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XIAOTONG XU

FRONTIER TOWNS: From Zhangmu in China (*above*) to Raxaul in India (*below*) Nepal's northern and southern borders have been severed for months by an earthquake and a blockade.



SEULKI LEE

CUT OFF

First, the earthquake cut off the highway to China through Kodari in April, then the blockade has obstructed Nepal's trade links with India since September. Landlocked Nepal is virtually cut off.

Time seems to have stopped at Kodari, the once-bustling trading town on the border between Nepal and China ever since the April earthquake brought boulders the size of houses crashing down. The Friendship Bridge across the Bhothe Kosi is damaged and

lifeless. Kodari in Nepal and Zhangmu in China were both abandoned after the earthquake, and all trade has stopped. No one really knows when this important Nepal-China trade route will open again. A parliamentary delegation visited the border this week and urged the government to reopen as soon as possible.

THE ENEMY WITHIN

EDITORIAL PAGE 2

Rasuwa, the border post heralded with much fanfare as an alternative trade route to China, has such poor infrastructure

that tankers and cargo trucks can barely make it across the narrow and treacherous road. Bureaucratic hassles and corruption deter those who try to move goods through Rasuwa.

Meanwhile, Birganj which is Nepal's biggest and busiest border town is in deep fatigue after continuous street protests and border obstructions since August. "When will all this end?" asked an Indian container truck driver who has been stranded in Birganj for five months.

Container trucks and tankers form a line many kilometres long into India as the blockade drags on into its fourth month. Nepal is facing a national emergency, its economy has been devastated, decades of progress in health, education and poverty reduction are in danger of being reversed.

Despite recent signs of progress, negotiations between the government and the Madhesi parties are stalled.



BORDERLINE

KODARI: An abandoned town and a lifeless bridge at the once-busy Nepal-China checkpoint

RASUWA: This alternative trade route to China is plagued by delays and corruption

BIRGANJ: At the blockaded Indian border there is frustration and fatigue

Special Report PAGE 14-15



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THE ENEMY WITHIN

We don't need India to wreck our country, Nepal's politicians are doing it just fine.

One aspect of the 18-week-long Indian blockade of Nepal that has always baffled us is why New Delhi would want to inflict such harm on a little neighbour, and to a lesser degree, on itself. There are many theories about what ‘India’ really hopes to achieve with this siege, and it is unclear if India itself knows what India wants. Or maybe, as some have suggested, India is unwilling to divulge what it really wants.

On the other hand, we are not at all surprised about the rulers in Kathmandu blundering from one mistake to another. Nepalis have never got the government they deserved. In the past 20 years we have been saddled with short-sighted, narrow-minded and greedy rulers. Most politicians since the mid-1990s instead of serving the people, have been self-serving crooks.

The single-minded focus in Kathmandu’s corridors of power has been to deflect attention from our own shortcomings and to indulge in knee-jerk India-bashing. To be sure, New Delhi has used (some would say incited) the agitation in the plains to justify its blockade so that it can push through its economic and strategic agenda. Such blatant arm-twisting notwithstanding, the communistic UML-Maoist coalition has made matters worse and prolonged the crisis by its own fecklessness. The opposition NC is trying to exploit the crisis by playing politics as usual.

This UML-Maoist coalition seems to take vicarious pleasure in playing victim and shifting all the blame on the blockade. Every day, ministers in the Oli administration come up with ever more outlandish statements to mask their own incompetence, such as ending load-shedding or wild promises about harnessing wind power. They are neither taking effective steps to end the crisis, nor dealing concretely with the shortages and deepening hardships.



Instead of expediting the petroleum purchase deal with China, opening the Kodari border and urgently upgrading the Rasuwa highway, all we get is political grandstanding and more rhetoric. Instead of executing an emergency action plan for incentives to shift to electric public transport or to accelerate hydropower projects, we get the same familiar waffling. Rather than immediately putting into place subsidies for domestic photo-voltaic systems with reverse metering, all we hear are pompous homilies.

The overwhelming impression is that of a state machinery and its organs profiting so much from the black market economy in fossil fuels that they want the crisis to last a while longer so they can fill their coffers. Four months into the blockade, we have no plans to fly in medicines and other essentials by air. With blessings from politicians and bureaucrats, NAC, NOC and NEA have their hands deep in the honeypot — the country be damned.

The most callous proof of government incompetence is

Which is why the NC and the Madhesi parties want to drive home their advantage, because they know time is not on Oli’s side.

Zooming out from the current crisis, we see how the lapses of the past have caught up with us. And we cannot blame India for them. How does a country with the richest hydropower potential in the region suffer such a crippling shortage of electricity? Why has a drinking water project for Kathmandu Valley that should have been completed in five years taken 25? Why has foreign investment never taken off despite the gains we made in the early 1990s in attracting them? Why haven’t we been able to hold local elections for village, district and municipal councils for 20 years? Why is the Tarai Fast-track Highway moving at a turtle’s pace? Why is Kathmandu airport in the state it is in? The list is endless.

We don't really need an India to wreck our country, our politicians have been doing it just fine.

how oblivious it is to the plight of over 2 million earthquake survivors this winter. Politicians of the NC and the UML have locked horns over the appointment of the CEO of the Reconstruction Authority. They let the bill lapse in parliament, allowed an already appointed CEO to step down. Only seven months after the earthquake was the bill finally passed on Wednesday. The survivors have lived through rains and are now shivering in tents, yet an uncaring state has been blissfully unmindful to their predicament for this long.

Sooner or later, as a harsh winter hardens people’s attitudes, all this flag-waving and nationalism are going to wear thin. Nepalis will point one finger at India, but the other three fingers will point back at our own establishment. The Oli government will be blamed for the failure to resolve the blockade and normalise the supply situation.

YOUR SAY

www.nepalitimes.com

MOPPING UP

'But it is hard to see how that helps India ('Mopping up', Editorial, #786).' It has helped India by making sure the Nepali Pahadi elite understand the seriousness of the Madhesi issue and realise the simple fact that they cannot ignore the Madhesis, Tharus, Janjatis or for that matter India when they pursue their self-interested parochialism. All the 'good wishes' that India's rescue efforts earned after the earthquake mean nothing if India cannot convert that into influence in Kathmandu. And if it cannot convert that into political capital it will turn it around and convert fear and animosity into influence - which is exactly what it has done. Now that tens of thousands of Nepal's are suffering and their leaders are running about clueless and they have played and failed at using the China card - they are left with no option but to negotiate with the Madhesis.

IAF 101

■ If one accepts that Nepali leaders are not left with any option but to negotiate with the Madhesis, one also has to concede that India has also

been forced to back off without having all its demands (masqueraded through the Morcha) met. And please, stop bringing in the Tharus and Janajatis as if they were so much involved during this hostage crisis.

Klaus

■ This is the biggest foreign policy blunder New Delhi has made and it's all because Mr Modi's feelings were hurt.

Nepalese

ENDING THE BLOCKADE

The Muluki Ain declared all Nepal's equal more than 50 years ago, and subsequent constitutions have not categorised Nepal's into higher and lower categories ('When the blockade ends', Om Astha Rai, #784). The UN, all the civilised states and Nepal's constitution do not put people into higher or lower categories, and a responsible journalist should not either.

R Rai

■ Swaraj's statements incorrectly gave the message that the constitution of Nepal was passed by a minority. Her remarks were factually wrong and

showed her reliance on a bunch of bureaucratic members who misinterpreted the statute to serve their own petty interests.

Arjun Karki

FILTHY CLOUDS

So if jet contrails over India add to the pollution in Nepal, the whole of the US, which has ten times the air traffic, should be as bad as Delhi or Beijing but it isn't ('Filthy clouds', Sarthak Sharma, #786). Sounds like you are simply fishing for excuses to blame India for everything.

Chilarai



Times

THIS WEEK



Most reached on Facebook

Faces of Madhes

Stories of Nepal creator Jaydev Paudel recently travelled to the Tarai in search of tales of how people in the plains are coping with the crisis. Here are some of the stories. (5,536 people reached)



Most shared on Facebook

Mopping up, Editorial (42 shares)



Most visited online page

Kul Gautam's way forward by Rubeena Mahato (2,198 views)



Most popular on Twitter

Back in Barpak by Ayesha Shakya (47 retweets, 51 favourites)



Most commented

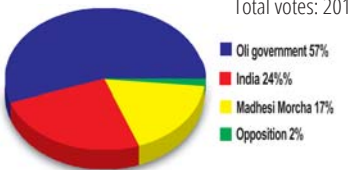
When the blockade ends by Om Astha Rai (13 comments)

Times

nepalnews.com

Weekly Internet Poll #786

Q. Who should be more responsible for ending the blockade?



Weekly Internet Poll #787
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Q. Should the Madhesi Morcha accept an all party committee to redraw federal boundaries?



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| EVENT | VENUE | DATE | RATE |
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| Christmas Eve Set Dinner | Rox Restaurant | 24 Dec 2015 | NPR 5,499 |
| Christmas Eve Dinner Buffet | The Cafe | 24 Dec 2015 | NPR 3,499 |
| Christmas Day Brunch | The Cafe | 25 Dec 2015 | NPR 2,999 |

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- Dessert will be served in the Lobby where a "Grand Dessert Buffet" will be on display and you can dance away to our live band and ring in the New Year.
- Enjoy authentic Nepalese and Indian flavors on New Year's Day with live music.

| EVENT | VENUE | DATE | RATE |
|------------------------------|----------------|-------------|-----------|
| New Years' Eve Set Dinner | Rox Restaurant | 31 Dec 2015 | NPR 6,999 |
| New Years' Eve Dinner Buffet | The Cafe | 31 Dec 2015 | NPR 5,999 |
| New Years' Day Brunch | The Cafe | 01 Jan 2016 | NPR 2,999 |

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Media suffers blockade

As the Indian blockade enters its fourth month, the shortage of fuel and daily commodities has brought life to a standstill all over Nepal. People want to know what is happening, so they buy newspapers but the newspapers themselves have been hit by the crisis.

Newspapers have got more readers, but less revenue because advertising has collapsed with the economic slowdown caused by the blockade. Combined problems of circulation, distribution and advertisement are dragging media companies, which had just started to recover from the April earthquake, down into an even deeper crisis.

Most national broadsheets like Kantipur, Nagarik and Annapurna Post have shrunk to 12 pages or less, and their content is almost devoid of ads.

Syakar Trading, which sells Honda motorcycles and cars in Nepal, has stopped all advertising due to the drop in sales, and also because it hasn't got new units from India because of the blockade.

"Simply put, we don't have anything to sell," Saurabh Jyoti of Syakar tells Nepali Times, "and even the raw materials for our other industries like agriculture, tractors, equipment, medicines are stuck at the border. So there is no point in advertising."

One of Nepal's largest advertising agencies, J Walter Thomson Nepal is also feeling the pinch with business almost down to nil, according to Managing Director Joydeb Chakravarty.

"No one is buying non-essentials," he says, "if it is so difficult to find fuel for a motorbike, why would you want to buy a new motorbike?"

Companies like Unilever which manufactures in Nepal and aims at both domestic and international market may suffer more intensely, for their business relies heavily on imports of raw materials and exports of products. The suspension in production and decline in sales also forced Unilever to stop advertising two months ago.

Chakravarty explains: "All major advertisers have stopped advertisements because consumer sentiment is down. No one wants to spend."

Xiaotong Xu and Siran Liang

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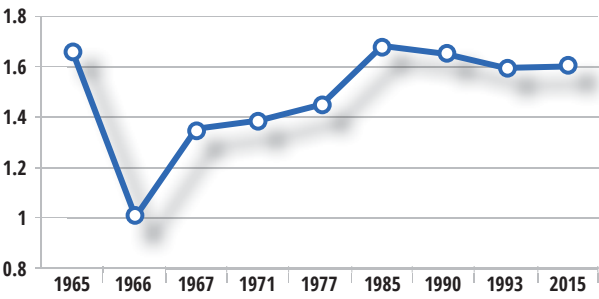
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Pegging a fine line

A thriving currency black market drags the fixed INR-NPR exchange rate into debate again

NPR for 1 INR



SARTHAK M SHARMA

The INR 100 currency note now selling for as high as NPR 180 in border towns of the Tarai has once more sparked debate in Nepal about whether the 55-year-old fixed peg with the Indian rupee needs revision.

With fuel, food and essentials being smuggled through the open border to be sold in the black market, there is also a thriving informal trade in Indian currency. Petrol smugglers need to be paid in INR and this demand has hiked the price of Indian currency which has been historically pegged to the Nepali rupee.

Some economists think that the black market rate for INR may reflect the true value of NPR, and that the exchange rate fixed at 1:1.6 more than two decades ago may need to be adjusted.

“The peg we have now is a political exchange rate, not an economic one,” says Sujeev Shakya of the think tank, Nepal Economic Forum. “The peg might have made sense 20 years ago, but is it still economically rational?”

The growing trade imbalance with India has meant that Nepal has a shortage of INR which it covers by selling the USD that it earns mainly from remittances of Nepali migrant workers abroad. Nepal’s foreign exchange reserves total nearly Rs 900 billion, enough to pay for nearly two years of imports.

“If the Indian rupee is unpegged, the Nepali rupee is not going into free fall,” one leading industrialist told *Nepali Times* this week, “we can easily buy Indian rupee in the international market by selling US dollars.”

But the reserves may not always be as comfortable. Countries that host Nepali migrant workers, including Gulf nations and Malaysia, are now seeing sluggish growth and political instability. This could affect remittance inflows.

But for the moment the problem with the INR peg is that it is looking increasingly unsustainable, especially after the Indian blockade. Experts say rather than unpegging the two rupees, what may need to be done is adjust the peg to a more realistic level, say 1:1.8.

Even before the current crisis, the fixed exchange rate meant Nepal had to implement monetary policies in line with those of India. However, while India has emphasised reducing inflation, Nepal’s inflation rate continues to spiral as a result of the April earthquake and the Madhes unrest.

This has reduced Nepal’s competitiveness. A recently-released report of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) also hints that Nepal has not been focused on ‘competitiveness-enhancing structural reforms to support the peg’.

But adjusting the exchange rate will not be without problems. Devaluing the NPR would make our exports cheaper on the international market. But since Nepal is so import-dependent on India, devaluation will lead to serious inflation. The other alternative, revaluation, was completely ruled out by a Nepal Rastra Bank official because of its potential to worsen the current account deficit.

Most economists have maintained that the peg has cushioned Nepal from our weak economy, and a revision should be made only when we have the required tools to handle the changed circumstances.

“The past twenty years or so have been politically turbulent, but Nepalis have never lost faith in our rupee because of the peg,” says Anil Shah, CEO of Mega Bank. “Let’s not fall for pseudo-nationalism. The last thing Nepal needs is a revision of the peg. I have more faith in the peg than in the government.”

Bhuwan Dahal, CEO of Sanima Bank, agrees. “The Nepali rupee may be

overvalued and may need to change, but this is not the right time,” he says. In its report, the IMF also concludes that ‘the peg continues to benefit Nepal in view of its close economic relationship with India’.

What all experts – supporters and critics – agree on is that there must be a mechanism, both in the government and in the private sector, to review the peg at stated intervals.

Says Shakya: “The peg may be right, it may be wrong, but somebody needs to research its costs and benefits and come up with a conclusion. It has been 22 years since it was fixed at 160.”

prabhu BANK BIZ BRIEFS

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Qatar Airways has launched new services between Doha and Durban. The new flight will serve passengers four times a week and is an addition to its daily flights to Cape Town and Johannesburg. Travellers can now choose from a total of 21 flights a week to South Africa from its hub Hamad International Airport.

QATAR AIRWAYS القطرية



Golf finals tee off

The final edition of the longest running amateur golf series in Nepal, Carlsberg Golf Series 2015, has begun at the Gokarna Forest Golf Resort.

After the second edition of the series, Norbu Sherpa and Tashi Tshering stand on top of the gross category while Lobsang Tashi stands third.

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SHORTAGE RAJ

Civil strife in the Tarai and the Indian non-blockade seem permanent by now and what was recently considered an untenable, impossible scenario has somehow morphed into the new normal. Despite the countless vehicles abandoned in petrol queues, traffic is approaching pre-crises levels, hotels, restaurants and homes are cooking with firewood and the most pressing question facing Nepal: ‘why the hell don’t the politicians sort things out?’ isn’t even being asked anymore.



Nonetheless, as the blockade (non) drags on, many questions remain. How difficult can it be to amend a patchwork constitution that’s been changed countless times already? Isn’t this document supposed to be inclusive and address the concerns of all Nepalis? If so, then why are so many rioting all the time? Perhaps the answers can only be found by asking another question: Who’s benefitting from this mess? The oil-bearing trucks that cross the border somehow go astray and never make it to the pumps while black-market petrol is freely available at 3-4 times the legal rate. Cooking gas has disappeared but covert home delivery can be arranged for those who can afford the wildly inflated prices. The English word ‘shortage’ entered the Nepali lexicon decades ago, a 2-syllable explanation of a market phenomenon so unfathomable it’s rarely questioned. Merely mentioning ‘shortage’ justifies price hikes and it didn’t take long for those in power to grasp the lucrative potential of such scarcity, real or created. Perhaps that explains why our leaders



GOPEN RAI

Returning to the Feuding Democratic Republic after a month abroad the only change is one of perception

continue to posture and demonise India while doing nothing to get cross border trade going again. Being opportunist by nature, they recognise the opportunity of a lifetime when they see it and with so much black money circulating there’s plenty to keep everyone collaborating in what may be the biggest racket in Nepal’s history. Unheard of cooperation across party lines indicates everyone’s getting their cut and rumour has it those parties that aren’t cooperating may be getting kickbacks to keep rioting. Even those paid a salary to stop such profiteering either turn a blind eye (for a price, presumably) provide protection for the criminals, or set up their own chains of supply. An entire network of smugglers, distributors, security, wholesalers, retailers, bureaucrats and politicians is thriving, the only functional

segment of an otherwise collapsed economy. This could also explain why so little effort has been made to internationalise the issue by asking for support from allies. Better if nobody notices and anyways, there’s plenty of time for that later once this golden opportunity has been milked dry and starvation sets in. Though the scarcity is especially bad this time around, Nepalis have been well trained for years in accepting shortages. It wasn’t so long ago the lights only went out if a transformer blew up. The introduction of scheduled ‘load-shedding,’ another English euphemism for dysfunctional governance, institutionalised shortages as official policy and somehow made them more acceptable, even normal. During the first Maoist government load shedding hit record 18 hour highs, which

suited the comrades just fine since they’d already cornered the market in generators, UPS and batteries. This clever, three pronged strategy created the electricity shortage (or allowed it to happen), made a fortune selling the solution to the crises and punished the *sukila-mukila* (fancy-dancy) people of Kathmandu while at it. Ain’t politics grand? It was for classic situations like this one, based on manipulation, revenge and loot, the Maoists launched their historic civil war. During those same years massive hoarding of essentials created shortages that led to sharply inflated prices. Stockpiled food lay hidden in godowns while the markets were bare as rumours of collusion between the authorities and the newly coined Food Mafia were rife. The business of scarcity and market manipulation became ever more entrenched as an economic strategy, tailor made to benefit those in power at everybody else’s expense. The recent earthquake provided an opportunity that only occurs once a century (we pray), creating immediate shortages in building materials and all sorts of necessities. Generous donations poured in, distribution systems soon broke down, and desperately needed goods were left lying on the tarmac. As the victims in the hills waited for help a brisk trade sprung up in donated tarpaulins, metal sheets and anything else the Disaster Mafia could finagle. This current blockade has seen shortages and price increases in almost everything, including products grown or made nearby, and Nepali consumers appear more resigned and accepting of dysfunctional governance than ever before. Now that coping with shortage and hyperinflation has become our way of life we can only expect more of the same from the parties and their mafia cohorts. Some people are making lots of money these days and the fact everyone else suffers seems to be the least of their concerns. Hey, what can you do? That’s just normal now. It’s almost enough to make one wish for the bad old days (versus the even worse nowadays) when a 2 rupee hike in the petrol price was enough to set off mass demonstrations. 🇳🇵

Jaffna in Janakpur?

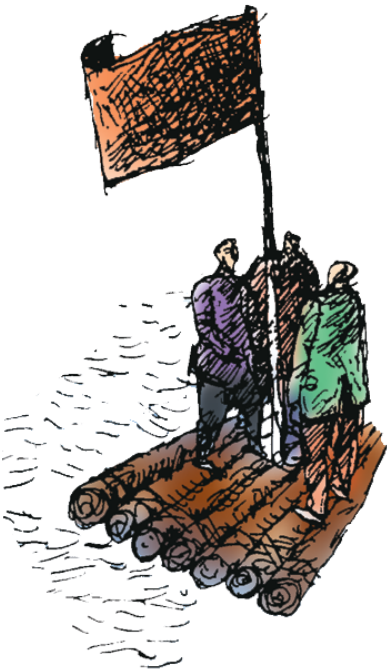
Nepal must exercise the logic of being a true buffer state

The Nepali language media last week was rife with reports that Indian officials told Foreign Minister Kamal Thapa during his recent visit to New Delhi that the bottom line for ending the blockade was that the word ‘secular’ should be removed from the preamble of the newly-adopted constitution and the whole of the Tarai should be one province.



While the advantage of Nepal being declared Hindu Rastra once again for the BJP’s domestic audience is understandable, what is puzzling is the purported insistence on the whole of the Tarai delineated as a single province. Incidentally, the same demand was raised by the Loktantrik Madheshi Morcha back in 2007 during the first Madhes

Movement. The similarity between that demand then and the Indian conditionality now, if true, is intriguing. That proposal makes absolutely no sense from whichever angle you look at it. The Tarai is a narrow strip of land some 30km wide running 800km east-west, how can it ever be self-governing? What do the people of Jhapa have in common with those in Kanchanpur? They are much closer to their cousins in Ilam and Panchthar. Secondly, the Tarai is ethnically diverse with people of Madhes and Pahad background more or less equally represented at close to 40 percent each. There are other even more compelling reasons why a separate Tarai province would be potentially disastrous for its inhabitants. The massive extraction of groundwater across the border in the Indian plains has meant that the water table in the Tarai is receding fast. While only a few decades ago, a tubewell 6m deep would have water, it now needs to be at least 50m deep. The worse is



yet to come. The only possible sources of water for the Tarai for drinking, irrigation and industrial development will be the rivers and streams flowing down from the northern mountains. Integrating the Tarai with the mountains makes common sense also from the development

perspective. The West Seti project will submerge 2000 ha of land and displace 16,000 people in the four hill districts of Doti, Dadeldhura, Bajhang and Baitadi, but would irrigate 360,000 ha of farmlands in the three Tharu heartland districts of Bardia, Kailali and Kanchanpur, generate 750 MW of electricity to be used mostly in the factories of the Tarai yielding an annual revenue of Rs 15 billion that could be used for the overall development of the country including the districts upstream. So, why would even the Madhesis want the whole of the Tarai to be a provincial strip in the plains only? Why would New Delhi also push that? A plausible answer was provided recently by Indian columnist Ananda Swarup Verma who wrote that India could be ‘trying to turn Nepal into another Jaffna’. The Tamil separatist conflict in northern Sri Lanka sucked India into a bloody and unwinnable war that New Delhi barely extricated itself from. True, India hasn’t been as blatant in the Nepal Tarai as it had in northern Sri Lanka, but we

must learn from India’s mistakes to protect Nepal’s national integrity. While, with all the behind-the-scene activities going on and the growing criticism within India of the Modi government for blockading Nepal the siege could come to an early end. Or, it may not. Either way, the Nepal government would do well to use this opportunity to bolster political and trade ties with China. Not to thumb our noses at India, but to restore balance in our bilateral ties with the northern and southern neighbours. This would raise hackles in India, but New Delhi will realise that it was its folly that pushed Nepal to the north. Nepal’s logic as a buffer between India and China presupposes that it benefits from its interaction with both the countries socially and economically even as we stay away from becoming either country’s satellite. This must constitute the crux of Nepal’s foreign policy from here on: a redefinition of the older doctrine of a ‘yam between two boulders’. 🇳🇵



Cold weather has peaked one month early this winter, as the minimum temperature falls to the low single digits in Kathmandu, and well below freezing across the mountains. This has added to the misery of earthquake survivors living in temporary shelters. The cold wave sweeping northern India is caused by a circulation in the northern Bay of Bengal that has shifted the prevailing wind direction to northwest. But there is no westerly disturbance on the horizon, so expect the frigid and dry air to keep both minimum and maximum temperatures up to 4 deg below normal into the weekend. Fog will grip the Tarai and the midhill valleys, while Kathmandu will have smog till mid-morning giving way to breezy and bright afternoons.

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THE 100,000TH REFUGEE

Camps for refugees from Bhutan are emptying, but some don't want to be resettled

GOPAL GARTAULA
in JHAPA

In the last eight years, the camps in eastern Nepal where up to 120,000 refugees from Bhutan were once housed in bamboo sheds for nearly two decades have gradually emptied as they are resettled in western countries.

Soon, the 100,000th refugee will be leaving for the United States. She is Debimaya Thapa, 53, who has been living with her eight-member family in Sector E1 Number 53 of Beldangi Refugee Camp of Jhapa district since 1990. She will be joining two of her grown daughters who have already been resettled in Ohio.

"I am excited to be leaving, I didn't know I would be the



100,000th refugee," Thapa told *Nepali Times* this week after a ceremony in Kathmandu. "But I am also a bit nervous about going to a new place."

Beldangi is now only one of three of the seven camps that housed refugees since 1990. But even this camp is looking more and more deserted. Remaining refugees who refuse to leave or are waiting to go back to Bhutan still say third country resettlement is not a solution to what they consider 'ethnic cleansing' by the Thimphu government of its Nepali-speaking population.

"Those who were resettled now have a domicile, they are getting education or have jobs, but the Bhutan regime has not paid for this gross violation of human rights, resettlement has just postponed and shifted our quest for justice," says Sanchahang Subba, secretary



IN-TRANSIT: Debimaya Thapa feeding her family at Beldangi Refugee Camp this week, and (*below*) in Kathmandu recently being greeted by Prime Minister KP Oli for being the 100,000th refugee from Bhutan to be resettled in a third country.



of the Beldangi Refugee Camp.

Twenty-five years after they had been forcibly evicted by the Bhutan regime, the Nepali-speaking Lhotsampa refugees started being resettled in third countries after

Thimphu refused to take them back. More than 80 per cent have since gone to the United States and others to Australia, Canada, Denmark, The Netherlands, Norway and UK.

The camps have now been consolidated into Beldangi 1, Beldangi 2 and Sanischare in Morang where there are a total 17,900 refugees left — of which 1,700 say they do not want to be resettled. The resettlement program administered by the UNHCR is supposed to wind down by end-2016.

Hara Jang Subba, 68, is leading the struggle on behalf of refugees who want to return to Bhutan. But of the ten members of his own family, six have already gone to America. He says the Nepal government was complicit in abandoning them and washing its hands by agreeing to resettlement.

He says: "One day we hope Bhutan's rulers will pay for the injustice they have done to us." 🇳🇵

WHERE HAVE THEY GONE?

Number of refugees from Bhutan resettled since 2007 (as of this week):

| | | |
|--|-------------|---------|
| | USA | 84,891 |
| | CANADA | 6,500 |
| | DENMARK | 874 |
| | NETHERLANDS | 327 |
| | NORWAY | 566 |
| | NEW ZEALAND | 1,002 |
| | AUSTRALIA | 5,554 |
| | UK | 358 |
| | TOTAL | 100,000 |

STILL HERE

Among the 17,900 refugees from Bhutan still in the three camps in Nepal some (most of them elderly) say they do not want to be resettled.

Bagbir Rai, 71, has been living in a bamboo hut in Beldangi 2 for the last 25 years with 15 other relatives. Despite their refugee life, and yearning for their homes back in Bhutan, they celebrated many festivals together. Now, there are only five family members left, all the others have been resettled in the United States. Rai doesn't want to go to America, he'd rather go back to his farm in Chirang of Bhutan from where he was evicted in 1990. He says: "My umbilical cord was buried in Bhutan, and that is where I want to live the rest of my days."

Bir Bahadur Khadka, 65, has lived



in Beldangi 2, Sector 3, Hut Number 4. His son and daughter are already in America. But Bir Bahadur and his wife don't want to go anywhere else but back to their farm in Bhutan. He wants the Nepal government to negotiate with Bhutan so he and others like him can go back. "I am not moving anywhere, only to Bhutan," he says.

Bishnu Lal Neupane, 62, has lived for the last 25 years in Beldangi 2 Sector B 1 and Hut Number 57. He has no intention of being resettled in Europe or America, he wants to go back to his ancestral land in Sarbhang in southern Bhutan. His wife Debi Maya has separated from him because she doesn't

agree with his decision. She and their two sons are waiting for resettlement. Says Neupane: "I have no intention of going to a strange land of unfamiliar language and culture at my age, I will go back to Bhutan even if it is to die."

Dal Bahadur Karki (*left*), 85, remembers his terrace farm in southern Bhutan like the back of his hand. When the army came to force him out in 1990, he was 61, and remembers setting his livestock free and leaving fields full of crops and store full of grain. He says with a faraway look: "I go back every night in my dreams, I can't think of going anywhere else."

Chandra Bahadur Chauhan, 55, was 20 when he and his family were forced out of Chirang village in southern Bhutan. He has been living almost half his life in a thatch hut in Beldangi 2 Sector E 1 Hut Number 40. Even though he is not as old as the other refugees, he says he will either stay in the camp or go back to Bhutan, he doesn't want to be moved again. He says: "I don't want to go to a strange place where I have to learn a new language and new ways of living."



SEULKI LEE
in MANANG

After decades of debate about the pros and cons of having the remote trans-Himalayan district of Manang connected by a motorable road, and the impact it would have on trekking in this scenic region, there is now a regular jeep service to the Pokhara-Kathmandu Highway. And it looks like Manang will not just survive, but prosper from the connectivity.

The rough 12-hour ride from Besisahar to Manang follows what used to be one of the world's most spectacular hiking trails up to Thorung La (5,416m) on the Annapurna Circuit. Although trekker numbers have dropped, most residents of Manang are glad that the road has reduced travel time since it opened in March.

"The road saves time, allows us to take the sick to hospital, it has made things cheaper," says Binod Gurung of a local conservation group. "Even I

don't need to walk for two days from Chame to my home here anymore."

Manang used to be one of the last four districts to be connected to Nepal's road network, now there are only two left: Dolpo and Humla. Even though many of the new roads are not planned well and are dangerous, they do meet the overwhelming local demand for transportation.

This 97km-long route from Besisahar to Upper Manang can take the whole day in a 4-wheel-drive lurching along at 10 km/h

along a narrow ribbon of road carved into sheer gorges above the Marsyangdi River. Nepali passengers on a recent trip were paying up to Rs 2,000 for a one-way ride down to Besisahar, the rate for tourists is Rs 5,000.

Although visitor numbers are down due to the earthquake and blockade, the ones who are here say the road has made it possible to stay longer in Manang, or make side trips to Tilicho or Nar and Phu that they couldn't otherwise.

"The Annapurna Circuit used

to take 17 days, now you can do it in seven," explains Gurung. But this does mean that trekkers now need to spend a few days in Manang to acclimatise before climbing up to Thorung. The road has also increased the number of Nepali trekkers, who were earlier negligible.

Manang is a place to linger, with stunning views of the northern wall of the Annapurnas, and Manaslu and Himalchuli dominating the eastern horizon. Manang has forests, glaciers, lakes and a high altitude desert,



ALL PICS: SEULKI LEE

THE HIGH HIGHWAY

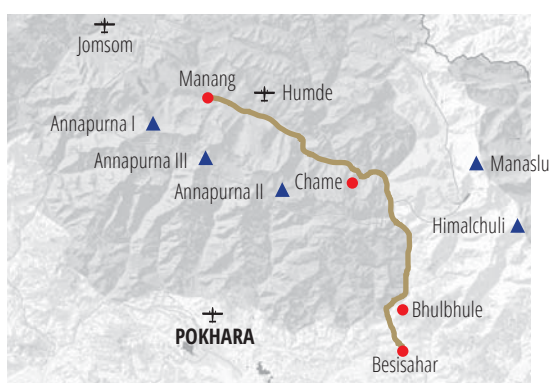
Manang will not just survive, but prosper from its new road



but is also a culturally rich valley with monasteries and a cave where Milarepa is said to have meditated.

"The motorable road is the most important infrastructure development for the livelihood improvement of local communities," said Narendra Lama, tourism officer at the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP). "However care should be taken to minimise the negative impact on the environment."

But the road gets a lot of



negative reviews on the Internet. Many miss the unspoilt 'back-in-the-day' Annapurna Circuit, like 60-year-old Ukrainian trekker, Sergei. "It is such a pity that the road will hasten the loss of an ancient indigenous culture and heritage of Nepal," he says.

ACAP is also concerned, and is trying to promote nine alternative trekking routes on the Annapurna Circuit that bypass the road. The trail from Pairothopla to Jomsom on the Mustang side of the Circuit is almost complete and nearly half the trekkers are

already using it, and ACAP is soon completing an alternative hiking trail from Lamjung to Manang.

For the time being, it might just be safer to walk. The most perilous stretch from Tal to Chamje is a narrow ledge chiselled into the side of a cliff, and it takes a brave driver (and passenger) to ride it. 🚚

EVENTS



Christmas events

A selection of the best Christmas events and activities in and around Kathmandu this year.

Gokarna Resort,

Enjoy a delicious Christmas Eve buffet dinner. Offerings include Turkey, mince meat with pie, Yule log, Christmas pudding and mulled wine. 24 December, 6pm, Gokarna Resort, Thali, (01)4451212, Rs 1,800 nett per person.



Club Himalaya,

Nagarkot's most popular hotel has a Christmas Eve package that covers one-night accommodation, cocktail snacks, special turkey dinner and breakfast. Club Himalaya, Nagarkot, (01)4442726, Rs 8,000 nett per couple

Shangri-La Hotel,

Enjoy Shangri-la's Starry Night BBQ with live performance by Ciney Gurung on Christmas Day. 25 Dec, 7pm onwards, Shangri-La Hotel, Lajimpat, (01)4412999, Rs 2,000 nett per person

Hyatt Regency,

Choose from the five-star's Christmas Eve set dinner, dinner buffet and Christmas Day brunch at Rs 5,499, Rs 3,499 and Rs 2,999 respectively. Hyatt Regency, Baudha, (01)4491234

Soaltee Crowne Plaza,

Special Christmas Eve dinner at all three of the hotel's restaurant outlets, and a gala lunch buffet on Christmas Day. Soaltee Crowne Plaza, Rs 3,000 nett per person, (01)4273999

Me and 2072,

Twenty five participants from different categories will paint their thoughts and emotions, and the best one will be presented to Prime Minister KP Oli. 19 December, 7am onwards, Basantapur Darbar Square

Explore photography,

School of Creative Communications' next photography workshop for all budding photographers. 17 to 28 December, 7 to 9am, Kupondol For registration: (01)5546705 or scc.kathmandu@gmail.com

Farmers' market,

Local producers gather to sell organic vegetables, dairy products, artisanal bread and pastries and home-made goodies. 8am to 1pm, Le Sherpa, Lajimpat, every Saturday, (01)4006587, 9802028777



Dog on the ramp,

Nepal's first ever dog fashion show. Ticket charges from Rs 300 to Rs 1,000. Registration: 9818279506

Creative Rendezvous,

Workshop on 3D artwork using papier mache, clay and cloth with Rajesh Yadav Rs 3,600, sattya.org

Help rebuild,

A special fund-raising print sale to contribute towards the rebuilding of heritage sites in Patan by Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust (KVPT). www.photoktm.com/#support



Critical Mass,

A monthly meet up of cyclists, followed by a brief ride around town Gather at Basantapur Darbar Square at 5.30 pm for a 6pm start, 25 December.

DINING

Fuji Bakery,

Tucked in Chakupat, this bakery offers homemade goodies like apple pie, pain du chocolat, and banana cake. Chakupat, Lalitpur, (01)5543678



Falcha,

Give yourself away to the twin pleasures of lemon jeera chicken and mutton handi kabab. Jhamsikhel, Lalitpur, 9851013475, bipinpiya@gmail.com

Fire and Ice,

For the best pizzas in town. Thamel, (01)4250210



Capital Grill,

This American style diner offers a large assortment of appetisers and entrees to suit everyone's tastes. Bhatbhateni, (01)4428426, grillcapital@gmail.com



Phat Kath,

Offers French-ish food, takeaway crepes, low tables and hookahs, and a formidable hip hop soundtrack for everyone. Thamel, 9803314268

MUSIC



Bipul Chhetri Live,

Celebrated singer Bipul Chhetri will perform for the third time in Kathmandu. 19 December, 2pm onwards, Sano Gaucharan Ground, Gyaneshwor

Plebeian Live

Originals as well as covers from bands like Arctic Monkeys, The Strokes, Rancid, Kings of Leon and more. 8 December, 7pm onwards, Irish Pub, Lajimpat



KANTA dAbdAb,

This musical trio combines sitar, percussion and bass to create a soulful fusion groove. 19 December, 6pm, Base Camp, Arun Thapa Chok, Jhamsikhel, Lalitpur, Rs 300



Guitar Fest 2016,

A guitar competition for all music lovers Auditions from 18 to 28 Jan, Sushila Arts Academy, 9849040554

GETAWAYS

Shangri-la Pokhara,

Two nights, 3 days at Shangri-la Village Resort, Pokhara including a Christmas dinner, breakfast for two days, discounts on food and beverages, free shuttle service to Lakeside plus arrival and departure transfers. Rs 6,777 net per person, until 26 December

Dwarika's Resort,

A holistic lifestyle retreat, drawing on ancient Himalayan knowledge and philosophy of care for nature and for oneself, set in magnificent natural surroundings. Dhulikhel, (11)490612, info@dwarikas-dhulikhel.com



Pokhara Grande,

A swimming pool to escape from the sweltering heat, a massage parlour and spa to loosen up and a gym to release stress: a great place to unwind. Lakeside, Pokhara, (61)460210, dosm@pokharagrande.com, www.pokharagrande.com

Buddha Maya Gardens Hotel,

Add value to your travel in Lumbini with a stay at probably the best hotel in the area. Lumbini, (71)580220, 9801033109, info@ktmgh.com



Raniban Retreat,

Situated at the other end of the Phewa Lake and nested inside Raniban forest and the World Peace Stupa, this retreat has one of the best views of the Annapurna range. Phewa Lake, Pokhara, (01)4411855

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Miraculous saves

Documenting tragedies whether natural or manmade is difficult for a filmmaker. How do you tread that fine line between being inquisitive but not intrusive, especially at a time when the wounds are still raw for survivors.

Bhagyale Bachekaharu (Nepal Earthquake: Heroes, Survivors and Miracles) which last week won the Best Documentary Award at this year's Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival is an example of how to treat such subject matter with sensitivity and empathy and walk that fine line.

The film directed by journalist Ganesh Panday is not only an important documentation of the April earthquake that devastated central Nepal, but also a testimonial to the value of ethical reporting in the media. Using footage and photographs taken during the first few days after the disaster, and combining them with interviews conducted later with victims, their families and rescue workers, Panday has made a film that humanises the tragedy without being voyeuristic.

The characters and situations Panday's film introduces to viewers are not unfamiliar to those who followed the earthquake's aftermath. Many of their stories have been



told on screen and/or in print before. What the documentary does is go beyond portraying them as victims.

Pemba Lama, the 15-year-old teenager who was rescued after being buried under rubble for five days, is like any other teen. He is awkward in his speech, and often smiles incongruously while narrating his tale.

Rishi Khanal, 28, who was rescued after 82 hours of being buried under rubble of a Gongabu hotel, we learn, is also a young

father. His seven-month old baby was the reason why Khanal had applied to go abroad for work when he was caught in a collapsing building. The Khanal family is visibly broken at his fate.

You meet parents of a 14-year-old girl who had to make a tough decision to amputate her infected leg, a mother who is reunited with her four-month old boy after 22 hours, a father who is wracked with guilt for advising his daughter to drop, cover, hold during an earthquake. She died.

Then there are the tales of rescue workers Deepak Rai of Nepal Army and Laxman Basnet of Armed Police Force who led rescues that made headlines across the globe. Even poet laureate Madhav Prasad Ghimire shares his experience of living through two major earthquakes. *Bhagyale Bachekaharu* does right by the people whose stories it seeks to tell. It does not aim to sell the earthquake, rather remind us to be grateful about the little miracles that happen in life.

Josiah Hooper's narration holds everything together beautifully. Editor Kumar Shah and consulting editors Sapana Sakya and Hooper deserve special mention for removing the rough edges and giving the film that fine polish and making it so beautifully crafted.  *Sahina Shrestha*

Bhagyale Bhachekaharu (Nepal Earthquake: Heroes, Survivors and Miracles)
Director: Ganesh Panday
Editor: Kumar Shah
Running time: 46 mins

 nepalitimes.com
■ Watch trailer 

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This year two quite different films have emerged about the highest mountain in the world, the first being - *Everest*, a Hollywood blockbuster based on Jon Krakauer's best seller *Into Thin*



MUST SEE
Sophia Pande

Air, the other - *Sherpa*, a carefully balanced documentary piece by Jennifer Peedom - an Australian film-maker who wanted to focus on the Sherpa people who are so often by-passed in the visual depictions of the journey to the top.

Peedom set out to make *Sherpa* in the spring of 2014, heading to Everest Base Camp with her crew, and her main character, Phurba Tashi, a Sherpa climber who is about to attempt a record-breaking

22nd summiting of Everest. Her documentary was to be made in the wake of a nasty brawl between three European alpinists and Sherpa guides last year which shocked the climbing community worldwide.

For years, there has been pushback against the misuse; some may call it exploitation of the Sherpa people who have become the backbone behind the climbing of Everest. There has also been heavy criticism of the hubris surrounding a certain culture of climbing - where people are willing to pay tens of thousands of dollars for the privilege of summiting the world's highest peak. These large sums of money are paid to the expedition operators in addition to the royalty of \$11,000 that each individual climber must pay to the Nepali government for a climbing permit. The Sherpa community and the Solukhumbu region receive none of the direct benefits of this money.

Sherpa engages directly with the issues surrounding the avalanche

that took the lives of 16 Sherpa guides, a catastrophic event that Peedom and her team were unfortunately in exactly the right place to document. The messy aftermath and the nebulous politics make for the emotional crux of the documentary as climbers who have paid to summit struggle against the outraged Sherpa community who seize the tragedy as a chance to forcefully lobby the government to provide them with adequate compensation for loss of life on Everest.

Beautifully shot, and poignantly scored, *Sherpa* is an important film for the world. It is a film that attempts to sum up all of the different grievances and viewpoints on the mountain in a fair manner. Unfortunately, some issues are far too complex to elucidate even with a feature length documentary. While the world may come away from *Sherpa* (rightly) feeling as if it has learnt a great deal about cultural clashes, those who have followed these disputes minutely will still find themselves struggling to understand what exactly happened on the mountain during these fateful events; there are no clear heroes or bad guys (except aside from the woefully inept Nepali government) - just flawed human beings with egos and wants, manifesting sometimes in the worst possible human behaviour.

nepalitimes.com
■ Trailer

HAPPENINGS



BIKRAM RAI

TROUBLED HOUSE: Madhesi lawmakers obstruct a parliamentary session discussing the constitution amendment bill and National Reconstruction Authority Bill on Tuesday. The second bill was later passed.



OM ASTHA RAI

LONG WAIT: Villagers in Yarsa of Rasuwa queue up to receive cash vouchers distributed by the European Commission and the ACT alliance as part of an earthquake relief program on Monday.



GOPEN RAI

FIGHTING BACK: Staff at the Ministry of Women, Child and Social Welfare participate in a self-defense training organised at Singha Darbar on Wednesday.



GOPEN RAI

BACK HOME: CNN Hero Maggie Doyne who runs a school in Surkhet poses with her trophy upon return to Kathmandu on Wednesday.



BIKRAM RAI

BRAND AMBASSADOR: Former Miss Nepal Shristi Shrestha at a newly opened mobile phone store in Darbar Marg on Tuesday.

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Compassion fatigue for Rohingyas

Santa Gaha Magar in *Himal Khabarpatrika*, 13-19 December

Burma's persecuted Rohingya Muslim refugees have been taking flimsy boats across the Bay of Bengal to the coasts of Thailand and Malaysia since 2012, but a few have ventured north in a perilous overland journey through Bangladesh and India to enter Nepal.

While thousands have been abandoned and perished at sea, in Nepal the 160 Rohingyas face a bitter winter in shelters in Kathmandu where humanitarian agencies are running out of money to look after them.

The UNHCR is to stop providing a subsistence allowance to the Rohingya refugees from December, saying it has run out of money because of refugee crises in other parts of the world. The 'boat people' who fled anti-Muslim violence in Burma are now fighting yet another battle for survival in Nepal.

The refugees have been on sit-in protests in front of the UN agency's office in Maharajganj since October, and they have been repeatedly chased away with batons by the Nepal Police. Now, four Rohingya youth have started a hunger strike from 1 December. They want their allowances until they get a chance to be resettled.

The UNHCR had been providing monthly allowances of Rs 5,750 to male, Rs 3,330 to female and Rs 2,700 to children Rohingya refugees who came to Nepal before 2013. Others who landed in Nepal since 2013 have not been recognised by UNHCR as 'urban refugees'.

"Refugee allowances are now being cut everywhere in the world, not just in Nepal, but we continue to provide allowance for elderly and children," says UNCHR's Dipesh Das Shrestha. "Instead of subsistence allowance,



we are now focused on giving vocational training to refugees. And we continue to support them for medical treatment and education, too."

Rohingya refugees say the UNHCR's decision has dealt them a double blow in the wake of India's blockade of Nepal. "The blockade has made even local Nepalis' lives difficult, and we suffer even more," says Jafar Miyan, 31.

The Rohingyas have also called on the UN to help them to either go back to western Burma or to resettle in a third country. Hasan Hasan, 23, was one of the first from his community to escape to Nepal in 2012, and is among those on hunger strike.

Nepal views the Rohingyas as 'illegal immigrants' and charges them \$5 for each day they live in Nepal. But Home Ministry spokesperson Laxmi Dhakal says these fines can be waived for those who have no money to pay.

Of the Rohingyas who have sought refuge in Nepal only 120 of them have obtained 'urban refugee' cards from UNHCR. Apart from refugees from Bhutan, Tibet and Burma, Nepal now provides refuge to people from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Iran, Iraq, Somalia and even Congo.

Since 2012, there have been several brutal pogroms against the Rohingya by Burma's Buddhist majority who consider them 'Bengali'. The Rohingyas have actually lived in Burma's Rakhine state for at least four generations, and most of them held Burmese citizenship till the early 1980s.

In 1984, Rangoon enacted a new citizenship law declaring

Rohingyas as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. They were then effectively deprived of government jobs and facilities and tensions ran high. Since 2012, about 120,000 Rohingyas have fled Burma, either to Bangladesh, Thailand or Malaysia.

Some, like Hasan, fled north to India in search of his family, and from there travelled 1,400 km

to eastern Nepal after someone told him there were refugee camps here. Only to discover that they were actually camps for refugees from Bhutan.

Hasan still hasn't found his family.

nepalitimes.com

Photo gallery



PRESENTS

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An abandoned town and a lifeless bridge at the once-busy checkpoint between Nepal and China

Bordering on

XIAOTONG XU
and **SIRAN LIANG**
in ZHANGMU, China

Time seems to have stopped at Kodari and Zhangmu, the once-bustling trading towns on either side of the border between Nepal and China ever since the April earthquake brought boulders the size of houses crashing down here.

The Friendship Bridge across the Bhote Kosi is damaged and lifeless. It is noon in Nepal, but 2:45 PM across on the Chinese side 25m away.

Khasa, the Nepali name for Zhangmu, was evacuated four days after the April earthquake, and seven months later the residents and businessmen still haven't returned to this town with its multi-storey buildings clinging to the mountainside.

Khasa grew as trade between China and Nepal boomed in recent years. Nepali traders brought poultry, pork, vegetables, handicrafts and Buddha statues to Khasa, while Chinese consumer electronics, apparel and construction material flowed in the opposite direction to Nepal. Last year, bilateral trade at Kodari alone totaled Rs 171 billion.



PICS: XIAOTONG XU

BRIDGE TOO FAR: The Friendship Bridge over the Bhote Kosi connects Kodari in Nepal with Zhangmu checkpoint in China. Once a major trading post for Nepali and Chinese businessmen, Zhangmu (*right*) has been deserted since the April earthquake.

Container trucks used to travel back and forth across the Friendship Bridge all day long. This week, there was only one Chinese border guard and one Nepal Armed Police facing each other at the bridge. The Chinese customs and immigration

offices at Zhangmu are closed.

At the bridge, porter Lukman BK has brought a sack of grocery to deliver to a resident of Zhangmu, but the Chinese trader hasn't shown up yet. That was the only Nepal-China trade going on at the border on Tuesday.

Seven months after the earthquake, most of the landslide debris has been cleared but the road from Kathmandu to Kodari is still rough. The highway on the China side is also badly damaged. There are ruins of homes, bent electric poles, dangling

wires all along the roadside from Kathmandu to remind people of the ferocity of the quake, and the Nepal government's lack of a sense of urgency in reconstruction.

A delegation from parliament's Development Committee visited Kodari this week and on return

A tale of two frontiers

Exhausted Birganj and deserted Tatopani wrap Nepal in a parenthesis

SM Misra is an Indian container truck driver who left the port city of Kolkata in early August loaded with Buddhist books. He unloaded his cargo, but then street protests broke out and the border was blockaded. Misra, 56, has been stuck on the Nepal side of the border for five months now.



COMMENT
Seulki Lee

We ask him how he feels. Misra snaps back with a question of his own: "When will all this end?" The father of three from Bihar says he has lost four month's salary and missed all the big festivals back home.

Birganj, Nepal's biggest and busiest border town, is in deep fatigue after continuous street protests and border obstruction

since August. Locals count out the number of days: "125th day of protests and 85th day of the border closure today," says one.

However, in the past week, the 4km stretch of road from the town's clock tower to the Raxaul border point is slowly getting back to normal. Schools, shops, banks, pharmacies along the main street that had been closed for months are warily opening their shutters again.

Prakash Gosain, 26, switched from driving a Tempo to a rickshaw because of the protests. "It was difficult to get petrol so I started to pedal a rickshaw," says Gosain, a father of three, who has had a difficult time feeding his family.

The major impact of the protests and blockade is felt by people like Misra from India and Gosain from Nepal. But for the politicians it has all been worth it and the only way they could get Kathmandu to address their demands for autonomy and fair representation.



SEULKI LEE

helplessness



to Kathmandu urged the government to get a move on reconstruction of the Arniko Highway and restore trade along this border point.

Most of the towns north of Lamosangu are not safe, there are still boulders coming down, and one injured an elderly woman in Tatopani this week. After the earthquake, half of the original population of Kodari moved out. The ones who remain pass the time playing cards in the sun.

“The earthquake was bad. But the closing of China border makes things even worse,” says Maya Tamang, a shop owner.

Tamang doesn’t understand why the Chinese border remains closed. “The road condition is



about the same as before. Trucks can still come through, and yet they don’t open it,” she says.

The Nepal Handicraft Shop stands out on the main street of Tatopani with its blue façade and bright red signboard and the name in Nepali, Chinese, and English. The only occasional customers here since the earthquake are

Chinese customs officials and police who come to buy chocolates and wine.

The single restaurant still open near the Nepal customs office has a cracked shelf with instant noodles, Red Bull and Coca Cola cans with Chinese characters. Chyang Dolma Sherpa buys her provisions from the canteen of the Chinese border guards on the other side. Like most others she has no idea why the border is still closed, or how long it will remain so. 🇨🇳



“The blockade program is a very effective strategy because major parties were not listening to us,” said Jitendra Sonar, ex-CA member of the Tarai-Madhes Democratic Party (TMDP) from Bara district.

One expects everything to be shut and streets deserted, but Birganj is bustling. It is only when bystanders open up that a visitor gets a sense of the accumulated frustration, alienation and insecurity. Policemen at major intersections have guns at the ready, banners and placards with Madhes demands festoon the major landmarks, but amidst it all there are wedding processions with brass bands.

“I couldn’t go to school for three months. One month because of the protests, one month during the festival, and one month because of the blockade,” says Grade 7 student Promise Muhiya. “My elder brother has SLC exams soon and he’s worried.”

The anger at the government in Kathmandu and the security forces that killed 60 people during the agitation is pervasive. “Why did the policemen have to shoot innocent citizens,” asks Saeda Debi, a relative of one of those killed, “why do they protect the government people and not us?”

Travelling from Birganj to Kathmandu and on the highway

to Nepal’s northern border with China a few days later, we sense the same sense of helplessness among the locals at Kodari. While in Birganj the border has been blockaded by India since September, in Kodari it has been blockaded by the April earthquake.

“There is nothing here. No people, no business. We open the shop just to pass the time,” says Lhamu Sherpa at a souvenir shop near the Nepal-China friendship bridge. She hasn’t seen customers since the earthquake triggered landslides that blocked the highway and buried towns. Rocks still tumble down from the mountains above from time to time.

“Before the earthquake, there were up to 100 trucks on this road every day,” says a customs officer who has been working in Tatopani for last two years. “We are ready to work, but we don’t know when the border will reopen, we are waiting for the Chinese to decide.”

Kodari in Nepal and Khasa in China were both abandoned after the earthquake, and all trade has stopped. The town is in darkness after sunset, although the Chinese have rigged up the police, customs and immigration offices with electricity. The remaining residents in Kodari rely more on



Chinese border guards for food and provisions than support from the Nepal government.

Public buses have stopped because there are no passengers, the highway has been badly damaged by landslides although it is still motorable. No one really knows when this important route of Nepal-China trade will open again. 🇨🇳



The wild west

Rasuwa was projected as an alternative trade route to China, but is plagued by delays and corruption

DAMBAR K SHRESTHA
in RASUWA

First, the earthquake cut off the highway to China through Kodari in April, then the blockade has obstructed Nepal’s trade links with India since September. Landlocked Nepal is virtually cut off.

The government boasted it would open the historic Rasuwa border with Tibet, and traders and tourism operators had pinned their hopes on this route speedily coming into operation. The 1,000 tons of fuel gifted by China did pass through this narrow road with much fanfare in October, but since then traffic has slowed.

The Nepal Army is to build a highway along the Bhote Kosi gorge, but that will take at least two years to complete. And Nepal needs to build customs, immigration and cargo facilities before this highway can serve as an alternative trade lifeline.

Across the river in China, there is an imposing 7-storey building and paved roads, while on the Nepal side there are tin huts and dusty, bumpy roads (*pics, above*). Nepali traders haven’t even been granted one day passes to travel to Kerung to buy goods.

Last month, a team led by the Chairman of Nepal-China Business Association Kumar Karki pleaded with officials on both sides to go to Kerung to urgently facilitate trade. Many Nepali businessmen who had rerouted their goods to Rasuwa after Kodari was closed are disheartened by the delay.

“We are facing difficulties because we believed in what the media told us,” says businessman Shyam Rugata who was in Rasuwa to study the situation in the border. Chinese transporter Zang Tsi Ping says that even if the goods arrive at Kerung, it is difficult to get it across to Rasuwa.

When truck driver Kapil Suwal reached the Rasuwa checkpoint to deliver a consignment to Kerung last month he was denied entry by the Chinese. So, he handed the truck over to a local driver and waited 20 days for it to return. Only 35 drivers who are from Rasuwa are allowed to cross over into China and they are fully booked, earning Rs 20,000 per trip.

Despite the obstacles, an average 25 cargo trucks do enter Nepal from China at Rasuwa every day. Another 400 trucks bringing goods

from Guangzhou have been stranded in Kerung and there is always a long queue of container trucks on the Nepal side.

Once the trucks enter Nepal, customs processing is even more cumbersome. Each truck passes through 15 security check points of Nepal Army, Armed Police Force and Nepal Police before they reach Kathmandu, and transporters say they have to pay off officials.

“It takes us ten hours to make the journey of five hours to Trisuli,” one driver complained.

There are also hassles with immigration and security checks. Truck cartels and local extortionists charge up to Rs 5,000 per vehicle to let them through. Chinese tourists and business also say they have to pay off Nepali police.

The government says it is moving ahead to build a dry port in Timure, and construction of a five-storey administrative building, a warehouse, security posts and parking for 350 trucks will start in three months. 🇨🇳



Rough Guide to Nepal

So much sewage has flowed down the Bagmuddy since the last edition of the Rough Guide to Nepal that much of the information therein is out of date. Hence, we have taken the trouble today to suggest the following revisions:

FACTS ABOUT NEPAL: Nepal is an India-locked Himalayan Free-To-Openly-Defecate Ex-Kingdom that is situated in yam-like fashion between two big dudes, one of which keeps throwing its weight around. Because of its strategic location between India and China, Nepal is rich in history, geography but weak in arithmetic. Visitors are advised before boarding their flight to

Nepal to reconfirm that the country still exists.

GETTING THERE: Most of the fun and excitement about Nepal is trying to get there. Kathmandu is connected to the rest of the world by a national flag carrier since there is a current shortage in Nepal of the country's unique trigonometric banner. The journey to Nepal is both unpredictable and full of surprises, and it is advisable to get to the airport at least two days before departure just to make sure your flight has not been pre-poned, and to stay on for a day or two after the scheduled departure in case it is post-poned.

WHAT TO BRING: Besides carrying a stockpile of national flags, passengers are advised to bring their own jerrycans of diesel and LPG cylinders as checked-in luggage in order to be able to get around and cook meals. Every incoming passenger is now required by law to bring his/her/ its own induction stove and hot water bag. Hot water bags should be pre-filled with water at airport of departure (unlike on Mars, there is no water in Kathmandu and even if there was, there is nothing to heat it with). Nepal is also running out of oxygen, so pack a cryogenic liquified O₂ tank, but for security reasons put it inside a transparent plastic sachet and make sure there is

less than 100ml of oxygen in it. Due to an acute power shortage, passengers would also do well to bring their own family-size nuclear power plant to generate electricity. And if you are able to smuggle that in you might as well try to smuggle in some centrifuges and weapons-grade plutonium to build your own thermo-nuclear warhead since we are all freezing our asses off here.

HEALTH TIPS: The bad news for travellers is that small pox and polio have been eradicated from Nepal. However, Nepal still has an exciting plethora of exotic pestilence like diptheria, tetanus, hepatitis A to Z, typhoid, cholera, yellow fever, rabies, giardiasis, Japanese encephalitis, kala azar, meningococcal meningitis, malaria, amoebic dysentery, whooping cough, dengue, tuberculosis, gonorrhea, diarrhoea and motion sickness. There is also an epidemic of foot-in-mouth disease among Nepal's politicians that could be transmitted to humans, if one is lucky.

VISA AND IMMIGRATION: Visitors can apply and get visas on arrival at Troglodyte International Airport (TIA). It is a fun-filled process that requires applicants to stand in a queue that is usually so long that by the time you get into another long line for immigration and your luggage finally appears at the carousel downstairs, your visa will have expired and you have to go back up and stand in line all over again.

EMERGENCY: Nepal was always known as a land of festivals, but now it is also known as a land of what-some-in-Nepal-call-a-blockade-but-India-denies. Many of you have asked me at office year-end parties when the blockade will be lifted. My answer, as usual, is: "I'm an ass, not an asstrologer." Predicting the exact date is not easy, since unlike the Gregorian calendar the blockade has been imposed by a country that is governed by a lunatic calendar.

USEFUL PHRASES:

Greetings and civilities:
Good morning = *Bhat khanu bho?*
Have a nice day = *Bhat khanu bho?*
How's it hanging, bro? = *Bhat khanu bho?*
What's cooking, man? = *Bhat ke le pakyo?*

On arrival:
Is this the line for visa? = *Yo visa ko line ho?*
Is this the line for immigration? = *Yo immigration ko line ho?*
Is this the line for diesel? = *Yo kalo bazar-sazar ko line ho?*
Is this the line for gas? = *Yo ghoos-shoos ko line ho?*

While trekking:
There are fleas in my bed, I'm going back to Tokyo = *Malai udus ra upiya le tokyo.*
I want one donut and jam. = *Euta chukka jam dinos.*
Which way to Pashupati? = *Pashupatinathle hamro rakshya garun.*



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