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BIKRAM RAI

## Sudden death

Ramita Shahi, looks on forlornly as her husband's body is taken out of the casket at Pashupati on Tuesday for cremation. Hemanta Shahi, 34, died in Saudi Arabia in October but his body only just arrived home on a flight that afternoon. Ramita has been grieving for three months; she has no more tears left.

Hemanta's body, wrapped in holy yellow cloth, is placed on the pyre. His six-year-old son lights it. Ramita sits nearby for the two hours it takes for her husband's body to be reduced to ashes which are swept into the Bagmati.

Nearly 87,000 Nepali migrant

workers flew to Saudi Arabia in 2015 for work last year. Hemanta was among the 273 who died there. He travelled from his village in Salyan district to Damman in Saudi Arabia in February. He wanted to earn enough to feed his family and educate his two children, who are enrolled in primary school back home.

There are nearly 2 million Nepali migrant workers in the Gulf and Malaysia, and another 2 million seasonal migrants in India. Between July 2014-July 2015, 1002 of them died - most of them in Malaysia. More than half the deaths are due to what is

called sudden unexpected death syndrome (SUDS). The workers go to sleep and never wake up. Health experts say the cause is overwork, stress, dehydration and poor diet.

A breakdown of the deaths last year shows that most migrant workers in Malaysia and Qatar die of SUDS, while in Saudi Arabia it is mostly due to hit-and-run accidents on highways. Hemanta Shahi's supervisor told his family he died in his sleep, but a death certificate stuffed in the casket says he died in a road accident. Hemanta's family is lucky to have received his body, at least

70 bodies are waiting to be flown back to Nepal from Saudi Arabia alone.

Hemanta's wife reached Salyan after the funeral on Thursday after 15 hours on a bus. Her husband died before paying the loan he took to go abroad, and the debt is now on her shoulders. She is Nepal's latest migration widow, her children the latest orphans.

Om Astha Rai

[nepalitimes.com](http://nepalitimes.com)  
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# STAYING ALIVE

The least that Nepal’s rulers must do is to ensure our workers abroad don’t have to die saving the country from economic collapse.

One reason Nepal has not gone completely belly-up despite the earthquake last year and this ongoing blockade is that the money wired home by Nepali migrant workers is keeping the economy afloat. The latest figures show that the country earned approximately \$6 billion in the past year from the 2 million or so overseas contract workers mainly in the Gulf and Malaysia. This did not include money sent back to families by another 2 million or so seasonal migrants in India.

For generations, Nepal has been a net exporter of human capital. Forced to migrate due to hardships such as exploitation, indebtedness, falling agricultural productivity, and lack of jobs at home, Nepalis have traditionally sought greener pastures abroad. Migration has been a safety valve that has let rulers in Kathmandu off the hook for their spectacular and unparalleled failure over the years in offering gainful employment at home for its citizens.

Such is the desperation that drives Nepalis to migrate, that the exodus has historically been seen as a given. The despair also partly explains the lack of outrage in Nepal about the export of our young men and women. The recruitment of the citizens of one country to fight and die for another is incongruous in this day and age, yet hiring mercenaries hardly raises an eyebrow in Nepal. The most alarming aspect about the trafficking of young Nepali women to brothels in India is not just the absence of any political will to stop it, but that the very communities from which the girls are taken tolerate this sexual slavery. Today, traffickers have moved on to duping and cheating young Nepali women in working as household help, and in this paper we have provided regular coverage of the horrendous exploitation and abuse they suffer at the hands of Nepali middlemen and their employers, particularly in the Gulf.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, poverty alone is not the primary driving force behind migration. The push factors of this mass exodus are the structural exclusion of a large section of the population, entrenched social injustice, weak



GOPEN RAI

governance and the ingrained neglect and apathy towards the welfare of its citizens. The districts from where there is the most out-migration are not the poorest: many who live in abject poverty simply can’t afford to migrate, because they don’t have the cash savings to pay middlemen fees and travel costs.

The migration industry is controlled by an unscrupulous mafia that has been given a *carte blanche* (with the collusion of the government machinery) to squeeze the last rupee out of the most vulnerable. Economists have pointed out that remittances should have been used productively to spur investment in infrastructure and manufacturing at home and to generate jobs, which would have bought us time to get our act together on the economy. Unfortunately, as things stand today, earnings sent home by workers abroad are used by families mostly for subsistence, to send children to

school or to buy property. It is not ploughed into investment that would create a multiplier effect on the economy. The infusion of hard currency therefore simply helps offset our burgeoning imports — mainly of petroleum products. We buy diesel with the blood, sweat and tears of our workers.

For a country that is so dependent on overseas contract workers, the Nepali state seems to be capable neither of protecting its citizens abroad nor of maximising the benefits of remittances to the national economy. The disgraceful way we treat the 2,500 Nepalis leaving for work and returning to Kathmandu Airport every day is proof that the worst enemy of Nepali workers is the Nepali state. Instead of declaring them national heroes, they are relentlessly fleeced, cheated, extorted, harassed, and abused by officials, security personnel every step of the way.

Just as Nepalis died during the World Wars fighting for foreigners, today they are dying in foreign lands where they toil. As our special coverage in this issue points out, even as workers queue up at Kathmandu Airport every day to board their flights, three coffins arrive daily on those same planes. More than 1,000 Nepali workers died in the past year, most of them in Malaysia followed by the Gulf countries — the main cause identified has been unexpected death syndrome (SUDS). Since autopsies are rarely conducted and there has been close to zero investigation into this appalling phenomenon, public health experts haven’t been able to figure out why certified healthy young men are dying of heart attacks at such a shocking rate in the plantations of Malaysia and the construction sites in the Gulf.

Among the contributing factors are overwork, exploitation, and acute stress caused by deep anxiety about not being able to take care of families back home. Successive governments of Nepal have failed to look after the welfare of citizens and provide jobs for them at home -- the least that the current rulers must do is to ensure Nepali workers abroad don’t have to lay down their lives to save the country from economic collapse.

Times

THIS WEEK

SEULKI LEE

**Most reached on Facebook**  
Life has always been hard in villages among the narrow valleys and towering, jagged snow peaks of northern Gorkha, but few here can remember a winter as difficult as this. First it was the earthquake on 25 April, then there was the problem of transportation caused by the Indian blockade and the fuel crisis. (7,489 people reached)

**Most shared on Facebook**  
Shivering in shelters by *Seulki Lee* (57 shares)

**Most popular on Twitter**  
The endless transition by *Rubeena Mahato* (62 retweets, 85 favourites)

**Most visited online page**  
The endless transition by *Rubeena Mahato* (1,405 views)

**Most commented**  
The endless transition by *Rubeena Mahato* (26 comments)

YOUR SAY

www.nepalitimes.com

**THE ENDLESS TRANSITION**  
The new constitution was a failure because it did not address the needs of the Madhesi people ('The endless transition', Rubeena Mahato, #789). Any half aware observer will know that this plays into the hands of Indian interests, as a stronger Madhesi electorate will enable India to exert its influence throughout Nepal. Nevertheless it was the Nepali politicians who failed in past decades to square this circle. Lacking any rational options, they chose to go against agreements made in 2007 as a consequence of the first Madhesi uprising. Whatever India's role in the blockade, Nepal's politicians handed them a golden opportunity. This testifies to their utter lack of political acumen.  
**David**

address this core problem that has resulted in the present crisis? Please don't blame this one on India - Nepalis near the border were protesting for a month prior to the constitution being promulgated, and in that duration 40 of them got killed by Nepal police - before India decided to intervene to stop the killings.  
**Shrestha**

Nepal's political system is a failure, no doubt. But to say that India has/ does not have a hand in the current crises is lying to yourself. In the past, India had always got the political players together in one room and hammered out the differences. Why not this time?  
**Namah**

Nobody loves big neighbours, ask Mexico about US or Uruguay about Brazil or Mongolia about China. But this doesn't mean that these small countries start blaming their large neighbours for their own incompetencies.  
**Layman**

Do you have anything to say about Nepal's internal political failure to worsen the geopolitical friction.  
**Binod**

Articles on *Nepali Times* are all starting to sound the same. Please give us, readers, new substance.  
**Hurray**

**THE FORCE AWAKENS**  
I, for one, would have liked the movie better had the director, JJ Abrams given more importance to how Jedi powers were transmitted ('The Force Awakens', Sophia Pande, #789).  
**Whatever**

Weekly Internet Poll #790

Q. Are you hopeful for 2016?

Total votes: 112

■ Yes 56.25%  
■ No 39.29%  
■ Don't know 4.46%

Weekly Internet Poll #791

To vote go to: www.nepalitimes.com

Q. Which country should PM KP Oli fire?

Times

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# Being baklava

Layered food is always a delight to the palette. I'm pretty convinced the reason lasagna, for example, is so yummy is because it is made up uniquely of layers of pasta and sauce. There is something about balance in layering and one can almost taste that balance when food is cooked right. Otherwise, there is almost no difference

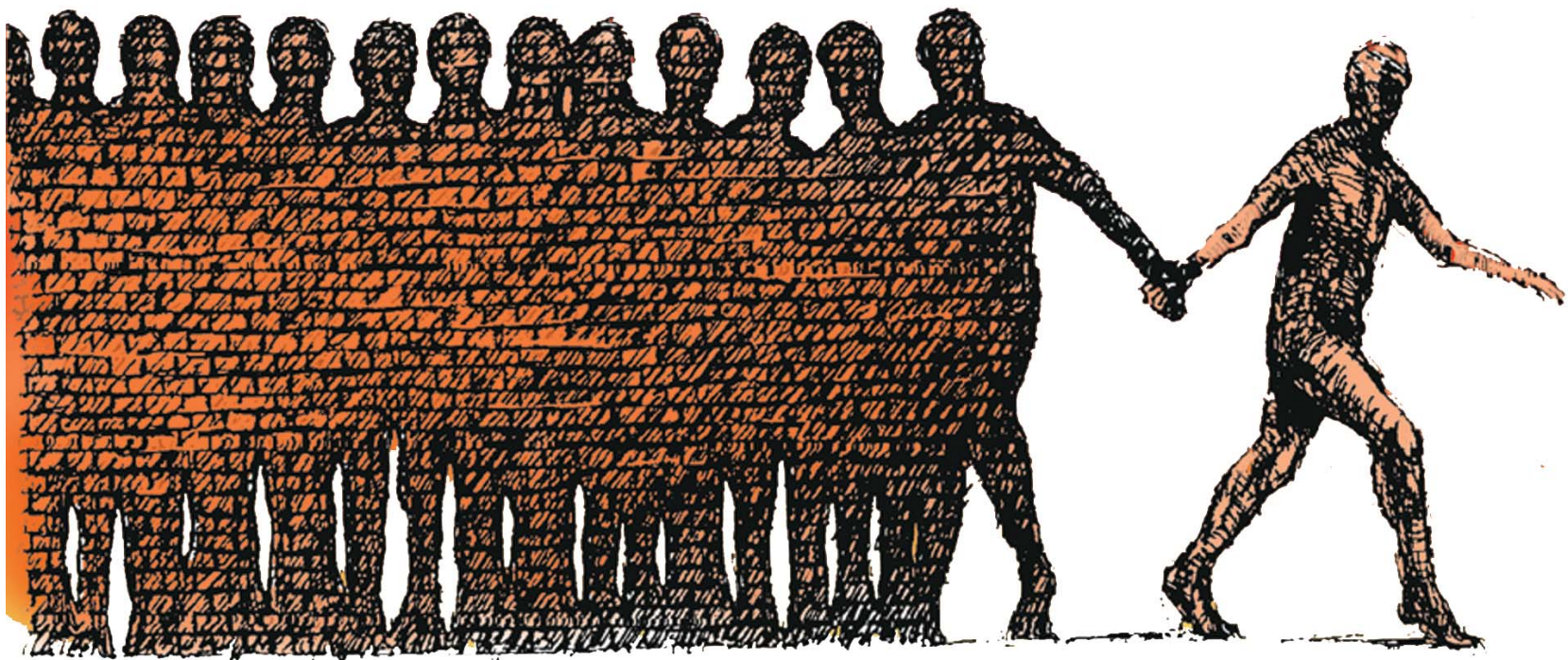


ONE TO MANY  
Bidushi Dhungel

between an average bolognese pasta bake and lasagna – in terms of ingredients—and yet it isn't lasagna.

This actually came to mind when making an entirely different dish, baklava, earlier this week. Baklava is a dessert dish that is the Middle Eastern world's equivalent to our own *mithai*. It is made up of wafer thin layers of phyllo pastry with fillings in between, drenched in butter, then baked to a crisp golden brown and then topped with sugar and honey syrup. They are cut up into these magnificent little diamonds, square and round shapes, perfect for pecking on.

Now, you might wonder why I am again writing about baked



The challenge in carving a Nepali identity which is identifiable as 'Nepali' and yet not all the same

goods when the country is falling to pieces. Well, for one, it is a hobby people in search of sanity or stress relief might turn to in times of turmoil. But more than that, like all else, one cannot help but see striking similarities between the various things one is passionate about, in this case baklava and identity.

Many foods depend on a delicate balance of layers to really develop in taste and appeal. That is the thing about the great classics like the croissant or a trifle, the balance of the layers, which carry different flavours. The croissant comes in various flavours and in various shapes and sizes and yet we all know when a croissant is a croissant.

It is the same with baklava too. What really makes it is the paper-thin in-tact layers that are neither soft nor hard once baked and neither too sweet nor bland. These are the fundamentals, which are the defining characteristics of the dish which are unchanged. The interesting thing is the baklava is different in different parts of the Middle East, and often the nuts used and flavours, shapes and sizes are different, and yet one can tell off-hand when you are being served baklava. That is because the defining identity of the dessert is unchanged regardless of where you go.

The balance of the layers, regardless of flavour or shape, is

the magic to its identity.

One might say it is rather similar to the notion of being Nepali, or the kind of Nepali identity we are in the need to forge. It seems the challenge in carving a Nepali identity which is identifiable as 'Nepali' and yet not all the same lies at the crux of the issue. Like the baklava, we want the different flavours, sizes, shapes and thickness, and also want to remain in the 'baklava' family without it being questioned, regardless of whether the filling is made of pistachios, almonds or desiccated coconut.

In fact, we want an obvious element to our 'Nepaliness' without it being monolithic,

or synonymous with only one language, dress, religion, etc. We want to break away from the Panchayat and Mahendra era 'Nepaliness' without compromising on the essence of a binding identity altogether.

And why wouldn't that be desirable? Going by how well baklava has done in being united in its diversity, it seems definitely the best way forward. The management of diversity in such a way that the fundamentals remain unchanged is the key. Perhaps for Nepal, the best thing to start off with would be to identify the fundamentals, if there are any at all. @bidush

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# ROAD KILL

SURENDRA PHUYAL  
IN BRASILIA

Nearly 1,800 people were killed in road traffic accidents all over Nepal in 2014-15. And although the Indian fuel blockade will bring down the figure for this year, it is sure to climb up again when the blockade is lifted.

The reason for the high fatality rate is poorly maintained and risky mountain roads, overloading of vehicles, lack of road discipline and poor training of drivers. New Zealand, with much more traffic than Nepal in a similar land area, saw only 253 road fatalities in 2013.

As low- or middle-income countries like Nepal motorise, often at the expense of road safety, growing road traffic fatality and associated losses to families and communities have become a matter of grave concern globally as delegates to an international conference on road safety in the Brazilian capital heard recently.

Globally, over 1.25 million people were killed and millions injured in road traffic accidents in 2013, according to the World Health Organization (WHO)'s Global Status Report on Road Safety 2015. And road accidents are the leading cause of death of

young people between 18-29 years of age. Those getting killed are therefore often breadwinners.

As Nepal bears the brunt of blockade of the Indo-Nepal border, road traffic rules and safety issues are clearly being overlooked. But even at normal times, traffic rules are often violated and reckless driving is the norm rather than the exception.

The shortage of public transport caused by the fuel crisis has made overloaded vehicles common, and passenger buses from border towns often carry petrol, diesel and LPG cylinders on their roofs. On the evening of October 21, a bus carrying petrol and LP cylinders crashed in Khaskusma of Banke along the East-West highway, killing at least 8 people. "It was like a scene of a bad plane crash," a local official told BBC Nepali Service. "The overturned bus was badly burnt with several passengers inside."

The WHO global status report on road safety cites Nepal's crackdown on drunk-driving and helmet use by motorcycle drivers as two areas where the country has made progress. However, only drivers are required to use



helmets, and often it is the pillion rider who is killed in an accident.

Drunk-driving tests are being carried out, but not with proper equipment, and there are no rules on the permissible

amount of alcohol in the blood. And the most bizarre rule about Nepal is this: a speed limit of 80 km/h for both urban and rural roads. School and residential areas lack speed limit rules and

enforcement. Nepal does not have any official motorway or any motorway speed limit. The only wide road from Koteswor to Surya Binayak is notorious for fatal accidents.

## Dramatic fall in fatalities

As far-fetched as it may seem, the Indian blockade has a silver lining

Recent news items about the Indian blockade of Nepal have reported on the fatalities caused by the shortage of medicines. However, the fuel shortage has actually saved many lives because there are fewer vehicles on the highways.

Latest statistics from the Traffic Directorate of the Nepal Police and the Metropolitan Traffic Police Department (MTPD) in Kathmandu show a dramatic drop in the number of highway fatalities and traffic accidents since August.

"One of the reasons the number of accidents decreased is because there were simply fewer vehicles on the road," Posh Raj Pokharel of the MTPD confirmed to *Nepali Times*.

In fact, there seems to be a clear correlation between the number of accidents in Kathmandu Valley and the number of diesel and petrol tankers entering the city. The average number of accidents in the capital in July-August was 495, but this had plummeted by half to 253 in October-November.

There is a similar drop in highway accidents nationwide as well. From 817 road traffic accidents in July-August, the total dropped to 617 in September-October.

Despite the drop, however, police records show an increase in the number of people falling off vehicles and roofs of buses because of overcrowding.

The tragic death of 36 passengers in an overcrowded bus in Rasuwa



DEVIKA GHARTI MAGAR

**COLLISION COURSE:** Eight people were killed when this speeding van collided with a school bus in Dang on Wednesday, the latest fatal accident on Nepal's deadly highways.

highlighted the fact that people have been forced to get on the fewer numbers of public buses that are plying because of the fuel shortage.

At the peak of the fuel crisis from mid-September to mid-November only about 10 per cent of the urban and intra-city public transportation system was functional. Traffic police relaxed the rules on travelling on roofs of buses and more than two people on motorcycles because there was so much demand.

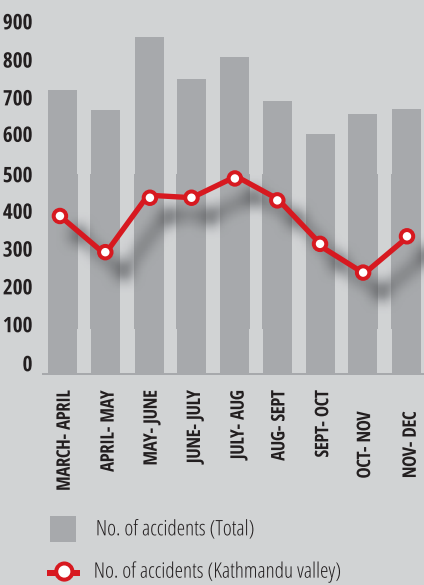
Police have also been unable to stop crowded buses from the Tarai carrying

plastic jerry cans of black-market diesel and petrol and LPG cylinders on their roofs. Eight people were burnt to death when a bus caught fire in Banke on October after going off the highway and striking a tree. Most of the 33 passengers in the bus were carrying petrol. Passenger buses have been turned into petroleum tankers, and police admit that this is a disaster waiting to happen.

Now that petroleum supply has eased somewhat, and traffic is back to 75 per cent of normal levels, the number of accidents in Kathmandu Valley is rising again. MTPD

### ROAD ACCIDENTS

March - December 2015



has also started enforcing rules on more than two persons on motorcycles and rooftop travel.

"Before the fuel crisis, we were seeing 15 accidents a day in Kathmandu, but this went down by half when the crisis was at its worst. Now the number of accidents is going up again," says Pokharel.

He adds: "The only way we can really bring down the numbers is if everyone including pedestrians, passengers and bus drivers and operators follow traffic rules."

Sahina Shrestha





GOPEN RAI

The WHO report points out that Nepal does have a national seat-belt law, and the rule is applied only to the driver and not to the front and rear occupants. Not surprisingly, the country also

doesn't have a national child restraint law, neither is there any restriction on children sitting in the front seat. Although arbitrary fines are occasionally slapped, Nepal also

doesn't have a national law on mobile phone use while driving, says the report. For a country where highway crashes are so common, Nepal doesn't have enough trauma care facilities along roads. Nor does Nepal have an emergency room surveillance system. There are no emergency access telephone numbers that are essential to saving lives during or after road traffic rash.

Of the country's nearly 1.2 million total registered vehicles as of 2011, nearly 900,000 are motorised two or three wheelers. But there are no front impact standards, or electronic stability control, says the report, and airbags aren't mandatory on new cars.

Worryingly, no data exists on deaths by road user category for Nepal. And little has been done to safeguard the needs of the pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists – the most vulnerable road users.

The UN's post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have set targets to halve deaths and injuries from road traffic crashes by 2020. Experts and officials agree that it will be extremely challenging for countries like Nepal to reduce road fatality rates and meet those targets within five years.

Etienne Krug of WHO told reporters in Brasilia: "The continuing inaction on road safety has to end."



Surendra Phuyal is a journalist with BBC Nepali Service. @surendraphuyal

## prabhu BANK BIZ BRIEFS



### Declaring debentures

Everest Bank has recently signed an agreement with Nepal Stock Exchange for the listing of 600,000 units of 8% Debentures worth Rs 600 million. The debentures, which have a face value of Rs 1000 each, will mature in 2078 BS and pay semi-annual interest. The agreement was signed by the CEOs of the two institutions.

### Turning 16

The internet, network and television service provider, Subisu Cablenet, has entered its 16th year. The



company was established in the year 2000 and has its reach in 64 districts of the country.

### Painters, attention

Pashupati Paints has launched a painting competition 'Color Your Dreams' for all painting enthusiasts in the country. Participants can log on to [www.pashupatipaints.com](http://www.pashupatipaints.com).



com/cyd or [www.facebook.com/pashupatipaints](http://www.facebook.com/pashupatipaints) for more information. Each winner will take away a cash prize of Rs 50,000.

### Quick growth

The multinational telecom equipment and services group Huawei has announced its revenue figures. The company's revenue exceeded \$20 billion in 2015, a 70 per cent increase from 2014. Huawei also shipped 108 million smartphones in 2015, a 44 per cent increase from the previous year.



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# The inevitable unraveling

The loose alliance of the Madhesi Front is fraying



BIKRAM RAI

It was bound to happen, and it has. As the border blockade shows signs of easing and Indian support for the agitation wanes, fissures have opened up in the United Democratic Madhesi Front (UDMF).

What is surprising is not that there are disagreements between personalities heading the component parties in the Front, but that it took so long for

for treatment. Mahato has been accused of exaggerating his injuries, using it for political grandstanding.

Mahato has often claimed that he represents the interests of ordinary Madhesis, and he has been constantly trying project himself as the most radical of the lot. Yet, even as he tries to identify with the cause of the Tarai proletariat, he has the lifestyle of Nepal's political neo-elite.

From his hospital bed at Medanta, Mahato announced fresh protests in statements written out in Hindi in stationery without the party letterhead. Other leaders in the Madhesi Front, especially Upendra Yadav, have not tried to hide their misgivings about Mahato's mischief, but they have to compete with his radicalism.

"He is just fooling the people, he is faking his illness and going through this drama to gain cheap popularity," Yadav told

a party program in Janakpur over the weekend. In tea shops in Birganj and among people huddled around cowdung fires in Janakpur, the talk is that the loose alliance of the Madhesi Front is fraying.

The most enigmatic has been Bijay Gachhadar of the Madhesi People's Right Forum-Democratic (MPRF-D) which was part of the Big Four alliance that mooted the constitution draft in August. But he fell out after the agitation in the Tarai spread and intensified. Gachhadar has been so quiet that many don't even realise that he is Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Physical Infrastructure and Transport in the Oli government.

The lust for power is no less among other leaders of the Madhesi Front. Upendra Yadav, Mahanta Thakur, Anil Kumar Jha have all held senior government posts in the past, and the perception among the silent majority in the plains is that

they have amassed wealth and built villas in Kathmandu while the people of the Madhes live in grinding poverty.

As the fires in the Madhes ebb, anger that used to be directed at the rulers in Kathmandu is turning to the Madhes' own self-appointed saviours. The nearly five month long agitation in which the Madhesi people suffered the most is now fizzling, and has left the people of the Tarai pondering what it is that they actually achieved.

Mahato has now said in so many words that he is no more associated with the Madhesi Front, which he regards as having sold out. The Madhesi parties have suffered frequent splits in the past, and almost always it is not over ideology but for plum posts in the central government.

They are the ones most guilty of appointing wives, sisters and in-laws to proportional representation seats in the CA. Rajendra Mahato offered a PR seat

to his better half. Anil Jha and Raj Kishore Yadav also made their wives CA members. Mahanta Thakur made his daughter's mother-in-law a CA member. Nepali politicians are in general notoriously irresponsible to their electorates, but the plains-based parties take the cake when it comes to lack of accountability.

The Tarai Madhes Democratic Party (TMDP) chair Mahanta Thakur has claimed that Madhes region fulfills all the parameters to be an independent state, and that a separate Tarai would be utopia. Even if it is an attempt to talk tough, these are irresponsible statements. Besides with the kind of nepotism, corruption and poor governance they have displayed, an independent Madhes is likely to be even poorer.

The Madhes movement was to build moral pressure on the Kathmandu government to amend the constitution. A child should be able to get citizenship by descent even if the mother is a non-Nepali. A naturalised citizen should be able to hold any constitutional, judicial and legislative post. Proportional representation for Madhesis should be institutionalised in the constitution. Two new plains provinces should encompass the entire Tarai for the Madhesi people.

As a Madhesi, I am sympathetic to most of these demands, but mainly I want the Nepali state to treat me fairly and with respect. We want equality, economic development, health, education and jobs. We need to attain these goals to also ensure that 60 innocent lives were not lost in vain.

The Madhes unrest and accompanying Indian blockade have impoverished the poor while the middlemen are making a fortune. The time has now come for Madhesi leaders to justify the four month-long agitation to the people who were made to suffer and die. Was it for genuine autonomy and respect, or was it so they could get into government? 🇳🇵



**GUEST COLUMN**  
Jivesh Jha

the splits to emerge. There is a feeling among the Madhesi people that they have once more been cheated at the hands of these self-proclaimed messiahs.

After Sadbhavana Party leader Rajendra Mahato was injured in protests in Biratnagar last week he was flown to New Delhi's most expensive private hospital



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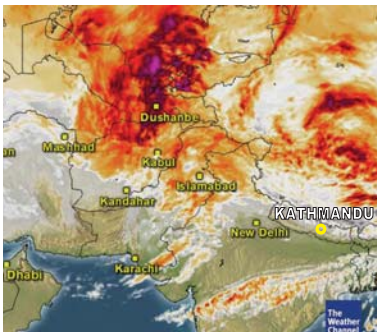


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A westerly system did sweep past the Tibetan Plateau this week, bringing a light dusting of snow to the higher reaches in trans-Himalayan Nepal. But for the rest of the country the drought has now lasted three months – not good news for wheat farmers nor for people under unprecedented power cuts. River levels are even lower this season at a time when demand has shot up as people turn to electricity for cooking due to the gas shortage. There will be some passing cloud cover over the weekend, but not much by way of precipitation. Machapuchre will continue to look dark and rocky for some more time.

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XIAOTONG XU

# From Patan to Beijing

XIAOTONG XU

As a world heritage site, Patan is one of the most visited tourist sites in Kathmandu. While three temples in the main square collapsed in last April's earthquake the place retains its old world charm.

For long the town's artisans have held the title of the most skilled craftsmen in the country and for good reason. The architectural beauty of Patan is unmatched, and even today bronze sculptors and wood carvers work in dimly-lit workshops, chipping away with a hammer and chisel to create high-quality religious figures.

Prem Awale (*pic, above*) is a craftsman-turned-businessman who opened his own showroom 12 years ago. Back then Malaysian tourists were his major customers, today it is Chinese mainlanders

who make up 80 per cent of his clientele.

China today is the biggest importer of Nepali metal craft, and last year the Nepali handicraft industry earned Rs 2.8 billion selling Buddhas, Taras and Manjushrees to the mainland. Metal craft makes up more than 20 per cent of Nepal's total handicrafts export.

However, as with other businesses, handicraft owners have seen huge losses first with the drop in tourism after the earthquake and later with the fuel shortage caused by the Indian blockade.

"I have received orders for bronze figures, but there's no way I can continue selling them at normal rates," Awale says frustrated, "manufacturing cost has gone up because of the price of fuel and also due to shortage of workers."

There are six other handicraft showrooms in the lane that houses Awale's shop, and all the owners have the same story.

An online handicraft store owned by Chinese businessmen this week rejected a customer's order for ten pieces of 7-inch copper Sakyamuni Buddha statues because they were unable to guarantee the delivery date due to problems in Nepal.

On Taobao.com, the biggest e-commerce market in China, there are almost 1,200 outlets selling Nepal-made metal statues. Nepali handicrafts command a premium because they are made in the country where the Buddha was born.

But Nepali handicrafts now have to compete with cheaper mass-produced Chinese imitations.

A 5-inch gilt Tibetan Buddha statue

imported from Nepal sells at RMB 650 (Rs 10,400) online, but a similar statue made in China is sold at RMB 299 (Rs 4,800). But even in the online photos it is easy to see that the Nepal-made statues have finer craftsmanship.

Even so, the delivery difficulties are pushing many Chinese traders to promote low-quality China-made statues back home. "The Nepalis never deliver on time and customers always complain," said one Chinese businessman.

Awale used to receive orders for up to 1,500 Buddha statues from a single Chinese buyer, and he still gets similar inquiries but is just not able to produce so many so quickly. Another factor in the waning business is the downturn in the Chinese economy. 🇨🇳

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PICS: POKHARA AIRPORT PROJECT

# POKHARA AIRPORT READY FOR TAKEOFF

After 40 years it looks like Pokhara’s new international airport is finally going ahead

SIRAN LIANG  
IN POKHARA

One of the side-effects of the Indian blockade is that the government in Kathmandu is trying to diversify its transportation links to the outside world, which means that it is finally getting serious about pushing the new international airport in Pokhara.

First envisaged 40 years ago, Pokhara’s new airport is being financed by the Chinese Exim Bank and although it got the

go-ahead during the Maoist-led government in 2009, it wasn’t moving ahead as fast as hoped. Now, the only thing that remains to be done is to sign a loan agreement during Finance Minister Bishnu Poudel’s visit to Beijing next week.

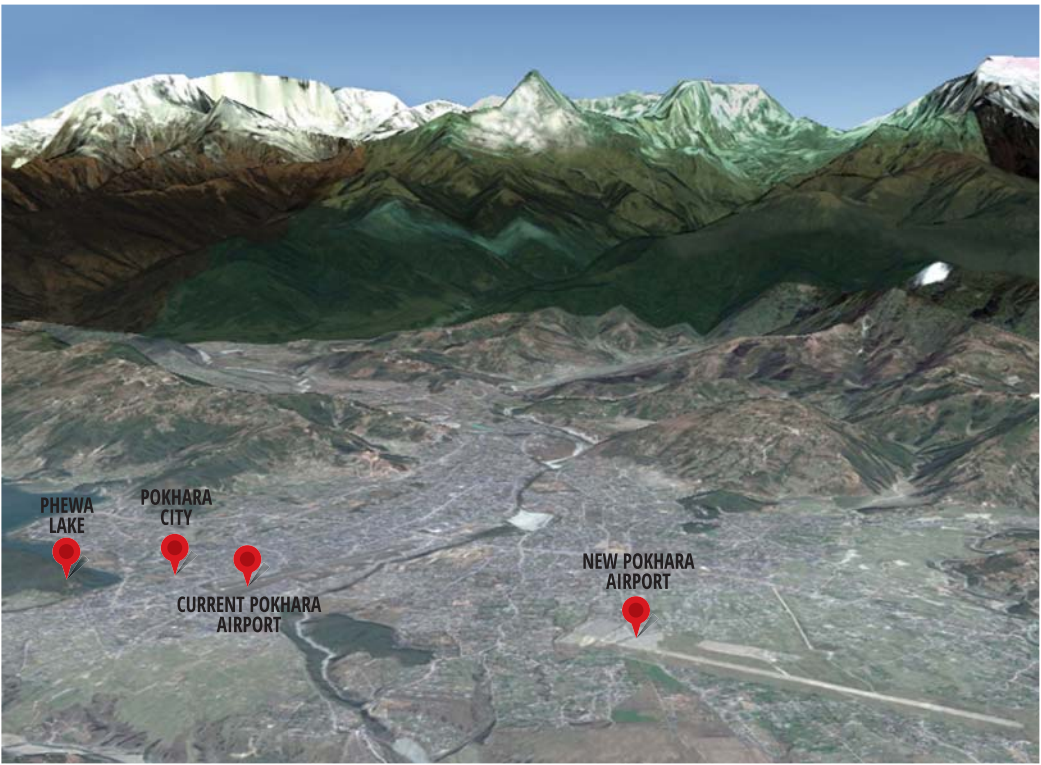
“We are ready to start the project once the loan agreement is signed, there is no problem on Nepal side,” airport project director Pradeep Adhikari told

*Nepali Times*. He added that the proposal is now with China’s Finance Ministry, and the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAAN) has been lobbying hard for the loan agreement to be expedited.

Chinese officials confirmed to *Nepali Times* that the project is “on track”. In 2014, China’s Exim Bank agreed to provide a soft loan of \$215.95 million for the new airport which is situated 4 km east of the city. Located in Chhinedanda, the new airport will have a 2,500 m runway and will be able to accommodate Airbus 320s and Boeing 757s.

“The people of Pokhara are very supportive and they want the project to go ahead at any cost, and so do the Chinese,” Adhikari said. CAAN had been dealing with compensation for landowners, carrying out construction work like drainage structure, access road and finalising flight procedures for the new airport. Bidding for the project was held in 2012, and the contract was awarded to China CAMC Engineering Co Ltd and the Engineering Procurement and Construction (EPC) contract

signed in 2014. Biplab Paudel of the Hotel Association Nepal in Pokhara is impatient with the delays, and led protests and hunger strikes in 2013 to pressure the government to approve the new airport. He reckons India has been putting pressure on senior government officials in Kathmandu not to go ahead with the airport project. After the new international airport comes into operation the existing one will be turned into prime urban real estate and generate revenue for CAAN. “Our plan for the next few years is just to maintain the basic condition of the domestic airport because the government’s investment has shifted to the new one,” says Dipak Baral of CAAN in Pokhara. The new airport will handle domestic flights as well as direct links for tourists who want to bypass Kathmandu, and will also cater to passengers from central Nepal flying to the Gulf or Malaysia. The government wants to improve road infrastructure and urban planning in Pokhara to coincide with the opening of the new airport. 🇳🇵







PICS: SIRAN LIANG



When Zhilin Xiao, a student at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) walked into the front yard of First Love Nepal (FLN) Children Home in Bhakunde Besi, 50km east of Kathmandu, last week, she was immediately greeted by excited children.

Xiao had returned to the village four months after first volunteering for post-earthquake reconstruction with 16 other HKU students to rebuild classrooms

at the Thakuri Primary School in collaboration with the Nepali NGO, Living Hope Nepal.

"International aid flooded Nepal after the earthquake but most relief workers left after a few months," says Xiao, "we returned because we realised that Nepal still needs help to rebuild."

Called Nepal Recovery Program, the HKU students also help teach at two secondary schools in Kavre. Says Suraj

Shrestha, director of FLN Children Home: "The help from Hong Kong students is important not just for our children but also for the whole community especially because government aid is not forthcoming."

The Hong Kong students believe that by rebuilding damaged structures and constructing new airy and bright classrooms, they will be leaving something tangible behind.

# Learning to rebuild


The program received 38 sign ups in a weeklong on-campus recruitment in Hong Kong in November and selected 17 members from various disciplines. The team includes two Indian architecture students at HKU, Gayathri Sivakumar and Shivangi Das.

While in India, Das felt the Nepal earthquake in April, so when she learnt about the program she decided to come despite her family's concern for her safety. "We felt a kind of a special connection with Nepal because it is a neighbour," Das says.

The Hong Kong team raised Rs 650,000 in Hong Kong and used

funding leftover from donations for the 2008 Sichuan earthquake for the Kavre project. It has also donated to Oxfam for its activities in Nepal.

Next week, after the classroom reconstruction is done, the Hong Kong students will carry out a mentorship program as well as puberty and menstrual hygiene education. One of the Hong Kong students, Phebe Ho has got attached to the Nepali children.

"They are just so simple, helpful, friendly and kind," she says, "they may not have much but they are always willing to share and give love to each other." 

Siran Liang in Kavre



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## EVENTS



### Donate a blanket,

Sasto Deal is organising a ‘Donate a blanket’ campaign for victims of the earthquake in Gorkha, Dhading and Sindhupalchok. Contribute Rs 500 per blanket.  
[info@sastodeal.com](mailto:info@sastodeal.com)



### Property rites,

Explore power struggles in this future-in-the-present action drama based on the play by Alan Haehnel and performed by Ullens IB students.  
29 January, 6pm and 30 January, 9pm,  
Ullens School, Khumaltar, Lalitpur

### Art market,

The Art market celebrates its first anniversary.  
9 January, 12 to 4pm  
The Yellow House, Sanepa, Lalitpur,  
[ange@image-ark,](mailto:ange@image-ark.com)  
[nayantara@photocircle.com.np](mailto:nayantara@photocircle.com.np)

### CAN Info-tech,

Don't miss the year's most exciting info-tech and entertainment conference.  
28 January to 2 February, Bhrikuti Mandap, Exhibition Road



### Organic farmers' market,

Head to 1905 for organic vegetables, cheese, bread and lots of delicious goodies.  
Every Saturday, 9am to noon, 1905 restaurant, Kantipath, Kathmandu

### SparkX Nepal,

Join a group of 15 entrepreneurs and take advantage of the support and connections to build your business.  
9 to 17 April, Registration:  
[sparkinternational.org/sparkx-nepal](http://sparkinternational.org/sparkx-nepal)

## DINING



## Soaltee Crowne Plaza

It's that time of the year again when the festive spirit finally takes a backseat. Resolutions are made to cut down on food and quit drinking. But for those who still have not given up their gluttonous desires and want a fine dining experience, head over to the Garden Terrace at Soaltee Crowne Plaza.

Away from the hustle and bustle of the streets, enjoy their special *a la carte* menu for both lunch and dinner. Guests can enjoy a variety of signature dishes from Soaltee's specialty restaurants of Kakori, Al Fresco and China Garden and customise their meal experience with their wide selection of Indian, Continental, Italian and Oriental food options.



Ideal for business meetings and casual rendezvous, Garden Terrace restaurant features 234 seats, a bar area, dessert counter, live show kitchen and a private dining room. Its open sundeck area overlooking the garden is perfect for guests who want to enjoy some sun during the cold winter months.

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## MUSIC



### Ankit Shrestha live,

Join Ankit Shrestha, Baaja and Shreeti Pradhan as they take the stage.  
9 January, 3pm onwards,  
Club 25 Hours, Tangal

### Guitar Fest 2016,

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



### Tribute to Bon Jovi,

Miracles will perform the ultimate tribute to Bon Jovi.  
23 January, 3pm, Purple Haze Rock Bar, Thamel



### Recalling 90s grunge,

All Stars, Sound Chains Pilots and Newaz will conjure up the awesome 90s grunge.  
20 February, 1pm, Purple Haze Rock Bar, Thamel

## GETAWAY

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[info@rural-heritage.com](mailto:info@rural-heritage.com)



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Gaurighat, Lakeside, (61)465819



### Haatiban Resort,

Climb up to Chandragiri in the morning for a royal view of Kathmandu Valley and jog down to the hotel for a relaxed evening.  
Pharping, Kathmandu, (01)4371537/56

## Nepal Literature Festival



Watch out for one of the country's biggest literary events, the Nepal Literature Festival. In the words of the organisers, the festival is “designed to feed readers intellectual curiosity, penchant for analytical musings and varied cultural interests.” In the past, the festival has hosted widely-known

personalities like Shashi Tharoor, Shobha De and Ned Beauman and has held discussions on literature, art, theatre, film, business, economics and politics. This year, more than a hundred national and international authors will join the event. Among the top names are the prominent Indian journalist Barkha Dutt, celebrated author Uday Prakash and best-selling author Ira Trivedi. Over 30 interactive sessions will be held. Don't miss out on celebrating literature, poetry, politics and more near the tranquil waters of Lake Phewa.  
29 January to 1 February, Pokhara  
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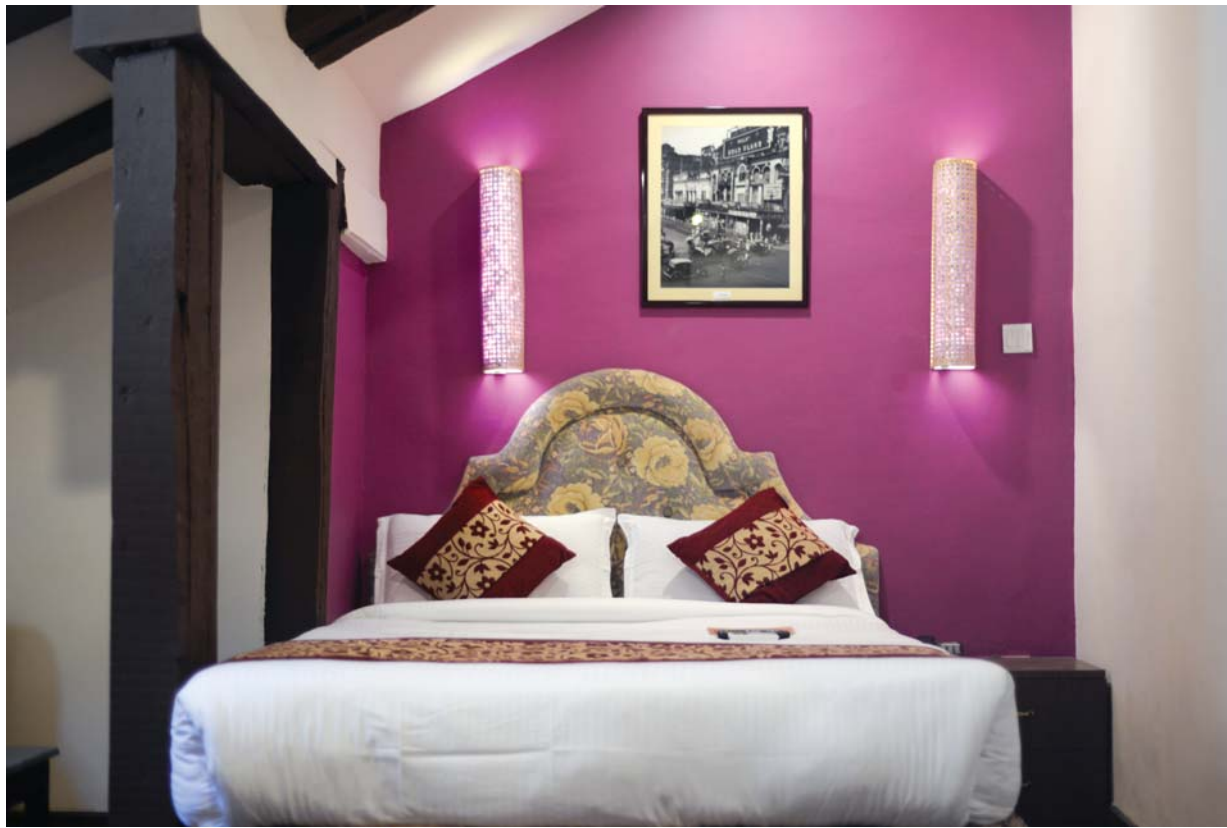
# OLD IS GOLD

For Mahendra Sakya, owner of the Heranya Hotel in Kathmandu, the earthquake that shook central Nepal in April last year presented a stroke of luck rather than a slump in business.

As the quake struck soon after the hotel opened in March, Sakya feared losing guests amidst the uncertainty. Instead, he found himself with a full house.

"It was luck," he says, as the building was largely left undamaged. Once deemed safe, Heranya welcomed the flood of media personnel and relief workers into Kathmandu. "The earthquake provided the real boost I needed to get my business going."

Built in 1936, the building was



initially leased out as office space to international organisations like UNICEF, WHO, and the Peace Corps. In 1966, it was slated for demolition when Sakya's father purchased it and converted it into the family home. Ten months ago, when Sakya renovated the building to open his hotel, he recognised its

historical value and opted to retain its integrity instead of erecting a completely new building.

Derived from 'hiranya', Sakya named his hotel Heranya as a tribute to his heritage. Meaning 'golden' in Sanskrit, 'hiranya' holds special significance to Sakya, who spent a month serving as a

custodian at the Hiranya Varna Mahabihar temple. His stint there, as well as years spent working abroad, helped deepen his sense of appreciation for his cultural roots.


Right down to the décor, the emphasis on preserving the past is apparent. With floors made of wood panels recycled from the old

palace windows, and rafter beams made of planks taken from the original structure, the furnishings pay homage to the past. Sakya deliberately repurposed the old materials in order to retain the building's character.

Keeping the inviting atmosphere alive today, Sakya and his family make the effort to personally greet guests and interact with them. His son, the



famous cinema actor Karma Sakya, works as an all-around handyman and is an actor in the Theatre Village, a playhouse located within the same compound.

For hotel owners like Sakya, heritage hotels provide a way to preserve the past while generating a means to support the future. Commenting on both the economic and sentimental rationales for preserving buildings, Sakya surmised, "We have a rich 800-year history. It would be a waste to throw everything away in our rush towards modernity." 

*Yu Wei Liew*

## Himalayan Beanz Coffee/Sara Bakery

I first began frequenting this cafe-cum-bakery in April last year when the earthquake forced many restaurants to close shop temporarily. Opening just a day after the quake, the Himalayan Beanz Coffee/Sara Bakery proved itself to be a survivor and a haven for those seeking a sense of normalcy amidst the continuing chaos and aftershocks. It helped that the facility had backup power and reliable wifi connectivity.

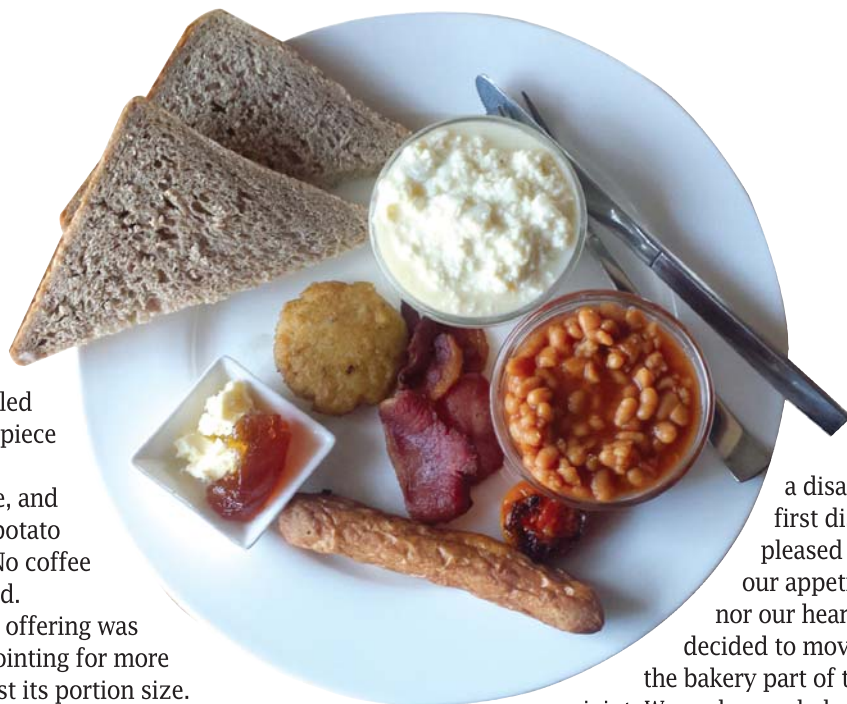
Eight months later, Sara (as I like to call it) has become a personal favourite; it's the place I invite friends to meet-up, a work space that remains mine as long as the coffee lasts, and a pick-me-up stop.

Usually my order is pretty simple: a cup of café latte (Rs 140) and an egg sandwich (Rs 210), two things that satiate my caffeine and food cravings. But as restaurant reviews demand, a critic must try more from the menu, don a more critical lens, and use all her five senses to judge even the simplest dish.

And so I entered Sara this week, for what must have been my umpteenth time, with the goal of venturing beyond its coffee drinks. To start I ordered the American Breakfast set (Rs 450); the other option was the English variant. I expected a generous plate of the archetypal meal. However, what was served were two slices of untoasted brown bread and measly serving of baked beans,

scrambled eggs, a piece of fried sausage, and a cold potato patty. No coffee included.

The offering was disappointing for more than just its portion size. The beans cooked in tomato and sugar sauce tasted like they came straight out of a can. The eggs were not light and creamy as scrambled eggs are supposed to be, but terribly runny and overcooked. The patty had a bland grainy taste and the fried sausage, which my meat-eating friend ate, was uncooked. Because I am a 'resilient' Nepali, I refrain from commenting on the cold bread because *batti thiyena*.




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After a disastrous first dish that pleased neither our appetite nor our hearts, we decided to move onto the bakery part of the joint. We each sampled a slice of the chocolate bread (Rs 75) and banana bread loaf (Rs 75). While the chocolate bread was dry and tasted stale, the banana bread was moist and delicious with the right amount of sweetness. Next, we picked a piece of the visually appetising chocolate tart (Rs 150). The crust was crumbly, the chocolate filling was light and the glaze on top was rich. All agreed this was the best of the lot.

On a separate visit I tried Sara's Veg Panini (Rs 210). The grilled sandwich came with the same side of radish and cabbage slaw, potato salad, and carrot pickle that is served with all other sandwiches. The dish was fulfilling albeit nothing to wax poetic about.

With no backup for wifi and electricity, the café has also ceased to be an ideal workspace during the current times of blockade and extreme loadshedding. The staff's inattentiveness is also slowly becoming an irritant. Regardless of who is on duty, the cashier always fails to inform a customer of a scheme that offers one, her seventh cup of coffee for free. The waiter usually takes half an hour to bring you a glass of water. Over time the barista and the wait staff have grown familiar, but sadly not friendlier; smiles are quite elusive among the staff.

Despite the many flaws of this place I still visit it regularly, like a lover in a bad relationship, well aware it would be better to search for a place that values and treats me right as a customer, but not finding the strength to break the attachment.   
*Khanchuwa*

*How to get there: Himalayan Beanz Coffee/Sara Bakery is located on the ground floor of a commercial building, right beside the Jawlakhel Ground.*



## NEPAL WHEREVER YOU ARE.

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For anyone who has ever wondered what it would be like to be stranded on an uninhabitable planet out in space, *The Martian* is essential viewing. The film portrays the dangers and beauties of space travel and is made by the great Ridley Scott, who has, inarguably (at least in the view of this critic) made some of the greatest science fiction films of our time.

*The Martian* which is adapted from a 2011 novel by Andy Weir, is a procedural along the lines of Vittorio De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* (1948)

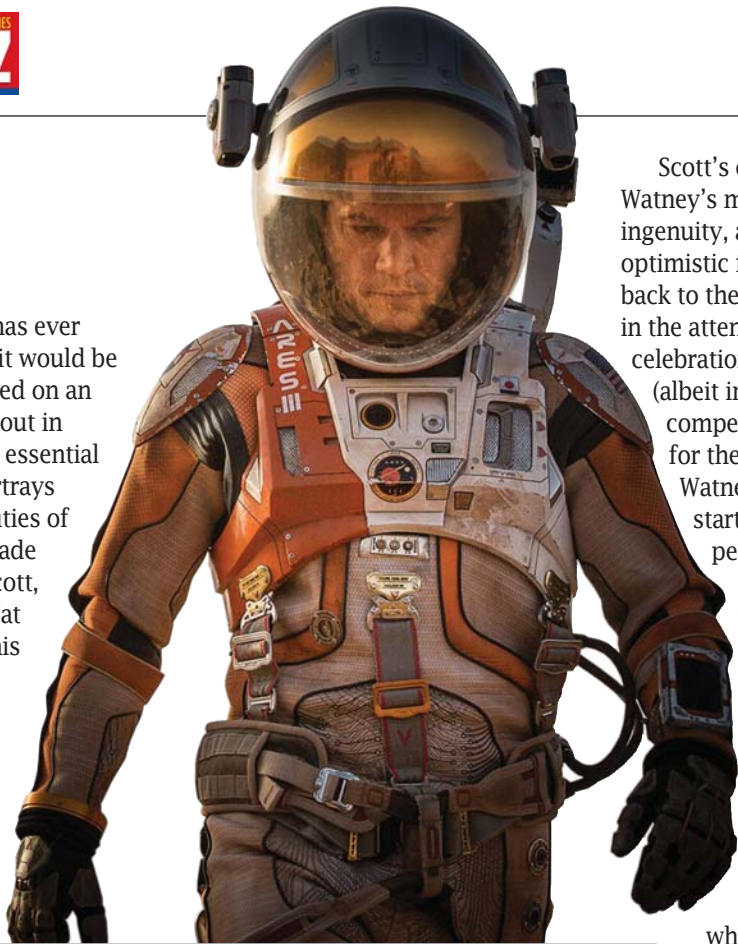


**MUST SEE**  
Sophia Pande

or Robert Bresson's *A Man Escaped* (1956) in that it provides minute details of what it would be like to be stranded in space, or in this case, on Mars.

Let I sound ridiculously lofty in referencing the great European neo-realists – let me move onto the plot: Matt Damon who plays Mark Watney – one of the members of the Ares III manned mission to Mars – is left behind due to a series

of very unfortunate incidents that leave his crew members thinking he is dead. With the Ares III crew on their way back to Earth on Hermes, their orbiting vessel, Watney regains consciousness to realise that his only chance of survival is to find a way to feed himself till the next Ares IV mission lands four years later, thousands of miles away from his current location.



Scott's character study of Watney's mixture of stoicism, ingenuity, and sometimes outright optimistic foolhardiness harks back to the cinema of Bresson in the attention to detail and the celebration of the mundane (albeit in space). While this is compelling enough to a viewer for the first third of the film, Watney's quotidian life soon starts to pall, thankfully the people at NASA figure out that their man is still up there right as your attention begins to wane.

What follows is an incredibly tense series of negotiations, frantic construction to send up a relief probe with extra food, and a heated debate on whether or not to tell the Hermes crew that they did indeed, however inadvertently, abandon one of their own on a planet far, far away.

Supported by a stellar cast (pardon the pun) including the likes of Jessica Chastain, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Kate Mara, and Jeff Daniels, *The Martian* is a riveting film that follows in the footsteps of the now classic Ron Howard film *Apollo 13* (1995), and of course, Alfonso Cuarón's stomach churning *Gravity* (2013), giving those of us on Earth an inkling or more of what it might be like to be in space.



nepalitimes.com

■ Trailer

## THE MARTIAN

### HAPPENINGS



**NOT CONFIDENT:** Madhesi Janadhikar Forum Chair Upendra Yadav (centre) at a press meet organised by the party in Birganj on Wednesday. Yadav expressed his doubts over the ability of the recently formed taskforce to resolve the current crisis.



BIKRAM RAI

**E-TALK:** Panelists speak at a discussion organised by the Independent Power Producers' Association of Nepal and Niti Foundation on the energy needs of the country on Wednesday.



RSS

**SPEAKING UP:** Members of various student groups protest outside Nepal Oil Corporation on Wednesday demanding an end to black market of petroleum products.



GOPEN RAI

**SHOE SALE:** A stall owner awaits customers at the Footwear Business Expo at Bhrikuti Mandap on Wednesday.



GOPEN RAI

**OVERLOAD:** A mechanic repairs a transformer at Nepal Electricity Authority's workshop in Lainchaur on Wednesday. More than 400 transformers have exploded in the city due to excessive power consumption since September.

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# Killed in the line of duty

Nepali migrant workers who return in coffins are too young and healthy to die

OM ASTHA RAI

Every day at Nepal's only international airport in Kathmandu, migrant workers queuing up to board planes for jobs overseas have to watch as coffins are unloaded from the cargo holds of aircraft.

On average, 1,500 Nepali workers fly out to the Gulf and Malaysia every day from Kathmandu Airport. And every day three bodies of dead migrant workers are air freighted back to Nepal.

Migrant workers are leaving to feed their families, educate their children, pay for the medical fees of aging parents. Most are cheated and abused, never earn what they are promised, are forced to return without savings and unable to pay back the loans they took to pay middlemen. Some don't even come back alive.

Between July 2014 to July

2015, more than 500,000 Nepalis migrated to work in construction sites in the Gulf states and in palm oil plantations and factories in Malaysia. During the same period, more than 1,000 migrant workers arrived shrink-wrapped and stuffed into plywood boxes.

"The rate at which Nepali workers are dying abroad is alarming because they are too young to die," says Ganesh Gurung, Nepal's foremost expert on labour migration. "If young and healthy people die at this rate, we must find out why it is happening."

Migrant workers who die abroad are not just young but also certified as healthy. Overseas contract workers must be between 18-45 and must also pass a medical test to be considered fit to work abroad. This is why public health experts find the high mortality rate surprising, especially considering that most are dying not from work-related accidents but of sudden heart



attacks at night.

Of the 1,002 Nepali migrant workers who died last year, 245 were said to have died in their sleep of Sudden Unexpected Death Syndrome (SUDS). They were fine, fit and slept like they always did, but never woke up. Much less numerous were

deaths in traffic and work-related accidents and suicides.

Autopsies are rarely performed, and most SUDS deaths are classified as 'heart attacks' or 'natural' since airlines do not carry bodies unless the cause of death is stated in the death certificate. Insurance companies

also do not compensate families of dead workers without death certificates clearly stating the cause.

"Without postmortem reports, it is difficult to believe what is written in the death certificates," says Gurung, "the employers could be hiding the actual cause

# Dying to work in Malaysia

Why a disproportionately high number of Nepali migrant workers are losing their lives in Malaysia

SONIA AWALE  
IN KUALA LUMPUR

Malaysia has the highest number of Nepali migrant workers overseas with 700,000 people employed in its plantations and factories. But the country also registers a disproportionate number of deaths of Nepalis.

Between July 2014-July 2015, 425 Nepali workers died in Malaysia, according to figures from the Foreign Employment Promotion Board in Kathmandu. Qatar, which has 550,000 workers from Nepal, had relatively fewer deaths: 178. Nine Nepali migrant workers died every week in Malaysia between July-November last year, according to the Nepali Embassy here, most of them from what health experts call sudden unexpected death syndrome (SUDS).

"Just a few months back another fellow Nepali worker simply dropped dead while walking to work," said Dilip Malla, 43, a security guard in the Damansara neighbourhood of the Malaysian capital. "We later learned it was a heart attack."

Malaysian doctors and labour activists are puzzled at



**AWAY FROM HOME:**  
Nepali workers at a plywood factory near Kuala Lumpur.

KUNDADIXIT

the abnormally high mortality rate from SUDS among Nepali overseas contract workers in Malaysia, disproportionately more deaths than Qatar, UAE and other Gulf countries.

Although research is sparse and autopsies are rarely performed on dead workers, factors could be hard work in hot and humid conditions, excessively air-conditioned living

quarters, worry about low pay and family back home, as well as consumption of illicit alcohol. An additional anxiety here is reduced earnings due to the falling Ringgit.

The money Nepali migrant workers send home forms 40 per cent of Nepal's total overseas remittances, and Nepali workers are paying with their lives.

Aegile Fernandez of the Malaysian labour rights group,

Tenaganita, says deaths of foreign workers are often overlooked despite the shocking figures. "We see high suicide rate and several cases of sudden death," she said, "the government should be more transparent and in-depth research should be carried out. Unless that is done we won't know why they are dying."

A Malaysian government hospital doctor who treats

migrant workers, and asked not to be named, said most sudden deaths are a result of cardiac arrest. "However I can't say for certain what is causing them, we never carry out any detailed investigation," she said.

Last year the Malaysian government decided to withdraw health subsidies and increased medical fees for non-nationals by 30 per cent. Public health experts here say this actually adds health risks to Malaysians, since many migrant workers also have TB or malaria.

Workers are also not aware of the precautions they need to take about the extreme climate in Malaysia compared to Nepal. "The Nepalis might not be used to such long hours of work, under scorching heat but they aren't given proper health and other training beforehand," adds Fernandez.

Last January, a riot broke out at a plywood factory in Kedah when Nepali workers protested the death of a colleague who had difficulty breathing and died because he wasn't taken to hospital in time. Protesting workers were arrested, and five deported. A month earlier two Nepalis in the same factory had also died of SUDS.

In another case, more than 1,000 Nepali workers protested at the factory in Johor when a fellow worker died due to lack of health care last August. Some 50 workers were arrested and most of them were sent back to Nepal.

"To find out why this is happening, we must include a clause for mandatory post-mortems for dead workers in labour agreements," said Ganesh





BIKRAM RAI

of death to evade legal action and having to pay compensation.”

The bizarre case in 2002 of a Sri Lankan domestic worker whose body was transported to Colombo from Kuwait without some organs like kidney was a shocking reminder of the vulnerability of migrant workers

Gurung, an expert on labour migration in Kathmandu. At present autopsies are not required.

After international outcry over the death of Nepali workers in Qatar, the authorities there argued that the fatalities corresponded to the national average for heart attack deaths in Nepal. However, statistics show that the death rate among migrant workers is ten times higher than in Nepal for sudden heart attacks among healthy young males.

Says Florida Sandanasamy of the Malaysian Trade Union Council: “Nepal is sending a huge labour force. Both the countries should be proactive and involved, because unless there is a political will to take action, migrant workers will continue to suffer and be abused.”

Another problem is that families of migrant workers in Nepal can collect insurance only if their relative dies on the job. Bimal Dhakal of the Nepal Association of Foreign Employment Agencies said: “We are lobbying to change this. Workers’ families must be eligible for insurance claims even if they die of sudden heart attacks.”

The list of woes migrant workers in Malaysia face is endless: breach of contract, being forced to work overtime, being paid below minimum wage, no sick leave, no insurance and medical benefits.

Security guard Malla tells a fellow-Nepali he can’t wait to go back home: “I won’t stay here long, and I want to tell Nepalis not to rush to come to Malaysia. There is nothing but pain here.” 🇳🇵

**HOME THEY BROUGHT THE WORKER DEAD:** Relatives prepare to cremate the body of Hemanta Shahi, who died in Saudi Arabia three months ago, on Tuesday at Pashupati. He was among 1,002 Nepali migrant workers who died abroad last year.

from South Asia. “If postmortem can be avoided, possibility of rich and powerful employers killing poor and vulnerable migrant workers to extract body parts cannot be ruled out,” says Gurung.

Laws in many labour destination countries require postmortems, but employers often persuade doctors to fill out death certificates in a way that allows them to evade liability.

Bimal Dhakal of the Nepal Association of Foreign Employment Agencies says most bodies of migrant workers are flown back to Nepal without autopsies. “Our government has failed to push for mandatory postmortems,” he adds.

Malaysia, Qatar and Saudi Arabia are top three labour destinations for Nepali migrant workers, and also where most workers die. Shamser Nepali is President of an association of 83 certified medical clinics that provide health checkups for migrant workers before they leave, and has made a breakdown of main causes of deaths.

“In Malaysia, migrant labourers work up to 18 hours a day and drink cheap spurious liquor before they sleep,” he says. “In Qatar it is the heat that kills. Nepali workers work outside in high temperature without precautions, sleep in air conditioned rooms and

their bodies can’t handle it. Consumption of toxic alcohol is also a major factor.”

In Saudi Arabia it is actually highway accidents that is the main killer of Nepali workers. “Road accidents occur elsewhere, too,” he says, “but in Saudi Arabia Nepali workers are killed by hit-and-run drivers.”

Shamsher Nepali says there are problems in health procedures in Nepal itself, where some clinics do not carry out proper checkups of workers. “The government must monitor clinics and scrap licenses of those who issue health certificate without conducting check-up,” he says.

Health experts have pointed out that migrant workers are not aware of the extreme conditions in which they have to work, the need to drink enough water, and about traffic rules. Janak Raj Regmi, Director at the Department of Foreign Employment says the government has made it mandatory for migrant workers to take an orientation course before departure. “For example, they are told how to cross multi-lane highways to avoid accidents, and what to do to avoid heat stroke,” he says.

However, many workers said the orientation was just a formality and they could easily get a certificate of participation without attending them. Labour recruiters, medical clinics and orientation companies use loopholes to bypass safeguards for workers. 🇳🇵

**nepalitimes.com**

Interactive Map

# Migration widows

Sumitra Rai was 18 when she got married to Bikram Yonghang of Ilam district. At 19 she gave birth to their first child. Shortly after, Yonghang left to work in Malaysia to earn for his family's upkeep. A year later his body was sent home in a coffin, he had been killed in a road accident.

Since her husband's death, Rai, now 22 (*pictured, right, below with her mother-in-law*) has spent much of her time commuting back and forth between Ilam and Kathmandu to claim his insurance money. This week the Foreign Employment Promotion Board, the government agency that needs to approve her insurance claim, rejected her application for the fifth time because of inadequate paperwork.



OMASTHA RAI

“Every time the officials tell me some paper is missing, and I need to go back to Ilam to get it,” she told us.

Rai’s village in Ilam is inaccessible by road and she has to walk for a day from the district headquarter. The Madhes unrest has also made it more difficult for the single mother to travel along the East-West highway.

“Once on our way home, we got stuck on the road for three nights,” said Rai, “I didn’t have enough money to buy food.”

Rai wants to start a shop with the insurance money, and hopes she can make enough to raise her son. “I do feel like giving up sometimes thinking about all the obstacles from officials, but I can’t. My son needs me,” she said.

The number of migrant workers dying abroad now averages three per day, breeding a new group of young widows in a country where the war had already left thousands without husbands.

Labour migration expert Ganesh Gurung says: “The rate at which young migrant workers are dying is resulting in an exponential growth in the number of young widows. The number of migration widows will soon surpass the number of war widows.”

Om Astha Rai

**nepalitimes.com**

Watch video of Sumitra Rai



# Doing it the right way

## Other countries hosting Nepali migrant labour should learn from Korea

SEULKI LEE

On 25 June last year, a trade union representing migrant workers in Korea gained legal status from the highest court for the first time, and leading it is Udaya Rai from Nepal (*seen at centre, picture below*).

This milestone in the Seoul-Gyeonggi-Incheon Migrants’ Union was the result of more than a decade of struggle led by Nepali workers with support from the Korean Trade Union.

South Korea started to import foreign workers for its booming construction, manufacturing and agriculture sectors after 1988 Seoul Olympics. The next decade saw rapid economic growth until the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-98 hit Korea hard.

The Industrial Trainee System of the 1990s was introduced to address a domestic shortage of low-skilled workers in labour-intensive small and medium-sized enterprises. This gave way in 2004 to the current Employment Permit System (EPS) that ensured that conditions for migrant labour was at par with Korean workers.

The legalisation of migrant labour unions and improvements in the rights of foreign workers was a result of struggle and public awareness-building by Korean civil society activists. Satire programs like *Bad Boss* on Korean Broadcasting System also helped turn public opinion in favour of better working conditions for migrants.



UDAYA RAI/FACEBOOK



KISMAT MANI SHRESTHA

Nepal started sending workers to Korea under the EPS agreement in 2007, and there are now 33,000 Nepalis employed in Korea. Among 15 countries that Korea imports labour from, Nepal’s annual quota is maintained at above 5,000 level. In recent three years, there were 5234 Nepali workers employed in in Korea in 2013, 5,939 in 2014 and 5,300 in 2015. The majority of them are recruited in Gyeonggi and Gyeongnam Provinces.

Korean employers prefer Nepali workers because they are seen to be hard-working and good-natured. “We do not hesitate to do extra work like night duty that Koreans don’t do anymore, maybe that is why they prefer us,” explains Bhupendra Khatri, 32, who worked in a metal foundry in Gyeongnam Province from 2003-2010.

Despite the official EPS system, there were Nepalis who entered Korea with tourist visas and stayed on illegally. Kismat Mani Shrestha, 55, was one of them who went to Korea in the 1990s and stayed on to work at a garment factory in Gyeonggi Province.

“We started working without a proper visa, and our boss kept our passports and never returned them,” recalls Shrestha. Still, workers like him organised and demanded better pay and working conditions.

It is partly due to the struggle of pioneer Nepali workers like Shrestha as well as Korean labour activists that foreign workers in Korea today are guaranteed minimum wage, insurance and health benefits under the G2G (government to government) agreement.

Since early 1990s, protests for minimum rights of migrant workers also took place in Myeongdong Cathedral, Seoul, the symbolic space for South Korea’s human rights and democratisation movement. Korea’s strong labour movement used to make international headlines through self-immolations and strikes.

Korea used to export its own labour to construction projects in the Middle East in 1970s, but turned into a labour importing country. There is therefore considerable support for the rights of migrant workers from countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.

However, Nepali workers in Korea are still not treated as well as their Korean colleagues. They earn less for overtime, there are delays in salaries, as well as verbal abuse. However, Nepalis in Korea fare much better than their compatriots in the Gulf and Malaysia.

“Nepalis working in Korea are protected by the inter-government agreement, but in the Gulf and Malaysia we need to help them to be aware of their rights and contracts,” says Khatri who is a member of the advocacy group, Asian Human Rights and Culture Development Forum.

As a migrant worker himself, Khatri feels the pain of uneducated Nepalis he meets at airports. He says: “We try to help Nepali workers before they go abroad with advice through a hotline.” 🇳🇵



# The main points once again

Before we get into the nitty gritty of what is really happening in the country this week, let us look at the main points of the news.

**Mahat Mahotsav**  
Ex-Financial Minister Mahat is voted the Best ex-Finance Minister in Asia and the World 2015 by The Banker. Don't know quite how that works, if he is the best ex-finance minister in the world, isn't he already automatically the best finance minister in Asia? And who is the Best Finance Minister Dead or Alive that Nepal Has Ever Had? Just so there is no ambiguity, The Banker should also confer Mr Mahat the additional award of Best Finance Minister in the Known Universe so we have it written in stone that there is none other like him.

**Mumbo Jumbo Cabinet**  
Just when you thought the jumbo cabinet could not get any bigger comes news that the Oli-garchy is crowd-sourcing the government with another expansion to save itself from oblivion. Here is a prime minister who can thumb his nose at the leader of the world's second most populous nation, but he is so scared that the two-member (Sangh) Parivar Party will pull the rug from under his coalition that he inducts the Family Federation for World Peace and Unificationism of the Holy Spirit Association of World Christianity of Sun Myung Moon into the government as State Minister for Inner Peace and Tranquility. To make way for more ministers, however, even the Moonie Ministry will be divided into the Ministry of Sodom and the Ministry of Gommorah. By the end of this month, the Cabinet will be so large that the weekly meetings of the Council of Ministers will be held at the National Stadium.

**North or South?**  
A deep throat in GONe speaking off the record because he did

not want to be named due to the sensitivity of the issue, but whose identity I can only reveal to you, dear reader, on condition that you keep it a topmost secret, and he is none other than press adviser at the PMO Mr Pramod Dahal, who has revealed that the Right Honourable Prime Minister is at the moment feeling like a sweet potato ensconced between two boulders and in the horns of a dilemma about whether to go to New Delhi first, or Beijing. China invited him first, so he is inclined to go there before he goes to India, but if he does that New Delhi may once more throw a tantrum and not lift the blockade till the second half of this century. #Whattodo? As usual in these matters, a compromise can be found acceptable to all parties, so the Donkey's suggestion is that Oli, Modi and Xi all meet together in a neutral venue equidistant from Beijing and Delhi, like the International Space Station.

**Blockade to continue**  
Wherever KPO goes first, the unofficial blockade is expected to officially continue till the unforeseeable future, according to unusually unreliable sources. They confirm that just as in 1989, the blockade will only be lifted after there is regime change in Kathmandu. Which means the Primate Minister has to either be reincarnated in his next life as a fruit bat, or he has to step down, whichever comes first. PKD and the Kangresis seem to have got the message and are already manoeuvring not to let KPO continue beyond 29 February (yes it's a Big Leap Forward Year), bring the Madhesi parties into the fold and set up a government of national unity to go for early elections. PKD usually goes to BKK or KL to meet handlers, and that is where he is now awaiting further instructions.

**Raxaul Mess**  
Everyone thought that after the Raxaul Mess that was feeding 1,000 Nepali agitators two

square meals a day was closed, the blockade would be lifted. Then we thought it would be lifted after Sushma Aunty said the border would be open in a week, God willing. Don't know which God she was referring to, but it doesn't look like He was very willing. Then we thought the the border would open after Foreigner Minister Kamal Thapa shook hands with Abhay Thakuri, but no such luck. The only conclusion the Ass can come to is that that India's chokehold will continue for two reasons: too much money is being made from smuggling diesel and gas by too many people on both sides of the border, and second, there is such intense competition in Kathmandu and New Delhi to take credit for lifting the blockade that the political forces all cancel each other out. NaMo wants to project himself as the one who brought the feuding Nepali sides together so he can be seen as the saviour, and the one to lift a blockade that he himself was responsible for imposing. Here in Kathmandu KPO wants to deflect blame from the prolonged shortages by going to Delhi and having the blockade lifted. The Kangresis want the blockade to continue and be lifted only when they get back to power. The blockade is the best thing that happened for the royal-right ultra-nationalists because now they don't have to work very hard to make Nepalis hate India. Everyone benefits from this siege, so why lift it?

And now for some International News.  
North Korea has exploded a nuclear device, but we don't know whether it was an Atomic Bomb, a Hydrogen Bomb or a Stink Bomb.



The Ass

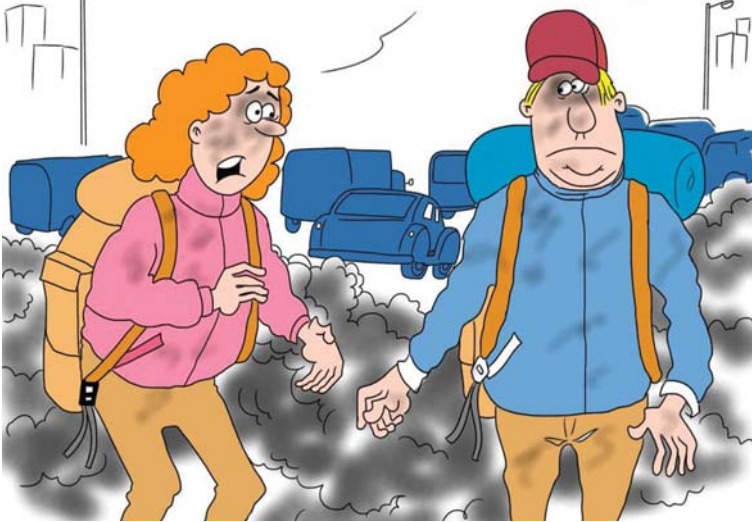
## PAST PRESENT FUTURE

DIWAKAR CHETTRI

Isn't there supposed to be a fuel shortage?



What are these vehicles running on?



I wouldn't be surprised if they're using firewood!



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