



FESTIVAL GREETINGS

The Kathmandu Post wishes all its readers, advertisers and well-wishers a Happy Dashain.

Since our offices will remain closed from October 23 to October 27, the next edition of the Post will be published on Thursday, October 29.



Children stand near a newly installed rote ping in Buipa of Diktal Rupakot Majhuwagadhi Municipality in Khotang. This year the Covid-19 pandemic has robbed people of the excitement in celebrating Dashain, the country's biggest festival.

RSS

India intelligence chief's sudden dash for Kathmandu raises many an eyebrow

Oli's meeting with him could be aimed at mending strained ties between Nepal and India, say observers, while party leaders disapprove saying it goes against diplomatic norms.



KP Sharma Oli

ANIL GIRI
KATHMANDU, OCT 22

Last week, when Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli effected a minor Cabinet rejig, one event that starkly stood out was his decision to remove Ishwar Pokhrel as the defence minister.

Oli took the defence portfolio with himself, leaving Pokhrel as deputy prime minister to "take care of" the Prime Minister's Office.

Conjectures were that the Nepal Army chief was not happy with Pokhrel for some of his statements regarding the national defence force. Pokhrel was vocally critical of the Indian Army chief over the latter's one statement in which he had said Nepal was taking umbrage at India at the behest of China.

Oli's move of appointing some ministers had also sowed the seeds of discord in the ruling Nepal Communist



Samant Kumar Goel

Party (NCP), with Pushpa Kamal Dahal, the other chair, expressing dissatisfaction at the prime minister's "unilateral move".

The conflict in the ruling party further deepened after about a dozen and a half members of the provincial assembly in Karnali filed a no-confidence motion against Chief Minister Mahendra Bahadur Shahi. Of those who tried to remove Shahi, 15 are from the former CPN-UML, and of them at least eight represent the Oli faction.

Amid all these goings-on, India's intelligence chief made a dash for Kathmandu, creating ripples among Nepali analysts, academia and intelligentsia.

Samant Kumar Goel, chief of India's Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW), during his less than 24-hour stay in Kathmandu, met with Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli.

Confirming the meeting, Surya Thapa, Oli's press adviser, said that Goel "paid a courtesy call on the prime minister on Wednesday evening".

Thapa refused to provide the details. But there was no official representation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the meeting between Oli and Goel, said a Foreign Ministry official.

A senior security official said Oli was alone while two officials accompanied Goel.

According to sources, the Oli-

Goel meeting took place right after a meeting of the National Security Council, which ended at around 9:30pm.

Former prime ministers Dahal and Madhav Kumar Nepal on Thursday morning refuted reports suggesting their meetings with Goel.

Since there has been no official word-neither from New Delhi nor from Kathmandu, the motive behind the sudden visit of the chief of Indian intelligence agency remains a mystery.

Analysts and some ruling party leaders, however, say Goel's brief visit to Kathmandu was part of a move choreographed by both the countries.

"As we know there are some misunderstandings between Nepal and India, Goel's visit may be aimed at breaking the stalemate and bringing the bilateral ties back on track," Bijaya Kant Lal Karna, a former ambassador, told the Post. "I think both sides want to engage at the top level and Goel's visit could be the starting point."

This, however, is not the first visit by Goel to Kathmandu during Oli's tenure as the prime minister. Goel had landed in Kathmandu last year in July as well, at the invitation of the chief of the National Intelligence Department, the R&AW's counterpart in Nepal.

Goel had met with Oli then too. But many wonder why New Delhi would send an intelligence chief to Kathmandu to resume bilateral dialogue.

Former deputy prime minister and minister for defence and home Bhim Rawal questioned the timing of the visit and the way Goel met with the prime minister.

Nepal's Foreign Ministry expressed its ignorance about Goel's visit to Kathmandu, even though a request to allow the Indian Air Force plane, on which the Indian official arrived in Kathmandu, was made through the ministry. Flights between Nepal and India currently remain suspended due to the pandemic. The Oli administration is yet to respond to India's request to resume flights.

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Nepalis prepare for a subdued Dashain

When it comes to festivals, Dashain is as pandemic unfriendly as it can get. And many people do not want—and cannot afford—to take chances of contracting Covid-19.

TSERING NGODUP LAMA
KATHMANDU

For the past six years, Awas Thapa always left Kathmandu on the eve of Fulpati for his village in Kaski district. He would catch the 8 pm bus that leaves Gongabu Bus Park and by 7 the next morning, he would reach his village.

“Like every household in the country, Dashain in our family has always meant a time when the entire family gets together, wears new clothes, eats good food, visits temples and seeks blessings from elders,” said Thapa, who moved to Kathmandu six years ago to work as a cook at a restaurant.

But for the first time in six years, Thapa says he won’t be going to his village to celebrate Dashain.

“Since Covid-19 is spreading so rapidly in the country, I don’t think it’s safe to travel to my village for Dashain,” said Magar. “Just thinking I might contract Covid-19 on my way to the village and infect my family and villagers gives me the chills. It’s a risk that I am not willing to take.”

Nepal recorded its first case of Covid-19 back in January, and on March 24, when the government declared nation-wide lockdown, the total number of cases in the country was only two. Fast forward to October 20, the total number of cases has reached 139,129 and 765 deaths. The rising number of cases means that for many Nepalis this Dashain will be unlike any they have ever celebrated.

“Back in March when the government imposed the nation-wide lockdown, I don’t think anyone thought that we wouldn’t be able to celebrate Dashain. I thought that the virus would get under control in a month” said Thapa.

“But by July, as the number of new cases continued to climb, it was pretty evident that Dashain celebration would have to take a backseat.”

At a time when social distancing has become the new norm, celebrating a festival like



POST FILE PHOTO

For most Nepali families, Dashain reserves grand celebrations and get-togethers. But this year, things are different. Apart from the fear of contracting the virus, another reason people are downplaying the festival is because of the financial stress.

Dashain, which is all about gathering with family and friends, poses a lot of risks, says Sudip Umesh Bajagain, a resident of Inaruwa, Sunsari.

“The pandemic is anything but festival-friendly. Actually, it is diametrically opposing. Dashain is all about friends and relatives, but this year we have no choice but to celebrate without them,” said Bajagain.

“If we do not abide by safety protocols and celebrate Dashain the way we are used to, we might have to pay a huge price. I am not keen to see post-Dashain devasta-

“If we do not abide by safety protocols and celebrate the way we are used to, we may pay a huge price.”

tion at the cost of a few exhilarating days.”

Bajagain says that he and his family won’t be visiting anybody this Dashain and won’t be welcoming anybody into their home either. Apart from the fear of contracting and spreading the virus,

month’s salary and advised him to return to his village.

“Since I lived at the restaurant and my owner wasn’t sure when the lockdown would be lifted, he had suggested that I leave for my village and assured me that he would call me when things return to normalcy,” said Thapa.

“I stayed in my village for five months, with no work and income. It was only in August that my employer called me and asked if I would want to resume work.”

Resuming work has brought some financial relief for Thapa, who is the sole breadwinner in his

Hungarian restaurant reinvents the wheel for social distancing

Michelin-starred restaurant Costes has staged a skyline dining event on Budapest Eye ferris wheel to generate sales in a coronavirus-proof environment.

BUDAPEST

Hit by a plunge in turnover after foreign tourists vanished, Michelin-starred Hungarian restaurant Costes has staged a skyline dining event on the Budapest Eye ferris wheel to generate sales in a coronavirus-proof environment.

Costes owner Karoly Gerendai said that turnover at one of his reopened restaurants is down to about a tenth of pre-lockdown levels, forcing him to look for new ways to do business.

“Now that there are not many people either on the wheel or in the restaurant because there are no tourists, the opportunity arose that we could do this,” he said of the event at the landmark attraction in central Budapest.

Tickets for the novel Costes dining experience cost up to 48,000 forints (\$154.40) each for a four-course meal.

“It is now especially important for people to be able to be separate from other guests to be safe, and the ferris wheel is ideal with its separate cabins.”

Tickets for the novel Costes dining experience cost up to 48,000 forints

(\$154.40) each for a four-course meal and sold out within days, Gerendai said, as affluent local clients sought a rare escape from the constraints of coronavirus restrictions. Gerendai is planning to repeat the event when warmer weather arrives in the spring, though the cooler October night was no deterrent for customers on Saturday.

“We wanted to get out a bit and enjoy eating out again because we have been living quite closed in,” said Szabolcs Balazs, who took the meal with his wife and two children.

“We used to go to restaurants quite often; we have been to two Michelin-starred ones, but because of Covid we stopped going. So this is the only chance for us now because here we are really separated.”

— Reuters



REUTERS

Owner Karoly Gerendai said that turnover at one of his reopened restaurants is down to about a tenth of pre-lockdown levels, forcing him to look for new ways to do business.

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