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POST PHOTO: KABIN ADHIKARI

Workers clean the exterior of a building at Gongabu in Kathmandu on Friday.

Six years after Tikapur incident, Tharus still wait for justice

Those who were tortured and sent to jails but acquitted say the state has failed them and their entire community, with no political party willing to take up their cause.

BINOD GHIMIRE
KATHMANDU, AUG 27

On August 25, 2015, Prem Chaudhary was at his medical store, like any other day. At around 11 in the morning, a group of police officers arrived and asked him to visit the local police station at Bhajani Municipality in Kailali district "for some inquiries". He was kept at the station for a couple of hours without being told the reason. Then he was moved to another police station in Sukkhad.

Then suddenly, police started beating him up, asking him to confess that he was one of the persons behind the protests the previous day, in which nine people, including a senior police officer and a toddler, had died.

Only then did Prem, 45, realise why he was arrested.

It was in the lead-up to the constitution promulgation. Protests had intensified across the Tarai plains. Tikapur, an area where Tharus have lived for centuries, too was simmering.

People from different indigenous communities, including Tharus, were pressuring political parties to include their agendas in the constitution.

Tharus from western Nepal were demanding a Tharuhat province. But there was huge resistance from the Pahadis, the people from the hills. They were demanding Akhanda Sudurpaschim or an undivided Far West.

Some prominent leaders like Sher Bahadur Deuba of the Nepali Congress, the incumbent prime minister, Bhim Rawal from the CPN-UML and Lekhraj Bhatta from the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) had either tacit or open sup-



POST PHOTOS

Prem Chaudhary (left) and Bishram Kushmi were tortured to confess crimes they didn't commit.

port to the Akhanda Sudurpaschim idea, as all came from the region.

Tharus worried about losing their say unless they were given a separate Tharuhat province. Tharus, however, lacked the heft in comparison to those championing the Akhanda Sudurpaschim cause. Nor did Tharus have a strong representative in Kathmandu to speak and fight on their behalf.

Tensions were building up. On August 24, 2015, the protest turned violent, and nine people—eight police officers and a toddler—were killed in ensuing clashes.

From the very next day, police launched an indiscriminate crackdown, arresting whoever they wanted. Prem was one of them.

After failing to extract a confession from him, he was taken to the District

Police Office, Dhangadhi at midnight.

"Until we reached the District Police Office, I was taken to every police station on the way, and I would be beaten with batons, kicked and punched," Prem recalled.

"Police would ask me to admit that I was one of the organisers of the protest. They wanted me to name others. Every time I said I did not know, the response would be thrashing."

By the time he was taken to Dhangadhi, he had almost lost consciousness, he said.

"I was forced to sign a statement the police had prepared, even without getting a chance to read it," he told the Post over the phone from Bhajani, Kailali.

The police torture continued for weeks.

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New urgency to airlift from Kabul after blasts kill dozens

Biden cites threat of more terror attacks as a reason to keep to his exit plan.

ASSOCIATED PRESS
KABUL, AUG 27

Evacuation flights from Afghanistan resumed with new urgency on Friday, a day after two suicide bombings targeted the thousands of people desperately fleeing a Taliban takeover and killed dozens. The US warned more attacks could come ahead of next week's end to America's longest war.

Two officials said 169 Afghans died, but a final count might take time amid confusion, with many bodies dismembered or not yet identified. Scores more were wounded in the blasts. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the media. The US said 13 troops were killed in the deadliest day for American forces in Afghanistan since August 2011.

As Afghan officials struggled to deal with the dead, at least 10 bodies lay on the grounds outside Wazir Akbar Khan Hospital, where relatives said the mortuary could take no more.

As the call to prayer echoed on Friday through Kabul along with the roar of departing planes, the anxious crowds outside the city's airport appeared as large as ever despite the risks. They are acutely aware that the window is closing to board a flight before the airlift ends and Western troops withdraw.

In an emotional speech on Thursday night, President Joe Biden blamed the Islamic State group's Afghanistan affiliate, which is far more radical than the Taliban fighters who seized power less than two weeks ago in a lightning blitz across the country.

"We will rescue the Americans; we will get our Afghan allies out, and our mission will go on," Biden said.

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With new dispensation in Kathmandu, talks resume on projects under BRI

Officials say Nepal and China are drafting implementation plan, as Deuba government aims to push projects under Beijing initiative to facilitate passage of America's MCC.



POST ILLUSTRATION: KRISHNA GOPAL

ANIL GIRI
KATHMANDU, AUG 27

Nepal and China are working on a draft implementation plan for the projects to be executed under the Belt and Road Initiative, four years after signing the framework agreement on Chinese President Xi Jinping's flagship programme that seeks to connect Asia with Africa and Europe via land and maritime networks.

Not a single project has taken off under the BRI, to which Nepal signed up in May 2017.

Now with both sides exchanging the draft implementation plan, negotiations on projects and their execution under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are expected to take off, according to multiple government officials.

A draft of the implementation plan is the prerequisite for project selection, funding modality, budget, supervision and monitoring and human resource management.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is taking the lead in developing the plan while other agencies like the Office of the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Finance are providing inputs, according to at least three officials working on the draft.

"The Chinese had sought the implementation plan so as to have a proper idea on how Nepal can execute the projects under the BRI," Kali Prasad Pokhrel, who served for more than three years as the head of the North East Asia Division at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, told the Post. "But we had yet to respond to the Chinese request."

Pokhrel retired from service in February this year.

"Not only from Nepal, the Chinese had asked for similar implementation drafts from other countries that have signed up to the BRI as well," said Pokhrel. "I am not aware of the current status though."

So far, close to 140 countries have signed up to the BRI.

When Nepal signed the BRI agreement in 2017, it was touted as a watershed moment in Nepal-China ties. But with not a single project taking off under the Chinese programme, there were concerns if there was reluctance from Nepal itself due to some geopolitical reasons.

India, Nepal's southern neighbour, and the United States see the BRI as China's bid to exert influence in the region, using its economic heft. Countries like Sri Lanka and Pakistan in South Asia too are part of the BRI.

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Gosainkunda, which sits at 4,380metres above sea level, is a popular trekking destination in Nepal.



Devotees ascend the steep trail of Chandanbari, a small settlement upwards from Dhunche.



Every year, thousands of devotees make their way to Gosainkunda to mark Janai Purnima. Some pilgrims also rent horses to commute on the foot trail.



A pilgrim searches for a mobile network on his way to Gosainkunda.



Devotees take a dip in the cold water of Gosainkunda. It is believed that the cold water of Gosainkunda washes away one's sins.

Between the world and the still glacial lake

Each year on Janai Purnima, thousands of pilgrims head to the abode of the gods—Gosainkunda, the holy lake. The pandemic didn't deter the devotees.

TEXT & PHOTOS : PRAKASH CHANDRA TIMILSENA

When my friend asked me if I wanted to visit Gosainkunda with her family last Thursday, I jumped on the idea. My logic was that amid the Covid-19 pandemic, fewer travellers would head to the holy lake for Janai Purnima, which would mean a quiet time in the serene landscape. It was a brilliant plan. Only I didn't realise that there would be thousands who would be thinking the same.

At Dhunche close to midnight, I was still looking for a room to accommodate our group of five. Unfortunately, the locals informed us that there were no rooms available. When we finally managed a room, we knew the journey ahead would not be easy, and it would be a race to book hotel services along the way. Many people had turned up to make a pilgrimage to the holy lake at an elevation of 4,380 metres, two days away.

On the trail, however, these things didn't matter. In the monsoon drizzle, we strolled, enjoying the natural sounds of the woods we passed through. The sweet smell of the damp earth beneath me invigorated my senses. The green view of the season filled me with wonder. Everything on the trail was exciting. And even something as simple as potato and yak cheese tasted divine.

But at Buddha Mandir above Laurebina, we had trouble finding a room again. Like hundreds of pilgrims, we had no option but to take shelter under the open sky

with just the tarpaulin and thin mats as our makeshift accommodation. It was cold and uncomfortable as we shifted sides. No one was sleeping. You could hear people rambling with each other.

I stared at the plastic ceiling, thinking if I should cover my face with my mask. But because the air was thinning with the altitude, I tried to distract myself from the idea. Perhaps, near the gods, the virus would weaken and be at bay. I choked on my logic.

When the morning arrived, I shoved off my reasoning and walked towards the glacial lake with my group, and upon reaching Gosainkunda, nothing else mattered. I was at peace with myself. The lake was stunning and surreal, as I had heard.

The soreness of the night disappeared after I took three daring dips in the icy water. Some pilgrims meditated before the lake, others changed their *janais* after taking a bath in the *kunda*. And I shivered in my euphoria and longed to stay back as some pilgrims packed their bags hurriedly to leave.

In that moment of clarity, I realised how the pandemic had burdened my shoulders too, like many people in the country. And in letting go of the anxiousness of the times, I could live a little more calmly. There on the edge of the lake, I took deep breaths and contemplated the profound landscape before me. As people performed their prayers and rituals, I heaved a sigh of relief from between the world and the still glacial lake.



Devotees walk through the misty environs of Chandanbari.



A devotee wears a plastic cape to protect himself from the rain while enjoying the view at Lauribina, Rasuwa.



Devotees pray in the morning at Gosainkunda, which is considered the abode of gods.



A group of shamans lead the kora procession around the sacred lake. Gosainkunda draws both Hindu and Buddhist devotees.

