

## LOCKDOWN+5

■ Sonia Awale

It was only five years ago that neologisms like 'self-quarantine', 'comorbidity', 'contact tracing', 'omicron' entered the Nepali lexicon.

PCR, CCMC, PPE, WFF and other acronyms were thrown about, and we became intimate with vaccine names: AstraZeneca, Pfizer, Moderna, Sinovac. We 'social distanced' or 'sheltered-in-place' as we tried to 'flatten the curve'.

After the second Covid-19 case was identified in a female Nepali student returning from Paris, the country went into lockdown on 24 March 2020. A day later, India followed suit, halting the movement of over 1.3 billion people.

Tens of millions of migrant workers walked hundreds of kilometers, including Nepalis. Many died along the way.

Social ostracisation and stigmatisation based on rumours fanned by social media was rife. Nepali workers who made it to the border were quarantined. Some jumped into the raging Mahakali River to get to their families and drowned.

Two million Nepali migrant workers in the Gulf and Malaysia were stranded, as there were not enough flights to repatriate them. Nepalis abroad sent money home as people lost their jobs, others collected money to ship ventilators, masks and personal protective equipment (PPE) to Nepal.

"Covid might be over but we are still unprepared for rescue and repatriation on that scale, considering that many Nepali workers are in conflict zones of the Middle East," warns Upasana Khadka of the non-profit Migration Lab. "The pandemic also highlighted the need for migrant reintegration, transnational mechanisms to claim wages of returnees, but most importantly it brought home the role of low-paying, unskilled migrant workers in propping up Nepal's economy."

The lockdown was initially announced for a week, but lasted four months till mid-July 2020. Within a month Nepal went back into lockdown again for four weeks before it was eased, and there was another two-month lockdown in April 2021. The time that should have been used for a mass

Nepali Times issue #1120 15-21 July 2022 urging people to wear masks, avoid crowds, and to get boosters amidst the Omicron surge.

vaccination was squandered in shutting people in their homes. This newspaper stopped its print edition for a year.

Without lockdowns many more elderly Nepalis and those with pre-existing ailments would have died. During the deadly Delta second wave (graph, page 2), even children became sick. But the prolonged lockdowns hit the poorest and neediest Nepalis hardest.

Research scientist Sameer Dixit at the Center for Molecular Dynamics Nepal remembers getting into an argument with security personnel as he bicycled in the morning during lockdown.

"They would ask me to mask up but I would tell them it wasn't required because the air was so clean for the first time," he recalls.

Indeed, the air was so clean that people could see the snowy

mountains from the Tarai and Mt Everest was visible from Chobhar. The lockdown offered proof that Kathmandu's notorious air pollution could indeed be cleaned up by reducing emissions.

"In many ways, we had actually forgotten about the need for cleaner, better air, Covid served as a reminder," says urban planner Bhushan Tuladhar. "In fact, air pollution made Covid cases worse. But as soon as the pandemic ended, we were back to breathing dirty air. Last week Kathmandu ranked among the most polluted cities in the world."

A 2019 study put air pollution fatalities at 41,000 per year in Nepal, several times more than total reported Covid deaths, 11,959. Better air quality would increase the life span of Nepalis by nearly five

years.

Unfortunately, there is no vaccine to combat air pollution. And with the anti-vaxxers in the Trump administration, there are already cuts in critical vaccine research to fight the next pandemic. This coincides with a bird flu outbreak and measles deaths in the United States.

"The single biggest lesson of the pandemic was the importance of vaccines," says Dixit, adding that the US withdrawal from WHO will lead to serious gaps in preparing for the next pandemic (editorial, page 2).

Buddha Basnyat of the Oxford University Clinical Research Unit (OUCRU) says US pullout from global health is a huge setback that could compromise disease surveillance and diagnosis: "The pace at which the Covid vaccines were developed was nothing short of a miracle, but we are vulnerable to both emerging and pre-existing diseases."

US withdrawal has left the field wide open for China and India to now lead the way. According to AidData headquartered in Virginia, China provided over \$4.6 billion in Covid-19 aid from 2020 to 2022, surpassing the United States and Germany which contributed \$4.05 billion and \$3.64 billion respectively.

China donated more than 239 million doses of Covid vaccines to its Asian neighbours. India supplied 301 million vaccine vials to 99 countries and two UN entities, 15 million doses as donation to more than 50 nations including Nepal. The US donated nearly three times more, but that may not happen next time.

"With America backing out, China and to a lesser degree India, will fill that role, and it is not necessarily a bad thing for us. As neighbours we are closer to them and it would be advantageous to us," says Sher Bahadur Pun, virologist at the infectious diseases hospital in Teku. He adds: "But

capacitating our health sector to manufacture vaccines at home would be the best way to prepare for future pandemics and health emergencies."

When denial goes viral Editorial PAGE 2

BREAKFAST, LUNCH & DINNER  
New Orleans Café  
Thamel 01-4700736

21st YEAR  
Outsource Your Non-Core Staff Through Suvidha Staffing  
Licensed Company by DOL, MOLESS  
ISO 9001:2015 Certified  
100% Statutory Compliance  
+977-9704805213  
www.suvidhasewa.com.np

eScan Anti-Virus  
TOTAL PROTECTION for Computers, Mobiles & Tablets  
An ISO 27001 Certified Company  
Contact no.: 01-4330980  
www.escanav.com

YOUR WELL-BEING IS YOUR GREATEST WEALTH  
TRANQUILITY SPA  
"Balancing Body, Mind and Spirit"

# NATUREKNIT

LUXURIOUS CASHMERE, CRAFTED TO PERFECTION

We bring you the finest cashmere—where quality meets class. Since 2004, we have been crafting premium cashmere and pashmina products, trusted by top multinational brands worldwide. Our garments, made exclusively from SGS-tested yarns, meet the highest industry standards, ensuring unmatched softness, durability, and elegance. Experience the essence of true luxury with us.

# When denial goes viral

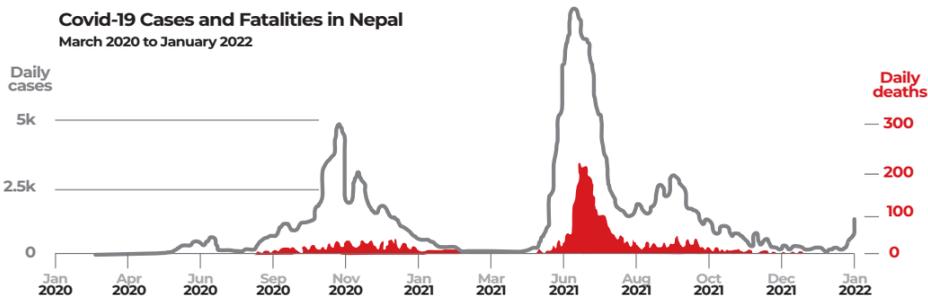
777,593,567. That is the number of confirmed Covid-19 cases worldwide before they stopped being reported last year. The total fatalities were 7,089,976 before WHO declared that it was no longer a public health emergency of international concern.

Covid-19 has tapered off, but it could be a sign of even bigger health crises to come. Alas, governments and people suffer from short-term memory loss.

Remember? The world came to a grinding halt: businesses, banks, schools, travel and tourism, sports, restaurants shut down overnight. Millions of migrant workers were displaced. Hospitals were overwhelmed and there were mass burials. Lockdowns to contain the virus inflicted more suffering.

What worked was the world coming together to develop and distribute vaccines. It significantly reduced the number of deaths worldwide, especially among the elderly, children and people with comorbidities.

Not only have some governments not learnt their lessons, but they actively refuse to admit that vaccines were our last line of defence. In his second term in office, Donald Trump picked Robert Kennedy Jr, an avid anti-vaxxer, as Secretary of Health and Human Services. The United States has recorded the first measles deaths in 10 years.



Trump caused enough harm in his first term when he repeatedly downplayed the severity of the pandemic, infamously claiming that hydroxychloroquine (and even bleach) cured Covid-19, and blatantly refused to mask up. The United States recorded 103,436,829 confirmed cases of Covid-19 with 1,219,038 deaths, one-sixth of all fatalities worldwide.

Vaccine deniers are in the same cult as climate deniers, and scientific evidence will not sway them. Trump has pulled the US out of WHO and funding cuts at USAID threaten to undermine decades of progress in preventing vaccine-preventable infections, maternal and child health, emergency preparedness, and reproductive health in countries like Nepal.

Many of these grants were also going into research and surveillance which played a big part in combatting the Covid-19 pandemic, and will be crucial as we monitor and control new emerging threats like the H5N1 bird flu, which has now spread in neighbouring India.

The UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) warned on Tuesday that the continued spread of avian influenza across the world was not just a serious threat to public health but also 'an unprecedented food security risk' as poultry farms are forced to cull millions of chicken.

The Covid pandemic improved Nepal's healthcare capacity with diagnostics, laboratory infrastructure, sequencing and pathogen genomics, and emergency care.

But, wait, what happened to all those ventilators and oxygenators? Where are the HCUs and Hi-ICUs? Plans to decentralise the infectious diseases hospital away from Teku?

While the priority is human health, the lesson from Covid-19 is that we have to also be mindful of animal health. Infections spread from wildlife to livestock factory farms and cross the species divide because of anthropogenic activities. We must therefore apply a 'one health approach' which addresses the interconnectedness of human, animal, and environmental health.

At the same time, Nepal must also buttress its drive towards ensuring universal health care. With greater and faster connectivity, the world is a global village more than ever before. No country is an island. No country, even those with vast resources, can build barriers to stop infections that emerge from the other side of the planet. That is the lesson from the Covid-19 pandemic that we ignore at our own peril.

Another lesson is that the world has to come together to defeat global crises: whether it is another pandemic, climate breakdown

## What lessons we have not learnt five years after Covid-19 turned the world, and Nepal, upside down.

or poverty. The resources that industrialised countries, China and India invested to rapidly develop vaccines against Covid-19, and multilateral mechanisms like GAVI that ensured their just distribution to the poorest and remotest regions worked well.

At a time when such global action is needed more than ever before, we see unilateralism and isolationist ultra-nationalism taking root in the world's most powerful nation.

Here in Nepal, we are now better prepared. We can even regard Covid-19 as a rehearsal for future transboundary health emergencies. It built the capacity of our doctors, nurses and paramedics, and helped upgrade infrastructure outside urban centres.

The pandemic and lockdowns increased awareness of personal hygiene. Most people are now habituated to wearing masks and hand washing, which in turn has reduced the incidence of other pre-existing infections including those caused by air pollution and contaminated water.

As we keep track of emerging diseases, we must not lose sight of common infections and risk factors that kill many more across the country every year than Covid-19 ever did (page 1). Only then, would we have achieved health for all.

**Sonia Awale**

## 20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

### Same old story

This editorial published 20 years ago this week might as well have been written today. Party leaders too busy with power struggles just don't have time for governance. Disillusioned and tired of these same hopeless leaders, there is some support even for reverting to monarchy. Excerpt from issue #239 18 - 24 March 2005:

It is no great secret that the political leadership had stagnated, lacked internal democracy, and exhibited a shameless inability to work together not just among parties but also within their own hierarchies. Too preoccupied with power struggles, they didn't see how far astray they had gone. This allowed outsiders, especially after October 2002, to play politics off against each other and manipulate them.

Their fecklessness undermined democracy, took the country to the brink and made February First 2005 desirable



in the eyes of many. One just needs to remember the headlines from the past 10 years to realise how deeply the rot had set in: horse-trading and floor-crossing, boycotts of parliament, politicisation of the police and bureaucracy, the cynical undermining of the democratic process for short-term partisan gain. And all along, in the offing, was the ominous thunder of an approaching insurgency.

Everytime this country's politics has come to a crossroad, the party leadership had the chance to look beyond petty concerns to the larger and enduring national interest. Sadly, they repeatedly mistook the cause for deeds, the process for outcome. It was as if, once elected, they didn't have to show accountability. Adolescent democracies everywhere are rambunctious and noisy.

The difference in Nepal was that politicians were not even fighting for seats at the dinner table, they were scrambling on the floor for crumbs.

**For archived material of Nepali Times of the past 20 years, site search: nepalitimes.com**

## ONLINE PACKAGES



RESCUED FROM SCAM CAMPS

Nepalis seeking foreign employment and those already working in Dubai are being trafficked to Burma by a Chinese mafia, who force them to work for online scam rings. So far, around 2,000 such victims have returned to Nepal. Watch videos on our YouTube channel, and investigation on page 10-11.



NEPALIS IN DISTANT WAR

Nepalis have nothing to do with the war between Russia and Ukraine, but they have been lured with attractive salaries to join the Russian Army. Sadly, many of their dreams end in death or injury. One such case is Tilak Budathoki, who served in the Nepal army and was once a ward chair in Rolpa. Subscribe to our YouTube channel for multimedia content.

### LIL BAHADUR CHETTRI

Lil Bahadur Chettri will be remembered for his immense contribution to Nepali literature ('Lil Bahadur Chettri, 93', Kunda Dixit, page 4). His novel Basain was in the curriculum of intermediate course grade back in the 90s. The story is a reflection of Nepali society, and will be iconic for many generations.

**Prakash Bahadur Shah**

■ I had an opportunity to translate his autobiographical essay into English. He seemed to be a simple and humble soul.

**Arjun Paudel**

■ What a legacy he left behind. Basain will always be remembered.

**Dipak Chettri**

■ We read Basain during our intermediate course. It is a timeless and heart-melting novel.

**Indira Karki**

■ How lucky we were to meet him, listen to him, and to receive his blessings. How sad we had been to leave him, knowing how he'd lived up as the hour wore on. Sleep in peace, Lil Bahadurji.

**Rupa Joshi**

### NEPALIS IN RUSSIA

It is frustrating that Nepal has been unable to implement and enforce any legislation to prevent its citizens from joining certain foreign military services ('More Nepalis in Russian Army killed in action', Bhadra Sharma, page 10-11).

**Iván G. Somlai**

■ We should immediately put a cap on Gurkha recruits. Otherwise like the first and second World Wars, we will have thousands of casualties.

**Robert KC**

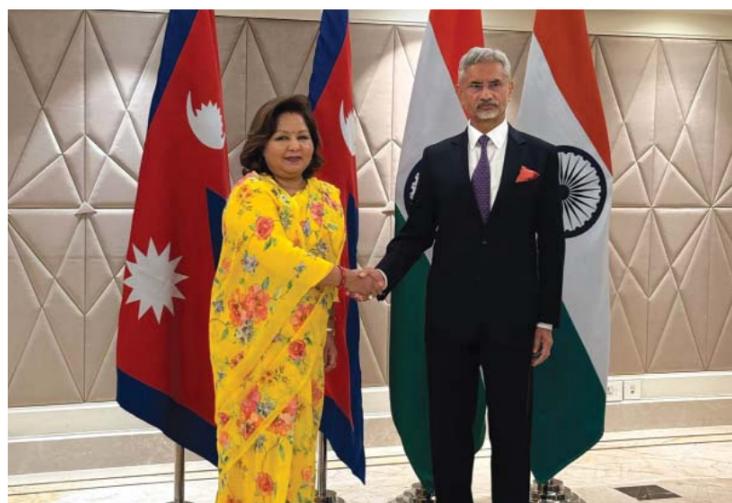
■ Those fighting for Russia will never survive, and even if they do, they will be sent back out on the field.

**Pan Chy**

■ Sadly they went to Russia from Nepal for work and were put in the Army.

**Alan Roadnight**

## 1,000 WORDS



ARZU RANA DEUBA

**NEIGHBOURHOOD FIRST:** Minister of Foreign Affairs Arzu Rana Deuba with her Indian counterpart S Jaishankar during the Raisina Dialogue in Delhi this week. The annual meet is India's flagship conference on geopolitics and geo-economics.



Nepali Times on Facebook  
Follow @nepalitimes on Twitter  
Follow @nepalitimes on Instagram

Editor: **Sonia Awale** | Special Correspondent: **Shristi Karki**  
Reporters: **Sudiksha Tuladhar, Vishad Raj Onta** | Layout: **Kiran Maharjan**  
Publisher: **Kunda Dixit**, Himalmedia Pvt Ltd, Patan Dhoka, Lalitpur | GPO Box 7251 Kathmandu  
editors@nepalitimes.com | www.nepalitimes.com | www.himalmedia.com | Tel: +977 1 5005601-08 Fax: +977 1 5005518



## WHAT'S TRENDING

### Godavari-Phulchoki Orchids

by Nomika Tamang

The small paradise of Godavari-Phulchoki harbours an array of orchid species, the wild abundance of which helps maintain the ecological biodiversity in Nepal's forest. But the orchids are facing mounting threats. Visit nepalitimes.com for details.



Most reached and shared on Facebook



### More Nepalis in Russian Army

by Bhadra Sharma

Britain is mulling deploying Gurkha peacekeepers in Ukraine. There are at least 1,000 Nepali mercenaries in the Russian Army and a few on the Ukrainian side, and about 70 Nepalis have been killed in battle. Join the discussion online. Read story on page 10-11.



Most popular on X

### Lil Bahadur Chettri, 93

by Kunda Dixit

Lil Bahadur Chettri, author of the classic 1958 novel on migration Basain, died last week in Guwahati. Although frail, Chettri was of sound mind when he met with visitors from Nepal three weeks ago and he spoke about his work. Read tributes to the author on our website. Tribute on page 4.



Most commented

### Around Kathmandu in 100 miles

by Vishad Raj Onta

Nepal has been steadily growing as a destination for adventure sports, especially trail running. Last weekend's Manjushree Trail Race (MTR), on a route that circled Kathmandu Valley, was proof that international standard trail races can be carried out in the country. Read the report online.



Most visited online page

## QUOTES



**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**

If and when there is a European peacekeeping force in Ukraine, the British Army's Gurkha soldiers deployed there could be in a theatre of war in which fellow Nepalis have been fighting for both sides.



**Subodh Rana @ranasubodh**

Russia will allow peacekeeping forces not from NATO countries but under the aegis of U.N. so no Gurkhas there only Nepalese peacekeepers perhaps



**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**

"It was Chandra Gureng's dream to document the history and evolution of ACAP, which was the first program that integrated conservation and human development. It was a paradigm shift in how to protect nature while ensuring community development."



**Forester @kuenvmgt504**

Not that "original" but new for Nepal application of the idea of community managing protected areas instead of the central govt trained professionals under the rubric of Integrated Conservation and Development Programs of which there are many example all over like ACAP

A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER 

# WE'RE ALL CONNECTED: LONDON

Connecting more countries than any other.



TURKISH AIRLINES

ENGLAND

# Lil Bahadur Chettri's final journey

Award-winning author of the classic Nepali novel on migration, Basain, dies

■ Kunda Dixit

“I do not know if I will survive till then,” Lil Bahadur Chettri said to visitors last month in Guwahati while the city’s tightly knit Nepali-speaking community was preparing to mark the author’s 93<sup>rd</sup> birthday on 1 March.

Chettri was frail, but his mind was sharp as he recalled to the visitors from Nepal how his classic novel बसाई (Basain) was first published in 1958.

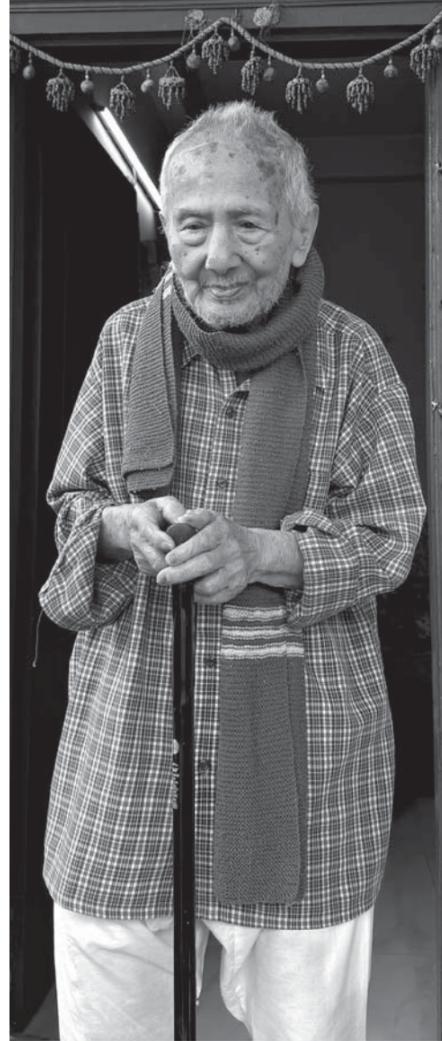
Lil Bahadur Chettri did attend his birthday on 1 March with the launch of a collection of his novels, लीलबहादुर क्षेत्री उपन्यास समग्र, but the multi-award winning author died on 13 March at his home in Guwahati.

At least two generations of Nepalis know Basain almost by heart because it was a literature textbook at Tribhuvan University. Like thousands of others, Chettri’s family migrated to Assam from the mountains of Tehrathum district in eastern Nepal, and the novel was a searing account describing factors like indebtedness, poverty and discrimination that drove Nepalis out.

The novel nearly never got printed, Chettri recalled in that recent meeting. On advice from a colleague in Dehradun, he had sent the manuscript to Kamal Dixit of Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya in Kathmandu, and after not hearing from him, thought it was not good enough to be published.

“One day, a friend from Darjeeling came to have me autograph my own book, and I did not even know it had been published,” Chettri remembered with a chuckle.

Basain went on to become the second most best-selling book in Nepali after Muna Madan by Laxmi Prasad Devkota. And it still has much resonance 70 years later, since the push factors driving outmigration from Nepal



KUNDA DIXIT

are still the same, even as the volume of people leaving has grown.

Chettri wrote in a preface to the first edition of Basain in 1958: ‘Do Nepalis leave their homes because they wish to? Perhaps that is true for many of them, but for others it is quite a different matter. I chose the misery and mystery that lie at the root of this as the theme of Basain.’

Basain was translated into English by Michael J Hutt of the School of Oriental and African Studies with the title Mountains Painted with Turmeric and published in 2008 on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Nepali edition’s first print. But in a cruel irony, Tribhuvan University a few years ago removed Basain from its list of required reading for Nepali literature students.

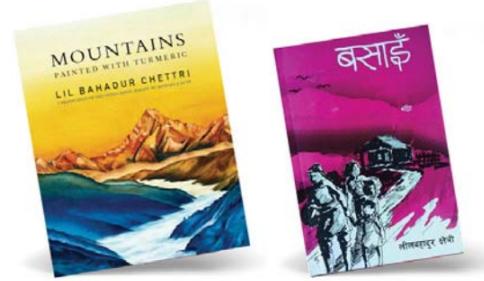
In the get-together with members of Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya in Guwahati



PRESIDENT'S OFFICE, INDIA

**IN PASSING:** Author Lil Bahadur Chettri saw off visitors from Nepal to his door three weeks before he died in Guwahati on 13 March (left).

Chettri was conferred the Jagadamba Shree Puraskar by Madan Puraskar Guthi in 2016, and was also awarded the Padma Shri by the President of India Ram Nath Kovind in 2021 (above).



last month, the author needed help to walk into his living room. Faltering in his speech at first, he grew more and more animated during the one hour meeting as he remembered fondly the respect he got whenever he visited Nepal.

Chettri lived with his son and his family, and slept in a bedroom full of books that he called “my jungle”. His daughter-in-law Kalpana was surprised how much meeting the guests from Nepal invigorated him.

“Your visit has been like medicine for him,” she said. “We hear him talking to his books at night.” When it was time to leave, Chettri walked unassisted to the door to bid the visitors from Nepal good bye.

Lil Bahadur Chettri was born on 1 March 1933 in Guwahati of Assam state in India. In 2016, he was awarded the Jagadamba Shree prize by Madan Puraskar Guthi in Nepal and got the Padma Shri from the President of India in 2021 for his contribution to literature and education. He was also a recipient of India’s Sahitya Academy Award for his book ब्रह्मपुत्रको छेउछाउ.

In his Jagadamba Shree acceptance speech nine years ago, Lil Bahadur Chettri had said: “Our ancestors left Nepal, and have been living outside for generations. But for us, our Nepali culture with its language and literature is still precious.” 🇳🇵

**NMB BANK**  
एनएमबि बैंक



## Turkish Golf

Turkish Airlines renewed its title sponsorship of the Turkish Airlines Open golf tournament after a six-year break. The tournament is a stop on the DP World Tour’s Race to Dubai, and will be held at Regnum Carya Golf & Spa Resort in Antalya between 8-11 May. Past attendees include Tiger Woods and Rory McIlroy. The Airlines also organises the world’s largest amateur golf tournament, across 73 countries, including Nepal.

Turkish Airlines flies to more countries than any other carrier. “We are glad to take another step to support sports and athletes through Turkish Airlines Open,” said CEO Bilal Ekşi.



## Nepalhilfe Beilngries

Nepalhilfe Beilngries of Germany has helped construct a new annex (pictured) to the Bhalchandra School in Panauti to accommodate increased enrolment. The German non-profit had gifted another building in 2013, and its founder Manfred Linder pledged more support in future to improve the quality of education. At the inauguration last week, Mayor Ramsharan Bhandari drew attention to widespread damage to schools in the municipality in last September’s floods.

## Ncell NSL

The Ncell Nepal Super League from 29 March-26 April at Dasrath Stadium has seven franchises taking part, including Lalitpur City FC, Pokhara Thunders, and Jhapa FC. Ncell is the title sponsor for the league and sees it as an opportunity to showcase and develop football talent. Khalti and IME Pay are official ticketing partners. Organisers hope that putting tickets on these digital wallets will make them convenient to buy and accessible.

## SSE open

Nabil Bank has opened applications, until 7 April, for the fifth batch of its School of Social Entrepreneurship program. The six-month course, held jointly with TU, consists of training and mentorship and is open to Nepalis older than eighteen with existing businesses or ideas.

## Fee discounts

Global IME Bank is offering a 50% discount on the service fee when paying online for the IELTS, TOEFL, SAT, GMAT, PTE, ACT, ACCA and USMLE tests.



## WorldLink-ISP

WorldLink Communications is the ISP partner for the Nepal Business Summit 2025, planned for 20 April. The conference is organised by the government and will be attended by various business bodies, the private sector, donor agencies etc.



## TVS scooter

Official TVS distributor Jagadamba launched the NTO RQ RACE XP BLACK, Nepal’s first 125cc scooter. It has voice command and can go 0-60kmph in 8.3s.



## Rana meets Sibiga

Foreign Minister Arzu Rana Deuba met with her Ukrainian counterpart Andriy Sibiga in New Delhi on 18 March. Deuba urged Ukraine to release seven Nepalis currently held as Prisoners of War (page 10-11). Deuba also met this week with Indian Minister for External Affairs, S Jayshankar during her India visit.

## NMB Green Savings

NMB Bank has started the Green Savings Deposit Account project, which funnels funds straight into environmental projects such as renewable energy.

## Petrol pipeline

Nepal Oil Corporation has started using the 70km Motihari-Amlekhgunj pipeline to import petrol from India. It was previously used only for diesel and is a more efficient alternative to fuel tankers. The price of petrol was lowered Rs5 to Rs163 per litre this week.

## Public Debt Soars

Nepal’s public debt has risen to Rs2.7 trillion, with Rs241.9 billion added in the first eight months of the fiscal year. The government habitually fails at fully collecting revenue and using the budget.

## BYD batteries

BYD has signed with recyclers in California and Wuhan to manage the lithium-ion batteries used in their EVs. The batteries will be evaluated for reuse, dismantled, and stripped for material to give to smelters. Proper battery recycling is a key priority for Nepal, given the many EVs now on its roads.

## Hydro builds locale

Five hydropower projects in Myagdi have agreed to meet community needs after pressure from locals. The projects, totalling 168MW, have committed to build and upgrade roads, and to distribute 10% of shares to people living in areas affected by the projects.



## Tata in Tarai

Sipradi has launched the Tata Curv, Nexon K3, and Safari models in Janakpur and Birganj. The Curv and Nexon K3 are electric SUVs, while the Safari is a diesel SUV. The Curv costs Rs5.7 million and has a range of 380km, and the Nexon K3 costs Rs4.9 million and has a range of 325km. The Safari starts at Rs12.2 million and comes in three variants.

Sipradi also celebrated the sale of over 100 Tata Ace electric cargo trucks. The trucks can carry upto 600kg, have a range of 155km and can charge 10-85% in under 2 hours.



## Kathmandu Valley to Silicon Valley

Nepali entrepreneur quits Google to launch an AI startup

■ Vishad Raj Onta

Generative AI models such as ChatGPT and Sonnet are trained on massive amounts of data that have over time enabled them to answer general questions. But they do not perform as well on narrower domains, even hallucinating or making things up.

Now here comes Anthromind, a startup developed by a 28-year-old Nepali engineer Pratik Karki (pictured) in the tech-womb at Silicon Valley, which develops datasets to improve the performance of AI models in specific areas.

Large language models are 'distilled' by running them on smaller, higher-quality data. AI is first used to assist with labelling or generating data. After that, human experts look at the responses and explain how they are wrong, helping tune the model just right.

Karki got the idea while working at Google (pictured above, right),

where he saw that while companies were trying to create their own models, they failed because the data was of low quality. In 2024, he left his lucrative job and took a risk by setting up a business that could make real impact.

It has not been easy. At Google he was one of over 100,000 employees, but after launching Anthromind, Karki has had to do sales, marketing, and recruiting, as well as leading a whole new team.

"At some point in your career, everything turns into sales," Karki told us by phone. "You need to sell potential investors on your vision, and you get a million no's before a yes." The connections he made at Google helped, and he even managed to poach a few and others became investors.

Karki studied in Biratnagar before moving to Kathmandu to do his A-levels where he did business courses. He remembers those formative years and credits his teachers in Nepal for encouraging

him to put himself out there and to speak up when needed.

He then went to Grinnell College in Iowa where he studied computer science and statistics, and realised that he liked to code: "I especially got a high debugging a program until it worked."

He went on to pursue a Master's in Computer Science and describes the course as a pure program with some very difficult machine learning courses.

Karki was recruited to Google from a highly selective early career program and got to work closely with the companies that were then building the generative Large Language Models that have since taken the world by storm. He worked on essential training infrastructure, including data warehousing and computing needs.

"Internally, we all knew about this technology and how disruptive they would be," says Karki. "But I also saw its limitations."

Karki took a calculated risk

in setting up his own company, knowing fully well that for Anthromind to succeed he would need a very obsessive and disciplined mindset.

"Every Friday evening I look at weekly data, and what worked and what didn't, especially in terms of getting customers," he says. "I had to be very deliberate with everything I did."

Karki attributes this discipline and frugality to growing up in Nepal, which he misses dearly, especially his family and the community. His best friends in California are Nepalis, they meet often and have already made plans to celebrate the approaching Nepali New Year with home-made momos.

Karki sees a lot more potential in the IT industry in Nepal, at the moment saturated with service-based companies when ideally new businesses should focus on products.

He explains how companies that provide offshore tech services operate in a 'default:alive' state,

where they can carry on even if they only have one client.

The alternative is a company whose success depends entirely on the quality of the product it puts out, a 'default:dead' state. This forces programmers to adopt an urgent, disciplined mindset. While a lot harder and riskier, it also has higher returns.

Karki is in a cohort of young Nepalis in the IT industry who have proven that serious tech innovation can come out of Nepal. Pukar Hamal of SecurityPal was recently featured in Forbes, while Sameer Maskey's FuseMachines has been listed on NASDAQ.

Financially independent since 18, Karki says Nepali families should encourage their children to make such moves. Nepal's education system should reward curiosity, instead of quelling it, to promote entrepreneurship.

He says, "Students should be rewarded for thinking individually and speaking out, like I was." 🇳🇵

**WEATHERCOAT**  
**LONG LIFE**  
EXTERIOR EMULSION WITH PU & SILICON

**घाम-पानी छेक्छ,  
१० वर्ष टिक्छ**

चर्को घामबाट बचाउँछ

मुसलधारै वर्षाबाट जोगाउँछ

१० वर्ष वारेन्टी

# SOCIAL REMITTANCE

Incoming Nepali migrant workers merit as much attention as outgoing ones

The Korea Employment Permit Scheme (EPS) is one of the most sought-after bilateral labour mobility programs for Nepali workers.

Many prospective workers prepare hard for the language tests like their "life depended on it" or "like studying for the civil



**LABOUR MOBILITY**  
Upasana Khadka

service exam". EPS is not just survival migration, but one that is financially rewarding.

One worker said migrants referred to the Korean Dream as दुई गुणा अन्तःकर्म — referring to the Rs200,000 monthly salary over a 58-month period, a transformative amount.

"Anyhow, कोरिया जाँ," was a popular slogan while cramming for the language exams (Read Diaspora Diaries, across). South Korea has also benefited from foreign workers, and the rapidly aging nation will continue to rely on expanding its foreign worker intake to offset its demographic drag.

A recent entrepreneurship initiative targeting current and former Nepali migrants in Korea funded by KOICA and implemented by the group Bridge International, demonstrates how the Returnee Innovator for Nepal (RIN) program can be made even more rewarding by maximising not just financial, but also social remittances.

The program is unique because the support begins not once workers arrive in Nepal, but in Korea itself. Selected candidates attend classes on basic entrepreneurship while in Korea and to work on their business ideas which they can further 'localise' once back in Nepal.

They also get linked to mentors from Korea-based companies from their area of interest to brainstorm, refine ideas, and get practical real-world guidance. In some cases, these can grow into business ties.

Santosh Timalisina (pictured) runs a successful coffee machine repair business Jumli Cafe in Pokhara, and was connected by Bridge International with a Korea-based coffee entrepreneur who trained him. Even though his EPS jobs entailed making golf balls or car parts, he took advantage of whatever free time he had to prepare for return by taking up coffee machine repair.

"Even now I rely on my Korean trainer for guidance and to access spare parts that are not available in Nepal," says Timalisina.

CEO of Bridge International Jinsol Hwang says the next cohorts will also be provided the option of using business plans that Korean entrepreneurs may have for those workers who are unsure about what to invest in once they are back.

The returnee program is in its early phases, and has just called for the second cohort, but demonstrates that labour mobility programs can be made more impactful. The return stage also merits as much attention, including from host country agencies like KOICA, social enterprises and even employers.

Jinsol says migration was part



**WHAT'S BREWING:** Santosh Timalisina started training in coffee machine repairs even before returning from Korea, and now runs a successful business in Nepal.

of Korea's growth story in the 1970s with workers headed to West Germany as miners and nurses and to the Middle East as construction workers. The remittances and skills acquired abroad were critical in Korea's transformation.

The role of returnees as entrepreneurs in creating jobs and contributing to the economy was a way to level the playing field. It provided access to capital, networks and skills they may not have otherwise had.

The second winning team at the recent Returnee Innovators Showcase of the RIN program was Hankook Meat Mart. It is a profitable effort by three Korea returnees to provide high quality meat products that they source from another Korean returnee who runs a pig farm (Sushil Lama, right).

The approach is to build a supply chain using high quality meat production, and diversifying to small complementary businesses such as a tiny but profitable Korean restaurant, and small factories making Kimchi and rice-cakes.

Dil Bahadur Tamang from Hankook successfully pitched his business, saying programs like RIN are useful to learn formal business management practices, for networking and exposure.

The financial award it won was helpful for business expansion as it launches a second branch.

"Those of us who go to work in Korea are not from a business background, so the switch from an employee to becoming self-employed is difficult especially in a country like ours," Tamang says. "Start-up failure rates are high

globally, if we don't understand the market and launch businesses without proper preparation, the chances of failure will be high and we lose our hard-earned money."

There are returnees who rush to businesses and subsequently fail. In the Diaspora Diaries series in this newspaper, one consistent advice, based on their own failures in some cases, has always been to take time just to understand Nepal's market before rushing into a business even if it is a sector they have years of overseas experience in.

The decision 'to return to Nepal or remain overseas' for current migrants is perhaps tougher than the decision youth face to 'migrate or stay in Nepal'. Migrants with the intention to return, whether by choice as they have stayed overseas enough, or because their contracts are ending, need more support with developing their plans back home.

This includes workers from the Middle East and Malaysia who inevitably return, not just EPS workers from Korea. In the Philippines, the Technical Education and Skills Development (TESDA), offers an online self-based business entrepreneurship program targeting current overseas Filipinos.

Such resources would also be useful for Nepali migrants who are trying to decide whether to return and what to do after returning. 

*Upasana Khadka heads Migration Lab, a social enterprise aimed at making migration outcomes better for workers and their families. Labour Mobility is a regular column in Nepali Times.*



**DIASPORA  
DIARIES 60+61**

These are the 60<sup>th</sup> and 61<sup>st</sup> episodes of Diaspora Diaries, a Nepali Times series in collaboration with Migration Lab providing a platform to share experiences of living, working, studying abroad.

## Dil Bahadur Tamang

I come from a middle-class family, and my father did all he could to make sure we had a proper education. I really wanted to be an engineer, but was not that good in studies and my father could not afford to pay for college. So I joined Korean language classes instead.

In Korea, I was blown away by the infrastructure and development. But once I entered my company premises, it was a different story. It was a smelly place with piles of trash.

This was not the standard 'foreign company' of my imagination. I had been placed with a plastic recycling company, and worked three years there before it went bankrupt. I switched to a welding company.

Korea taught me the value of work and time, and more importantly, just how much of a difference being within a system can make.

# Bringing

In small ways, many migrat

## Prabin Shrestha

I randomly came across an acquaintance who was a Korea returnee and jokingly told him that I also wanted to go. He talked about a new Government-to-Government (G2G) scheme called EPS, and told me I should give it a shot. It would be cheaper and more rewarding, but I had to pass a language test.

My first job in Korea was drying animal leather, but a year later I moved to a plastic company before returning to Nepal to start my own plastic manufacturing venture with Shahadev.

Despite having skills and experience, I quickly realised that it was difficult to remain competitive with 18 hours of daily power cuts. We were afraid of losing our hard earned money.

So Shahadev and I decided to remigrate and joined our previous company in Korea. This time, the thought of "नेपाल गएर के गर्ने?" kept gnawing at me. The skills and experience I acquired in Korea were not usable back home, where my heart was.

I used to go to a meat shop nearby, where the shopkeeper, an elderly woman, was nice to me. We used to chat, and I wondered if I could start something similar in Nepal: a well-organised meat shop.

My friend and I started applying for jobs in the meat sector. We wanted to work at a pig farm, but got jobs in a meat processing plant.

## Shahadev Gurung

We were the first lot that went to Korea under the EPS scheme. Korea had a good image in our community,

# The me

Insurgency, earthquake, Co

## ■ Sushil Lama

I interrupted my Grade 11 education to go to Malaysia to work as a security guard. During the Maoist era the environment in my college was not conducive to studies. I stayed on in Malaysia for eight years.

Overseas earnings helped me support my family and buy land, and more importantly, to spend on the treatment of my father's heart condition.

Our duty was 12 hours and we were on our feet all day checking in visitors and employees at the gate. Nights were slow and all we did was walk around with our dogs and check every hour on our radios. Sometimes, the boys also sang dohori over the radio as we passed the long nights.

One memorable part of my security job was that we were each assigned a dog, and were also evaluated on how well we trained them. My dog's name was Amy and I grew very fond of her over the years.

During drills, we wore protective clothes that prevented us from getting hurt if we were bitten, and as a lightweight, I was easily attacked and trampled.

But I was sent home unexpectedly because I had encouraged new Nepali workers to demand higher wages since they were paid less than me for similar work. That felt unfair, but no one wants a foreign rabble rouser.

For some time after being sent back abruptly, I felt bad because I

was not mentally prepared to come home. I had planned to stay for another two years, and had made earning plans accordingly.

For a year in Nepal, I studied for the EPS which was started in 2008. Going to Korea had not picked up strongly then. I saw my friends and villagers migrating to Korea one by one, and decided to give it a try.

In Korean language class, the teacher used to say "Anyhow कोरिया जाँ", and all we wanted to do was get to Korea. We had to study hard and I gave it my all. I used to write the Korean names for every object so it was etched in my memory. Whether it was a phone or bucket or plate, it would have the Korean word for it and my walls and ceiling were full of Korean words. I passed.

My migration to Korea was a bit dramatic. It was two days after the earthquake, and we were at the EPS office in Gwarko for our documents and caps and t-shirts. I did not get to properly shop for Korea. Even though I was unprepared for the trip, the frequent aftershocks and the closeness of death made me desperate to leave. I was relieved to get on the plane and escape.

In Korea, I grew capsicum. The work was easy, except for a couple of months. Night duty as a security guard in Malaysia made it difficult to pass time, but in Korea, I was working around the clock and lost track of the hours.

My wife and I studied in the same language school in Nepal. She was assigned to a strawberry farm. We got married in Nepal a

# g Korea's prosperity to Nepal

igrant workers are returning with skills to start businesses back home



**BACK HOME:** (Left to right) Dil Bahadur Tamang making a pitch at the RIN program. Prabin Shrestha at his shop in Nepal. Shahadev Gurung cutting meat surgically. Hankook Meat Mart (below) stood second in the Returnee Innovators Showcase that was organised by The Bridge International and funded by KOICA.

a place where young Nepalis could make something of themselves.

Prabin and I went on the same flight, we worked in the same plastic company, and changed to the same meat processing company. We thought it would be easy, and would be simply cutting meat like we did back home. But there everything had to be cut just right. It was a new experience and initially felt complicated.

### Prabin Shrestha

Our employer told us that he had started with nothing, and made a lot of money selling meat. With just a knife and focus on hygiene, you can do a lot if you put your mind to it, he used to tell us.

It was like surgery. Every part mattered. Knowing that these skills could be an investment back home,

we were keen to learn everything about cutting meat perfectly.

After work, we used to take home the bones to assemble a skeleton so we could learn about all the parts. We would memorise the names and familiarise ourselves with the right angle of the knife to slice them with. We were so obsessed we learnt in 2.5 months what took others six months. Our employer gave us raises.

### Dil Bahadur Tamang

After we returned to Nepal, we started Hankook Meat Mart. I have known my co-founder Prabin Shrestha for 25 years, he is like family to me. We studied together, went to Korea together.

Even before we left Nepal, we knew that we would one day run a business together. Returning from Korea, we studied the market for months before launching the

business, visiting meat shops and talking to people.

We learnt that oversupply of meat reduced the price and put quality farmers at a disadvantage. Even when we found cheaper suppliers, we set a floor price for our meat suppliers who were picked based on whether they fed the pigs proper feed and not waste, and if the animals were 6-8 months old.

We also realised that pork meat parts are not separated but mashed together. Hygiene and quality also fluctuated. Consumers get good meat one day and the next day the same shop sold meat that was difficult even to chew.

Imported meat was available, but costly. Our niche was going to be quality, premium meat.



### Shahadev Gurung

The three of us work well together even after all these years. There is a strong trust between us. Each of us individually carry out our duties well. That I think is what has worked for us to help us endure this long partnership.

The skills we learnt in Korea have stayed with us, and we are still reaping the benefits. Current EPS workers engaged in the agriculture sector can benefit here as the skills can be used, but you have to be willing to work hard in Nepal just like you do overseas.

You cannot slow down just because you are in Nepal. It is also helpful to think about your return while overseas, that makes transitioning to Nepal much easier.

### Prabin Shrestha

Korea for me was like a university where I learnt a lot. When I came home, my suitcase was full of knives, aprons for meat processing.

There are so many things that we can learn overseas, small things that would make our lives easier here. All I learnt was to cut meat. But we have created jobs for 30-40 people, while being close to family. We don't have to dream very big.

I enjoy working in Nepal. I saw many cottage industries that started small in Korea that I found inspiring so we bring machines from Korea and run shops that make rice cakes and kimchi. We are opening a new branch, and a small Korean restaurant. My former boss who visited us in Nepal is thrilled with our progress and even gifted us a meat slicer.

Working in Nepal is not always easy, of course, the trick is to try to find happiness even in those tough moments. That makes life easier.

This kind of hustle can scare some people and dissuade many but we have to build the appetite for it because one day, these experiences will become part of our story, our journey. 🇳🇵

# eat of the story

Covid, swine flu, Nepali worker has seen it all, and persevered



few years later, and wanted to work together.

I found a new job in a pig farm, where I asked my employer about the possibility of bringing my wife to the same company and he said that if he was happy with my work,

he would hire her.

That was enough incentive for me to work extra hard and I picked things up fast which made my employer happy. That's how it is overseas: things are easier if you win the confidence of your



**PIG STY:** Sushil Lama worked for eight years as a security guard in Malaysia, where he trained sniffer dogs. After returning to Nepal, he went to Korea and worked in a pig farm. He brought back his knowledge to start a boar farm (above) that now supplies pork to Hankook Meat Mart, run by fellow-returnees from Korea.

employer. They eventually hired my wife, with whom I worked together for two-and-a-half years. My employer increasingly relied on me while also investing heavily in our knowledge and growth.

Every morning, he used to teach us about pig farming for an hour or two, which has been invaluable for us till today, covering a range of topics including raising piglets, vaccination, artificial insemination and how to breed them on rotation. He was full of good life advice, too, including for our post-return plans.

In 2020, we decided to come back to Nepal. By this point, I felt like I had learnt everything that I needed to know about pig farming. My wife and I wanted to run a pig farm in Nepal on a rotational system, something that is not practiced widely here which puts farmers at a financial disadvantage.

We returned to Nepal during the early stages of Covid. It is strange how I left during an earthquake and returned five years later to another crisis. After eight months we started our Unnati Bangur Hamro Bangur Farm in Panauti.

Just as things were picking up, we had to go through a devastating loss when the African swine fever hit Nepal. Back then, I was spending all my time in the hospital because my newborn had a heart condition, and four months after his birth, he passed.

There was African swine flu detected in my farm, after which we had to shut it down for almost a year. These multiple losses took my wife and me to a dark place for months, before we had to gather ourselves up and restart work.

Thankfully, things are going better now. This is the nature of

business, you need to exercise patience. Things are not constant. Profit, loss. Supply, demand.

Rates of meat have gone up now because many farmers exited the market after the swine fever. We were patient, and now get significantly better rates which has helped us recover.

The meat available in regular meat shops is very different from what we offer because our pigs are fed quality feed, not waste, and are given proper vaccinations. We have good buyers like Hankook Meat Shop run by fellow Korean returnees (see above) who look for quality produce.

The challenge of working in Nepal is that there is no proper differentiation by quality of meat, and no traceability to the farms producing the meat which makes farmers less accountable for consumers' health. It harms those practicing ethical farming.

Manufacturing is more popular in Korea among Nepali EPS workers, but it is work in the agriculture sector that is more useful after return. I brought most of my equipment from Korea along with me.

When we returned for good, our suitcases had no personal items like chocolates or electronics, they were full of farming equipment like vaccine guns and pig tooth nippers.

Even now, I tell my friends in Korea to bring me farm equipment when they come home on breaks, and that I will buy them the usual blankets and chocolates to gift to their families in Nepal itself. 🇳🇵

## EVENTS



## NIFF 2025

The eighth Nepal International Film Festival will feature 87 films from 40 countries, exploring the power of movies to inspire, inform, and entertain.

20-24 March, 11am onwards, Tickets: Rs100-Rs400, QFX Civil Mall and QFX Chhaya Center

## Stand-up Comedy

Apporwa Kshitiz Singh makes light of everyday unfairness in his stand-up show Tai Chup, Mai Chup.

22nd March, 8pm onwards Tickets: Rs800, Titos Pub, Thamel



## Art exhibition

In What Once Was, Katyani Rai and Sabita Gyawali examine the delicate balance between presence and absence through etching, watercolor, and mixed media.

Until 4 April, Sidhartha Art Gallery, 11am-5pm (Sunday-Friday) / 12pm-5pm (Saturday)

## Shakti

Erina Tamrakar's solo exhibition Shakti is an exploration of feminine expression, personal growth, and emotional connection. Her works offer a window into the artist's heart and soul, where external and internal worlds intertwine.

Till 9 April, Takpa Gallery, Lazimpat



## NITFest 2025

The third edition of the Nepal International Theatre Festival is running under the theme of Theatre for Social Transformation: Light of Indigenous Wisdom. The festival, organized by and at Mandala Theatre, will have play workshops, poetry, live paintings, panel discussions, open air performances, and musical performances.

19-25 March, Mandala Theatre, Baneshwar



## Accelerate Actions

20 female artists from Nepal and Malaysia showcase their creations through a diverse range of mediums including painting, ceramics and printmaking.

Till 1 April, 10am-6pm, Classic Gallery, Chakupat

## Spring Klean Market

The exclusive Spring Klean Market redefines fashion and wellness, celebrating eco-conscious shopping and mindful living. Stop by and browse through a curated selection of sustainable brands, thrift shop pop-ups, fresh produce, and wellness products.

The Baha, Sanepa, 22 March, 11am-6pm

## MUSIC

## Metal Monsters III

Metal Monsters is back with the launch of an album from the band Antim Graham, as well as performances by Binaash and Strangle. Tickets available via IME Pay.

22 March, 3pm-7pm, Purple Haze Rock Bar



## Phosphenes

Vibe to the indie melodies of the Phosphenes band, live at Moksh this weekend.

21 March, 7pm onwards, Tickets: Rs1000, Moksh, Jhamsikhel

## Live music night

Go with family and friends to see Raju Gurung of Hakuna matata perform live this Friday.

21 March, 6pm onwards, Bhapa Cafe



## Chill Music Fest

Rockheads, Kali Prasad Baskota ft. Sathi Bhai, Jhilkey and The Company, and Jamesy will light up the stage at the Chill Music Fest.

22 March, 2pm onwards, Tickets: Rs500, Madhyapur Thimi



## Jenn Cleary

Listen to Jenn Cleary perform acoustic rock and blues alongside the Ramsterdam house band.

21 March, 7pm onwards, Ramsterdam Cafe

## DINING



## Grill Durbar

Experience a wide variety of flavors at Grill Durbar. Get their signature grilled meat platters or get a taste of authentic Arabic food with their Kabsa rice.

Jawlakhel, 9849777410

## GETAWAY



## Chandragiri Hills

Book the perfect getaway at Chandragiri Hills Resort with their Hilltop Blossoms package. Enjoy cable car transfers, infinity pool access, your choice of wall climbing, sky walk, or swing adventure, along with 20% off on spa facilities.

Until May, Rs12,999, Chandragiri, 9802069900

## Godavari Village Resort

Set amidst a lush green terrace valley, with a magnificent backdrop of the Himalaya, Godavari Village Resort offers Nepali hospitality combined with luxury.

Godawari (01) 5560675



## Sunshine Resort Pokhara

Escape to this boutique resort for a tranquil retreat with views of the mountains and easy access to local attractions including Phewa Lake and the World Peace Pagoda. Enjoy the a dip in the infinity pool as the weather warms up.

Phedi Patan, 9801181115



## Paradise Villa

Paradise Villa promises an unforgettable experience with its on-site spa featuring rejuvenating massages, dry sauna, and a Jacuzzi. Also dine at the cafeteria, which serves both local and international cuisine.

Budhanilkantha, 9851365487

## Grand Norling

Enjoy a calm and relaxing stay at Norling with their spacious rooms. The large balconies provide front-row seats to the garden, the golf course, as well as monkeys and deer herds that wander by.

Gokarna (01) 4910296



## The Patisserie

Indulge in the delightful flavors of exquisite cakes and sweets at The Patisserie, a Parisian-style bakery in Kathmandu. Whether you're celebrating a special occasion or simply treating yourself, The Patisserie offers next-day delivery on pre-orders.

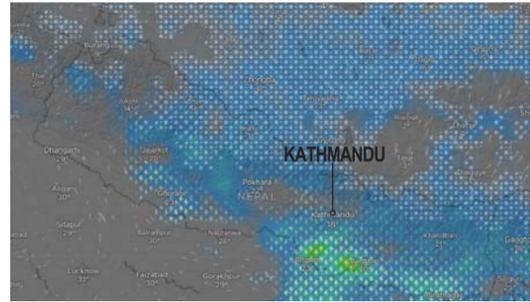
Kathmandu, 9803368875

## Tamarind

Boasting an array of cuisines, Tamarind has something for every palate. Explore authentic Thai flavours, and try their Sea Bass Fillet, Pad Thai Kai and Pad Thai Koong, or explore their fresh seafood selections.

Jhamsikhel (01) 5422626

## WEEKEND WEATHER

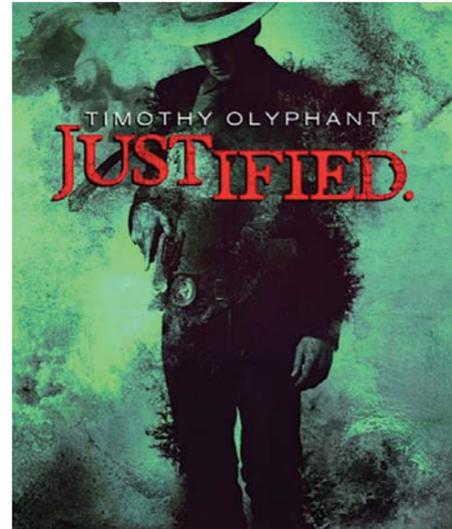


FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY
25° 13°	21° 12°	21° 12°	23° 13°	25° 14°

## Wet Saturday

After a dry and hot week with the maximum in Kathmandu hitting 25°C, things are set to cool down again over the weekend with the arrival of moisture on a frontal system from the west. Together with convection-driven clouds this could bring showers to the Valley on Saturday (forecast Windy image, left). Some clouds will linger on Sunday, with things brightening up again next week when temperature will rise to mid-20s. The minima will stay in the low teens.

## OUR PICK



After his deadly confrontation with a mob hitman is called into question, US Marshal Raylan Givens is unceremoniously reassigned to the Marshal's Service in Eastern Kentucky where he was born and raised. His investigations with his new unit take him back to his hometown Harlan, where Givens had hoped to never return. As he sets out to ensure that justice is served to those in need, Givens must confront his past, stirring up old rivalries, friendships, and relationships in the process. The American neo-western drama Justified ran for six seasons, and stars Timothy Olyphant, Nick Searcy, Jacob Pitts, Erica Tazel, and Walton Goggins.

## गर्मी मौसममा संक्रामक रोगबाट बचाउ र बचाऔं

- गर्मी मौसममा मलेरिया, कालाजार, डेंगी, हैजालगायतका विभिन्न संक्रामक रोगहरू फैलिन सक्छन् ।
- संक्रामक रोग फैलाउने झिँगा, लामखुट्टे, भुसुना आदिको नियन्त्रण गरौं ।
- संक्रामक रोगबाट बच्न शुद्ध र उमालेको पानी पिऔं ।
- बासी तथा सडेगलेका खाना नखाऔं ।
- घरभित्र र वरपरको सरसफाइमा ध्यान दिऔं ।



नेपाल सरकार  
विज्ञापन बोर्ड

## Feast of Persia

Get a taste of authentic Persian cuisine curated by Chef Mona Poordaryaeinezhad at Aloft. Indulge in fragrant stews, grilled kebabs, saffron-infused rice, and traditional Persian sweets for the ultimate experience.

Till 22 March, Aloft Thamel Kathmandu, 9801976054



## Octave

Nestled in the heart of Durbar Marg, Octave features Japanese and intercontinental dishes, including the salmon sushi and Octave momo platter. Enjoy live music, karaoke sessions, and a panoramic view of the city from their space.

Durbar Marg (01) 4220569



## Sam's One Tree Cafe

Head to Sam's for a dining experience that blends diverse flavors with cuisines ranging from Nepali to Continental. Try their pork chop with mustard sauce or stuffed chicken breast with mushroom sauce for a flavorful experience.

Durbar Marg (01) 5343610

## Mechung

Get authentic Tibetan cuisine at Mechung. Their sha phaley, thukpa and gyuma are a must-try.

Boudha (01) 4577759

# Detainee dead end in Bhutan's prisons

UN experts find political prisoners held illegally in Bhutan, call for immediate release

The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention in a report published this month has drawn attention to the Bhutan government's detention of its citizens without parole for expressing political opinions. This is despite its multiparty democratic system and its claim of being an enlightened land that promotes 'Gross National Happiness'.

Human Rights Watch and the Global Campaign for the Release of Political Prisoners in Bhutan (GCRPPB) identified at least 37 political prisoners in the country in 2023. Thirty-two of them belong to Bhutan's Nepali-speaking Lhotshampa community, which has faced decades of discrimination, abuse and forced exile from the Bhutan state. Most were convicted because of prohibited political activity between 1990 and 2008.

Five of the 37 prisoners were released upon completion of lengthy sentences recently and spoke of dire conditions in detention at the Chemgang Prison near Thimphu.

A report by the UN Working Group highlighted a catalogue of violations of fundamental rights upon examination of the cases of three out of the 32 remaining political prisoners.

Birkha Bahadur Chhetri, Kumar Gautam, and Sunman Gurung became refugees at a young age after the government expelled 90,000 Nepali-speaking nationals



**STILL LOCKED UP:** Lok Bahadur Ghaley, Rinzin Wangdi, Chandra Raj Rai and Kumar Gautam. Bottom row: San Man Gurung, Birkha Bahadur Chhetri, Omnath Adhikari and Chaturman Tamang.

in 1990. When the three returned to Bhutan in 2008, they were arrested for distributing political pamphlets and sentenced to life without parole under Bhutan's 1992 National Security Act.

The Act deems anyone who conspires, solicits, or commits offenses against Tsa-Wa-Sum—which refers to the King, the people, or the country—a political prisoner.

The UN found the three men's detention to be arbitrary and illegal under international human

rights law. The circumstances of their arrest and incommunicado detention were found to be outside the protection of the law and in two cases amounted to enforced disappearance.

As it relates to the distribution of pamphlets, the three individuals were simply exercising their rights to freedom of thought and opinion under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN stated.

Breaches of the prisoners' right to a fair trial were also traced by the group, which found that

the prisoners were "deprived of their liberty on discriminatory grounds, because of their political opinion and status as members of a linguistic minority." The body also expressed grave concern at the prisoners being denied visitors.

The cases of Chhetri, Gautam, and Gurung echo other cases of unjust imprisonment which Human Rights Watch and GCRPPB have been documenting.

As it stands, the remaining detainees live under brutal conditions, wherein they do not

have access to adequate food, clothing, or medical assistance.

The government of Bhutan did not respond to the UN Working Group's communications.

A former inmate, Ram Bahadur Rai, had previously spoken to the Human Rights Watch explaining conditions of reduced food rations, poor quality of clothing, minimum medical assistance and lack of welfare checks.

Rai said that sometimes the clothing they were provided would be so small that the prisoners had to make do with rice sacks, not just for clothing but also bedding.

While many of these prisoners continue to serve life sentences without parole in dire conditions, Bhutanese authorities completely deny their existence.

Rai further added that many of them are in very poor health as they are obligated to seek medication on their own and sometimes need to wait for months just to see a doctor.

Meenakshi Ganguly, Deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch, has urged Bhutan's international partners to call on the Bhutanese government to release all remaining political prisoners immediately. [▶](#)

[nepalitimes.com](https://nepalitimes.com)

Go online to also read 'Political Prisoners Languish in Bhutan's Jails' by Devendra Bhattarai.

TATA **ev**

TATA

introducing

**Curvv.ev**  
SUV coupé



top variant price  
**Rs. 56.99 Lakhs**

**SIPRADI TRADING PVT. LTD.**

THAPATHALI - 01 5350643, 9802333164 | RADHE RADHE - 01 5914771, 9802333160



**SIPRADI**

# Nepalis in 'scam camps'

Trafficked and forced by the Chinese mafia in Burma to defraud victims online

■ Man Bahadur Basnet

Twenty-year-old Girendra had just completed high school when he was forced to step up to support his family. His father's contracting business went under, and his mother lost her private sector job.

Like many Nepalis, Girendra's parents decided that an overseas job would be the best option for their son. Girendra was offered a security guard position in Dubai by an acquaintance of his mother's, but he refused the job.

He then met a woman named Sunita in Kathmandu who identified herself as an agent for a recruiting agency, and offered him a marketing job in Thailand that would pay him Rs150,000 monthly.

All he needed, Sunita told him, was typing and data entry skills, and Rs400,000 to get to Thailand. Girendra went back to his village in Udaypur to get the money, dreaming of earning enough to then fulfil his end goal of joining the French Foreign Legion.

In September last year, Girendra arrived at Kathmandu airport to fly to Bangkok accompanied by Sunita's brother Naresh. But both men were stopped because they did not have proper travel documents.

Sunita then bribed the officials who let the two through to catch their Nepal Airlines flight to Bangkok two days later.

The pair were met at the Suvarnabhumi Airport by their contact, Marku, a heavy-set, tattooed man who held a placard bearing their names. They were put inside a black Toyota Fortuner, and driven seven hours through four security checkpoints to the city of Mae Sot on the border with Burma.

Marku took their photos, and set them up in a hotel. Girendra and Naresh were met the next morning by a tall Chinese man who again took their photos and loaded them up at the



back of a red Ford pickup.

They drove past a sign for the Thai-Myanmar Friendship Bridge, but instead of going across, the truck took a route through the jungle to the Moei River, where their belongings were confiscated by men in motorbikes. The two were then put on a boat to cross over into Burma.

"It was a whirlwind of activity, we barely had any time to think," recalls Girendra. "But a chill ran down my spine when I heard the Chinese men on the boat laughing like monsters."

On the other side, they were loaded into another truck, which passed remote villages, encountering teenagers in bulletproof vests carrying AK47s, and soldiers having lunch or smoking cannabis.

The truck finally stopped at a big compound, where Girendra and Naresh had their passports and phones confiscated. They were made to sign a document that read 'Human trafficking, drugs and mobile phones are prohibited.'

As grand as the compound looked from the outside, its interior was dark, marble walls crumbling. There was



sound of weeping from a group of young African women huddled in a corner with bruises all over their bodies.

Girendra's worst fears were confirmed: they had been sold to Burma. The pair were led into a conference room where a group of men of various nationalities were at work stations. A Malaysian man on

a sofa informed them bluntly that they had been sold into an online scam ring.

"You are trapped here now," Girendra recalls the man telling him. "After hearing this I went to the restroom and wept."

Soon after, the two were led to an 'interview' by men who tested them on their English language

skills, travel experience and typing speed, then given laptops.

The first thing Girendra did was to find out where he was via Google Maps. They had ended up in the Burmese border town of Myawaddy in Kayin State, that has been ruled for 15 years by the Karen State Border Guard Force (KGBF), one of the most powerful among the self-governing armies that separated from the Burmese military in 2024, and is now known as the Karen National Army.

Cyber scam rings began to thrive along the Burma-Thailand border in the years after its control was ceded to the ethnic army, particularly in the Kayin State. The Kokang region located in northeastern Shan State that borders China is just as notorious for cyber scam centres.

Chinese gangs have been recruiting youth from across the world into their scam networks. They are made to pose as women and lure men under the guise of lucrative jobs in Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia. But Burma has become fertile ground ever since its 2021 military coup.

A 2024 study on transnational crime in East Asia published by the United States Institute of Peace found that cyber scams in Burma are defrauding people of \$64 billion annually. The UN estimates that at least 100,000 people have been trafficked and forced to work in cyber scam centres in Burma, terming it 'modern-day slavery'.

In Myawaddy, the two Nepalis were asked to change their names. Girendra chose 'Netra', hoping that the light would one day guide him away from the darkness of his circumstance. Naresh chose the name 'Ram'.

There were 11 Nepalis in the compound, including two women who had also been trafficked. They warned the newcomers of the extremes that their Chinese bosses would go to force them to meet extortion targets.

Girendra soon witnessed the punishment, which included electrocution, beatings, isolation without food or water, and exposure to extreme outdoor heat.

His routine involved him posing online everyday from 3PM to 9AM as 'Alicia Farooq', the persona of a wealthy 30-year-old fashion designer based in Singapore. Armed with a list of phone numbers everyday, 'Alicia' would gain trust

## More Nepalis in Russian Army

As Britain mulls deploying Gurkha peacekeepers in Ukraine, more Nepalis die in battle

■ Bhadra Sharma

If and when there is a European peacekeeping force in Ukraine, the British Army's Gurkha soldiers deployed there could be in a theatre of war in which fellow Nepalis have been fighting for both sides.

Three years into the conflict, there are at least 1,000 Nepali mercenaries in the Russian Army and a few on the Ukrainian side. About 70 of them have been killed, 180 injured are being treated in hospitals in Russia, dozens have deserted, and there are seven prisoners of war captured by the Ukrainians.

Reports in the British press last week quoted Defence Secretary John Healy announcing the formation of a 500-strong Gurkha Artillery regiment to be sent to Ukraine in the event of a peace deal. European defence ministers met last week in Paris to decide on a 'force generation' as part of a 20-nation 'security and stabilisation'



**POLITICAL MERCENARY:** Tilak Budathoki served three years in the Nepal Army, but resigned after his family was harassed by the Maoists during the conflict. He was elected ward chair in Rolpa (above) in 2017, but was defeated by a Maoist candidate in the 2022 election.

Desperate to pay off debts, he found a job in the Russian Army (left), but was killed in action in Ukraine last week.

operation in Ukraine.

There are currently just over 4,127 Nepali nationals in the British Army, most of them in the infantry. The new artillery unit would be deployed in surveillance and reconnaissance roles attached to anti-aircraft missile systems.

Meanwhile, fighting has intensified even as US-brokered peace talks take place in Saudi Arabia. Russia and Ukraine have been hitting cities deep into each other's territories with missiles and long-range drones. And Russia seems to be gaining ground to retake the Kursk region.

Casualties are high, and both sides are running out of manpower. Ukraine is feeling the shortage of recruits more acutely, while the Russian Army has been getting conscripts from the hinterland as well as mercenaries from Ethiopia, India and Nepal.

Tilak Budathoki from Rolpa paid a Nepali intermediary from Dang recruiting for the Russian Army Rs1 million to get him

# escape to tell the tale



**KIDNAPPED:** Nepali and other nationalities being driven to the Thai border by the Karen Army (left) in Burma after ransoms were paid for their recent rescue from a Chinese-run scam camp.

Rescued workers in a safehouse after crossing into Thailand (left, below and above).

Screenshot of a clandestine video smuggled out last year by a rescued Nepali of a call centre in Shan state in Burma (above, right).

Human traffickers take various routes to take recruits from Nepal to Burma.



and establish relationships with unsuspecting individuals, often sending intimate videos to tempt young men to engage.

They would then be tricked into ordering goods from the scamming platform Bitubi Binance in exchange for a \$30 commission deposited into the spender's account.

The final 'killing' entailed Alicia asking the target individual to deposit a larger amount on the platform in exchange for a bigger commission. By the time the person at the other end realised the cryptocurrency and binance accounts are a sham, 'Alicia' would have vanished with the money.

Girendra was given the goal of collecting at least \$10,000 every month. The entire scam network in Myawaddy had 20,000 people, a town unto itself. The compound had its own casinos, clubs, restaurants, bars, markets, even money exchange centres.

"If you had money, you had everything except your freedom," says Girendra. "I would see new people arrive, and was helpless to do anything but watch as they fell into the same trap that I did in front

of my eyes."

Two months after Girendra and Naresh arrived in Burma, five fellow Nepalis were somehow rescued. Girendra secretly contacted the returnees, who over the next two months put him in touch with a man named Bibek Rai in Nepal. In exchange for Rs150,000, Rai said he could get them out, but Girendra did not have that kind of money.

Bibek Rai visited the Burmese Embassy in Kathmandu to appeal for the release of Nepalis trapped in Burma. Girendra then got the contact of Sanjay Pradhan, a Burmese citizen of Nepali origin, and sent him the information of the remaining Nepalis at the compound who wanted to get out.

By now, Girendra had failed to meet his target extortion amount, and was subject to harsh physical punishment which hurt his neck.

Pradhan messaged Girendra that they were working on their release from the compound, but

their first round of negotiations for ransom with the KGBF to enter its jurisdiction fell through.

Two weeks later, armed KGBF militia suddenly came to collect the Nepalis, calling them by their passport numbers.

"I cried uncontrollably when I came out of that cage," Girendra recalls. Over the next few days, Pakistani, Indian, and Philippine nationals were also released from the compound.

One Nepali, who had been appointed 'leader' by the Chinese bosses at the compound, refused to return because it was more profitable for him to stay back.

An NGO then took charge, paying for their return from Burma to Thailand in a convoy of 20 military vehicles. Each person was given 10,000 Thai baht (\$300) for further travel expenses.

The Nepalis then got in touch with the Nepal Embassy in Bangkok asking for tickets home, but Girendra says they were treated like

criminals.

"Embassy staff told us that they were not our parents," he adds. Finally, the rescued Nepalis found other ways to pay for their flights back to Kathmandu and returned last month.

## Bob's Story

In Chitwan, Bob's family farm never recovered after being hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic. So, when he saw an ad on Telegram about a sales and marketing job opportunity in Thailand that promised zero recruitment fees and a \$1,500 salary, Bob immediately messaged the Telegram account to apply for the job.

He heard back from someone named Barsha that candidates would be selected through a video interview. Bob's interviewers kept their video on mute during the meeting.

Finally, he was called to Kathmandu, where he was asked by Barsha to pay Rs150,000 that would be returned to him once he reached Thailand.

Bob reached Kathmandu airport on the day before the Phulpati festival last year, where he met Samir Thapa Magar, an IT student from Gorkha who had also responded to the ad in Telegram. He had been offered a job as a cleaner in Thailand. Samir paid Barsha Rs105,000 in cash and Rs25,000 in cryptocurrency.

Bob and Samir landed at Rangoon airport three days after they left Kathmandu, and were told that they would be taken from there to Thailand.

Their passports were taken by their employers, after which they were driven for a whole day, changing vehicles 20 times before finally reaching Myawaddy.

"It was only there that we realised that we had been scammed," remembers Bob.

The two men were coerced into working as online scammers disguised as women. They would have to extort \$10,000 a month, failing which they were tortured by armed militia. Samir now regrets scamming people out of up to \$22,000 in a month.

Last year, a Chinese gang was apprehended in Kathmandu working under the cover of a beauty salon named YYP Services to recruit Nepalis into 'scam camps' in Burma.

In July 2023, Chinese national Liang Jun was arrested by Nepal Police after a woman who had been forced into a scamming ring in Burma since July 2022 returned to Nepal and filed a complaint at the Anti-Human Trafficking Bureau.

The woman had been promised a monthly salary of \$1,000, and had paid Rs100,000 in recruitment fees, but had been sent back to Nepal after she fell ill due to exhaustion while working in a scam network in Burma.

The Kathmandu District Court sentenced Liang to two years in prison, the minimum punishment for human trafficking. Since then, some other Nepalis who have returned from scam rings in Burma have filed complaints with the Bureau, but no one else has been arrested.

## The Dubai connection

Traffickers have not just targeted desperate Nepalis seeking foreign employment, but also Nepali migrant workers already employed in the Gulf. Agents also use Dubai as a transit point, taking unsuspecting Nepalis on visit visas, setting them up in apartments before dispatching them to scam rings across Southeast Asia.

Of the 11 people in Burma sent back to Nepal by the Karen State Border Guard Force, half had arrived in Burma from Dubai. One of them, Yograj Liwang from Jhapa, had been working in Dubai on a visit visa, and had reached Burma in October 2022, initially receiving information on Facebook.

Last August, Nepal's Central Investigation Bureau (CIB) arrested 36 individuals including two Chinese nationals after raiding a cryptocurrency trading ring in Lalitpur which had been trafficking Nepalis in Dubai. That syndicate with tentacles in the UAE, Nepal, and China had defrauded people of more than Rs105 million.

"The Chinese had contacts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia," says a Deputy Superintendent of Police involved in the investigation. "Although there is no evidence that this group sent Nepalis to those countries, we have reason to suspect that they are responsible."

There is no way to know how many Nepalis have been scammed into working as scammers across the other three Southeast Asian nations. Returnees estimate that around 2,000 Nepalis have been forced into working for online scam rings. 🇳🇵

*Some names have been changed. Watch videos online.*

# killed in action

a military job. He was promised Rs300,000 a month salary for a 'support job' in the army, and Russian citizenship.

Budathoki had served three years in the Nepal Army, but resigned after the Maoists threatened his family. With his military experience, he felt he could handle a military job.

He was flown to Moscow via New Delhi despite a government ban on mercenaries joining the Russian Army. After a few weeks training, he was sent off to the front, although the agent had said the Nepalis would be in kitchen duty or be back-up while Russian soldiers did the fighting.

He was sent off to the Donestk front where the fighting was fierce. The soldiers were constantly hungry and cold in the icy trenches. While the Nepalis foraged for food in nearby bunkers, they would be subject to relentless Ukrainian drone attacks.

"This is nothing like I imagined, I

have nothing left to lose," Budathoki told us during a one-hour conversation over Facebook Messenger in January. "I do not think I am getting out of this alive."

Budathoki in the trenches on Facebook Messenger in January one hour conversation was despondent and didn't think he would make it back alive because of relentless Ukrainian drone attacks, black smoke billowing out of the snow-covered forests.

Budathoki had heard of Nepalis who had deserted and made it back to Nepal after paying the same recruiters who had brought them to Russia and after the Nepal Embassy issued them temporary travel documents. They charged \$3,000, but several attempts to flee were unsuccessful.

Among those who managed to escape is Krishna Kumar Shahi from Dailekh who was wounded, and is now in TU Teaching Hospital in Kathmandu. He remembers: "There are corpses strewn all over like goats, and on the other side is Ukraine."

After reports of desertions, Russian military intelligence had increased surveillance and had a list of Nepalis in the Russian Army. Those caught were immediately sent back to the front, and deployed in the places where the fighting was fiercest. Some were tortured when they returned to their units.

"I am just waiting to die," Budathoki had told us, saying he missed his 12-year-old son and 6-year-old-daughter. "I came here so I could afford to send them to good schools. Everyone here wants to return to Nepal, they say they do not want any money, just safety."

For Budathoki, it was hard to take the death of Sajan Gurung, who had been recruited with him in Nepal and both had travelled together to Moscow. Gurung was killed in action along with three other Nepalis in a Ukrainian drone attack on a trench barely 400m away.

On 25 February, Budathoki told his friends and family that he had been sent off

again to the frontlines. A few days later, he was killed in action.

Tilak Budathoki's death was announced on 11 March in Parliament in Kathmandu by Rolpa's MP Iswari Gharti of the UML party. Budathoki had been elected ward chair of Sunchahari Municipality-5 of Rolpa. He lost the next election to a Maoist candidate, and was desperate for a job to pay off the loans he took for his campaign.

Since it was impossible to bring the body home, the families of Budathoki and Gurung performed ritual funerals in Nepal.

MP Gharti told Parliament: "I request the prime minister to stop recruitment of Nepalis in the Russian Army."

Many of the Nepalis in the Russian Army have never been paid, or not paid what they had been promised. Except for two of the dead, none have got compensation and their families in Nepal are deep in debt and cannot service loans they took to pay the recruiters. 🇳🇵



**aloft**<sup>®</sup>  
KATHMANDU THAMEL

THE  
**TROVE**  
Hospitality by Design

# The feast of Persia

With  
**Celebrity Chef Mona Poordaryaeinezhad**  
from Iran

**20-22 March, 2025**

**nook**

**Rs. 3500 nett per person**  
**Rs. 6000 nett per couple**

**6.30 P.M. Onwards**

Complimentary welcome drink  
Lavish buffet

**NYLGIRI**  
Above it All

**Rs. 5000 nett per person**  
**Rs. 9000 nett per couple**

**7 P.M. Onwards**

Complimentary welcome drink  
Snacks and lavish buffet  
Music and entertainment

T&C\*