role local facilitators had to play. Since then, there were several initiatives by the UN as well as by bilateral actors to facilitate negotiations, to open up channels between the conflicting parties, to establish back channels, to be in a stand-by mode, to facilitate meetings, to hold seminars or to network behind the scenes.

However, it seems that there was no role or no interest from the international community to address the conflict at a track-one level in a more systematic and coherent way. There is not only a single role for external actors to play: there are different roles that have to be taken up by different actors. What is needed is a coherent, coordinated and well-balanced approach that uses the strengths, balances the weaknesses and helps to make an enabling peace initiative acceptable for all stakeholders.

Nobody likes a bunch of strange foreigners in their garden. We have to be modest and clear in our advice. Confusing and weak signals might trigger the opposite of what we would like to achieve: a democratic and just peace in one of the most beautiful countries on earth. ●

Günther Baechler, PhD in Conflict Analysis, is Special Adviser for Peace Building in Nepal of the Swiss Foreign Ministry



KIRAN PANDAY



# Autocracy for beginners

## A lesson on how to lose legitimacy in quick easy steps

One year after the Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Nepali Army assumed the responsibilities of CEO through royal proclamation, the question of legitimacy continues to haunt the regime. No matter how you read the law of the land, there is no provision in the 1990 constitution that permits the king to act as the fountainhead of all state authority. Democracy was hijacked at gunpoint last year and it has brought nothing but woe to everyone.

### STATE OF THE STATE CK Lal



During the Cold War, American academics cloaked naked power grabs with the Doctrine of State Necessity. It helped the west justify support to tin-pot dictators by: a) that which is otherwise unlawful, necessity makes lawful, b) that the safety of the people is the supreme law, c) the safety of the State is the supreme law.

The state necessity thesis has since been quoted by the

advocates of military regimes everywhere to justify almost anything. Nepal's rulers have been ardent adherents of political experiments in Pakistan and it is instructive to look at the implications of this doctrine in Kathmandu.

The apex court of Pakistan first enunciated the principle in 1955 thus: "Subject to the condition of absoluteness, extremeness and imminence, an act which would otherwise be illegal becomes legal if it is done *bona fide* under the stress of necessity, the necessity being referable to an intention to preserve the Constitution, the State and the Society and to prevent it from dissolution." If the justification for February First was similar, then it ended up achieving the exact opposite in Nepal.

In 1977, Pakistan's Supreme Court quoted the 1955 judgment to validate the Zia-ul-Haq regime but laid out the grounds of rationalisation in clearer terms. It said that a military takeover could be justified only if it met at least four conditions: a) an imperative and inevitable

necessity or exceptional circumstances, b) no other remedy to apply, c) the measure taken must be proportionate to the necessity, and d) it must be of a temporary character limited to the duration of the exceptional circumstances.

To do away with even these four conditions, General Musharraf issued a Provisional Constitution Order, which barred the courts from issuing 'any order against the Chief Executive or any person exercising powers or jurisdiction under his authority'. In justifying the 1999 coup, the court had to resort to Latin, saying: '*salus populi ex supreme lex*' (the welfare of the people is the supreme law of any land).

Here in Nepal, the king has failed the test of performance legitimacy. Over the year of his absolute rule, the economy has gone into a tailspin, society is on the verge of disintegration and the polity has all but surrendered to the military. The dark days of long blackouts are back in Nepal after nearly a decade. For the first time since

the insurgency began, the spectre of failed state now haunts even most optimistic Nepalis.

The drift towards autocracy began to unfold after 4 October 2002. On 1 February 2005, the experiment climaxed with the military storming into our newsrooms. Now even the media that had given the king the benefit of doubt has lost faith. That perhaps has been the biggest loss of all: February First served moral victory to the Maoists on a silver platter. It proved that their diagnosis of the root cause of evils afflicting Nepali society have been correct all along.

Unfortunately, a corollary to that assumption is that we may have to tolerate totalitarianism to defeat authoritarianism. The madness of the Maoist methods as evidenced by the pointless assassination of a minor political actor like Vijay Lal Das of Janakpur shows that for the comrades, the end still justifies the means.

However, part of their prescription may now be inevitable: a constituent assembly to herald the end of monarchy is an imperative. ●

## Purwanchal! Here we come!!



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# Research for whose benefit?

A vaccine tested on 2,000 Nepali soldiers will soon be released in the market



Birendra Military Hospital in Kathmandu

MIN BAJRACHARYA

MARTY LOGAN

A vaccine for Hepatitis E that was tested on Nepali soldiers three years ago will soon be released into the market, reviving doubts about the ethics of testing.

Two thousand Nepali soldiers were used to test the vaccine developed for the US Army in clinical trials in 2001-2003. One thousand soldiers received vaccine injections on day one, after one month and then six months later. The remaining 1,000 soldiers got placebos.

The company developing the vaccine, GlaxoSmithKline, announced in December that the drug had proven 96 percent effective and that it would take the next steps to market it. Critics have asked whether the soldiers

were properly informed and whether Nepalis would benefit. The government says it must balance ethical concerns with the need to acquire medical know-how.

The field trial was organised by the Thailand office of the US Armed Forces Research Institute of Medical Sciences, which set up the Walter Reed-AFRIMS Research Unit Nepal (WARUN) in Kathmandu in 1995. The army had long wanted a drug to combat Hepatitis E, a water-borne disease that causes half of all hepatitis cases in developing countries such as Afghanistan, where the US military is increasingly active, and targets the 16-40 age group. Those affected are sick for two-six weeks with symptoms that include nausea, vomiting, fever, abdominal pain and fatigue.

A vaccine was developed by the US National Institutes of Health and the first field trials were carried out in the US and on dozens of Nepalis living in Lalitpur in 1998. Nepal was chosen because Hepatitis E is endemic here.

The results of the US-Nepal trials were encouraging so WARUN readied another trial on 2,000-3,000 locals in Lalitpur. But people there began asking questions, such as how they would benefit from lending their bodies to science. Soon the media and NGOs heard of the plans and the field trial was moved when WARUN teamed up with the Royal Nepali Army to test it on soldiers.

The coordinator of the ethical review board at Nepal's National Health Research Council (NHRC)

told us the soldiers were fully informed about how the trial would work and what the risks and benefits were. "There was some confusion about whether a captive audience could be willing subjects. We went to the army, we talked to some of the recruits, casually as if we were just visiting doctors. They said they were asked and consented voluntarily," says Ramesh Kant Adhikari.

Lumanti is one of the NGOs that had questioned the planned trial in Lalitpur. "You'll have to ask the soldiers how much they understood about the tests," says Executive Director Lajana Manandhar. "Our concern (in Lalitpur) was that the process followed was not ethical. The volunteers had signed an agreement without knowing what they had signed because they were either illiterate or semi-illiterate."

The NHRC had ethical guidelines for research when the Hepatitis E vaccine (HEV) trials began. But they were probably not widely disseminated, says Adhikari, who is also dean of the Institute of Medicine at Teaching Hospital. Today's standard is the *National Ethical Guidelines for Health Research in Nepal*, first published in 2001. "If this proposal came to us now, we would ask 'how are you going to ensure that our people can make use of this vaccine'? But probably at that time the question was not asked," Adhikari added.

The NHRC today would also ensure that local researchers

benefited substantially. "All the (HEV) results are being taken to Bangkok so nothing is going to be left behind for strengthening our intellectual capacity," he said.

Jason Andrews, a medical student at Yale University, raised such questions in a 2005 article in the *American Journal of Bioethics*. The Lalitpur community was sceptical about the trials because people felt that they lacked transparency and that they had been excluded from the planning process, he wrote.

'Concern about benefits was particularly legitimate,' Andrews added, 'in light of similar vaccine trials (for Hepatitis A, Japanese encephalitis, and typhoid) carried out by AFRIMS, which resulted in profitable traveller's vaccines that have proven too expensive for public distribution in the country in which they were tested'. The typhoid vaccine was developed in Nepal but is used mostly by tourists here, he added.

According to Adhikari, "the Hepatitis E vaccine would be very useful here. Fatality is very high if the disease occurs in pregnant women." He added, "we have been raising this question. If the vaccine is \$ 60, what is its use for Nepali people? But the researchers haven't been able to say if it will be available here."

Andrews also asked if the Nepali Army, which received millions of dollars worth of weapons and training from the US military, was in a position to say no to Uncle Sam. 'Based on prior studies between the Royal Nepali Army and AFRIMS that demonstrated the high risk of hepatitis E to RNA soldiers, the RNA chose to collaborate with the US Army,' the US Embassy in Kathmandu told us in an email. ●

# Is there poison in your neighbourhood?

Twenty years later, tons of condemned pesticides remain stored in Nepal

ALOK TUMBAHENG PHEY  
in AMLEKHGANJ

It's 10 in the morning in Amlekhganj. The sun is out, the birds are chirping and there's a soft tarai breeze in the air. Children walk along the side of the highway headed towards Nepal Smriti High School. It's a peaceful, bucolic setting.

The only thing out of place is the warehouse right in front of the school. The 50-year-old building once belonged to the now defunct Birganj-Amlekhganj railway but for more than a decade has been used to store almost 51 metric tons (MT) of poisonous and obsolete pesticides, in violation of the law banning storage of chemicals in a densely populated area.

Some of the pesticides here belong to the Dirty Dozen group of chemicals that are so poisonous that they are banned in most parts of the world. Huge skull-and-bones signs in red on the walls warn of the danger. Every summer children at the nearby school complain of headaches, stomach pains, nausea and even vomiting.

An open gate leads to a small compound in front of the warehouse, which appears to have been used as a public latrine. The building's doors are all padlocked and cracks have appeared in the walls. By now most of the older children know what's inside after watching a documentary screened by an environmental group. "A lot of us get ill when the wind

starts blowing in the summer," complained one ninth grader.

In 2001, Greenpeace visited Amlekhganj, Khumaltar in Kathmandu and other sites to make the pesticides safe by packing them in tightly sealed protective containers. Today the younger students blithely use the walls of the warehouse as play props.

For 50 years warehouses like these across the country have stored obsolete pesticides like DDT imported during the late 1950s and 1960s for farming and malaria eradication. By the late 1980s, it was clear that the large stocks of unmanaged materials posed a serious threat to the people and the environment around these storage areas.

UNDP, the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank have helped inventory the storage sites. At least 100-150MT of the chemicals were 'safely disposed' of by companies such as New Zealand-based ANZDEC Limited in the late '80s.

But a report prepared by the Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists Pesticides Watch Group (PWG) in June 1993 criticised the disposal method used: burying or spraying the toxic chemicals in jungles and even plans to incinerate them in the Hetauda Cement Factory. Thankfully, after the intervention of Greenpeace and the media, the incineration was prevented.

Today some 75MT of pesticides remain stored in 22 locations, of which at least



10MT have been classified as Persistent Organic Pesticides (POPs). Among them are Dioxins, DDT and PCBs, highly toxic materials that can remain intact in the environment for long periods and accumulate in the fatty tissue of living organisms. POPs circulate globally and can cause damage wherever they travel.

When CropLife International, the company that produced many of these chemicals, offered in October 2001 to take back some of them the government did not respond. Officials even deny having received the offer whereas officials at CropLife and Greenpeace confirm it was indeed made.

Sparling between the (then) Ministry of Population and Environment and the Ministry of Agriculture about which office

should manage disposal funds has delayed disposal (See 'The Dirty Dozen', # 200).

According to Jay Ram Adhikari, national coordinator for the Persistent Organic Pesticide Management Committee now under the Ministry of Environment, Science and Technology, the plan is being prepared and it is possible that at least some of the pesticides will be disposed of locally. "The National Implementation Plan will be completed by May/June and we will reach a conclusion regarding the proper disposal of POPs," he told us.

Others question Nepal's ability to safely dispose of the pesticides. Toran Sharma of the Nepal Environmental and Scientific Services and coordinator of the PWG, says the government lacks sincerity and the country doesn't have the expertise. "Making inventories is not the solution. We don't have the technology or the capacity to dispose of these chemicals. If you incinerate poison it will spread," Sharma told us.

One bright note is that the use of chemical pesticides for agriculture has decreased significantly over the years as farmers return to using organic fertilisers and more environment-friendly options to protect their crops, according to officials at the Pesticide Registrar's office.

Firmer rules on importing and distributing pesticides are now in place to prevent mass import of chemicals that could lead to a repeat of past problems. ●



### Bad debts down

Government-owned Rastriya Banijya Bank says it will reduce its bad debts or non-performing assets to 28 percent by July 2007 from the current level of about 50 percent. Experts say the RBB will have to continue with its modernising bid in order to achieve that target. “The bank would achieve its goal by adopting a modern banking approach,” said deputy governor of Nepal Rastra Bank, Bir Bikram Rayamajhi. RBB officials claim that the bank has recovered Rs 7.4 billion in cash over the past three years and completed restructuring of Rs 2.56 billion worth of loans. Officials also said the 41-year-old bank has been trying to automate 47 of its branches to improve performance and loan recovery. Under the financial sector reform programs of international financial agencies, the central bank has allowed RBB and the Nepal Bank Limited to be managed by foreign teams.

### Andhikhola bags award

The Andhikhola Power Plant of Butwal Power Company (BPC) has won the Blue Planet Prize of UNESCO and the International Hydropower Association for the year 2005. The private sector BPC runs the 12.3 MW Jhimruk power plant in Pyuthan, Andhikhola in Syangja, which is to be upgraded from 5.1 to 9.4 MW. The company also plans to add several more power generation centres to take its total generation capacity to 50 MW by 2010. The Blue Planet trophy honours Andhikhola's achievements in rural electrification.

### World wetlands

The Nepal Tourism Board and Friends of the Bagmati in partnership with World Wide Fund for Nature and the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation is organising ‘World Wetlands Day 2006’ and the ‘2nd Taudaha Jamboree’, from 28 January to 4 February in Kathmandu.

#### NEW PRODUCTS

**EVEREST SAVINGS:** Everest Bank Ltd. (EBL) has launched *Sunaulo Bhawisya Yojana*, a deposit scheme that will enable customers to transform small savings deposits into a bulk amount thanks to a higher rate of return. Under this scheme, customers must deposit at least Rs 500 every month for a specified period of time and the bank will pay the principal amount along with half-yearly compounded interest to the depositor at the time of the maturity. The deposit period is 1-5 years. The scheme also includes the flexibility to extend an advance up to 90 percent of the deposited amount at an interest rate 1.25 percent higher than the deposit rate.



**FINGERPRINT SAFE:** Home Furnishers has introduced the first ever Fingerprint Lock Safe in Nepal, made by Korea's Bumil Safe Company. The safe is able to hold nine fingerprints, which can be verified within less than one second. You can also enter a digital password.



# Back to the Stone Age

## The fruits of war include electricity and oil shortages

This Beed received a spate of emails from well wishers abroad when the curfew was clamped on this valley last week. When mobile phones were cut, more worried queries arrived. Then came the state sponsored

ECONOMIC SENSE  
Artha Beed



banda, in the form of a day-long curfew, and people started offering me their homes and advice on why I should leave Nepal.

Perhaps it's to be expected that a country that resorts to curfews and disrupting communication lines without explaining why such measures are necessary will produce such a reaction. Regardless, the impact on the economy is starting to tell. It's a pity, for example, that the tourism industry cannot see three good months in succession. People in power who make decisions that impact the economy do not realise that a single advisory can kill businesses for months. Another classic case is the energy sector. A 3 1/2 -hour blackout schedule has suddenly expanded to 17 hours and experts suggest this may increase again in a month or two.

This is something we will have to live with till Pashupatinath knows when. On one hand there is no way that donors will cough up 'free' money to build generation plants and on the other, no private investor

would be willing to take the risk today. Hydropower units require at least four years to be built but Nepal has no plans on the drawing board.

Five years of myopia is starting to show in the form of blackouts. Alongside this shortage of power is a bankrupt NOC (No Oil Corporation). Fuel prices are high and the price of generation from captive diesel plants is double the price of electricity. Political myopia and potentially vested interests have delayed reformist legislation resulting in this cold, dark winter.

With no electricity nor diesel, the Stone Age appears near. Conversely, if we had not experienced such problems over the last decade, our gross domestic product (GDP) could today be closer to \$ 10 billion, much of which could have been invested in development. The comparison is not made just to cry over the past but to put into perspective what we have potentially lost in the past decade's conflict.

Higher energy costs and erratic supply of petroleum products also means a direct inflation hit. As inflation touches the double-digit mark and GDP growth turns negative, the economy further suffers. There are many examples in the world of governments being toppled due to inflation, which results in more frustration for the common citizen. The worst scenario of all would see



the political exchange rate with India being reviewed downwards, producing spiralling price rises. A depreciated Nepali Rupee is the last thing this economy needs.

While neighbouring economies are growing at a rapid pace, we are seeing stagnation. More frustration will result if our open border, already witnessing a pilot citizen ID scheme, becomes more restricted. This would clamp down the Nepali economy even further.

Common sense suggests that ruling a good economy is always better than ruling a bad one. However, it is not uncommon for common sense to lose out. By the time the political equations are settled, we will have lost more. The Beed has always maintained that giving up the business of war at the cost of the business of peace is always difficult for people who have tasted the fruits of war. We have to look at the larger picture. A country of 25 million depends on it. ●

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# Manpower agencies turn to women

## Sent for factory work, Nepali women end up as domestics in Malaysia

NETRA KC in KUALA LUMPUR

Bindu Giri is barely 19 years old and just finished school but instead of going to college she is headed to Malaysia with dreams of making enough money to buy her own house. “I’ve heard a lot of negative stories about Nepalis being exploited in Malaysia but I’m quite optimistic,” said Giri cheerfully, looking excited at the sight of the Thai International plane at Kathmandu airport.

She and 40 other women are part of the first batch of Nepali women traveling to work in Malaysia after the government gave manpower agencies permission to recruit female workers. Wearing uniforms of white caps and pink jackets, they seemed eager to reach the capital Kuala Lumpur and start work. All are supposed to work in a fish-packing company but they still have no idea how much they will earn.

“I think we will do fine. No worries,” said Asamaya Nemwang, who is taking the risk despite hearing about how Nepali men have been regularly exploited, underpaid and overworked at Chinese-owned companies in Malaysia. Stories of Nepalis being exploited and tricked by Nepali manpower agencies are nothing new but more and more women job-seekers are willing to pay recruiters to find them work here.

However, Nepali men working in Kuala Lumpur are concerned at news that women are coming here to work. They fear the women will be even more vulnerable to exploitation than themselves and might end up being abused or lured into prostitution.

The Nepali embassy here still has no idea how many female workers have arrived and are on the job since the government gave the green light for female workers in May 2005. “We have not met any Nepali

female workers yet,” says the embassy’s Debilal Kandel.

Until now the government blocked Nepali women from migrating to work because of many incidents of rape and sexual abuse in Gulf countries. In the late 1990s, Kani Sherpa was working as a maid in Kuwait when she was gang-raped and then pushed to her death from a balcony. Authorities there said she committed suicide.

Nepalis who run their own businesses

here also worry that the women will be bigger targets for exploitation because they are not as demanding as men. “They might end up in different places than those promised,” says shop owner Subash Shrestha, who explained that many female Nepalis end up working as maids because their income in the factories is less than what is promised in their contracts.

Such exploitation “is a risk that every Nepali labourer is putting himself or herself in and they will believe it only when they suffer,” says Hari Bahadur Thapa, who has been working in a local plastic factory for the past four years. The reason the Malaysian government prefers Nepali workers is clear: they are the cheapest source of labour.

The highest wage paid to unskilled Nepali workers here is Rs 20,000 monthly but most workers take home barely Rs 7,000-10,000. They spend that money for rent, food and clothing and by the time they return to Nepal, many save barely enough to pay back debts they incurred to come here.

“Our government must have stronger measures to ensure that all job contracts are clear and workers are not exploited,” says businessman Bhim Adhikari. Until that happens, many Nepali workers here suggest Nepali women don’t come to work in Malaysia, for their own security. ●



NETRA KC



# Polls a ploy

UML General Secretary Madhab Kumar Nepal in Kantipur, 24 January

कान्तिपुर

The king's election call is based on his incorrect analysis that he would be able to kill many birds with one stone. His first card was to lure in the parties to take part in polls so he could portray himself as a democrat and legitimise all of his undemocratic moves. If the parties did not participate, Plan B was to sideline them on charges that they had lost their credibility among the people and had been displaced. The third scheme was to cash in on possible indifference and rifts among the parties. It was expected that the isolated royal regime would be able to entice one of the factions of the parties' alliance. The dangerous part of this plan is that the king's loyalists and yes men win the elections using rubber stamps like the Election Commission and the royal administration. It is very important to understand that this is all part of a grand design to create political parties comprising his votaries and to uproot the mainstream political blocs. The king wants to institutionalise his autocratic regime and by amending the 1991 constitution he plans to establish a guided democracy under an active monarchy. The drama of this election must be seen in the context of the appointments of zonal and regional administrators and army interference in the civil administration in the name of a unified command. Now we see their efforts to create mass opposition against elections so that the rulers are forced to hold the vote within the confines of army barracks and police stations. Once security personnel in civil dress and their family members are made to cast their votes within these areas, such an election becomes meaningless. You will not find legitimacy anywhere in the whole world for such polls. The Maoists long ago announced they would not allow the vote to take place. In that case, it's possible that the government may announce that the candidates were elected unopposed, which would produce a result void of any credibility and legitimacy. Our campaign of boycotting the municipal polls is only a step in the democratic movement that aims to end the autocratic monarchy. We don't need polls as a medium to reach the people. Even without participating in the elections, we have been able to win the people's support and it is growing. Hundreds of thousands of people attended our mass meetings in Butwal, Janakpur, Biratnagar, Nepalganj and Birganj. At a time when the reactionary regime has been chaotic, unstable and disorganised, the right policy would be to boycott the polls and isolate the rulers. Of course, the UML utilised the opportunity of elections during the Panchayat regime. But that was then, this is now. At present such a policy will not work.



KIRAN PANDAY

## Ask the parties

Political analyst Shastra Datta Panta in *Rajdhani*, 22 January

राजधानी

The seven-party alliance has once again raised the issue of religious secularism, making it clear that they are trying to disturb the country's religious harmony. That proves that their movement's only aim is to destroy—they have no genuine goal. If it were not so, no supporter of democracy would oppose elections. Rather, they would point out shortcomings and ask for necessary changes but not boycott the polls entirely. In our case, the parties have decided to not only to boycott the polls but to also work towards violating the rights of the voters and the candidates. Ironically, it is the parties who talk about human rights. They cannot deny the fact that it was they who allowed Hindi movies in the market even after the artistes had denounced them. The Nepal banda, with its demand that small vehicles should not be allowed to ply more than 30km, was an orchestrated plan but they kept quiet about Indian vehicles that were allowed to operate freely in Nepal. If the parties are not being remote controlled by foreign forces, these are the questions they need to answer: Why do they not take part in the elections? Why are they for a constituent assembly? Why can't they join in the common voice against terrorism? Why don't they introduce democracy within their own parties? What do they mean by all-party government and how can it be formed? At a time when they have been making a hue and cry about human rights violations, why are they quiet when the rights of Nepalis in Kalapani and Susta have been violated because of Indian encroachment in those areas? Why don't they raise their voices



KIRAN PANDAY

to help resolve the Bhutani refugee crisis? Why do they hesitate to speak about the problems Nepal faces in regard to transit? The list of questions can go on and on.

## Rights office wrong

*Nepal Samacharpatra*, 23 January

समाचारपत्र

Government officials have made strong objections about what they call extra-territorial interference by the UN's OHCHR-Nepal. They made the accusation at a recent high-level meeting headed by Foreign Minister Ramesh Nath Pandey. "The High Commissioner's office is not supposed to tell the government to announce a ceasefire," said a secretary who attended the meeting. "All that office should do is announce whenever there is a violation of the international concept of human rights." Another participating government official said that the UN office is quick to point out any small transgressions by government forces but closes its eyes to Maoist attacks. Government officials also criticised the office's reports as being based on newspaper articles or reports prepared by NGOs. The meeting was attended by the chief secretary and the secretaries of the Home, Defence and Women and Social Welfare Ministries, along with senior officials of the army and police. With the 62<sup>nd</sup> meeting of the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva in March, Ian Martin sought the government's input about one month ago. Once Martin gets a reply he will prepare his report and send it to UN Human Rights High Commissioner Louise Arbour.

increasing because none of the warring sides wants to give in. Military expert and former army officer Karna Thapa blamed a foreign power for backing the recent Maoist attacks. There is a danger that Nepal will soon be the next Sikkim or Bhutan, he added. The political parties must be wary of such influence, which has grown in the last few years, according to Thapa. Instead of looking for answers in Delhi, the leaders of the political parties need to look for solutions inside the country, he argued. Activist Charan Prasai said the state should be held responsible for the Thankot massacre instead of making the police the scapegoat for the incident. Since the state consistently ignored the Maoist's unilateral ceasefire, such an incident was inevitable, he added.

## Ministry's missives

*Deshantar*, 22 January

देशान्तर

That the Home Ministry has lost its cool and control was evident in the press statements it issued on one recent day. On 16 January the Ministry came out with several statements that suggested that it did not know what it was actually doing. The first one concerned asking people to stay indoors at night. Then came a notice that a curfew had been



KIRAN PANDAY

## Violence will grow

*Nispakshya*, 24 January

निष्पक्ष

Human rights activists are concerned that murder and violence are rapidly gaining legitimacy in the country and predict that in such a situation, the peoples' voices will be ignored by all sectors. Rights activist Krishna Pahadi says that both the state and the rebels should be ashamed of their killings. As the parties are moving further away from the people, those waging war are left with a perfect excuse to reject peace and encourage violence, he added. If the path to peace is not found, the country will be pushed further into danger, Pahadi predicted. Instead of badmouthing the international community for interfering in internal matters, the state needs to move beyond such rhetoric and work to find a peaceful solution. A member of the National Human Rights Commission, Gokul Pokhrel, said that violence is

imposed from 10 pm to 4 am. The next statement was about urging the people not to take part in the showdown the opposition parties had planned to hold in Kathmandu's Basantapur on 20 January. The same night the Home Ministry issued a fourth statement banning all kinds of demonstrations within the Ring Road of the Kathmandu Valley. Before the Ministry's flip-flop, Home Minister Kamal Thapa had reached Itahari to receive instructions from the king. Understandably, the monarch reminded him that it was the home minister who was entrusted with the responsibility of taking care of such things. It was after those words from the king that Thapa went ahead with the curfew and ban on demos.



Top: Doublespeak  
Flag: Seven Parties  
Left: If he stopped the election I would stop the protest.  
Right: If he stopped the protest I would stop the election instead of getting into a tussle.

जन भावना *Jana Bhawana*, 23 January

### QUOTE OF THE WEEK



“China hopes the situation in Nepal can stabilise as soon as possible and all parties can narrow their differences through dialogue and commit themselves to national development and prosperity.”

- Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Kong Quan at a press conference in Beijing, 24 January



Two ‘ists’

Rituraj in *Himal Khabarpatrika*, 14-28 January

Some people in Nepal like to call America ‘imperialist’ and India ‘expansionist’. But compare the construction work of new boundary walls at the American Club in Phora Darbar and the Indian embassy and something doesn’t seem right. The expansion of the American Club south of the royal palace has resulted in an impressive and wider sidewalk and has made the Kantipath intersection less congested. On the other hand, the Indian Embassy has raised the height of its wall in the narrow lane connecting Lajimpat to Kapurdhara and Sinamangal so that it now looks like a tunnel. The Indian Embassy has the largest area of any embassy in Kathmandu yet it didn’t offer to make the road wider, while the Americans were much more generous. The so-called imperialists turned out not to covet territory as much as the so-called expansionists, who wouldn’t give an inch. Maybe that is the difference between the two.

Renewed fear

*Nepal Samacharpatra*, 24 January

The pain caused by the deaths of 12 people killed by a soldier in Nagarkot has still not healed for the families and friends of the innocent victims and now they have to face up to rumours of Maoists planning mass abductions in their villages. Over 300 youths from five wards of Nagarkot have already fled to Kathmandu and Bhaktapur in the past week. Former VDC chairman Bil Bahadur Tamang said the rumour has left villagers sleepless. Even the police are now taking shelter inside the army barracks due to fears of Maoist attack. Police officer Deepak Giri justified the step due to the heightening insecure situation.

Forced candidates

*Ghatana ra Bichar*, 25 January

The government, which has taken a firm decision to hold the municipal elections although no citizen is willing to freely declare their candidacy, is on a manhunt for people willing to run for office. After officials began calling district offices in search of candidates, *mandales* (pro-monarchists) are in a state of fear. With increasing pressure from the government, VDC chairmen and vice-chairmen in Banke, Bardiya, Kailali, Dang and Kanchanpur have reportedly fled to India. Kamal Thapa and others who were brought into the government to ensure that there are candidates for the posts of mayor and vice mayor have been constantly pressuring them. After getting calls from ministers, secretaries, palace officials and people like Sachit Shamsher, their family members have refused to even give out their contact information. Many of the pro-monarchists who have been forced to give their names for candidacy have reportedly left instructions to their wives to “run the household properly and buy a white sari”.

Speaking out

Statement by Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, 26 January

The country is facing a grave crisis unprecedented in its history—one that we can and that we must avert. If wisdom and reason can be made to prevail among all the major political forces and if the best interests of the nation and the aspirations of the Nepali people for peace and democracy are given precedence then we are still in time to salvage our beloved country. This is not the time to apportion blame or to settle old scores. This is the time for contemplation and reconciliation. I strongly urge His Majesty the King to take initiatives for a dialogue with the parliamentary political parties. I urge the king:



- To issue a Royal Proclamation that immediately ends the direct rule assumed on 1 February 2005
- To unconditionally release all of those who have been detained unlawfully and undemocratically: leaders of political parties and their supporters, human rights activists, journalists, students and others.
- To withdraw curfews imposed in the Kathmandu Valley and other parts of the country.
- To cancel elections to the local bodies with immediate effect, and
- To invite the parliamentary parties for a

dialogue and to form a democratic government. And that government must have full powers to negotiate on behalf of the Nepali people to settle the Maoist conflict and ultimately hold elections for the parliament.

I am proud to be a founding member of the Nepali Congress Party, the party that successfully led two revolutions, the first against the Rana oligarchy in 1951 and the second against the king’s autocratic panchayat system in 1990. But at this crossroad I am profoundly saddened and deeply hurt by the split within the party. I appeal to both the factions to reconcile. I urge my friends to set aside their grievances, put aside personal ego and ambitions and work collectively and without delay towards uniting the party. A democratic and united Nepali Congress Party can be an untenable instrument of permanent peace and stable democracy that is inclusive and egalitarian. Let democracy and peace prevail as we take our beloved country into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and let us allow the people freedom to develop in their own way.

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The workshop aims to bring together representatives of civil society to discuss relevant issues of social exclusion and nation building. The aim is to ensure that the research agendas are more relevant to the needs of the excluded and disadvantaged groups and the outcome of the research contributes more effectively to policy debate and a deliberative democratic process. The outcome of the workshop will provide valuable insights on the relevance and urgency of issues pertaining to inclusion/exclusion and will assist in prioritising the areas for research funding. *Potential Researchers who are likely to submit research proposals in the area of social inclusion/exclusion and nation building are invited to participate in this forum.*

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# The Karnali Highway isn't even finished yet and it's already had a road accident

# Ten lost



INDU NEPAL in JUMLA

Despite being the only district headquarters in Nepal that has suffered a major Maoist attack not once but twice, Jumla is surprisingly laid back.

This high and remote town is in the icy grip of winter. The snow this year has been thick and a freezing wind blows down from the white-clad mountains to the north. People don't linger much, even in the feeble sun.

Jumla is an astounding representation of what lies beyond in the Karnali region. For those who can't quite make it to Mugu and Simikot, Jumla provides an accessible example of what rulers in Kathmandu have

ignored over the years. Its tarmacked airport runway and the slightly kinder weather make it relatively easy to get to all year round. The flights from Nepalganj bring more cargo than people these days but the Jumlis are used to the sight of NGO workers and journalists getting off the plane.

When the airport runway was asphalted in 1998 it was hoped it would lure tourists to this remote western district, which is the gateway to Rara Lake and beyond. But the insurgency soon engulfed the region and the expected tourism-led economic boom never happened. The only large bazar in a district of 25,000 people lies along a ridge by the banks of the Tila also home to an estimated 4,000 soldiers in the

heavily fortified army base overlooking the town. Essentially, therefore, this far outpost of His Majesty's Government is a garrison town.

Children play in the snow covered fields on top of soil already prepared for winter barley. They run around barefoot in the snow, some attracting admiration and others pity from strangers passing by. Fathers uncharacteristically tend to the needs of their young ones, spinning yarn and knitting scarves. Everyday life continues despite the ever-present threat of violence.

Along the Karnali Highway south there are no teenagers and young adults to be seen in the villages. The only youngsters we

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# years



meet are those who seem to be in 'the party'. Tasks traditionally undertaken by the younger generation are now predominantly carried out by women and the older inhabitants and this includes the community groups that are engaged in digging the World Bank-funded road.

The Maoists tolerate the road-building and in some place actively promote it. There appears to be some confusion about the party's aims, even among the rebel cadre. The majority seem unaware of the ideological underpinnings of the revolution, although they seemed to have memorised the slogans and jargon of the struggle. Some appear to have paid a terrible price for their involvement: they were missing limbs or had been maimed.

The Karnali Highway isn't even finished yet and Jumla has already had its first road accident. One of the tractors that was ferried here by chopper fell off the road into the Tila, killing

four people.

Both the state and the rebels are competing for the hearts and minds of the people and since the road is so popular, both are helping to build it. Given the war zone on the Kalikot border, it may take a few more years for this stretch of highway to be linked to Surkhet but for now at least a 30-km stretch will soon be ready from Jumla southwards to the Maoist-run micro-hydro plant at Rarali.

Most young male Jumlis have fled the winter cold to migrate for seasonal work in India. They will come back in late spring with their savings, as they have done for generations to plant rice in the irrigated fields along the Tila. Then they will return to India again.

As long as true development doesn't come to Jumla, this annual coming and going will continue. Even the conflict hasn't really changed the rhythm of life in this far-flung land. ●

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# Not famine but failed systems

Food insecurity is a complex problem that delivering more rice won't solve

NARESH NEWAR

Food security in Nepal has been the subject of a lot of media speculation. Journalists often call it famine whenever the Nepal Food Corporation fails to airdrop rice into areas facing shortages. But the rice is mainly sold at subsidised rates among government officials, their families and residents living in or near the district headquarters.

Villagers who live in remote areas and are the ones who actually suffer from rice shortages rarely get to see the government supplied cereal. At the same time, rice is not the staple food in many districts suffering from food shortages.

Famine reports get prominence in many Kathmandu-based newspapers particularly during the pre-cultivation and post-harvest seasons from December to June, notorious as hungry months. At that time, mostly male farmers head off to India to find work and return only during farming and harvest time.

There has also been considerable speculation that the Maoists are responsible for low agricultural production because they seized farms producing an exodus of rural dwellers. But agricultural experts working in both the government and NGO sector say that this is not true at all.

No matter who owns the farms, rebels or villagers, agricultural production has remained stable and even grown in some districts where agriculture-focussed NGOs are implementing innovative farming and improved irrigation programs. The truth is however, that production on most farms provides hardly enough food for five months.



NARESH NEWAR

Food security in food deficit districts like here in Rukum is mainly due to the government's failure to develop the farming technology.

If there has been one negative influence on Nepal's food and agriculture, it is the lack of government agricultural programs, especially management of the food distribution system, marketing of agricultural products and establishing effective post-harvest food storage systems.

The UN's World Food Programme (WFP), which specialises in food security, has repeatedly said that our country, unlike Sudan's Darfur or other famine-hit African regions, does not face food crises so extreme that it requires emergency humanitarian relief.

A new WFP study, *Household Food Security*, provides an excellent analysis of food vulnerability in Nepal's food-deficit

districts. Based on a sampling study conducted in 43 districts with 168 communities and 1,676 households, it provides the real causes of food shortage, its economic and health impacts and recommends ways to improve the situation.

It begins with the concept of 'hungry poor households' in 41 of the 43 districts. These include families who own limited assets, lack access to remittances from labour migration and live in larger households. The problem is especially acute in districts with low Human Development Indexes. Ethnically speaking, it is not just Dalits and Janjatis who suffer but Brahmins

also, says the report.

The farms of the hungry poor do not generate enough food to meet household needs mostly due to small land holdings that result from distribution of lands among many male relatives. As a result, the families need to buy food from the market but due to a lack of cash they often end up in debt after buying on credit or borrowing at high interest rates.

According to the study, around 71 percent of the hungry poor often purchased food on credit or with borrowed money, which the WFP points out is a coping strategy rather than a productive activity.

The study found that an average of 44 percent of household expenditure is on cereals and less on nutritious food such as pulses, vegetables, fruit, milk and eggs. This often leads to low intake of proteins and micronutrients, one reason why these families face problems of malnourishment. The worst malnourishment among children is found in mountain regions, it added.

WFP recommends comprehensive solutions based on multi-sectoral approaches to improve food security. Access to improved farming technology, education, health care, employment and low-interest agricultural loans are needed, it says, along with "infrastructure improvements to develop a functioning agricultural market system".

The conflict has made delivering these solutions more difficult, points out the WFP, but it has not created the problems. ●

Household Food Security World Food Program, Nepal



STATE OF FEAR

KANAK MANI DIXIT

The 'Barrel of the Gun' section of the Film South Asia '05 festival last October showed two documentaries on Peru's Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) rebellion and the state's reaction as orchestrated by charismatic, dictatorially inclined president Alberto Fujimori.

One film, *The Fall of Fujimori*, focussed on the corruption and shamelessness of the president, his downfall and abject and anonymous exile in Japan. The other film was *State of Fear*, which saw its Asian premiere in

Kathmandu and is gathering momentum in screening halls in New York City and elsewhere.

No experience of two countries can be exactly alike and societal factors specific to each nation state will define the course towards peace. Nevertheless, *State of Fear* resonated among the Nepali audience at FSA '05 because of so many disconcerting parallels. The underlying historical exploitation of the indigenous population vis-à-vis the upper-class white Latinos, the distance between the sheltered capital of Lima and the hinterland,

## State of Nepali fear

A film from Peru that steers too close for comfort is being premiered in Nepali

the urban classes looking the other way until the terror arrived at their door-step—and then a willingness to let loose the dogs of war.

Other aspects of the film will make Nepalis nod in recognition: Fujimori's excuse of the Shining Path terror to destroy democracy; the Lima regime's attempt at military pacification which terrorises the peasantry of the hills and plains jungles; the brutality of Comrade Gonzalo's rebels, the Peruvian military's reliance on torture and disappearances and its impunity; Sendero's recruitment of child soldiers and indoctrination of Quechua youth; peasants caught between the militants and the military and the arming of village vigilantes by the army.

The visual cues are also disconcerting. In places the Andean altiplateau resembles eastern Nepal. The build and facial features of the indigenous population reminds one of the ethnic people of Nepal's hill and plain. We see the same Kazak Mi-18 helicopters landing on tropical ridgelines. Gutted homesteads in

Peru look the same as gutted homesteads in Nepal. Fujimori's destruction of Peruvian democracy was followed by a period of massive corruption and loot by his henchmen and cronies. *State of Fear* forces us to constantly compare and contrast.

But Peru is not Nepal and there are indeed sharp divergences in experiences across the seven seas. Fujimori never sought a political resolution, instead he captured Gonzalo and displayed the rebel leader in a cage. In Nepal, other than elements in the royal regime, everyone seeks desperately a political settlement. At their top most levels, the Maobadi themselves have conceded to the future multiparty polity. While seeking to address their internal contradictions and worship of violence, the rebels of Nepal are seeking a 'safe landing', even as the Kathmandu regime seems to prefer the Fujimori solution.

We in the Himalaya must learn from the Andes. Perhaps we will be saved from going the way of Peru, with *State of Fear* helping us

understand the menace of a depoliticised, militarised society. Towards the end, the film emphasises the importance of exhuming the memory of death and destruction, of truth commissions that place accountability for inhumane acts by rebel, soldier and dictator alike. Only then can there be true reconciliation and confidence in the future. This is 'transitional justice'. Societies will not emerge undamaged from dreadful episodes unless we uncover the truth: what happened and who did what. Nepalis will need to go through this exercise and not paper over the past. We too will need a truth commission.

The learning from *State of Fear* would have been limited to a privileged Kathmandu audience if it had shown only at FSA '05. But a group of volunteers has with the permission from the film's producers (Skylight Pictures) translated and dubbed the film in Nepali. *Bhayako Rajya* will premiere in open exhibition at the Ashok Hall in Patan Dhoka at 1PM on Sunday 29 January. Tickets available at the gate. ●





# War need not be bad for health

In Sri Lanka, health and education programs are intact despite conflict. Why can't it be the same in Nepal?

ARUNA UPRETY in BATTICALOA, SRI LANKA

Here in eastern Sri Lanka, one year after the tsunami and amidst a fraying ceasefire, thoughts turn to a return to war in Nepal. Inevitably, one is inclined to make comparisons and the paradox is that despite a separatist civil war that is much more virulent than Nepal's, the health care system on this island is still intact.

Tensions are rising again in Sri Lanka's northeast, too, after four years of ceasefire. But the rebels have a man in charge of their health service. There are no guns about as we go to see him and he speaks fluent English. Even more surprising, he had all the public health issues in the area at his fingertips or if he didn't remember he would pull out a file and find the information which include assessments, research and programs.

Having visited the war-torn far western regions of Nepal many times over the past 10 years of conflict I never came across a single Nepali Maoist leader who had even a fraction of the health information about the local population as this man had. No Maoist I met in Nepal ever kept any records or had reports.

And while Nepal's conflict has made an already horrific public health situation, especially maternal health, much worse, here in Sri Lanka health and education are so important that in the past, both sides have stopped fighting at exam time or during vaccination campaigns.

The Sri Lankan government still pays for schools and teachers, hospitals and doctors. The Tamil Tigers allow health workers access to their territory

whenever there is an inoculation drive or health survey. Except in some remote parts of northeastern Sri Lanka, the immunisation coverage in Sri Lanka is much higher by far than anywhere else in South Asia.

There are some areas where health personnel lie about the success of their vaccination campaigns and in these places it is very reminiscent of Nepal. In one village in the Tiger-controlled northeast we asked the women if all the children were given polio doses. They said sometimes children were given only one dose and the health worker would fill out the card to make it look like all the doses were given so he wouldn't have to come back.

Even before the ceasefire, the midwives of Sri Lanka's public health service were doing a good job. The result is that despite the war, Sri Lanka's maternal mortality rate is at par with middle-income countries and much lower than other nations in the region. In Sri Lanka, less than 40 mothers die for every 100,000 live births while Nepal's national rate is 600 and in parts of Rolpa and Jumla it is at least 1,000.

The reason is Sri Lanka's heavy investment in health and education since independence. The momentum of this success has kept public health systems intact despite disruptions caused by conflict.

It is just the opposite in Nepal: health and education have suffered directly as a result of the conflict. In fact, there is a deliberate policy in Nepal to target education as a part of the conflict strategy.

Sri Lanka's emphasis on health and education are self-

enforcing. Higher literacy of women (95 percent of women here are literate compared to 35 percent in Nepal) has helped reduce infant and maternal mortality.

The other reason is that most Sri Lankan women give birth in hospitals where complications can be treated. In Nepal, only 10 percent of deliveries take place in hospitals. But in far and midwestern Nepal, nearly 100 percent of deliveries are at home.

No two wars are alike. There are things Nepal shouldn't learn from Sri Lanka, especially about allowing ethnic tensions to boil over into full-scale civil war. But there are things we should learn how despite the conflict there is still a strong emphasis on female literacy and public health. ●

Dr Aruna Uprety is working for an international aid agency in Sri Lanka.

# Getting physical

No surprise that the World Year of Physics passed without a whimper in Nepal

In grade three we had an essay assignment in Nepali class-'What I want to be when I grow up'. Over 90 percent of my classmates wrote about wanting to be either a doctor or an engineer. One small boy was audacious and innocent enough to ask: "Miss, how do you say scientist in Nepali?" He got an incredulous look from the teacher.

Over the past few years things are changing. There are now strong, ambitious students equally attracted to the humanities and the arts. But science, pure science intended for the purpose of further extending knowledge, continues to be notably absent.

Last year was the centenary of Albert Einstein's three stunning papers on light quanta, which

formed the basis of quantum mechanics, Brownian motion, which was an experimental test for the theory of heat, and the special theory of relativity proving that neither space nor time is absolute. Each is the bedrock in its respective branch of physics. The World Year of Physics 2005 was dedicated to celebrating the importance of physics in our everyday lives and informing and inspiring young scientists all over the world. In Nepal, of course, the World Year of Physics went by almost totally unnoticed. We have always studied science as the basis for gaining expertise in some other applied field but never as a possible field of expertise, a profession in itself.

Here's an interesting fact: compared to students from Europe or North America, Nepalis tend to be far better grounded in mathematics and the pure sciences with far greater depth in theoretical knowledge as well as exercise. But what we develop in ability, we lose in interest because of the excessive dependence on rote learning in our schools.

Science has been reduced to a passive intake of information to become aforementioned doctors or engineers rather than an active mode of inquiry, an outlet to innate curiosity. Nepali science textbooks contain only that which is useful, never what is beautiful or inspiring about science. Of course, no one is stopping those interested to go and look up that book on astronomy or anatomy on their own. Most students satisfy their hunger for science this way but in Nepal few have access to relevant books. Then, also, reading for leisure outside of what is required for school isn't really a strong point of the Nepali education system.

Even so, let's say a student is really passionate about pure science. The parents will discourage them from going into something they consider has no promising future or social status. Nepal has zero facilities for scientific research and job opportunities are limited to poorly-paid teaching positions in schools and universities. A career in science requires dedication and hard work and in a society like ours, given our social structure and upbringing, the educational system, the lack of scientific facilities and job opportunities, this choice is immensely difficult-even for those who are passionate about science.

In Nepal we may not have marked 100 years of Einstein papers but let's not let another century pass before we get serious about science. ●

Bibhusan Shakya is a science student at Stanford University in the United States.



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# Courting catastrophe

We can and must plan for unlikely events, like the Indian Ocean tsunami



RICHARD POSNER

One year after the Indian Ocean tsunami, what are the lessons? The biggest one is that it was the type of disaster to which policymakers pay too little attention to. One that has a very low or unknown probability of occurring but that creates enormous losses if it does occur. As great as the resulting death toll, physical and emotional suffering of survivors and property damage caused by the tsunami were, even greater losses. Moreover, more damage could be inflicted by other disasters of low (but not negligible) or unknown, probability. For example, the asteroid that exploded above Siberia in 1908 with the force of a hydrogen bomb might have killed millions of people had it exploded above a major city. Yet that asteroid was only about 200 feet in diameter. A much larger one (among the thousands of dangerously

large asteroids in orbits that intersect the earth's) could strike the earth and cause the total extinction of the human race through a combination of shock waves, fire, tsunamis and blockage of sunlight, wherever it struck. Other catastrophic risks include natural epidemics (the 1918-1919 Spanish flu killed between 20 million and 40 million people), nuclear or biological attacks by terrorists, certain types of lab accidents and abrupt global warming. The probability of catastrophes, whether intentional or not, resulting from human activity appears to be increasing because of the rapidity and direction of technological advances. The fact that a catastrophe is unlikely to occur is not a rational justification for ignoring the risk of its occurrence. Suppose that a tsunami as destructive as the one in the Indian Ocean last year occurs on average once a century and kills 250,000 people. That is an average of 2,500 deaths

per year. If such a toll could be substantially reduced at a moderate cost, the investment would be worthwhile. Educating residents of low-lying coastal areas on the warning signs of a tsunami (tremors and a sudden recession in the ocean), establishing a warning system involving emergency broadcasts, telephoned warnings and air-raid-type sirens and improving emergency response systems would have saved many who were killed by the Indian Ocean tsunami. At the same time, the cost would have been well below any reasonable estimate of the average losses that can be expected from tsunamis. There are several reasons why such measures weren't taken in anticipation of a tsunami on the scale that occurred. First, although a once-in-a-century event is as likely to occur at the beginning of the century as at any other time, it is much less likely to occur in the first decade of the century than later. Politicians with limited terms of office and thus foreshortened political horizons are likely to discount low-risk disaster possibilities, since the risk of damage to their careers from failing to take precautionary measures is truncated. Second, to the extent that effective precautions require governmental action, the fact that government is a centralised system of control makes it difficult for officials to respond to the full spectrum of possible risks against which cost-justified measures might be taken. Given the variety of matters to which they must attend, officials are likely to have a high threshold of attention below which risks are ignored. Third, where risks are regional or global rather than local, many national governments, especially in poorer and smaller countries, may drag their heels in

the hope that larger and richer countries will bear the costs of addressing them. Knowing this, larger and richer countries may be reluctant to take precautionary measures, as this would reward and thus encourage 'free riding'. Fourth, countries are poor often because of weak, inefficient, or corrupt governments, characteristics that may disable them from taking cost-justified precautions. And the difficulty people everywhere have in thinking in terms of probabilities, especially low probabilities, which they tend to write off-weakens political support for incurring the costs of taking precautionary measures. An even more dramatic example of neglect of low-probability/high-cost risks is the danger of an asteroid strike, which is analytically similar to the menace of tsunamis. Indeed, in part because tsunamis are one of the risks of an asteroid collision, the Indian Ocean disaster has stimulated new interest in asteroid defence. Deflecting an asteroid from its orbit when it is still hundreds of millions of miles from Earth is a feasible undertaking. Nevertheless, in the United States, NASA spends only \$ 4 million of its annual budget of more than \$ 10 billion on mapping dangerously close large asteroids. At the current rate, NASA may not complete the task for another decade, even though such mapping is the key to an asteroid defence because it may give us years of warning. The fact that a disaster of a particular type has not occurred recently or even within human memory (or even ever) is a bad reason to ignore it. The risk may be slight but if the consequences should it materialise are great enough, the expected cost of disaster may be sufficient to warrant defensive measures. ● (Project Syndicate) Richard Posner is a Judge of the US Court of Appeals, a Senior Lecturer at the University of Chicago Law School and the author of *Catastrophe: Risk and Response*.

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## High oil prices

Many developing nations are gaining from prolonged high oil prices, unlike their experience during the 1970s' oil shortage, said Rob Vos, director of development policy and analysis at the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). "They are benefiting either because they are net oil exporters or because also non-oil commodity prices are up and prices for many of the products they import are down. So many have gained." DESA's 160-page annual report points out that there are, however, a number of downside risks to economic growth in 2006. For instance, a prolonged high oil price over the next one to two years will have a stronger inflationary impact on most African economies. "Oil prices are expected to remain high in the near term and the impact on growth and inflation will vary from country to country," says *World Economic Situation and Prospects 2005*. With international oil prices about 42 percent higher than in 2004, the combined oil export revenues of energy-rich Middle Eastern nations are estimated to have reached a hefty 300 billion dollars in 2005.

## Helping Neighbours

To the average consumer the piles of outsize vegetables in the local markets look appealing and fresh, especially when given an occasional sprinkle of water. "No need to be happy. These vegetables are watered by the Hudiera drain," says Hania Aslam of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Pakistan, referring to a highly polluted tributary of the River Ravi. Villagers are aware of the high levels of pollution in the drain along the India-Pakistan border near the Pakistani city of Lahore but are unsure of the extent of the damage it can cause to human health. Aslam, coordinates a project that is trying to improve water quality. The project, being implemented by WWF-Pakistan, is supported by the small grants program of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The UNDP is also funding a similar project in India to clean up the Indian side of the Hudiera. The goal is to reduce the pollution load in the Hudiera drain by working with stakeholders and putting in place clean management practices, says Dr Anjana Pant of WWF-India. The findings of the survey will be announced after two years and a strategy drawn up to tackle the issue, in partnership with the WWF- Pakistan, which has already conducted a survey of the Hudiera drain, she adds. Both the projects are expected to be completed by 2006, following which the WWF hopes to help formulate a joint pollution control strategy by Pakistan and India. "This trans-boundary project could be an example of regional cooperation in South Asia. With all the goodwill now surrounding Pakistan-India relations, Hudiera can be a symbol of all that can go right once the two neighbours decide to clean up their act together," says Rina Saeed Khan, an analyst.



# Awesome Aussie Open

Martina’s return leads a fantastic women’s draw

One of my favourite pastimes is watching tv coverage of grand-slam events such as the Australian Open. I love the tension and drama. Whether it is rooting for an underdog or admiring the talent of Roger Federer, there is never a dull moment. The only problem is staying awake late at night to watch the live action from Melbourne. The year’s first grand slam has not disappointed me. By the time this column is published, the men’s and women’s finalists would have already been determined. Here are my thoughts and predictions for this year’s Australian Open.

Martina mania

I remember watching Martina Hingis play the finals of the French Open Junior tournament when she was just 13 years old. I could not believe how good she was at such a young age. She had an amazing feel for the game. Martina was a supreme tactician and master of improvisation. It did not surprise me when she dominated women’s tennis for a number of years before she retired with foot injuries. How refreshing it has

GAME POINT  
Sujay Lama



been to see her roll over her opponents in her first major since retirement. Welcome back Martina, we have missed your flair on and off the court.

Marcos who?

How about the play of Marcos Baghdatis from Cyprus? This young man has the game and the charisma to be a star on the men’s tour for years. Watching him steamroll over Andy Roddick with 58 winners was amazing. It was also great to see the Greek fans go wild and cheer for him helping him play his best tennis. If a country with fewer than a million people can produce a player the calibre of Marcos, there is hope for countries like Nepal. Don’t be surprised if he goes all the way to play Roger Federer in the finals.



Women Rule

For the first time in years, all the top women players were fit to play in a grand-slam event. Injuries have taken a toll on the stars of the WTA tour of late so it was good to see them all battle. Serena, Venus, Sharapova, Henin, Clijsters and Davenport are intriguing personalities and it is very important that they are able to compete with one another to create rivalries and capture the imaginations of tennis fans worldwide. One of the Belgians will hoist the trophy and I have a gut feeling that it will be Justine Henin.

Men Depleted

The absence of Marat Safin, Andre Agassi and Rafael Nadal put a damper on the men’s draw. It is about time that the ATP tour had a legitimate off-season so that the pros had time to recover from the rigors of the tour. It would definitely reduce the spate of injuries. These athletes could come back rested to showcase their best tennis. With the departure of Roddick and Hewitt early on, it would be a major shocker if Federer does not hoist the trophy Sunday.

Hey mate, you know how to celebrate tennis down under

I coached at the Australian open from 1993 to 1995. It was the most enjoyable grand-slam event for me because it was laidback and the Aussie hospitality was fantastic. Australians have a great tennis history. Champions like Rod Laver, Margaret Court, Ken Rosewall and John Newcomb made tennis one of the most popular sports in the country. Too bad that the Aussies have not had a great run in Melbourne for years.

lama@ad.uiuc.edu



Two Tables: Naxal’s Youth CLub players use their imaginations to set a game in.

MARTY LOGAN

# Positive spin

Table tennis poised for a comeback, says new chief

MARTY LOGAN

A little money and long-term investment in players could return table tennis in Nepal to its heydays of the 1970s when our players competed with mid-level Asian teams. Says Chaturananda Rajvaidya, the first elected president of the All Nepal Table Tennis Association (ANTTA): “We’re not far behind. It’s just a matter of time, technique and investment.”

His strategy? Attract player interest with prize-money tournaments and identify young prospects batting away at those cement tables found in schoolyards and vacant lots across Nepal. “We are concentrating initially on schools,” adds the former number one doubles player at his personal office in Tripureswor, which also doubles as the ANTTA headquarter. “In nine months we’ve held more than 16 inter-school tournaments. For a school they’re very easy to organise and table tennis is very popular.”

Netting young players is one thing, holding on to them is another. “They play for two or three months but then their exams come and they stay home because of family pressure. We’re trying to put together a stipend that would keep them coming.”

Six months ago, ANTTA hosted its first cash tournament, with Rs 100,000 up for grabs.

Rajvaidya is hoping to organise another one within a couple of months, followed by the South Asian Junior Championships, which ANTTA will host in midyear. Last year, Nepal’s boys grabbed a bronze medal at the same event.

The organisation also hopes to convince the Nepal Sports Council to fund a team to travel to the world team championships in Bremen, Germany in April. But its president says everyone’s main goal is the SAF Games in Sri Lanka, recently postponed till August.

India is the region’s best, followed by Sri Lanka and Pakistan. “We’re only a bit behind them,” Rajvaidya says. “Sri Lanka is coming up quickly, they’re investing a lot in sports there.” He adds, “In sports you have to look at the long-term. It’s not just a matter of one year. You



Nepal’s No. 1 for two sraight years-Rabindra Shakya

have to start with schoolboys and work with them for at least 15 years.”

Just down the road from the Naxal Bhagawati Temple, kids from the local youth club taking turns at the outdoor table say they would like to be on the national team one day. But most of them seem more focused on immediate results. “We can make our arms strong by playing,” says one 15-year-old. ●

# An overseas smash

Table tennis appears to be a hit with Nepalis overseas. The first North America Nepalese Open tournament was held at the 2005 ANA convention in Texas. The overwhelming champion was former national player Sangeeta Shrestha, the only woman among 25 participants, who won both the singles and doubles titles (with Suraj Neupane). Sangeeta was also Minnesota State’s 2005 champion.

This Saturday, the Nepal Seattle Society is hosting its first NSS Open Table Tennis Championship Tournament. It will include women’s and men’s draws and momos and chiya will be available. (www.nepalseattle.org/1sttabletennis.htm)

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## ABOUT TOWN

### EXHIBITIONS

- ❖ **Combination 3** an exhibition of paintings and sculptures. Nepal Art Council 28 January 2 PM
- ❖ **Fragments of a Journey** Oil paintings by Aditi Sadhu Chakraborty, 18-31 January, Park Gallery Lazimpat. 4419353



### EVENTS

- ❖ **Reflecting Changing Realities in Nepali Art** lecture by Sangeeta Thapa, 27 January, 9.30 AM, Shankar Hotel.
- ❖ **German Jocks** by Nutan Singh. 27 January. 4.15 PM, Goethe Zentrum,
- ❖ **Clean Up Valley 2005** Prize distribution ceremony for schools and students participating in Clean Up Week and Poster, Poetry and Essay Competitions on Friday 27 January, 10 AM 4279712.
- ❖ **2nd Taudaha Jamboree** Bird watching, Cycle rally, Taudaha Mela & Walk In Activities, 28 January. Contact Shristee / Bijay, Friends of the Bagmati, 4470770
- ❖ **Walk With WAVE V** heritage walk from Teku - Thapathali. 28 January 9 AM, National Trading, Teku

### MUSIC

- ❖ **Paleti** to feature Daisy Baraili, 27 January, Nepa-laya R sala. Tickets Rs. 500. 5552839
- ❖ **Cadenza & Friends Live** 28 January 1905, 1.30 PM Onwards. Tickets Rs. 800
- ❖ **Musician Night at Moksh Live**, 27 January. Tickets Rs.150. 5526212
- ❖ **The Cloud Walkers** at Rox Bar. Request the music of your choice. Hyatt Regency Kathmandu: 4491234
- ❖ **Heartbreakers** live every Friday at Rum Doodle Bar & Restaurant
- ❖ **Cadenza Collective** live every Wednesday and Saturday. 8 PM, Upstairs Lajimpat
- ❖ **JCS Quintet** at Niek's Place
- ❖ **Jatra Friday** nights, live music by Siron. 4256622
- ❖ **Unplugged** sessions with Strings, Jatra Saturday nights. 4256622
- ❖ **Live Music** at Juneli Bar, Hotel de l'Annapurna. 4221711
- ❖ **Uncork the Good Times Fusion:** Ciney and Par-e-jat playing popular sounds of 70's Friday 7 PM onwards. Rs. 750. Dwarika's Hotel. 4479448

### DDINING

- ❖ **Buffet Breakfast** at Hyatt Regency assorted salads and deserts. 4491234
- ❖ **Maki Newa Bhutu** for traditional Newari cuisine at Hotel Royal Singi. 4439784
- ❖ **Mexican and Italian** food at Fuzone Café, Lagankhel. 5542935
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- ❖ **Wonderful Wednesdays** at Fusion, Dwarika's, happy hour 5-9 PM.
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- ❖ **Breakfast** at 1905 New York style bagels whole wheat pancakes and real croissants baked in house daily. Omelettes made to your gourmet style. 1905, Kantipath
- ❖ **BBQ Dinner** at Summit Hotel every Friday. 6.30-9.30 PM. 5521810

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- ❖ **Conferences** at Godavari Village Resort. 5560675

## Quest Entertainment

English filmmaker Sue (Alice Patten) comes to India to make a documentary drama on freedom fighter Bhagat Singh and his contemporaries. But after failing to gather funds for the film, she decides to recruit students from Delhi University. She finds DJ (Aamir Khan), a DU graduate, Aslam (Kunal Kapoor), a middle-class Muslim poet, philosopher and guide, Sukhi (Sharman Joshi), Laxman Pandey (Atul Kulkarni) and the fundamentalist Sonia (Soha Ali Khan), a vivacious tomboy engaged to Ajay (Madhavan), a pilot. Sue's film makes DJ and his friends stop and realise what it means to be the descendants of great men. And the story of Rang De Basanti begins...

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## NEPALI WEATHER

by MAUSAM BEED



The *Maghe Jhari* (winter rain) is yet to arrive making January the third consecutive month without rain. This has resulted in record low humidity levels and dryness. Satellite pictures show a serpentine westerly jet carrying fresh clouds over the Pakistani Himalaya but it is unlikely reach us because of a high pressure zone in its way. However there is good possibility of sunny intervals early next week as break-away high and dry clouds are on the way. Though subsequent westerly fronts have passed without bringing rains, they have done a good job of chasing the thick foggy layer covering the Ganga plain away. Conclusion: Valley residents should expect more sunny days and chilly mornings this weekend but sunny intervals early next week.

## KATHMANDU VALLEY



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I WILL SURVIVE: An elderly citizen puts up a brave fight against armed police trying to arrest him during the protests at Basantapur on Saturday.



LAST GOODBYE: Madhuri Dixit pays her final respects to her husband Mahesh Mani Dixit, UML member of the national assembly, at a ceremony in the UML office at Balkhu on Monday.



MAGHE JHARI: The rain hasn't arrived this winter but protestors and members of the press at New Road were handed free showers by security forces on Tuesday.



A PIECE OF THE PIE: Bimala Rana registers with the election office on Thursday. When asked what position she is running for she replied, "Maybe mayor , maybe deputy mayor."



SWIRL SAND SMILES: Reputed Kathak dancer Shobha Narayan performing at the BICC to mark the 57th republic day celebrations of India on Monday.

# From beggar to seller

Ten years ago she was a familiar face around Darbar Marg and Thamel. You could see her clutching her infant daughter and four other kids, begging every other passer-by for a rupee or two.

Sabila Khatun left her village in Malangwa VDC in Sarlahi district for a better life in Kathmandu with her family of five children and husband in 1994. The landless Khatun family had nothing left in the village and the capital was their last refuge. But the city was not an easy place to adjust in, as they soon learned. Sabila's husband tried to get a job but months of failure forced him into alcoholism and pushed Sabila to the streets to beg.

Her children were her main concern. Fortunately for her, a few foreigners took pity and put them in schools. When her children started going to school they in turn pressured their mother to giving up begging.

One day, when Sabila's purse was full with Rs 300 from a tourist, she decided enough was enough and that she would give up begging and go into business.

She went to a shop and bought a few moneybags, the kind with Buddhist designs on the front that you hang from your shoulders. With these wares to sell, Sabila started her new life.

It has been almost seven years since she gave up begging. Life hasn't been easy and there

have been other tests. Her husband returned to Sarlahi, got caught in a robbery scam and later married another woman. All this has only made Sabila, now 36, stronger. "My only concern is to make sure my children receive a proper education," she says.

Today, with the help of a few good foreign friends, her children attend private schools while Sabila sells woollen gloves, caps, socks, embroidered pillow and cushion cases and cigarettes in Tridevi Marg. The competition is tough, but she isn't giving up easily.

"Times are bad, but you have to do what you have to do," she says, proud that at least she makes her living doing an honest day's work. ●

(Alok Tumbahangphey)

## Freedom from Dandruff



# No laughing matter

**D**on't laugh. Given the present state of the nation, it is our duty to inform all concerned authorities, heads of constitutional bodies, and public sector torsos that laughing in public will henceforth be totally banned in all 75 district headquarters from 1 Jestha 2058. Guffaws, giggles and chuckles are hereby declared against the national interest, since they distract attention from our most serious problem: our continued inability to take things seriously.

An alliance of 108 left-out parties led by the Unruffled Marxbad-Leninbad will start a phase-wise nationwide programme to protest the misuse of laughter in all its forms. Led by its vanguard student wing, the All-over-Nepal Campaign To Abolish Laughter and Glee (Revolting) will first target state-controlled media, which is the source of much mirth all over the kingdom at primetime everyday.

It is extremely detrimental for our national morality, our territorial imperative and sovereignty that the entire nation breaks into gales of laughter before, during and after the evening news on radio and television. I don't speak in jest when I say that the mouth

organs of government lack a certain gravitas. They will therefore be forced to refrain from outright comedy in their broadcasts, to wit: they will be forced to look and sound more tragic as befitting the times.


The various party organs (motto: "He who laughs last is history") also need to be disciplined since they don't seem to realise that there are limits to the average per capita duration that an adult Nepali can break into paroxysms of laughter on any given day. With most of the allotted time taken up by the state media, they must spare a thought for those compatriots who just can't laugh no more.

Although the editors are understandably tickled pink by the goings-on in our landlocked Himalayan kingdom of 23 million, they must exercise restraint, and not overstep their bounds. Today, more than ever before, we need journalists who understand that although the constitution (much to our amusement) guarantees the freedom to laugh at whoever we want whenever we want to, this freedom comes with responsibility and should not be abused. And more importantly, we must never, ever, laugh at ourselves since this will have a negative impact on our sense of national self-esteem, self-importance, self-aggrandisement and ultimately erode our self-defence.


Epidemiologists tell us that laughter is contagious, and this is all the more reason that we must stop this nonsense of breaking into fits of laughter at every tiny excuse. Remember: laughter spreads by word of mouth. So, every time you feel like chortling in public, spare a thought for all the innocent bystanders who will be inadvertently infected. This is why, however amused we may be, we must suppress our urge to laugh at least until such time as an all-clear is sounded and we know that the country's current crisis has passed. You, at the back in the Groucho mask, what are you sniggering at? (From #42) ●

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