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Times nepalnews.com
Weekly Internet Poll # 382

Q. Do you think 2008 will be better than 2007 for Nepal?

Total votes: 4,433

Weekly Internet Poll # 383. To vote go to: www.nepaltimes.com

Q. Who is most to blame in the delay in setting an election date?

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Third time lucky?

SUBASH DEVKOTA

There are still plenty of things that can go wrong between now and then, but the seven parties have agreed on a date for elections for the constituent assembly by April.

Just announcing an election date of course doesn't mean there is going to be one. There have been two abortive attempts in June and November 2007.

But this time it is different. Maoist hardliners, who had been putting their leadership under pressure not to agree to polls, are now on board. The NC, which

Poll dates are set, but the reshuffle may not be enough to mollify all madhesis

had previously resorted to delaying tactics, has run out of excuses. The election commission, which had wanted

90 days for preparation, will have a comfortable margin for preparations this time.

Still, there are spoilers. The main problem is the unrest in the madhes, which is reaching boiling point. All madhesi groups have announced separate but coordinated agitation starting on 19 January, the anniversary of the uprising that flared up a year ago after a demonstrator was killed.

The royalist and centre-right political parties also don't want elections because the polls will automatically set the country on the path to republicanism. Kamal Thapa's RPP Nepal party held its first big rally in Kathmandu on Monday, questioning the right of the seven parties to abolish the monarchy.

This week's spat between the army chief and prime minister on one side and the Maoists on the other, over integration of the two armies, appears to have

been a deliberate attempt to provoke a Maoist reaction and weaken Pushpa Kamal Dahal's position within his party during a crucial central committee meeting.

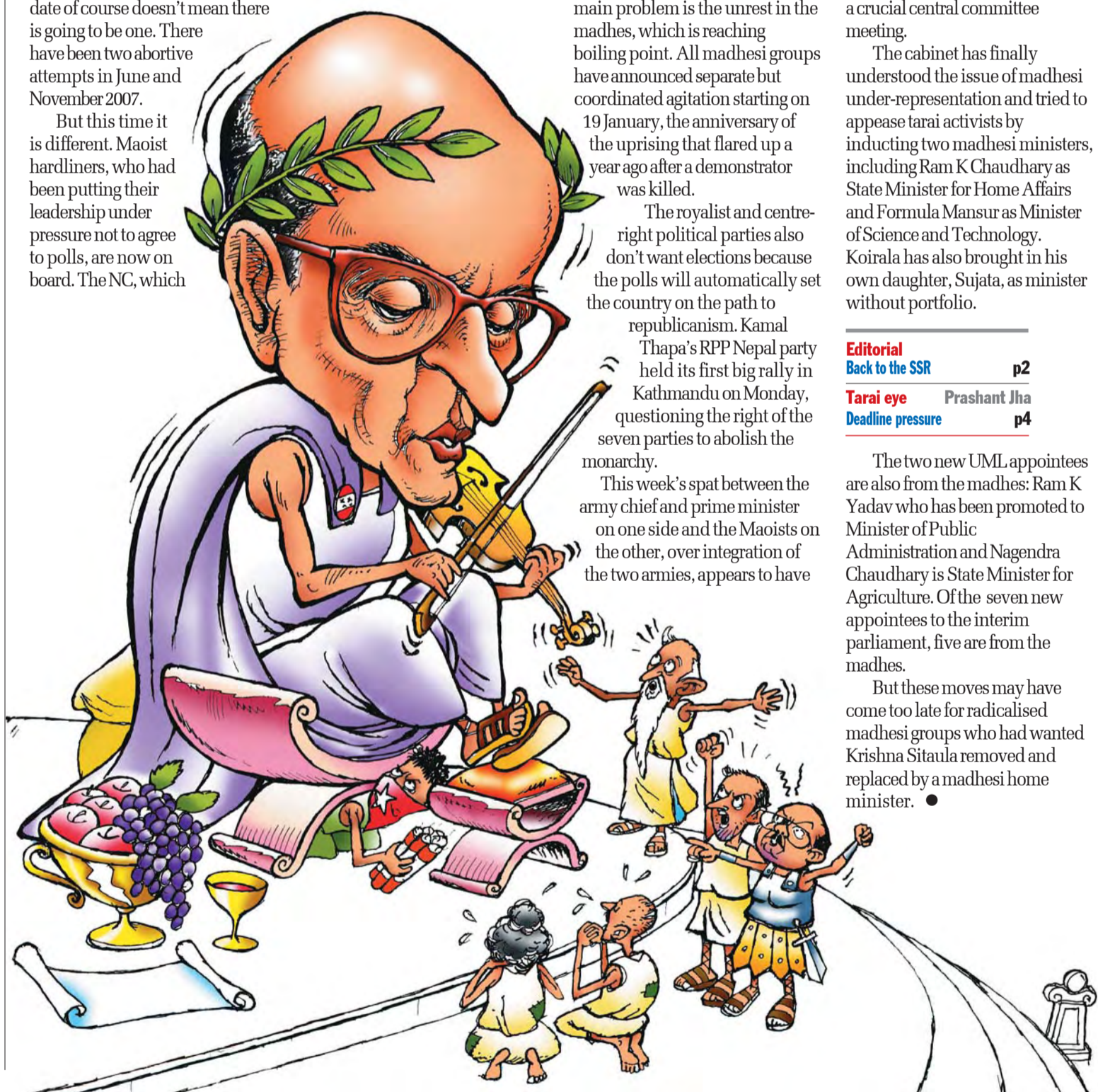
The cabinet has finally understood the issue of madhesi under-representation and tried to appease tarai activists by inducting two madhesi ministers, including Ram K Chaudhary as State Minister for Home Affairs and Formula Mansur as Minister of Science and Technology. Koirala has also brought in his own daughter, Sujata, as minister without portfolio.

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Tarai eye Prashant Jha
Deadline pressure p4

The two new UML appointees are also from the madhes: Ram K Yadav who has been promoted to Minister of Public Administration and Nagendra Chaudhary is State Minister for Agriculture. Of the seven new appointees to the interim parliament, five are from the madhes.

But these moves may have come too late for radicalised madhesi groups who had wanted Krishna Sitaula removed and replaced by a madhesi home minister. ●



SUBHAS RAI

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BACK TO THE SSR

If there is one thing that symbolises how far we have come in nearly two years of the peace process, it is the sight of the newly re-inducted Maoist ministers walking around with (ex-royal) Nepal Army bodyguards.

It should be a small extra step from this to integrate the two armies, but things are not as simple as that. Our army for many years was a largely ornamental force that paraded on Tundikhel twice a year and was at the beck and call of the palace. November 2001 changed all that, and for the next five years the army fought a dirty internal war that badly tarnished its reputation.

Nepal's defence budget tripled during the war years, the number of men under arms nearly doubled. We can't afford, and don't need, such a massive military. With the peace process, there is an opportunity to clean up the institution and move from a feudal praetorian guard to a non-partisan, professional force under elected civilian command.

So, how do you reconcile adding tens of thousands of ex-guerrillas into an army that should be downsized? Is soldiering the only job we have to offer ex-combatants? Downsizing and integration of Maoists into the army go under the acronym SSR (security sector reform).

Gen Katuwal's uncharacteristically direct comments after visiting India and before his China trip were echoed by the prime minister this week. However much UNMIN and the Europeans may push SSR, it looks like our giant neighbours aren't that fond of the idea. Now that we are getting ready to vote out a monarchy that used to be the symbol of nationalism, it is even more important to have a de-politicised army that is above the fray.

The way the Maoists have tampered with the ministries under their control gives ammunition to those against integration. The Ministry of Information has turned state media into Maoist mouthpieces. We just can't allow that to happen to the Nepal Army, or be politicised like the Nepal Police was by the NC and UML in the 1990s.

To be sure, Katuwal was being disingenuous when he said he didn't want the army to be infiltrated by indoctrinated cadre. After all, let's not forget that February First was a military coup of which the jarsing was one of the kingpins. If the army had no problem doing the bidding of diehard royalists then, theoretically, there should be no problem allowing diehard republicans into the rank and file now.

There is also a psychological factor at play here: for the sake of peace the army shouldn't reject integration outright. Cadre politics within the Maoists just wouldn't allow its leaders to be seen to accept the role of a defeated PLA. Senior commanders will probably drift into politics anyway, and some battle-hardened warriors could be useful to the national army.

The best compromise could be to set up a separate rapid deployment force made up of both armies for border patrols, industrial security and to guard the national parks.

But for all this to happen, it would behoove the comrades to show that they can be trusted, prove that the YCL listens to the leadership to stop extortion and violence, and desist from threatening every other day to go back to the jungles.

Dear Comrade

An open letter to Puspha Kamal Dahal

There is no doubt that you and your party have created history in Nepal after 12 long years of struggle. Nepal is at the cusp of a new phase in its history that we couldn't even have dreamt of three years ago.



GUEST COLUMN
Aruna Upreti

Even royalists in this country now think the monarchy is too much trouble to keep. Your party played a role in bringing about this change. But you will soon find that perhaps waging an underground guerrilla war was perhaps the easy part. It is easy to reach the top but difficult to remain there, as they say.

First off, you should have no illusion that it was violence and conflict that brought us to where we are today. Your revolution was going nowhere militarily, violence was a dead end. The real

tipping point came with the largely peaceful street protests of April 2006. It is hard to admit that, but be honest and acknowledge it.

You also need to know that struggle can't go on forever, struggle should have a purpose beyond just grabbing power. For Nepal it must be for peace, democracy and justice. But you keep repeating the tired old lines in your speeches: "Our immediate aim was to attain new democratic revolution but like any other Communist our final objective was also to establish socialism and communism."

What I understand by socialism is that people have food, education, health care and freedom from abuse by the state and other groups. Time and again you have said that the 21st century will "again be a century of revolutions". Do you really believe that, or are you saying it

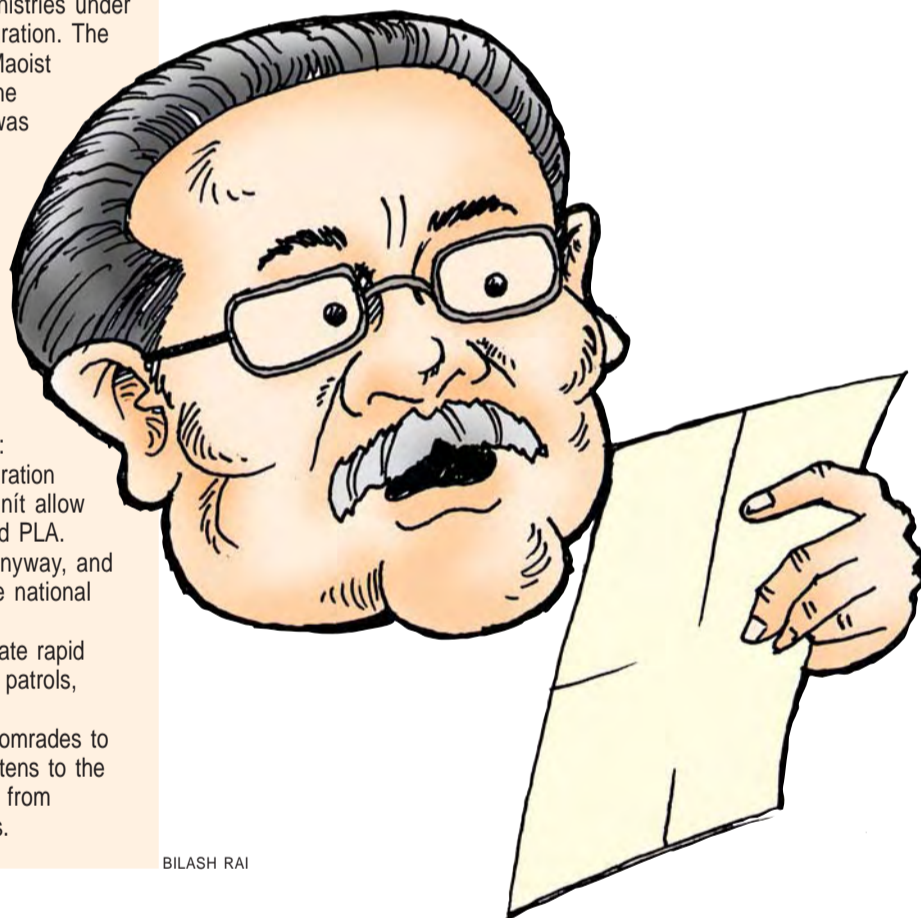
only for effect? Revolution for what? For the development and happiness of Nepalis or for more misery, pain and death? If the continued threats and violence by your cadre go on, there isn't much of a future left for your party.

You have said "sorry" many times. And last week you even visited a political activist beaten up by your cadre and said your party had changed its policy and you had directed your flock to desist from such acts. Who is going to believe you?

In another interview you say "a single appeal by us will bring the masses onto the streets again". Who are you trying to threaten? Why not mobilise your people against hunger and poverty? Educate people about cultural practices that confine women to the cowsheds. You tried to do it, but by the threat of violence. And you still haven't learnt that transformation doesn't happen by the barrel of the gun but by social mobilisation. It's been nearly two years, but you have failed in that time to re-educate your cadre that atrocities against the people do not bring change.

You told senior editors recently: "Had Lenin been alive for another five years, he would have allowed political competition. He would not have allowed the kind of repression within the party which was unleashed by Stalin." Finally, an admission of Stalin's purges. But why is Stalin's picture still on your wall?

You have said you can change the face of the country in 10 years. Yes, it can happen given the right visionary leadership, commitment and determination. But it won't happen if you continue talking about going back to the jungles, about "fighting for another 40 years" or threatening to unleash another uprising. ●



BILASH RAI

LETTERS

POWER OF WATER

I thank you for taking on the issue of trans-boundary water sharing (Editorial, 'The power of water', #381) and bringing it to the public's attention. A strong and united democratic state of Nepal is essential to protect our national interest. A weak and fragmented state on the other hand would have many players ready to sell out. The politics of water is vital for Nepal and is now also linked to climate change. The recent big water battle between three US states (Florida, Alabama and Georgia) is not unrelated to the global warming and drought. Likewise, India has a 30 percent fresh water deficit, and the next big rush is going to be over water. Don't think that the politics in Nepal is completely for the sake of politics only.

Alok K Bohara,
University of New Mexico, USA

- Being diplomatic, you've only hinted at the links between power, water and

politics in Indo-Nepal relations in your editorial. My view is that water is the single most important issue and dominates everything else India wants from Nepal. New Delhi will do what it has to do to get a malleable government in Kathmandu. The sooner Nepali leaders come to terms with this, the quicker there will be political stability in Nepal.

Name withheld, email

TARAI

Thanks a lot, Prashant Jha. I could not control my tears while reading 'The year of the madhesi' (Tarai Eye, #380). Nepal is no more the same. I think the time has come for all madhesi to ask the questions that Prashant has raised and it is time for the media to bring these issues to the fore. Let people like Prashant and CK Lal speak clearly. We have already addressed the issue of federalism but now need more efforts to implement it.

Alok, USA

- In the article 'Tarai frontline' (#381), it seems like Prashant Jha is gloating about the actions of the militants. There is no sense of responsibility in his writing and not the slightest sense of remorse for the internally displaced. Is he really advocating the tit-for-tat attacks on madhesi in pahadi dominated areas? However, he does say that these are nothing but Bihari goondas taking advantage of the fluid situation. I hope experienced politicians like Mahanta Thakur will help ease tensions in the madhes, although I haven't heard one madhesi politician condemning the attacks on pahadis.

Sandeep Dhungana, email

NOT RAMAN

Although you have corrected it in your website, for the record I'd like to state that Raman is a friend of mine and he has never been a member in any armed force (In search of reconciliation, #380). He has been actively working as

an outdoor leadership trainer and facilitator to several team building programs.

Prabha, Kathmandu

- We have been working with Raman Bhattarai for more than 10 years in community service and peace and are distressed to see him misidentified in your caption. Mr Bhattarai is a genuine social reformer and has never been in any government, let alone in an army.

Yogendra Khatriwada, Nodan Club

- Re: 'In search of reconciliation'. One of the captions states, Kumar is currently 16 and joined the Maoists in 1993, he would have been a very young comrade indeed. Regardless of whether or not Kumar took up revolutionary politics when he was two years old, the CPN-M wasn't formed until 1995 in any case.

M Grassi, email

The sigh of Susta

Border issues are whipped up whenever rulers want to distract the public

The border between Nepal and India is shaped like the jagged teeth of a rusty saw. It is difficult to demarcate, tricky to measure and complex to map. Overcoming all these challenges, the Nepal-India Joint Technical Level Boundary Committee declared in 2005 that the two countries shared a common border of 1,880km.



STATE OF THE STATE
C K Lal

Disagreements over the location of boundary pillars and claims of encroachment are rare along the 1,240km-long, 10-yard-wide strips of no man's land. However, 640km of the border runs through meandering river beds that change course every few years. When old river courses dry out, land grabbers on both sides claim public land for private use.

The Susta story is more complex. Susta-Triveni was a sleepy settlement in Nawalparasi until the government decided to populate it with retired soldiers in the early 1960s, following King Mahendra's order to inhabit villages along the international border west of the Bagmati with hardcore loyalists of the Panchayat regime.

Most beneficiaries of this royal munificence were pahadis from the middle hills. They dreaded the prospect of living in the malarial swamps of Susta. Fallow fields were soon sold to speculators from Butwal, Chitwan and beyond. To these distant owners, the land was not sacrosanct *matribhumi* but merely property of uncertain productivity that could be bought or sold at will. Rather than moving there themselves, the new owners sent poor tenants



KIRAN PANDAY

to cultivate their holdings.

Settlers from the hills had no emotional attachment to what was for most of them alien terrain. Meanwhile, most displaced madhesis had crossed the border and found shelter in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, from where they still hold a grudge against pahadi settlers who turned them from landowners into squatters.

Mahendra soon realised this policy was a failure. He shifted his attention to Chure-Bhabar and the Inner Tarai for a colonisation drive conducted with American money and Israeli expertise. But along with greedy compromises over the Gandaki and Kosi (Mahendra was personally involved with both these deals), strategic blunders

such as Susta and Bhandabari were transformed into metaphors for Nepal's fragile nationhood. So whenever rulers in Kathmandu need to divert public attention from domestic failings, a chorus over Kosi, Gandaki or Susta is carefully orchestrated with the help of useful idiots in the communist parties.

This is the reason why UML radicals and YCL hooligans get so worked up over what is essentially a technical issue to be resolved on the basis of authoritative documents. But what did the regime want to hide this time by reactivating the 'Susta Occupation' slogan?

Rajendra Mahato publicly charged that the SPA government was trying to downplay

grievances of madhesis by unnecessarily ratcheting up Susta. Some influential NC leaders believe the Maoists just want to refurbish their nationalist image and erase their close association with India from public memory by raising the emotive issue of contested boundary pillars.

Publicly, leftist parliamentarians are more vocal than anyone else over Susta—after all, it was almost their monopoly till recently. But in private, UML stalwarts admit that reactivation of the Tanakapur and Susta issue at this juncture will be counterproductive.

Taking her cue from Balkhu, Foreign Minister Sahana Pradhan directed Shital Nibas

TOKEN PROTEST: Student unions affiliated to the seven parties at the Indian Embassy last week to protest alleged encroachment by India at Susta.

mandarins to devise damage control measures. Early this week, MoFA announced that Nepal and India have agreed to maintain the 1968 status quo over Susta and Kalapani. The implication is that the legacy of Mahendra will still be available whenever some populist has an urge to air their insecurities in the guise of patriotism.

The border uproar will probably die down in a few days. But as long as the Nepali psyche needs a regular fix of jejune jingoism, the last sigh of Susta will never be heard. ●

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Deadline pressure

BIRGANJóThere is a week to go before the whole spectrum of madhesi groups launch their agitations in the tarai. Both Mahanta Thakur and the Yadav-Mahato fronts have separately given the government an ultimatum of 19 January to address demands or face protests.

We don't know whether the movement will pick up intensity. The two forces have not yet forged a working unity, and instead misunderstandings seem to be increasing. They haven't been able to evolve a coherent, popular agenda and are swinging between extremes, from warning of a decisive movement to sounding accommodative.

People are disillusioned, and it is hard to gauge the general mood. Unlike last year's movement which was a spontaneous expression of historical angst, madhesis will think twice before joining in. No major protest has taken place over the past year. What madhesi activists in mainstream parties do in the next week will be important.



TARAI EYE
Prashant Jha

But there is no mistaking the anger against the state, and the people are radicalised. The government, true to form, has still not realised the gravity of the crisis. In all likelihood there

will be a period of further instability and strife, especially if the armed groups decide to back the protests in full strength.

Once that happens, events can take on their own momentum. No one, not a single outfit or even a group of organisations, can claim to have control over madhesi politics anymore. And that makes the current state of play unpredictable, murky, and in the words of a senior madhesi politician, "mysterious".

Neither does any one quite know which way the madhes will vote during polls. This is a major reason for both the political uncertainty and why no force has any incentive in creating an environment conducive for elections.

Madhesi groups have set a 19 January ultimatum

Madhesi groups have taken their cue from the Maoists. If you pick up the gun, you can have 83 MPs in the house. This is one of the simplistic but powerful lessons that is repeated endlessly by madhesi militants in private conversations.

The NC is now more scared of the tarai than it has ever been. Most madhesis regard the NC as having betrayed them. Kangresi activists are demoralised and have stopped even trying to defend the government's track record. Many are merely using the party as a cover while being active in other groups, including armed ones. Ram Baran Yadav is a term of abuse.

When NC leader Smriti Narayan Chaudhary criticised Mahant Thakur's move to quit the party, party activists hooted him and asked him to leave the stage.

There haven't been elections for eight years, and traditional voting patterns have changed. The new generation doesn't care much for the Congress in what used to be its vote bank. The only thing the party had going for it was a strong organisation, and now Thakur's party has the potential to damage that.

Not that madhesi groups are any more confident. None of them have strong organisation yet. All leaders, especially Yadav, Mahato, and the coterie around Thakur, face a severe credibility problem. They have limited finances. Madhesi leaders know they will win only a few seats, and privately admit that they have no additional interest in pushing for polls.

Here is a situation where poll results will essentially boil down to caste and candidate. No organised party structure in the madhes is actively selling the idea of elections or creating a mood for it. The ground is open for agitation, and for armed groups keen on disrupting polls.

While any public agreement between the different sides will have to revolve around a principled commitment to autonomy and a change in the electoral system, the real behind-the-scenes deal will be based on securing the electoral positions of all the major sides. That is why it is difficult to foresee who will create momentum for polls in the tarai, and why. ●



PICS: JOHN NARAYAN PARAJULI

Spoiling for another fight

One year on, Lahan is once more gearing up for political agitation

JOHN NARAYAN PARAJULI
in LAHAN

Exactly a year ago, this highway town in the eastern tarai was in flames. Madhesi anger boiled over after the killing of a local youth and the Maoist mishandling of the issue.

"For weeks there was only smoke here," recalls Ramchandra Malik. "The burnt out buses blocked the highway." A year on, madhesi parties and militant groups are preparing to launch separate agitations from 19 January, accusing Kathmandu of not listening to their demands of political representation and autonomy.

Last year's uprising was spontaneous, and although there is still resentment against the state, most people here are weary of the past year of violence and disruptions. Long-distance buses speed through the town all night, horns screeching. Pahadi and madhesi vendors serve food and drinks to passengers through the windows. Armed police patrol the main junction, watchful but not

obtrusive.

The political parties, made of madhesi figures who recently defected from the NC are preparing for their agitation. The Sadbhabana faction led by Rajendra Mahato and the Biswas-led MJF splinter group are rallying support for their stir.

"If they don't join us, they will be finished," says Mahato, who is in Lahan this week to train his newly formed YCL-like Madhes Raksha Bahini. Clad in blue jackets, Bahini members frequently march through the tarai towns chanting slogans in Hindi: "Who will protect the madhes? We will."

Mahato told *Nepali Times* the Bahini is just a deterrent force meant to dissuade other armed groups from infiltrating his party's agitation. There is deep resentment against the "pahadi state" in the tarai, and leaders like Mahato and Mahanta Thakur, another NC defector, are trying to capitalise on it.

But there is also bitterness against leaders like Thakur and Mahato for not doing enough while they were in power in Kathmandu. The emergence of these high-caste, landed madhesis has also brought out fissures within the madhesi community. Dalit and Tharu leaders within the newly formed tarai parties say their next struggle will be against madhesi leaders for inclusivity and proportional representation.

"What rights have we got since last year's uprising? We just got Upendra Yadav and got so many of us killed. And now what does he do? He goes away to ride a Pajero in Kathmandu," says Ramrati Ram without mincing

BLUE SHIRTS: Members of the Madhes Raksha Bahini, set up by Rajendra Mahato (below, left, with phone) of the Sadbhabana faction, marched through Lahan's streets last week, alongside an APF patrol vehicle.

words. The disenchantment with the madhesi leadership is almost as strong as resentment against armed groups which are harassing madhesis as well as pahadis. But even more intense is the seething anger against Kathmandu, seen to be apathetic towards madhesis and not treating them with dignity.

With the government now committed to hold elections by mid-April, moderate madhesi parties have agreed to take part. But the armed groups have said they won't let the elections happen. Tarai intellectuals feel the armed groups are using the madhes as a front for criminality, and they can be bought off for the right price. But the only way to deal with the madhes parties is by negotiation.

"The only big change in the past year has been that we aren't called 'dhoti' or 'Indians' in Kathmandu anymore, we are called 'Forum'," says a Lahan resident, Prem Jha.

Aside from the danger of militant violence in the coming months, there is an added tension as parties desperately compete to tap the madhes vote bank. The NC is the biggest loser because of the defection of Mahanta Thakur, who controlled the party machinery in the eastern tarai. Thakur has defended his move, saying he was disillusioned with the NC leadership. ●



30 million Canons

Canon Canon has produced its 30 millionth EOS-series DSLR camera to coincide with its 70th anniversary and the 20th anniversary of its EOS line of SLR cameras. Commemorating the occasion, Canon has launched the new EOS-1D Mark II and EOS-1Ds Mark III, as well as the EOS 40D. Primax International is the sole distributor of Canon imaging products in Nepal.

Two-year-old Bossini

Bossini will be celebrating its two-year anniversary in Nepal with the launch of a new logo, various Bossini gifts for customers and extra discounts from 11 to 18 January. Headquartered in Hong Kong, Bossini launched its first retail outlet in 1987 and has now expanded to 18 countries around the globe.



Park View Horizon



Varun Developers, a subsidiary of RJ Corp, is building luxury condominiums to be called Park View Horizon at Dhapasi Heights. The apartments are aimed at rich customers looking for high-quality living. The grand launch is scheduled for 12 January.

Child account

Birgunj Finance has launched a new scheme called the 'eBalbalika Bhawisya Jyoti Khata'. This account can be opened for children and its minimum balance is Rs 499. The interest rate will be 7 percent and the account holder can choose to close the account after he/she reaches 17 years of age.



Wipro in Nepal

WIPRO Wipro Computers have entered the Nepal market with Neoteric as the authorised distributor. Neoteric belongs to the Golchha organisation and already represents Samsung, Nokia and Logitech.

Biker Fastrack

Fastrack has launched its range of Biker's Collection sunglasses in Nepal through Nepal International Business. This range has 100 percent UV 400 protection and is manufactured by Titan. The glasses will be on sale for Rs 1,200-3,000.



Share scare

The interim parliament and the stock exchange bear an uncanny resemblance to each other

For Nepalis, there seems to be very little difference between the parliament and the stock exchange: in both we make noise and get a result. The Beed is yet to understand the connection between the stock market and the advent of loktantra or Nepal becoming a republic.



ECONOMIC SENSE
Artha Beed

The Nepal Rastra Bank made an announcement as hastily as any political party last week, and then investors went and stalled the transactions at the stock exchange just like the political players stall parliament. And then, when the market reopened after a week, prices plummeted. Beed predicted just such a bear run in his last column after the bull hit the wall, and it seems to have started. Suspended trading of certain stocks has become as regular as suspended proceedings in parliament. The problems at the Nepal Stock Exchange are twofold. The first is that it is basically an extension of the casino, with people speculating rather than investing wisely. The other is that the volume of stocks is too low. Globally, the development of stock markets has only worked well when guided by institutional investors rather than individuals. In Nepal we have individual investors, led by some rogue insiders, who have turned it into a punters' den. The stock exchange has been relegated to a racecourse, with betting



KIRAN PANDAY

dependent on the alcohol content in one's blood rather than rational thinking by one's brain. The Nepal Rastra Bank, as this Beed has been harping on about for years, should not run things in knee-jerk fashion. In 1994, just such behaviour by the bank killed the stock market for more than a decade, and it seems not to have learnt from the mistake. The regulation of markets and the financial sector has to be an ongoing exercise, not just a reaction to the latest problem. The wave of demonstrations that have come after the advent of loktantra in Nepal seems not to have frightened off the financial sector. Closure of the stock exchange in this way is unacceptable. If, next time, interest rates were slashed to head off inflation, would the banks be closed too, by depositors unhappy with their lower interest rates? It is vital that the financial sector is seen to be stable if the country is to build credibility as a place to invest in. If we claim to be part of the global economy, then closing the stock exchange has to be seen not only as primitive behaviour but completely unacceptable.

Mobonomics may be the order of the day in Nepal, but not elsewhere in the world. The business sector also needs to pull up its socks. Corporate governance should be a way of life if Nepali companies are to compete in the global arena. Relying on insider trading or dodgy legislation will not work in the long run. Looking ahead, the stock exchange must provide the necessary avenues to assist in funding Nepal's economic growth, but this must be based on sound international practices. Beed would humbly suggest the following:
● Make trading paperless to reduce speculation
● Give the regulators stronger, on-going powers
● Give favourable tax breaks to mutual funds and institutional investors so that individuals go through them instead of trading directly in the market
● Acknowledge that stock investment is a long-term game and not a short-term gamble, and accept that decent returns will only occur if the market is healthy
● The stock exchange should never be closed except for holidays.

NEW YORKóThe world economy has had several good years. Global growth been strong and the divide between the developing and developed world has narrowed. India and China led the way, experiencing GDP growth in 2007 of 11.5 percent and 8.9 percent respectively. Even Africa has been doing well. But the good times may be ending. There have been worries for years about the global imbalances caused by America's huge overseas borrowing. America, in turn, said that the world should be thankful: by living beyond its means, it helped keep the global economy going, especially given high savings rates in Asia, which accumulated hundreds of billions of dollars in reserves. But it was always recognised



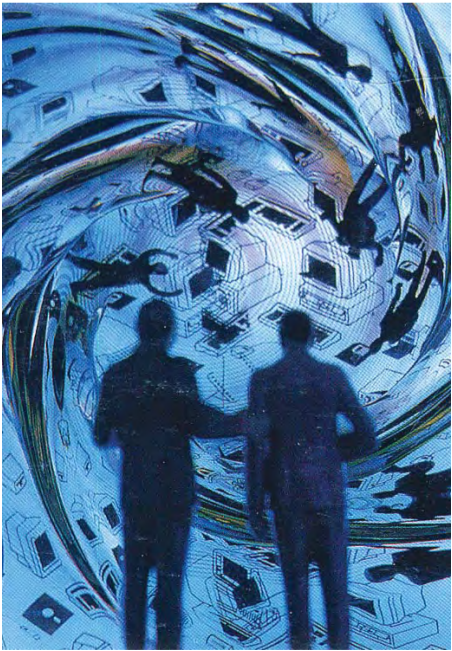
MONEY MATTERS
Joseph E Stiglitz

that America's growth under President George W. Bush was not sustainable. Now the day of reckoning looms. America's ill-conceived war in Iraq helped fuel a quadrupling of oil prices since 2003. In the 1970's, oil shocks led to inflation in some countries and to recession elsewhere, as governments raised interest rates to combat rising prices. And some economies faced the worst of both worlds: stagflation. Until now, three critical factors helped the world weather soaring oil prices:
● China, with its enormous productivity increases, exported its deflation

Stagflation cometh

The good times may be ending for a globalised world economy

● The US took advantage of this by lowering interest rates to unprecedented levels, inducing a housing bubble with mortgages available to anyone not on a life-support system.
● Workers all over the world took it on the chin, accepting lower real wages and a smaller share of GDP. That game is up. China is now facing inflationary pressures. What's more, if the US convinces China to let its currency appreciate, the cost of living in the US and elsewhere will rise. And, with the rise of biofuels, the food and energy markets have become integrated. Combined with increasing demand from those with higher incomes and lower supplies due to weather-related problems associated with climate change, this means high food prices ñ a lethal threat to developing countries. Prospects for America's consumption binge continuing are also bleak. For America today, the real question is only whether there will be a short, sharp downturn, or a more prolonged but shallower slowdown. Moreover, America has been exporting its problems abroad. Europe is finding it increasingly difficult to export.



At the same time, there has been a massive global redistribution of income from oil importers to oil exporters and from workers everywhere to the very rich. It is not clear whether workers will continue to accept declines in their living standards in

the name of an unbalanced globalisation whose promises seem ever more elusive. In America, one can feel the backlash mounting. For those who think that a well-managed globalisation has the potential to benefit both developed and developing countries, and who believe in global social justice and the importance of democracy, all this is bad news. There is one positive note in this dismal picture: the sources of global growth today are more diverse than they were a decade ago. The real engines of global growth in recent years have been developing countries. Nevertheless, slower growth ó or possibly a recession ó in the world's largest economy inevitably has global consequences. If interest rates are raised relentlessly to meet inflation targets, we should prepare for the worst: another episode of stagflation. The cost in lost jobs, lost wages, and lost homes will be enormous. ● Joseph Stiglitz is a Nobel laureate in economics. His latest book is Making Globalization Work.

"If your stomach hurts, is it the king's fault?"

Interview with Bharat Keshari Simha, former aide to the king, in Nepal, 13 January

नेपाल

How do you feel about the parties declaring a republic?

Bharat Keshar Singh: How would anyone feel about such an undemocratic, unconstitutional and baseless decision? Right now, the parliament itself is unconstitutional because they're not elected. The king was the one who gave them their powers and now they're the ones to strip the king of his powers. How can this happen? This is even more stupid than what Jang Bahadur did.

What is the king's reaction to all this?

If there was any meaning then there would be a reaction. There is no meaning so there is no reaction. If someone says I'll cut off your name and take away your means of living, what do you say to a crackpot like that? This is why the king is quiet.

Doesn't the palace's silence show its acquiescence?

Why comment on something that has no facts, no truth and is unconstitutional? The current prime minister took his oath from the king. Up till now, he is the king's prime minister. It was when he declared himself prime minister and didn't come to the king to take the oath that all this senselessness started happening. They themselves wrote in the interim constitution that the king's fate would be decided by the constituent assembly but they have already made the decision.

Why do you oppose the parties so much?

Maybe I oppose them because I'm a royalist. But talk to the foreigners: they think that the current government is a joke.

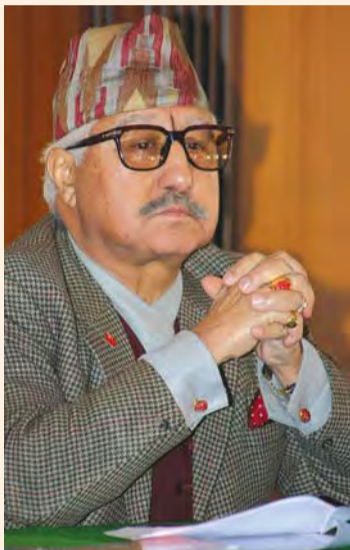
But the people seem to be siding with the seven parties.

The people wanted democracy but are now wondering if they've brought in another Rana-rule. One party gets to have all the weapons

it wants while the king's weapons get locked in the barracks. How does this happen?

Why doesn't the palace say anything? Are they scared?

What if the king says something and then the parties declare a republic then and there? I don't know if it is fear. We tell the king what we think, but there is no right or wrong response from him.



What kind of things do you talk to the king about?

I brief him on whatever is happening. I tell him about how the people are suffering, power is being abused, the economic situation is deteriorating, and there is no law and order. The king is very worried. Many refer to his silence as the calm before the storm.

Do you think the army is showing any loyalty to the parties?

How should I know? Am I in the army? The CoAS claims to be all for the nation, nationalism and constitutionalism.

What if a constituent assembly majority decides not to have a king? Will you accept the decision?

Of course. Why not? But that election needs to be impartial. It should be done under international supervision. If the decision is democratic, then it needs to be accepted. If not, then we must take up

arms just like the Maoists.

Do you think there will be an election in April?

Looking at the present circumstances, there is no way in hell it'll happen. Do you want to exclude the tarai and hold elections only in Kathmandu?

Some say that the king incited the tarai.

Can you say anything you want? Here's an SMS joke ñ if your stomach hurts, it must be the king's fault. Still, the king remains quiet, I myself am surprised.

Melamchi mirage

Bikas Thapa in Kantipur, 7 January

कान्तिपुर

When the Maoists joined the government the first time last year, Minister of Physical Planning and Works Hisila Yami overturned the decision of the previous government to give the Kathmandu Valley water management contract to Severn Trent. The fact that she was being swayed by anti-Severn Trent activists and NGOs is proven by the fact that she appointed them to decision-making positions. Severn Trent left, but what did we get? A project that would have been finished in 2011 will now take till 2013.

The Maoists have returned to government, and there is now a proposal to turn Melamchi into a multi-purpose regional project and not just a capital-centric scheme. Such new-fangled ideas inexplicably emerge whenever the Maoists come into the government. It is not a coincidence that the expanded Melamchi idea is in the parliamentary committee just before the Maoists returned to government at the behest of some persons and groups.

The 'new Melamchi' is supposed to generate 235MW of power and irrigate 30,000 hectares of tarai farms. Its proponents claim that the only additional cost will be the widening of the 26km tunnel to bring water from the Balephi through another

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tunnel. The argument is that the power generation aspect will attract foreign investors who will then also be co-investors in Melamchi. Although the supporters of the expanded Melamchi say the NEA is “desperate for electricity”, the reality is that the authority is scared to sign any power purchase agreement because a power component to Melamchi was declared unfeasible by engineers back in 1995.

The timing of the new proposal comes as the ADB is deciding on the Melamchi loan for the tunnel contract this month. Is the expanded Melamchi being pushed by a foreign contractor? Experts say it will take three to four years just to study the new proposal, and if the Maoists decide on the multi-purpose Melamchi, the project will never be built. In other words, this could be a trick to actually abort Melamchi.

Some people may benefit from Kathmandu's continued water shortage, but in the long term Melamchi will remain a mirage for Kathmandu's thirsty citizens.

Economic envoy

Excerpts from an interview with
Vijay Kant Karna, Maoist-
appointed ambassador to
Denmark, *Abhiyan*, 7-13 January

અભિયાન

Would you have been an ambassador if the parties had not decided to distribute the posts amongst themselves?

Vijay Kant Karna: I do not

know that, but if I had not been a madhesi I wouldn't have been selected. I was selected because of my region rather than my party.

Since you were recommended by the Maoists, how do you plan to show your gratitude?
I did not become an ambassador so that I could show any gratitude. The Maoists asked me whether I would contribute to the nation and I said yes. If any party or group, with the exception of the royalists, asks me to do something for my country, I will happily do it.

What are your plans as ambassador?

Right now every ambassador has the same objective: to change the identity of Nepal. We need to establish Nepal as a free, sovereign republic. I believe that it is the duty of every ambassador to convince the international community to help us build our new identity. I have also discussed with other parties my role as ambassador and I plan to take their advice.

What advice do you plan to take?
First, economic diplomacy: I plan to look for donors within and around Denmark. Increasing the number of tourists, talking to European airlines for direct flights to Kathmandu, and establishing a market for Nepali goods in Europe are on my list of things to do.

Matrika's antics

Chandrakishor in *Naya Patrika*,
7 January

नयाँ पत्रिका

Matrika Yadav's refusal to take his oath of office in Nepali but in Maithili carries a lot of symbolism in the madhes. After all, one of the chief demands of the madhesi movement has been the recognition of the language, culture and attire of its inhabitants. Yadav's efforts to highlight the madhes demands is praiseworthy. It was due to his efforts that even the United Nations held a seven-hour meeting with madhesi leaders on

9 December and internationalised the madhes issue. Ever since his first tenure, Yadav has been less a Maoist leader and more a madhesi one.

The week before 19 January is going to be critical not just for the madhes but for Nepal. Yadav's role as minister is significant as the mediator between the madhesi people and the government. The peace process is in jeopardy, there is a temptation to resolve the madhes issue by force rather than negotiations, and the activities of armed groups are growing. Senior ministers from the mainstream parties led by

Mahanta Thakur have resigned from the government, party and from parliament.

The first order of business for the constitution is to abolish the monarchy. Supporters of the monarchy are therefore likely to create obstacles for elections, and this challenge has to be met. It is a make or break week for the madhes, and national politicians are moving down to the tarai. But the people don't want any more speeches, they want their grievances addressed once and for all. If Minister Yadav can't deliver, he will be held responsible.



Boat: Country

नेपाल *Nepal* in 13 January

SELECTED MATERIAL TRANSLATED EVERY WEEK FROM THE NEPALI PRESS

War games

Bhojraj Bhatt in *Kantipur Koseli*, 5 January

कान्तिपुर

In Jungkot, a remote village in Rolpa, children gather at the school ground to box and wrestle each other. When Maoist leader Barsaman Pun (Ananta) was young in these parts he played the same games. Pun served as a deputy commander of the Maoist army, and although peace has returned to Rolpa, the effects of the war are still visible. Aside from the physical destruction, there are the children who all play with plastic guns.

Seven-year-old Asheshraj Basnet, clad in camouflage fatigues, was firing off imaginary bullets from his plastic AK-47.

“Who are your enemies?” we asked.


“Maoists,” he replied.

Why?

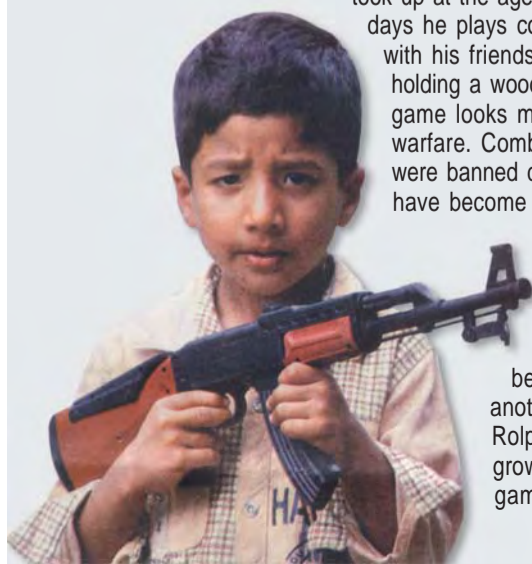
îThey tortured the villagers.î

Villagers told us Asheshraji's family was displaced by the Maoists during the conflict.

While Comrade Anantaís cadres enter parliament donning their new grey coats, his son, Utsav, plays Spiderman and pretends to kill imaginary enemies with his plastic Chinese pistol.

A young boy with dark hair and a serious expression is holding a black and red toy rifle. He is wearing a light-colored, patterned shirt. The background is a plain, light color.

Pradip Punis father was killed by the army. Until just two years ago, he was holding a real pistol in his hands, which he took up at the age of six. These days he plays cops and robbers with his friends in Thawang, holding a wooden gun. But the game looks more like guerrilla warfare. Combat clothes, which were banned during the war, have become popular with Rolpa's children. It is said a war affects three generations, and it may not be unusual for another generation of Rolpa's children to grow up playing war games.



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A LAND OF OLD AND NEW: (top) A young girl swings free across Kirtipurís skyline
(anticlockwise *l-r*) A kitchen hand prepares to winnow freshly pounded rice at *Nawa Lahana*

Women weed mustard fields near Naya Bajar

The Jugal Himal range and the valley as seen from Uma Maheswor Temple, the highest point in Kirtipur

Nawa Lahana is an open museum cum restaurant

Antique swords and shields used during the battle against Prithvi Narayan Shah hang in the Bagh Bhairab Temple

A monk rests in peaceful solitude at the Sri Kirti Bihar.





So near, and yet so long ago

It's just 6km from Kathmandu's city centre, but historic Kirtipur may as well be many centuries away.

The picturesque ridge-top town has always fallen between the cracks of the tourist towns of Bhaktapur and Patan. And despite the proximity, one gets the feeling time has passed Kirtipur by.

Kirtipur was the first of the Valley's kingdoms to be attacked by Prithbi Narayan Shah. The resolute inhabitants held out till 1768 after three fierce sieges by the Gorkhalis. Unlike Patan and Kathmandu, Kirtipur is naturally protected on all sides.

Despite the ravages of time, past battles and earthquakes the medieval features of this fortress kingdom are still intact. The ancient town is an open museum for religion, cultural tradition and exceptional Newari craft and architecture. The sounds of women using *ugha* to beat rice and the whirr of the *tan* as threads are woven into cloth have all but disappeared elsewhere, but survive in Kirtipur.

At the 600-year-old Bagh Bhairab temple the swords and shields, remnants of the battle against Prithbi Narayan Shah, are proudly displayed and remind visitors of the courage of the defenders.

Up the hill is the Uma Maheswor temple, from where there is a sweeping view of the valley and the mountains beyond.

Kirtipur's glorious history comes right down to the present times: the activism of its inhabitants and the nearby university ushered in democracy in 1990 and in April 2006 with peaceful protests that inspired the nation to stand up against an autocratic monarchy. ●

Srishti Adhikari



Nepal, Inc.

We should be rebranding our nation in a more positive light

International media images of our troubled nation are upsetting. Nepal appears like a Lilliputian comedy, with little people fighting over little things in a faraway little place.

In Jonathan Swift's classic, the Lilliputians and their enemy, the Blefuscutians, are constantly at war to settle their dispute over the right way to eat a boiled egg. The former, called Big-endians, insist on eating from the rounded end and the latter, the Little-endians, argue on behalf of the pointy end. The ongoing Nepali theatrics reinforce that mythic analogy.

The problem is that such stereotyping conceals more than it reveals. Media images change, as we change. During the 1960s, the press couldn't get enough of our Shangri-La image. Then, during the 1980s, the international media found nothing much to report from here. With the royal massacre, the parachutists suddenly descended on Nepal and found out there was a war going on. And now there is the 'failing state' myth.



NEPALI PAN
Dharma Adhikari

We may very well be a failing state. But what now, as we cross our fingers in the hope that peace will prevail and reconstruction begin? And how do we want to be perceived by

the outside world? Let's start repairing our attributes and build our image anew.

Many countries in the developing world which were wrecked by wars, poverty, famine and corruption have in recent years embarked on image restoration, also called 'nation branding'.

Nepal's own campaign 'Naturally Nepal' once is not enough is aimed at boosting tourist arrivals. Effective place branding, however, targets wider public perceptions than tourists, including our export destinations, the host countries of our migrant workers, and our immediate neighbours.

Simon Anholt, author of *Brand New Justice* and a leading proponent of nation branding, writes that branding in transitional and developing societies ensures that their reputation keeps pace with their progress.

His prescription for Nepal:

- Find out what the world *really* thinks about Nepal.
- Link the image closely to the country's economic, political and social aims.
- Get a coalition of government, business and civil society at the highest level to map out investments, innovations, policies, actions and behaviours to be carried out in every sector over the next five to ten years.
- Carry these out to world-class standards.

It is not good enough to read the papers and assume that a place has a bad image: it needs to be properly measured and properly analysed, Anholt cautions. He has developed a Nation Brand Index (NBI) based on measures of quarterly global public perceptions on a country's assets or appeal in governance, economy, culture, people, and tourism.



Apparently, politics is our worst indicator. With failing exports, sluggish investment, and massive unemployment, our economic situation isn't faring much better. Still, we may look fairly attractive in culture, heritage and biodiversity.

Some positive images do make it through the gloom and doom in the news accounts: pashmina, coffee, cricketers, artists, rugs, elephant polo, gifted physicians, golf enthusiasts, skilled IT and media professionals, and cardamom.

Some attributes shine in the wider field of media culture. A popular thrash metal band from Argentina calls itself 'Nepal', perhaps for our mystique. Gforge, a French company, just released 'Nepal 10.0', a software coding program, possibly for our resilience. A similar project with the 'Nepali' brand (symbolising 'stability') by a US firm disappeared a few years back, when our mountains began to bleed.

There are other attributes that we could recover (the Buddha is one) or build, and most importantly, live up to. These ought also to be reflected in popular media reporting. Increasingly our national media adopts western agendas, so it should also review its style. The government and businesses must manage a versatile public information system so journalists get an array of story ideas.

Of course, the propaganda should not try to cover our warts. But in these days of blogs and media spin, there are ways to amplify the positives.

●

Dharma Adhikari is a visiting faculty member at the Institute of Advanced Communication, Education and Research (IACER) in Kathmandu



Bir Hospital's burns unit does its best to provide top class care at rock bottom prices

MALLIKA ARYAL

Early on Saturday morning, Sri Ram Shrestha awoke in his house in Nala, Kabhre, to find flames and smoke filling the air. He rushed upstairs to save his sleeping 32-year-old daughter, Ram Pyari Shrestha. But by the time he got to her, her face, hands and legs were severely burnt.

She was driven to Banepa Hospital, but because 40 percent of her body was covered with second and third degree burns, she was sent on to Bir Hospital, where she now lies shrouded in bandages, groaning in pain, her swollen face and lips smeared with soothing ointment. The hospital staff fear her lungs may have been damaged by smoke inhalation. Her father lost all his possessions in the fire and burnt himself during the rescue. "Whatever I could find, I spent it to bring my daughter here," he explains.

Duty nurse Nara Devi Bariya was not surprised when Shrestha told her he could not pay. Instead of turning his daughter away, staff immediately treated Ram Pyari, bandaged her and applied the necessary ointment. Of the nine patients in the unit, all except one are receiving free treatment.

The charges are minimal – usually for medical supplies – but most patients end up not paying anything because it is generally the poor who come for treatment.

"Those who can afford it seek private help," says Bariya. "The patients who come to us are sometimes so poor that they not only can't pay for their treatment, but don't have enough money to go home."

Bir Hospital's burns unit, set up in 2001, is one of three in Kathmandu. Staffed by two dressers and five nurses, it is always full. Overflow patients are kept in the emergency ward until a bed is free, and patients receive protein-rich meals and snacks daily. The Krishna dispensary at the hospital provides some drugs for free to those with absolutely no money.

Most cases are women from poor households, and records at the Bir unit show that nearly two thirds of cases result from accidents, and nearly one third from self-inflicted burns. "It is usually married couples, where the men work and women stay at home," says Bir Bahadur Lama, counsellor at the burns unit. Most suicide cases result from economic problems. "The husband cannot fulfil basic economic demands, and our culture is such that couples don't

really share their feelings, so it is usually the women who burn themselves as a last resort."

For more than three years the unit has been without a much-needed plastic surgeon. "The deeper wounds need surgery," says volunteer Wendy Marston. "But since the unit doesn't have a surgeon, patients take longer to

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PICS: SAM KANG LI

A burning issue

heal." This means they also take up valuable bed space for longer.

Keshav Das Joshi, chief of the Plastic Reconstructive Unit at Kathmandu Medical College, says a major problem in dealing with such cases is the shortage of specialised burns units and plastic surgeons in Nepal. "In India it is estimated that around

0.5 percent of the population gets burnt," he says. "We estimate that the figure is similar here, which is quite significant."

In a month's time, KMC will open a new reconstructive plastic surgery and burns unit which will help to meet demand.

"There are so many accidents that should not be happening but

do because of lack of awareness," says Marston. She says the government could make more use of radio to provide advice to illiterate families.

While Bir Hospital provides basic medical supplies, patients may have to pay for some expensive drugs themselves. The unit gets some support from

international organisations and individuals, but there is always a need for more assistance. "The help does not necessarily need to be monetary," says Marston. "Those interested can contribute by providing things like protein-rich food, towels and bed sheets."

Despite the constant struggle to make ends meet, the burns unit

provides vital, often life-saving treatment to a steady stream of patients. "The resources we work with may be limited and we may be understaffed, but those who work here are committed, and we always do our best," says Bariya. ●

Burns Unit, Bir Hospital: 01-422 1988 Ext: 358

Versus table sugar, honey scores full points. Why ? Simply because sugar doesn't have much other than empty calories. Yes "empty". Nothing nutritive apart from the carbs. Which if you don't burn, turns into fat. So if you want the bulging waistline, go for the sugar. If you want the health, go for Dabur Honey. Point ?



HEALTH POINT

HEALTHY CHHA. TASTY CHHA.

Double billing

Technically a zombie movie, *I am Legend* smartly keeps its zombies out of sight until well into the movie, which serves to focus on the existential plight of its protagonist. Robert Neville, played with revealing sensitivity by Will Smith, is apparently New York City's sole surviving human—or at least the sole surviving human not turned into a sunlight-allergic zombie by a virus engineered to cure cancer.

We witness the affection he showers on his dog and conversations with mannequins that keep together his fragile sanity and strained psyche. His solitariness in an urban landscape that is slowly turning feral provides some unique pursuits for Robert, such as hunting deer in a racing car through New York's deserted streets, and generates some truly mesmerising cinema.



CRITICAL CINEMA A Angelo DiSilva

His isolation ends with the appearance of Anna, who rescues Robert when he suffers a bout of self-destructiveness.

Anna, in her faith that there is a colony of survivors somewhere, quickly emerges as the spiritual foil to the rational-minded Robert, a military scientist who is still intent on finding a cure. It is evident that faith in god and science serve to sustain Anna and Robert respectively, and the film is recast along that tension, which is ultimately poorly resolved by a Shyamalan-esque epiphany.

I won't ruin it by telling you who, if anyone, gets out alive, but the ending, an image of a strange and perverse utopia, a diametric reflection of derelict New York City seems like an odd cop-out: heavy gates open to an idyllic town guarded by soldiers with an American flag drowsily whipping in the air and a church steeple in the distance. Then the camera is above to deliver an airplane's view of the habitation surrounded by impenetrable high-walls. It's a fantasy of a refugee camp, a mirage of tranquil wholesomeness that has a whiff of sanctimonious piety, and ultimately an act of Hollywood self-sabotage.



In *Charlie Wilson's War*, refugee camps provide the few sombre scenes in a movie that is almost too incredibly jocular (if sardonic) about one American congressman's instrumental efforts to fund the Afghans in their 10-year conflict against the Soviet Union. This is a film that manages a bubbly glaze over international arms-dealing, CIA political engineering, and even helicopters firing upon villages. Tom Hanks is the eponymous Charlie Wilson, a liberal Texan Democrat and a veritable libertine who emerges as the impious conscience of the film. He is nudged by Julia Roberts' character, Joanne Herring, a right-wing Christian, staunch anti-communist, very rich socialite into taking up the cause of the Afghan mujahedeen in their fight against the Soviets. The pair are rounded off by the brilliant Philip Seymour Hoffman as the blunt and brazen CIA operative Gust Arvakotos.

Like *I Am Legend*, the tension between religion and secularism comes to dominate the film. Sometimes delicately, sometimes inelegantly, it attempts to foreshadow the rising religiosity that will mark the so-called 'Clash of Civilisations'. When our trio brings another American Congressman to visit an Afghan refugee camp, his promise of American arms and training in a speech evokes a dangerous edge of fanaticism on both sides of the equation. At one point Wilson warns wanly: 'I think what's got Gus worried is that sooner or later, God will be on both sides.'

Charlie Wilson's War is undoubtedly entertaining, in no small part because of the zippy conversations that mix humor, ideological debate and political bargaining, all with a lilt of levity by its cast of charismatic characters. However, considering what came next, it leaves something of a bitter aftertaste that doesn't sit comfortably in the mind. And perhaps it is all the better for that.

I AM LEGEND

Director: Francis Lawrence.

Cast: Will Smith, Alice Braga.

2007. 100 min.

CHARLIE WILSON'S WAR

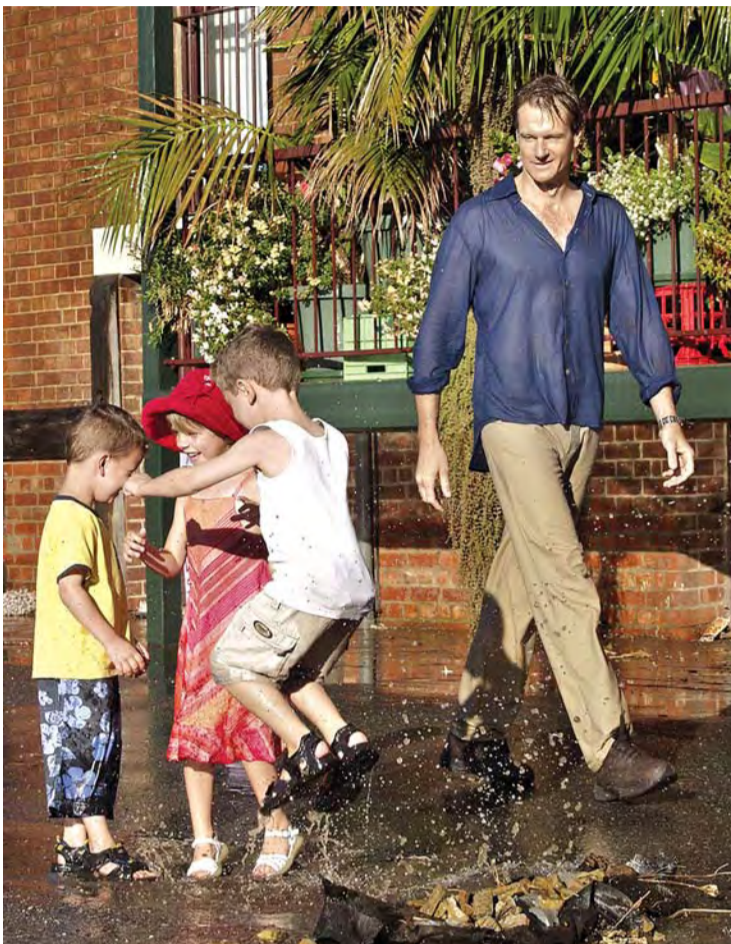
Director: Mike Nichols

Cast: Tom Hanks, Julia Roberts, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Amy Adams, Om Puri.

2007. 97 min.

Aussie action

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what makes him different. But one day, after he flies off the school roof and ends up in a full-body cast, Lake decides to make a bid to lead a normal life. To his parents' horror, Lake gets a normal job, buys a beige suit and does everything in his power to conform. Lake will do anything to be banal, even if it kills him.

Jindabyne (2006), 18 January, 5.30 PM

Based on a short story by Raymond Carver, the film tells the story of Stewart Kane, an Irishman living in the Australian town of Jindabyne. While on a fishing trip with three other men, he finds the body of a murdered girl in the river. Instead of reporting the incident, the men continue fishing and only report their find days later. Stewart's wife Claire is deeply disturbed by her husband's action. In her quest to understand Stewart, her peaceful life is threatened and her marriage is taken to the brink. A powerful film about a murder and a marriage.

Newsfront (1978), 19 January, 5.30 PM

In late 40s Australia, Len Maguire and his side-kick Chris are two intrepid cameramen who cover big news stories for the Cinetone newsreel company. Len is an old-school cameraman, loyal to the company, the Australian Labour Party and the Catholic church. But with the advent of television, he finds times are changing. The film is an adventurous saga of the two cinematographers and reporters who risk life and limb to capture footage of breaking news for the movie-going public.

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Now in its sixth year, the 2008 Australian Embassy Film Roadshow will provide cineastes with some of the best of contemporary Australian film next week.

There will be a screening each evening from 13-19 January at the Russian Culture Centre of a diverse selection, ranging from comedy to thriller and drama. Ray Lawrence's acclaimed *Jindabyne* will be shown at the official opening on 13 January and again later in the week.

Tickets are priced at Rs 30 and are available at the Australian Embassy, Hotel Radisson, Himalayan Java, Jeans Café, and the Courtyard restaurant. All proceeds from sales will go to the Nepal Wheelchair Club in Bhrikuti Mandap.

Danny Deckchair (2003), 14 January, 5.30 PM

A cement-truck driver named Danny, whose long-awaited vacation is cancelled thanks to his scheming girlfriend, decides to escape his grim life in suburban Australia. He blasts off on a chair tied to helium balloons and lands in the town of Clarence. Danny reinvents himself in this new town and establishes a relationship with Glenda, the town's only parking cop. A story of an ordinary fellow, who gets a second chance to stand out from the crowd and fall in love again.

Look Both Ways (2005), 15 January, 5.30 PM

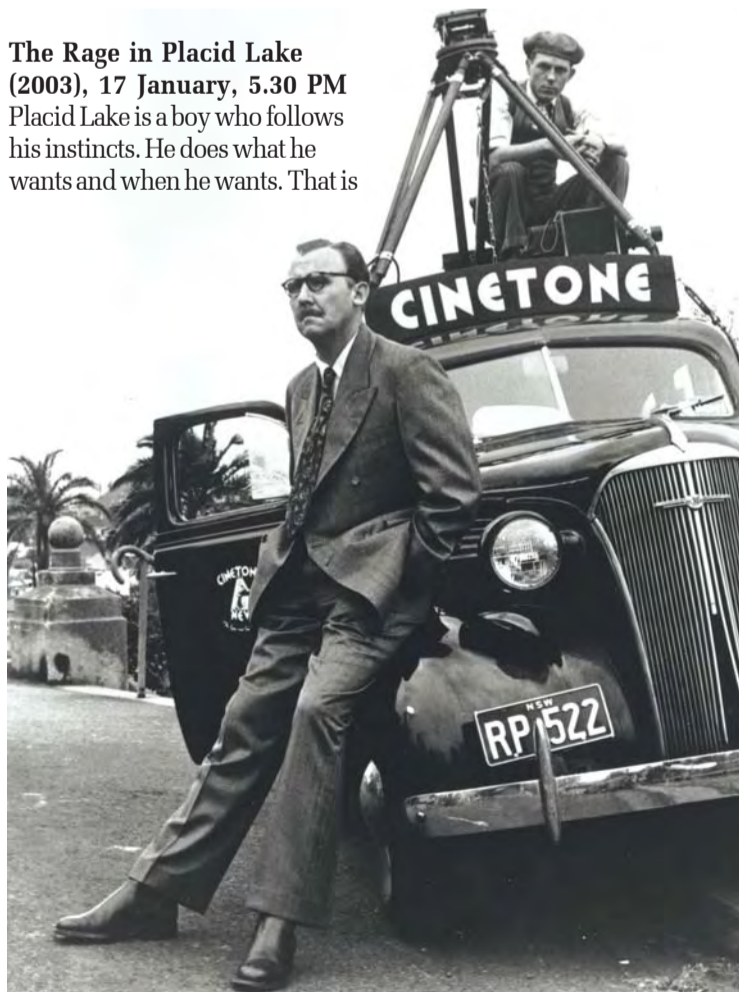
On a Friday after a horrific train crash, three newsmen in Adelaide discover different things about their own lives. Nick, a photojournalist, learns that he has cancer, Andy, a

writer, learns that his lover Anna is pregnant and Phil, an editor, realises that he has missed his children growing up. A mix of live action and animation, set over a hot weekend, the characters' lives intersect and converge creating an intriguing film.

Storm Boy (1976), 16 January, 5.30 PM

In the wild Coorong wetlands of South Australia, a 10-year-old boy rescues a baby pelican orphaned by hunters. With the help of an Aboriginal man, Fingerbone Bill, the boy takes care of the bird and names it Mr Percival. The two become inseparable – until the outside world decides to encroach.

The Rage in Placid Lake (2003), 17 January, 5.30 PM
Placid Lake is a boy who follows his instincts. He does what he wants and when he wants. That is





QUEST ENTERTAINMENT

We don't have to be embarrassed about Nepali movies anymore

Coming of age with *Kagbeni*

KUNDA DIXIT

After watching *Kagbeni* when it premieres on Friday, many viewers will say it is the best Nepali movie they have seen. Trouble is, that's not saying much.

Given its inane mediocrity and crass imitation of Bollywood, anything would be better than Nepal's pubescent film industry. But even by international standards, *Kagbeni* is a handsome movie: superbly crafted, seductively acted, meticulously directed. No longer will we have to be embarrassed about Nepali movies. (See also: 'Aiming high with *Kagbeni*', #381)

The film starts with the starkly scenic panorama of the trans-Himalaya forming. Combine this ethereal location with a classic thriller (based on the 1902 novel by WW Jacobs, *The Monkey's Paw*) and for two hours you are transported into a Faustian dreamland.

The minimalist screenplay by Prashant Rasaily distills Jacobs down to a barebone plot. Krishna returns from Malaysia and is reunited with his childhood friend, Ramesh. But there is a sense of foreboding when they meet a sadhu who gives them a talisman with tantric powers. After this the story becomes a drama that unfolds at two levels: the real and the occult.

Director Bhusan Dahal does a surprisingly slick job, considering this is his first feature film, by getting everyone involved to give it their best.

There is a perfectionist attention to detail in Dahal's direction. The characteristic up-valley gales of the Kali Gandaki blow through the cinema in surround sound, the faces of the actors are all weathered by sun and wind as they are in real-life *Kagbeni*. The film's languid pace fits perfectly with the way the hours in a day and the seasons pass in the mountains of rural Nepal.

The director has included local crudities: the lead actor wipes snot on his jacket, and Dahal even gets away with having a sleazy trader scratch his crotch in public. Empty brandy bottles clink in harmony with mule bells, creating music.

The soothing flute score by Sharad Gurung is a perfect accompaniment to the backdrop. Nothing is overdone, even though it must have been tempting to add more minutes of timelapse cinematography as the clouds race past Dhaulagiri. Bidur Panday restrains himself and has some excellent vertical shots that accentuate the stacked houses and narrow alleys of Lower Mustang.

The indoor scenes evoke the feeling of a stage set, and this is not surprising because leading actors Saugat Malla (Ramesh) and Deeya Maskey (Tara) are both from theatre. Malla does a stellar job first as a morose Ramesh, and nine years later as a responsible family man troubled by his past. Deeya's understated performance makes the soul-wrenching grief she

has to portray towards the end even more powerful. Viewers may at first be sceptical of pop singer Nima Rumba (Krishna), but he puts on an strongly convincing performance.

Kagbeni may not be a Golden Globe nominee, but producers Bhaskar Dhungana, Nakim Uddin and Rajesh Siddhi have honed their skills with this debut effort, and may do even better with their next venture, *Sano Sansar*, due for release later this year. *Kagbeni* could have been shorter, the

BEDROOM SCENE: Saugat Malla (Krishna) and Deeya Maskey (Tara) in a sequence from *Kagbeni*. This must be the boldest love scene ever in Nepali cinema, but it is done with finesse and is devoid of vulgarity.

music during the supernatural scenes could have been less melodramatic, some characters are mechanical and detached. But overall this is a film that proves Nepali cinema has finally come of age. Even in a fairy tale, it portrays a gritty, dusty, real Nepal not a sanitised, escapist one seen in most Kollywood musicals.

As you wait in excruciating

suspense for a climax that you know will be tragic, the moral of the story hits you even before the end rushes come on: "Be careful what you wish for." ●

Kagbeni will be shown from Friday, 11 January at Jai Nepal and Kumari (01-4442220) and in cinemas across Nepal in high definition digital format.

Beautiful at any Age

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ABOUT TOWN

EXHIBITIONS

- ❖ **photo.circle.special.edition** Kripa Joshi talks about her Miss Moti comics and the scope of graphic novels, 14 January, 6PM at the Pulchok Bakery Café. 9851014930
- ❖ **Larger than Life** panoramas by Kishor Kayastha, exhibition and sale, until 15 January, 8AM-6PM at the Indigo Gallery, Naxal. 4413580
- ❖ **Himalayan Harmony** paintings by Vijay Thapa at Park Gallery, Lazimpat, until 14 January, 10.30 AM-5.30 PM.



EVENTS

- ❖ **Elizabeth** a film by Shekhar Kapur at the Lazimpat Gallery Café, 6.15 PM on 11 January. 4428549
- ❖ **Shastrartha** on how to read Laxmi Prasad Devkota with Padma Prakash Devkota and Prabhash Devkota, 12 January, 3-5PM at Martin Chautari. 6910277
- ❖ **animalNEPAL community meeting** to discuss the street dogs of Patan, 4PM on 20 January at the Summit Hotel. 9841334537

MUSIC

- ❖ **21st Yala Maya Classic** with Pandit Hom Nath Upadhyaya and Bikash Nath Yogi, 16 January, 5PM at Yala Maya Kendra. 5553767
- ❖ **Ciney Gurung** every Wednesday and Rashmi Singh every Friday, live at the Absolute Bar, Hotel Narayani Complex, 7PM. 5521408
- ❖ **Catch 22** live at the Zest Restaurant and Bar, Pulchok.

DINING

- ❖ **Illy espresso coffee** at the Galleria cafe, Thamel with contemporary art exhibition at the Galleria lounge, every Friday espresso coffee cocktails, also at Park Village, Buddhanilkantha.†
- ❖ **Saturday special** barbecue, sekuwa, momos, dal-bhat at The Tea House Inn, Windy Hills, Nagarkot every Saturday. 9841250848.
- ❖ **Dice-licious brunch** at Kakori, Soaltee Crowne Plaza, roll the dice to the number of the day and get 50 percent discount on an individual meal, Saturdays and Sundays, 12.30-3.30PM. 4273999
- ❖ **Vegetarian alternative** at Stupa View restaurant and café, Boudha Stupa. 4480262
- ❖ **Scrumptious woodfired pizzas**, cocktails and speciality coffees at † Roadhouse, Bhatbateni 4426587, Pulchok 5521755 and Thamel 4260187.
- ❖ **Cocktails and jazz** with the JCS Quartet and a choice of cocktails at Fusion o the Bar at Dwarika's. 4479448
- ❖ **Starry night barbecue** at Hotel Shangri-la with live performance by Ciney Gurung, Rs 666 nett per person, at the Shambala Garden, every Friday from 6.30 PM. 4412999
- ❖ **Kebabs and curries** at the Dhaba, Thapathali. 9841290619
- ❖ **Calcutta's rolls, biryani, kebabs** Indian cuisine at Bawarchi, Bluebird Mall Food Court. 9741000735
- ❖ **LaVazza coffee** Italy's favourite coffee at La Dolce Vita, †Thamel. 4700612
- ❖ **Little Britain coffee shop** fresh organic coffee, homemade cakes, WiFi internet, open all day, everyday. 4496207
- ❖ **Pizza** from the woodfired oven at Java, Thamel. 4422519

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For inclusion in the listing send information to editors(at)nepalitimes.com

Quest Entertainment



Kagbeni begins with Krishna coming back to his village after spending time in Malaysia. After visiting his friend Ramesh, they decide to travel together. On their journey they come across a hermit who hands Krishna an animal's paw that has power to fulfil wishes, but also creates horrific consequences. Unaware of its ominous powers, Ramesh makes a wish, and the journey of betrayal and revenge begins.

Call 4442220 for show timings at Jai Nepal
www.jainepal.com

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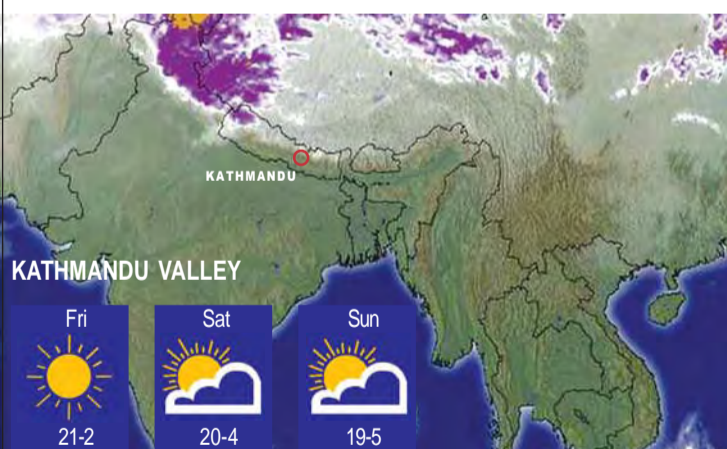
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WEEKEND WEATHER

by NGAMINDRA DAHAL

It has been nearly two months since the last rain fell over the south side of the Himalaya, which is a disaster for agriculture and for our hydroelectric production. For probably the first time this winter, the satellite photo for Thursday morning shows an approaching westerly frontal system. It is dumping snow in Kashmir but shows signs of veering off. But there is still a likelihood of some of this moisture working its way eastwards along the foothills. Trans-Karnali will get a sprinkling of snow in the higher reaches and some rain. Expect thick morning fog and hazy afternoons over the weekend with the minimum temperature climbing a notch.



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KUMAR SHRESTHA

LOYAL ROYALS: Former minister Kamal Thapa with other members of his RPP Nepal party at a pro-monarchy rally in Kathmandu on Monday.



KIRAN PANDY

TAXI STAND: Taxi drivers rally on Tuesday, choking Kathmandu's streets and causing a mammoth traffic jam. On Wednesday, the strike was called off after the government agreed to consider all their eight demands.



MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

LOUNGING AROUND: Minister of Tourism Prithivi Subba Gurung at the opening by Oriental Hotels Radisson of a new Executive Class lounge at Kathmandu airport.



MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

TEACHING TEACHERS: Gunnar Andersen of Save the Children Norway and Basanta Thapa of Himal Association at the launch of *Sikshyak*, a new magazine for Nepal's teachers.

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Long live Joketantra

What do Nepal and Naples have in common besides the fact that every year the postal service mis-directs thousands of letters with **Nepali** addressees to **Napoli**?

Rubbish. Yes, residents on the outskirts of Naples have stopped taking any more of the city's trash until the municipality provides them with adequate compensation. They have been burning tyres on the streets of Naples, and garbage is piling up in the tourist area. What a relief to know that they have the same problems with waste management in Italy as we have in the Kathmandu Metropolitan City.



Comrade Awesome keeps comparing himself to Gautam Buddha. The Maoist HQ is in Buddha Nagar, the central committee meeting this week is being held at a resort in Namo Baudha and there is actually a commander with the nom de guerre of 'Comrade Siddhartha'. What's with the Buddha obsession, comrades?

We don't know if PKD brought up the matter of the eight-fold path at the Maoist central committee meeting in Kabhre this week since it was being held behind closed doors, but we are informed on good authority that he suddenly got up, looked at his watch and said: "Whoa! Completely forgot. Gotta go."

So, with **Comrade Laldhoj** in hot pursuit, Fearsomeness skipped the centcom to attend a Marwari Family invitation to deliver a speech. The interesting thing here is not that a Maoist leader deigned it important enough to leave a critical party meeting to attend a function organised by Nepal's premier business community, but what he told the Marwari businessmen: "The YCL can be mobilised to control the growing insecurity, extortion and abductions suffered by business sector." Do we smell a deal here?

Forever the optimist, the Ass takes all this positively. The rise in YCL extortion nationwide in the past week is the surest sign yet that the Maoists are putting together a war chest and therefore are serious about elections. Om mani padme hum.



However, over at Baluwatar, there is no sign of urgency in declaring a poll date. Even on Thursday, the cabinet postponed the decision. Last week GPK said one week, this week he is saying next week. The reason for the delay is that Girjau has suddenly decided to make his daughter minister. **Frau Jost** really wanted the Foreign Minister's job, but apparently had to settle for minister without portfolio. Which means what, she gets to interfere with all other ministries?

This must be an indication that the First Daughter has a leg up on First Cousin Shekhar and Sitaula Baje. There have been signs of Sujata Auntie having a greater say in matters of state these days. The other day she managed to get the whole Reporter's Club to come to Baluwatar to meet the prime minister. If Mohamad (PBUH) can't go to the mountain, the mountain (Rishi Dhamala) can always come to Mohamad.

It was at that press meet that Girjabau endorsed what **General Ajay P Nath** had told the press before he went off to China that army integration was a bad idea. Why should the First Daughter be orchestrating all this if she doesn't agree with it? Rightwing kangresis are now as dangerous to the peace process as the baddies.



Trouble is that the prime minister is torn between keeping happy the First Nephew (who is Sitaula Baje's chum) while not hurting the First Daughter's feelings. How the prime minister sorts this one out is going to have a greater bearing on this country's future than the unity of the seven party alliance.



But true to the South Asian tradition of anointing offspring as heir apparents (look at **Bilawal Bhutto** sweating it out this week at a presscon in London), Girjau probably wouldn't mind if Sujata Ma'm succeeded him. Is that why he told kangresi wimmin cadre last week that it was time Nepal had a female prime minister?



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