

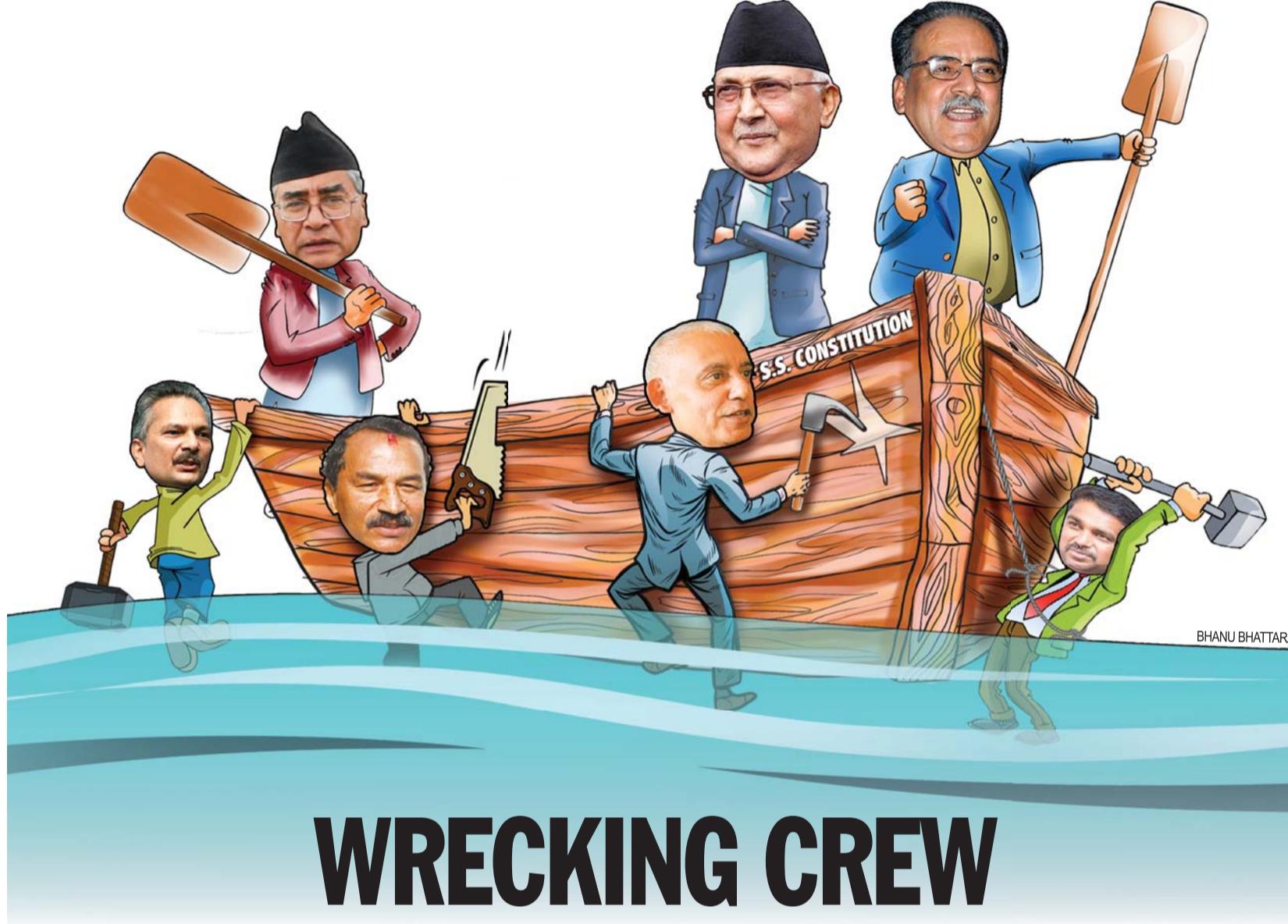
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## WRECKING CREW

Four years after the Constitution was promulgated, the main political actors involved in drafting it are now ruling the country. The 2017 federal, provincial and municipal elections made this the most powerful government in Nepal's democratic history. Yet, the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) has squandered not just its mandate but also the opportunity to make the Constitution work.

There were very high expectations among Nepal's long-suffering people that stability would attract investment, create jobs and improve accountability and governance. But disillusionment is running high, with opposition parties and dissident groups exploiting the discontent to push for constitutional amendments.

The government's response has been to crack down on dissent, intimidate and attack those who are critical of ruling party figures on social media, and try to push through bills in Parliament that would curtail hard-won freedoms. Prime Minister Oli himself has ordered that Constitution Day on Friday, 20 September be

used as an opportunity to defend the Constitution.

In what critics say is Panchayat-era style, the central government ordered Chief District Officers and local governments to 'celebrate with much enthusiasm' Constitution Day for three days, 19-21 September, by proudly flying national flags at homes, wearing t-shirts emblazoned with flags and illuminating homes and offices for three nights. The Home Ministry homepage even has a popup box displaying the exact dimensions and colours of the national flag, and instructions on correct ways to display it. The new Minister of Tourism and Culture, Yogesh Bhattarai, even tried to get the national anthem played before evening prayers at Pashupati.

Oppositionists are trying to cash in on the public's anti-government mood. Despite being in disarray itself, the Nepali Congress (NC) has smelt blood, and its leader Sashank Koirala is trying to ride the Hindutva wave to have secularism scrapped from the Constitution. Kamal Thapa of the RJP is going one step further to

campaign for the restoration of a Hindu monarchy. Former Maoist ideologue Baburam Bhattarai, now leader of Samajbadi Party Nepal, wants a constitutional amendment for identity-based federalism and executive presidency. And then there is the Biplav faction, which wants to go back to armed struggle.

The NCP is lashing out at critics. Party Co-chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal last week instructed cadre to 'retaliate' against the opposition, echoing Prime Minister Oli's call to 'unleash hornets' on them. NCP youth have used mob tactics against those posting critical content on social media. Information

Minister Gokul Banskota doesn't hide his disdain for the free press, and is pushing the Media Council Bill, an IT Bill and the Mass Communication Act through Parliament.

Critics say the way to defend the Constitution is not by threatening dissenting voices, but by protecting the freedoms that it guarantees. Former head of the Nepal Bar Association, Sunil Pokhrel, says: "If there is a problem with the Constitution, the way to resolve it is not by wrapping ourselves in the national flag. The flag is being used to hide defects in the Constitution."

**Saindra Rai**

**FOUR-YEAR ITCH**  
EDITORIAL  
PAGE 2



**buzz**

**Why is Okinawa so popular among Nepalis?**

PAGE 8-9

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# FOUR-YEAR ITCH

**A**ftershocks were still rocking Kathmandu four years ago this month when top leaders decided to fast-track the long lingering Constitution. The government was facing criticism for not doing enough on rescue and relief, and wanted to make its presence felt.

It was seven years in the making and took elections of two constituent assemblies for the Constitution to be drafted and finally promulgated on 20 September 2015. A photograph in this paper that week (*below*) shows the main protagonists beaming and shaking hands, congratulating themselves. All of them, except Prime Minister Sushil Koirala of the NC, are still around.

But they do not have much to show for it, and the euphoria of that day has long evaporated. The Constitution was not popular among Madhesi activists, who had demanded a separate province spanning the Tarai, among various janjati groups, who wanted an ethnically-defined federalism, and India was livid because Nepali leaders had not



listened to then-Indian Foreign Secretary S Jaishankar's advice to delay promulgation by two weeks. New Delhi's displeasure manifested itself in a five-month Blockade, for which the unrest that spread across the plains became a convenient cover.

The UML's KP Oli portrayed himself as a David against India's Goliath and rode the nationalist wave to sweep the 2017 elections. The UML's electoral partnership with the Maoists and the NCP's near two-thirds majority in federal, provincial and municipal assemblies made it a formidable political force.

But to describe the four years since the promulgation of the Constitution — especially the past two under the NCP government — as a letdown would be an understatement. There were very high expectations among Nepal's long-suffering people, even those who did not support the Communists, that stability would attract investment, create jobs and improve accountability and governance.

What a disappointment it has been. The politicians and the party have squandered their mandate, and have worked to undermine the very Constitution they spent so much time and effort to write. In fact, the strongest government in Nepal's democratic history behaves as if it is the weakest. It sees threats everywhere, lashes out and threatens critics. Party Co-chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal last week exhorted his gofers to 'counter' critics, echoing Prime Minister Oli's call to unleash hornets on them.

**For four years, the politicians have worked to undermine the very Constitution they spent so much time and effort to write.**

that espouses a Hindu state. Former Maoist ideologue Baburam Bhattarai, now leader of Samajbadi Party Nepal, also wants identity-based federalism and executive presidency. Kamal Thapa of the RJP is campaigning to revert Nepal to a Hindu monarchy.

Since the political wind is blowing from the South, some are suggesting that the Narendra Modi government may be giving moral support to anti-secular forces. This could be why both Oli and Dahal have used public speeches to warn king Gyanendra against trying to restore the monarchy.

But the reason the Constitution is a frayed document has nothing to do with India. It has everything to do with the lack of a democratic culture and a gradual descent into demagoguery.

The best way for the NCP and Oli to safeguard the Constitution is to fulfil the election promise of stability and prosperity, and to behave like leaders of the strong party that they run. The Constitution will not be defended by firing cannons at 6AM on Friday in Tundikhel, distributing t-shirts, singing the national anthem in cinemas or flying national flags in homes.

Ruling party youth have been used much like the Alsatian puppies in *Animal Farm* to intimidate and assault anyone who dare oppose its leaders. In this increasingly Orwellian world, people who post videos are hounded and physically assaulted and 'banned' from certain districts by NCP youth. YouTubers are threatened and ordered to take down satirical videos that go viral about corruption in high places.

Our comrades seem to have learnt from despotic regimes around the world to silence critics with trolling, strong-arm tactics, verbal intimidation, physical assaults or by unleashing 'bot armies. The Information and Communication Minister has been trying desperately to get a new Media Council Bill, an Information Technology Bill and the Mass Communication Act through Parliament. Human Rights Watch this month described the Acts as containing 'numerous loosely defined and draconian measures... criminalising free speech on vague grounds.'

The government's knee-jerk reaction to criticism is to blame the messenger, a tactic used by insecure authoritarians everywhere. It wants to distract a public increasingly disillusioned with its under-performance by co-opting Friday's Constitution Day to stir up pseudo-nationalistic fervour. It is fanning fears that the country's federal, secular Constitution is threatened by forces within and without, when it is the government itself that is undermining constitutionally guaranteed freedoms.

The opposition is unwittingly boosting Oli's narrative about threats. Sashank Koirala, who desperately wants to lead the rudderless NC, has been pushing the agenda of replacing Nepal's secular Constitution with one

that espouses a Hindu state. Former Maoist ideologue Baburam Bhattarai, now leader of Samajbadi Party Nepal, also wants identity-based federalism and executive presidency. Kamal Thapa of the RJP is campaigning to revert Nepal to a Hindu monarchy.

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## 10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

This paragraph from an editorial in #469 edition of Nepali Times 18-24 September 2009 is proof of how difficult it was to write the Constitution, and why it took so long:

Should the standoff in Parliament and the confrontation in the streets continue, the drafting of a new statute will be delayed, if not altogether sabotaged. The second casualty will be the functioning of the government, which has already been brought to its knees by various armed groups operating in the eastern hills and the central Tarai. The third impact will be the most cataclysmic: the ongoing peace process will unravel, with all the attendant complications and consequences.

The term 'failed state' is one of the most misunderstood and misused of our times. But the possibility appears to be staring us in the face. Girija Prasad Koirala and Madhav Kumar Nepal quibble over the arrangement of deckchairs even as the ship risks being sunk by the Maoists and its breakaway armed groups. No matter how many berths the Prime Minister adds to his cabinet, they will not be enough to accommodate all the minister-aspirants and keep his wobbly coalition afloat. There has to be some other way to end the stalemate.



MIRACULOUS SURVIVAL

Neurosurgeons in Nepal recently treated an extremely rare and risky case: removing a steel rod lodged in Raharman Tamang's head. Tamang lived to tell the tale. Watch the story of his survival. Story: page 11.



COSTLY AIRPORT

Ever wondered why the cost of air tickets from Kathmandu is more expensive than from other cities in Asia to the same destinations? How come more European airlines do not serve Kathmandu? Expensive jet fuel and high charges at Kathmandu airport are keeping international airlines away. Story: page 4-5.

### FORESTATION

One theory behind Nepal doubling its forests in 25 years is that less land is being farmed as more young people head out of Nepal to work, sending remittances so their parents also don't need to depend on farming ('Tree-mendous', Peter Gill, #977).

Marianne Heredge

■ An encouraging success story. Thanks for talking about it.

Karl Schuler

■ At a time when we are facing a global trend in climate change and when the earth's 'lungs' — forests — are playing a major role in combating CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, deforestation on a grand scale is ecologically irresponsible. The argument that re-planting four times as many trees is a false narrative. Tree saplings can take decades to grow to the size of the ones they are replacing. It is essential that we keep the big trees.

Alex Ferguson

### COVERING CLIMATE

Excellent work on covering the climate crisis by the *Nepali Times* team.

Sam Cowan

Maybe we need less alarmism and more focus on reducing polluting emissions from energy production and use of fossil fuels ('The Third Pole is warming faster than expected', Kunda Dixit, #977). We should focus on looking for alternative sources of renewable energy.

Sami Määttä

■ If current patterns keep up, most of the glaciers covering the Himalayas could melt within the next 50 years, 80 percent will be gone within 30 years. This should be addressed in a global summit to save the Himalaya.

Purr Purr

### CLIMATE AND TOURISM

('Tourism, aviation and carbon', Sanghamitra Subba, #977)? There are millions travelling by any means of transport that use fossil fuel on a daily basis. The 2 million tourists will not even account for a small part of the carbon emitted by visitors to Nepal during Visit Nepal 2020.

Saurav Pd



Bhutan is on the move

by Lisa Choegyal

Enchanting Bhutan, the world's first carbon-negative country, zealously guards its traditions, navigating the cultural clash of ancient and modern. It has bewitched both tourists and the author. Go online to read about her multiple visits to the country.

**f** Most reached and shared on Facebook

### Tree-mendous

by Peter Gill

New analysis of historical satellite imagery indicates that Nepal's forest area has doubled in the last 25 years, making the country an exception to the global trend of deforestation. This casts new light on plans to log a huge area of jungle for the proposed Nijgad airport. Visit nepalitimes.com for the full story and join the discussion online.

**Twitter** Most popular on Twitter

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### It's a jungle out there in Nepal and the Amazon

By Ajaya Dixit

The Amazon forest went up in flames this year as the world watched helplessly. Now it is the rainforest of Kalimantan. They remind us of the urgent need to deal with potential large-scale forest fires in Nepal too, as global warming, erratic rain and droughts make forests more vulnerable.

**Page** Most visited online page

### QUOTE TWEETS

**Nepali Times** @NepaliTimes Rare good news: How did Nepal double its forest cover in 25 years? Read in this piece by @pitaarji

**Laxmi G** @LaxmiG10 Let's consider we have 45% forest, are we utilising our forests properly? Are we getting benefits from our forest in a sustainable way?

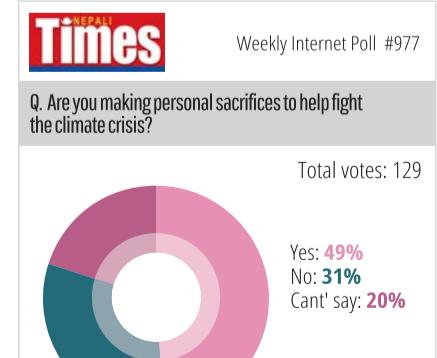
**Prem Biswokarma** @PremBiswokarma How about the deforestation going on in the Tarai and the Kathmandu? And this is not taking years, just months?

**Prakash C Joshi** @pcjoshi17 It's true that after community forestry was launched, forest cover has increased.

**Paudel Madhuban** @madhuBTM276 Thanks to the Community Forest concept. It has at least stopped desertification.

**Nepali Times** @NepaliTimes Bhutan is the first country in the world to become carbon negative. Its forests absorb more carbon than its inhabitants burn. This week in her fortnightly column @lisachoegeyal recounts tales from her multiple visits to the country that has bewitched her.

**Biren Limbu** @limbubiren58 Bhutan is also the first country to make refugees out of Bhutanese people of Nepali origin.



Weekly Internet Poll #978  
To vote go to: www.nepalitimes.com

Q. Should the government lift the ban on women going to West Asia as domestic workers?

A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER 

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# High cost lays aviation low in Nepal

Kathmandu has the highest fuel and handling costs of any airport in the world, and the poorest facilities

**Sharad Ojha**

Ever wondered why the cost of air tickets from Kathmandu is more expensive than from other cities in Asia to the same destinations? How come more European airlines do not serve Kathmandu? Why there aren't any direct flights to Australia?

Answer: expensive jet fuel and high service charges at Kathmandu airport are keeping international airlines away, and preventing ones that fly here from adding flights to meet demand.

High fuel costs mostly pinch airlines that fly widebody aircraft on long flights. Korean Airlines, China Southern, Turkish Airlines, Qatar Airways and Nepal Airlines use widebodies on longhaul routes. Congestion often forces their planes to circle for hours, and the cost of all this is passed on to passengers.

A *Nepali Times* survey shows the price of ATF JetA1 at Kathmandu airport this week was US\$1,050 per kilolitre (kL), almost double the cost in New Delhi and Bangkok (\$525/kL) and considerably higher than Beijing (\$750/kL). (See chart, above.)

"The cost of fuel is the main expense for an airline, and the feasibility of a route is determined by the fuel cost at the destination," says Abdullah Tuncer Kecici, Nepal Manager of Turkish Airlines, which operates daily flight using the Airbus 330 from its Istanbul hub.

**Cost of aviation turbine fuel JetA1 in Kathmandu (US\$/kL)**



The carrier plans to continue daily operations for Visit Nepal 2020, but says that plan will depend on lower fuel price.

After long flights, widebody jets need to top up their tanks with at least 40 tons of fuel in Kathmandu for their return journeys. Qatar Airways, Cathay Dragon, Turkish and China Southern all operate A330s and need refuelling in Kathmandu, as does Korean Air's Boeing 777s. Thai International's 777s usually do not refuel in Kathmandu unless they burn their reserve while waiting to land. Even Nepal Airlines flies into Kathmandu on a full tank so its planes do not need to take on too much fuel here for their next flights.

After a request from the Board of Airline Representatives new Minister of Tourism and Civil Aviation Yogesh Bhattarai assured carriers he would "give the matter serious consideration". Nepal Oil Corporation (NOC) says it will soon reduce costs by \$75/kL, but

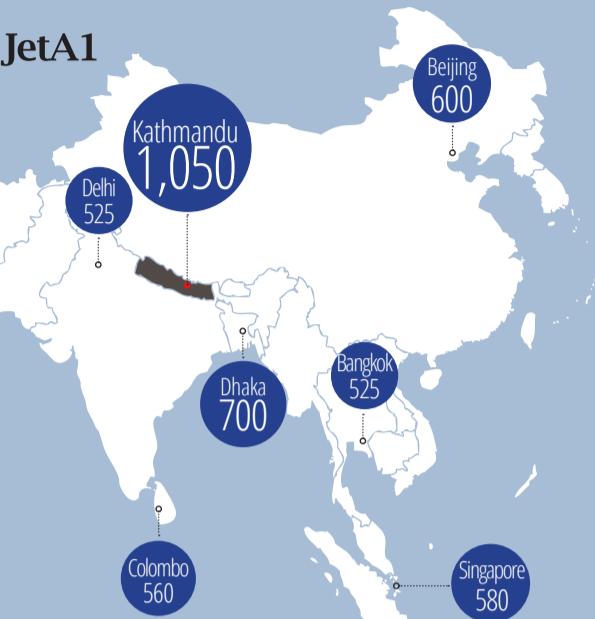
carriers say that is not enough.

"The reason fuel cost is high is because of taxes, and the need to subsidise fuel for domestic airlines, and LPG cylinders for the public," NOC Spokesperson Birendra Goit told *Nepali Times*. Indeed, NOC's homepage shows it makes a clean profit of more than Rs50 per litre of JetA1 fuel sold to foreign airlines.

Aviation fuel in Kathmandu used to cost as much as \$1,800/kL before 2015, but fell after the global price declined in 2016, to \$750/kL. Since then, there have been steady unexplained increases every few months to a peak of \$1,125 in August last year. The price hikes took place after the Nepal Communist Party government assumed office in early 2018. (See graph, above.)

Aviation experts say high taxes on aviation fuel dissuade international airlines, which magnify downstream benefits to Nepal's economy through tourism promotion, cheaper travel for

**Cost of JetA1 (\$/kL)**



Nepali migrant workers, and by making air cargo competitive.

"The way to make money from airlines is to encourage cheaper flights so there are more tourists. It is counterproductive to squeeze carriers through higher fuel costs and airport fees," says the representative of an Asian airline.

Besides fuel costs, charges for ground handling, parking and landing fees are also costlier in Kathmandu than in other South Asian airports. A widebody operator with 290 passengers pays \$6,000 for ticketing and ground handling per flight at Kathmandu airport, which is twice the cost in New Delhi or Bangkok. Landing and parking charges in Kathmandu are \$2,800 for heavies like the A330 or B777, which is 20-30% higher than other airports in the region.

"Kathmandu has the highest cost among all the airports in our network, but in return we get poor quality of service and bad infrastructure," said an airline

source, who did not want to be named because he was not cleared by headquarters to speak to the media.

He added: "The automatic doors on ramp buses don't work, the airport is over crowded and inefficient, but we take that as given. We just wish there is better communication and ample notice from CAAN and the airport management about disruptions."

Nepal Airlines Deputy Managing Director Ganesh B Chand maintains ground handling charges for widebodies are the same in Kansai as in Kathmandu, adding: "Our costs are high because the taxes for ramp buses and other equipment make them five times costlier than in Delhi."

Conclusion: operating costs for airlines at Kathmandu airport is the highest in the world because of abnormally high taxes needed to subsidise domestic air travel and the public's use of LPG cylinders.



KUNDA DIXIT

◆ prabhu BANK BIZ BRIEFS
**New Turkish app**

Turkish Airlines announces Companion Entertainment, a mobile application that can be paired with the Turkish inflight platform, Planet. Passengers will be able



to browse content on Planet before flights, add preferred movies, tv shows and series to 'favourites', and watch them during their flights. Companion Entertainment will be available on over 100 planes during the first phase.

**Him. Bank award**

Himalayan Bank Limited received a Trade Finance Program (TFP) Award 2019 in Singapore on 3 September 2019 for the highest number of transactions recorded from 1 July 2018 to 30 June 2019. The TFP award, the third for Himalayan Bank, is given in recognition of the bank's role in promoting trade finance in Asia and the Pacific.

**Dry mixed mortar**

Sagarmatha Precast Solutions has introduced Dry Mix Mortar products to Nepal. These include Ready-mix Plaster, Bricks-Block Joining Mortar, Tile Adhesive and Industrial Power Grout. The products are made using global technology and high-quality raw materials tested rigorously in Sagarmatha's state-of-the-art laboratory, producing innovative products with the best quality, high strength, dimensional accuracy and consistency.

**Little Smiles**

IMS Little Smiles, an IMS Group company, has acquired the sole national distributorship for bbluv, a Canadian brand of products for kids and babies. IMS Little Smiles has its showroom in City Centre, Kamal Pokhari, where it sells products from other international baby brands like Dr Brown's, Crane and Himalaya Baby Care, most of them available for the first time in Nepal. The company has also made bbluv products available via online store SmartDoko.

**Gokarna golf**

Ola Dongstetsang took top prize at the Pepsi Open Golf Tournament on Saturday at Gokarna Golf Club in Kathmandu. Playing with a 10 handicap, Ola finished 1 point ahead of Dawa J Sherpa. Nabaraj Thapa bagged the best gross award after being tied with Raj Pradhan.



◆ prabhu BANK

# Not so CUTE

A serious oversight by the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAAN) and Kathmandu airport management has led to the expiration of a contract with the global airline communication company SITA (Société Internationale de Télécommunications Aéronautiques) for ticketing of airline passengers flying from Kathmandu. The contract lapsed on 14 September, apparently because no one in Nepal bothered to renew it.

SITA employs an application called Common Use Terminal Equipment (CUTE) to speed up passenger processing by sharing check-in desks, providing a software platform to generate boarding passes and baggage tags, as well as integrating the data with the global airline network.

CAAN and the airport passed the buck to each other last week, but managed to get a two-week extension till 28 September. SITA is demanding a three-year extension of the contract, but Nepali officials reportedly only want to do one year.

Airlines serving Kathmandu are prepared to do manual check-ins with handwritten boarding passes and baggage tags, which may mean delays at the beginning of the tourist season. Said one airline representative: "We hope it will not come to that next week."





# NAMASTE

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# Smarter Nepalis with smarter devices

Let's place smart citizens at the centre of planning for new homes, cities, energy and infrastructure

**T**ill only two centuries ago almost every human being lived and worked from home. The industrial revolution brought factories, then offices forced city-dwellers to commute to work and back.



1/2 FULL

Anil Chitrakar

But with the Information Age, smart devices in the hands of smart people means we can once again work from home. Going to an office will and should become irrelevant. Home workers will also not have to work five days a week. They will be so productive, three days will be enough.

That is probably what will also reduce traffic jams, improve the air quality and as we become healthier, we will once again live longer. Where you are physically located will become irrelevant and the notion of going abroad will be limited to leisure, adventure and disposable incomes. But even here, we have seen a 15% drop in domestic air travel in northern Europe as awareness of the impact of aviation on the climate crisis becomes clear.

The transformation in the way we work is going to have huge implications for the designs of homes, neighbourhoods and cities. The key word is 'work'. There are still many who are looking for a *jagir* salaried job in the civil service or private companies. Perception and understanding of work and *jagir* will be very different depending on who you ask.

Some still seek a 10-5 *jagir* in an office that pays a fixed income



each month, comes with a lifelong pension, and takes a little bit of *chakari* to keep bosses and political masters happy. Performance and delivery of output are not really an issue, and the worst thing that can happen is you get moved to a different office or to some remote area of the country away from your family and the schools your children attend.

Many are seeking a *jagir*, while others seek work. From construction to managing a restaurant, from driving a taxi or tipper truck to growing crops and vegetables, there are many who work.

Work requires self-discipline and a high level of skill and knowledge, which come with a piece of paper that proves you can

benefits are there. They love to have fun, they really know when and how to spend time with family and friends.

With the ongoing restructuring of the state there will be fewer government and private sector *jagirs* going around in Kathmandu. This may be a good opportunity to carve out our work niche for ourselves. Many already have a head start.

Numerous producers and service providers have set up businesses. Many young people tell us that they are skilled, they have support from the family, have a bit of savings and they want to work — gainfully and independently.

These are smart Nepalis with smart devices who want to work smart. They partner with other smart people and wish to live in smart houses in smart neighbourhoods of smart cities. The marketing is all data-driven in an age where data is more valuable than oil.

We now need to extend this concept to our towns and cities. For example, being climate smart is critical for the future of humanity and hence there is a need for all individuals and families to do their own carbon audits. A smart app can tell us our carbon footprints, and suggest ways to reduce them.

The smartest system is our ecosystem, and we are all smart enough to learn how nature produces for us and what its limits are for absorbing what we waste. As we plan our homes, cities, energy and infrastructure, let us place smart citizens and their work at the centre of all planning.

**Anil Chitrakar** is President of Siddharthinc

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Chitwan and Nawalparasi got 300mm of rain in one night on Wednesday. Nepal saw one of the last gasps of the monsoon this week, and the rains are in full retreat as the monsoonal trough is pushed back by a fresh westerly. Clouds bulging with moisture were forced to dump their rain over the mountains as they fell back. The trend is for the showers to wane, followed by misty mornings with sunny spells and afternoon build-up into the weekend. There is so much water vapour about that the evening showers can still be sharp and thundery.

FRIDAY 23° 18° SATURDAY 24° 18° SUNDAY 24° 18°



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PHOTOS: MARTY LOGAN

# The lure of green

Marty Logan

When I've had enough of the smog, barking dogs, crowds and cacophony of Kathmandu I seek out my 'oasis', a small piece of green real estate that, I'm sure, slows my heartbeat and lowers my blood pressure on sight in — Dilibazar.

Yes, that's right, Dilibazar, one of the oldest suburbs of 20th-century Kathmandu, once known for its sweet shops and the derelict Charkhal Jail, but today recognisable by the educational consultancies and their billboards — 'Study in Australia, Canada, Cyprus, England, Greece, Ireland!' — that have spilled onto its streets from Putali Sadak. It's definitely not the first place that comes to mind when you think of Kathmandu and nature.

My paradise is small and tranquil, wild but constrained by the boundaries of private property. On its fringes is an old, intact Nepali brick house and surrounding it 1960s-vintage concrete homes, one of them belonging to my in-laws. It is from my *sasurali*, the dining room windows to be precise, that I gaze onto the neighbours' pocket-sized 'jungle' with its plum, pomegranate, pecan and avocado trees, small copse of bamboo and a barely visible path, fringed by wild flowers in warmer months, which passes by a tiny temple.

If I step back slowly from the dining-room window, holding my gaze, I soon reach a point where the brown frame is filled with green only. Marvelling, I approach again, push open the glass and breathe deeply, in wonder that this tiny piece of nature remains and can draw me so strongly, while all around

it the concrete jungle grows.

Research in recent years has tried to quantify how trees affect human health. By filtering air pollution, trees averted \$6.8 million yearly in health costs in the US, a 2014 study in the journal *Environmental Pollution* found. In Toronto, having 10 more trees than average on a street was comparable to a \$10,000 increase in personal income, and moving to an area with a \$10,000 higher median income or being 7 years younger.

Nature has long drawn me. When I was about 10, my family spent the weekend on an island a short boat ride away from our town. While the adults talked inside, I wandered away, towards the ocean, hopping from stone to stone to avoid the mud and pools of water left behind by the retreating tide.

Bending to peer into one of those tidepools an entire, tiny world emerged: orange crabs crawled out from under stones, the movement sending up miniature clouds of sand that obscured the scuttling crustaceans. Tiny fish darted, and the long-legged bugs we called 'water skimmers' zoomed across the surface. It was only when I heard a voice calling me that I realised I had been lost in my new world — until my brother arrived to make sure I had not passed out, or worse.

Years later, an earnest student in Vancouver, I passed far too many hours peering into books under the stark lights of university rooms, but then waiting for the night bus to take me home I would fall under the spell of a row of giant poplar trees that on windy nights swayed in the street-lit shadows

above, their leaves rustling like running water.

Fast forward to our first move to Kathmandu, searching for an apartment. We turned the corner of a *galli* not far from the Charkhal Jail and a magnificent camphor tree rose at the T-junction ahead. I knew then that I wanted to live on that alley, and soon after we signed the contract.

Back in Toronto seven years later, we were visiting another possible rental in the heart of Canada's biggest city. At one end of the delightfully long apartment was a former balcony, converted into a room for four-season living. Outside its huge windows a stand of maple trees rose above the parking lot. Here's a future office, I thought, and we were lucky enough to rent that apartment too.

Today, I am again fortunate to live in a relatively green section of Kathmandu, with a backyard that hosts guava, mango, avocado, and other fruit trees. Unless the neighbourhood dogs are yapping, birdsong wakes me in the morning and frogs call

insistently after a nighttime monsoon rain.

I have been luckier than most people to live so often next to nature, which bestows enormous benefits often in small, simple ways. I could spend hours soaking in my Dilibazar jungle, but I get the same pleasure from hearing raindrops hit the leaves of the trees outside my open window.

*Postscript:* The owner of the Dilibazar jewel died in mid-August, before I could go and ask how he managed to preserve a natural paradise amid the steadily shrinking 'empty' spaces of the neighbourhood. I dedicate this article to that man I never met, for notwithstanding the pressure to sell out and cash in.

I am not exactly sure what motivated him to conserve his patch of land, but hearing that just before he died he had asked one of his children to bring him seedlings from overseas, I'm confident it went beyond simply keeping the valuable property in the family. ☺

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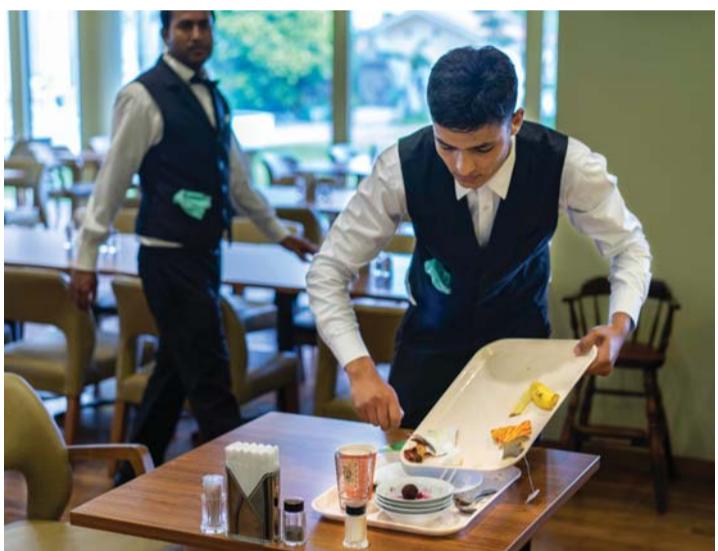


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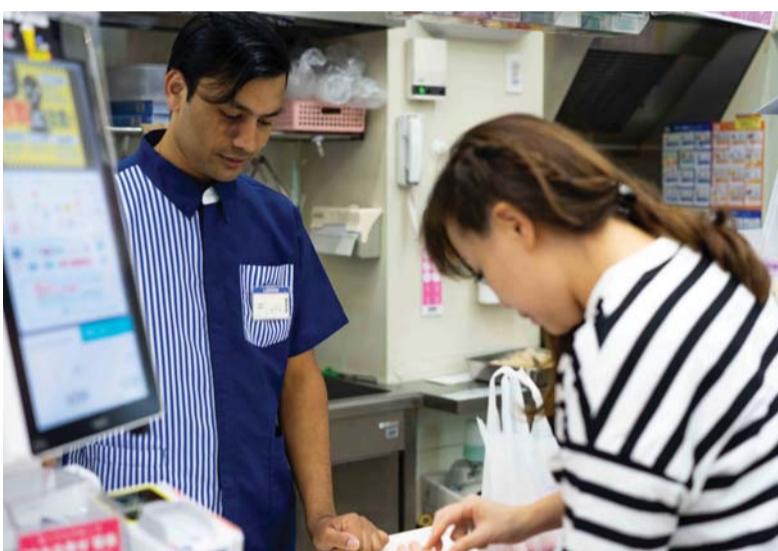
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Ramchandra Bhandari, 32, and Ram Pandey, 32, work at CityMart, selling Nepali food items mainly to Nepali students from nearby Japanese language schools. They also assist Nepali students with remittance.



Narayan Baral, 28, works as a part-time waiter at Pacific Hotel while attending school in the evenings. Even though it is his third year in Okinawa, he misses his family in Nepal.



Subash Tripathi loves the laid-back culture in Okinawa compared to mainland Japan. He studied at a Japanese language school and is now working and pursuing his studies at Okinawa International University. "I love the weather in Okinawa, and the people here are very kind," said the 27-year-old.



Sabina Magar, 19, usually works the night shift, from 6pm to 1am, at a supermarket across from her dormitory. The Japanese language student is happy to work during the summer vacation to earn enough to pay for her rent and tuition fees.



Both Nepali and Japanese beers are for sale at Shiva Mahal.



Mani Pokhrel, 26, (left) has been visiting Kantipur Curry House since he was a Japanese language student. He now works for Japan Airlines, and comes to meet his friend Krishna Shahi, 43 (right) whenever he misses home cooking.

# Why Nepalis are flocking to Okinawa

Nepalis make up the largest proportion of foreign workers on Japan's tropical island

Photos and story by Charlene Chua

**F**ive years ago, 27-year-old Anita Sapkota left behind friends and family in Kathmandu to seek a better life on Japan's tropical island of Okinawa. Sapkota is now married to another Nepali, who runs the Shiva Mahal restaurant in Naha, speaks fluent Japanese and is at university studying to be an English teacher.

She was working in a travel agency in Kathmandu, but decided to take the leap to pursue her studies 4,000km away. "At first I cried a lot, was homesick and did not want to leave my parents," recalls Sapkota. "I did not know when I would be back."

The number of Nepalis in Japan has grown 10-fold in the last 10 years to at least 80,000 today, and many of them have decided to settle in Okinawa, which is warmer and more relaxed than the main islands of Japan. Nepalis make up the biggest proportion of foreign workers in Okinawa at 24.6% — followed by Vietnam (16.4%) and the Philippines (12.5%).

Nepali students like to come to Okinawa because they are allowed to work up to 28 hours a week during the school term, much longer than in Australia, another popular destination for Nepalis. This allows them to study and work to pay off tuition fees and living expenses.

Another reason is that international students have a higher chance of getting employed in Japan now, as the government is encouraging Japanese companies to employ more foreigners, under the Japan Revitalisation Strategy.

Many Nepali workers choose to work in convenience stores here because they can practise their Japanese by interacting with customers. Last year, the number of foreign nationals working in Japan's four major chains exceeded 55,000.

But Nepali migrants pay a price to pursue their dreams in Okinawa. It costs nearly 1,256,000 yen (\$11,500) a year to do a two-year course at a



"I miss momos most," says Mani Pokhrel.

# Nepalis locking inawa

The highest number is on the laid-back, land in Japan

and text by  
Chua in Okinawa



Japanese language school. Many Nepali students have to work to pay off the loans they took to come here. Even if they work the full 28 hours, many still struggle financially given the 800 yen (\$7.4) hourly wage, and risk deportation to take multiple jobs.

After 6PM, instead of driving south to his home in Itoman City, Laxman Ojha heads in the opposite direction to Urasoe, where he attends a karate class in a dojo three days a week. Ojha has been living in Okinawa for eight years, and said that while he does not have any issues integrating with Okinawans, newcomers struggle because of language and cultural differences.

"If nobody teaches them, they could make mistakes, which will not be good for both communities," said the 32-year-old.

Despite her struggles, Nepalis like Anita Sapkota are hopeful about the future: "Okinawa has taught me the meaning of hard work and the importance of family and friends. My aim is not only to work here, but to get a reputable job where I can earn respect before heading home."

**Charlene Chua** studies at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University. She was part of the Going Overseas for Advanced Reporting program.



in Okinawa. "It is a comfort food for me."



It has been eight years since **Laxman Ojha** started learning karate. "Okinawa is the birthplace of karate, so it was natural that I picked up the sport," said Ojha, who has a black belt.



**Laxman Ojha** with his fellow karate practitioners, who congregate every Friday night for an hour-long class.



**Laxman Ojha**, 32, and his karate sensei, Giyu Gibo, sign certificates to give out to students during class. The two have known each other for 12 years, and Ojha affectionately calls Gibo his "Japanese father" and visits him every weekend for dinner.



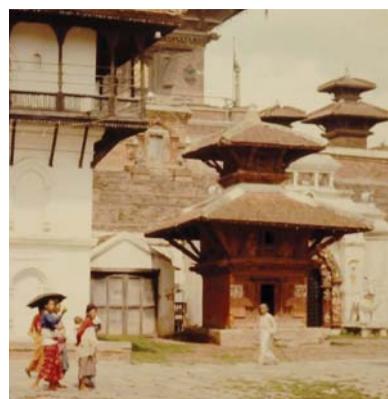
Kantipur Curry House was set up in 2015 by **Kavi Kachhipati**, who has been living in Okinawa for 10 years. The Nepali food chain has three outlets in Okinawa, near Japanese language schools frequented by Nepalis. "I wanted to bring authentic Nepali cuisine to Okinawa so that they can get a taste of home-cooked food far away from home," said Kachhipati, 39, who plans to open more outlets.



When she is not at university, **Anita Sapkota**, 27, helps her husband manage the Shiva Mahal restaurant in Naha.



## EVENTS

**Nepal Then**

Photographer Ed van der Kooy has been documenting Nepal since the late 1970s. Now, 40 years after his first visit, van der Kooy will be showcasing a film he made in 1978, along with photographs and two paintings.

18-28 September, The Taragaon Museum, Boudha (01) 6201035

**Women On Stage**

Women On Stage worked with 22 women in Kathmandu over the age of 25 to help them share their stories through spoken word poetry, creative movement and visual arts. To celebrate their work, panel discussions, writing workshops and sharing sessions will be held.

21 September, 11am-5pm, Ageno: The Hestia, Sanepa (01) 5536974

**Art is Power**

Siddhartha Art Gallery presents, Art is Power: Equal Power Equal Freedom Equal Representation, a collection of artwork by girls from Banke, Makwanpur, Sunsari, Jumla and Sindhuli.

17-28 September, 11am-6pm, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Babar Mahal (01) 4218048

**Global Climate Strike**

Fridays for Future Nepal will be hosting the Nepali chapter of the Global Climate Strike. This initiative was founded by young climate change activist Greta Thunberg to demand action to prevent further global warming and climate change.

20 September, 8:30am-10:30am, Maitighar Mandala, 9851037701



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## MUSIC

**1974AD**

Legendary band 1974AD will be performing for the first time since their reunion earlier this year.

21 September, 7pm onwards, Rs1,000+ per person, LOD, Thamel, 9843948997

**Twelve Thoughts**

Twelve students from the Community Children Art School will exhibit their artworks. Starting 21 September at 12pm. 22-28 September, 10am-6pm (Daily), 9am-3pm (Saturday only), Classic Gallery, Chakupat, 9841224753

**Photo Exhibition**

Celebrate 70 years of Nepal-France relations with a photo exhibition showcasing the countries' friendship through the decades.

17-30 September, 10am-6pm, Alliance Française Katmandou, Jhamsikhel (01) 5009221

**Paint Party**

Bring your friends and family for a paint party. Learn techniques from artists and let your creativity shine.

21 September, 1pm-7pm, Limited seats available, Cafe Mocha, Budhanilkantha, 9863424715

**Pop Up Printmaking**

25 contemporary Nepali artists will present artwork that celebrates printmaking in the Nepali scene. The exhibition is accompanied by a live jazz performance.

20 September-17 October, 5:30pm onwards, Bikalpa Art Cafe, Pulchok (01) 5013524

**Love Juice**

Love Juice identifies their sound as world music, playing traditional and contemporary songs from Norway to Japan. Witness a medley of various music genres at their performance.

20 September, 6:30pm, Bikalpa Art Cafe, 9851147776

**Ser O Duo**

Ser O Duo are Chilean musicians who play innovative music on the transverse flute, quenas, bansuri, Bulgarian kaval, Turkish ney and saxophone. They will perform with the KJC Girl's Choir.

20 September, 7pm-9pm, Rs500, Moksh, Jhamsikhel (01) 5543554

**Places Jazz Night**

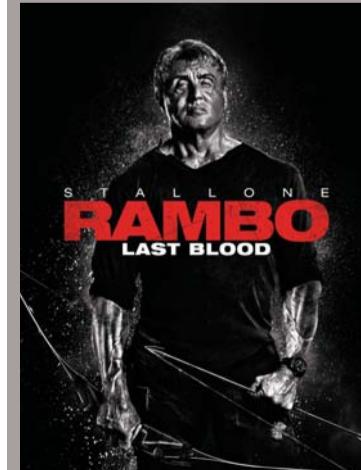
Listen to the jazzy tunes of Time Dilation, a Nepali jazz group featuring Chitiz, Subash and Sahil.

20 September, 7pm onwards, Places Restaurant & Bar, Thamel (01) 4700413

**The Midnight Riders**

The Midnight Riders will launch their debut album Baiguni Lai Blues Le Marnu Parcha. Their music is influenced by classic rock and contemporary sounds.

21 September, 6pm onwards, Rs300, 25 Hours, Tangal, 9818542920

**OUR PICK**

Opened in Kathmandu on 20 September

Sylvester Stallone returns to the Rambo franchise, in what is expected to be the last movie in the series, and Rambo fans worldwide are excited. Rambo, who started out as a young war veteran full of energy and living a life of adventures, is now in the autumn of his life. Watch to find out if he's still got it.

## DINING

**Anatolia**

Anatolia's Indian and Turkish dishes are packed with spices and an unforgettable assortment of flavours. From the Mutton Kofta Curry to the Baklava, the kitchen's treats, all halal, will leave you wanting more. 10am-10pm, Thamel (01) 4258757

**Nina's**

Nina's is a favourite of those seeking a juicy burger or steak. Their service is unparalleled, the quality of the dishes is unmatched and the owner is unlike any other in Nepal.

11am-8:30pm (Except Sundays), Maharajgunj, 9851130043

**Wunjala Moskva**

Although serving Russian and Newari dishes together might sound peculiar, those who have tried the combination know that it works surprisingly well. Try the Russian Piroshki and the Newari Nyakhuna during your next visit.

12pm-10pm, Naxal (01) 4415236

**Jatra Cafe**

Jatra Cafe & Bar has an extensive menu that spans sandwiches, pasta and curry. But their Samaya Baji Newari khaaja set is one of the best out there and as authentic as it can get. 10am-10pm, Thamel (01) 4256622

## GETAWAY

**Royal Mustang**

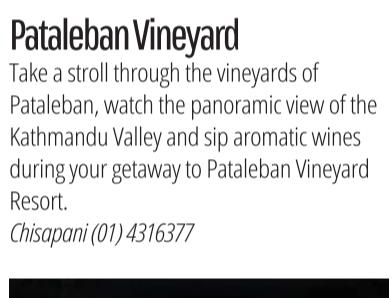
Set to a backdrop of glittering white mountains, a field of flowers and typically clear skies, Royal Mustang Resort stands like a mirage amidst Nepal's driest regions.

Lo Manthang, Mustang 9746707045

**Tiger Mountain**

Tiger Mountain Resort offers a rustic getaway in rural Pokhara. Everything is made from home-grown, fresh ingredients, the spa offers relaxing treatments and there are enough activities to fuel the adventurer in you.

Pokhara (01) 4720580

**Pataleban Vineyard**

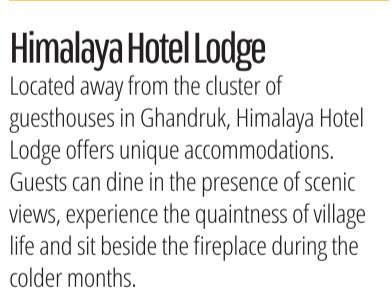
Take a stroll through the vineyards of Pataleban, watch the panoramic view of the Kathmandu Valley and sip aromatic wines during your getaway to Pataleban Vineyard Resort.

Chisapani (01) 4316377

**Chaimale Village**

Adorned with pear trees, the resort is an idyllic getaway from the concrete of Kathmandu.

Chaimale (01) 4268121

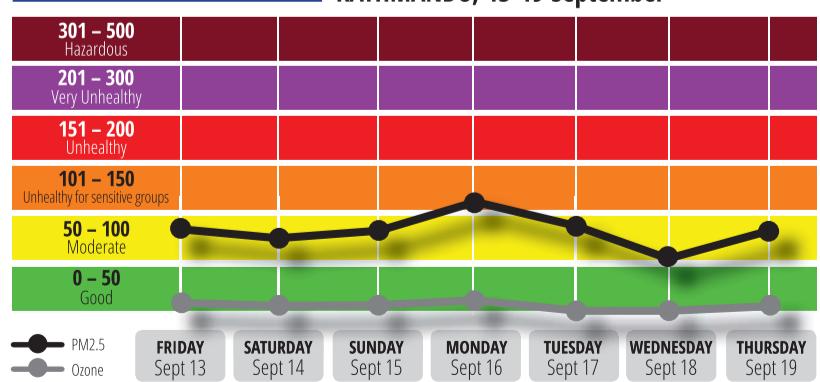
**Himalaya Hotel Lodge**

Located away from the cluster of guesthouses in Ghandruk, Himalaya Hotel Lodge offers unique accommodations. Guests can dine in the presence of scenic views, experience the quaintness of village life and sit beside the fireplace during the colder months.

Ghandruk (01) 4435686

**AIR QUALITY INDEX**

KATHMANDU, 13-19 September



The Air Quality Index in Kathmandu measured at the US Embassy station at Phora Darbar showed a marked improvement this week because of the heavy and sustained rainfall. The concentration of dangerous particulates below 2.5 microns stayed at the Moderate (yellow) level every day except Monday. However, as soon as the rains stopped, the hourly averages crept up. For live hour-by-hour AQI levels go to [www.nepaltimes.com](http://www.nepaltimes.com) on PCs or mobiles.

<https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/>

# Man survives steel rod piercing his head

Rahman Tamang was using a circular saw to cut a steel rod at a metal shop in Bhaktapur when a section of the rod snapped off and pierced his head.

The rod entered through his left forehead just above his eyebrow, crossed the brain in the midline, and exited from behind the brain on the right side. (See CT scan, below) While doing so, it damaged the basal ganglia and

doctors Suvas Lohani, Ranjan Lamichhane, Madhav Gautam and neurosurgeon Shikhar Shrestha took part in the operation. They also consulted Professor Laxmi Pati and Terence Hope. First, they performed a craniotomy and carefully pulled out the rod to prevent infection and bleeding.

The only reason Tamang survived the delicate operation was because the rod



internal capsule, the conglomerate of neurons controlling the movement of the left half of his body. Half of his body became paralysed immediately. Tamang, 20, lost consciousness and went limp.

Relatives rushed him to a nearby hospital in Bhaktapur, which said it was not possible to treat him.

They then took him to TU Teaching Hospital at Mahajganj, where he was turned away because there were no beds in the ICU.

By the time they got to the emergency ward of Upendra Devkota Memorial National Institute of Neurological and Allied Sciences in Bansbari it had been four hours since the accident.

Doctors were shocked — they had never seen a case like this. They were doubtful at first that the patient would live. Quickly the team reviewed literature to guide the patient's care and management. Neurosurgeon Pratyush Shrestha found an article in *Pubmed* about a similar case in a hospital in Mumbai.

"We did not have much time: the dirty rod could lead to brain infection," Shrestha recalls. Any foreign object that enters a head has to be taken out from the direction opposite to its entry, since removing it from the same side could inflict additional damage on vital nerves.

An 11-member team, including resident

miraculously missed by arteries that supply blood to the brain by millimetres. It also did not touch the brain stem and the vital organs regulating respiration and cardiac activity.

Three weeks after his treatment, Tamang's health is improving and he has been shifted to the general ward of the hospital (picture, below). He can talk, and is not suffering any major side effects, but needs to take his medication to avoid infection, and do physiotherapy. The doctors involved are working on a paper to be published in a peer-reviewed journal so the experience can help in treating other patients. "Just like we were guided by a paper, we hope our experience will also be useful to others," says Shrestha.

Tamang's accident is an example of the sorry state of industrial safety in the country. He would not have been as severely injured if he was wearing a helmet.

Sunil Kumar Joshi, a physician at Kathmandu Medical College, says that though the government has rules about safety in the workplace, they are not enforced.

"Workers do not know that they can ask their employers to ensure safety and security," he says.

**Ramu Sapkota**

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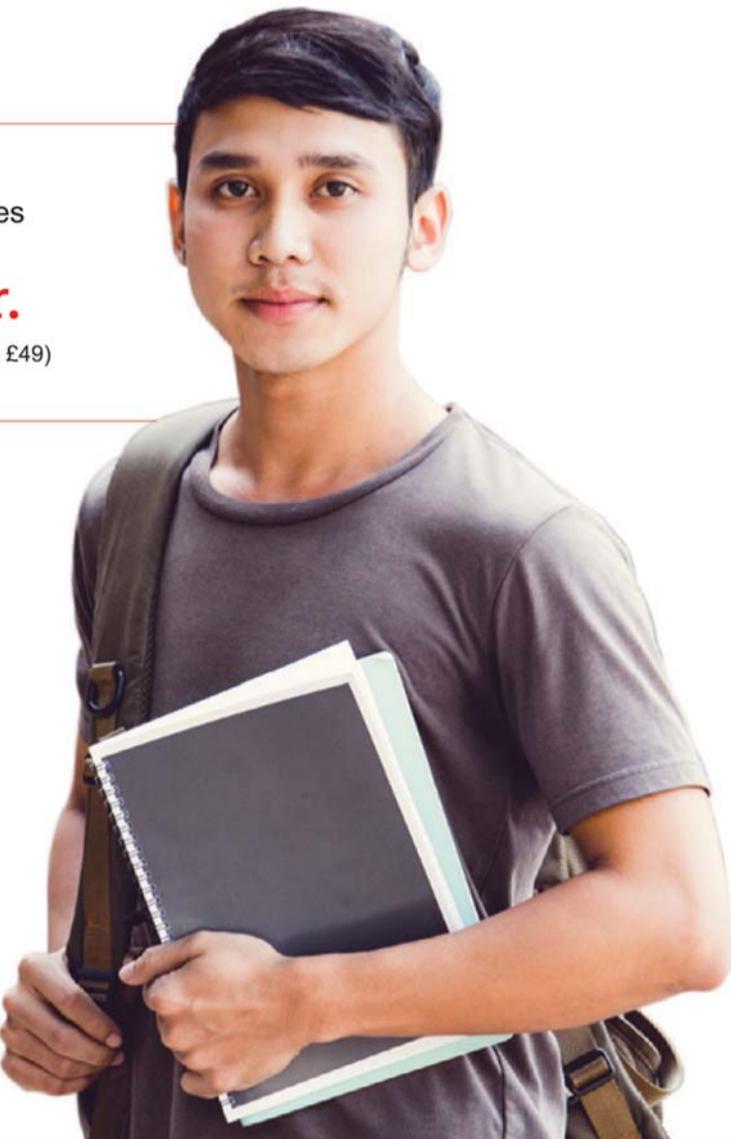
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SIDDHANT PANDEY  
**WHAT'S COOKING?**: Lord Mayor of the City of London Peter Estlin and British Ambassador Richard Morris make momos at Dalle central kitchen and restaurant on Sunday.



FRENCH EMBASSY  
**LONG-DISTANCE FRIENDS**: French Ambassador François-Xavier Léger inauguates a photo exhibition celebrating 70 years of Nepal-France relations in Kathmandu on Tuesday. Patan Mayor Chiribabu Maharjan at left.



TURKISH AIRLINES  
**ISTANBUL CALLING**: Turkish Airlines Manager for Nepal Abdullah Tuncer Kececi awards two round-trip tickets to Istanbul to Vipasna Dhakal, winner of the 'Dream Destination' art contest organised by Turkish Airlines and Glocal.



AMBASSADORS RANDY BERRY / TWITTER  
**DREAM BIG**: Students attend an education fair organised by the US Embassy in Kathmandu this week.

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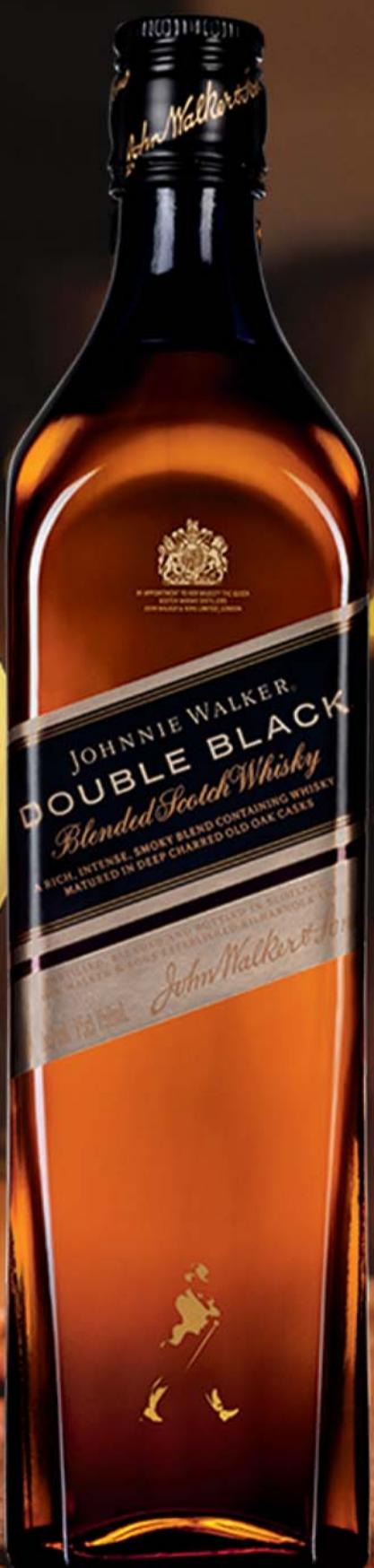
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# Nepal and Malaysia rewrite

Two countries agree on safer, easier and less costly process for workers

**Kunda Dixit**

In what could be a major step forward in safeguarding the welfare of migrant labour, Nepal and Malaysia have rewritten the rules for work contracts.

After a crossborder investigation by this newspaper, *Himal Khabarpatrika* and *Malaysiakini* last year, which exposed collusion between corrupt Nepali and Malaysian officials and private companies to charge workers

investigation showed. This did not include recruiters' fees and plane tickets that the workers also had to pay for.

After that expose, Minister Bista signed a landmark MoU with his counterpart, Malaysian Minister for Human Resources M Kulasegeran, in 2018. The agreement required employers to pay for visa fees and air tickets of Nepali workers, who will now be guaranteed salary payments the first week of every month. However, it was not until the technical details were worked out by a joint working group in



exorbitant fees, Minister of Labour Gokarna Bista stopped Nepalis from going to Malaysia for work in May 2018.

There are about 400,000 Nepalis working in Malaysian palm and rubber plantations, factories and service industries. The investigation revealed that powerful Malaysian businesses with political protection in the Barisan Nasional coalition of former Prime Minister Najib Razak worked with influential politicians, bureaucrats and middlemen in Kathmandu to cheat Nepali workers.

The Malaysian government, private companies and their Nepali affiliates took more than Rs5 billion (US\$450 million) from over 600,000 Nepali workers between September 2013 and April 2018, the

Kuala Lumpur last week that the door has opened for Nepali workers to resume working in Malaysia.

The major sticking point was Nepal's demand to increase the 37 institutions the Malaysians had recognised to do medical tests for workers to 122. The Malaysians will send a team to audit the additional facilities in November. During the negotiations, it was also agreed that Nepali security guards would get the same deal as other workers — a point that had stalled previous talks.

"Our overall migration governance effort is to reduce the unnecessary burden on workers while providing a level playing field for all private stakeholders," said Joint Secretary Ram Prasad Ghimire of the Ministry of Labour,



Employment and Social Security. "We wanted to decentralise medical tests to make it more convenient for our workers."

Ghimire, who led the second joint working group meeting in Kuala Lumpur last week, said the flow of Nepali workers to Malaysia could now resume.

The Nepali team persuaded the Malaysian side that it was unfair that workers had to spend up to eight months of their two-year contracts just to pay off fees and ticket cost to get to Malaysia. Malaysian employers will now have to pay Nepali recruiters the equivalent of a half-month's salary per worker as a finder's fee.

The Malaysia-Nepal agreement has set a precedent for migration-

**CHEAPER MIGRATION:** Nepali workers at a styrofoam factory on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. There are 400,000 Nepali workers in Malaysia.

New workers will benefit from the agreement signed last week in Kuala Lumpur between Betty Hasan, Undersecretary at the Malaysian Ministry of Human Resources, and Ram Prasad Ghimire, Joint Secretary at the Ministry of Labour and Social Security of Nepal (*left*).

related reforms in Nepal and the region, and laid the basis for agreements that Nepal signed recently with the UAE and Mauritius.

Indeed, a writ petition to the Bangladesh Supreme Court against a cartel of 10 recruitment companies sending workers to Malaysia cites last year's *Nepali Times* investigation by Ramu Sapkota and Alyaa Alhadjri.

Malaysian and Nepali officials and companies were found to be overcharging workers, and the writ recognises the Nepal government's efforts to break such syndicates. In its recent verdict, the court instructed the Bangladesh Government to create an inter-ministerial committee to investigate why only those 10 firms were allowed to send workers to Malaysia.

## "We want Nepali workers to spend less on fees, earn more, and be treated well"

Minister for Labour, Employment and Social Security Gokarna Bista spoke to *Nepali Times* about the renegotiated labour agreement with Malaysia and his other efforts to ensure the welfare of Nepali migrant workers. Excerpts:



**Nepali Times:** How important was last week's agreement with Malaysia?

**Gokarna Bista:** Nepali workers were being cheated by middlemen. Not only was that unjust, but it made the poor poorer and the rich richer. Both Malaysia and Nepal had seen a change of government, and after I became minister we started negotiations with my Malaysian counterpart, Minister of Human Resources M Kulasegeran, who was aware of labour rights and the need to safeguard them. We shared a good rapport, and both of us wanted a mutually beneficial arrangement for Nepali workers in Malaysia.

**So why did it take so long?**

Our MoU was a broad agreement, but the joint working group had to sort out technical details. It was not easy to break the syndicates running medical tests, and we recommended that 122 new test centres be approved all over the country for transparency and to decentralise testing. We also

mutually agreed to include the security guard category in the agreement, which was originally not in the scope of the MOU. They are now sending a team to audit these new centres outside Kathmandu to ensure that they meet their parameters.

**How difficult was it to face political pressure in Nepal against the deal?**

We had to work hard to iron out the details. There was a lot of money going to the pockets of middlemen in both countries for levies, visa fees and medical tests. Both sides agreed that it was unfair for the workers to bear these costs. From now on, the workers do not have to pay for their roundtrip tickets and visa fees. They will get their salaries by the seventh of every month, they will be paid overtime, have social security benefits, get tickets to go home every two years, receive paid leave for 15 days if either parent dies, work-related accidents will be compensated, and if workers

die, employers will bear the cost of the repatriation of their bodies. We have made sure that Nepali recruiters are paid a small fee by the employers of up to half a month's salary.

There are very few countries with such ironclad safeguards for workers, and this sets a precedent for other labour-exporting countries. The Nepal-Malaysia agreement could be a model for migrant worker agreements in other countries as well.

**But can this agreement be replicated?**

We have a similar agreement now with the UAE and Mauritius, and are about to sign a labour pact with Oman that will also ensure worker rights. We are in negotiations with Qatar. We are also talking with higher quality labour markets, like Germany and Portugal, for Nepali workers.

We have signed a deal with Japan for workers in 14 job categories, and the first caregivers will be going this year. Japan had opened up worker quotas for only seven countries, but after much lobbying they added Nepal, the only South Asian country.

**How about female domestic workers who cannot come home because of the ban?**

I spoke to the parliamentary committee, and we agreed that it was inhumane and unjust to stop the workers from coming home on holidays to be with their families because they were afraid they could not go back to their jobs. It is true that domestic work is risky for Nepali women but I argued that current domestic workers would not go back anyway if their jobs were not satisfactory. But we have to ensure more protection before we allow new female domestic workers to go.

**What other reforms are you working on?**

We will now allow all seven provincial capitals to issue labour permits so migrant workers do not have to travel to Kathmandu to get travel documents. Nepali missions abroad will also be allowed to renew the permits. Ultimately, all documentation will be online. Once Bhairawa and Pokhara airports are built, many workers will not have to come to Kathmandu at all.

Ultimately our goal is secure, safe and exploitation-free quality jobs overseas for our citizens. We are not going to be driven by how many go abroad to work, but how much they earn and how well they are treated. We want to equip them with skills so they do not have to do the dirty, difficult and dangerous jobs. We also want Nepalis to come back with knowhow so there is technology transfer.

# rules for migrant labour



KUNDA DIXIT

Minister Bista told *Nepali Times*: "There are very few countries with such ironclad safeguards for workers, and this Nepal-Malaysia agreement could be a model for migrant worker agreements in other countries as well." (*See full interview below*).

However, experts say that the real challenge now is to implement the agreement in letter and spirit so that Nepali workers going to Malaysia are not cheated again.

Legacy policies, past practices, deep-rooted vested interests and political pressure from recruiters and private companies involved in the visa and biometrics racket could still render this well-intentioned policy ineffective.

Recruiters who have been

unable to overcharge workers going to Malaysia for a year could be waiting to resume cheating to recoup their losses. Nepali workers could also lose out if Malaysian employers do not have to bear the cost of workers from labour-supplying countries like Indonesia or Bangladesh, and may be forced to pay fees in order to keep their jobs.

A concerted effort with strong monitoring from both governments will be necessary to implement the MoU, acknowledged Minister Bista, adding: "Ultimately our goal is secure, safe and exploitation-free quality jobs overseas for our citizens. We are not going to be driven by how many go abroad to work, but how much they earn and how well they are treated."

## Nepal allows female domestics to come home for Dasain

Ambika is a Nepali domestic in Beirut who has not been able to return to Nepal to see her three children for four years. The reason: a Parliamentary committee's ban on Nepalis working as domestics in West Asia because abuse by employers.

The ban left thousands of women like Ambika stranded overseas because they feared they would not be allowed to return to their jobs if they went back to Nepal for holidays. Some who had to return for family emergencies had no option but to pay middlemen up to Rs200,000 to smuggle them back to Lebanon through India.

This week, the Nepal Government decided to allow stranded women to come home for the upcoming Dasain festival to see their families, after which they can return to their employers in West Asia. Current domestic workers in that region can also renew their approval to legally return to the same employers.

There are 15,000 Nepali maids in Lebanon, 5,000 in Jordan and thousands more in other Gulf countries. Many continue to bypass the ban, travelling overland to India and flying from there.

Ambika said on the phone she was thrilled that she could come home, but there have been so many false alarms that she is still cautious.

"We are waiting for some Nepalis we know to go and return. I may not make it to Nepal in time for Dasain," she said. Stories of Nepali domestic workers who have started receiving labour renewals are floating around on social media, but that is not enough to assuage Ambika's fears.

Other women in Lebanon are also taking a wait-and-see approach, letting bolder women take the lead and return safely before they decide to go.

"I have not yet told my children I am returning home soon. I do not want to raise their expectations too high," says Ambika. "Last Dasain also there were rumours of the ban being lifted, and they were so excited. I do not want to disappoint them."

She is one of the many domestic workers who had been torn between holding on to their jobs or holding their children again. Many Nepali domestic workers send money home so their children can afford a good education.

The impact of the ban is especially felt during festivals or personal emergencies, when domestic workers are torn between saving a job and meeting their loved ones, often for the last time.

"This is too good to be true," exclaimed Dhana, another domestic worker in Lebanon, who could not return to Nepal for her father's funeral.

The domestic work sector has been contentious for migrant workers from Nepal, and a series of partial and blanket bans have been implemented.

This has had unintended consequences for



**LONG WAY FROM HOME:** Nepali domestic workers like this one on the balcony of her employer in Beirut will now be able to go home without the fear of being prevented from returning to their jobs.

current domestic workers who have had favourable migration experiences. The stories of stranded migrants spurred the Ministry of Labour, and Social Security to request the parliamentary committee to reconsider the ban. (*See interview*)

"I have been home only once in nine years," says Sundari, another domestic worker in Lebanon. "The last time I was making plans to return home for a two-month vacation when we heard about the ban. I was crushed because I had already started dreaming of being with my family."

Sundari hopes it will not happen again, and that this winter she can really go home. She is grateful to the government and everyone who lobbied to have the ban lifted. She laughs on the phone: "Better late than never."

It is uncertain when and if the larger ban on new domestic workers going to West Asian countries will also be lifted. But for now, this Dasain will finally see thousands of reunions in families across Nepal. ☺



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# Miss Guided

As surely as night follows day (or is it the other way around?) it is now that time of year again when we celebrate the season of beauty contests. From now till Dasain just about every venue in the city is booked for knockout tournaments in various categories to select young men, women, or both, who are most qualified to be Mister Donut, Messrs Schmidt, Miss Nepal, Miss Taken or Miss Guided.

One gala pageant last week saw the crowning of Miss Teen Kunay in all her resplendent glory. And just so the other contestants would not be disheartened, there were also awards for Miss Photogenic, Best Hair and Thickest Dandruff categories.

As expected, competition was keen, as indicated by the riot that broke out over the counting process for online votes. Awards were then also given to Mr & Ms Tod Fod, Mister Hat Pat, and Miss Hina Mina. In order to introduce gender parity to these pageants, various organisers this year have also encouraged members of the unfair sex to participate in the mayhem.

We are now in possession of the calendar of events for the rest of the season, and it looks like a busy next few months of pageant-hopping for us hacks in the beauty beat.

**Master and Miss Infant Nepal 2019**  
**Motto:** "Catch 'em Young!"

**Date:** September 23-27  
**Venue:** Prasuti Griha Maternity Hospital Main Auditorium, Thapathali

**Criteria:** Only babies who have their umbilical cords already cut are eligible. Newborns will be required to take part in the elimination rounds which include the Koochi-

koochi-koo Round, Crawling-Around Round, Disposable Diaper Round, Breast-feeding Round, Burping Round and the Wee-wee and Poo-poo Rounds. Judges will evaluate participants on the basis of noise, poise, odour, motor functions and response to questions in the Interview Round. Sample question: "What kind of world are you being brought into by your parents?"

**Mister Unfair and Ugly Nepal Street Pageant, 2076 BS**

**Slogan:** "We Do Not Believe in Fair Competition"

**Date and Time:** Daily 10am-5pm  
**Venue:** Maitighar Mandala Prohibited Zone

**Categories:** Mr Brickbat, Mr Young Turk, Cutest Arsonist in the Tyre-Burning Round, Mr Water Cannon, Most Authentic Weeping in the Tear Gas Round.

**Politically-Incorrect Pageant 2019**

**Credo:** "Mother and Motherland Are Dearer Than Heaven"

**Venue:** Behind-the-Scenes

**Procedure:** Winners will not be selected on merit basis but nominated by a clique of shadowy political appointees.

**Categories:** Miss Melanin-Challenged, Miss Impunity, Miss Latent Talent, Mr & Mrs Kleptocrat, The Right Honourable Mr Ex-Convict, Messrs Wilful Defaulters, Miss Highland and Mr Cutest Ass.

**Activities:** Participants will be eliminated in the Muscial Chairs Round during which winners will be allowed to sit for a brief period on chairs before they are unceremoniously unseated.



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BG Mall, Gongabu, Tel: 9814145265  
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