

MUZZLING THE MEDIA | POLITICAL ENDGAME | ON THE ROAD WITH THE RED GOD

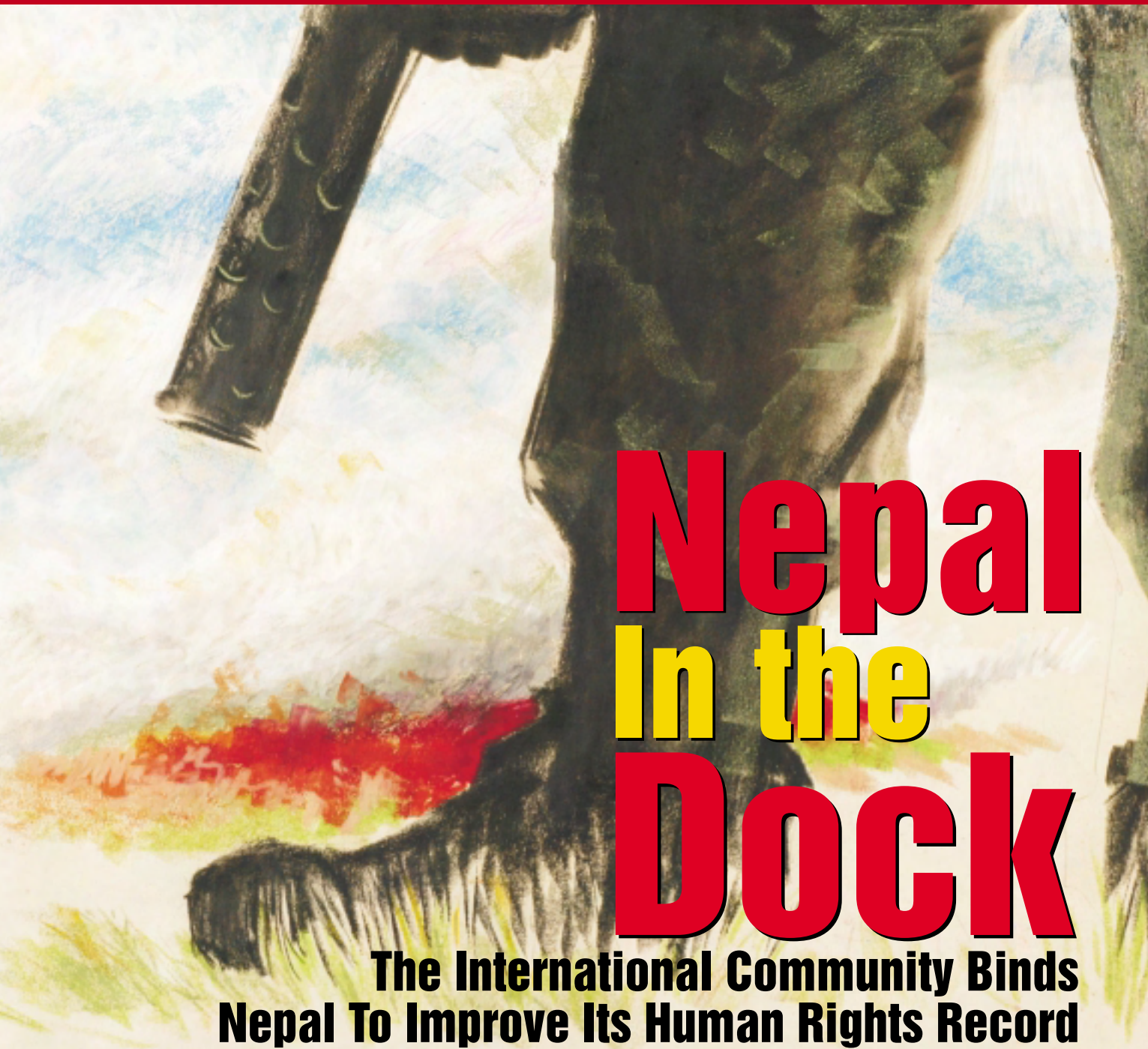
MAY 2, 2004 VOL. 1, NO. 2

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WEEKLY

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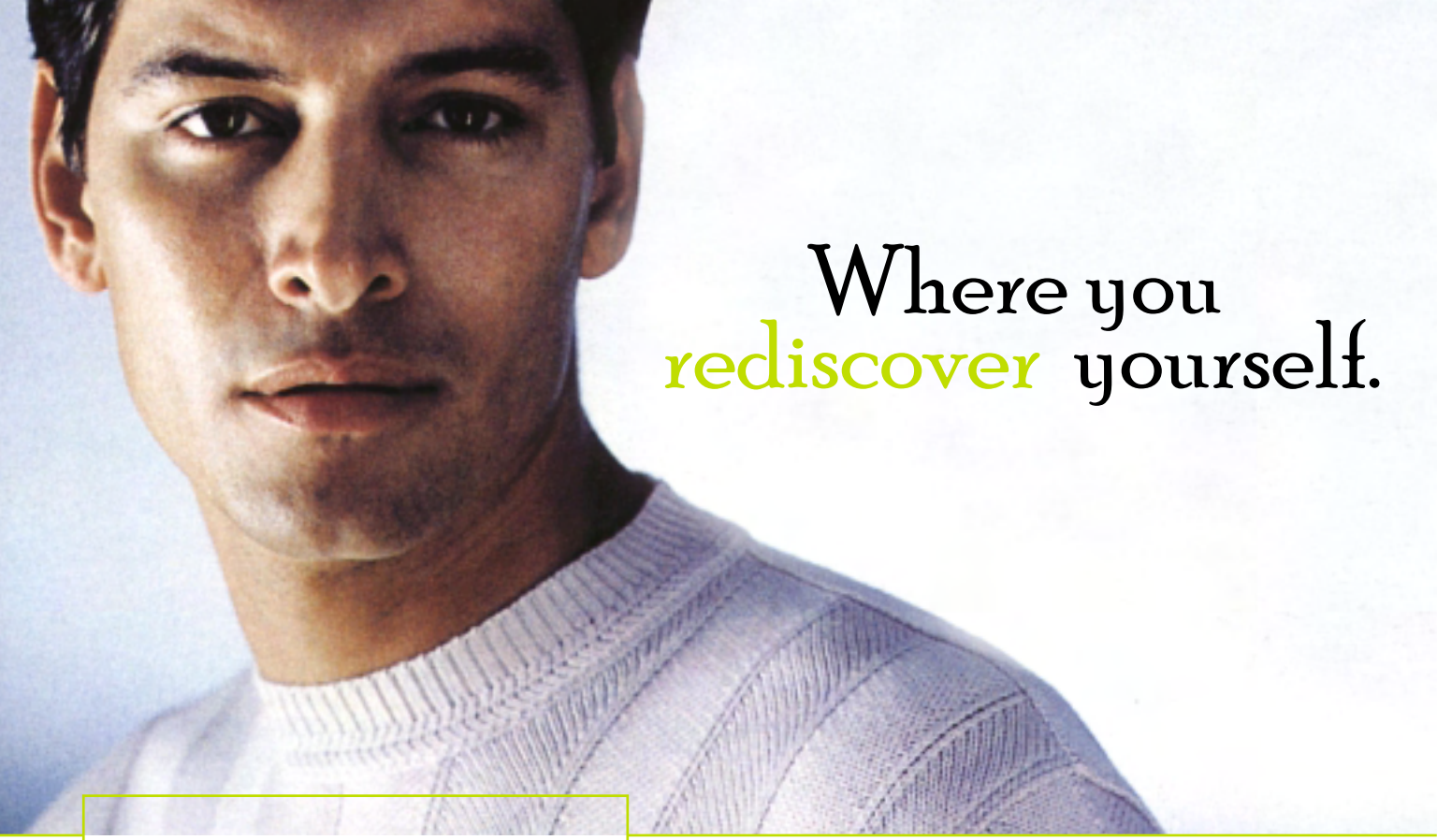


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Our first subscriber: Parbati Rai

Congratulations to nation weekly
YOUR FIRST ISSUE (APRIL 19-25) LOOKS good. But there are some typos and the captions on some pages are poorly displayed. I am particularly impressed by your bold use of color and pictures.

As for the coverage, Suman Pradhan's cover story "14 Years Later" was an interesting read. He has done well to document the darker side of the party protests. Most newspapers in recent days have become overtly pro-party in their news coverage, and have completely ignored the common man's perspective. You have made a good beginning but I would like to see more coverage on how the party protests have inconvenienced almost everybody in Kathmandu—school children, office goers, the business community, street vendors. Everyone else but the party cadre, it seems.

ARUN PARAJULI
BALKHU

CONGRATULATIONS ON THE LAUNCH of the newsmagazine. I visited your website (www.nation.com.np). I could not open some of the folders, though. The web is attractive and radiates dynamism. The analyses are thought-provoking and the paper seems to have attracted younger analysts who bring out fresh perspectives. I enjoyed Swarnim Wagle's well written article, "Anthem of Sovereignty." A pro-Royalist article strongly arguing for an active role

of the King would have balanced the coverage. Reproduction of Nepal related articles from foreign media would also add variety. I will be a regular visitor of your website and will share the address with other friends and colleagues.

NABENDRA DAHAL
LAOS, VIA E-MAIL

A GOOD START. I JUST HOPE YOU CAN give continuity to the marvelous layout. Also, try to give more variety. Surely, I want a thicker magazine for Rs. 30.

SOMESH VERMA
GHATTEKULO

YOU CERTAINLY SEEM TO HAVE MADE your launch at a pretty crowded time in Nepal's media market with other publications also coming on stream or updating their formats. However, I really enjoyed your first edition and look forward to future editions. As a *bideshi* in Nepal, I very much welcome an English weekly that promises to help me understand the complexities of Nepal today (often not easy at the best of times!). Also for me, the format of a color newsmagazine certainly makes it more appealing than some of the other weekly magazines around. You've set high standards to start with. Best wishes to keeping this up or, even better, improving it further.

PETER NEIL
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INK SPILLS ON THE STREETS: On April 17, a day after the police arrested two Kantipur scribes, the Federation of Nepalese Journalists staged a protest.



Malinowski's Diplomacy

BY SUMAN PRADHAN

By the time you read this column, U.S. Ambassador Michael E. Malinowski will have left the country in a cloud of controversy. Some papers have claimed that he was being recalled due to

growing differences with European envoys over the Maoist insurgency and political agitation.

I do not pretend to know the truth about the matter. All I know is that Malinowski vehemently denied being recalled, asserting that he was due to leave this summer anyway and his successor had already been identified more than four months ago. It is unfortunate that Malinowski had to depart under such circumstances. Unfortunate because the controversy has clouded some of his real achievements. Many may have forgotten that the ambassador was the first foreign envoy who seriously tried to help Nepal and Bhutan resolve the protracted refugee issue.

The combined pressure the United States and India brought to bear on Bhutan, thanks in large part due to Malinowski's efforts, did nudge the Bhutanese to seek a solution. His frequent warnings during the difficult JVT negotiations between Nepal and Bhutan also served to alert Nepali officials about the dangers ahead.

But the ambassador will not be remembered for his efforts on the refugee crisis, but for his role in the on-going Maoist insurgency and the resulting political crisis. For good or bad, he had a central role in raising Nepal up the U.S. foreign policy agenda. It is another story whether that sort of attention has helped this country or not.

Getting into this debate is futile without first discussing the seminal events that characterized the nearly three years of Malinowski's tenure in Kathmandu.

The two most pressing issues of the period: an increasingly violent Maoist insurgency; and the suspension of representative rule by King Gyanendra, putting the Royal Palace and the parties on a path of confrontation. Remember also that Malinowski arrived in Nepal just over a month after the September 11 terrorist attacks on U.S. soil, which turned U.S. foreign and security policy on its head.

The focus on global terrorism since then, particularly the Al Qaeda brand of terrorism, has brought the world's only superpower to South Asia in a big way. Its involvement in Afghanistan and Pakistan since late 2001 has had far-reaching implications for the region, particularly for India, China and even for marginal countries like Nepal.

Having served during such times in Nepal, Malinowski's brief no doubt included fighting terrorism wherever possible. The Maoist insurgency provided just such an opportunity. In this, Malinowski was aided by none other than some of the very politicians and parties who tried to

capitalize on 9/11, and who later became so critical of him. Remember that the then Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba went to the United States to specifically plead with President George W. Bush to help Nepal defeat the "terrorist outfit."

The U.S. response to Nepal's plea is ironically at the heart of the controversy surrounding Malinowski. If a diplomat's job is to lie for his country with a straight face, Malinowski didn't play by those rules. He was straightforward and blunt, calling a spade a spade. In the U.S. eyes, colored by world terrorism as it were, the Maoist insurgency was no more a political struggle but a means to grab power by violent terrorist means.

In other words, the Maoists had become "terrorists" and had to be

dealt with by counter-terrorism tactics. Much to the delight of subsequent governments in Nepal, not to speak of the Royal Nepal Army, Malinowski became the foremost exponent of this doctrine. This translated into growing U.S. military assistance to a beleaguered government battling a vicious insurgency.

Malinowski's blunt pronouncements would probably have been forgotten if not for another conflict brewing up in mid-2002. The King's sacking of an elected government and subsequent rule by hand-picked prime ministers began alienating the political parties. But U.S. policy, and indeed the policy of most donors in Nepal, didn't change. Most of these nations and donors had been on the side of democracy in 1990, but the changed global context meant the Maoist violence remained a larger concern

than the pro-democracy agitation. The parties, and their affiliates in the press, held Malinowski accountable for this, perhaps unfairly.

Just at about this time, reports of growing human rights violations by both the state and Maoists began to make the Europeans uneasy. It is no secret that in recent months the human rights issue has been at the forefront of European concern whereas the United States by and large still remains focused on the Maoists. It is not clear whether these differences in priorities translated into policy differences between the western allies. But it did make Malinowski increasingly bitter about the Europeans towards the end of his tenure, and vice versa.

The larger question now is, will U.S. policy change after Malinowski? Probably not. As long as the United States continues to see global terrorism as its major foreign policy agenda, its policy on Nepal will most likely remain the same. What could change is the style of diplomacy, not its substance. **N**

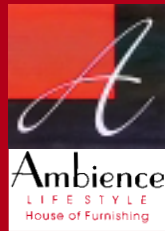


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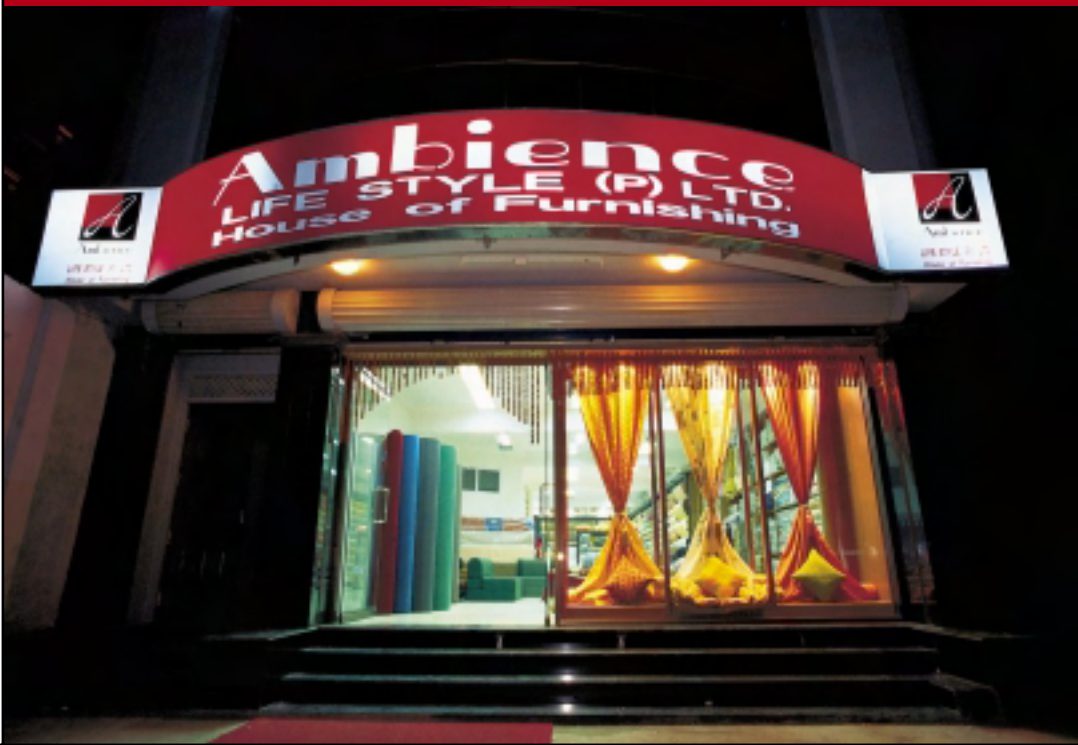
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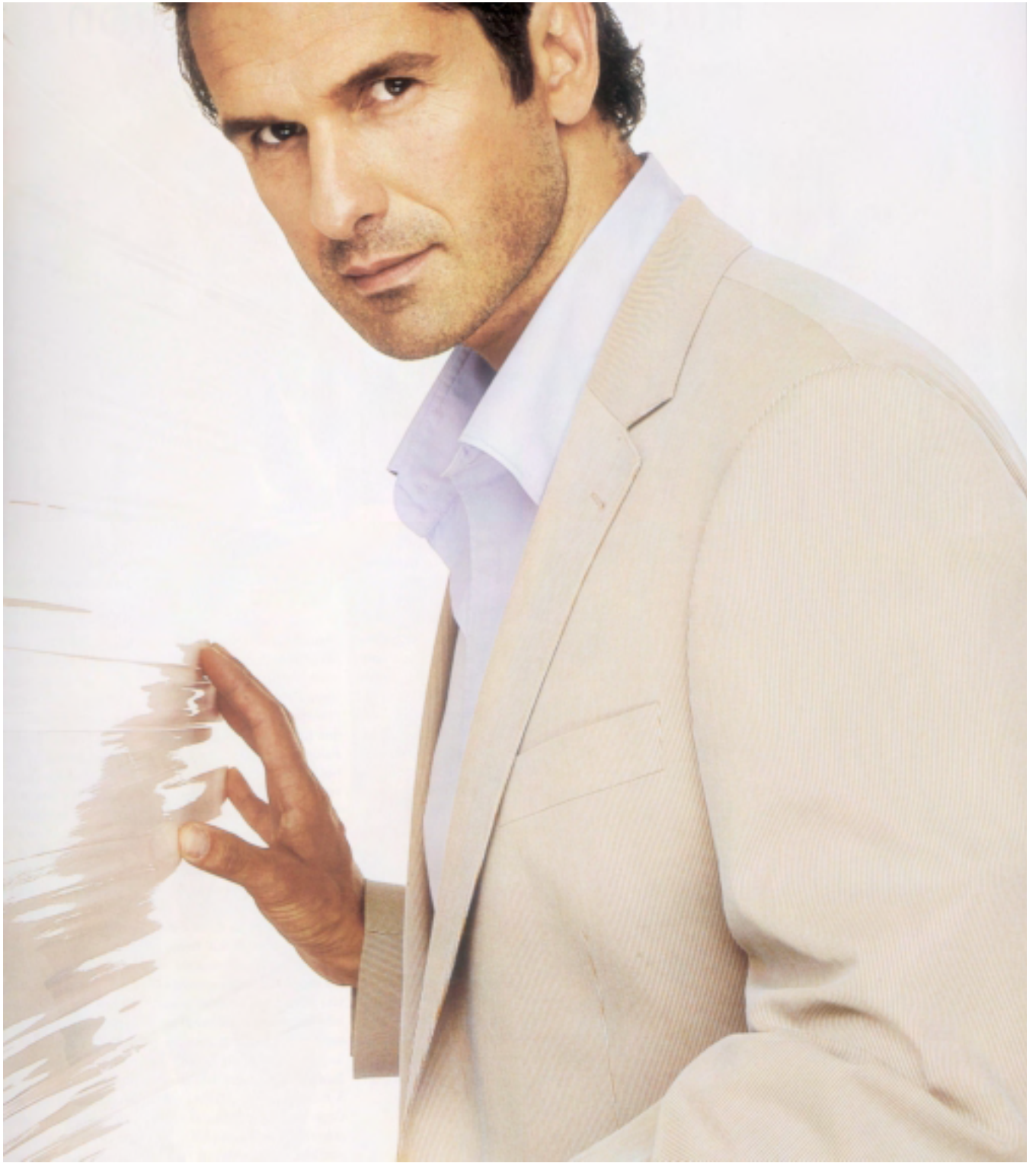
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Farewell to U.S. envoy

U.S. Ambassador Michael E. Malinowski left Kathmandu on Friday after 28 months in office. In an “invitees only” pre-departure press gathering, he categorically denied claims that he was being recalled due to policy differences with the Europeans. He also quashed suggestions of possible policy shift in the way Washington views Nepal’s conflict. The U.S. envoy expressed frustration over lack of progress in tackling Maoist insurgency and worsening relations between the parties and the government. He said it was unfortunate that much of the U. S. assistance for Nepal had to be used in purchasing arms and ammunition. “U.S. military assistance has significantly helped Nepal,” he said. The envoy stressed that the military assistance had helped maintain peace in the country.

A U.S. Embassy statement last week said the incoming Ambassador James F. Moriarty was still awaiting his confirmation by the senate. Moriarty is currently Senior Director for Asia at the National Security Council. A diplomat described him as a China expert, who enjoys close ties with U.S. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice. Janet Bogue has been appointed the Charge d’ Affaires until Moriarty’s arrival.

Bhupalman awards

Gayak Phatteman Rajbhandari has been awarded Bhupalman Singh Puraskar 2060, and actress Bhuvan Chand received the award in the theater category. Likewise, Madanmani Dixit has been named in the literary research category, Bimal

Koirala in the language category and Diamond Shumsher’s “Griha Prabesh” in the novel category.



U. N. assistance

At the Human Rights Commission’s annual meet held in Geneva, Nepal almost suffered a major cut on external assistance that comes through the United Nations. The move came after Australia, the chair of the meet, cited the rising human rights violations in Nepal. European donors and Canada were involved in extensive lobbying of the resolution that was sponsored by the Swiss government. The United States opposed it. The 60th session of the Commission on Human Rights took place from March 15 to April 23.

Open Sundays

The New Year saw Nepal Telecommunication Corporation turn into a company with a new name, Nepal Telecom. Last weekend, its new Managing Director Sugat Ratna Kansakar showed what he meant when he said he needed to place the company alongside more



professional and private organizations. Nepal Telecom decided to open customer services even on Sundays, a government holiday. The new MD, who sounds very ambitious in his media interviews, says he wants to take Nepal Telecom to new heights.

Nepal in WTO

Nepal officially joined the global economy last week when it was given a full-fledged member of the World Trade Organization.

Protest violence

The street protests have turned more violent this past week with protesters suddenly shifting their focus to New Road, the capital’s shopping hub. Office goers complained that the disturbance had started right from the morning rush hour, rather than the late afternoons. Campuses wore ghastly looks with students burning tyres and obstructing traffic. Newspapers ran stories of the oldest participant in the rally and tear gas disturbing hospital patients. Bagbazaar, Putalisadak, Bhrikutimandap, and Tinkune-Baneshwore, where the Nepali Congress (D) concentrated their protests, turned to battlefields.

Football season

The Shahid Smarak football league started at Dashrath Rangashala on April 17. Thirteen teams are participating in this year’s tournament which has a total prize money of Rs. 2,595,000. The most outstanding striker, midfielder, forward, defender, scorer and the coach will each take home a Yamaha Escort bike. The organizers have spaced the



matches with enough time-outs between matches to attract more crowd. The tournament, sponsored by Mount Everest Brewery, will conclude on July 17.

Vehicle ultimatum

Truck owners in Narayani zone are up in arms about the government forcibly using their vehicles to ferry protestors to lock-up pens in the Valley. The Narayani



Transport Entrepreneurs Association (NTEA) has demanded that its trucks be handed back to the owners within seven days. According to the Association, most trucks have suffered damages from rock-pelting protestors. NTEA president Hiralal Shrestha says, “An apolitical association like this, dedicated to public service, has been victimized by the state itself.”

IS THIS THE ENDGAME?

The talk is that Prime Minister Thapa is resigning to make room for a new government. Even if that should happen, it is still not clear whether the political parties will get their act together this time round.

BY CAROLYN RODAL

The movement against regression launched by the five political parties has reached its fourth week. And a possible finale. There is now talk of Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa's impending resignation to make way for Sher Bahadur Deuba's reinstatement, though it could not be conclusively established by the time we went to press.

Other prime ministerial contenders, according to various sources, include Nepali Congress central committee member Shailaja Acharya and RPP President Pashupati SJB Rana. Speaker Taranath Ranabhatt is a wildcard in the race.

"It's all extremely fluid at this point," said Dr Prakash Sharan Mahat, a Deuba

aide and central committee member of the Nepali Congress (D). On Friday, a day after Deuba met the King, Dr Mahat said it was still too early to tell how the formation of the new government would pan out, or whether the Palace had made up its mind to give marching orders to Prime Minister Thapa at all.

But the agitating parties had made up their minds about a few things by Friday, a day after the King met RPP's Rana, Deuba and Nepal Sadbhavana Party's Badri Mandal. The five-party alliance stated in no uncertain terms what it thought of the King's overtures to the three leaders: in starting dialogue with fence-sitting parties, instead of the agitating parties, the Palace has given a clear message that it wants pro-Palace forces to prevail should there be a new govern-

ment. Unlike in the past, the parties however have set their own conditions for their visit to Narayanhity. They want the Royalist government to release party activists placed in police custody during the protests, and lift the ban on protests in the so-called riot-prone areas, something the government started doing at least in parts by late Friday.

"We are not against the talks," Nepali Congress President Girija Prasad Koirala told a mass rally in Bhaktapur. "But we have been cheated many times in the past in the name of talks. We are now wary. We will not let that happen again."

Badly bruised after 19 months in the political wilderness, there seems to be an increased realization in the party leadership that they can't bungle it all over again. But it remains to be seen whether their resolve is strong enough to overcome a deeply entrenched institutional paralysis, which has largely stifled democratic debate. Little wonder then, the parties are mostly dominated by leaders who have huge egos but narrow visions and who continue to exercise clout due to their control over party machinery. The last thing Nepalis want to hear from the party leaders now is their old fixation with petty party politics.

Four parties in the alliance—the Nepali Congress, Janamorcha Nepal, Nepal Majdoor Kisan Party and Nepal Sadbhavana Party (Ananda Devi)—are said to be against Deuba's premiership while the CPN(UML)'s position against the former prime minister is hardening. Some leaders in the alliance insist that the new prime minister has to be nominated from within the alliance.

That however hasn't stopped those who have been demanding Deuba's reinstatement from making their case. Their argument is simple: if the dismissal of an elected government on October 4, 2002 derailed the constitution, the best way to put it back on track is through the re-appointment of the then prime minister. "The best way to undo regression is to go back to the status quo," says Dr Mahat, the Deuba aide. "Our party has clearly stated that."

It may not always be so clear in the world of politics. And there are a number of reasons why. First and foremost, parties have already said that they don't



AND THE LUCKY WINNER IS: The King met Rana and Deuba last week, fueling speculations on a change of guards at Singha Durbar



UNITED WE STAND: Nepal and Koirala, both in the Palace's bad books, may need to help each other out in the coming days

view positively the new round of consultations that the King began with Deuba, Rana and Mandal.

The mood in the party ranks and street protests will decide how the parties will proceed here on, though the agitators were markedly subdued on Friday as the news of the Palace's overtures circulated through the party ranks. The CPN(UML), meanwhile, was categorical in its demand for Thapa's resignation as a condition for its visit to Narayanhity.

At the heart of the parties' reservations lies their deep-seated suspicion of the Palace, which party leaders say has cried wolf one too many times since October 2002. "As far as we are concerned, the movement will go on," says Dr. Mahat of Nepali Congress (D), which made a late entry in the protest, largely because Koirala did not want the splinter Congress joining the fold independently.

"If I am reinstated, I will form an all-party government to start dialogue with the Maoists," Deuba told reporters on Thursday after his meeting with the King. Deuba should first get into some kind of dialogue with his old nemesis Koirala if

he is to keep his prime ministerial ambitions alive and non-controversial.

There are speculations that the Nepali Congress may not feature in a new government that will be headed by Deuba, who will have three deputies—from RPP, Sadbhavana and UML—alongside royal appointees as cabinet colleagues. This arrangement

Badly bruised after 19 months in the political wilderness, there seems to be an increased realization in the party leadership that they can't bungle it all over again.

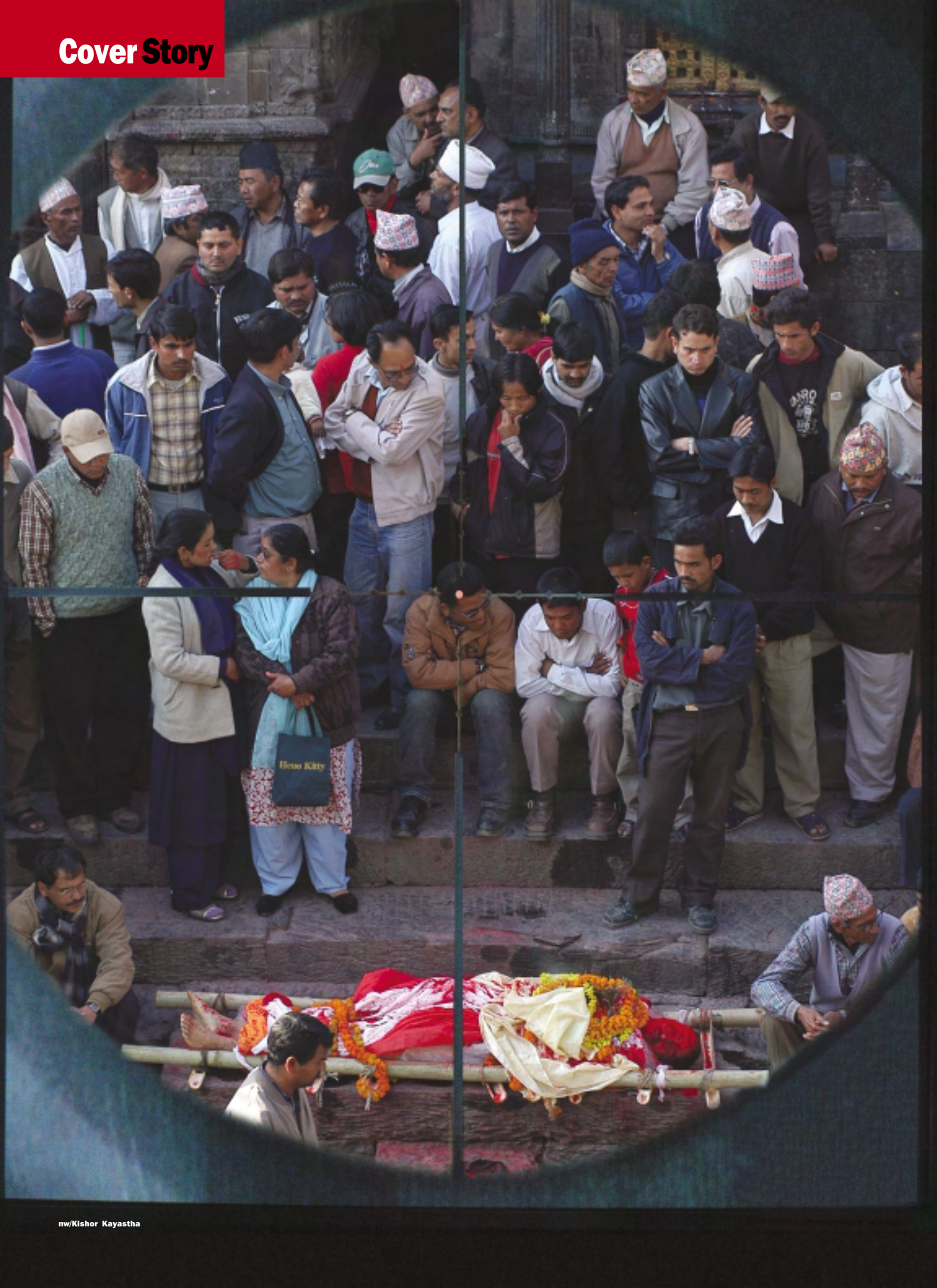
will curtail any influence Koirala, hated by many but still revered by tens of thousands of party workers and non-partisan democrats, may have on the government.

"Any government that has no representation of the Nepali Congress will

not be acceptable to us," says Gagan Thapa, General Secretary of the pro-Nepali Congress Nepal Student Union. "We can successfully continue the agitation all by ourselves if the situation so demands."

Both UML and Nepali Congress leaders say the Palace will make every attempt to slide a wedge between the parties. In any case, it will be a real test of character for the five-party alliance, especially for the Nepali Congress and UML. Nepalis will be keenly watching whether 19 months in the wilderness has taught them any lesson on integrity and cohabitation. Some argue that since the "agitation against regression" is ill-defined, it could snowball into inter-party feuds.

"The parties have no clear direction right now," says Radha Krishna Mainali, a key figure in the 1990 Jana Andolan, who was recently suspended from the UML's central committee for his opposition to the current movement. "The parties say they are fighting for democracy but their students are on the streets calling for a republic, and everyday they change their stance—on an all-party government and reinstatement." ■



Despite Nepal's stiff resistance, the Commission on Human Rights in Geneva last week issued a binding statement, asking Nepal to accept international monitoring of its human rights situation. But the bigger question is whether Nepal is keen about improving its poor human rights record

BEHIND THE SMOKE SCREEN

BY SUSHMA JOSHI

Dinesh Prasain has a gap in his teeth when he smiles. The co-ordinator for the Collective Campaign for Peace says he didn't always have a missing tooth. On December 14, four men in plainclothes came and knocked on his door. "I will open the door if you show me your ID," said Prasain, who had recently received death threats after writing an article that questioned the integrity of NGOs.

The men broke down his door and started to beat him up. They asked him four questions. "Why didn't you open the door?" "Why are you looking at us in the eye?" "Do you know Bharat Prasain?" And finally: "Where is he?"

Dinesh says Bharat Prasain, a well-known Maoist, comes from Mugitar, the same village as him in Rammechap. The social service worker, who graduated from Budhanilkantha School in 1989, says everybody in Prasaingaon (Prasain Village) knows Bharat. But like the well-known CPN (Maoist) leader Baburam Bhattarai, nobody would know his whereabouts.

They beat him for half an hour in front of his father, who had just had a stomach operation. Then the men, who addressed each other as "Captain" and "Major," apologized to Prasain, put his gold chain back on his neck, and shook hands with him before they left.

This kind of arbitrary violation of human rights is what made the Swiss government, half a world away, lobby intensively for a resolution that would compel the Nepal government to accept assistance through the United Nations to monitor human rights inside the country. At the 60th session of the Commission on Human Rights, the Chair from Australia made a statement on April 22 binding Nepal to accept assistance in monitoring.

"Thanks to the efforts of like-minded donors, including UK and



nw/SS

CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE: Kishor Khadka, 26, was shot by the Armed Police Force personnel while trying to mediate between the police and a drunken man

Canada and the determination of Switzerland,” says Marcel von Arx, advisor on conflict and governance at Kathmandu-based SDC, Swiss Agency for Co-operation and Development, “the resolution has been adopted by consensus.”

He’s not the only person who’s relieved. Nepalis living under an increasingly repressive regime, as well as well-wishers and friends of Nepal, welcome the resolution. But the question remains: will the government follow up on it pledge?

“The government has already signed around 16 international conventions on human rights,” says Prasain. “How will they monitor this new commitment?” Prasain, who was unable to press any charges against the men who beat him up because he had no evidence, is painfully aware of the loopholes in implementing human rights law.

The beating that ended with a broken tooth and a handshake is symbolic of the inconsistency that dogs the government’s



BRAZEN ATTACK: Prasain claims he was attacked by the security forces but is unable to press any charges due to lack of evidence

stance on human rights. These moves confuse not just international observers, but also Nepal’s own bureaucrats, mak-

ing the process of implementing and monitoring an uphill task.

A 25-point paper that showed commitment to human rights, hastily prepared by the government to forestall the Swiss-sponsored resolution, was a predictable case of double-speak, none more apparent than in the way it was presented.

Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa, reading aloud from the paper on March 26, said that no arrests would take place at night. A day later, Home Minister Kamal Thapa went on record to say that the night arrests would continue. Tellingly, no implementing or monitoring mechanisms were included in the paper. Sushil Pyakurel of the National Human Rights Commission points out that almost a month after the paper was presented, the government has made no move to account for the whereabouts of 1,200 detainees.

The government has dealt with the dilemma of keeping its image clean in

the international community by changing its spin according to the occasion. It instituted human rights cells in the Police and Army, but the cells have done only nominal work. It tried to replace the NHRC with its Human Rights Promotion Center, which diverted funds from the under-funded NHRC but has done little else.

The security forces, the main targets of large-scale Maoist attacks, are on the defensive. The Maoists recruit women, children and old people in their armed militias, making the security forces' job difficult and dangerous. Detention facilities are in short supply, and legal proceedings rarely take place. Security forces cite logistics—the lack of detention facilities, for instance—as one reason for acts of impunity against Maoist suspects. The other is the lack of any legal or disciplinary proceedings.

Acts of impunity from the security forces have gone unchecked, with only token punishment for low ranking officers receiving high-profile media attention. Until January 2004, the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) Human Rights Cell



investigated 18 cases. Only eight were human rights related. Court martial was recommended for four cases. The disciplinary action taken was in no way commensurate with the crimes committed, according to Amnesty International.

The government, which blames the insurgency for its failure to follow human rights norms, lobbied intensively to forestall the Swiss resolution in

Geneva. It got help from the Americans, who put their weight behind them to scuttle the proposed resolution. “The U.S. delegate didn’t meet with us, even though delegates usually meet with NGOs,” says Mandira Sharma, a human rights activist with the Advocacy Forum. “We found out through other sources that they were planning to block the resolution. They said no documents

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OBJECTION, OBJECTION: Lawyers protest ban on public protests in "riot-prone" areas

should come out, not even the chair's statement."

Since March, Foreign Minister Dr. Bhekh Bahadur Thapa, a career diplo-

mat with decades of experience in shaping international public opinion, was dispatched by the government on a damage-control mission. In Geneva, as well as in meetings with various foreign ministers of European countries, Minister Thapa actively defended the Nepali state's human rights record and blamed the Maoists for the continued violence.

Minister Thapa's public relations tour came a few days too late, however—the Guardian newspaper had already termed Nepal one of the most repressive regimes in the world, along with Iraq and Israel. Amnesty International also brought out a report stating that Nepal topped the list of countries with the highest numbers of "disappearances."

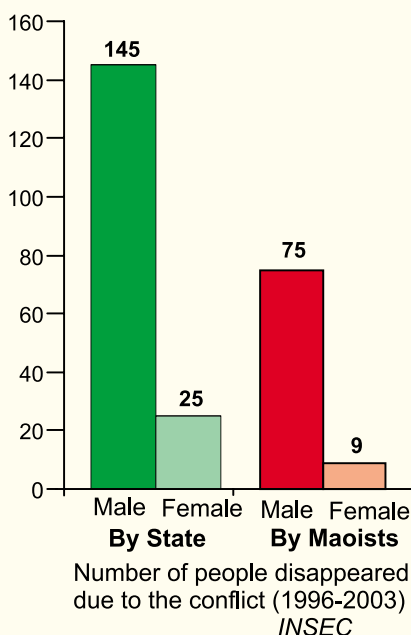
The Swiss-sponsored resolution may have passed in Geneva, but the challenge of implementation and monitoring remains. Donors, especially from European countries, have become savvy to the government's obfuscation. "The government has said one thing and done an-

other for far too long," said one diplomatic source.

Others are more positive about the outcome. "What matters now is the follow-up. If we can achieve nationwide monitoring of human rights situation in line with international standards, carried out by reasonably independent body, such as the National Human Rights Commission, with the technical, financial, and staff terms of the UN system, I would be happy," says Marcel de Arox of SDC.

Geneva is over, but a battle as significant is coming up in the National Development Forum (NDF) slated for the first week of May, when individual donors decide how much funding to allocate to Nepal.

"We are extremely concerned about the deteriorating situation of human rights in Nepal," says Gert Meinecke, chargé d'affaires of the Danish Embassy. The Danes are one of Nepal's largest bilateral donors. "In the long run, we cannot co-operate with a state which does not follow international norms of human rights." **N**





MUZZLING THE MEDIA

BY SATISH JUNG SHAHI

Issues of press freedom came two weeks too early this year and not on the customary May 3—World Press Freedom Day. Just when some observers were lauding the

police for their restraint, the police strangely started targeting journalists.

On April 16, police attacked reporters in Bhotahity, Bhrikutmandap, and Ramshahpath. The journalists were only doing what they had been doing the past couple of weeks: covering the five-party protests on the streets of Kathmandu. It's a different story that the government officials, and the police, weren't terribly thrilled about their pro-party coverage.

On that fateful Friday, two weeks ago, police beat Kantipur reporters Hari Bahadur Thapa and Khim Ghale

and held them in custody overnight. Later, more than 70 journalists who protested the police atrocities were detained briefly. The next day, scores of journalists defied the government's prohibition order to stage a rally that started from Sanchar Gram in Ring Road. Some 165 journalists, including Chairman of the Federation of Nepalese Journalists Taranath Dahal, Himal South Asia's Editor Kanak Mani Dixit and Kantipur Editor Narayan Wagle gave themselves up voluntarily to the police to express solidarity with

the reporters who were detained the previous day.

To be sure, most journalists have often tinged their coverage of the protests with a pro-party slant. But it's not too difficult to see why. The reasoning goes: if the political parties have now been pushed to the fringes, the media is very likely the next target. "There is currently a certain degree of fear syndrome that the axe is going to fall next on the press," says Bharat Dutta Koirala, one-time chief editor of Gorkhapatra and last year's Ramon Magsaysay award winner. Much like the parties, most journalists view the current regime as regressive and many of them feel that the clampdown on press freedom is just round the corner.

But the media's role in society—state-run mouthpieces notwithstanding—has always been based on the principle that it will take a non-partisan stand on issues that affect the public. In Nepal, where many journalists often spin stories in accordance with their leanings, an open alignment with parties undermines journalists' claims to be the voice of democracy.

The Federation of Nepalese Journalists (FNJ), the umbrella body representing thousands of journalists across the country, has come out

strongly against the government. It has demanded that Home Minister Kamal Thapa be sacked and the Prime Minister issue an unconditional public apology. The federation has also accused the Home Minister of masterminding the infiltration of local goons in the ongoing protests. Minister Thapa has gone on record to say that the police's heavy-handed actions were justified because Maoists have infiltrated the party-protests.

For his part, FNJ President Dahal defends journo's joining in the protests. "We were dragged into the protests when the government started targeting journalists even after they had produced their identity cards," says Dahal. "It's like the Panchayat days."

During times like these, journalists often recall the Panchayat days when the government would send officials with threats to shut down the press as and when it pleased. Sometimes, editors and reporters were attacked. Padam Thakurathi of Saptahik Bimarsha survived a gun-attack believed to have been carried out by the "bhoomigat giroha" (underground group) with alleged links to the Royal family. Saptahik Bimarsha

had been vocal against the group, and ironically enough it was Prime Minister Thapa who had then voiced his dissatisfaction with the Palace's underhanded moves.

But that was all before the 1990 Constitution came into effect, whose Articles 12, 13 and 16 guarantee press freedom. The first guarantees right to freedom of opinion, the second, right of press and publication, and the third, right to information which bars the government from closing down media houses without fair reasoning.

Today, journalism in Nepal may have swung to the other extreme, though that's partly understandable given the high degree of political polarization. Vitriolic pro and anti-party news reports are routinely splashed across the spectrum. There are some in the profession who, however, do not like this change in the tides. "There is always a thin line between politics and journalism," says

Kosmos Bishwokorma, News Coordinator at The Himalayan Times. "Yes, journalists may be the most political animals but it's not good to be blatantly taking sides," he says, expressing concern that some journalists are also wearing party hats.

Such words of caution coming from journalists are, however, few and far between. The FNJ, which has been at loggerheads with Royalist governments for a long time, has called for a media blackout on the Prime Minister for four days starting April 25. The federation, on April 7, joined a number of professional organizations to reiterate its solidarity with the ongoing five-party protests. This

trend of journalists taking to the streets is likely to continue. "After all," says Sanjeev Adhikari of Radio Sagarmatha, "There is no guarantee that the press will not be clamped down in the future, no matter who comes to power." **N**

Most journalists view the current regime as regressive and many feel that the press could be clamped down



STRATEGY TIME: FNJ members gather the day after April 16 to discuss how they should counter the government crackdown

A LABORATORY KNOWN AS EVEREST

BY SUSHMA JOSHI

Scientists from all over the world come to Nepal to conduct experiments which have long-term consequences for humanity. Few of us hear about them. One

such experiment is being conducted by three young women on Everest this summer. Angie Morey, 25, Mara Larson, 24, Lara Vowles, 22 are returning to Nepal for two months to follow up on research which will shed light on issues as diverse as Parkinson's disease, ways in which to lessen air traffic accidents, and the mission to Mars.

Why do this research on Everest, you may ask? Everest is probably the only place in the world where people voluntarily put themselves in a temporary situation where their brain is deprived of oxygen. Cutting off the supply of oxy-

gen to the brain can lead to brain damage, which is what happens during strokes. It would be ethically wrong to put subjects through oxygen deprivation in a laboratory to see what can happen to their brains under such conditions. Testing climbers on Everest to see what happens to people's brains when they are deprived of oxygen provides a perfect way out of this ethical dilemma.

People with brain damage have one clear sign of it—slurred or damaged speech. At the core of the three girls' research lies human language. The sounds that we utter everyday, along with the complex languages that weave our thoughts into ideas, are unique to human beings. No other animal has the power of speech.

Why can human beings speak and apes, our closest genetic neighbors, cannot? This question has brought forth multiple and contradictory answers. Debates rage in academic institutions in the West about the exact origins of

speech. In other words, he is interested in finding out how slurred speech could be the first red flag of brain damage. The National Space Biomedical Research Institute, which funds this project, will apply the findings of the research on oxygen starved brain-behavior to the 2020 mission to Mars.

Lieberman is Angie and Mara's teacher, and he met Lara, a tour guide who leads treks in Wyoming, on a trip he made with his wife. That's how the three girls found themselves thrown together in a common project, and now at Everest base-camp.

A team of well-known mountaineers, including Hector Ponce De Leon from Mexico and Andrew Maluish from Australia, who are trying their luck at scaling the world's tallest mountain, have agreed to participate in the brain study for the sake of science. Discovery Channel is following them with a camera all the way up to the top, creating a cinema verite series on what it feels like to climb Everest. Six minutes of this documentary will be dedicated to the research.

"It was exciting to come and visit a place we had only seen in the map," says Angie Morey. Last year, the research team recruited various climbing teams attempting to scale Everest to take their tests. Palm Pilots, loaded with a number of tests used by American researchers to test cognition and memory, were handed to the climbers. They were then asked to play games on the Palms at various points during their climb. Games tested the climbers' memory and retrieval at

Everest is probably the only place in the world where people voluntarily put themselves in a temporary situation where their brain is deprived of oxygen.

gen to the brain can lead to brain damage, which is what happens during strokes. It would be ethically wrong to put subjects through oxygen deprivation in a laboratory to see what can happen to their brains under such conditions. Testing climbers on Everest to see what happens to people's brains when they are deprived of oxygen provides a perfect way out of this ethical dilemma.

speech. At the heart of this debate is Philip Lieberman, a professor of Cognitive Science at Brown University. Professor Lieberman has been studying the origins of speech since the 1980s.

Professor Lieberman's scientific curiosity about speech led him to his current research, where he looks at how damage to parts of the brain, including the subcortical basal ganglia, may be re-

base camp, and during various points on their climb.

The sentence comprehension tests were designed to look at changes in sequencing of thought and thought shifting. "Most people were pretty accommodating," says Angie. There were a number of initial problems. For one, the screens of the Palm Pilots froze in the extreme cold.

This time around the researchers have brought new and improved versions of the gadgets, which will hopefully eliminate that problem. Some of the tests were much too long, and these have been shortened. Earlier, the climbers also had to divert from their trails to find optimal places to transmit their data, not the most ideal condition when you are halfway up Everest. Now they can do it from inside their sleeping bags.

The research findings too proved inconclusive, so this year the researchers are back with improved versions of the cognition tests. Further, Angie has also designed her own tests to see how our brain remembers, and also how it retrieves items previously stored in our memory.

The three women, who each bring their own strengths to the table, formed a close bond over the two months they spent in base camp last summer. Although there were some stressful times, they also had fun, says Angie. "There is a lot of downtime while climbers go up and down the mountains, so everybody has to hang out. We would watch movies in people's tents," she says.

The women were also recruited to become informal base camp managers after one of the teams fired their manager, and they became adept at downloading \$200 weather reports from the Internet and passing it on to the climbers. They also set up a hot lemonade stand to welcome the climbers back, which made them instantly popular with the climbing crowd.

The young researchers are not averse to combining research with adventure. Mara and Angie ended up running a marathon organized for the fiftieth anniversary of the ascent of Everest. "There were about 30 Nepalis, and us," says Mara. "We were the only Westerners, and the only women." The marathon, which Angie

completed in six hours and 48 minutes, started at base camp and went down to Namche, and then back. "I was a bit surprised," says Angie smiling. "I was expecting my legs to hurt, but only my feet did." Not only did the girls take part in the marathon, but this year they have official permission to climb a smaller mountain, Lobuche East, which compared to Everest is only a mere 20,000 feet high.

Scientific research of this type is done in increments, with people building upon each other's work. Similarly, scientific funds also go a long way, with money ostensibly meant for some abstract cause rebounding for mass benefit. The Internet started out as a communications net for the U.S. military, and has now become a worldwide fixture. In a few years from now, the research on Everest may not just save an astronaut from flying his craft into the side of an asteroid. It might also provide the information to build a device that warns a man that his slurred speech is a red flag of an impending stroke, and help devise a prevention mechanism for Parkinson's disease. **N**



AS LONG AS YOU FILM IT

The success of “Bhedako Oon Jasto” proves that it’s okay to plagiarize indigenous resources and get away with it

BY SAMUEL THOMAS

Bhedako Oon Jasto,” Kiran Krishna Shrestha’s documentary about a group of people searching for the origins of a folk song, was recently screened by the Inter Cultural Film Society at Bhrikuti Mandap. This is a space that hosts some of the best movies from around the world. Most have been subjected to scrutiny, unlike the celebrated documentary in search of a song. Amrit Gurung, one of the protagonists, released another music video two weeks ago at Baggikhana, this one set in Dolpo. He shared the stage with the usual suspects. Now for the killjoy observations.

“BOJ” received good press largely because of the sociology of the protagonists, including the presence of a leading journalist, Narayan Wagle. The presence of the star-cast helps deflect attention from the process by which a lot of

the-original-than-thou, statement to the press, the filmmaker was quoted as justifying how Nepathya’s rendition was the “original” and that the rival Dipesh Kishore Bhattarai could not even get the geography straight (confusing Mustang for Langtang) as if that were the true measure of an “original.” The message: it is okay to plagiarize as long as you get the geography right and make a documentary, something that did not strike the other plagiarist as being necessary.

Over the last few years the international community has been greatly concerned over the theft of resources, traditional knowledge, skills and technologies. The debate has resulted in several declarations, and in accepted codes of benefit-sharing. It is possible that there is no specific code on taking folk music from the *goths* north of the Valley and not paying for it, not even

sources. There is very little explaining in the documentary; the outsiders are never shown the door. It is this hospitality that is exploited, although that trust and the ready sharing that follows in scene after scene is never repaid even by the sharing of full information. This violates the principle of informed consent: we are taking your music for commercial gain. Do we have your permission? Ideally, it should be ‘We are taking your music for commercial gain. We’d like you to participate in the commercial dissemination of this music. You can participate as musicians, and you can participate in enjoying the sale of proceeds on an equal basis.’ What do we have instead? No permission, and not even any royalty.

For example, check out this soundbite from the documentary. Daniel Karthak: “These guys in the *goth* have achieved harmony. Considering that they do not even know what harmony is [a western concept], it is amazing...it is amazing.”

The condescending tone, reminiscent of the writings of a lot of foreign researchers, is a serious problem in itself. Then, since when did Nepali musicians have to wait for certification from a music hall chap about achieving or not achieving harmony—validation by an external knowledge hierarchy?

The making of music of this kind best illustrates the impudence of repeat offenders. It will only take limited research to show a history of blatant plagiarizing, of no recompense and of free media promotion. Nepal’s own media community is guilty of promoting this. It took the death of Jhalak Man Gandharva for people to wake up to his contributions. Jhalak Man died in penury, like many of his illustrious peers and forebears.

The journalist, the music hall chap, the singer and the filmmaker never pass up an opportunity to promote themselves. The journalist never fails to mention that this is his fourth visit to Langtang (he wants to go to all 75 districts like the eminent Dr Harka

There is amazing ease with which some privileged people have access to traditional folklore, knowledge and resources.

indigenous products, including fabric, music, lifestories, and folklore have been exploited for commercial gain or for personal profit.

This is not new to Nepal. It is the same all over the world—West Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the American South. In a holier-than-thou, closer-to-

asking for it, but ignorance is not an excuse. “BOJ” is the proof of the co-opting, where brazenness passes for, or is attempted to be passed off as, a certain transparency.

There is amazing ease with which some privileged people have access to traditional folklore, knowledge and re-



Gurung); the singer uses the opportunity to insert a clipping of an earlier song (no doubt popular but here in this narrative a clear promo clip); the music hall chap does not pass up the opportunity to bring to the narrative his western music training, his condescending tone.

Why have the Nepali media, and the other sponsors—their names all appear before the screening—never been so generous with indigenous musicians? Why have none of these donors ever supported an oral history project that takes into consideration issues of copyright and benefit-sharing models and serve as a document of ‘prior art,’ so that inappropriate claims like this can be challenged?

Film South Asia and ICFS could do better than promote Kathmandu’s movie-makers with handy cams making personal accounts of plagiarism a national event. This is too much of a personal trip, there is too much banter, there is self-promotion; no one in Langtang is ever told that Nepathya is bringing out a commercial music album based on their music. The journey—of a senior journalist—back to the place where he first heard the song is passed off as the reason for being there, and to the viewers of the documentary, as justification enough. The Tamang/Sherpa introduction to the song is neatly excised in the final.

Amrit: We learn from you...you learn from us...It should be like that.

Girl: You have understood our song...but we have not...

The end sums it all up. The plagiarists are in their practice room and singing—the exploitative, extractive hurrah, the distortion. The message is clear: go and pinch a folk-tune, and put a copyright on it. Pinch the tune, pinch the song, give nothing back, sell your cassettes, show this film as a promo and make your name, all at other people’s expense.

(Thomas works with the IUCN Nepal Country Office. The views expressed are his.) **N**

Rugged Riding

For the serious biker, Nepal, with its innumerable village trails and rough roads can be mountain biking heaven



BY MILAN WAGLE

Though the mountain bike was invented in Marin, California on the opposite side of the world from Nepal, it was adopted here very soon—sooner than in most developed countries. Tourists coming to Nepal began carting their bikes with them during the late 70s and early 80s. Chimmi Gurung, president of Nepal Mountain Bike Association recalls how he and his friends would modify their staid Phoenix bicycles to emulate tourists' mountain bikes by replacing their factory-issued handle bars with GI pipes and thin wheels with broader ones. Nepali cyclists back then, on their Atlas and Hero one-speed *budo* bicycles, would often watch in amazement as a mountain bike easily zoomed up a hill that seemed unconquerable on a single-speed bike.

When the tourists left, to get rid of extra baggage or to cough up money to

buy a ticket home, they would sell their bikes to locals and by the mid-80s mountain bikes were the in-thing. Local cycle shops caught the trend and started importing Taiwan-made mountain bikes like the Santosa and Mustang. Then in the late 80s Indian manufacturers came up with their own mountain bikes and soon flooded the Nepali markets. Uttam Manandhar, the owner of Raani Pokhari Cycle Center situated at Kamlachhi, the Valley's cycle hub, estimates that mountain bikes today account for more than 25 percent of the bikes sold in Kathmandu. And with the recent influx of Chinese-made bikes like Rotax, Mamet and Mongoose, you can buy a fairly reasonable ride from Rs. 4,000 up.

For those interested in mountain biking as a sport, Nepal offers so much. After all, it would take at least 10 years to explore all the tracks around the Valley. Add to that no safety regulations, no speed limits, and the rugged scenery with the

Himalaya as a backdrop, and you've got biking heaven. For the serious mountain biker the whole country with its innumerable village trails is an open game.

Initiates of the sport could start with the roads that lead off Kathmandu to places like Godavari, Tika Bhairav and Chapagaon. Then if you want to explore trails that are more challenging you could try the Nagarjun Forest trail near the Pasang Lhamu Highway, and the Lyakhure Bhanjyang trail that starts out near Gwarko in Lalitpur.

In the Nagarjun Forest trail, it is possible to chance upon animals like deer and gazelle. The Lyakhure Bhanjyang trail's uphill goes on and on, and just when you are ready to die, downhill. You will definitely see a lot more of your country should you pick up a bike and get yourself out of the city.

Besides the entertainment, mountain biking is a healthy sport. It is a complete exercise regime: you won't be working just one set of muscles; everything from your ankle joints to your upper chest will get more than they bargained for.

So next time you are bored of visiting the same bars, discos and restaurants, borrow a mountain bike from a friend, get some food, lots of water, some basic tools and preferably someone to keep you company. Then go and find out what oxygen means. **N**

BUYING A MOUNTAIN BIKE

1. Go with a friend who knows about bikes

Not only will he know which parts are good but he will also know the dealers, and you'll be less likely to get ripped off.

2. Don't buy an expensive bike

Buy a cheap bike to start with. And if you find the sport entertaining, you can upgrade.

3. Don't buy supplementary junk

Mountain bikes come with lots of accessories (timers, pacers, heart monitors, pumps, toe-clip pedals, etc.) Most of them are unnecessary if you are a beginner. So just get the bike and a helmet and start from there.

4. Get a good warranty

You will keep breaking parts. So make sure that the shop you buy the bike from is willing to give you free tune-ups and subsidized replacements.

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On The Road With The Red God

Kesang Tseten's new film captures both the Rato Machhindranath festival and the preparations accompanying the grand event in a blow-by-blow rendition

BY SUSHMA JOSHI

The sight of a priest proudly displaying a tiny vest at the Rato Machhindranath festival has been etched into our national consciousness. "On the road with the Red God: Machhindranath" is a film recently made by Kesang Tseten. Tseten takes 110 hours of footage of various acts of human ingenuity and devotion to what seems like a lost cause—namely, the construction of an unwieldy 100 foot chariot that gets tangled up in the electric wires of Patan and tilts drunkenly as it is dragged and pushed and pulled by enthusiasts across flood-washed roads every 12 years, and where men get roaring drunk and get into fights all the way from Bungmati to Patan, and then repeat the process all the way back.

Behind the vest rests a red god, known as the Rato Machhindranath. This is the divinity worthy of all that work—painters, artisans, rope-makers and carpenters donate days of working hours to build him that sky-high vehicle. Thought to be a manifestation of Avalokiteswor, the Buddha of Compassion by some, and Shiva by others, the Rato Machhindranath enjoy a popular following. While we have all seen this god in one form or another—postcard, photograph, television appearance—what is not clear to most Valley residents is why this god in general, and his festival in particular, took on such national significance.

Tseten's film, by carefully documenting the entire process from the beginning, brings us a rare behind-the-scene glimpse of a production involving un-

countable actors and decision-makers, from the guthis of Bungmati and Patan to the hundreds of people who materialize to drag the chariot back and forth between the two cities.

The festival can appear, on first sight, to be a classic excuse to get drunk and get into a good fight. Buff young men fight each other to get on the prow-shaped steering brake. The ousted men are unceremoniously pulled off. Acrimonious exchanges involving everything from the division of meat to the dogs to assigning blame for the tilting of the chariot is apparent. Scenes of conflict abound, and after a while you begin to wonder how people even manage to get that goddamn chariot upright, let alone drag it all the way from Bungmati to Patan.

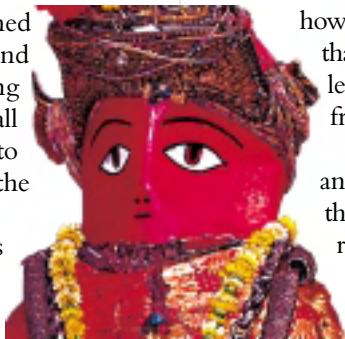
If the chariot falls down and touches the ground, bad things happen. Kings can die, royal families can get massacred, and the guthi people can mysteriously get sick and die in mass numbers. The chariot has to be rebuilt anew in the event of such a calamity. So there rests a level of national responsibility amongst all the people involved in the venture. Some measure of co-operation amongst all the different people—from the men who run alongside and swiftly put a piece of wood in between the wooden wheels to brake the momentum, to the men perched on top who give the navigational directions, to the buff young men doing the steering, to the hundreds of volunteers who pull the ropes—has to exist. And don't forget the women who brew all that potent alcohol.

After a while, the seeming chaos and loose organization take on a logic of their own. In spite of the overt conflict, which



gets hashed out at every level, it's apparent that the co-operative nature of Newari society remains the core spirit that guides the enterprise. While it started out as a local Newari festival, the discourse on the streets makes it clear that all Nepalis think of the festival as their own. When the chariot finally makes it into Jawalakhel, the level of mass participation and work involved in the process comes to fruition. When the priest takes out that tiny vest and displays it so proudly to the country, he is not just taking out a medieval garment—he is also taking out the symbol of a process in which, in spite of the conflict that exists at every level of society, the spirit of co-operation has again triumphed over small differences and created a structure in which such a mind-bogglingly complicated event could take place.

In both a literal and a symbolic level, the festival is an analogy of any large structure, i.e., our nation-state. Conflict exists at all levels in every organization. The trick is to find a way to resolve it without major calamity. Tseten, by actively editing footage to show the reality of conflict and its day-to-day resolution, follows more than a chariot. He is following the god behind that vest—the god of compassion that can allow a society made up of diverse and heterogeneous groups of people to come together and work on a national project without getting crushed. ■



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The October 4 Windfall

BY DEEPAK THAPA

October 4 has become one of those dates, like June 1 and February 13, that has been etched into contemporary Nepali history. But unlike the latter two, October 4 stands out for the

resonance it now has on the general state of the Nepali polity. And, here, I would like to submit that the King's takeover is the best thing that could have happened to Nepali democracy.

Consider the chain of events that began the slide to that fateful day in October, 19 months ago. The tentative attempts at negotiations during Ceasefire I amidst the clamour from political parties against anything seen as a compromise with the Maoists ended in failure. The major political parties spoke as one in their support of the emergency imposed in November 2001 and did not see it fit to caution the government as it went about dismantling democratic institutions such as freedom of the press. New political games began when the time to extend the emergency arrived three months later and there was much talk of constitutional reforms even though it ultimately amounted to nought.

Differences between Sher Bahadur Deuba and Girija Prasad Koirala were an aside to the political drama that led finally to the dissolution of parliament and a split in the Nepali Congress itself. The CPN (UML) saw the disarray in the ranks of its main rival as a wonderful opportunity to springboard to power through a promised election, while the two Congress parties fought it out over name and party symbol. Maoist attacks in Sindhuli and Arghakhanchi in September 2002 ruined election plans and the politicians were forced into a huddle to seek a way out of the crisis. The result was Deuba's ouster and the present impasse.

There is no point dwelling on what went wrong in the preceding 12 years since it has been analysed umpteen times by people much more competent. Some questions still remain though. It has been argued that Nepal was a young democracy, and since it takes time for democratic culture to seep into the national ethos, the roller-coaster was but natural. All true, but despite the political chaos, there were still plenty of opportunities for genuine reforms. There is almost universal consensus that many of the demands raised by the Maoists are genuine. If that be the case, why were there no attempts to address those issues? Adopting the Maoist agenda as far as it was possible could have taken the wind out of the revolutionary sails, or at the least undermined the high ground that the Maoists have claimed for themselves as the champion of the deprived and the oppressed.

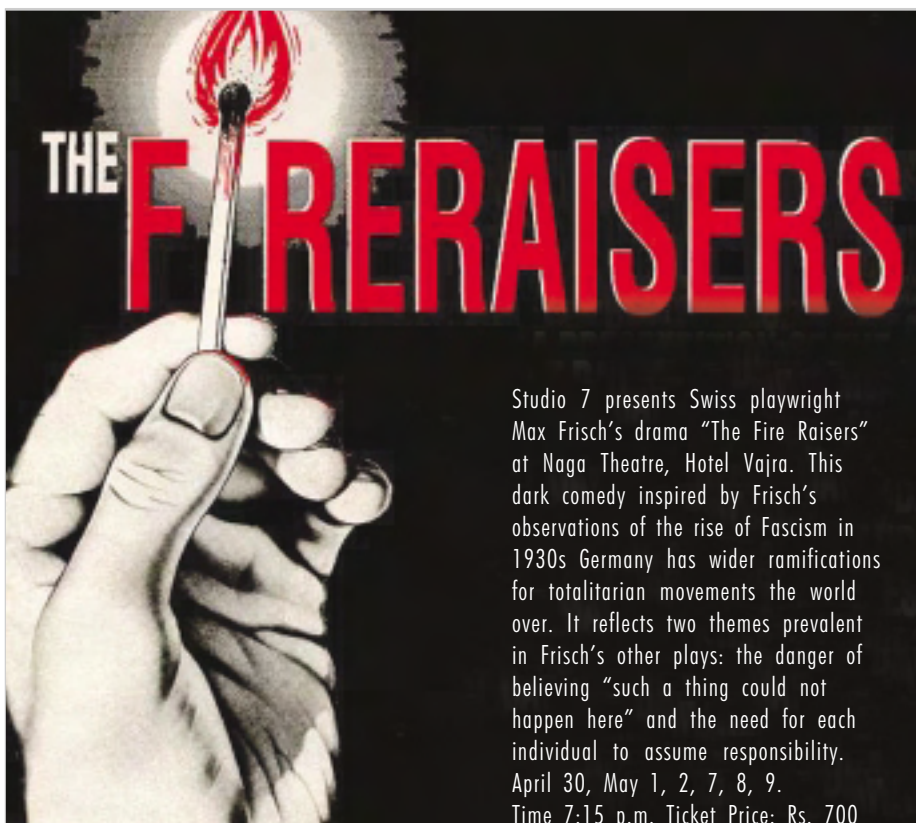
That did not happen and now we are being told that the 18 demands agreed upon by the five-party alliance is the best possible solution. That wish list, however, is one that seems more concerned that parliament will not have to face the royal axe any more. The list goes into great detail

about how the powers of the Monarchy (and the Army) will be curtailed but offers little in terms of the genuine changes the country requires if the cycle of violence is to stop.

Having said that, even the cursory nod to reforms is much more welcome than what the politicians have offered so far and it does indeed provide a starting point for real structural changes the country sorely needs. That is why the present political movement assumes a significance larger than is apparent now. To be sure, the masses seen in 1990 have still not come out onto the streets. But



that has more to do with the people's disenchantment with politicians, and it would be a mistake for the powers that be to interpret that as disillusionment with democracy itself. Nepalis have already experienced political freedom and just an illusion of democracy cannot fool them for long. There are already indications that the party cadres are not likely to be mollified even if their leaders are hoisted back to power. The momentum gathered has to find ultimate expression in a more just and pluralistic state. That's why I argue that 4 October, 2002, is the best thing that could have happened to the health of Nepali democracy. For without that jolt, our politicians would have continued in the business-as-usual mode, with consequences unknown for our country. **N**



Studio 7 presents Swiss playwright Max Frisch's drama "The Fire Raisers" at Naga Theatre, Hotel Vajra. This dark comedy inspired by Frisch's observations of the rise of Fascism in 1930s Germany has wider ramifications for totalitarian movements the world over. It reflects two themes prevalent in Frisch's other plays: the danger of believing "such a thing could not happen here" and the need for each individual to assume responsibility. April 30, May 1, 2, 7, 8, 9. Time 7:15 p.m. Ticket Price: Rs. 700 (Includes tea. Student discount available) For Information: 4271545

CHINESE FILM FESTIVAL

Jai Nepal Cinema Hall

Organized by the World Cultural Centre and Chinese Embassy.
 April 26-30. Ticket Price: Rs. 25-50.
 For information: 4247834.
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 Breaking the Silence
 April 27: 9:30 a.m.
 Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon
 April 28: 9:30 a.m.
 Gada Meilin
 April 29: 9:30 a.m.
 Love Story by Tea
 April 30: 9:30 a.m.
 Sigh



NEPATHYA TOUR 2004



In 2002 Nepathya traversed Nepal during their "Education for Peace Tour," and then again with five other artists for a "Sundar Shanta

Nepal Tour." Now it is on the the road again with "Shantiko Lagi Shikshya, Nepathya Tour 2004." This time Nepathya will be travelling to 15 cities in Nepal.

Tour dates:

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 - April 29: Dhangadi
 - May 1: Nepalgunj
 - May 3: Butwal
 - May 4: Bhairahawa
 - May 6: Pokhara
 - May 8: Tansen
 - May 12: Dharan
 - May 16: Damak
 - May 18: Janakpur
 - May 20: Hetauda
 - May 22: Narayanghat
 - May 28: Kathmandu, BICC
 - May 29: Kathmandu, BICC
- For information: 5542646, 5552839
 E-mail: nepalaya@wlink.com.np.

ART EXHIBITIONS

Caravan Hall, Summit Hotel

Exhibition of Tibetan thangkas, pashminas and statues. Till April 30. For information: 5550415.

Lazimpat Gallery Café

Exhibition of mix media of Buddha images titled "Samadhi: A journey through Sri Lanka." Last day April 26. For information: 4428549.

Siddhartha Art Gallery, Babarmahal Revisited

An exhibition of photographs by Wayne Amtzis titled "Still Life/Street Life." Till May 3. For information: 4414607.

Srijana Contemporary Art Gallery, Kamaladi

Paintings and sculptures by prominent contemporary artists as New Year's gift exhibition. Till May 13. For information: 4247889.

64 Photo Journalists

present their most influential pictures at Nepal Art Council Gallery, Babarmahal.

Nepali photo journalists have captured the moments of our lives, often under thankless working conditions: around-the-clock working hours, dismal wages and a lack of



recognition for their efforts by both the public and the media houses themselves. Here's an exhibition to celebrate their valiant efforts in bringing Nepal's realities to the fore.

Organized by the National Forum of Photo Journalists. Till April 30. For Information: 9851048178 (Dhruba Ale), 9851043306 (Rajesh Dhungana), 9851023004 (Prakash Mathema).



Quantity Tourism

BY UJOL SHERCHAN

The government's new tourism policy is on the anvil. Let's hope it departs significantly from the current one with its single-minded focus on "quantity tourism." Paradoxically, this

obsession with quantity is one reason why the tourism industry hurts that much more in times of downturn, which is also when lobbyists invariably prescribe the same solution—More Tourists—and exact concessions from the government, thus setting in motion a vicious cycle.

Some trends indicative of Nepal's current 'quantity tourism' thrust: The health of the tourism industry is routinely measured by the number of arrivals or percentage change in arrivals. This figure doesn't say much and is quite useless. More telling data such as tourism revenues per arrival per day and revenues per year over the years, including proper accounting of cultural and environmental impacts of tourism, are needed, to monitor the industry and inform policy.

The royalty for climbing Everest has been reduced from the high of US\$50,000 apparently to increase the quantity of permits demanded, in spite of the fact that the number of permits was already high and sustainable. The lobbyists failed to recognize that Everest is a "positional good," for which there will always be a demand because of its position and stature.

Premium pricing was, therefore, justified. Even Reinhold Messner and Junko Tabei took advantage of the Everest Golden Jubilee to suggest that the number of permits issued for Everest be reduced and that Chomolungma be given a 'break' for a number of years.

When Nepal's tourism industry took a series of big blows because of incidents like the Indian Airlines Flight IC814

highjack in 1999, the Hrithik Roshan scandal in 2001, or because of an upsurge in violence, the lobbyists successfully pressured the government to waive visas or visa fees for SAARC nationals to attract more tourists, even though this gesture is not reciprocated by all SAARC countries except India. Moreover, Nepal grants tourist visas to any foreigners on arrival. Only few countries in the world do this.

Many who come to Nepal for whatever reason for a short duration invariably come on tourist visas, so we do not have an accurate estimate of the number of "bona fide" tourist arrivals to Nepal. The practice of waiving visas and visa fees to SAARC nationals (except on the basis of reciprocity) or granting visas to foreigners on arrival not only removes or relaxes one additional layer of safeguard, but may also in time pose significant risks to national security and interests. We're living in the

post-9/11 world. The media regularly reminds us that Kathmandu is becoming a hub for smugglers, money launderers, and bio-pirates. The CIA World Fact Book unabashedly lists Nepal as transit point for opiates from Southeast Asia to the West. What next—international trafficking rings? Al Qaeda?

On the supply side, surplus of service providers has led to undercutting and an increase in bargain-hunting tourists, resulting in what Kanak Mani Dixit, an eminent journalist, once described as, "tourist heaven, tourism hell." Nepal has eight of the 10 highest mountains in the world as well as a unique natural and cultural diversity but continually sells itself short.

"Quantity tourism" has become a self-defeating success because the message going out is that one can travel for very little in Nepal. Many independent trekkers are known to spend as little as US\$0.27 as lodging fee per night in the attic of a farmhouse. Is this the kind of

tourists we want to attract? Industry-wide the overcapacity to undersell Nepal becomes glaring in times of downturn, as tourism-dependent businesses go bust one after the other.

All too often, planners, policy wonks and lobbyists recommend that tourism should be made the centerpiece of the Nepali economy. Placing overemphasis on such sensitive sectors as tourism is unwise. The thrust should instead be on moving

away from the present quantity-focused paradigm toward diversifying the economy so that it is made more resilient and better able to absorb shocks.

Let us therefore hope that, among other things, the new tourism policy provides: mechanisms for managing the tourism industry, including the flow of tourists, better; doesn't go against national security concerns and interests; emphasizes community-managed tourism for rural development, not "quantity tourism" of dubious and speculative merit; and encourages non-price competition while keeping undercutting in check.

Now, if we could only fly RNAC on strategic international routes to capture the real bulk of the tourist's budget long before they even enter Nepal. **N**



BUDGET TOURISTS:
Nepal for a song?

PHOTO: S.S.

Pilgrim's Picks

Eleven Minutes

By Paul Coelho

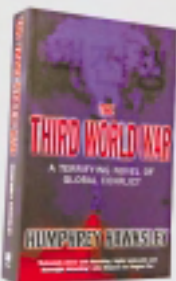
Sex and love, probably the most intriguing subject ever explored by the human mind, is the central theme of celebrated new-age fabulist Paul Coelho's new book, "Eleven Minutes." Coelho seeks to dive through the murky layers of love and the darker sides of sex and emerge with insights on the essence of this basic human instinct. The author attempts to tackle this tough subject through the life of Maria, a Brazilian prostitute—who's obviously seen it all.



The Third World War

By Humphrey Hawksley

"The Third World War" written by well known BBC correspondent Humphrey Hawksley, charts the possible course the world could take if the present arms race between India and Pakistan, and the overall political climate in the world continues. The world-war is set in motion by two events that take place in the subcontinent: the Indian parliament is bombed and the president of Pakistan is assassinated. In the wake of these events, the region falls into chaos and soon the whole world is embroiled in a world-war. Written like a typical Tom Clancy novel, the writer spins his novel from stories taken from the popular press. The book is well-paced, but the author could have probably done better than simply taking his defining tone from the U.S. views on the "War on Terrorism."



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Fatal Obsession

REVIEWED BY SMRITI JAISWAL

Last year, "Adaptation," an offbeat movie starring Nicholas Cage and Meryl Streep, was nominated for four Academy Awards. The movie owed its success to "The Orchid Thief," a runaway bestseller, on which the movie was based.

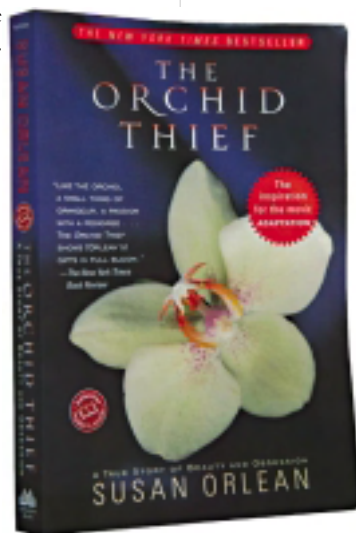
"The Orchid Thief," is a non-fiction that follows the world of orchids and Florida, a devastating combination. John Laroche, the wacky protagonist, is an orchid smuggler under trial for having poached endangered flowers from a government-protected sanctuary. Laroche, "a tall guy, skinny as a stick, pale eyed, slouch-shouldered, and sharply handsome, in spite of the fact that he is missing all his front teeth," strikes many people as eccentric. The Seminole Indians, for instance, have two nicknames for him: "Troublemaker" and "Crazy White Man."

But the readers will find more than just the protagonist eccentric. As the trial unfolds Laroche (Mr. Encyclopedia) emerges as the meteoric character many wish to be but few have the wit for. The book dives into a conglomeration of weird events, histories, crimes, people, passions, places and flowers. For someone not really into the botanical world and its surprises, orchids will take on a whole new meaning after the read. And for those not criminally inclined, crime might become a fascination.

While reporting the various amazing forms of the more than 30,000 known orchid species, Orlean imparts startling information about this flower. "One species," she says, "looks just like a German Shepherd with its tongue sticking out. One species looks like an onion. One looks like an octopus. One looks like a human nose. One looks like Mickey Mouse. One looks like a monkey. One

looks dead...there are species that look like butterflies, bats, ladies' handbags, bees, swarms of bees, female wasps, clamshells, roots, camel hooves, squirrels, nuns dressed in their wimples, and drunken old men." It's not surprising they drive orchid-lovers crazy. "The Orchid Thief" is about the madness of and for orchids. Only the variety of orchid fanatics hankering after these "queer freaks" matches the oddity of the flora.

From what Orlean tells us, orchids sometimes arouse more passion than romances. They are "the sexiest flowers on earth," she writes, and several—several—orchid hunters have died in the effort to own them. Some have drowned



on collection expeditions, some have died of dysentery, some have been lost and some have even been murdered during their quest. The lengths to which orchid collectors go to are both fascinating and otherworldly. It seems pretty bizarre that there really are these dreamers living their lives in hothouses, and there really are flowers so cunning, so deft as to have "outlived dinosaurs;

[and] they might outlive human beings."

Even if one is not too hot on flowers, "The Orchid Thief" is still a must read for its curt, understated but uproarious use of language and information. Orlean does not dilly-dally with words, and yet she is a lyricist: the novel is streaked with poetry.

The author's wide-eyed amazement at the people she meets, the places she visits, the facts she learns all conduct themselves to the reader, like visiting a different world—one too wild, too tropical, too extravagant, sizzling hot, and so so intriguing. As Orlean declares of Laroche, many things are "incredible or staggering or cracked or improbable, but they [are] never boring." **N**

Bringing on the Blockbusters

While many cinema halls in the country have closed down and many others are struggling, Jai Nepal Cinema Hall has been doing good business. The credit for its success goes to the young entrepreneurs of Vision Quest who have introduced a number of trendy innovations in the theatre world: blockbusters



Jai Nepal Cinema Hall

screened within days of release, air-conditioned hall, state-of-the-art sound system and most importantly a clean, cool place to hang out.

Bhaskar Dhungana, one of the owners of the Jai Nepal Cinema Hall, talked with Sushma Joshi of the Nation Weekly about the hall's history, upcoming plans for digital exhibition, and the potential for Nepali films to be widely distributed with new digital technology.

Why isn't cinema doing so well in Nepal?

Cinema is not cinema anymore. It was a social event before. Now it's a place where people are herded together in a commercialized space. We had to recreate the social aspect and make it fun. We wanted a clean environment and a place where families and children were welcome.

How did you get interested in starting a cinema hall?

I always thought it would be nice to have theatres like the ones in foreign countries in Nepal. I was studying in the United States from 1990 to 1996, in Luther College in Iowa. After I came back, I was interested in making my own films, but I never found people to collaborate with.

What attracted you to this location?

I went to see "Caravan" at Jai Nepal Hall, and thought it would be a great hall to refurbish and renovate. I passed by one day and talked with the

owner about the state of the hall. He mentioned he was interested in leasing it, so we got a 10-year lease.

How did you fund the initial renovation?

There are three of us at Vision Quest: me; Nakim Uddin, my jwai (brother-in-law); and Rajesh Siddhi, who studied with me at Luther. At first, we had no money. We approached a lot of institutions. Finally, we got funding from the Nepal Share Market, plus our own initial investment.

How do you choose your movies?

We don't give priority to high-brow movies. The average Nepali doesn't like them. We like to show action-oriented movies in Hindi and English. Nepali films don't run well. We ran "Bhedako Oon Jasto" for seven days, but that had a lot to do with the good marketing of the producers. Bluntly speaking, Nepali films are not of good quality, technically and content-wise. Bollywood is not far behind Hollywood in technical terms.

You are starting digital exhibition of films in your hall for the first time. How would this affect viewers?

We are working with GDC and AdLabs, two companies based in Hong Kong. They're promoting a new technology that put films on digital data disks. The quality of this is higher than DVD. We're promoting digital exhibition in five theatres nationwide. This is a useful tech-

nology for small cities and towns which don't have access to a print release.

People say that Nepali films are not being given priority, as theatres only show Hindi films.

Movies are not made or selected for nationalistic reasons. People won't watch it unless they enjoy it, or at least they get their money's worth. Why shouldn't we give Nepali films priority? If they did well, it would be great for us as distributors.

Any plans to go into the production business?

We thought about it. But first we have to develop a platform in which these films can be shown. It's useless to have a movie with good sound if the hall doesn't have the equipment to broadcast it.


How do you see Jai Nepal in the next 10 years?

I think it will be thriving. There need not be a revolution in production. There can be a revolution in distribution, like the large format I-Max theatres.

How would this new technology affect the distribution of Nepali films?

Nepali films could eventually get a worldwide audience. It is also easy to subtitle in digital. In 10 years time, it will be a different ballpark. That's the future. **N**

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Press Freedom In Peril

The moral ground that Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa stands on has always been soft and slippery: he came into office heading a non-representative government the political parties didn't want. Yet when he took office in June, people reluctantly gave Thapa the benefit of doubt in the hope that the King had his reasons for passing over Madhav Kumar Nepal, the five parties' prime minister-designate. The view was that King Gyanendra wasn't exactly a fan of the gaffe-prone CPN(UML) General Secretary. And Thapa got the nod.

The UML chief made little effort to hide his disappointment over the Royal nomination. But Nepali Congress President Girija Prasad Koirala remained tight-lipped. It was plain common sense that was behind his silence. Thapa and Koirala shared reasonably cordial personal ties and many considered Thapa a liberal, at least by RPP standards. That meant that the chances of his government making progress on two crucial fronts were better than his predecessor's. Lokendra Bahadur Chand was seen to be too cozy with the Palace to inspire confidence either among the political parties (to make way for an all-party government) or the Maoists (to add vigor to a peace process that seemed to be going nowhere).

The Prime Minister has failed on both counts. His narrow political base looks starkly exposed. Notably, on more than one occasion he has spectacularly failed to follow up on his grand promises—his commitment paper on human rights, for one—which would have given him a political cover he so badly needs. He seems to have almost completely used up his political capital as a closet liberal. It was always open to question whether he had any grip over the Army but recent events even force us to ask,

“Does the Prime Minister control anything?”

On April 16, riot police assaulted journalists while they were doing what they had been doing for the past couple of weeks: covering the street protests. Two Kantipur reporters—Hari Bahadur Thapa and Khim Ghale—were held overnight in custody that fateful Friday. Seventy others who came out in their support were also detained for a short while. The next day scores of journalists rightly defied the Home Ministry's prohibition order on protest rallies.

A number of journalists who were at the rally, including our own photographer, Sagar Shrestha, tell us that the turn of events that day was a bit disturbing. On more than one occasion police came close to clubbing the protestors. If things didn't turn nasty, it was because some senior police officers knew many of the journalists personally, and journalists gave themselves up to the police without resistance.

On Wednesday, Shrestha was injured on while covering the protests. We suspect the stone that landed on his head may have come from plainclothes policemen. Outfitted in the easily identifiable “press jacket,” Shrestha has been out on the streets every single day since the renewed round of protests began on April 1. It is highly improbable that the protestors would have targetted someone who has in the past two weeks exposed police high-handedness through his camera. There does seem to be a deliberate attempt to intimidate the press and we join the Federation of Nepalese Journalists in demanding a public apology from Prime Minister Thapa.



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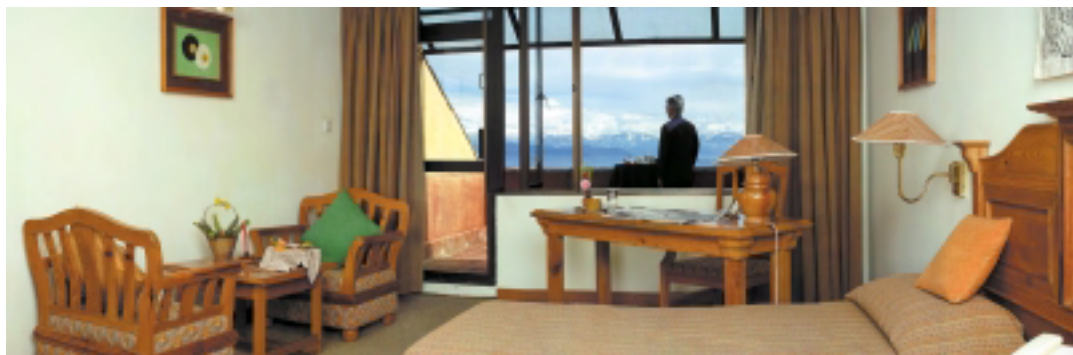
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