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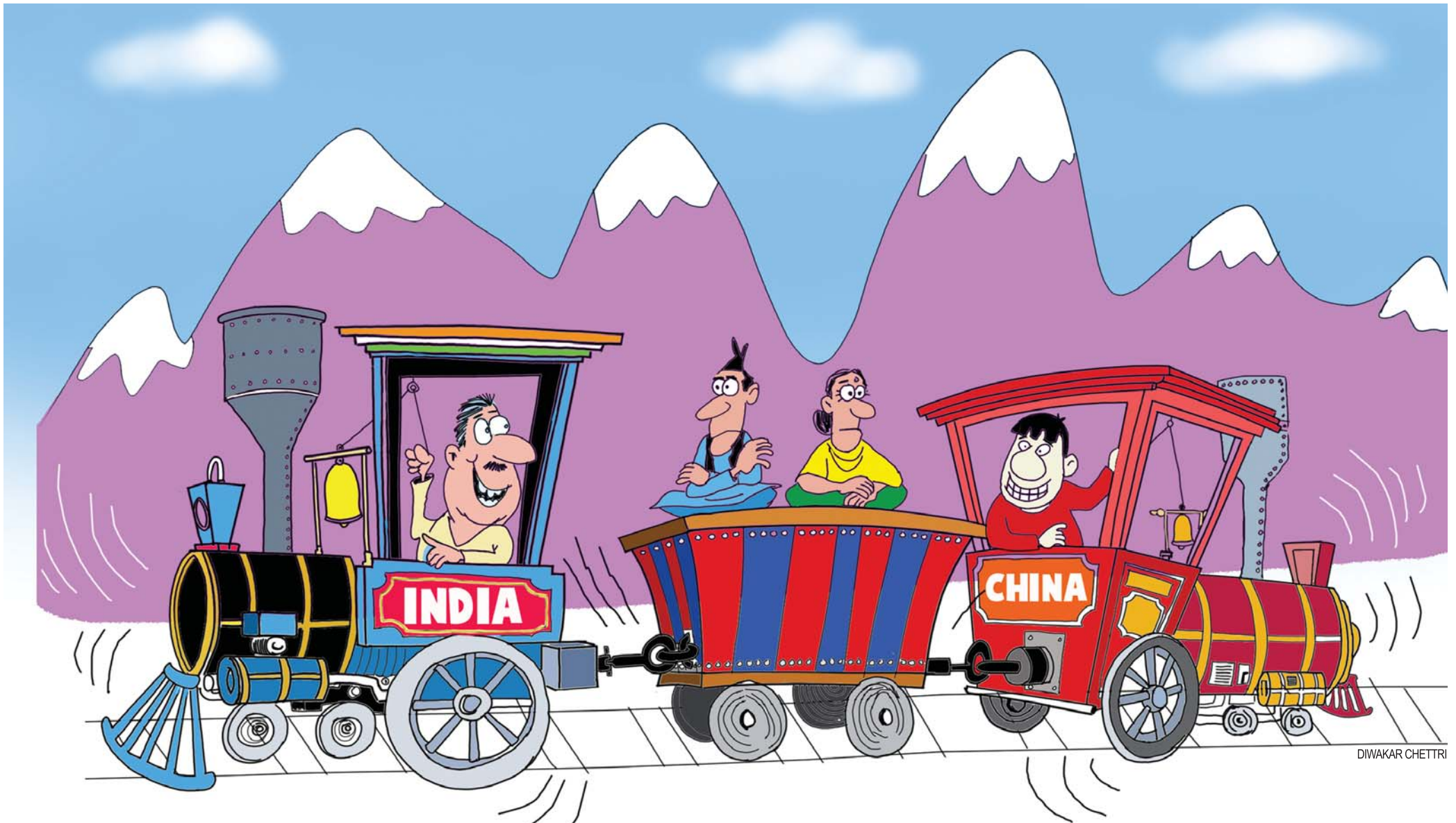
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Hitching our wagon

Venezuela is in the news worldwide for US-backed attempts to bring down the Nicolas Maduro government, but it is making headlines in Nepal because of conflicting statements by the ruling party and the government on a country on the other side of the world.

NCP co-Chair Pushpa Kamal

Dahal issued a harshly-worded statement condemning US 'imperialism', and he did it while Prime Minister K P Oli was in Davos trying to make the West forget that Nepal has a Communist government. Asked for a clarification by the US Embassy, the

A YAM BETWEEN 3 BOULDERS
EDITORIAL
PAGE 2

Ministry of Foreign Affairs fell back on more diplomatic language.

The Venezuela controversy exposed a fault-line between ex-UML and ex-Maoist elements within the NCP. It also brought into sharp focus Nepal's need now to balance not just its northern and southern neighbours, but also the West. The pre-1990 bipolar world has turned into a multi-polar Cold War, and analysts say Nepal needs to be more careful about not being dragged into any of the alliances.

Nepal's location makes this new geopolitics much more sensitive than ever before. China is a rising global power, India is aspiring to be the same, and America is trying to rope New Delhi into its geostrategic alliance. Nepal has to take advantage of the economic powerhouses to the north and south by hitching its wagons to the Indian and Chinese locomotives, and try to get them to pull it in the same direction. For this it needs a new coherent foreign policy strategy that does not allow outside powers to back proxies in Kathmandu.

LOVE RECTANGLE

Bhairaja Panday and Arit Baral analyse Nepal's new geopolitical reality.

PAGE 14-15





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GOING PLACES TOGETHER

A YAM BETWEEN 3 BOULDERS

Nothing has exposed the ideological chasm between the ex-UML and ex-Maoist components of the ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP) more than the two widely divergent statements issued on Venezuela this week.

Who would have thought that the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela would loom so large in exposing fissures in a government of a country on the other side of the world with which the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal has no real strategic interests.

The Co-chair of the NCP and prime minister-in-waiting Pushpa Kamal Dahal fired off a statement in full support of the glorious revolutionary comrades under Nicolas Maduro, and denounced US intervention.

Oli looked uncharacteristically flummoxed when asked about Dahal's missive when he returned from Davos. The statement also came less than a month after Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali's meeting with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Washington DC during which the two discussed implementation of America's \$500 million assistance through the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Nepal Compact for road and power connectivity.

The two are also understood to have discussed America's Indo-Pacific Strategy which, together with the MCC, are seen as a counter by China as a challenge to its Belt Road Initiative (BRI) which Nepal has signed on to. Gyawali trod a tightrope to balance the geostrategic interests of the two global powers, and clarified that Nepal was not going to join any US-led alliance in the Indo-Pacific.

The renaming of the US Pacific Command into Indo-Pacific Command last year, designating India as a Major Defence Partner, the joint Malabar 2017 exercise in the Indian Ocean involving the navies of India, Japan and the US, the revival of the Quad Alliance of Japan, Australia, the US and India as an effort to 'contain' China, are all indications that Sino-US competition is heating up in the region.

Asian countries may be nervous about China's growing economic and political clout, but Beijing feels it is being encircled by America and its allies. Still, many Southeast and South Asian countries do not want to be forced to choose between America and China.

Which is what makes Dahal's statement on Venezuela so damaging for Nepal at a time when the Foreign Ministry is trying to steer a neutral course

that would benefit Nepal's trade, investment and infrastructure. The Ministry's damage control this week was with a much more balanced statement saying Nepal respected the democratic will of the people of Venezuela, and opposed foreign interference.

During the war, as Chairman Prachanda Dahal famously paraphrased King Prithvi Narayan Shah to say that Nepal was "a dynamite between two boulders". It seems he has not outgrown his penchant for hyperbole.

There was a time when Nepal just had to worry about balancing its giant northern and southern neighbours, but the world is now multi-polar and getting to be a much more complicated place. Our neighbours are drawn into a global power struggle, and being a yam between three boulders, Nepal has to be careful about how America's increasingly erratic behaviour will affect its precarious equidistance between India and China.

A place to start would be to forge a united and coherent foreign policy strategy that prevents outside powers from using one or other party or faction in Nepal to push their strategic agenda.

Nepal must forge a united and coherent foreign policy strategy that does not allow outside powers to back one or other faction of the ruling party to push their strategic agenda.

It has to be said that the US has indeed come across, as it has in the past, as a global bully throwing its weight around with sanctions and threats against a poor and badly-governed country. When will America learn to pick someone its size?

But Dahal made a boo-boo by aligning his party, and by association Nepal, needlessly in a power struggle reminiscent of the Cold War.

There were two problems with the NCP statement. First was the timing; why would Dahal want to issue it while his party co-chair Prime Minister K P Oli was in Davos trying hard to make a good impression on foreign investors?

Oli had admitted before he left that his job was to convince the international community and multinational companies that his government was 'Communist' only in name, and that Nepal was open for business. Even if Oli had been only partially successful in removing the stigma, Dahal's communique firmly identified Nepal as an adherent of an obsolete ideology and a relic of the past.

The only explanation we can give to this juvenile behaviour is that Dahal has a sad case of FOMO. By launching a heat-seeking missile aimed at no one in particular, Dahal may also have been trying to re-establish his rather frayed Communist credentials. But the unnecessarily strong language denouncing American 'imperialism' which was creating 'chaos and violence' was inappropriate, undiplomatic and counterproductive.

10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Just as this issue of *Nepali Times* deals with Nepal's geopolitical dilemma, ten years ago in issue #436 of 30 January - 5 February 2009, Prashant Jha reported from New Delhi about how India had a 'wait-and-watch' policy towards the newly-elected Maoist government led by Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal. Excerpt:

'India is getting increasingly concerned about the slide in Nepal, but doesn't think it warrants a policy shift just yet. Indian officials admit that they are unhappy with the Maoists: "They have not delivered on their promises," one official told us, "their commitment to democracy seems doubtful. They are warming up to China. Not good signs."

But sources insist India continues to support the peace and constitution writing process and will not destabilise the present arrangement. "It will be good if non-Maoist actors add pressure on the Maoists. But we will not back any effort to topple the government right now," one senior official told Nepali Times.'



ONLINE PACKAGES



The hiking season in the Himalaya is no longer restricted to spring and autumn. Winter trekking is catching up and is now possible not because of new roads, guest houses and facilities along the trails. Let *Nepali Times* take you on a winter trek to Annapurna Base Camp. *Story: page 8-9.*



Shailee Theatre has been encouraging children's drama, and recently concluded its 10th National Children's Theatre Festival where 20 plays were staged. Go online to watch some of its productions. *Story: page 12.*

THE NEXT BIG ONE

Every reason to consider this more seriously ('Ain't seen nothing yet', Editorial, #944)! The media in general should take a more serious role in encouraging better preparedness.

Bharat Dutta Koirala

KATHMANDU AIRPORT

A country that relies heavily on the tourism should have an airport that is easily accessible and clean ('Kathmandu Airport is Nepal in a microcosm', Anil Chitrakar, #944). Nepal needs a sweeping change.

Samisha Joshi LaMeyer

■ The problem is that Nepal is so much more than just the airport, so the authorities know they need to do nothing about it because people will still want to visit.

Michael Roche

■ Navigating Tribhuvan Airport is like walking through Asan, chaotic and unsystematic ('Try Visiting Nepal', Sewa Bhattarai, #944). The senior airport management and relevant ministries cannot be bothered with making service improvements.

Raghu Shrestha

GURKHAS

My heart breaks for Gurkhas and their families ('Gurkha grandparents', Sikuma Rai, #944). We owe them so much. Sending them love and respect.

Sue Everall

PRAISE

Best newspaper in Nepal, not afraid to write critical articles. Thank you for your courage.

Stephan Kocher

■ Nepal Times is a beautiful newspaper.

Jasmyn Andele

FELLOW COUNTRYMEN

This is very sad but not surprising ('Nepali restaurateurs fined in Finland', Namrata Sharma, #944). As thousands of Nepalis travel abroad for work, more reliable information is needed before the trip. Maila was brave and he got justice.

Eira Torvinen

WHAT'S TRENDING



Kathmandu Airport is Nepal in a microcosm

by Anil Chitrakar
The experience of going through the Kathmandu airport is not simple, not easy, not smooth, not efficient, not welcoming, not respectful, not friendly, and definitely not fast. Many readers related to Anil Chitrakar's ½ Full Column last week and flooded our feed with comments. Visit nepalitimes.com to join the on-going discussion.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

Most commented

Ain't seen nothing yet

Editorial
The 2015 earthquake was just a forewarning of an even bigger disaster to come, and response to it should now encompass the whole country. This hard-hitting Editorial citing the latest reports by seismologists was widely shared by readers. Go online if you missed it last week.

Most popular on Twitter

Nepali restaurateurs fined in Finland

by Namrata Sharma
Nepali restaurants in Finland are so popular they have replaced Indian diners. But there is a dark side to this success: some Nepali owners have been found guilty of human trafficking, discrimination and tax evasion. Readers were not surprised by the news, but strongly condemned the culture of Nepalis cheating Nepalis overseas.

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS

Nepali Times @nepalitimes
EDITORIAL Seismologists say moderate quakes like 2015 earthquake can actually trigger future megaquakes. These urgent warnings came as Nepal marked the anniversary of the 1934 megquake last week as National Earthquake Safety Day.

👍 🔄 🌟 ...

Sushma Joshi @joshi_sushma
Ready to be terrified? Nepal doesn't have good horror movies but it does have good editorials.

default20924 @_default20934
To believe that a megquake like the one in 1505 won't happen again is to fool oneself. New earthquake-related laws and regulations must be passed and the safety standards raised to design and build public/private infrastructures.

Ujwal Thapa @ujwalthapa
Most important : #Leadership is #Preparedness

Nepali Times @nepalitimes
Elderly parents of British Gurkhas are attracted to Britain because of facilities like monthly allowance, house rent, extra heating allowance for winter, and free health care. But does that mean they are happy there? @sikumarihannon reports from London

👍 🔄 🌟 ...

Mark Horrell @markhorrell
Interesting article in @nepalitimes on Gurkha grandparents - despite free health care, elderly ex-Gurkhas and their families in UK ache for their home in Nepal. No surprise, I guess.

Anita Gurung @Anita21Gurung
If they have children and grandchildren in U.K. then it is a worthwhile experience. They go due to poor infrastructure in Nepal.

Weekly Internet Poll #945

Q. What is the worst part about Tribhuvan International Airport?

Total votes: 178

Cramped space: **7%**
Long cues: **6%**
Confusion: **7%**
All of the above: **80%**

Weekly Internet Poll #946
To vote go to: www.nepalitimes.com

Q. Is the constitutional crisis in Venezuela of any concern to Nepal?



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Nepal trekking industry in damage

The Tourism Ministry cracks down on fake rescues, plans to counter negative publicity

Sharad Ojha

Responding to a slew of reports in the international media about insurance fraud in the trekking industry, the Nepal government says it is cracking down on perpetrators, while planning action against an insurance investigator said to be behind the sustained negative coverage.

Reports this week in *The New York Times* and *The Independent* quote a letter written to Minister of Tourism Rabinendra Adhikari by Jonathan Bancroft, Managing Director of Traveller Assist, in which he has threatened to get his clients to cut coverage if Nepal does not press charges against 17 trekking agencies, helicopter companies and hospitals it says are involved in claiming insurance for fake rescues.

Both stories quote Danny Kaine of Traveller Assist, who is said to

have personally delivered the letter to the ministry in which Bancroft bluntly writes: 'To be clear, this is an ultimatum! If our clients stop issuing travel insurance policies in Nepal ... (it) will have a devastating effect on the tourism industry in Nepal, and your country's reputation.' (See box, overleaf.)

The government appears to be taking the damaging media coverage seriously, and called an emergency meeting in Singha Darbar on Tuesday with Tourism Minister Rabinendra Adhikari, representatives of the Ministry of Finance, the Central Bureau of Investigation and others.

Adhikari told *Nepali Times*: "We are committed to cracking down on insurance fraud, and set up a Committee last year to investigate. After that, the number of cases of helicopter rescues, especially unnecessary ones, had actually started to drop. Which is why we are concerned by the continued leaks to the international press, and the threatening tone of this letter."

The Ministry of Tourism says its statistics show that there were only 186 helicopter rescues in the autumn

trekking season last year, a sharp drop from the 1,532 between March and May of 2018. (See graph.)

In the letter to the minister, Bancroft says his company had issued the 15 February deadline since 'not a single charge has been laid' on the companies named in the ministry's report, which it said were still in business.

The incidence of fraudulent rescues claiming insurance has risen in the past four years, as reported by this newspaper and others. Some trekking companies, in collusion with helicopter charters and hospitals, entice trekkers to opt for medical evacuation at an inflated fee, and share the profits. There have even been rumours of guides deliberately spiking the food of trekkers so they fall sick.

Stung by the flurry of reports, the Tourism Ministry set up an investigation committee which issued its report in August. The Ministry then drafted new rules governing search, rescue, and treatment of trekkers to check fraud.

However, Tourism Ministry officials themselves admit that the rules have not been enforced because of a lack of manpower. Says

Secretary Krishna Devkota: "We are committed to investigate and take action against the guilty. These scams are having a negative impact on the industry ahead of Visit Nepal 2020."

A source at the Tourism Ministry disclosed that last August, after the investigation committee presented its report, a delegation led by Nabaraj Dahal of Trekking Agents Association of Nepal met the co-Chair of the ruling NCP Pushpa Kamal Dahal who then put pressure on Minister Adhikari to let

those named off the hook.

Some of the unscrupulous companies involved in the scam enjoy high-level political protection because they are party donors, offer free helicopter rides during elections, or provide complimentary hospital treatment.

Prakash C Lohani of Alpine Rescue Service which represents half the foreign insurers says: "The rescue business needs to be better regulated. We need to punish the guilty, and stop maligning the whole trekking industry."





PHOTOS: RESPONSIBLE ADVENTURES

control mode

Those involved in fake rescues play on the grey zone in which even physicians are not able to tell if a patient suffering from altitude sickness or severe diarrhoea needs immediate evacuation or will get better by simply descending and taking medicine. Many trekkers themselves agree to be evacuated at the slightest sign of trouble.

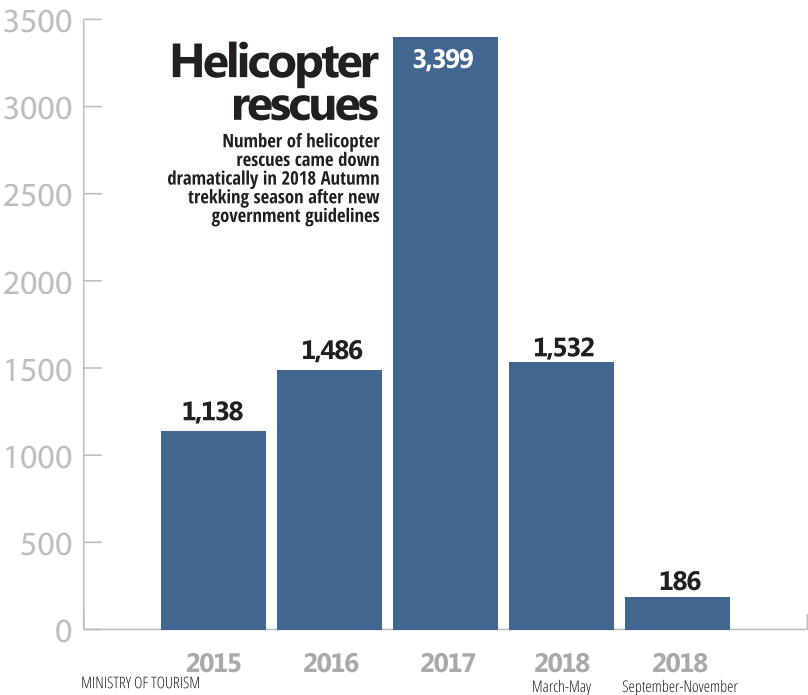
Ram Sapkota of Himalayan Social Journeys says the real problem is unnecessary rescues rather than fake rescues. “Some trekkers get seriously sick, others pretend to be more ill than they are. Up in the mountains no one wants to take a risk,” he adds.

After the investigation and new rules, the Tourism Ministry says the number of unnecessary rescues have gone down. Strict enforcement of the guidelines, setting an upper limit for helicopter rescues, a fixed price for hospital treatment, and monitoring compliance would prevent price gouging.

“All they have to do to control fraud rescues is to enforce existing rules,” says Rajendra Bahadur Singh of Mountain Helicopters, who knows of rescues in which charter companies evacuate more than one trekker, but bill them separately. There is also conflict of interest: some travel

and trekking agencies represent insurance companies, and approve final compensation payments to themselves.

Says mountaineer Kaji Sherpa: “This scandal has tarnished Nepal’s image, and that of the many upright companies here. There should not be a cover-up, we should correct ourselves and book the guilty.”



What is Traveller Assist?

This Ireland-based company works on behalf of international insurance underwriters in Nepal and other ‘difficult countries’ on medical assistance, insurance processing and ‘cost containment’ – a euphemism for investigating and reducing false claims.

All stories in the international media in the past year exposing insurance fraud in Nepal’s trekking industry quote Traveller Assist’s Danny Kaine, an ex-soldier and a frequent Nepal visitor. This week, Kaine is said to have delivered a letter from Traveller Assist Managing Director Jonathan Bancroft addressed to the Minister of Tourism Rabindra Adhikari in which he has threatened to get his clients to stop issuing coverage for Nepal after 15 February unless those guilty of fraudulent rescues are charged. The letter was leaked to international media and got wide coverage.

Ministry officials say they are now strictly monitoring unnecessary rescue flights, and claim that the numbers have come down. “We are surprised by these damaging leaks to the international press at a time when we were cleaning up the industry,” said a Ministry official. “We have taken note of the threatening tone of the letter. Who are they to be giving an ultimatum to the Government of Nepal on behalf of their clients?”

Indeed, reputable agencies and hospitals in Nepal, while admitting there are dodgy companies involved in insurance scams, accuse Kaine of writing them emails soliciting all insurance business for himself. Ministry officials also refuted Kaine’s claim that he has an agreement with the government to uncover rescue fraud. The Police Central Investigation Bureau is reportedly probing Kaine’s activities in Nepal, and confirmed that he flew out this week.

Many media reports quote Traveller Assist’s statistics on the fraudulent rate for the 3,200 helicopter rescues in 2018. Doctors specialising in high altitude medicine interviewed by *Nepali Times* say that even if a company had access to so many medical records of rescues, it would still be difficult to determine the exact condition of the patient, and whether a rescue was necessary or not in cases of Acute Mountain Sickness.

In an interview in Kathmandu last week, Kaine denied writing emails to trekking agencies and hospitals, and demanded to see them. He added: “I don’t have any personal interest in this, but Nepali companies are cheating American, British and Australian insurance firms as reported in the international media. If the guilty are not charged, we will increase international attention on this issue.”

In a separate note to *Nepali Times* on 29 January, Kaine said the emails about him were ‘fabricated ... by one of the companies named in the fraudulent investigation’. He went on to accuse this paper of ‘acting on behalf of the companies accused of fraud ... a very dangerous precedent to set for a journalist from a respected news agency in Nepal’.

Earlier, in answer to a simple email query about whether Kaine really worked for Traveller Assist, Jonathan Bancroft was needlessly abrasive, and accused this reporter of trying to play him off against Kaine. Bancroft went on to add: ‘Mr Sharad, after asking some questions in the industry in Nepal about you ... (it) ... gives me the inclination to no longer communicate with you or your organization...’.

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Turkish Airlines adds Lusaka, the capital of Zambia, to its expanding network as its 55th destination in Africa, with two flights per week with stopovers in Dar es Salaam.



The city is a home to one of the seven natural wonders of the world, the Victoria Falls, which is the most important tourism destination of the country. Introductory round trip fares are available from Istanbul to Lusaka starting at \$749.

Reduced prices

Dish Home has announced reduced prices on all of its monthly packages, starting from 24 January. The prices range from Rs250-400 depending on the type of packages which are Basic, Medium, Super HD and Premium HD. Customers who activated the network before the date can pay the offered monthly fee on the course of annual recharge.

All new Duster

Renault announces the launch of its all new Renault Duster RXS petrol variant at its showroom in Naxal. Equipped with a modern 7inch touch screen infotainment system, dual airbags, gun metal finish alloy wheels, and many other new features, the Duster RXS variant is powered by a 1.5



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Transit spa

Cathay Pacific has opened ‘The Sanctuary’ by Pure Yoga in its Business Class lounge at The Pier in Hong Kong to practice yoga and meditation through video guidance, which is also available inflight. Additionally, Diamond and Gold Marco Polo Club members arriving in Hong Kong are offered complimentary one-day access to any Pure Fitness centre or a choice of any Pure Yoga class up to 12 times a year.

Financial bridge

NMB Bank and One to Watch signed a MoU to work jointly for meeting the financial requirement of companies,



awaiting foreign investments, under a bridge finance arrangement. One to Watch will be identifying and linking entities with viable investment opportunities, while the bank provides bridge financing facilities until the approval of foreign investment.





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John R Edwards, a life in the shadow

Eclipsed by his dominant elder brother, JRE was the unsung hero of the early Tiger Tops

The skinny brown-haired Englishman with tattooed arms, soft eyes and an engaging smile strode towards me down the Chitwan forest trail, a small white dog trotting at his heels. Sweat and dust matted the hairs on a pair of chopstick-thin legs, topped by baggy green shorts.



John Edwards always seemed to be in a hurry, unless he was propping up the stone bar at the end of the day with a Khukri rum and coke in hand. There was little choice of brand in 1970s Nepal. “We are deep in the national park and one day a leopard will get Toyo,” he used to say, and sure enough it did. His strutting pet peacock, Henrietta, went the same way.

The unsung hero of the early years of Tiger Tops, John R Edwards (JRE as we called him in inter-office memos, although Raymond was a well kept secret) was a master at selecting camp sites deep within the jungle or on the Park perimeter.

His building background enabled him to construct golghar, decks, blinds, shelters, bridges, landings and tent platforms from wood, bamboo, grass and river stone blending seamlessly into the landscape. He taught by example, developing teams of talented locals and establishing what became widely celebrated as the Tiger Tops style. Rather than expand the main treetop Jungle Lodge in Chitwan, the eco-philosophy was to restrict impact with small satellite camps around the Park. It was JRE who made it happen.

Rescued from a self-confessed drifting life as an occasional builder and seaman, John was summoned from the UK to Nepal by his big brother AV Jim Edwards soon after he and Chuck McDougal had



MEMORIES: Lisa Choegyal with John Edwards at Tiger Tops Tented Camp in Chitwan 1974 (left). Tenzing Norgay was a frequent visitor to Tiger Tops, with John Edwards in 1978 (above).

acquired the management of Tiger Tops in 1972. John’s practical hands-on construction talents were deployed at the grass roots level, his love of adventure blossoming in the wild places of the Nepal Tarai throughout Jim’s conservation tourism ventures. John became an invaluable operations manager, Jim’s trusted lieutenant and right hand man. He recced river trips, jungle treks and fishing opportunities, quietly working his magic, stamping his gentle humour on Tiger Tops lodges, camps and wildlife activities. Fresh from UK and sensitive to his humble background, it took John time to assimilate into jungle life. When I first arrived in Chitwan, he could be found leading a group of tourists armed like a sahib on shikar with a shotgun that only we knew was for show. After a late night session at the Lodge bar, he survived a close encounter with George the resident rhino, who was not as tame as he looked.

Our amusement was not appreciated when John led a group of guests, creeping silently through the night to the hide where tigers were viewed on their kill. Only tonight it was a false alarm, no tiger in sight and the buffalo bait very much alive and mooing. One evening he left a little old American lady behind in the grass blind – we were only alerted by her plaintive “coo-ees” which were in danger of attracting a curious tigress. Escorting the British royal family on one of their many visits, he broke all taboos by grabbing the untouchable Queen to lift her over a flooded ditch. John savoured the vicarious glamour of riding elephants and hanging out in the haitisar but needing four elephants at six o’clock for a morning guest safari he never lived it down when six elephants appeared at four o’clock. However when the kitchen caught fire, John was on the thatched roof attempting to douse the engulfing flames while I, tallest of all, thrust

up the buckets of water passed down the line from the Reu River throughout that dramatic night. John developed a rare empathy with the Tarai locals, spoke their language and passed on his building craft. He honoured their woodland spirits, appreciated their local wisdom, sympathised with their traditions, and was respected in return. One night he bravely attempted to sleep in an alleged *dakini*-haunted room at the Lodge, only to be violently disturbed by its female spectre. Often his forehead would be smeared with rice and colour, relics of a shikari puja, blood sacrifices deep in the forest. And he never lost his passion for a good fish curry. John had British humour, and could always be relied on for an irreverent story, dreadful joke or witty one-liner. My favourite was the Rolls, a car that “rolls down the hills but can hardly get up them”. At his wedding to Oreno, a spear wielding Naga lady swathed in red, white and black hand weave

in a dusty bungalow garden now long built over, my inadequate Nepali vocabulary resulted in the bemused houseboys bringing cooked rice with which to shower the happy couple. Their first child was named Justin, “born just in time” John would grin, soon followed by a mellow cherished daughter, Ann. Eclipsed by his dominant elder brother, it was inevitable that the acolyte role would eventually pall. “John needs a bigger vision - I’ve given him India,” Jim told us with typical bravura, although it seemed more like banishment from his beloved Nepal jungles. Whatever the irony, John was despatched to run Mountain Travel India, and left Nepal in 1990. The complexities of Jim’s Indian operations with their uneasy partnerships and labyrinthine bureaucracy would have presented a difficult task for anyone. John’s strengths were hands-on and in the field, not a basement office in New Delhi, but he stuck it out for a decade before settling back in London with his long-term partner Deborah.

During his time in India, John not only managed camps in Ladakh, Kashmir, Himachal, Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka, but found fulfilment in pioneering trips into remote parts of India’s undiscovered North East. In Oreno’s family territory of Nagaland his local knowledge came in handy -- the tribes were reputed to be headhunters. Travelling with rhino specialist, Andrew Laurie, to check out Kaziranga in Assam, he managed to get them both thrown into Dhubri jail. Hitchhiking on the back of a lorry, John had insisted on snapping a ‘No Photography’ sign outside a military installation on the West Bengal border. That evening they persuaded their jailers to escort them to a restaurant, two rickshaws, them in one and two armed guards in another. Released the next day by the District Magistrate, they were entertained to tea on his lawn and regaled with stories about his father’s time at Cambridge. The poor truck driver was not so lucky, stuck in Dhubri without a permit to carry his grain, having been diverted to take them to prison. Leaving town next morning by taxi on the orders of the District Magistrate, they saw their stranded driver. “We gave him some rupees, can’t remember how much, but we kept adding notes until he started smiling.”

John R Edwards: born 22 September 1946, died 18 January 2019



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The westerly front that dumped all that snow and rain over Nepal last week is now followed by a weaker low pressure system that will bring fast-moving high altitude cirrus over the country into Friday. This will have a filtering effect on sunlight, and bring down the maximum, but the blanket effect will raise the minima slightly. Expect brighter sunny days into the weekend, with very little chance of further precipitation.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
 18° 7°	 19° 6°	 19° 5°

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Mithila representations of Kathmandu’s metamorphosis

Sewa Bhattarai

In his 16th solo exhibition *Mithila Cosmos: Songs of Innocence and Experience*, artist SC Suman depicts his experiences in his signature Mithila style. The exhibition at the Siddhartha Art Gallery brings southern Nepal’s popular art form to Kathmandu.

Mithila paintings are a renowned art style practiced by women of Nepal and some parts of India. Traditionally, women used to make the two-dimensional figures on the walls of homes with natural colours, and they were compulsory during festivals and celebrations. The sketches of daily life and mythical stories are now fast disappearing from homes, but making a re-appearance in art galleries and craft shops.

SC Suman (pictured), one of the pioneers of expanding the boundaries of Mithila art in Nepal, has incorporated his experiences of living in Kathmandu into this exhibition. So not only do we see the sketches, flat figures in vibrant colours that characterise Mithila art, there are also Kathmandu landmarks like Swoyambhu, Pashupati, Kirtipur, and Newa architecture in the paintings. One of them even has paintings of the eyes and five Buddhas that the Newa community paints on doors.

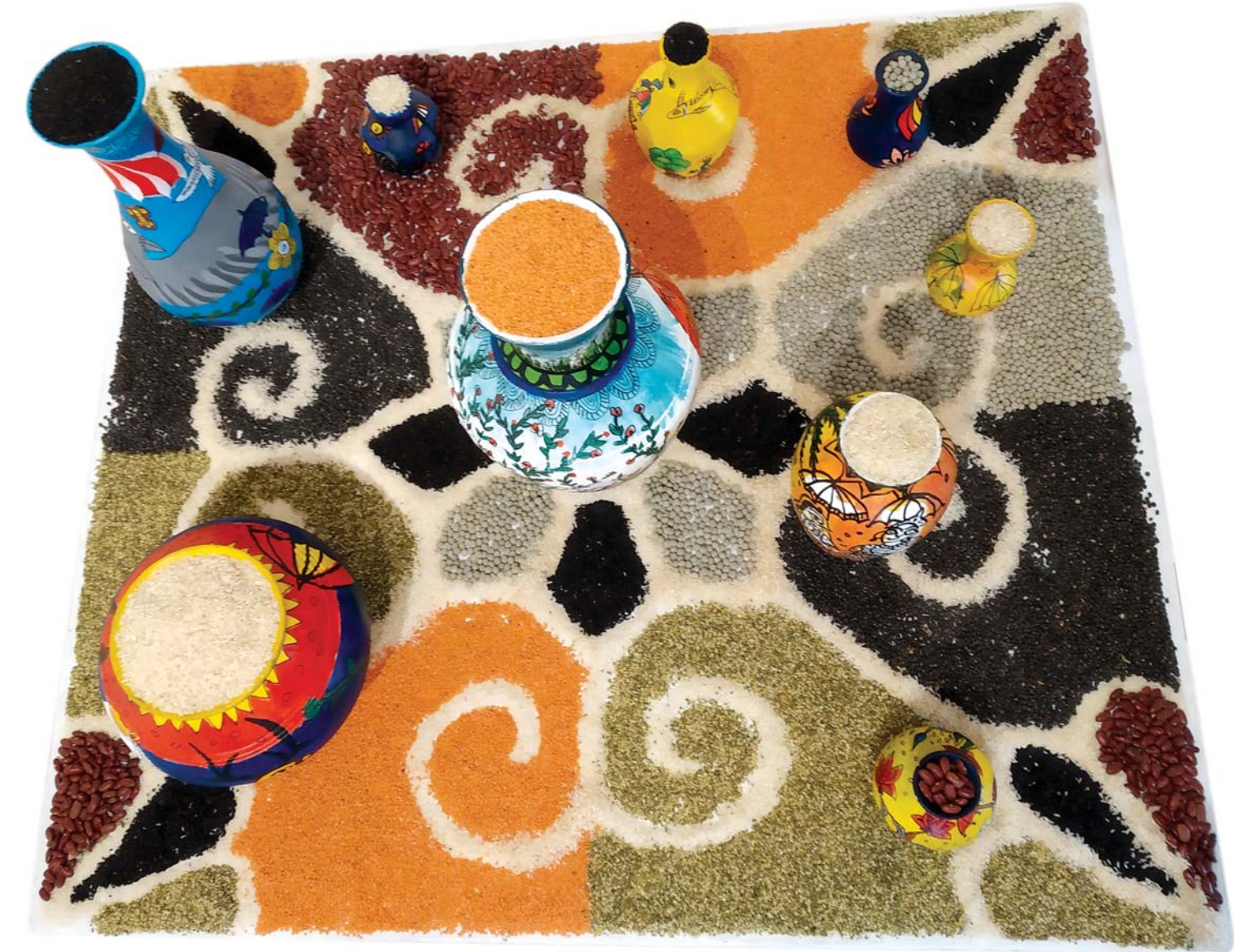
“Though I am from Southern Nepal, I have lived most of my life within these doors of Newar bahals,” Suman says, showing us details of wedding rituals and daily life in the paintings. “Later, I got married here, my children grew up here, and even my daughter got married from a Newar house. This painting represents how Kathmandu is a cosmos in itself for the people of Nepal.”

Indeed, Suman’s paintings capture the melting pot that is Kathmandu. We see Kathmandu evolving through the window of Mithila art: from bucolic rural life of fields and trees, to a crowded milieu of buildings and more buildings.

Suman’s spiritual and environmental concerns are also reflected in paintings like the one of Dashavatar, containing all nine avatars within the outline of the Buddha, implying that the tenth avatar is a composite of every idea that came before. Though a Hindu, Suman puts the Buddha foremost in this work. Some paintings touch the roots of Mithila philosophy with a tree of life, and the cosmos.

In a panorama of Nijgad forest (left, below) which is now threatened by a proposed international airport, Suman gives umbrellas to the monkeys, birds, elephants that live there.

“The umbrella is a symbol of protection. Everyone needs them, even animals and trees. But who will speak up for them as we



speak of rapid development that will fell the oldest trees first?” he asks.

The *Kachni* style of line work, and *Bharni* which means colouring are both reflected in Suman’s rendering of the Mithila style. Most of his paintings are fusions of line work, or colours filled in

with intricate precision, while some have broad swathes of background colours as befits the mood.

Suman’s work widens the traditional range of Mithila paintings to depict a whole spectrum of emotional and spiritual ideas, while still retaining the basic art



ALL PHOTOS: SEWA BHATTARAI

form. The exhibition also gives visitors an artistic representation of Kathmandu’s metamorphosis. 📌


Mithila Cosmos: Songs of Innocence and Experience
Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal Revisited
Until 6 Feb

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TATA

Monika Deupala
in Kaski

Ever since trekking became the mainstay of tourism in Nepal, guidebooks have decreed that hiking in the Himalaya is only advisable in spring and autumn. What nonsense.

As we saw this past week, Nepal becomes a winter wonderland during January. The mountains emerge with a fresh coating of snow, the air is crisp and the sun blindingly bright. And the best thing about it is that there are very few other tourists.

Winter trekking is now possible not just because of global warming, but also because there are new roads, guest houses, homestays and facilities along the trails. And while the high passes like Thorung La and Kang La in Manang, the Mardi and Khopra Treks, or Cho La in the Everest region may be completely snowed under, the Annapurna Base Camp trek is do-able.

A recent trek to ABC showed that the trail is mostly occupied by Nepalis and Koreans who are more adventurous and no longer satisfied with throwing around snowballs on Pulchoki or Chandragiri.

“It is hard to describe the pleasure of walk on a snowy trail with just the sound of your heavy breath, friction of your jacket, or boots crunching through the snow,” says Lee Chul from Korea, at Machapuchre Base Camp.

After Kathmandu Valley did not meet his expectations about Nepal, Chul headed off to Pokhara and the ABC trek despite the snowfall. He went without a guide, and says that although he had to rough it, the adventure was worth every minute. He adds bravely: “The cold cannot keep us away from the Himalaya.”

At the Annapurna Conservation Project checkpoint in Chomrong (2,177m) Sarita Pun shows us the entries for January which have numbers that are almost the same as for December.

“After this week’s snowfall, some trekkers have turned back because of ice on the trails,” she tells us, while many trekkers are waiting it out in Ghandruk for the snow to start melting on the trails above Bamboo, which is at 2,340m.

Unique Gurung, 21, is a cook at the Annapurna Sanctuary Lodge at ABC (4,130 m) and says the temperature hit -20 this week. He has headed down to Deurali (3,200 m) along with his team to shovel the snow to keep the trail open for trekkers.

Gurung says October is the peak season at ABC with 70 guests a day, and although the number is lower in winter, there has been an unusual surge of Nepali trekkers venturing up through the snow.

Almost as adventurous as the Nepalis are Koreans, and tourists from China have started arriving for the Chinese New Year Holiday. Some 50 of them had to be evacuated by helicopter from Deurali after heavy snow blocked the path down this weekend.

Nabin Balla from Bhaktapur is a new breed of Nepali trekker who has been exploring different parts of Nepal. Although he finds October the best time for treks in Nepal, he is always open to adventure and was in ABC in mid-January.

“It is actually more expensive to trek in winter because you need extra heavy-duty gear to keep warm, but it has its rewards in mountains that are crystal clear and empty trails,” he says.

Rana Roka of the Eastern Light Trek in Pokhara recommends Poon Hill and Jomsom as the best bet for winter, although he does not rule out ABC once the snow on the trails has thinned.

Says Roka: “You have to be careful about avalanches and sickness, but trekking in winter is challenging and exciting at the same time.”



The hiking season in the Himalaya is no longer restricted to spring and autumn. Winter trekking is catching up and is now possible not because of new roads, guest houses and facilities along the trails. Let *Nepali Times* take you on a winter trek to Annapurna Base Camp.

nepalitimes.com



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The hiking season is
longer restricted to
and it's not because



2



3



4

ABCs Winter trek Nepal

in the Himalaya is no
spring and autumn,
due to global warming



5



ALL TERRAIN TREKKING:

- 1 Hikers on their way from Machapuchre Base Camp (3,700m) to Annapurna Base Camp (4,130m). This part of the trail is closed due to heavy snowfall this week, and may reopen in about 10 days.
- 2 Annapurna South (7,219m) from the entry point to the Sanctuary.
- 3 Mt Machapuchre (6,995m) and its imposing double summit from the Mardi Khola walk in.
- 4 An uncharacteristic view from the north of Mt Machapuchre from Dovan (2,505m).
- 5 Snowbound trail at Machapuchre Base Camp



EVENTS



Boson Uphill

Come and support a local adventure festival of uphill running and cycling challenges for a distance of 4.5km from Chanakhel Chautara to Football ground, Boson gaun. Prizes for the winners. Other attractions: mini zipline, horizontal bungee, clackline, pony ride, hiking, local cuisine, folk music and dance.
2 February, 9am onwards, Boson Village, Dakshinkali, 9851234567, Registration: bit.ly/boson19

Transformative Tech

Join in to understand how portable Electroencephalography (EEG) tools can be used to calm your mind. EEG is a new business opportunity, designed to enhance psychological well-being, cognitive function and physical capabilities.
2 February, 9am-12pm, Moksh Bar, Jhamsikhel, Register: https://bit.ly/2AVykWb

Object in Focus

The first exhibition, Project 1336, from a series “Object in Focus” focuses on one object, one artist Manish Lal Shrestha and his one big idea, which is in a form of a knitted rope representing the elevation of the Kathmandu Valley. Art enthusiasts are welcome to look, observe and think contemporary art in a different light.
1-11 February, 10am-5pm, Taragaon Museum, Boudha, (01) 6201035



Bar Bar Brain Hacking

Enjoy your Saturday with good food, drinks, and cool magic and illusion with Suraj Mayavi, Guinness World Records and Everest World Records holder.
2 February, 7pm onwards, The Bar Bar Black Sip, Thamel, 9803859320

Pinjadaki Chari

Directed by a guest from Théâtre de l'Ordinaire in France, Maxime Séchaud, the drama translated as “A little bird in a cage” is a collaborative effort the Sarwanam team.
1-16 February, 5-6:15pm, Sarwanam Theatre, Kalikasthan, (01) 4011027

Charaharuko sammelan

A Nepali adaptation of 'Conference of the birds', the play has been chosen to be performed at the very prestigious 20th Bharat Rang Mahotsav, National School of Drama, Delhi. Produced by Actor's Studio and directed by Deeya Maskey.
2-6 February, 5pm onwards, Kausi Theater, Teku, 9851223023

Info session at USEF

Meet and interact with a representative from the University of Wyoming at a free information session. Bring along your photo ID.
4 February, 1-2pm, USEF-Nepal auditorium, Gyaneswar, Register: (01) 4414598



Himalayan Outdoor Festival

The 8th edition of the adventure sport festival is back with plenty of activities for everyone to enjoy. Bring your own tent/ bivvy/hammock or book a room at Hattiban Resort. Challenge yourself or watch others challenge in different categories of riding, rock climbing and running.
22-24 February, Hattiban Hills, Pharphing, 9851236987

Book reading

Book reading of Thamel “Dark Star of Kathmandu” by Rabi Thapa, and conversation with Ramayata Limbu. The book is not a travel book but more a part-memoir and part-narrative of memories from people who have lived in and experienced the iconic location over the years.
6 February, 6:30-8pm, HUB, Thamel, 9866273244

MUSIC



Legends at Jatra

Legendary artists Dev Rana , Jyoti Ghemeri and their band The Gentleman Band are performing at the restaurant.
2 February, 2pm onwards, Jatra Restaurant, Kirtipur

Latin Jazz Concert

Highly-energetic, eclectic and amped-up, 2-time Grammy winner, artist, producer, songwriter Marlow Rosado is undoubtedly a driving force in the Latin music industry and one of the leading components in the salsa scene. He is here in Kathmandu with some of the great local and international musicians to perform his best.
1 February, 7pm onwards, Moksh, Jhamsikhel, Rs1,000 (pre-sale), Rs1,199 (at the door), (01) 5528362

Saturday sessions

Saturday sessions with DJ Enhancify bringing Afro, House and Disco beats in the house. Pump it up!
2 February, 6-9pm, Base Camp: Outdoor Lifestyle, Jhamsikhel, 9841226397

OUR PICK

Opens in Kathmandu on 1 February

February is here and the mega movie industries of the world are vying to offer heart touching rom-coms in the month of romance. The first of them is *Ek Ladki ko Dekha toh Aisa Laga*, which channels a 90's Bollywood song. The movie raises interest by casting Anil Kapoor, the original hero of the song, in the role of the father, while his daughter Sonam Kapoor plays the eponymous girl. Directed by Shelly Chopra Dhar, the movie also stars Bollywood's dark horse Rajkumar Rao.

DINING

Gokarna House Restaurant

Celebrate and learn about Chinese Spring Festival with organic and authentic Chinese fine dining experience. Special gifts and offers on booking.
1-14 February, Paknajol, Thamel, (01) 4218960

The Cafe

Celebrate Lunar New Year with a wide range of signature Chinese delicacies from salads to desserts, and an opportunity to win an exciting holiday to Hong Kong.
4-5 February, 6:30pm onwards, Hyatt Regency Kathmandu, Boudha, Rs 2,200++ (including a beer), Reservation: (01) 5171234



The Fun Cafe

Experience Radisson's way of celebrating the Chinese New Year with diverse range of oriental cuisine.
1-8 February, lunch and dinner, Radisson Hotel Kathmandu, Lazimpat, Rs1,800++ (including a beer), (01) 4411818

The Sunrise Restaurant

Join the hotel to celebrate this Chinese New Year with a grand Chinese buffet.
5 February, Hotel Yak & Yeti, Darbar Marg, Rs3,750++, (01) 4248999

GETAWAY



Dwarika's Resort

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Dhulikhel, (11) 490612

Dahlia Boutique Hotel

A luxury hotel at the bank of Phewa Lake with 180 degree mountain and city view: a good end to a memorable trek.
Lakeside, Pokhara, (061) 466505

Club Himalaya

Amazing mountain views refreshing weekend escapades.
Nagarkot, (01) 6680080

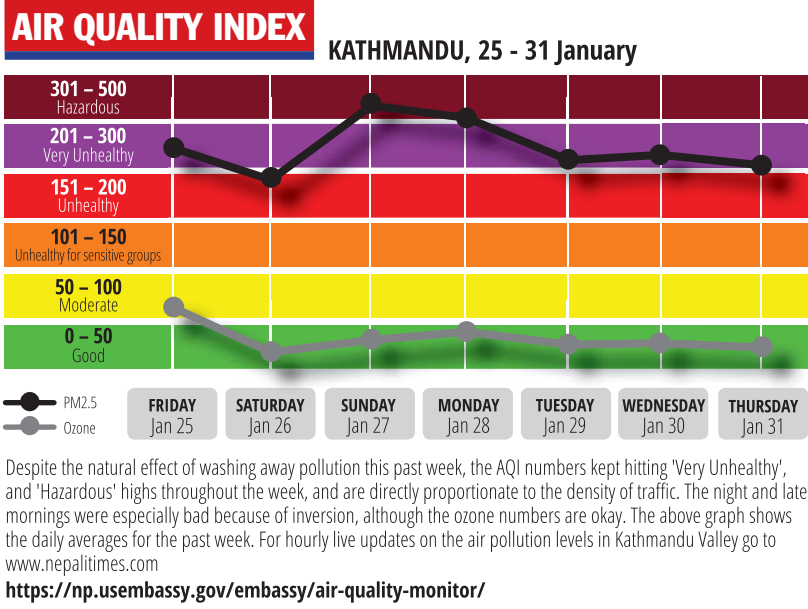
Milla Guesthouse

If you prefer the quiet and admire a mix of old and new, this is the perfect place to stay. Not too far from the city, yet worlds apart.
Bhaktapur, 9851024137



Lake View Resort

The resort's private huts, featuring hand crafted wooden furniture, local stone exterior and a veranda, offer a great weekend escape.
Lake Side, Pokhara (061) 461477/463854



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Crime and politics

Nirmala Panta's unsolved rape and murder divides activists and prolongs the family's grief

Namrata Sharma
in Kanchanpur

Six months after the unsolved rape and murder of her daughter, the stress is beginning to show on Durga Devi Panta. Her face is taut, her wrinkles deeper, but there is the fire of determination in her eyes.

Nirmala was a studious 14-year-old and the second of Durga Devi's three teenage daughters. After her husband left her for another woman 12 years ago, the four lived in a simple house amidst fields on the outskirts of town in Kanchanpur.

The crime has become a national issue because of Police bungling the investigation, and not being able to find the guilty. It has become the focus of country-wide protests by human rights activists, was featured in the international media and has now even got a Wikipedia entry.

"My daughter is gone, but I want justice for her, and also my remaining two daughters to have a safe and good life," says Durga Devi with a faraway look.

As protests over the crime escalated last year, Durga Devi's estranged husband Yagya Raj, his second wife and their son have also joined the campaign for justice, raising some eyebrows. Yagya Raj has shown signs of psychological instability, and Panta said he nearly strangled her recently.

Laxmi and Yagya Raj, ostensibly under pressure from the opposition Nepali Congress, do not want Durga Devi to accept the compensation of Rs1 million from the Central Government and Rs500,000 from Province 7. Durga Devi herself does not want to be tangled in the politics, and says the compensation money would at least help her take care of her two daughters.

Laxmi and Yagya Raj say they do not want Durga Devi to take the compensation for Nirmala's death because they do not want it to affect the fast-unto-death by Govinda KC, since one of his demands is justice for Nirmala.

Women's groups and



LONELY STRUGGLE: Nirmala Panta's mother Durga Devi (*above*) at her home in Kanchanpur. She has been prevented by her ex-husband and his new wife from collecting the government's compensation offer.

Nirmala's step-mother, Laxmi, at the protest site outside the CDO office in Mahendranagar (*right*).

homemakers from all class and backgrounds campaigning for the case in Dhangadi, Kailali and Mahendranagar last week shared their frustration with the police's inability to solve the crime. The protests have also become politically polarised, with the opposition NC and other parties using it to embarrass the NCP government.

Nirmala Panta had joined a study group in the house of her class mate Roshani Bam after school on 26 July last year. When Nirmala did not return home, Durga Devi had become frantic, and went to Roshani's house to look for her



PHOTOS: NAMRATA SHARMA

daughter. Her body was found the next day 500m from Roshani Bam's house in a sugarcane field owned by police inspector Jagdish Bhatta, who has now been suspended for tampering with evidence.

Province 7 Chief Minister Trilochan Bhatta denied that Police

had destroyed evidence. He told *Nepali Times*: "All the evidence, including the vaginal swab of the victim, are safe with us. It will take time but we will crack this case soon in coordination with the Centre."

Meanwhile, the Women Human Right Defenders of Kanchanpur and

Kailali districts with other activists and independent women's groups are continuing with their relay hunger strike at the Chief District Office in Kanchanpur.

Sitting under the tent last week was Nirmala's step-mother Laxmi Panta with activists from Kathmandu, including Sabitri Subedi, who staged the 'petticoat campaign' in Kathmandu. There is much mutual suspicion even among the activist groups and muttering about each others' motivations.

"Nirmala's case is now so muddled that we do not know what will happen to the investigation," says Nirmala Bagchan of the Women Human Right Defenders. Sabitri Ghimire of the Dalit Women's Right Forum in Kalali accuses the Police of deliberately destroying all evidence to protect powerful interests.

The rights groups appeared to be fatigued by infighting and frustrated by the lack of progress in the investigation. Conspiracy theories swirled about a cover-up by senior officials of the provincial government and Police officers allegedly involved in the crime. Why else would the Police destroy evidence, delay the investigation, frame an innocent man, detain the Bam sisters then take them to Kathmandu, and now ask the father and mother to provide DNA samples?

Superintendent of Police Kuber Khadayat claimed there had been eight cases of rape and five of attempted rape since the Nirmala case, and all had been solved. He said Nirmala's case happened before he took office, and exuded confidence it would be solved 'soon'.

The infighting among activists and the politicisation of the human rights groups helps the government, which can now blame 'politics' for its failure to find the culprit. However, the real victims here are Nirmala's mother and sisters who need the truth and justice. 🇳🇵

Namrata Sharma is the Chair of the Centre for Investigative Journalism Nepal.



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SHAILEE THEATRE

Children on stage

At Kathmandu's Russian Culture Center a hall full of children watch with bated breath as a Russian folklore unfolds on stage. As the story poignantly presents the affection between a father and son, the son's budding romance, and his eventual adventurous journey to a mountainous kingdom, the children cheer wildly at the right scenes. It is obvious that they enjoy slapstick comedy that adults may be bored with, and are deeply touched by the basic portrayals of love and separation that grownups may find clichéd.

The play *Matoko Phul* was presented by Shailee Theater as part of its week-long Children's Theatre Festival. In its tenth edition, the festival showcased 20 plays by schools around the country and also awarded prizes in six categories. While some of the plays were written or directed by adults, all

plays were acted out by children from schools in Kathmandu, Lalitpur, Bhaktapur, Kavre, Sindhupalchok, and Lamjung.

In these plays children explored themes that are important to them which may or may not be portrayed with the same urgency in regular theatre: child marriage, child rights, child labour, sexual abuse, education, and even cultural practices like Deuki where girl children are offered to temples. One of the plays explored child psychology, depicting what happens when children are put under pressure by excessive parental expectations.

This tenth consecutive year of the Children's Theatre Festival is an example of rising interest in theatre in Nepal, where children are acting, writing and directing plays. "Ten years ago when we put out a call for children's plays, we only received three entries," recalls Nabaraj

Budhathoki of Shailee Theatre. "This year we got more than 40, and selected the best 19 out of them. That is a sign of how far we have come."

The festival's goal is to help children develop their personality, educate them about their rights, and aid the growth of theatre by involving children from a young age. Indeed, after many such outreach programs it has now become normal for private schools to have a drama teacher and hold theatre activities in schools. There is even some interest from community schools which usually lack resources for such extracurricular activities.

As the theatre scene grows, Nepal's children's theatre is also getting a boost offering children age-appropriate entertainment as well as opening up possibilities of artistic expression.

Sewa Bhattarai

Tenth National Children Theater Festival
Russian Culture Center
22-31 Jan



RSS

UP IN ARMS: Leaders of Nepali Congress including Gagan Thapa protest after the passage of the Medical Education Bill by Parliament last week. Meanwhile, Govinda KC's health is deteriorating as he is on a fast onto death to protest the bill and other demands.



RABINDRAADHIKARI/TWITTER

GRIM PICTURE: Officials of Accident Investigation Committee submit a report on the US Bangla Airlines crash last March to the Minister of Tourism and Civil Aviation Rabindra Adhikari in Kathmandu on Sunday. In the report, it said the Captain had psychiatric issues.



EMBASSY OF INDIA

LOVE THY NEIGHBOUR: Vice President Nanda Bahadur Pun being welcomed by Indian Ambassador Manjeev Singh Puri at a ceremony to mark the 70th Republic Day of India in Kathmandu.



BIKRAM RAI

BAD AIR: Locals wash clothes and carry water from a pond as a brick kiln nearby spews smoke in Lalitpur on Tuesday. The furnaces contribute 25% of toxic suspended particles to Kathmandu's air pollution.



RADISSON HOTEL

CHINESE DELIGHTS: Artists perform cultural dances during the Chinese Food Festival at the Fun Cafe, Radisson Hotel in Kathmandu last week. The event promoting Chinese cuisine will run until 8 February.

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YOYOKHABAR

Doctors solidarity with Govinda KC

Nagarik, 31 January

नागरिक

Doctors across the country have taken to the streets to protest the government's inaction on Govinda KC's demands and his deteriorating health. The House of Representatives passed the Medical Education bill on 25 January, amidst opposition, without addressing KC's demands of reforms in medical education. Doctors, united under the leadership of Nepal Medical Association, have begun a relay hunger strike to pressurise the government.

KC is on his 16th fast-unto-death at the TU Teaching Hospital at Maharajganj. His health is said to be critical after not eating for more than three weeks and he has difficulty breathing due to chest pains. Decreasing white blood cell count has put his life at grave danger. The amount of oxygen, glucose, and potassium in KC's body has also decreased, he has trouble sleeping and is vulnerable to infections. KC needs to be

treated in an Intensive Care Unit (ICU) but has refused to go to there.

KC has been fasting since 10 January, asking the government to implement the agreement made with him after his 15th fast. But after the government prepared the Medical Education bill in contradiction of the agreement, KC began his current fast. The government claims that the bill fulfills KC's demands.

Nepal Medical Association says that doctors in major cities like Biratnagar, Dharan, Janakpur, Chitwan, Birgunj, Butwal, Pokhara, Nepalganj, Dhangadi and others have carried out protests in support of KC, and medical professionals working in Primary Health Care Centers have joined them.

On Wednesday, former Chief Justice Sushila Karki visited KC and expressed her solidarity with his movement. "Not fulfilling Dr. KC's demands would be a loss to the entire nation, and his victory is the victory of 30 million Nepalis," she said as she asked the government to fulfill his demands.



On table: Medical education bill passed by parliament
Sher Bahadur Deuba: We won't stay idle. We will hit the streets

अन्नपूर्ण

Basu Kshitiz in *Annapurna Post*, 25 January



Man to statue of martyr: Good thing you became a martyr, if you had lived, you would have committed suicide

क्रान्तिपुर

Vatsyayan in *Kantipur*, 26 January

A conflicting stance

Devprakash Tripathi in *Ghatana ra Bichar*, 29 January

घटना विचार

NCP Co-chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal recently expressed strong support for the sovereignty of Venezuela's elected communist government, and denounced foreign intervention, particularly that of the United States. This is ironic because his own political trajectory has depended on foreign intervention and support. As a rebel, Dahal sought shelter abroad while perpetrating violence in his home country. His signing of national agreements while in foreign land was already an open invitation for interference. Even when he was in power, Dahal pursued the agendas of foreign powers to support his own power. Historically, Dahal has shown no

respect for Nepal's sovereignty. He was involved in demolishing statues of Prithvi Narayan Shah, was irreverent of poet Bhanubhakta Acharya and other figures regarded as Nepal's national heroes. Yet, Dahal is in effusive admiration of Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Mao who in no way contributed to Nepal's development. Dahal's statements are hypocritical, and inconsistent with his own past.

There is speculation that Dahal issued the statement to regain China's diminishing trust in him after his India visit. This was evident in the way the Chinese snubbed him on a recent trip to China. This latest statement calling for international support of Venezuela's communist government may be intended to convince China that his communist stance is still intact.

Communist internationalism

Jana Aastha, 30 January

आस्था

Venezuela's political crisis has divided world opinion into two distinct categories. The opposition has the backing of the United States, while the ruling government under Nicolas Maduro has Russia's support.

This political upheaval in a country so far away from Nepal raises some questions about governance here: what will happen if a powerful foreign country tries to oust our democratically elected communist majority government? Should Sher Bahadur Deuba follow the footsteps of Venezuela's opposition leader Juan Guaido and ignite street protests?

NCP leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal recently

released a statement strongly supporting Venezuela's Communist government. Since Communists are internationalists, it should not come as a surprise that Prachanda, a prominent member of an elected communist government in one nation, stands up for another such government -- especially when the United States decries the ruling Venezuelan government because it is communist.

Dahal is not the prime minister, so his statement cannot represent the entire nation, but only that of the Nepal Communist Party. NCP's political manifesto clearly portrays it as a Communist party, and thus Dahal's support for Venezuela's ruling government under his party's political framework should not be considered unusual.



“खुलेर बोलौ विभेद रोकौ”

“महिला हिंसा विरुद्ध शुन्य सहिष्णुता कायम गरौ” “दमनको प्रतिवाद गरी महिला

हिंसा अन्त्य गरौ”



नेपाल सरकार

सञ्चार तथा सूचना प्रविधि मन्त्रालय

सूचना तथा प्रसारण विभाग

Nepal now has to balance not just

Bhairaja Panday

Article 5 of the 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty implicitly forbids arms imports directly from third countries. Opposition to this provision has become the bedrock of Nepali nationalism over the years, and the demonstrated ability to flout it has catapulted some to become national heroes. From King Mahendra onwards, Nepal's rulers have been tempted to use this shortcut to fame. India's response has also been consistent: violators are made to pay a heavy price. The latest to play the nationalism card is Prime Minister Oli in fiery rhetoric against the Indian Blockade that landed him a thumping victory in the 2017 elections. Since then, he has pushed pro-China policies, signed the Belt Road Initiative (BRI), clumsily withdrawn Nepal from a BIMSTEC joint military exercise in Pune last September, and pressed ahead with the bilateral military exercises with China which could have been prompted by his party Co-Chair going down on his knees during a visit to India. Nepal now has been given access to four Chinese ports, ending the Indian monopoly on transit. Though symbolic for now, this is of

monumental significance for Nepal since it is now no more India-locked. Article 5 has become redundant. But in a multi-polar world, Nepal has to tread carefully. Barely a month after Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali met US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Washington DC and discussed the Indo-Pacific Strategy, Co-Chair Dahal dashed off a statement supporting the beleaguered Venezuelan regime which the West is trying to bring down. An Indian Army Chief recently said Nepal's 'geography' required it to tilt towards India, like Bhutan. Nepal now finds itself squarely in the middle of these two once bitter enemies, and now competing economic giants. The West has made common cause with India and other Asian countries in an attempt to contain China's rise. Oli unwittingly finds himself in the middle of this widening power game -- now he does not just need to balance India and China, but also the West. How well he handles these competing interests will determine whether Nepal will remain at peace with its territorial integrity intact, and whether Oli's own political career will remain on track. Nepal's politicians used to spout anti-India rhetoric at election time, and then undertake their very first official trip abroad

Nepal finds itself unwittingly in the middle of a new global power game

to Delhi to expiate for their sins and start a fresh page of cooperation based on the rhetoric of historical ties and cultural affinity. Nepal's elite and their Indian counterparts ended up with business as usual. It is noteworthy that neither Nepal nor India have made any attempt to stabilise Nepal's economy, and ensure prosperity. The main preoccupation of Nepal's politicians has been to remain in power as long as possible for which they sought Indian blessings. New Delhi, for its part, was happy as long as Nepal remained a source of soldiers and doormen. For this arrangement to work, Nepal was expected to pay deference and remain aligned southwards. This marriage of convenience lasted nearly six decades through absolute monarchy, the Maoist uprising, a royal massacre, and the writing of a disastrous constitution that threatens the nation's very existence. But this status quo has changed with the awakening of the sleeping dragon, China. The



Eminently beneficial for India and Nepal

Ajit Baral
in New Delhi

The real reason why, six months after it was finalised, India is sitting on the EPG report

The Eminent Persons Group (EPG) mandated to review past bilateral treaties between India and Nepal and provide recommendations completed its work in June last year. But it is still under wraps. Why was the eight-member Group formed in the first place, and so much money and time wasted? It was Nepal's idea to set up a

group made up of notable people from India and Nepal to come up with a mutually acceptable plan to reset bilateral ties in keeping with the times. Nepal has for a long time wanted to revise some of its treaties with India, particularly the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship. Signed 70 years ago, the Treaty of Peace and Friendship needs revision because it was signed by Prime Minister Mohan Shumsher Jung Bahadur Rana whose sole intention was to perpetuate his clan's hold on power, rather than

protect the national interest. The protocol was also askew, since it was signed on India's behalf by its ambassador in Kathmandu and not Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Nepal also had issues with Clause 7, which states: 'The governments of India and Nepal agree to grant, on a reciprocal basis, to the nationals of one country in the territories of the other the same privileges in the matter of residence, ownership of property, participation in

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India and China, but also the West



DIWAKAR CHETTRI

trade and commerce, movement and other privileges of a similar nature.'

Being a much smaller country, Nepal wants this changed and also wants to ensure that its gigantic and militarily stronger southern neighbour respects the Treaty. India has blockaded its border with Nepal several times, using ambiguities in Clause 5, which states: 'The Government of Nepal shall be free to import, *from or through the territory of India*, arms,

ammunition or warlike material and equipment necessary for the security of Nepal. The procedure for giving effect to this arrangement shall be worked out by the two Governments acting in *consultation*.' (Emphases added)

Nepal first proposed the formation of an Eminent Persons Group in 2011 when Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai visited India. According to the Indian media at the time, New Delhi welcomed this idea, but there is reason to doubt it. India has always wanted to maintain the status quo in its relations with Nepal. If it indeed was supportive, Delhi would not have

dragged its feet and taken three years just to prepare the terms of reference for the EPG, and two more years to actually form it.

But in February 2016, the formation of the EPG was suddenly expedited because of New Delhi's need to mend its ties with Nepal after the Blockade. This should offer us clues as to why India is now reluctant to receive the report painstakingly negotiated and drafted in nine meetings over two years.

If the members of the EPG are vexed, they are hiding it well, saying that Indian Prime Minister Modi has not received the report "owing to his busy schedule". Some members of the EPG are former ambassadors and are trained to be diplomatic in their language, but it is clear they are getting fed up of telling it like it is.

Nepal had wanted the report

submitted to Narendra Modi when he was in Nepal for the BIMSTEC Summit in August last year, but India refused saying that it would not discuss any bilateral issues during a multilateral forum.

The suspicion is that the Modi government does not agree with some of the content of the joint report which recommends that the 1950 Treaty be replaced with a new one proposing a 'smart and regulated' border and consider the proportionate sizes of the two countries on the issue of national treatment for citizens. These 'concessions' to Nepal apparently have displeased hawks in India's ruling BJP, which fears they may be used against it by the opposition ahead of India's 2019 general election.

But this argument is untenable. The recommendations are not binding and the Modi government could have easily glossed over

lessons here for India too, and it cannot be business as usual. New Delhi has got to be more serious about the promises it makes to Nepal.

The Indian focus on the Tarai region since 2015 has ruined whatever was left of trust between Kathmandu and New Delhi. 'One Madhes One Pradesh' would have divided Nepal horizontally, triggering unimaginable problems. Both sides made a complete mess of it, and it is time for India to let Kathmandu handle this problem to the best of its ability.

India's policy on Nepal has been to keep it at the level of 'controlled anarchy' so Nepali leaders have to keep shuttling to New Delhi. But history has shown anarchy cannot always be controlled. And instead of blaming China for trying to encircle India, it would behoove New Delhi to be magnanimous towards its smaller neighbours and nudge them along on the road to development.

A stable and economically vibrant Nepal will contribute to the success of both economies, and help stabilise the region as a whole. Spheres of influence are obsolete, it is time to get on with improving the lives of our people. 🇳🇵

Bhairaja Panday is a former senior UN official and he is currently MD of Invest Nepal Pvt. Ltd.

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Transparently corrupt

Not everything happening in Nepal is bad. If you just looked at the glass as half full, the news that Nepal has dropped another two notches to now rank #124 among the most corrupt countries in the world is in fact the best news we've had so far this year.

Corruption is good for business, it spreads the wealth around through an alternative tax regime, it greases the system so the bureaucracy moves faster, it raises Nepal's GDP. Without corruption this country would grind to a halt.

What's that? Didn't quite catch you. You are saying that the country is already at a standstill, how can it grind to a halt? That is exactly the problem with this country. It is full of cynics like you. Don't blame corruption for the country's stagnation, how can we get anywhere if we still have honest cops who refuse to let you go on a traffic violation even if you offer them a cash incentive?

Then there are tax officials at the airport who stubbornly insist on confiscating the extra bottle of whiskey you brought from Bangkok, and to rub salt on the wound, they give you an official receipt for it. And there are ministers who want to actually punish bureaucrats extorting money from contractors on National Pride Projects instead of rewarding them. How will this country ever attain Middle Income Status at this rate?

Finally, we are able to get Don Manange sworn back into Parliament. Populating our federal legislature with members of the mafia, representatives of crime syndicates, cartel owners, the medical-industrial complex, knaves, goons, and mass murderers is the only way we can have a can-do law-making body that will restore Nepal as the proud and glorious nation it once was.

Instead of banning corruption we must find ways of making it work in the national interest. One way to do that is to make malfeasance contribute to Nepal's macro-economic stability by taxing vice. A service surcharge on graft and bribes would help us redress Nepal's balance of payments deficit so we can hit the 7.8% growth target for fiscal 2018-19.

Once we legalise corruption, we will become more transparent as a nation. Every time someone from the Ministry of Poultry and Livestock pilfers from the coffers, or a tycoon passes out a hefty baksheesh they will be slapped 13% VAT on the spot. Investors keen to start joint ventures in Nepal can be given a one-year tax holiday on all bribes they have to pay to lubricate the labyrinths of officialdom. Foreign diplomatic missions and international agencies, will of course have duty-free status, since their presence in our country is governed by the Vienna Protocol.

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