

Courage & Conviction

newsfront

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PM Girija Prasad Koirala and UMDF leaders Upendra Yadav, Mahantha Thakur and Rajendra Mahato after signing the 8-point accord at Baluwatar on Feb 28.

Undermined SPAM's crisis of confidence

■ nf correspondent

The three minor constituents of the ruling alliance have come out openly against the 'big-brother' attitude of the top three parties—Congress, UML and Maoists; with a veiled threat that they may even walk out of the alliance.

The warning of the three, jointly followed their assessment that the top three parties were guided and dictated more by India in the country's internal affairs, sometimes even at

the cost of their national interest. The Left Front led by CP Mainali, the Mazdoor Kisan Party led by Narayanman Bijukchhe and the Samyukta Janamorcha are however, still assessing the, "relevance or futility of our staying in the alliance."

The three were kept in dark about the accord with the United Madheshi Democratic Front (UMDF) and the Federal Republican National Front (FRNF) that the PM signed guaranteeing autonomous states after the elections to the constituent assembly. The

normal practice while taking such major decisions in the past was to have them ratified in the steering committee or apex level leadership of the seven parties including the three.

"But it was deliberate as we know who was guiding and dictating the whole show with PM Koirala acting like a pawn," Bijukchhe told newsfront. Home Minister KP Sitaula who played a key role on behalf of the PM tried to pacify the ruffled feelings of the coalition partners by saying, "It was a mistake on the part of the government not to have sought the endorsement of the seven party alliance." But CP Mainali's reactions and response were not only critical of the PM but he also accused India of interfering in Nepal's internal affairs. "India, it seems, has tried to rein us in," he said.

The accord with the UMDF, especially the ambiguity on one-madhesh-one-pradesh

and the question of autonomy needed much more debate and a wider understanding. "It has made our national unity and sovereignty vulnerable," said Mainali. It seems that Health Minister Girirajmani Pokhrel who represents the Samyukta Janamorcha in the cabinet had asked the PM to sign the accord only after consulting other alliance partners, but the PM had other compulsions," a minister said.

But the wrath of the three minor parties is equally directed against the other parties in the alliance - Congress, UML and the Maoists. "None of them has spoken officially against the deal and the manner it was signed," he said. But senior leader of the UML, Jhalnath Khanal is also believed to be opposed to the deal. He apparently told his party leadership, "Most leaders acted like eunuchs when there was such a brazen interference in the country's internal affairs." ■

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Deals galore

Both sides' faces saved

Prime Minister GP Koirala sort of created a record by signing two accords with major outfits waging war for provincial autonomy and federalism within a span of 48 hours. The first was signed with the United Madheshi Democratic Front (UMDF) on Feb 28 and the other with the Federal Republican National Front (FRNF), two days later.

The signing of the accord has brought the unrest in Terai that crippled the country and its economic activities for 16 days, to an end. It also injected some hope that the last hurdles for the elections in April are now over. Political leaders belonging to the main three ruling parties have already set out for their constituencies

for campaigning.

The eight-point accord with the UMDF promises that future Nepal will be a federal republic, but the degree of autonomy to be enjoyed by the states would be determined by the constituent assembly. Similarly, both sides agreed to adopt a vague or ambiguous stance on the question of 'one Madhesh One Pradesh' as the accord simply states that 'a Madhesh province' will be created, but does not guarantee that all the 22 districts of the plain adjoining India would be part of it.

Nevertheless, the accord that in principle recognises the spirit behind the demands of the two fronts, gave a face saving device to the agitating groups who instantly declared that

they would not only suspend their agitation, but will also go to the polls. Soon after the agreement was signed, the Election Commission said it was making some changes to accommodate the late-comers in the election process, "but there will be no further flexibility shown."

UMDF leader Mahanth Thakur said, during the signing ceremony held at the Prime Minister's residence, that the Mahesh movement was not directed against anyone but aimed at promoting nationalism in a larger sense. But it was an irony that Thakur, who last year had been assigned to negotiate with the Madhesh groups on behalf of the Koirala led government, signed the accord on behalf of the agitating groups.

Despite the agreement, annoyance and reluctance were writ large on the faces of the leaders like Upendra Yadav of the Madheshi Janadhikar Forum (MJF) who kept insisting till the last moment that elections must be postponed for a month to give them enough time to prepare for the polls.

The other accord that was signed on behalf of the FRNF recognises all its supporters killed during the movement as martyrs, as in the case of Madhesh. It also recognises Madheshis' entry in the security and civil service sector of the government in proportion to their population and gives due attention to the marginalised language, ethnic groups and regions while forming the federal set-up. The responsibility to implement the provisions of these accords, with no time frame decided, has been left to the government. ■

Business and politics

Koirala controls money

While political parties are all set to go to the polls, major political parties, mainly the Congress and the UML are facing a resource crunch. Despite the unification of the two Congress groups as one single party, Prime Minister GP Koirala has monopolised all the resources and 'uses his discretion' to allocate it to the candidates.

"He has initially given Rs one lakh to each of the party candidates; only to those who belonged to his group, and has left out the ones belonging to Deuba camp," a senior leader of the party said, adding, "A divided image of the party might bring misfortune to us." But as the party controls finance ministry and the leadership of the government, Koirala still is in a far more advantageous position to mobilise resources. "But he is more concerned to ensure that his daughter Sujata emerges as the most powerful leader after the election, and allocation of resources for the candidates will be done accordingly," a prominent working committee member said.

But the problem that the UML has been facing is somehow different, and it is something that the party had not encountered in earlier polls. Many business houses that used to donate to the

party earlier are now hesitant to do so after the UML included two top businessmen Vinod Chaudhary and Tibdewala in its closed list for the constituent assembly. "The party has its own businessmen, so why don't you ask them for money, was the answer I got from a business house," a UML candidate told newsfront on condition of anonymity.

The Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) in that sense appears much more comfortable financially than others as it is estimated to have a huge amount that it got through extortion and 'donations'. Going by the graffiti and posters on the walls and roads in the capital and most parts of the country, especially in the urban areas, Maoists are far more visible than other parties already.

While the UML began erasing some of its slogans following instructions of the Election Commission not to stick bills and write slogans on private and government property, the Maoists have stepped up the slogan campaign. The most popular slogan of the Maoists is: 'Red salute to comrade Prachanda, first future President of republic Nepal.'

As the crime graph in the capital rises and exhibits a deeply entrenched international dimension, Nepal police finds itself handicapped with a shortage of resources to effectively identify and nab them. While the police have succeeded in busting smaller groups involved in extortion and cheating, its success in nabbing groups who have links outside largely depends on the level of cooperation they get from abroad.

Its latest worry is the attack on businessman cum builder, Shashi Kant Agrawal, in the capital last week, who had a miraculous escape. There are speculations that it was a case of extortion and that the demand was very high. The Nepal police says it has come close to identifying the group. It is also believed to have sought cooperation of INTERPOL as the criminals may have their networks and operation base abroad. Police said the criminals in this case appear more sophisticated and well-equipped. "We hope to make a major breakthrough very soon," the official said. Agrawal who was fired upon, sustained injuries in his thigh.

Fighting crime

Nepal police solicits Interpol help

"We are encouraged after we managed to nab kingpins of the major extortion racket, Amar Tandon and Ram Kumar Pyakuryal, from Balaju and Sinamangal in the capital," a top level police official told newsfront. Both were wanted in the case related with abduction of businessman, Mahesh Murarka, who bought



Businessmen condemning attack on Shashi Kant Agrawal

his freedom from the duo for a hefty amount of Rs. 7.7 million.

But the 'extortion' pattern has shown that it is not only the big business houses and industrialists but even low income groups are being targeted.

The crime busted by the Metropolitan Police Crime Division recently identified the National

Liberation Army as one such which basically enlisted financial institutions, school owners and hotels besides reputed individuals as their possible targets. But the amount they realised from their 'victims' was at the time too small, up to Rs. 500, the police said. All those allegedly involved in the NLA were found to be in their late teens or early 20s.

While this group mostly used Mero-mobile phone sets to make the demand, some newer groups are believed to have used satellite phones subscribed in a country in South East Asia. "This is where we feel handicapped by the resource crunch. And we cannot move forward without an active support from the Interpol and the country concerned," said the official. But the praise that Interpol chief showered on Nepal police, especially in the context of its success in nabbing of Dr Amit Kumar of the kidney racket, and later that of Amar Tandon and Pyakuryal has apparently lifted the morale of the Nepal police. "He has promised us all help, and let us see how that moves ahead," the official added.

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Newsbrief

I - factor



The I - factor invariably figures in almost anything important that takes place in Nepal. The development that led to signing of an accord between the government and the United Madhesh Democratic Front (UMDF) was not an exception.

Insiders say Madhesh leaders ultimately signed the accord after India conveyed through a senior official of its external intelligence outfit - Research and analysis Wing (RAW), that not signing the accord would spell 'peril' for UMDf.

The official, Gurinder Singh who holds the Joint Director's position in the outfit was on a two-day visit to Kathmandu which coincided with the signing of the event. Singh is expected to replace the current RAW Chief, A K Chaturvedi when he retires, pre-maturely or on completion of his terms.

The UMDf, sources said, was unwilling to sign the accord unless the government conceded to some of the key demands and agreed to postpone elections at least by a month to let them prepare for the polls.

AA Director

Bimal Phnyal, an expert on non-formal education and a writer, has taken over as the Country Director of Action Aid Nepal.



Phnyal replaces Dr Shivesh Chandra Regmi who completed his two terms, last month.

Phnyal who has worked for different NGOs in the past, had earlier served Action Aid in Nepal and London. He is a regular contributor in prominent Nepali media on education, politics and social issues.

SAARC Secy Gen

SK Sharma, a Joint Secretary level officer in the Indian Foreign Service has taken over as the new Secretary General of South Asia Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Sharma replaces L. Chenkyab Dorjee of Bhutan. The post, normally a three-year tenure, goes to the member countries on a rotational basis.

Sharma is the ninth Secretary General

of the SAARC and second from India to occupy the post. He served as India's ambassador to Australia before taking on the present post.

Issue of confiscated property

The Communist Party of Nepal-Maoists (CPN-M) has claimed that it has returned all the land and property it seized during the conflict period in Dolpa district to their rightful owners. Dolpa is one of the least effected districts in the country in terms of confiscation and seizure of property by the Maoists.

A statement issued on Feb 28 by the party said that all the property that belonged to former Ministers, Moti Prasad Pahadi and Nara Bahadur Budhathoki has been returned in deference to the commitment the party made through the Comprehensive Peace Accord and the 23-point agreement. The party however, has not yet returned the property in most areas. Among the prominent victims whose property are still under Maoist 'control' are the Congress leaders, KB Gurung and Benay Dhoj Chand.

Father's daughter

The Minister without portfolio, Sujata Koirala may be inconsistent in what she says on political issues at times, but those who know her assert that she can never go against her father on crucial issues.

That is what she did exactly on February 29. She said she will go along with the party line on the issue of Republicanism and not carry monarchy on her shoulders during the elections.

Even after the party passed resolution in



favour of Republicanism, Sujata had stated publicly that she was in favour of monarchy being retained in some form in future Nepal.

According to the party sources, Sujata's latest turnabout follows serious complaints lodged with her father by a powerful lobby within the Congress led by the Home Minister.

VC Gurung dies

Bhanu Bhakta Gurung, 86, one of the last surviving heroes of the Second World War passed away at his residence in Dharapani village in Prithvi Narayan municipality of Gorkha, on March 1, after a prolonged illness.

He had fought in the war from Burma front and was awarded Victoria Cross for the courage and heroism he displayed. Gurung's last rites were performed on March 2. Gurung was recruited in the Gurkha Brigade in India in 1940 when it was under the imperial rule.

Support

Madhav - Prachanda pact

nf correspondent

In what appears as a quiet apex level deal, UML General Secretary, Madhav Nepal, is believed to have assured Maoist chief, Prachanda, of full support in Kathmandu's constituency number ten. Prachanda is the Maoist candidate from the constituency.

According to the deal, although Sanu Kumar Shrestha has been fielded as the UML candidate from there, 'his candidature will be kept low key.'

In return, UML has for asked sincere participation and campaign, free from violence and intimidation, from the Maoists' side. The UML that is hopeful of faring much better in the election to the constituent assembly is also believed to have told the Maoist leaders not to use provocative language.

The suggestion comes in the wake of Prachanda's announcement during his address to the party cadres recently that they should be ready to "capture power." In his interaction with the cadres in presence of party candidates for the election, Prachanda repeatedly said they must be ready to rule, and for that they must capture power.

Nepal, who had earlier been advocating that



UML and the Congress party should make some compromises to ensure some 'top Maoist leaders victory,' gave the assurance to Prachanda of his party's support. There are no details available about any such deal reached on large scale between the two parties.

It is not yet known whether the Congress party will make any such gesture towards the Maoists, but there are fears that, 'rigging could take place on a large scale' in the hill constituencies in the face of Maoists' declaration that they would be deploying at least 200 Young Communist League (YCL) activists in each polling booth. Moreover, the security forces are demoralised, and the Nepal army that was in action in the previous three general elections is not likely to be deployed this time around.

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Point to Ponder

Most of the important things in the world have been accomplished by people who have kept on trying when there seemed to be no hope at all.
 - Dale Carnegie

Welcome move

It was like history repeating itself. On February 28, the nation celebrated once again as the government and the United Madheshi Democratic Front (UMDF) signed an agreement, with both sides once again committing to go the polls. It was exactly from the same venue that the government and the Maoists had promised to usher Nepal into peace, democracy and economic prosperity in June 2001; but their subsequent conduct showed that sticking to their chairs at any cost was far more important to them than translating their tall pledges into action.

Will they be different this time after signing the new agreement? The UMDF instantly called off the agitation in Terai that had brought the entire activities across the country, mainly its supply system, to a grinding halt. This has at least for now created a more favourable situation for those living in Madhesh to exercise their franchise.

Both the Maoists and the government, who signed the June 2006 agreement, have failed the people and the nation as the Maoists continue to take laws into their hands, and the government condones it through its silence, invisibility, indifference or helplessness. And this is something that still casts doubts over the elections taking place in April. The situation can improve if the Madhesh leaders and the people there actively move forward towards creating an atmosphere conducive for the polls.

The latest agreement, perhaps, means nothing more than a reiteration of its commitment on federalism as far as the interim government is concerned. Everything including the size of Madhesh as a province, the degree of its rights or autonomy, modality of proper representation of Madhesh, ethnic groups, women and Dalits have all been left to the yet to be formed constituent assembly.

The demands that are open or otherwise, for the creation of other states where other distinct groups living in Madhesh - like Tharus and those in the hills, also have to be addressed. Besides, the basis of the formation of the states, their relations with the centre needs to be charted out. Things could have been made easy and uncomplicated if the GP Koirala government had set up a high-powered experts commission into the issue; as it would not at all have provoked Madhesh and other groups to launch the agitation.

The nation and its people pay heavily if the rulers of the day are arrogant and without vision. The fact that so many people died in Terai is a clear proof of this arrogance and lack of vision of the government. The people can only hope that the last hurdle in the smooth conduct of the CA polls is gone, and that the government now will be fully responsible for creating an atmosphere for the polls, especially by enforcing the law and order.



Letters

Objections

I object to your front page report that says half of the population will not take part in the forthcoming elections. How can you say that? How many Madheshis does this so called Madheshi leaders like Upendra Yadav, Mahantha Thakur, JP Gupta, Rajendra Mahato, represent? May be not even one percent of Madhesh population. The huge turnout during filings of names proves that the majority of Nepali people including the Madhesi people want CA election to move ahead.

■ Shirish Pradhan
 Chauni, Kathmandu

Kudos to Coon

Krishna Bista's interview by Ellen Coon was a remarkable piece in many ways. Firstly, it was a respected foreigner living in Nepal profiling and interviewing a Nepali village woman. Even we who knew of Bista did not know so much about this woman who faced such a hostile world to do what she wanted to do. She is indeed a symbol of courage, conviction and dedication. And Coon deserves all praise and thanks for at least unfolding the life and struggles of Bista.

But it is also a matter of shame that Nepalis have not yet recognised this great lady. At a time when every political party was looking for a suitable woman candidate for the forthcoming elections; it would have been very appropriate if



one of the major parties had included her name under the proportional representation system. But individuals like Bista will remain true representatives of the people, doing what she has been doing all her life.

■ Sarmila Shahi
 Pulchowk, Kathmandu

Thanks Kisunji

Even after reaching 84, you have not tried a populist exit from the Nepali politics by not becoming 'anti-current,' which your contemporary GP Koirala has done. It is here, outside Nepal, we Nepalis feel how selfish all our so-called mainstream political parties and leaders

are. They feel proud to disclose the number of times they visited Indian Embassy, e.g. PKD; but the same fellows just hate to listen to the word "King" leave alone meeting or talking to him.

After all, King G too is a Nepali, who has preferred to remain in house despite a barrage of humiliation from all hysteric sides of today's Nepal, the political parties, self styled civil society, sensation loving Nepali media, and impotent judiciary. King G could very easily have fled the country. But, why should he? For all the mess, how can the propagandists put all the blame upon his some two years' direct rule? KP knows well that politics is perennially not the game of rhetoric even if that is paying temporarily to the self-made SPA government at the moment? Kisunji, your voice has the overt and covert endorsement of millions of Nepalis within and outside Nepal, like me.

■ Pradeepta Sharma
 Sanjay Gandhi Nagar,
 Jogeshwori (East),
 Mumbai

Readers, your reactions, criticisms, comments, suggestions are most welcome. Please address it to:
newsfront@bhrikuti.com

Spiritual Corner

Siddha sciences

Bogar Siddha (a mystic, yogi), belonged to the caste of goldsmiths and became a Siddhapurusha under the guidance of Kalangi Nathar. In Bogar's Saptakanda he reveals details of various medicinal preparations to his disciple Pullippani (so named as he is believed to have wandered in the forests atop a Puli or tiger) and at every stage he quotes his guru as the authority.

It is said that as per the last wishes of his guru, Bhogar proceeded to China to spread the knowledge of Siddha sciences and his journey is said to have been made with the aid of an aircraft. He demonstrated to the Chinese the details of the construction of the aircraft and later built for them a sea-going craft using a steam engine. The details of these and other experiments demonstrated by Bhogar in China

are clearly documented in the Saptakanda. Bogar's guru, Kingi Nthar, is believed to be a Chinese who attained Siddhi in South India and thus became included among the 18 Siddhas.

An expert in medicine, Bogar used 4448 rare herbs and made nine poisonous medicines to make a master medicine (one medicine to



cure all diseases). With the consultation of Agasthiar (father of Ayurvedic Medicine) and other siddhas, Bogar made the medicine in the form of Lord Murugan which is currently worshiped at Palani Murugan temple. There is a place near Palani Hill called Thanasiappan Temple which is the place where Bogar mixed the Nava

Bashanam and made the Murugan idol. His disciple Pulippani then took over the job of Lord Murugan pooja after Bogar went into Nirvikalpa Samadhi. Bogar Samadhi is inside Palani Murugan temple at Palani Hill. Actually Bogar himself constructed his samadhi exactly under the Lord Murugan Navabasha idol and went into Nirvikalpa Samadhi there. The entrance to his samadhi is a cave like structure. Worship for this Siddha is conducted at this entrance where he was last seen by his disciples at the Palani temple. The shrine at the top of the hill, made later than the Tiru Avinankudi temple, has overshadowed the older temple in the present century due to its popular appeal. Created by Bhogar, it was maintained after him by Sage Pulippani and his descendants almost as their personal and private temple.

What is the CPN (M) up to?

The trump card, as the Maoists see it, is threatening to bolt, to take to the streets, to launch a new people's war. Though they quickly clarify that they do not mean "returning to the jungles," the threat is clear enough - pitched street battles.

CPN (M) demands cannot be met within the context of parliamentary democracy. The Maoists themselves are quite explicit in this regard. They remain committed to sweeping away of the old-order and replacing it with a new-order that is "Maoist." The specifics involved are common to Maoist movements throughout South Asia and feature a dreary litany of state intervention in all economic, social, and political facets of existence, accompanied by an "anti-imperialist" foreign policy that supports the likes of North Korea, Iran, and Venezuela.

Power as goal

All actions being taken are designed to bring the Maoists to power. When called to account by their CCOMPOSA compatriots for their having abandoned the revolutionary struggle, the Nepali Maoists succeeded in placating their critics by outlining just what is set forth here. Put in so many words: our way will deliver power by emphasising the "non-violent" aspects of people's war – and using violence to give them salience.

This implementation of people's war strategy, however, has not gone unchallenged. The 5th Plenum of the CPN(M), which was held in early August using as an 'expanded meeting (EM)' format that brought together 2,174 delegates, saw fierce opposition to staying the course with campaigns just short of overt confrontation. Though a Central Committee meeting was held at the end of July (2007) to ensure that the required report (to the party) by Prachanda was a consensus document, the EM did not go smoothly.

Having continued to exclude the state from the rural areas, yet gaining unfettered access to the urban centers, a faction of the Maoist leadership demanded open confrontation to finish the job. In particular, it saw no point in Maoist ministers continuing in the government. In the event, the Maoists did bolt in September 2007.

Thus the Maoists left the government, strenuously demanded acceptance of their 22 demands – many of them precisely the issues that were to be settled by a constitutional convention – and issued instructions to CPN (M) front organisations to be prepared to initiate street actions.

What happened was fully in accord with their plans: SPA agreed to establish a "republic," thus disestablishing the centuries old monarchy, and the Maoists, in December, returned to government.

Their only goal left unaccomplished, which will be used to precipitate the next crisis, is integration of their combatants into the army – thus neutralising it.

The CPN (M), therefore, is simply pursuing its ends by time and again changing its tactics. Its lines of operation have remained consistent. Only the emphasis placed upon any one line has changed with time and circumstances. The present means of choice are front organisations (there are numerous allegedly independent bodies that are in reality Maoist creatures) and the YCL, which dominates the streets and conducts the strong-arm activities against businesses (e.g., forcing through Maoist unionisation). Concurrently, the CPN (M) seeks to function as an open political party (the mass line), mobilising those who will respond to

■ Dr. Thomas A. Marks

any force that seems to offer them better life-chances.

What motivates the Maoists?

Coercion, persuasion, and inducement are but facets of Maoist strategy, campaign elements inherent to the Maoist lines of operation. Faced with the refusal of the old-order to go quietly, the Maoists have responded through greater use of coercion, a form of violence. They have increased their level of menace, particularly through use of the YCL.

This coercion is linked to upping the ante in numerous other ways, from verbal abuse to throwing sand in the machinery of governance. What is significant is that all coercion is linked to inducements and persuasion. Businessmen, for instance, are assured that the market will be



allowed to function – but in a more equitable manner. Interest groups are assured that their concerns will finally be addressed once the Maoists are in power.

The trump card, as the Maoists see it, is threatening to bolt, to take to the streets, to launch a new people's war. Though they quickly clarify that they do not mean "returning to the jungles," the threat is clear enough - pitched street battles. That plans have been made for such an eventuality is known to the government, but the SPAM coalition is so tenuous that there is no one to take cognisance of the information.

What is occurring is a battle of mobilisation capabilities. Throughout the counter-insurgency, the Maoists had the advantage for the simplest of reasons: the government did not recognise the game being played. To the contrary, all efforts by knowledgeable members of the state, especially within the security forces, to mobilise citizen capacity, whether in local defense forces or even watcher groups, were thwarted by incomprehension, outright opposition, or alliances made with the donor community.

In contrast, the entire thrust of the Maoist effort was to engage in mass mobilisation, to form a counter-state that could challenge the state. The Maoists explained their situation in these terms – they continue to do so. By 2003, they claimed they were a state (i.e., a counter-state) that existed on equal terms with the existing state and therefore had all

the rights and privileges of the state. Just as interesting theoretically was their advancing the claim that sub-state actors had all the rights and privileges afforded in international law only to states. There could be no middle ground: one order had to give way to the other.

In this effort, Maoist organisation remained hierarchical, with an effort to overcome centripetal forces and indiscipline. "The revolution" was overwhelmingly an internal phenomenon, with the Nepali expatriate community largely onlookers, except as victimised by Maoist efforts at extortion or seeking to participate in the form of fellow-travelers.

Eventually, after April 2006, serious divisions did emerge within the expatriate community, with the debate played out principally through blogs but noteworthy for the increasing consideration in the debate of "Mein Kampf considerations." That is, what does it mean for the possible future of a country to have potential (and certainly would-be) leadership figures who engage in Cambodian Holocaust denial; who deify (at least several) mass murderers; and who advance ideas that in the 20th Century produced the greatest crimes in the history of humanity?

The decentralised nature of the electronic debate faithfully reflects what has been occurring within Nepal itself as hierarchy, both organisational and societal, has broken down. In one sense, it could be argued that the security forces have maintained a degree of hierarchy even as the Maoists have increasingly become networked. Indeed, one of the problems for the transitional state in dealing with the Maoists is the factor of assessing just what the Maoist leadership really controls. How much that is happening is in response to commands, and how much is simply local initiative that the Maoist leadership seeks to exploit?

The most frightening prospect, of course, remains a possible breakdown of law and order beyond anything yet seen. This at times appears to be the way the Tarai is headed. Determined not to deploy NA, the weak government would have to be faced with a catastrophic situation before it would act, and by that time, the forces unleashed would probably be uncontrollable. The beneficiaries certainly would be the Maoists.

Thomas A. Marks is a political risk consultant based in Hawaii. His most recent book is Maoist People's War in Post-Vietnam Asia (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2007).



Can Nepal afford cheap fuel?

Where is Nepal government's energy security policy? Why has there not been any public accountability or hearing?

■ Shivendra Thapa

A steady, reliable supply of energy at reasonable cost is one of the key determinants for industrial competitiveness in any country. Unfortunately, insufficient power generation capacity in most of the countries within South Asia has contributed to lower rates of growth across the region. Chronic energy shortages coupled with an inadequate energy infrastructure, and uneven energy distribution has hampered economic growth. Most developing countries, particularly least developed countries heavily subsidise energy, especially fuel, but can Nepal afford to provide cheap fuel at the expense of other developmental priorities like education, health, etc?

Countries in South Asia rely on a number of energy sources to fulfill their energy needs. They use coal, natural gas and biomass to fuel economic activity but these local energy resources are insufficient to meet growing energy requirements. The countries do not produce enough oil and gas for their needs and are thus dependent upon energy imports. These energy imports very often come at a high cost, and may compromise other domestic requirements in Member States, negatively impacting the economic development of the country and ultimately of the region.

South Asian countries can improve the situation by accessing surplus energy from other countries in the region where feasible, and by collective imports of natural gas and electricity. Not only will such cooperative, collective action maximise economies of scale, reduce costs and guarantee a steady supply of energy but will also encourage the adoption of and investment in new, efficient renewable energy technologies for sustainable development in the region.

Access to cheap energy has become essential to the functioning of modern economies. However, the uneven distribution of energy supplies among countries and the critical need for energy has led to significant vulnerabilities. Threats to global energy security include the political instability of several energy producing countries, manipulation of energy supplies, competition over energy sources, attacks on supply infrastructure, as well as accidents and natural disasters.

In recent years, new threats to energy security have emerged in the form of the increased world competition for energy resources due to the increased pace of industrialisation in countries such as India and China. Increased competition over energy resources can lead to the formation of security compacts to enable an equitable distribution of oil and gas between major powers such as the United States, Russia, India and China. However, this can happen at



the expense of less developed economies like Nepal.

A number of opportunities exist for promoting flows of electricity and natural gas in addition to the exchange of energy technology and information between countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Energy trade among Member States has been classified as an 'Energy Ring' in the region, representing significant opportunities for the import and export of energy within Member countries and the creation of a far encompassing and free market for energy.

In recognition of the role of energy in development, the Heads of State or Government at the 13th SAARC Summit held at Dhaka on November 13, 2005 agreed to the recommendation of the SAARC Energy Ministers to establish the SAARC Energy Centre (SEC) in Islamabad. SEC intends to: facilitate intra-regional trade among Member states; serve as an energy information network; promote private sector investment among others. At present, SEC's mandate is broad and its detailed modalities are yet to be worked out. The effectiveness of these initiatives lies in their implementation.

Without the formulation and effective implementation of energy trade policy reforms, participation in initiatives like SEC will remain a token gesture. The energy crisis engulfing Nepal is of paramount importance to its developmental objectives at all levels; grassroots, national, regional and international. Nepal's energy sector ranging from the inadequate supply of petroleum products to the underutilization of its water resources is in a state of disarray fueled by rampant malpractices and corruption. Also, the lack of access to capital is leading to chronic underinvestment in the sector, adding to its woes.

For instance, fuel shortage has become a persistent problem in Nepal. Anti-competitive practices are endemic in the petroleum sector, characterised by monopoly or cartel at almost every stage of the business. The monopoly begins with the sourcing of fuel, as the 1974 Memorandum of Understanding between Nepal and India obliges Nepal to import fuel solely from the Indian Oil Corporation (IOC). On the domestic front, the state-owned Nepal Oil Corporation (NOC) remains the only fuel import monopolist. NOC's monthly losses run into the

tens of millions and it owes IOC and domestic financial institutions billions in outstanding dues, as it buys dear and sells cheap. As the outstanding dues accumulate, IOC frequently halts or cuts supplies in an attempt to pressurise NOC and the Nepali government.

Wholesale prices are still government-administered, so the suggestion of an upward adjustment in fuel prices is politically contentious; almost every political party in government is reluctant to adjust prices to the extent warranted by global price fluctuations. Price-hike decisions have invariably attracted the angst of opposition parties, notwithstanding the recommendations of studies commissioned by different governments for devising a politically free mechanism to revise prices in accordance with the world price trend. Fuel prices have increased globally, thus raising worldwide inflation. Even if domestic fuel prices are to increase, it must be well managed and gradual.

Another instance of rampant inefficiency and malpractice behavior lies in the electricity sector. At a broad level, two major issues persist - absence of an independent regulatory authority and stagnant power

projects. Nepal needs to fast track these projects and increase investment promotion by removing bureaucratic corruption.

Where is Nepal government's energy security policy? Why has there not been any public accountability or hearing? To answer these questions, Nepal's energy trade policy must be pragmatic, based on ground realities and cannot merely remain confined to its regional or international obligations. It must involve: economic diplomacy; an intrinsic understanding of bi-lateral, regional and multilateral trade agreements; alignment of foreign policy with trade policy objectives; institutional reform; transparency and increased debate; public accountability; prevention of rent-seeking activities; and economic resource management.

Designating regulatory authority to independent bodies as in the cases of electrification in Bangladesh and India along with liberalisation of the energy sector can accrue benefits: increased quality and quantity of fuel; independent regulation; less adulteration leading to less pollution among others. Export policy is an urgent priority for Nepal. Failure is not an option. ■

Treasure of CONSCIENCE



Literature, art and music can do magic in social reform.

Rejoicing in promoting others, being joyful at others' good fortune, and always living one's values – this is what this cheerful grandfatherly figure, **SHYAM DAS VAISNAB**, who loves to call himself a slave of Lord Vishnu is about. 83 years old now, he devoted his life to literature, music and arts. He also worked as a journalist in Radio Nepal for many years. He walked down the memory lane and shared his thoughts and feelings with **SUSHMA AMATYA** recently.

What values do you hold dear?

Integrity and sincerity are very important to me. They are my treasures. I never placed my personal interest above the cost of my principles. This was not easy but it earned me a lot of affection and good will from all the people I come in touch with. These values formed the foundation on which I operated.

With a childlike innocence, I approached everything life put in front of me and I always gained from it. The fact that my father and grandfather were spiritually inclined and were also interested in literature must have had its impact on me. My strong belief is that one's conscience is the most important capital one can have.

Why do you call yourself Vaisnab?

Vaisnab denotes a sense of dedication towards Lord Vishnu. To know that I'm at the service of god is essential for me. Since Lord Vishnu is the master of management, I choose to call myself his slave; and try and practice accordingly.

When did you first start writing?

I used to act in plays as a youngster. I was 12 or 13 when once I happened to be at Dillibazar where some friends were performing. They asked me to go to the poet, Laxmi Prasad Devkota and get a play written by him. Devkotaji would not give the entire play at one time. Whatever he gave, I copied and took it back to him for his final approval. This process continued. One day, he told me I had beautiful handwriting and that he was looking for someone like me. It was the opportunity I was looking for.

I used to write depending on my



whims but my association with the poet helped me mature. One day I asked him how one writes poems. He replied that I should just keep writing and show it to him but he didn't tell me how to write. I realised later that poetry is something that you have to write yourself. One day after a morning walk, I felt like writing something when I saw the sunrise, and I wrote the poem, Ratko Ansu. He was so happy with it! He also got me a job after that.

Your view of Nepali society today?

In my tradition, the elders feed the youngsters before they eat and that seems to have left a positive mark on me. I rejoice in others' happiness. It makes me happy to see others prosper even though at that time, I may be suffering materially. It may have been impractical at times but a sense of altruism, of putting others before me, always helped me live a life that I can be proud of.

The greatest defect I've seen in this society is saying one thing and practicing something else! To fool others, to lie, to pretend to be something else is the worst thing one can do but this seems to be common problem here. Thus, I always watch for actions and not get taken up by sweet words.

There is lack of integrity today in our country. There were outstanding personalities in my time that lived for others, sacrificed a lot but they are all gone and now I hardly see anybody around here to take their place. The people I knew sacrificed a lot but the people who do not appreciate or understand their sacrifice are enjoying the fruits today. We espouse lofty ideals but practice on the contrary. This applies to us all no matter how we brand ourselves no matter what – capitalism, communism, democracy or whatever!

Why do you place so much importance on the company one keeps?

I benefited a lot from the company I kept with the likes of Devkotaji, Siddhi Charan, Gopal Prasad Rimal, Bal Krishna, Riddhi Bahadur and so many other wonderful people. From that experience I can vouch that the company you keep can make or break you. My awareness developed to such an extent I would never have thought possible thanks to those personalities. They were my source

of inspiration which helped me think ahead, ask questions and expand my mind.

Your work?

After Devkotaji passed away, people approached me to put his writings in order and get them published. Some ask me to write forwards for their books. I also wrote many autobiographical pieces on personalities like Parijat, Narharinath etc. And literature is a world in itself that keeps you very busy. If you are in literature, you should also be aware of injustice and repression taking place around you and raise your voice against it.

Noble thinking is my motto and my work always. Be selfless and be able to exercise your wisdom and conscience for larger interest of human kind and for the good of your country. Literature, art and music can do magic in social reform. As far as I'm concerned, I enjoy inspiring others to lead rather than myself being a leader. There are still five or six unpublished works that I want to publish.

Why are most writers, artists misunderstood?

Ranas used to say that Devkota's style of writing was more of a madness. Writers and poets are introspective and different; not to understand that is madness in my opinion. For instance, Shashi Shah sees horses all around. Such people have extraordinary kind of thinking which normally people do not understand.

What in your opinion is the root cause behind the crisis in the country today?

Lack of wisdom and conscience has cast an ugly shadow over all the idealism floating around today. In democracy, each should respect the other but that is not in practice today. The crisis today is largely due to the fact that the right people have not been recognised. Once people get to power, they tend to forget their roots, the reason they walked that way in the first place. All the so called leaders did not know to identify the potential of the people and utilise it correctly.

There are just empty words floating around, no concrete, well meaning action. Finally, we have to practice what we preach but most of us do not do it. ■

There is lack of integrity today in our country. There were outstanding personalities in my time that lived for others, sacrificed a lot but they are all gone and now I hardly see anybody around here to take their place.



■ Yasodha Shrestha

Recognise and discourage politics of isolation

Nepal today is going through an important stage in the history of political transformation. At the moment, different groups are raising their voices and putting forward their demands one after another. There seems to be no end to different groups coming forward, calling for strikes to have their voices heard. In the process, the society faces the danger of polarisation.

All the groups are so engrossed in their own issues and concerns that certain groups have gone to the extremes of not recognising the voice and issues of the other; demonstrating no empathy, concern and respect for the issues and concerns of others. This may lead to a situation where we may isolate ourselves from other groups forgetting that all Nepalis have equal right to space and influence in the political transformation process.

The Janajatis have grouped together to fight for their own issues and concerns, but they have not taken any opportunity to listen to the voice of other stakeholders. It is the same with other socially excluded groups. We have forgotten the fact that we are all Nepalis first. The issues of caste

discrimination, gender based discrimination, social exclusion are the concerns and issues of all socially excluded groups. We are all aspiring for equal participation, representation in different levels of social and political structures, role in decision making, respect, identity and space. We all must remember that isolated battles have lesser impact on politicians.

Battles for equality and inclusion should be fought at different levels. For instance, women will only be successful to address the issues of gender discrimination when they are capable of convincing the men that their issues are crucial to both genders. The issue of discrimination faced by the blacks at the hands of the whites in the United States could only be addressed effectively when the whites realised the wider implications of discriminatory practices against the blacks and stepped forward to fight against all kinds of racial discrimination.

We can only succeed if we all realise this is our joint battle. The increasing polarisation taking place in the country is not only splitting the country into different isolated groups,

We have forgotten the fact that we are all Nepalis first.... We can only succeed if we all realise this is our joint battle.

but is also providing fertile grounds for the coalition of seven ruling parties to be engrossed in having dialogues selectively. Instead of moving forward, we seem to be stuck in a time zone that is packed with insecurity, fear, corruption and anarchy.

Why are we giving the current interim government the opportunity to divide and rule, and to become more irresponsible, unaccountable and corrupt? The current challenge for all stakeholders is to come together through a series of round table discussions, settle their differences and join hands in solidarity for a common cause. A concrete strategy is needed to make sure all stakeholders have an equal say in the formation of a new constitution that respects the voices,

issues and concerns of all.

In the name of 'social inclusion' we are heading towards massive exclusion with all its fall outs. The challenge that lies in front of each of us is how can we nurture each other and provide a positive environment for each of us to grow together as Nepalis. We must understand that mere physical restructuring is not enough. It needs to take into account the social psychological transformation of the minds of the people in order to build more sustained relationships for national integrity.

This is where the Jana Awaaj programme can play an important role as it aims at promoting people's participation in the constitutional process. Funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) under Developing Democracy in Nepal Responsive Facility (DDNRF), it is implemented by Center for International Studies and Cooperation (CECI) in partnership with Federation of Community Forest Users in Nepal (FECOFUN) and Worldview Nepal. It should be able to make serious efforts to facilitate dialogue between the different

groups that enhances better understanding and come to a common consensus and discourage politics of isolation.

The project has been able to create awareness on the constitutional assembly process, mandate and membership. It has also identified the CA issues of different disadvantaged groups and presented them to the representatives of the political parties in order to incorporate them in their political manifesto. There is still more that needs to be done to make sure that these issues are incorporated in the new constitution.

The civil society could initiate a few steps to ensure that our country moves towards true justice and peace building. The factors that link different groups should be identified and promoted so that divisive tendencies are discouraged; value education that allows the different groups to reflect on their values should be promoted; organise peace building programs which focuses on relationship building; and encourage trust and understanding between different groups.

(The author is project team leader, Jana Awaaj Project, CECI Nepal.)

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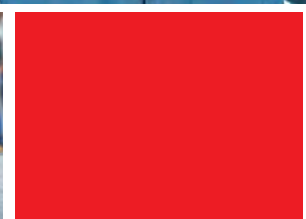
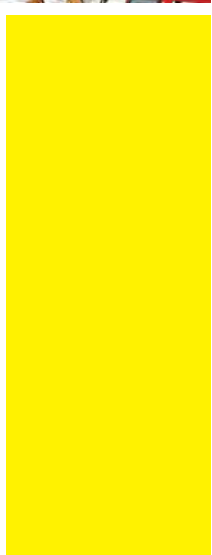
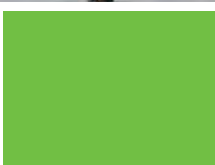
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Iran leader in landmark Iraq trip

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has arrived in Baghdad on the first ever visit to Iraq by an Iranian president.

The visit marks the culmination of a process of normalisation between the two countries after the long war they fought in the 1980s.

Correspondents say the two-day visit is a strong show of support for the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad.

Mr Ahmadinejad is meeting the Iraqi PM and president - both of whom have visited Iran.

The US is not involved in security for the visit and did not provide helicopters to transport Mr Ahmadinejad into central Baghdad.

He had to travel by car along the usually dangerous road from the

airport to Iraqi President Jalal Talabani's residence near the US-controlled Green Zone.

He was warmly greeted by Mr Talabani as he walked down a red carpet, meeting members of the Iraqi government.

Security is heavy for the visit. Iraqi patrols were said to be stationed every 100m along the airport road, which was closed for all other traffic.

The US has accused Iran of supporting Shia militants in Iraq, a charge Tehran denies.

Before leaving for Iraq, Mr Ahmadinejad laughed off the American accusations.

"Is it not funny that those with 160,000 forces in Iraq accuse us of interference?" he asked.

The US and Iran are also at odds over Iran's nuclear programme. Iran says its programme is for peaceful power generation only but the US and other Western countries fear Tehran is trying to build nuclear weapons.

The UN Security Council is currently considering new sanctions against Iran and a vote could take place as soon as Monday.

All this puts the Iraqi government nervously in the middle, allied to both the United States and Iran, says the BBC's John Leyne in Tehran.

Despite the reconciliation between Baghdad and Tehran, many analysts believe in the long term the two countries are destined to be rivals.

(BBC)

Time needed to restore normalcy in hills: Buddha

Kolkata, March 1 Addressing a meeting in Siliguri on Saturday afternoon, Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee claimed peace has been restored in the hills for the moment.

But more time and dialogue was needed to restore full normalcy in the region, he added.

"Some people were trying to incite violence in Darjeeling. If the turmoil continued in the hills, it would have affected the process of industrialisation in the state," Bhattacharjee said.

He added, "There are groups who want to foment trouble in this region. For example, activists of the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO), who had taken shelter in Bhutan hills, came down to Jalpaiguri. They have, however, been brought under control. Now,



Gorkhaland

Maoists are trying to get a foothold in the region."

Temporary suspension of the agitation launched by Gorkha Janamukti Morcha (GJM), following Subash Ghisingh's decision to step down from Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) has brought some relief to the hills, said a district administrative official.

"I still find it hard to believe that Ghisingh gave up so easily," said a teacher in Darjeeling on condition of anonymity.

Meanwhile, on his return to Darjeeling on Friday, GJM leader Bimal Gurung said: "People in the hills have revolted against Ghisingh. It will be difficult for him to stay in Darjeeling after stepping down."

Gurung also warned that if Ghisingh was found indulging in any "conspiracy", he will be responsible for the consequences. Victory processions were taken out in several areas to greet Gurung.

A large number of supporters even turned up at Bagdogra airport to give him a hero's welcome. Morcha supporters also took out a "funeral procession" of Ghisingh's effigy.

(Expressindia)

Prince Harry returns

Prince Harry is back in Britain on Saturday after his emergency withdrawal from Afghanistan where he spent ten weeks without the public knowing it. The prince arrived at Royal Air Force (RAF) Brize Norton in Oxfordshire near noon time on an RAF troop transporter plane, Sky news reported. The 23-year-old was greeted by his older brother William and his father Prince Charles who was proud and relieved at his safe return. Harry, a member of the Household Cavalry, was flown out from Afghanistan on Friday night after news about his current deployment in Afghanistan's Helmand Province was leaked by foreign media. He had been secretly



fighting in southern Helmand for 10 weeks under a news blackout deal between the British media and the Ministry of Defense. Harry's commanding officer said Harry had proved himself as a soldier but the decision to withdraw him was not made lightly. The news was leaked on U.S. website the Drudge Report, which picked up the story from an on-line Australian women's magazine published on Jan. 15.

(Xinhua)



Senior Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat (front) waits at an Israeli checkpoint in the West Bank city of Hebron.

UN chief depllores Gaza assault

Ban Ki-moon, the UN secretary-general, has condemned Israel for using "excessive" force in the Gaza Strip and demanded a halt to its offensive after troops killed at least 96 people over four days, with more than 60 dead on Saturday alone. At least a third of those killed have been children, according to medical sources in Gaza.

Addressing an emergency session of the security council in New York on Sunday, Ban also called on Palestinian fighters to stop firing rockets into Israel. Ban said: "While recognising Israel's right to defend itself, I condemn the disproportionate and excessive use of force that has killed and injured so many civilians, including children ... I call on Israel to cease such attacks."

"I condemn Palestinian rocket attacks and call for the immediate cessation of such acts of terrorism."

However, there is no sign that the Israeli government is ready to call off an offensive that took troops deeper into Gaza on Saturday and in larger numbers than at any time since Israel ended a military occupation of Gaza in 2005. Daniel Carmon, a senior Israeli diplomat, dismissed suggestions Israel was guilty of war crimes.

" Hamas bears sole responsibility for the violence," he told the security council. Two Israeli soldiers died in a ground assault on Saturday, and an Israeli civilian was killed by a rocket in

a border town on Wednesday.

Al Jazeera's John Terret, reporting from New York, said that members of the security council were discussing a draft resolution regarding the conflict in Gaza. He said: "It does not look like the draft will be completed today - it may take two more days."

"The Libyan delegation representing the Palestinians have put forward a draft, and it is now subject to debate from the members."

But diplomats have reportedly said that the security council was unlikely to adopt a Libyan resolution that condemns Israel's killing of civilians, but makes no mention of Palestinian rocket fire.

Western diplomats say the Libyan resolution would not pass unless it was amended to condemn the Palestinian rocket attacks and dropped language suggesting Israel was guilty of terrorism.

The bloodshed in Gaza jeopardises US-backed peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

Ahmed Qurei, the chief Palestinian negotiator, called off a meeting scheduled for Monday with Tzipi Livni, the Israeli foreign minister, Israeli officials said.

Meanwhile, Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, accused Israel of "international terrorism", saying its assault on Gaza constitutes "more than a holocaust".

(Aljazeera)

MARSHLAND FLOWERS

No form of Buddhism believes that this universe was created at a certain time. Samsara is beginning-less and endless. Actually this is intimately related to the principle that there is no creator – God.



■ Acharya Mahayogi Sridhar Rana Rinpoche

Whatever differences there are, are in the finer interpretation of these things and not in the basic tenets themselves. No form of Buddhism believes in a God who created the universe, no forms of Buddhism believe in an eternal soul or Atma. No form of Buddhism believes in an unchanging entity that transmigrates from one life to another; or that karma is given to one by some super power/energy/deity and can be changed by the grace of such a power.

No form of Buddhism believes that this universe was created at a certain time. Samsara is beginning-less and

endless. Actually this is intimately related to the principle that there is no creator – God. I use the word creator – God because nowadays many theistic systems have also been reinterpreted in a more mystical experiential way by some of their supporters, especially those who practice meditation in one form or the other. But it must be said that such interpretation of God is not accepted by the mainstream theistic religious

systems. While it could be said a stray few in all religious system had always interpreted God in a more mystical sense it must also be said that those who interpret God in this way were either considered heretics or in some cases even put to the sword. Although such an interpretation of God is a step towards the Buddhist concept of enlightenment, it must still be said all such mystical interpretation

Buddhist enlightenment is the experience of the emptiness of all entities/dharmas.

Interpretation of God

of God still falls short of the Buddhist enlightenment.


Even if God was considered more a mystical – experiential experience, this God would still be an eternally existing entity which is very far from the Buddhist enlightenment which is the experience of the emptiness of all entities/dharmas. It must be said clearly that this emptiness is not the same as the emptiness found in many Hindu texts like the Vigyana Bhairava Tantra etc.


Within Buddhism there are infinite and beginning-less cycles of beginning and ending. We can only talk of a cycle beginning (created) but that is not the beginning of Samsara/ universe itself but the beginning of one small unit of Samsara. One unit

of Samsara (maybe a galaxy in modern term) called Lokadhatu begins and ends but there are endless such Lokadhatus beginning and ending at any one time.

And even these Lokadhatus are not created by any creator of a sort but appear and disappear based on various principles/laws called 'Niyama' which includes karma – niyaams. When the power of the pull of the karmas of sentient beings and the other niyaams synchronise then a world system (Lokadhatu) appears (rather than created) etc. These Niyama are more like the principles of gravity etc. which no one created. (To be continued)

(Sridhar Rinpoche is a Vajrayana Master)





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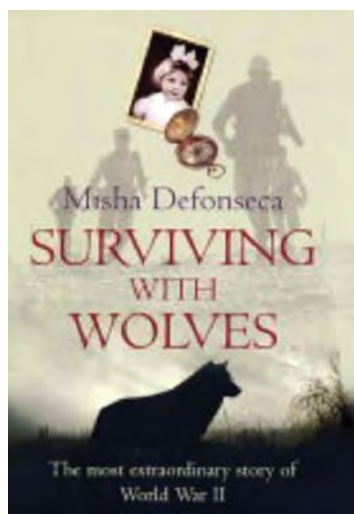








Belgian invents 'Holocaust' tale



The story, presented as autobiographical, tells of a little Jewish girl whose parents are arrested and deported by the Nazis in 1941.

A Belgian woman whose tale of survival with a pack of wolves in Nazi-occupied Europe became a hit film has revealed that she invented the story.

Monique De Wael, who adopted the pseudonym Misha Defonseca, also admitted that she was not Jewish.

Her revelations came in an interview with the Belgian daily Le Soir, which said more than six million people had already seen *Surviving With Wolves*.

"It's not actual reality, but it was my reality," she told Le Soir.

"It was my way of surviving... I seek forgiveness from those who feel betrayed, but I implore them to put themselves in the position of a little four-year-old girl who has lost everything, who has to survive."

The story, presented as autobiographical, tells

of a little Jewish girl whose parents are arrested and deported by the Nazis in 1941.

She goes in search of them across Belgium, Germany and Poland, with only the wolves for company. The book was first published in 1997.

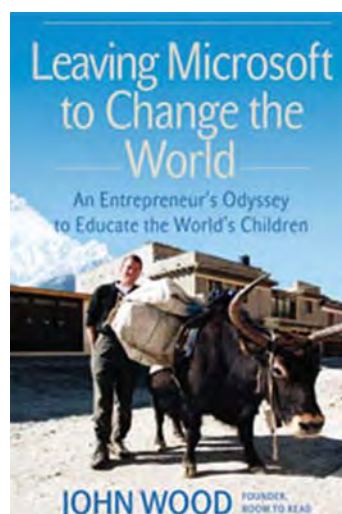
In reality, De Wael says her non-Jewish parents were in the resistance but were indeed deported by the Nazis.

She says she then stayed with her grandfather and was "treated badly".

"It's true that I've always felt Jewish... it's true that I've always created a different life for myself, a life that cut me off from my family, a life far from the people I hated," she said.

Her true story came to light after suspicions were voiced in Belgium about her tale, prompting Le Soir to seek clarifications from her.

BBC



John has vividly chronicled Room to Read's beginnings, his life-altering decision to leave the corporate world and his quest.

A hi-profile executive quitting his lucrative position with Microsoft to establish schools and libraries in remote Nepali villages sounds unbelievable. But it is true, it happened and its impact is being felt far and wide. John Wood's inspiring book, 'Leaving Microsoft to change the World' talks about it.

The Nepali translation of the book, 'Microshoftdekhi Bahundanda Samma' was released in the capital on Saturday by Pashupati Neupane, District Resource Person of Lamjung.

Wood said Neupane was an inspiration for him to work on something different to educate school children of remote villages.

Bye Microsoft, hello Room to Read

The book in Nepali is a publication of Fine Print and translated by author, Khagendra Sangraula. It details American citizen John Wood's dedication to establishing schools and libraries in remote villages of Nepal and later in different developing countries. It talks about the infancy of a non-

profit organisation, 'Room to Read', its early success and lays groundwork for its long-term vision of changing the world.

John has vividly chronicled Room to Read's beginnings, his life-altering decision to leave the corporate world and his quest to create a non-profit organisation with a strong business ethos. The original text of the book first appeared in English a year and half ago.

■ nf correspondent

enjoy. enjoy. enjoy. enjoy. enjoy. enjoy. enjoy. enjoy. enjoy. enjoy.

KHEL

Tuesday 9:30pm

Revive and rediscover REAL NEPAL

■ Shivanth B Pande

'Visit Nepal Year 1998', the campaign to attract tourists to Nepal claimed success in attracting 500,000 tourists. The truth is that we will never know how many arrived due to the intrinsic unreliability of data in our country. Ten years on and plagued by civil war, we are attracting only 3000 international air travelers a month in peak tourist season implying that only 36,000 airfare tourists visit annually. There is in addition a minority of western tourist who trickle in by bus, coupled with an unknown quantity of Indian tourists. Comparable world class destinations like Egypt attract 11 million in 2007; Tibet attracted 4.5 million last year. Even conflict ridden Sri Lanka managed to attract 494,008 tourists in 2007.

New Zealand managed to increase its tourism revenue from 8 billion NZ dollars in 2000 to around 19 billion in 2007. With a population of 4.5 million the revenue per head amounts to 2250 dollars per head and accounts for 6% of total employment. China earned U.S. \$137 billion last year from tourism alone and gives extreme priority to the sector with initiatives such as the Beijing Olympics and the Shanghai Expo boosting earning and jobs in the sector. 10 % of global GDP is spent on travel, leisure and entertainment and there are nearly one billion global travelers. The benefits from tourism towards GDP growth, foreign exchange revenue, skilled employment generation and experience in hospitality sector can be enormous for nations who manage their strategy well.

How can Nepal tap into the higher end spectrum of global travelers? One very important place to start is wooing relevant global tour operators. Tour operators can make or break any destination; they reward the best players and punish the mediocre. I was present at the World Travel Mart 2006 where amazing promotional stalls enticed and awed visitors. The Nepali stall was pathetic and easily outclassed by around 99% of the competition. Tiny destinations such as St. Lucia in the Caribbean had excellent marketing drives managed by leading industry professionals. Participating in such events unprepared actually has a negative impact on our brand promotion presenting tour operators and industry execs with a poor and unorganised brand to market.

We are constantly undershooting our true potential and we are complacent with our current position. We too could attract four million tourists within a 10 year timeframe if we had the right vision in place with the right leadership. Nepal's tourism policy should envision better service delivery, attractions, safety, hygiene and quality. We need to revamp our product-line in adventure, relaxation, holistic spas, luxury resorts, safaris, cultural and religious tourism to compete on an equal footing with other world class destinations.

We need to aggressively target the up market tourists from the West, India and Asia and diversify away from the lower income segment consisting of backpackers and other budget travelers. We have recently lost favor among the desirable segment of India's 300 million middle class tourists who can now afford world class exotic destinations offering better shopping,

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holiday options, services and value for money.

An over reliance on traditional markets like Germany and Japan have also taken these tourists for granted. Our policy is flawed as we have not been successful in increasing the rate of growth of arrivals from these countries, especially among the youth.

At the home front major initiatives have to be exacted and existing issues need to be resolved. Nepal needs massive investment and improvement in existing infrastructure like roads, trekking trails and hotels. We need to facilitate necessary infrastructure such as highways in potential tourism sites, upgrade existing highways, build new tunnels and cable cars. Creating a South Asian air transport hub in Nepal via a second international airport should be fast tracked along with a North-South railway that connects Nepal and China as these can help bring in more tourist arrivals.

The introduction and implementation of minimum standards relevant in tourism such as Health and Safety Act, Vendor Service Quality and Consumer Rights acts need to be present if we ever hope to compete in the global market. The service quality provided by tour operators, hotels and restaurants also need to be improved to compete. Furthermore, employers need to improve staff pay, invest in better skills and provide better working conditions. Employees also have to become professionals at doing their jobs and providing a quality service experience.

There is dire lack leadership in formulating a winning tourism strategy and visionary master plan. Without an international marketing campaign, requiring significant investment and professional management we will be nowhere in the field. We have had 15 years to fail in successfully brand Nepal as a world class holiday destination and this has resulted in no growth in revenue.

Meanwhile, our brand name has suffered miserably over the past five years, with the Maoist insurgency, royal massacre and takeover, revolution, constant Bandhs, Terai insurgency and now the decreasing law and order situation. The damage is only realised when news channels such as CNN will not say 'Nepal', but rather the 'Himalayas' or even 'Tibet' when talking about us. The recent article in the Economist "From treks to sex" also devastatingly highlights Nepal's re-branding as a haven for sex tourism and gambling. The Nepal Tourism Board needs to immediately utilise donor aid

money and networks to gain professional help in terms of consultants and agencies to carry out a world class global branding effort. We need to target new markets and realise growth in existing markets. We need to improve our reputation and visibility and we need to do this quick. We need to ask ourselves why Tibet and

Bhutan are more fashionable, successful and have grabbed our market share for the past decade. The ignorance and mismanagement of our tourism potential is something we can ill afford. All said and done, tourism and promotion of our common heritage, identity and culture may even help hold our nation together. ■

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