



THE KATHMANDU POST

WITHOUT FEAR OR FAVOUR

Nepal's largest selling English daily

Printed simultaneously in Kathmandu, Biratnagar, Bharatpur and Nepalgunj

Vol XXX No. 317 | 8 pages | Rs.5
Sunday, January 08, 2023 | 24-09-2079

25.5°C -5.8°C
Gharahi Jumla

TODAY

SUNDAY EXPLAINER

Nagarik Unmukti Party was registered on January 3 last year. Resham Chaudhary is behind the bars as the convict of masterminding the Tikapur incident of August 2015 in which eight police and a toddler were killed. **Pg 3**

OPINION



Measures of accuracy, fairness, impartiality, respect for people's privacy, public interest and community wellbeing are matters of the mind or imbued human values rather than of materiality like technology or content, writes Dharma Adhikari. Pg 4

MONEY

The demand for Nepali products has started to pick up in China as Beijing has reopened two-way trade via the Rasuwagadhi-Kerung port, which was shut since the start of the Covid pandemic. **Pg 5**

SPORTS

A goal from forward Sunil Bal gave Martyrs Memorial 'A' Division outfit Sankata Club 3-2 extra time win over the visiting Bhutanese Youth SC in the final of the Aaha-Rara Pokhara Gold Cup football on Saturday. **Pg 7**



A plane flying past Mount Dorje Lakpa pictured from Baneshwar on Saturday evening as the Kathmandu weather cleared amid the winter chill. POST PHOTO: KESHAV THAPA

They lost elections but still want to get into Parliament somehow

Attempts of some influential leaders to become lawmakers post-election is an insult to voters, analysts say.

NISHAN KHATIWADA
KATHMANDU, JAN 7

A few political leaders, after their electoral defeats, have been engaged in wheeling and dealing to become lawmakers again, with the ultimate goal of getting prominent posts such as that of a minister. It is a terrible practice, say observers.

Nepal's constitution mandates that ministers and prime ministers be appointed from among members elected to the federal parliament; in case of non-lawmakers, they should become lawmakers within six months of their appointment to the executive posts.

As such, many key political leaders, for long, have been engaged in closed-door dealings for by-election or any other option to get elected to Parliament—after the public threw them out of parliament through elections.

The Janata Samajbadi Party has been laying its claim to the post of Vice President in negotiations with the Maoist Centre chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal-led government. What's

interesting is the alleged ulterior motive of the Janata Samajbadi chair Upendra Yadav behind his lobbying for the major national position for his party.

Yadav clearly wants to be a lawmaker—and most probably the parliamentary party leader—through a possible by-election in Bara-2, in place of Ram Sahaya Prasad Yadav, the incumbent parliamentary party leader. If Yadav succeeds in electing Ram Sahaya the Vice President, the lawmaker seat from his constituency will be vacant. Upendra Yadav will then contest the vacant seat.

Article 62 (6) of Nepal's constitution states: "In case a person who holds a political office to be fulfilled by way of election, nomination or appointment is elected the President under this Article, such office shall, ipso facto, fall vacant."

Similarly, Article 67 (3) states that in case a person who holds a political office to be fulfilled by way of election, nomination or appointment is elected as Vice President, such office shall, ipso facto, fall vacant.

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Oli makes jibes at Congress, decries foreign intervention

UML chairman says the largest party was manoeuvring to beat Prime Minister Dahal in the Tuesday confidence vote.

ANIL GIRI
KATHMANDU, JAN 7

Former prime minister and CPN-UML Chairman KP Sharma Oli on Saturday took a jibe at the Nepali Congress while also indirectly criticising India.

Without naming India, Oli said that neighbouring countries are showing unnecessary interest in government formation in Nepal and urged them not to intervene in the country's internal affairs.

As the political parties were preparing to elect the new prime minister, according to one UML leader, India, and the United States to some extent, wanted to see the continuation of the Sher Bahadur Deuba government, which did not happen. Oli's latest comment is viewed in this connection.

In a dramatic move, after the Congress refused to let Pushpa Kamal Dahal lead the government in the first phase, the UML had abruptly come forward to support Dahal's bid. Dahal claimed that Deuba had failed to honour his word to allow the Maoist chairman to lead the government in the first half of the five-year term. With the backing of the UML and other smaller parties, Dahal became the prime

minister on December 25.

Addressing an orientation programme for newly-elected UML lawmakers on Sunday, Oli criticised the Congress leadership.

"Formation of the government was an important step towards protecting Nepali sovereignty," said Oli. "Some acts were carried out in breach of diplomatic norms during the government formation process."

UML leaders said that Oli felt it necessary to expose such manoeuvrings, as he did on Saturday.

"We formed the government by fending off external intervention. We are a sovereign nation. The Nepali people are happy to have formed their own government," said a UML leader, wanting not to be named.

This is not the first time that Oli has lashed out at India. He kicked off the campaign for November 20 elections from the far-western corner of Darchula, the site of an old boundary dispute between Nepal and India.

Back in May 2020, the Oli government issued a new map incorporating Kalapani, Limpiyadhura and Lipulekh, which India had claimed as its own in the map it made public towards the end of 2019.

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KP Sharma Oli

POST PHOTO

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Rights body recommends Yadav, others be probed for 2007 Gaur killings

As many as 27 individuals linked with the Maoists were killed and 115 others left injured.

BINOD GHIMIRE
KATHMANDU, JAN 7

The National Human Rights Commission has recommended that the government probe Janata Samajbadi Party chairperson Upendra Yadav and 129 others in connection with the 2007 Gaur massacre and take action if he is found guilty.

The constitutional rights watchdog has concluded that the killings of more than two dozen people were well orchestrated and both the then Madheshi Janadhikar Forum Nepal and CPN (Maoist) were aware of possible violence.

On March 21, 2007, as many as 27 individuals associated with the Maoists were brutally killed and another 115 injured in the incident.

As neither party took an initiative to averting the violence, the commission has also decided to draw the attention of Pushpa Kamal Dahal, then Maoist chairperson, Prabhu Sah, then general secretary of the Madheshi Mukti Morcha, Bindesh Yadav Rautahat, district chief of the then 'People's government', the administrative wing of the Maoist party, and Yadav, the then MJFN chairman.

"The parties concerned must stop the politicisation of the incident and support the Nepal Police and the district attorney in completing the probe," reads the NHRC decision.

"They should publicly commit not to repeating such heinous crimes in the future."



Upendra Yadav

POST FILE PHOTO

Commission took 15 years to decide on the report prepared in April, 2007.

dent, the commission on Tuesday also directed the government to take departmental actions against then Rautahat district police chief Yogeshwar Romkhami; then chief district officer Madhav Prasad Ojha; Superintendent of Police Ram Kumar Khanal; deputy superintendent of

Armed Police Force Dharmananda Sapkota; and sub-inspector Kamakhya Narayan Singh. If they are not in service, don't give them an opportunity in future government service, the commission further said.

The commission has also directed the government to provide compensation of Rs300,000 to the families of each deceased and free treatment for the injured. The government has been asked to report to the commission within three months whether or not its recommendations have been implemented.

The commission had started an investigation immediately after the incident and the report was submitted on April 11, 2007. However, it took the commission another 15 years to decide on the matter.

The commission was headless when the incident happened and an investigation started. Though the earlier leadership had shown an interest in the probe, its tenure expired without taking a decision on the matter.

Surya Dhungel, a member of the commission, said clearing pending cases has been one of their priorities. "The commission had completed the investigation in 2007 itself. We took the decision after revisiting the report while also studying reports from the government's probe panels and by different human rights organisations," Dhungel told the Post.

"The Gaur police are yet to start a probe in the matter. As a result, the perpetrators of the barbaric crime remain outside the purview of law."

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NATIONAL

■ DISTRICT DIGEST

Police detain man on motorcycle theft charge

PARSA: Police arrested a 20-year-old man red-handed while he was stealing a motorcycle in Birgunj-12, Parsa on Friday night. The man was nabbed while he was trying to whisk away a parked Royal Enfield bike. A police team from District Police Office detained the accused with the bike.

Embankment construction begins along Narayani river

EAST NAWALPARASI: The Narayani River Management Project has started constructing an embankment in the Gaiadkot area. According to Shekhar Nath Neupane, an engineer at the project, construction work is underway along the Narayani at wards 2, 6 and 9 of Gaiadkot Municipality. The project is estimated to cost around Rs1.74 billion.

Aquatic bird count begins

KAPILVASTU: Count of aquatic birds has commenced across the country to study about the species and total number of water birds in Nepal. The count will be conducted with coordination of Wetland International and various organisations working in bird conservation. The count started from Taudaha lake and the Bagmati river in Kathmandu on Saturday.



President Bidya Devi Bhandari on Saturday went on a ride on a Sajha bus from Sheela Niwas to visit various places in Patan. Lalitpur Metropolitan City Mayor Chiri Babu Maharjan welcomed the President to the historical city. During her tour, the President visited the Madan Puraskar Library, Pimbaha Pokhari and listened to Malla-era music.

Oli decries the Congress' 'petty games'

>> Continued from page 1

"Our friends are not coming through the front door. They are trying to come through the backdoor to change the government here, which is not possible," Oli reportedly told his party's MPs on Saturday. "It is not expected of a neighbour. We will lead our country in our own style and I urge [foreigners] not to intervene in our domestic affairs," said Oli.

Relations between Nepal and India dipped to a historic low after the map row. There were some rounds of meetings between Nepal and India at the foreign minister and foreign secretary levels but India refused to take up the matter in bilateral forums. During his India visit, then-prime minister Deuba also raised the issue with his Indian counterpart but there has been no momentum in resolving the boundary dispute, an irritant in bilateral ties for decades.

"We do not expect such activities from our neighbours and friends," said Oli. "Whatever assistance you can extend to us is welcome, but you should stop intervening in our internal affairs... Let such manoeuvrings stop and let's work and act as friends. Let's work together as per the principle of equal sovereignty."

Stressing the Nepali policy of non-interference in others' internal affairs, Oli said Kathmandu expects similar treatment from others. "I urge

the neighbours to work with our government, no matter who gets to power."

Oli's statement comes ahead of the confidence vote scheduled by Prime Minister Dahal for January 10. Some media reports suggest that the Congress is trying to make Dahal fail the floor test, by wooing some coalition partners out of his fold.

Oli also criticised the role of Congress as it takes the opposition bench. The Congress indulged in petty games to prevent Dahal from winning the confidence of the House, he said. "The Nepali Congress is offering the post of prime minister to different political parties."

There have been reports of the Congress reaching out to Rastriya Swatantra Party and Rastriya Prajatantra Party with the offer of prime minister position if they agree to uninstal the Dahal government. The RSP is in government while the RPP is preparing to join the Dahal-led Cabinet. Some RPP leaders back the claim.

To Oli's claim that "enormous effort" was being made to prevent the government from taking shape, Congress General Secretary Gagan Thapa on Saturday said his party has not offered the prime-ministership to any party and it would take up the opposition role.

"We are not in the game of govern-

ment formation," said Thapa. "Our party president is meeting some leaders as per their request but he has not offered anyone the post of prime minister."

Referring to Deuba's statement that his party would stage a comeback, Oli said the largest force in the House was trying to topple the Dahal administration on January 10.

"They are indulging in petty games. They call on the chairman of one political party and offer him the post of prime minister. But if this government is toppled, the Congress will try to lead the government as the largest party with Deuba as the prime minister," said Oli.

The Dahal government was formed as per Article 76 (2) of the constitution. If Dahal fails the floor test, a new government would be formed as per Article 76 (3), whereby the largest party in the House claims the government.

"We are sure the Nepali Congress will oppose and protest against this government for another five years," said Oli.

"The Congress will try to entrap the government. Even when the Congress had won just 23 seats [in the House directly], it had used different power centres to install its prime minister. The Nepali Congress hopes to topple this government by driving a wedge between the ruling parties."

Boy goes missing in Mahakali river after falling off a tui

Police say they are yet to receive details about the incident given the remoteness of the accident site.

MANOJ BADU
DARCHULA, JAN 7

A 10-year-old boy went missing after he fell into the Mahakali river while using an improvised cable crossing, locally known as tui, in Byas Rural Municipality-4 of Darchula district. Although the incident occurred on Thursday, it came to light only on Saturday.

The victim, Dipendra Bista of Dokat settlement, was on his way to India, according to Binod Singh Kunwar, vice-chairman of Byas Rural Municipality.

Kunwar said that the incident occurred after the boy followed his mother, who had gone to the Indian side to collect thatch. The victim is a fourth grader at Bramhasthan Basic School in Dokat.

The District Police Office in Darchula is unaware about the incident. "A police team from Sunsera Police Post has been dispatched to Dokat to inquire about the incident," said Police Inspector Jagat Gaha Magar. "We are yet to receive details about the incident as the incident site is in a remote area."

The KP Sharma Oli government in 2015 had pledged to replace all tui crossings in the country with suspension bridges but the plan has yet to materialise. Many people lose their lives while crossing the risky tui in Darchula and other districts in the country.

In July 2022, 17-year-old Sachin Budhathoki of Byas Rural Municipality plunged into the river after the tui snapped at Dumling in Byas-2. The incident took place while Budhathoki was returning home from a neighbouring Indian town. On July 30, 2021, Jaya Singh Dhimi, 33, from Khangdang Mal of Byas-2 fell into the Mahakali river after Indian security personnel allegedly untied the cable of the tui Dhimi was using to cross the river.

The local people of Byas and other remote villages of Darchula, a hill district of Sudurpashchim Province, risk their lives daily to cross the Mahakali river through cable crossings for a lack of suspension bridges in the area. Accidents and deaths while crossing the river using tuins, wooden boats, tyre tubes, and wooden logs are reported every year.

Beware of job placement frauds in South Africa, embassy says

POST REPORT
KATHMANDU, JAN 7

The Embassy of Nepal in South Africa on Thursday issued a travel advisory citing an increase in illegal activities under the guise of promising well-paying jobs in the African nation.

The Pretoria-based embassy said that cases of people being duped of millions of rupees under the assurance of a comfortable life and well-paying job in South Africa were on the rise, urging all to get visa-related information by contacting the missions of the respective countries or the Nepali missions abroad.

"The victims are made to travel through tough and dangerous routes,

via India, UAE, Tanzania, Mozambique, Kenya, Mauritius, and other nations, to reach the African nation, after which they are left stranded," reads the advisory. "Some victims are even left on their own during transit."

In the notice, the embassy has also mentioned that vacancies for 140 sectors based on skill and experience were announced in August last year, adding that South Africa takes foreign employees only when they do not have enough natives to fill the vacant positions.

"It is misleading and false that it is easy to enter countries in Europe and America among others from South Africa," the notice reads.

Gaur deaths accused to come under scrutiny

>> Continued from page 1

The commission said the incident happened as the Maoists insisted on holding their programme in the Rice Mill area of Gaur where the MJF-Nepal had already booked a spot as the venue for its mass meet.

Several human rights commissions came to similar conclusions. In its report in April 2007, the Human Rights Watch remarked that there was no doubt that most, if not all, of the kill-

ings could have been prevented.

"On 21 March the MPRF [Forum] leadership allowed hundreds of its supporters to file into Gaur, armed with prepared bhaatas, knowing that if used, they could be lethal. It also cannot be excluded that MJFN supporters were carrying firearms," the report said. At the minimum, the MJF-Nepal supporters were prepared to use lethal weapons and did so, it added.

-BY THE NUMBERS-

Rs800 million

Minimum paid-up capital required of payment system operators by the Nepal Rastra Bank in a new licensing policy for companies involved in payments.

SOURCE: NEPAL RASTRA BANK

5.48 tonnes

Paddy production in the fiscal year 2022-23 as yield rose by 6.94 percent year-on-year.

SOURCE: MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE AND LIVESTOCK DEVELOPMENT

Rs2 billion

Import of Basmati rice during the first five months of the fiscal year 2022-23.

SOURCE: MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE AND LIVESTOCK DEVELOPMENT

614,148

The number of foreign tourists visiting Nepal in 2022.

SOURCE: NEPAL TOURISM BOARD

209,105

Tourist arrivals from India in 2022.

SOURCE: NEPAL TOURISM BOARD

15

The number of mountaineers receiving winter expedition permits for five mountains as of January 5.

SOURCE: DEPARTMENT OF TOURISM

486,000

Total doses of Pfizer Covid-19 vaccine meant for children which are expiring in January-end.

SOURCE: MINISTRY OF HEALTH AND POPULATION

Government of Nepal
Ministry of Water Supply
DEPARTMENT OF WATER SUPPLY & SEWERAGE MANAGEMENT
Prevention and Control of COVID-19 Through WASH and Health Initiatives in Secondary and Small Town (PCCWHISST) Project
PROJECT MANAGEMENT OFFICE, Panipokhari, Kathmandu

Invitation for Bids

Date:	8 January 2023
Grant No. and Title:	Grant 9219-NEP: Prevention and Control of COVID-19 through WASH and Health Initiatives in Secondary and Small Towns (PCCWHISST) Project.
Contract No. and Title:	PCCWHISST/OCB/W01-III/Charali,Lalbandi,Barakhshetra, Birgunj, Bharatpur, Nepalgunj and Dhangadhi Multipurpose Shelter Project.
Deadline for Submission of Bids:	7 February 2023, 12:00 Noon, Nepal Standard Time (NST)

- Nepal has received a Grant from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to be funded by the Japan Fund for Prosperous and Resilient Asia and the Pacific (JFPR) towards the cost of Prevention and control of COVID-19. Part of this financing will be used for payments under the contracts named above.
- The Project Management Office, Prevention and control of COVID-19 through WASH and Health Initiative in Secondary and Small towns Project, DWSSM, MOWS ("the Employer") invites electronic bids from eligible bidders, for Construction of Multipurpose Shelter conforming to the required specification in bidding document.
- Only eligible bidders with the following key qualifications-should participate in this bidding: Minimum average annual turnover of NPR.169.00 million calculated as total payments received by the Bidder for contracts completed or under execution over the last 5 (five) years. Value of work completed within the last 7 (seven) years and that is similar to the proposed works, where the value of the Bidder's participation exceeds NPR 109.90 million.
- Pay a nonrefundable fee of NRs 10,000 (in words: Nepalese Rupees Ten Thousand Only) by depositing the amount in the bank account as stated below:
Name of Bank: Rastriya Banijya Bank, Kathmandu
Bank Account No.: 1000100200010000
Office Code: 313013505
Name of Office: Project Management Office
Revenue Heading No.: 14229
- To obtain further information and inspect the bidding documents, Bidders may visit PPMO e-GP system www.bolpatra.gov.np/egp or should contact :

The Project Director
Project Management Office, Panipokhari, Kathmandu.
Ph: 0977- 1 - 4006647, 0977- 1 - 4423186
Fax: 0977-1-4413280
Website: www.uwssp.gov.np
Email: info@uwssp.gov.np

Some leaders who lost polls want to be MPs

>> Continued from page 1

Shankar Pokharel, general secretary of CPN-UML, has also been manoeuvring behind the scenes to secure a lawmaker position after he lost in the November polls. As a common candidate of the Congress-led alliance, Rekha Sharma of Maoist Centre defeated Pokharel. Recently, Sharma was offered the post of Vice President in a bid to bring Pokharel to Parliament from the constituency. But she turned down the offer.

"Both KP Oli and Pushpa Kamal Dahal offered Sharma the vice-presidential job. But she rejected the offer," a Maoist Centre politburo member said on the condition of anonymity. "Sharma did the right thing. She has defeated a political heavyweight, which is a great accomplishment."

Rajesh Gautam, a political analyst, said the leaders who lost election have already been rejected, and if they succeed in becoming lawmakers, it will be an insult to voters.

"It is wrong to try to bring in leaders who lost elections to Parliament. This naked pursuit of power contravenes the values of electoral politics," he said. "Such leaders have been creating unnecessary disputes in the party and in broader politics just to get power, even after losing the polls."

Historically, many key leaders have engaged in such closed-door dealings to become lawmakers, or to get elected to powerful positions.

Speaking at a function on Friday, Bamdev Gautam, a National Assembly member, said the provision that only lawmakers can get ministerial berths should be taken down. "Our governance system is wrong. Until the system to pick ministers only from

Parliament ends, corruption will worsen," he said. "So there should be a directly-elected executive and the system of appointing ministers from Parliament should end."

Chandra Dev Bhatta, another political analyst, said that while becoming parliamentarians through the back door might bring short-term benefits, it will harm such candidates in the long run as their public image takes a hit. "Nor will it do any good to their mother parties," he added.

Historically, many key leaders have engaged in closed door dealings to become lawmakers.

National Assembly member Gautam has in the past been known for his power-at-any-cost mindset.

After Nepali Congress leader Sanjaya Gautam beat him in the 2017 parliamentary elections from Bardiya, his dream to become a minister and probably the prime minister was shattered. But he would not remain outside Parliament.

Article 86 (2 b) of the constitution, which discusses the composition of the National Assembly, says that three of its members, including a woman, will be nominated by the President at the recommendation of the Government of Nepal.

Bamdev Gautam, after his defeat, tried to woo other UML leaders to vacate their lawmaker position, but to no avail. Only Rambir Manandhar

agreed to resign as an MP for Gautam. But Manandhar backtracked on his offer after being widely criticised for trying to subvert the electoral mandate.

Later, the President appointed Bamdev Gautam to the upper house, a writ petition was filed against his appointment to the upper house, arguing that a leader beaten in the polls should not be allowed to be a minister. The court in November 2020 cleared the way for Gautam to become a minister after the constitutional bench led by Chief Justice Cholestha Shumsher Rana scrapped its own previous order.

Bhatta, the political analyst, said that public frustration with the old faces has been growing. When a loser succeeds in getting a prominent post through a back door, it makes the situation worse. "Bamdev Gautam's political career has taken a hit due to such shady activities," he said.

On May 25, 2009, Madhav Kumar Nepal was appointed the prime minister. This was after he had lost the 2008 Constituent Assembly elections from two constituencies. Later, he was nominated to the Constituent Assembly, and he then stitched together a coalition government with the backing of 22 parties.

Even the Maoist Centre had supported his nomination to the CA, believing Nepal would be a great help in constitution drafting. UML CA member Sushil Chandra Amatya had vacated his seat for Nepal.

In return, former CA member Amatya was appointed the ambassador to Sri Lanka in July 2009.

SUNDAY EXPLAINER

The rise of Nagarik Unmukti Party

A look into how it became a formidable political force within a year of its establishment, the agenda it carries and its way forward.

BINOD GHIMIRE
KATHMANDU, JAN 7

When the Nagarik Unmukti Party was registered last year, not many had thought that it would emerge as a dominant regional force in no time. Formed by Ranjita Shrestha, the wife of Resham Chaudhary, a former lawmaker serving a jail term, the party has won four seats in the House of Representatives and has representatives elected to three out of the seven provincial assemblies. It became the largest party in Kailali district in the local elections that were held within five months of its formation. The party won the leadership of four local governments, and 99 ward chairs and members.

Let's take a look at how the party came into being and how it soared to success even before it marks the first anniversary of establishment.

When was the party formed and why?

The Nagarik Unmukti Party was registered at the Election Commission on January 3 last year by Shrestha. Chaudhary is behind the bars after being convicted of masterminding the Tikapur killings in August 2015 that left eight police personnel and a toddler dead. Both Chaudhary and representatives from the Tharu community have been claiming that he was framed.

Chaudhary contested the 2017 elections and registered victory from Kailali-1 on the Rastriya Janata Party (RJP) ticket while he was still in hiding. In February 2018, he turned himself in to the police. Then, on March 7, 2019, he was convicted by the Kailali District Court, a judgement which was later upheld by the Dipayal High Court. Shrestha says they had to establish a new party because the RJP, now the Loktantrik Samajbadi Party, never seriously raised the demand for Chaudhary's release.

Chaudhary's supporters have a feeling that Madhesh-based parties used the Tharu community as merely their vote bank to get to power.

Establishing a separate party was necessary to address the concerns of the Tharu people because the Madheshi parties did little towards that end, Shrestha says.



What agenda does the party carry?

The Tharu people who have their dominance in five districts—Kanchanpur, Kailali, Bardiya, Banke and Dang—staged a series of protests in the wake of the promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal in 2015, demanding a separate Tharuwan province. Chaudhary, a media professional and artist, was involved in the protests. The killings took place when the

agitation was at its peak. From the very next day, the police began a crackdown, arresting and torturing the Tharu people. Several houses were torched by 'unknown' groups.

A restaurant and a radio station owned by Chaudhary were destroyed. Dozens of innocent Tharu people were tortured in detention. Justice for the Tharu people and their proportional representation in the state machinery are the two major causes the party is advancing.



The party formed by Ranjita Shrestha (left) has made the release of Resham Chaudhary (above), who has been jailed in connection with Tikapur killings, its major demand.

How big is the party?

The party has made its presence felt in three out of the seven provinces in the recent elections for all three tiers of government. It won the seats of mayor and chairpersons in four local units of Kailali, in addition to 99 other positions of ward chairpersons and members. With four seats, after a lawmaker who won as an independent joined the party, it is the ninth-largest in the House of Representatives. It won a total of 12 seats in the provincial assemblies. The Shrestha-led party has become the fourth-largest party, winning seven and four seats in Sudurpaschim and Lumbini provincial assemblies, respectively. It also has one seat in the Madhesh Province assembly.

The party fared equally well in the proportional representation category of election and became the ninth-largest force in national politics. Political observers say the party's performance so far has been remarkable, considering that it was formed just before the polls.

Is it a regional party?

The results of the recently held polls and the agenda it carries ground it as a regional party. It won the elections in constituencies where the Tharu community is dominant. So far, the party

has organisational structures only in around a dozen districts in the plains where the Tharus have a sizable population. However, Shrestha, the party's chairperson, says they don't want to limit the Nagarik Unmukti Party to a regional party. "It will gradually be expanded in other parts of the country as well," Shrestha told the Post. "We have started forming party organisations in more districts, particularly of Lumbini and Madhesh provinces. We will organise people from all the communities across the country."

In the view of political observers, the party dwells on identity-based politics and it fared well because the Janata Samajbadi Party and Loktantrik Samajbadi Party left the identity issue behind and instead got engaged in politicking with no other motive than to secure power. They claim that the people from Tarai/Madhesh award the parties that play the opposition, pressuring the parties in power to address their concerns. History shows that Nepal's regional parties have not fared well when they get enmeshed in lust for power.

What do the people expect from the party?

Tharu activists say people are keeping a close eye on the party's activities. In addition to the release of Chaudhary,

the party's priority should be towards unveiling the report of the Lal Commission and ensuring justice to the Tharu community who have suffered at the hands of the authorities. The commission was formed to investigate the deadly violence involving police and protesters in the run-up to the promulgation of the constitution in September 2015.

Shravan Chaudhary, coordinator of Tharuhat Tharuwan Rastriya Morcha said the leadership of the Unmukti Party must not forget that the Tharu people have huge expectations from it. "We believe the Lal Commission independently investigated the atrocities during the protests," he told the Post. "We want to see the party taking the necessary steps towards unveiling it."

The commission led by Girish Chandra Lal, a retired justice from the Supreme Court, was formed in February 2016 and submitted its report to the then prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba on December 16, 2017. But the report is gathering dust in the government's drawers. Despite ruling from the House of Representatives, twice, the successive governments refused to make the report public. Madheshi parties have been making it a political agenda for a long time.

Will the party join the government?

Nagarik Unmukti Party is one among seven parties that have extended their support to Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal. However, it hasn't joined the government. Release of Chaudhary was the party's bottom line in joining the Dahal Cabinet. The erstwhile Sher Bahadur Deuba government in December had recommended President Bidya Devi Bhandari to issue an ordinance to revise the Criminal Code, clearing legal hurdles to withdraw cases that are sub-judice in the Supreme Court. Bhandari is still sitting on the ordinance that has received serious criticisms. There are only two ways for Chaudhary to get released—either if the Supreme Court gives him a clean chit or if the criminal code gets modified.

The party's whip Ganga Ram Chaudhary has said it will not join the Dahal government as the ruling parties have not mentioned the Tharu uprising in their common minimum programme.

BRIEFING

Nepal reports first Covid-19 related death in over 2 months

KATHMANDU: Nepal on Saturday reported its first Covid-19 death in 75 days, marking the first death in the fifth wave of the pandemic. The last time the country witnessed a death from Covid-19 was on October 24. The countrywide death toll has now reached 12,020 since the pandemic began, the Health Ministry said. On Saturday, three people tested positive to the coronavirus in 555 polymerase chain reaction tests, taking the nationwide infection tally to 1,001,020. According to the ministry, as many as 988,979 infected people have recovered from the disease so far, two of them in the last 24 hours. The number of active cases stands at 21 as of Saturday.

Draft team submits common minimum programme

KATHMANDU: The task force formed by the ruling coalition to draft the government's common minimum programme submitted its report to the top leaders of the ruling parties on Saturday. Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Bishnu Paudel, who headed the team, submitted the report to CPN-UML chair KP Sharma Oli, who also heads the high level mechanism formed to cooperate in government functioning, at the prime minister's official residence at Baluwater. Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal from the CPN (Maoist Centre), Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister Rabi Lamichhane from Rastriya Swatantra Party, Rajendra Lingden from Rastriya Prajatantra Party, CK Raut of Janamat Party and Ranjita Shrestha Chaudhary of Nagarik Unmukti Party were also present at the programme. Barshaman Pun of Maoist Centre, Mukul Dhakal of Rastriya Swatantra Party, Dhawal Shamsheer Rana of Rastriya Prajatantra Party and Rakam Chemjong of Janata Samajbadi Party were the members of the Paudel-led drafting team.

New Chinese envoy Chen Song arriving in Kathmandu today

KATHMANDU: The new Chinese Ambassador to Nepal Chen Song is arriving in Kathmandu on Sunday to take up his assignment. Chen's arrival in Nepal was delayed after he and his wife got infected with Covid-19. China had proposed Chen, one of its senior diplomats, as the new ambassador to Nepal in November. He replaces Hou Yanqi, who has already returned to China after completing her four-year tenure in October. Hou assumed office in Kathmandu in December 2018. Chen is a familiar face in Nepal's diplomatic circles as he has in the past been a part of several meetings with Nepali officials.

After Unified Socialist move, Maoist Centre forms team to explore unity among left forces

Maoist vice-chair Krishna Bahadur Mahara leads the five-member task force.

TIKA R PRADHAN
KATHMANDU, JAN 7

With the poor show in the November 20 federal and provincial polls and the rise of new forces from elections, the CPN (Maoist Centre) seems to have felt the need for some hard work to keep itself relevant. To bolster its chances, the party has decided to go for a broader left unity.

A meeting of office bearers of the ruling party on Saturday formed a talks team led by vice-chairman Krishna Bahadur Mahara and entrusted the five-member team with exploring the possibility of a left unity and initiating the process.

The panel includes the party's general secretary Dev Gurung, and deputy general secretaries Girirajmani Pokhrel, Shakti Basnet and Janardan Sharma as members. "We will hold talks with different parties including Nepal Samajbadi Party led by Baburam Bhattarai," said Basnet, the team member.

On Saturday, Bhattarai and his supporters met Prime Minister and Maoist Centre chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal at Baluwater and discussed various issues including the parties' unity. Ganga Narayan Shrestha, co-chair of Nepal Samajbadi Party, said: "We will form a talks team at our party's political committee meeting on Sunday to lay the ground for unification at the earliest."

Former prime minister Bhattarai, who used to be an ideologue of the Maoist party, is in regular touch with Maoist Centre leaders for party unity.

Bhattarai's NSP had contested the November 20 polls with the Maoist symbol and won a seat in the House of Representatives and two seats in the provincial assembly.

The party's Mahendra Raya Yadav was elected to the lower house from Sarlahi-2. Phanindra Devkota and Ganga Narayan Shrestha were elected from Gorkha

2 (a) and Sindhuli 2 (b) respectively to provincial assemblies.

The CPN (Maoist Centre) accommodated one lawmaker from Bhattarai's party under the Proportional Representation system in the House of Representatives as the two parties forged an electoral alliance.

On Thursday, the CPN (Unified Socialist) revived its four-member task force led by party general secretary Beduram Bhusal to hold talks with left-leaning forces. The team includes Gangalal Tuladhar, Prakash Jwala and Vijay Poudel as members.

But not all Maoist Centre leaders are on the same page when it comes to unity among the left parties. Some are not hopeful that its attempts may yield desired results given the failure of the 2018 unity with the CPN-UML in less than three years.

"I think this talks team formation is just a ritual to reciprocate the decision of the CPN (Unified Socialist)," said Ganesh Sah, secretary of the Maoist Centre. "It will hold dialogues with the parties including the UML but I don't think it will yield any substantive result."

Sah doubts the motive as he thinks that all "feudalistic communist parties" that follow parliamentary democracy are focused only on reaping the benefits of power politics.

"I don't think the Maoist Centre can yield any results if it intends to unite with the UML anytime soon," said Jhalak Subedi, who comments mostly on left politics. "It seems that the talks team has been formed focusing on the parties led by Baburam Bhattarai and Madhav Nepal and the splinter groups of the Maoist party."

"Since both the Maoist Centre and the Unified Socialist are under extreme pressure for a merger given their poor show in the latest polls, they could continue with the dialogue," Subedi told the Post.

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The gods of mediated things

MEIDASUTRA

The media is often derided for all the ills, with little appraisal of the forces behind it.

DHARMA ADHIKARI

My last column discussing content as king triggered some private conversations in my academic circle, prodding me to reflect on other salient aspects of mediated communicative practices.

Look also behind the content, urged one colleague.

Journalists or providers tend to play God, often consigning communicative ascendancy to content alone, commented another. If content is king, why the decline of the "authority" of content in recent decades?

Indeed, public criticism makes little discrimination between channels or their creations, lumping them into something called the media. It's this media that is often derided for all the ills, with little appraisal of the forces behind it. The problem is that much of such criticism overlooks the providers or producers.

A colleague joked, "If content is king, who is the queen, prince or princess? There are others who pull the strings and constrain the power of the monarch in ways often not realised by the general populace."

Content and channels, in themselves, are neutral, until we begin to trace the designs and motives of the providers behind them. Measures of credibility such as accuracy, fairness, impartiality, respect for people's privacy, public interest and community well-being are matters of the mind or imbued human values rather than of materiality like technology or contents. Let's not confuse the light with the mirror.

The digital divide has largely been rendered obsolete, but now digital segregation is intensifying the knowledge divide. In a democratic society, issues of trust and credibility hinge on public competence to scrutinise the gods of small and large mediated things in newspapers, TV and networked platforms.



SHUTTERSTOCK

Untangling providers

The word provider, *pradayak* in Nepali, refers to "one who gives". We have all become givers in the digital age. Who actually gives or what is given doesn't even sound important.

Not too long ago, journalists and media producers would sniff at the provider label. Now assortment is in fashion. Providers include users; and commenters have emerged as formidable players. Not infrequently, they are the ones that sway public opinion, much to the awe of headline writers.

Demystify the providers for a fair appraisal of media credibility. Simply blaming the messenger with little or no regard to context risks normalising our mediated state of affairs.

A media-literate public strives for a deeper understanding of the principles governing providers. We uphold a liberal media order riddled with authoritarian tendencies. Individual providers, particularly in the West, remain averse to or are limited in their capacity in internalising self-regulation.

Journalism informs, edifies as well as amuses. Columnists opine and librarians circulate resources. Advertisers, publicists or propagandists push for sales and influence. The question is how well they do their jobs, not what they do.

Owners as providers also invite much scrutiny of their roles. Ideally, information and media content may offer knowledge and truth, but it so happens that they are often organised to gain profit and power to the detriment of editorial independence. The

extent of conflict of interest in institutional media is yet to be unearthed. How deep and wide do negative stereotypes of owners as *maliks* or overlords go? Do public attitudes towards start-uppers signal something different about the growing number of new, independent providers?

Knowledge of media codes or genres and their representational potencies comprises another evaluative means. Sometimes, it is the format of the information or media content that limits how detailed or accurate it can be. A developing story is often likely to be inaccurate in details and lacking in appropriate representation.

It is not unusual to see users citing the published word as sacred: "It is true, I saw it in the newspaper!" The media tends to be selective, referring to certain salient charac-

teristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, political loyalty, sexuality or cultural trait. How many users look for the subtext? One encouraging sign is that users increasingly contest narrow, unfair, oversimplified, prejudicial or stereotypical images in our media.

Provider impact is part of the equation. Reporters run after scandals and YouTubers go to the extent of self-objectifying. Too often, people believe the media affects others and not themselves. The subtleties of the effects of edutainment, media-induced social withdrawal, violence or empathy are seldom discussed.

Calls for transparency

Commercial imperatives do provoke occasional outcries over dubious investments, exploitation of workers and poaching of talent. The media is criticised for running ads at the expense of objective information. Paid subscriptions are hard to come by, and ads serve as the life blood for providers. Public calls for transparency barely extend to advertorials, sponsored content, click bait, and more recently, media merchandise. Add to the list journalists or TV hosts appearing in ads and commercials.

Many people tend to dismiss providers as pretentious, unruly and without reins. However, the seeming chaos in the media exists within some order, based on formal standards and ethical codes, at least among committed and organised professionals. Unlike government regulations, ethics is about self-imposed standards.

Not least of all, oversight or monitoring mechanisms could help bolster the discovery process. Regrettably, public awareness and use of such existing mechanisms, notably the Press Council, independent watchdogs and trade publications, looks dismal. Most users would prefer to vent out their grievances directly on the platforms.

Hostility and vitriol offend more and enlighten less.

The work of watchdogs and monitors also leaves much to be desired. Public criticism of the media is thus burdened with multiple layers of appraisal needs.



Adhikari is an associate professor at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, China.

Call for columns

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Prachanda: An epitome of survival

During his electoral campaigns, Prachanda admitted that aligning with KP Sharma Oli was a tragedy.

SAMBRIDH GHIMIRE

Back in 2009, when the Maoist government was in power, I'd read an article that compared the Maoists to Hamas. It speculated that despite different external circumstances and interventions, the Maoists would also tread the path of Hamas, slowly departing from mainstream politics. Today, Hamas remains a powerful militant force in the Gaza strip. But the nation has become a great game for Israel, the Fatahs and Hamas. Fortunately, Nepal did not depart on that turbulent path.

government, but he has become the premier of the nation two more times.

Parasitic relationship

Prachanda has used the skills he acquired during the civil war in contemporary politics as well. Having spent ample time in the woods, he seems to have imbibed the parasitic instincts of flora and fauna there. A parasitic relationship is a symbiotic relationship in which one organism (the parasite) benefits at the expense of another (the host). The parasite relies on the host for survival and may cause harm to the host, either physically or by consuming resources that the host needs. His political career started with his flirtations with the monarchy, in which he wanted to align with King Birendra against the parliamentary parties. This was because he wished to have a parasitic relationship with one of the political forces and weaken the other. A few years later, he used the same

nepotism and newfound wealth spread during his short stint as prime minister. The poor and landless felt he did little to redistribute resources. Thousands of people continued to leave the country looking for work. He was accused of muzzling the press. He attempted to sack the army chief, alienating an already suspecting military establishment. Prachanda eventually resigned, furthering instability and leading the party to electoral defeat. Many in Nepal thought that this was the end of Prachanda's political spell. But all were proven wrong. He went on to become prime minister in 2016 and in 2022.

Guerrilla warfare

Consider another strategy that Prachanda used during his wartime days. One of them is guerrilla warfare, which is a type of irregular warfare in which a small group of combatants, such as paramilitary personnel, armed civilians, or irregulars, use mil-

early ones were to his colleague and friend-turned-foe-turned-friend Baburam Bhattarai, during the civil war and after the latter's stint as prime minister. Madhav Kumar Nepal, catapulted by Prachanda to the post of president, had a steep fall after the latter went back on his word. Shortly after the election results, Madhav Nepal was again ambushed by Prachanda when he was left with the Congress, and Prachanda brokered ties with Nepal's mother party, the CPN-UML. Recently, Prachanda reached out to Madhav Nepal, asking him to join the Maoists-led government. One can wonder if Nepal is up for a double ambush in a span of a month. KP Sharma Oli was a casualty of Prachanda's hit-and-run tactics when the latter withdrew his support from the government to become the premier for the second time. Sher Bahadur Deuba is a textbook example of Hegel's saying that history repeats itself twice. Prachanda ambushed him right before the federal elections of 2017 and raided the electoral success of the Congress Party yet again after the elections to sabotage Deuba and form an alliance with KP Sharma Oli, perfectly exemplifying what Marx added, satirically, Hegel's saying, "History repeats itself twice, the first time as a tragedy and the second time as a farce." During his electoral campaigns, Prachanda admitted that aligning with KP Oli was a tragedy and isolating Congress was one of his biggest regrets. Yet, again due to his survival instincts, he has led his crew of frivolity to Singha Durbar yet again.

Tactics and results

Although from a normative point of view, these strategies and tactics have corrupted the political practice of Nepal. It has also taken away idealism, morals and values from Prachanda as an individual. But empirically, Prachanda and the Maoist party have gained much from these iniquitous contrivances. The Maoists' electoral graph has been in a steady decline, from around 29 percent in 2008, falling to 15 percent in 2013, declining to 14 percent in 2017, and diminishing to 11 percent in 2022. Their seats share in the Parliament has fallen from 38 percent, 14 percent, 19 percent, and 12 percent, respectively. Despite this, they have led all the resulting governments, except from 2017. They have held strong portfolios in all the governments and have the same, if not more, access to state resources as their counterparts. This has been due to Prachanda's survival instinct and his renegade.

If the word snollygoster—an unprincipled person, especially a politician—were to apply to anyone in the 21st century, Prachanda would beat all others by a significant margin. As the great American novelist William Gaddis once observed, "Power doesn't corrupt people, people corrupt power". Is it Prachanda who has corrupted the power play in Nepali politics, or has Nepali politics corrupted Prachanda?



POST PHOTO: ANGAD DHAKAL

The Maoist insurgency took the lives of around 15,000 Nepalis, but their exit was peaceful. However, the actions that led to their departure from the government were totalitarian. After this, there were opinions that this would slowly make the Maoists and their leader Prachanda inconsequential in the policy of Nepal. But history shows that Prachanda did not let the hypothesis become a theory. It has been 12 years since Prachanda was ousted from the

tactics while aligning with the Seven Party Alliance, and forged a battle against the monarchy, consuming monarchy as an institution. Instances of this type of powerplay in his life outnumber his limited achievements.

After the first election, Prachanda reached a "gentlemen's agreement" with Girija Prasad Koirala to make him the first president of Nepal. But he soon backed off in his quest for absolute power. Tales of his

itary tactics, including ambushes, sabotage, raids, petty warfare and hit-and-run tactics. Guerrilla warfare is often used by groups seeking to fight a larger and more powerful force, such as an occupation army. On the other hand, they may be used by groups with a smaller military capability to resist an occupation or a more significant military force.

Prachanda's political strategy involves ambushing and sabotaging. A few of his



Ghimire is a political consultant and electoral strategist.

FOREX

US Dollar	132.66
Euro	139.47
Pound Sterling	157.32
Swiss Franc	141.14
Australian Dollar	89.43
Canadian Dollar	97.40
Singapore Dollar	98.49
Japanese Yen (10)	9.88
Chinese Yuan	19.33
Saudi Arab Riyal	35.30
Qatari Riyal	36.29
Thai Bhat	3.90
UAE Dirham	36.12
Malaysian Ringgit	30.13
Korean Won	10.42

Exchange rates fixed by Nepal Rastra Bank

BULLION

PRICE PER TOLA

 Fine Gold	Rs 102,300
 Silver	Rs 1,365

SOURCE: FENEGOSIDA

BIZLINE

Air India grounds crew over handling of unruly passenger on flight

NEW DELHI: Air India has issued show cause notice and de-rostered one pilot and four cabin crew as it investigates the handling of an unruly passenger on a flight from New York to Delhi in November, the airline's chief executive office said on Saturday. The Tata group-owned airline has faced criticism from India's aviation regulator following an incident on a November 26 flight in which a male passenger, while apparently inebriated, urinated on a female co-passenger. A second similar incident occurred last month on a flight from Paris to Delhi. "Air India acknowledges that it could have handled these matters better, both in the air and on the ground and is committed to taking action," the airline's CEO and managing director Campbell Wilson said in a statement on Saturday. (REUTERS)

NYC hospitals prep for nurse strike amid negotiations

NEW YORK: Negotiations to keep about 10,000 New York City nurses from walking off the job headed into a final weekend as some major hospitals were already preparing on Friday for a potential strike by sending ambulances elsewhere and transferring some patients, including vulnerable newborns. The walkout could start early Monday at several private hospitals, including two of the city's biggest: Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan and Montefiore Medical Centre in the Bronx, each of which has more than 1,000 beds. They and a handful of other hospitals are bargaining with nurses who want raises and an end to what they say are untenable staffing squeezes, nearly three years into the coronavirus pandemic. (AP)

Mega Millions jackpot rises to \$1.1 billion after no winner

DES MOINES: Another Mega Millions drawing, another night without a big winner. No one hit all six numbers and won the estimated \$940 million jackpot, pushing the lottery prize to an estimated \$1.1 billion ahead of the next drawing on Tuesday night. The prize is now the third-largest in US history. The numbers drawn late Friday were: 3, 20, 46, 59, 63 and gold Mega Ball 13. There have been 24 drawings without a jackpot winner, stretching back for more than two months. (AP)

Demand for Nepali products in Tibet grows after two-way trade resumes

According to the exporters, the Tibetans have started placing orders for the goods via telephone.

BALRAM GHIMIRE
RASUWA, JAN 7

The demand for Nepali products has started to pick up in the Chinese market as Beijing has reopened two-way trade from the Rasuwagadhi-Kerung port, which was shut since the start of the Covid pandemic.

Nepali traders have been exporting goods such as flour, turmeric, chilly, bamboo stool, grass broom, handicrafts, cosmetics, noodles and among others to Tibet via Rasuwagadhi.

According to the local traders, the Tibetans started placing orders for the goods via telephone calls with their Nepali counterparts immediately after the border was opened for export.

"The Chinese people love Nepali products," said Mukunda Poudel, a local trader from Kalika Rural Municipality. "The Chinese traders have already booked two containers of bamboo stool made in Nepal."

Poudel said he has started collecting the items amid the soaring demand from Tibet.

Around 150 Nepali traders along with Poudel have been exporting goods to China through the Rasuwagadhi border point.

The goods exported from Nepal are mainly sold in Tibetan cities like Lhasa, Shigatse and Amdo.

According to the Rasuwa Customs Office, since the resumption of export, nearly a dozen containers loaded with Nepali produce have crossed the border till Monday this week.

"The goods worth Rs13.11 million have been exported as of Monday," said Narayan Prasad Bhandari, the chief customs officer.

The import and export via Rasuwagadhi were affected from January 2020 initially due to the snowfall and Lhosar, a local festival and the New Year of Tibetan.

However, the operation got further impeded by the Covid-19 pandemic.



PHOTO COURTESY: CHINESE EMBASSY NEPAL

The goods exported from Nepal are mainly sold in Tibetan cities like Lhasa, Shigatse and Amdo.

The border was shut for five-and-half months due to the lockdown. The import recommenced from July 6, 2020, but the export was still held back. The local traders have been troubled by frequent disturbances.

Ant Group founder Jack Ma to give up control in key revamp

Ma publicly criticised regulators in a speech in October 2020.

REUTERS
SHANGHAI/HONG KONG, JAN 7

Ant Group's founder Jack Ma will give up control of the Chinese fintech giant in an overhaul that seeks to draw a line under a regulatory crackdown that was triggered soon after its mammoth stock market debut was scuppered two years ago.

Ant's \$37 billion IPO, which would have been the world's largest, was cancelled at the last minute in November 2020, leading to a forced restructuring of the financial technology firm and speculation the Chinese billionaire would have to cede control.

While some analysts have said a relinquishing of control could clear the way for the company to revive its IPO, the changes announced by the group on Saturday, however, are likely to result in a further delay due to listing regulations.

China's domestic A-share market requires companies to wait three years after a change in control to list. The wait is two years on Shanghai's Nasdaq-style STAR market, and one year in Hong Kong.

A former English teacher, Ma previously possessed more than 50 percent of voting rights at Ant but the changes will mean that his share falls to 6.2 percent, according to Reuters calculations. Ma only owns a 10 percent stake in Ant, an affiliate of e-commerce



Jack Ma

giant Alibaba Group Holding Ltd, but has exercised control over the company through related entities, according to Ant's IPO prospectus filed with the exchanges in 2020.

Hangzhou Yunbo, an investment vehicle for Ma, had control over two other entities that own a combined 50.5 percent stake of Ant, the prospectus showed.

Ma's ceding of control comes as Ant is nearing the completion of its two-year regulatory-driven restructuring, with Chinese authorities poised to impose a fine of more than \$1 billion on the firm, Reuters reported in November.

The expected penalty is part of Beijing's sweeping and unprecedented

crackdown on the country's technology titans over the past two years that has sliced hundreds of billions of dollars off their values and shrunk revenues and profits.

But Chinese authorities have in recent months softened their tone on the tech crackdown amid efforts to bolster a \$17-trillion economy that has been badly hurt by the Covid-19 pandemic.

"With the Chinese economy in a very febrile state, the government is looking to signal its commitment to growth, and the tech, private sectors are key to that as we know," said Duncan Clark, chairman of investment advisory firm BDA China.

"At least Ant investors can [now] have some timetable for an exit after a long period of uncertainty," said Clark, who is also an author of a book on Alibaba and Ma.

Ant operates China's ubiquitous mobile payment app Alipay, the world's largest, which has more than 1 billion users.

Ant, whose businesses also span consumer lending and insurance products distribution, said Ma and nine of its other major shareholders had agreed to no longer act in concert when exercising voting rights, and would only vote independently.

It added that the shareholders' economic interests in Ant will not change as a result of the adjustments.

Renault considers making mass-market EVs in India, sources say

REUTERS
NEW DELHI/PARIS, JAN 7

Renault is considering building a mass-market electric vehicle in India, two people with knowledge of the ongoing review told Reuters, as part of a renewed push into a market where EV adoption is expected to grow quickly from a small base.

The study by Renault underscores how the French automaker is pushing ahead with electrification plans even as it extends unresolved negotiations with its partner Nissan Motor about investing in an EV unit it plans to carve out from its other operations.

It also points to the shifting perception of the auto market in India, which posted the fastest growth of any major market in 2022. EVs were on track to be less than 1 percent of car sales last year but the government has set a target of 30 percent by 2030 and has had recent success in attracting suppliers for international automakers, with a range of subsidies.

Renault is studying launching a made-in-India electric version of its Kwid hatchback, the people told Reuters.

The review will assess potential demand, pricing and the ability to build the EV with local components, said one of the people, adding that any launch would be late in 2024.

Mixed emotions as McDonald's leaves Kazakhstan

REUTERS
ALMATY, JAN 7

Workers removed the branding from McDonald's outlets in Kazakhstan's biggest city, Almaty on Friday after the fast food giant's local business appeared to fall victim to collateral damage from the Russia-Ukraine war.

The brand's exit from the Central Asian nation of 20 million divided opinion on social media and among onlookers near one of the Almaty restaurants where workers were taking down the large white letters from the top of the building.

"It was one of the nicest places where I used to spend time with my friends," said local resident Karina, who only gave her first name.

"I doubt any other company will be able to compete with McDonald's in Kazakhstan at the moment as no other fast food chain can replicate the menu that McDonald's had for the same price." Others described the brand's departure as a minor inconvenience or said they would check out other fast food joints.

Chains such as KFC, Burger King, and Hardee's have restaurants in Kazakhstan and Popeyes said last month it would open dozens of restaurants in the former Soviet republic in partnership with local firm Centras Group.

Many Kazakhs, proud of their meat-focused cuisine, expressed incredulity that McDonald's Kazakh licensee, Food Solutions KZ, could not source its beef patties locally and imported them from Russia until the war forced it to stop and ultimately shut down.

Industry insiders, however, say certificates and audits required by the US brand were expensive and lengthy, and local meat producers did not want to bother with them.

Food Solutions did not immediately respond to an email requesting comment. McDonald's said its agreement with the licensee had been terminated but did not answer questions about the reasons.

The auto market in India posted the fastest growth of any major market in 2022.

The move is part of a broader plan by Renault to rekindle sales in a country where the carmaker remains profitable despite selling fewer cars in 2022 than a year earlier, the person said.

Renault India declined to comment on product plans but said the company has a "strong focus on electrification globally" as part of the strategy outlined by CEO Luca de Meo and that "India is one of the key markets" for the group.

India is set to become the world's third-largest market for passenger and other light vehicles, displacing Japan, according to a forecast by S&P Global Mobility. Industry-wide sales grew an estimated 23 percent to 4.4 million vehicles in 2022.

That is a contrast to the outlook for the United States, where the market is expected to remain below 2019 levels next year, and China, where demand is weakening.

Nepal's external debts swell in rupee terms as dollar surges

The greenback had risen to Rs132.07 by the end of the first quarter from Rs128.11 at the start of the fiscal year.

POST REPORT
KATHMANDU, JAN 7

With the Nepali rupee sinking against the United States dollar, the government has to dish out more in domestic currency to repay external debts as the exchange rate works against it.

During the first quarter of the current fiscal year, fluctuations in the rate of exchange resulted in an exchange loss of Rs5.52 billion, according to the Public Debt Management Office.

At the beginning of the fiscal year on July 16, the exchange rate was Rs128.11 to the dollar. By October 17, at the end of the first quarter, the greenback had risen to Rs132.07.

The value of the Nepali rupee fluctuates together with the Indian rupee to which it is pegged.

According to the Public Debt Management Office, when there is an exchange loss, it does not necessarily mean that Nepal has to pay the entire loss to its foreign creditors. The

exchange rate loss is calculated covering the entire outstanding external debt, it said.

"But Nepal had to bear part of the exchange losses in the payments made during the first quarter," said Hira Neupane, information officer at the Public Debt Management Office.

There was an exchange rate gain of Rs12.51 billion in the last fiscal year 2021-22, according to the office.

When Nepali currency falls against US currency, it means higher inflows of remittance in rupee terms. But it also means more rupees flows out of the country to repay debts and pay for imports.

Though Nepal has debt liabilities in other currencies such as euro and yen, among other currencies, most of the payments need to be made in greenbacks. As the size of Nepal's external debt is on the rise, the country faces an increased exchange rate risk. When the country was hit by a deadly earthquake in 2015, Nepal's debts—external and internal—surged as the country

had to spend huge amounts for money on the reconstruction of damaged infrastructure.

More resources were needed to manage the newly-created structures for the implementation of federalism and address the Covid-19 pandemic.

According to the Public Debt Management Office, Nepal's external debt swelled to Rs1.02 trillion in the last fiscal year 2021-22 from Rs388.76 billion in fiscal 2015-16. External debt rose further to Rs1.05 trillion during the first quarter of the current fiscal year.

The country was in debt to the tune of Rs2 trillion at the end of the first quarter of the current fiscal year.

Nepal's overall public debt accounts for 41.38 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) while external debt accounts for 21.64 percent of the GDP.

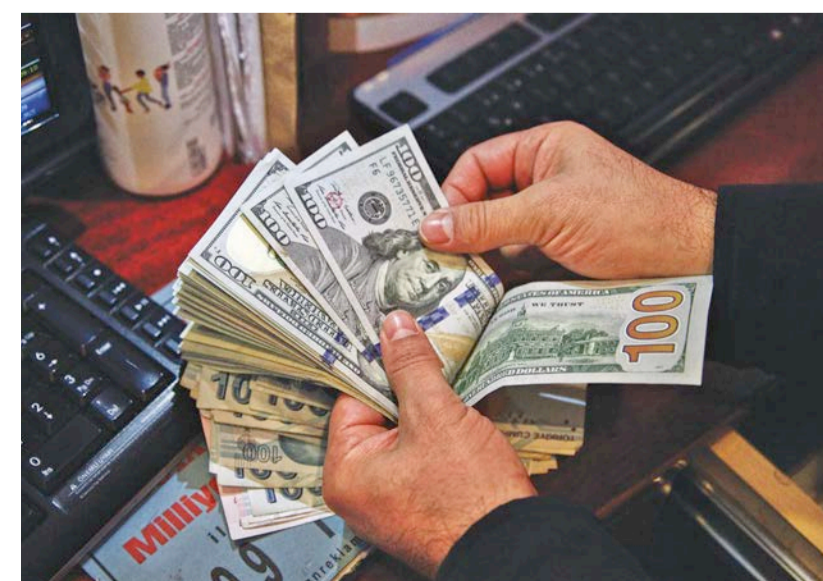
Nepal's GDP was worth \$36.29 billion in 2021, according to official data from the World Bank. The country's Gross National Product (GNP) was reported at \$40.405 billion.

As per the Public Debt Management Act 2022, the government cannot borrow in excess of one-third of the GDP of the previous fiscal year. This law was passed to ensure discipline in external borrowings. Despite growing public debt, officials and experts say that the country continues to remain in a comfortable position in terms of the debt-to-GDP ratio.

The government's recurrent expenditure has been on the rise while its revenue collection has fallen behind, which is expected to force it to take more domestic and foreign loans.

"At the moment, Nepal does not face a great exchange rate risk because of the low interest rate on external loans, most of which have been obtained from multilateral donor agencies," said Neupane.

Borrowings from multilateral donor agencies such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank account for 88.78 percent of the total external loans, according to the Public Debt Management Office.



A file photo shows a money changer counting US dollar banknotes at a currency exchange office in Ankara, Turkey.

WORLD

McCarthy elected House speaker in rowdy post-midnight vote

Eager to confront President Joe Biden and the Democrats, he promises subpoenas and investigations.

ASSOCIATED PRESS
WASHINGTON, JAN 7

Republican Kevin McCarthy was elected House speaker on a historic post-midnight 15th ballot early Saturday, overcoming holdouts from his own ranks and floor tensions that boiled over after a chaotic week that tested the new GOP majority's ability to govern.

"My father always told me, it's not how you start, it's how you finish," McCarthy told cheering fellow Republicans.

Eager to confront President Joe Biden and the Democrats, he promised subpoenas and investigations. "Now the hard work begins," the California Republican declared. He credited former President Donald Trump for standing with him and for making late calls "helping get those final votes."

Republicans roared in celebration when his victory was announced, chanting "USA! USA!"

Finally elected, McCarthy took the oath of office, and the House was finally able to swear in newly elected lawmakers who had been waiting all week for the chamber to formally open and the 2023-24 session to begin.

After four days of gruelling ballots, McCarthy flipped more than a dozen conservative holdouts to become supporters, including the chairman of the chamber's Freedom Caucus.

He fell one vote short on the 14th ballot, and the chamber became raucous, unruly.

McCarthy strode to the back of the chamber to confront Republican Matt Gaetz, sitting with Lauren Boebert and other holdouts. Fingers were pointed, words exchanged and violence apparently just averted.

At one point, Republican Mike Rogers of Alabama, shouting, approached Gaetz before another Republican, Richard Hudson, physically pulled him back.

"Stay civil!" someone shouted. Order restored, the Republicans fell in line to give McCarthy the post he had fought so hard to gain, House speaker, second in the line of succession to the presidency.

The few remaining Republican



Incoming House Speaker Kevin McCarthy of California holds the gavel on the House floor at the US Capitol in Washington, early Saturday.

holdouts began voting present, dropping the tally he needed. It was the end of a bitter standoff that had shown the strengths and fragility of American democracy.

The tally was 216-212 with Democrats voting for leader Hakeem Jeffries, and six Republican holdouts to McCarthy simply voting present.

The night's stunning turn of events came after McCarthy agreed to many of the detractors' demands—including the reinstatement of a longstanding House rule that would allow any single member to call a vote to oust him from office.

Even as McCarthy secured the votes he needs, he will emerge as a weakened speaker, having given away some powers and constantly under the threat of being booted by his detractors.

But he could also be emboldened as a survivor of one of the more brutal fights for the gavel in US history. Not since the Civil War era has a speaker's vote dragged through so many rounds of voting.

At the afternoon speaker's vote, a number of Republicans tiring of the spectacle temporarily walked out

Republicans roared when his victory was announced, chanting "USA! USA!"

when one of McCarthy's most ardent challengers, Gaetz, railed against the GOP leader.

Contours of a deal with conservative holdouts who had been blocking McCarthy's rise had emerged the night before, and took hold after four dismal days and 14 failed votes in an intraparty standoff unseen in modern times.

One significant former holdout—Republican Scott Perry, chairman of the conservative Freedom Caucus, who had been a leader of Trump's efforts to challenge the 2020 election—tweeted after his switched vote for McCarthy, "We're at a turning point."

Another Republican holdout, Byron

Donalds of Florida, who was repeatedly nominated as an alternative candidate for speaker, switched Friday too, voting for McCarthy.

Trump may have played a role in swaying some holdouts—calling into a meeting of Republican freshmen the night before, and calling other members ahead of voting. He had urged Republicans to wrap up their public dispute.

As Republican Mike Garcia nominated McCarthy on Friday, he also thanked the US Capitol Police who were given a standing ovation for protecting lawmakers and the legislative seat of democracy on January 6.

But in nominating the Democratic leader Jeffries, Democrat Jim Clyburn recalled the horror of that day and told his colleagues, "The eyes of the country are on us today."

Electing a speaker is normally an easy, joyous task for a party that has just won majority control. But not this time: About 200 Republicans were stymied by 20 far-right colleagues who said McCarthy was not conservative enough.

The House adjourned on Friday until late in the night, giving time for last-minute negotiations and allowing two absent Republican colleagues to return to Washington.

Newly elected Wesley Hunt of Texas arrived to vote for McCarthy—to applause, days after his wife had given birth—as did Ken Buck of Colorado.

The disorganised start to the new Congress pointed to difficulties ahead with Republicans now in control of the House, much the way that some past Republican speakers, including John Boehner, had trouble leading a rebellious right flank. The result: government shutdowns, standoffs and Boehner's early retirement when conservatives threatened to oust him.

The agreement McCarthy presented to the holdouts from the Freedom Caucus and others centres around rules changes they have been seeking for months.

Those changes would shrink the power of the speaker's office and give rank-and-file lawmakers more influence in drafting and passing legislation.

China suspends social media accounts of Covid policy critics

ASSOCIATED PRESS
BEIJING, JAN 7

China has suspended or closed the social media accounts of more than 1,000 critics of the government's policies on the Covid-19 outbreak, as the country moves to further open up.

The popular Sina Weibo social media platform said it had addressed 12,854 violations including attacks on experts, scholars and medical workers and issued temporary or permanent bans on 1,120 accounts.

The ruling Communist Party had largely relied on the medical community to justify its harsh lockdowns, quarantine measures and mass testing, almost all of which it abruptly abandoned last month, leading to a surge in new cases that have stretched medical resources to their limits. The party allows no direct criticism and imposes strict limits on free speech.

The company "will continue to increase the investigation and clean-up of all kinds of illegal content, and create a harmonious and friendly community environment for the majority of users," Sina Weibo said in a statement dated on Thursday.

Criticism has largely focused on heavy-handed enforcement of regula-

tions, including open-ended travel restrictions that saw people confined to their homes for weeks, sometimes sealed inside without adequate food or medical care. Anger was also vented over the requirement that anyone who potentially tested positive or had been in contact with such a person be confined for observation in a field hospital, where overcrowding, poor food and hygiene were commonly cited.

The social and economic costs eventually prompted rare street protests in Beijing and other cities, possibly influencing the party's decision to swiftly ease the strictest measures.

As part of the latest changes, China will also no longer bring criminal charges against people accused of violating border quarantine regulations, according to a notice issued by five government departments on Saturday.

Individuals currently in custody will be released and seized assets returned, the notice said.

The adjustments "were made after comprehensively considering the harm of the behaviours to the society, and aim to adapt to the new situations of the epidemic prevention and control," the official China Daily newspaper website said in a report on the notice.



Medical workers check on a patient at an emergency hall in a hospital in Beijing on Saturday.

BRIEFING

At least 29 killed in Mexico capture of Chapo's son

MEXICO CITY: Nineteen suspected gang members and 10 military personnel were killed in a wave of violence surrounding the arrest of Mexican drug cartel boss Ovidio Guzman in the northern state of Sinaloa, Defense Minister Luis Cresencio Sandoval said on Friday. Mexican security forces captured Guzman, the 32-year-old son of jailed kingpin Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, in the early hours of Thursday morning, prompting hours of unrest and shootouts with gang members, the minister said. Guzman was extracted by helicopter from the house where he was caught and flown to Mexico City, before being taken to a maximum security federal prison, Sandoval added. The arrest spurred the powerful Sinaloa Cartel—once headed by El Chapo himself—to go on a rampage, setting vehicles on fire, blocking roads, and fighting security forces in and around Culiacan, the capital of Sinaloa.

Philippine military chief replaced by retiring general

MANILA: Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr on Saturday cut short the term of the military chief of staff he appointed five months ago and replaced him with a retiring general without explaining the surprise move. Marcos's office announced the replacement of Lieutenant General Bartolome Bacarro, who had received the highest military award for combat bravery as a young army officer. A statement late Friday that did not specify any reason for the change in military leadership. Bacarro's three-year term was supposed to end in August 2025. The appointment of military chiefs is a sensitive issue. The military has a history of restiveness, failed coup attempts, corruption scandals and has faced accusations of human rights violations.

49 Ivory Coast soldiers pardoned by Mali's junta leader

BAMAKO: Mali's military junta leader on Friday pardoned 49 soldiers from neighbouring Ivory Coast who were convicted of undermining Mali's state security and conspiracy against the government, authorities announced. Colonel Assimi Goita granted the pardon and "demonstrates once again his commitment to peace, dialogue, pan-Africanism and the preservation of fraternal and secular relations with regional countries, in particular those between Mali and Ivory Coast," said a statement from Colonel Abdoulaye Maiga, the government spokesman. (AGENCIES)

Ukraine hails US military aid as ceasefire falters

ASSOCIATED PRESS
KYIV, JAN 7

Ukraine's president is praising the United States for including tank-killing armoured vehicles in its latest multibillion-dollar package of military aid, saying they are "exactly what is needed" for Ukrainian troops locked in combat against Russian forces.

Officials, meanwhile, said it was unclear whether Moscow was abiding by a unilateral 36-hour cease-fire for Orthodox Christmas that Ukraine has denounced as a ploy.

The latest multi-billion dollar package of US military assistance announced on Friday by the White House was the biggest to date for Kyiv. For the first time, it included Bradley armoured vehicles—known as tank-killers because of the anti-tank missiles they fire.

In his nightly televised address on Friday, Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called it "a very powerful package."

"For the first time, we will get Bradley armoured vehicles—this is exactly what is needed. New guns and rounds, including high-precision ones, new rockets, new drones. It is timely and strong," he said.

He thanked US President Joe Biden, US lawmakers and "all the Americans who appreciate freedom, and who know that freedom is worth protecting." Ukrainian authorities on Saturday said that a Moscow-declared temporary truce for Orthodox Christmas appeared to have been ignored by some of its forces pressing ahead with the nearly 11-month invasion.

In the fiercely contested Luhansk region of eastern Ukraine, regional Governor Serhiy Haidai reported con-

Putin praises Russian Church for backing troops

MOSCOW: President Vladimir Putin on Saturday praised the Russian Orthodox Church for supporting Moscow's forces fighting in Ukraine in an Orthodox Christmas message designed to rally people behind his vision of modern Russia.

The Kremlin issued Putin's message after the Russian leader attended an Orthodox Christmas Eve service on his own inside a Kremlin cathedral rather than joining other worshippers in a public celebration.

In his message, Putin made it clear

he saw the Russian Orthodox Church as an important stabilising force for society at a time he has cast as a historical clash between Russia and the West over Ukraine and other issues.

"It is deeply gratifying to note the enormous constructive contribution of the Russian Orthodox Church and other Christian denominations in unifying society, preserving our historical memory, educating youth and strengthening the institution of family," said Putin. (REUTERS)



A local resident runs past a burning house hit by the Russian shelling in Kherson, Ukraine, on Friday.

Iran executes 2 more men detained amid protests

ASSOCIATED PRESS
DUBAI, JAN 7

Iran said it executed two men on Saturday convicted of allegedly killing a paramilitary volunteer during a demonstration, the latest executions aimed at halting the nationwide protests now challenging the country's theocracy.

Iran's judiciary identified those executed as Mohammad Mehdi Karami and Mohammad Hosseini, making it four men known to have been executed since the demonstrations began in September over the death of Mahsa Amini. All have faced internationally criticised, rapid, closed-door trials.

The judiciary's Mizan news agency said the men had been convicted of killing Ruhollah Ajamian, a member of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's volunteer Basij force, in the city of Karaj outside of Tehran on November 3. The Basij have deployed in major cities, attacking and detaining protesters, who in many cases have fought back.

Heavily edited footage aired on state television showed Karami speaking before a Revolutionary Court about the attack, which also showed a reenactment of the attack, according to prosecutors' claims. Iran's Revolutionary Courts handed down the two other death sentences already

carried out. The tribunals don't allow those on trial to pick their own lawyers or even see the evidence against them. Amnesty International has said the trials "bore no resemblance to a meaningful judicial proceeding."

State TV also aired footage of Karami and Hosseini talking about the attack, though the broadcaster for years has aired what activists describe as coerced confessions.

The men were convicted of the killing, as well as "corruption on Earth," a Quranic term and charge that has been levied against others in the decades since the 1979 Islamic Revolution and carries the death penalty.

tinued Russian shelling and assaults. Posting on Telegram, Haidai said that in the first three hours of the cease-fire's supposed start on Friday for Orthodox Christmas Eve, Russian forces shelled Ukrainian positions 14 times and stormed one settlement three times.

The Ministry of Defence in Britain, a leading supplier of military aid to Ukraine, said on Saturday in its daily readout on the invasion that "fighting has continued at a routine level into the Orthodox Christmas period."

Russia's Defence Ministry alleged on Friday that Ukrainian forces continued to shell its positions, and said its forces returned fire.

Popular Himalayan town evacuated after homes develop cracks

REUTERS
LUCKNOW, JAN 7

Indian authorities have moved nearly 200 people from their homes in the Himalayan town of Joshimath, an official said on Saturday, after hundreds of buildings in the area popular with pilgrims and tourists developed cracks due to shifting soil.

For years, experts have warned that large-scale construction work, including hydro power projects, in and around Joshimath could lead to land subsidence - the sinking or settling of the ground surface.

In recent weeks, cracks have been reported in more than 600 houses in Joshimath, prompting local authorities to move around 193 residents to safer locations, including hotels and guest houses, government official Himanshu Khurana said.

"The evacuation process is under way and a team of scientists from different institutes have been trying to know the cause and how to contain the situation," said Khurana, the district magistrate in Chamoli district, where Joshimath is located.

"The administration is helping the affected people with everything they need." A flash flood in February 2021 in Chamoli district killed over 200 people and swept away two hydro electric projects, alarming some scientists studying climate change and how it is affecting the world's highest mountains. A town of around 17,000 people in northern Uttarakhand state, Joshimath is a gateway to pilgrimages to Hindu and Sikh shrines, and popular with tourists looking to trek parts of the Himalayas.

Atul Sati, the convener of the Joshimath Bachao Sangharsh Samiti that has been protesting government inaction to stop land subsidence, said local residents had been flagging the issue for months.

"The administration woke up from its slumber when the situation started getting grave and now they started relief efforts," Sati said, "Our town is sinking and we need to save it."

Piyooosh Rautela, executive director of the Uttarakhand government's Disaster Management and Mitigation Centre, said the land subsidence was likely the rest of a breached aquifer—an underground layer of rock that holds water.

"The concerned authorities are working on it and the only way to contain the problem is to channelise the water stream," Rautela told Reuters.

Sankata win Aaha-Rara Cup

Bal scores the decisive goal in extra time to beat Bhutanese Youth SC 3-2 in the final.

SPORTS BUREAU
KATHMANDU, JAN 7

A decisive goal from a newly-recruited forward Sunil Bal gave Martyrs Memorial 'A' Division outfit Sankata Club a 3-2 extra time win over the visiting Bhutanese Youth SC in the summit clash of the Aaha-Rara Pokhara Gold Cup football tournament at the Pokhara Stadium on Saturday.

Nepali international Bal, who also wore the captain's armband since the regular captain Rabi Silwal was benched, tapped a low ball at the far post in the three minutes before the end of additional half an hour as Sankata lifted their second Aaha-Rara title. The match was pushed to added time following a 2-2 stalemate in the regulation 90-minute period.

The victory made Sankata rich by Rs1.2 million while the runners up Bhutanese Youth walked away with a purse of Rs 600,000.

Earlier, Bhutanese Youth made a

dramatic comeback in the first-half after Sankata were 2-0 up in the 35th minute. The newly recruited Suraj Jau Thakuri gave an eighth minute lead to Sankata after he found the ball parried by goalie Pujan Thapa Magar in his bid to block defender Nishan Khadka's cross at the area.

Sankata doubled the advantage in the 35th minute through Cameroonian forward Messouke Oloumou after he found captain Bal's corner in the crowded zone.

When it seemed that Sankata were heading for a big win, Rene Santillon spearheaded the visiting side's comeback reducing the deficit two minutes later. Willis Griffith headed in the first half stoppage time to bring the game on level terms.

As the game was seemingly heading to shootout, Bal netted the decisive goal. Bal had joined Sankata from league champions Machhindra and was appearing in his debut tournament for the new team.

Apart from Bal, Sankata have also recruited defender Gautam Shrestha, midfielder Thakuri, Ayush Ghalan and goalkeeper Tekendra Thapa. They have also signed overseas players Oloumou, Stephen Binong and Andre Thiery Biyik to bolster their squad.

Following the victory, coach Salyan Khadgi said that they had faced a tough challenge and thanked all his players for their full efforts.

Sankata players also dominated the individual awards with Bal winning the best player award. He won a Tailg electric scooter for his efforts. Tailg managing director Sanjeeb Silpakar handed him the key. Sankata's Tikendra Thapa was named the best goalkeeper, Ayush Ghalan, the best midfielder and Stephen Binong, the best forward. Messouke Oloumou ended up with the highest scorer award for his four goals in the tournament. Bhutanese Youth's Hector Orgega was named the best defender, while Dharan FC won fair play award.



Players and officials of Sankata Club celebrate with the trophy of Aaha-Rara Pokhara Gold Cup at the Pokhara Stadium on Saturday.

Biratnagar, Kathmandu enter playoffs

Biratnagar beat Kathmandu to finish third while the latter's fourth place finish was confirmed after Far West see off Pokhara's challenge in their last league game.

SPORTS BUREAU
KATHMANDU, JAN 7

Biratnagar Super Kings and Kathmandu Knights secured the remaining two playoff spots, finishing third and fourth on the last day of the league rounds of Nepal T20 League at the TU cricket ground in Kirtipur on Saturday.

National captain Rohit Paudel-led Biratnagar defeated former captain Gyanendra Malla-led Kathmandu by seven wickets to secure the third place at 10 points. Kathmandu finished fourth on eight points after Far West United, already out of the playoff race, edged past Pokhara Avengers by 41 runs to pour cold water on their top four ambitions.

Lumbini All Stars and Janakpur Royals with 16 points and 14 points respectively, have already entered the playoffs as table toppers and runners up in the six-team contest that sends the top four teams into the playoffs.

Both Far West and Pokhara finished on six points each, but the former ended up in the fifth due to a superior run rate.

Biratnagar and Kathmandu will now contest in the eliminator on Monday while Lumbini and Janakpur will compete in the first qualifier on Sunday. The winner of the qualifier will enter the final while the losing side will take on the winner of the second team to compete in the eliminator.

Biratnagar Super Kings' Rohit Paudel scored half-century against Kathmandu Knights.



Biratnagar Super Kings' Rohit Paudel scored half-century against Kathmandu Knights.

US opener Sharma who remained unbeaten on 51 runs.

Sharma hit four boundaries. Paudel was run out. Hussain Talat played for a 12-ball 21, while Bibek Yadav scored 10 runs, remaining unbeaten, hitting a boundary and a six off the only two deliveries he faced.

Kathmandu bowler Abinash Bohara claimed two wickets in his 3.4 overs spell conceding 35 runs.

In the late fixture, opting to bat first, Far West posted a challenging total of 187/5 after captain Hashmatullah Shahidi and Binod Bhandari slammed a half century each and shared a 134-run partnership for the opening wicket. They bowled out Pokhara for 146 runs in 18.1 overs to complete their third win.

Far West's Afghani captain Shahidi, also the man-of-the-match, smashed 67 off 51 balls, comprising six boundaries and two sixes. He got run out in the 15th over. Bhandari smashed 59 off 47 that included six fours and two sixes before being caught by wicket-keeper Upul Tharanga off Abhimanyu Mithun's delivery.

Milinda Siriwardana (12), Rashid Khan (14) and Karan KC (not out 11) were other contributors for Far West.

In the run chase, Pokhara captain Tharanga scored 36 off 23, the highest of the innings, while Pratish GC played a quickfire knock of 34 off just 11 balls. Siddhant Lohani (28 off 25 balls) and Bishal Bikram KC (15 off 13 balls) were the other major contributors for Pokhara.

Far West bowler Durgesh Gupta returned with figures of 4-0-29-3, while Shahidi and Prakash Jaishi picked up two wickets each.

TODAY'S MATCH
Qualifier 1
Lumbini All Stars vs Janakpur Royals

In the early fixture, Kathmandu elected to bat first and posted a score of 154/6 before Biratnagar captain Paudel and Gauranshu Sharma slammed half centuries each in their run chase to take their team to the winning total of 160/3 in 18.4 overs.

Kathmandu's opener Santosh Karki and Alex Blake contributed 34 runs each. Karki hit three boundaries and a six in his 34-ball knock before captain Paudel had him caught by Bibek Yadav. English batter Blake slammed two hits to the boundary and an equal number of sixes in his 29-ball knock before Nandan Yadav bowled him.

Kathmandu's Sandeep Rajali scored a 24-ball 30, captain Malla a 13-ball 22 and Basir Ahamad an 8-ball unbeaten 17.

West Indies' spinner Raj Nannan grabbed four wickets for Biratnagar in his four over spell conceding 13 runs and bowled a maiden over.

Chasing the target, captain Paudel scored 66 off 42 balls, the highest of the innings, studded with five hits to the fence and three sixes. The player-of-the-match also shared a 94-run stand for the second wicket with the

SCORECARD

NEPAL T20 LEAGUE
29th Match, TU Cricket Ground
Toss: Kathmandu Knights, elected to bat first
A Blake 34 (26), S Karki 34 (34)
R Nannan 4-13, N Yadav 1-28
Biratnagar Super Kings 160-3 (18.4/20 overs)
R Paudel 66 (42), G Sharma* 51 (49)
A Bohara 2-35
Biratnagar win by seven wickets.
Player of the match: Rohit Paudel

30TH MATCH, TU CRICKET GROUND
Toss: Far West United, elected to bat first.
Far West United 187-5 (20 overs)
H Shahidi 67 (51) B Bhandari 59 (47)
A Mithun 2-32, P GC 1-31
Pokhara Avengers 146 (18.1/20 overs)
U Tharanga 36 (23), P GC 34 (11)
D Gupta 3-29, P Jaishi 2-8
Far West win by 41 runs.
Player of the match: Hashmatullah Shahidi

NEPAL T20 TABLE

Teams	P	W	L	Pts	NRR
Lumbini	10	8	2	16	0.984
Janakpur	10	7	3	14	0.667
Biratnagar	10	5	5	10	-0.278
Kathmandu	10	4	6	8	-0.271
Far West	10	3	7	6	-0.227
Pokhara	10	3	7	6	-0.888

Deschamps to remain France coach until 2026

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
PARIS, JAN 7

Didier Deschamps said on Saturday he will remain France coach until the 2026 World Cup after leading the team to the final of the last two editions.

Deschamps' contract expired after the World Cup in Qatar where defending champions France lost to Argentina in a penalty shootout after a thrilling final on December 18. It had been reported that French Football Federation (FFF) president Noel Le Graet only wanted to give Deschamps

a two-year extension until the 2024 European Championship but the 54-year-old coach had insisted on staying in charge until the next World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

"I am going to announce something which for me is an immense pleasure, and that is that the president has decided to extend (my contract) until 2026," Deschamps said at the FFF general assembly. "I thank the president for his constant support and his continued confidence in me."

Former Marseille and Juventus

midfielder Deschamps captained France on home soil when they won their first World Cup in 1998 and he became coach of the national team in 2012.

He guided France to the Euro 2016 final where they lost to Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal and two years later led Les Bleus to glory at the World Cup in Russia, where they beat Croatia 4-2 in the final.

In Qatar, France overcame the loss through injury of world player of the year Karim Benzema just before the tournament to reach the final.

HOROSCOPE

ARIES (March 21-April 19) ****
Working with an artistic outlet can be particularly therapeutic, so don't hold back if you feel the urge to create. News of opportunities for financial success or occupational gain may enter your sphere. Keep your eyes open for industrial gossip.

TAURUS (April 20-May 20) ***
You'll feel like locking the door and staying inside this morning. This might be a good time to take some space for yourself. Otherwise, you could end up lashing out at others. Luckily, you'll feel more elevated and open-hearted as evening rolls in.

GEMINI (May 21-June 21) ****
Your intuition will receive a cosmic boost. Unfortunately, it would be easy to get carried away by these uplifting vibes, making it important that you hold onto logic and reason. You may feel a bit on edge today. Make sure you take deep breaths.

CANCER (June 22-July 22) ***
A lack of movement could leave you feeling frustrated. You should choose your battles wisely, especially when it comes to your closest companions. Make sure you break through your social barriers and forge new alliances today.

LEO (July 23-August 22) ****
You will find yourself in a temperamental mood this morning. Don't feel guilty about cancelling plans in order to focus on self-care, as the universe pushes you to reclaim your sense of harmony. Luckily, your friends will step in to lift you up.

VIRGO (August 23-September 22) ***
You will feel a bit wound up when you awaken this morning. This will act as a wake-up call to prioritise your mental and physical health, marking the perfect occasion to indulge in self-care. You'll begin to feel more vibrant and in control, later.

LIBRA (September 23-October 22) ****
Try not to compare yourselves to others. Doing so could trigger your insecurities and a bruised ego, making it important that you focus on the qualities that make you great. Learn to let go and focus on self-care.

SCORPIO (October 23-November 21) ***
Give yourself permission to navigate your emotions however you see fit, whether doing so results in a total meltdown or raising your walls. Luckily, you'll feel motivated to crawl out of your bed before the afternoon.

SAGITTARIUS (November 22-December 21) ***
Today, your sensitivities will be heightened, and this will leave you open to overstimulation. This celestial exchange will trigger your intuitive gifts, though you'll want to be careful of who you share your secrets with.

CAPRICORN (December 22-January 19) ****
Try not to accumulate any debt today. Invest in your health and wellness and try not to become frustrated if you feel as though your friends are evolving too fast for you. If possible, spend time on meditation and self-introspection.

AQUARIUS (January 20-February 18) ***
Tension and disagreements may brew within your love life. These issues will become intensified if you've been placing too much value on the opinions of your partner. Don't be afraid to share what's in your heart.

PISCES (February 19-March 20) ***
The universe may give you a tough time if you've been slacking on your goals recently. It is time to get you back on track, and it's important that you do so with compassion and love for yourself. You'll feel motivated to live your best life.

Astrology.com

CROSSWORD

ACROSS
1 Loud sound
5 Not glossy, as a photo
10 Wrist-to-elbow bone
14 Film director — Reitman
15 Not fancy
16 Carpenter's item
17 — fide
18 Apples gold leaf
19 Burger mate
20 Buffaloes
22 Political gatherings
24 No problem
27 Noted limerick maker
28 Obsolete
32 Luxurious
36 Miscellany
37 Hay units
39 Sauce with basil
40 Like so
42 Dissatisfied feeling
44 Name in fashion
45 It swims with crocs
47 Chair-back pieces
49 Doze off
50 Utter
51 Geometric figure

DOWN
1 Lobster-eaters' accessories
2 Bard's river
3 Billionth, in combos
4 Nibbled away
5 EPA figure
6 Spinks defeater
7 Soft mineral
8 Kind of wave
9 Follow upon
10 Straightened out
11 Neighbor of Thailand
12 Cleopatra's river
13 Anguished wail
21 Swedish import
23 Dogpatch cartoonist
25 Wild guess

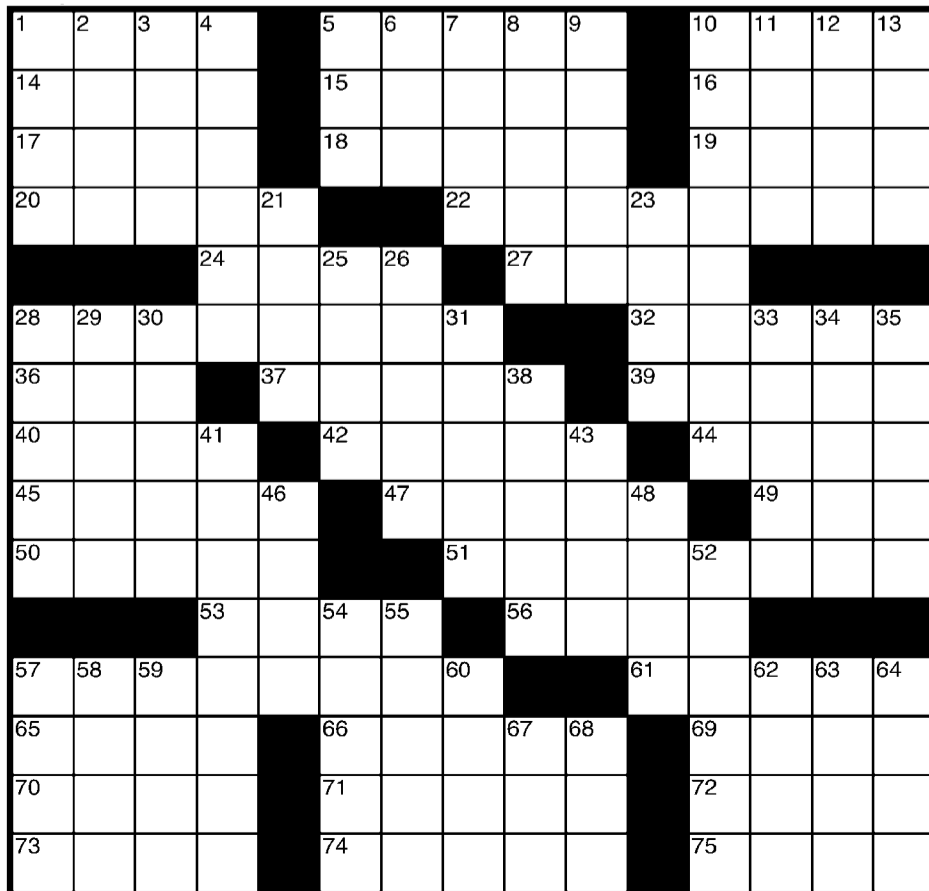
PREVIOUS PUZZLE SOLVED

PLEAT VOCAL BAD
CORGI IDAHO ALE
STROP BOSSA SOS
THERE THINK
CHAMOIS WHALES
ROSIER TWEET
ANTS EGRET CATS
WEEK YAP HERA
LYRE OMITS IRIS
YEAST PONIES
MEREST RAGGEDY
CLOUDS SWIRL
CIA ALIEN EXACT
ODD YARNS RICHT
YES SWEDIE SITIN

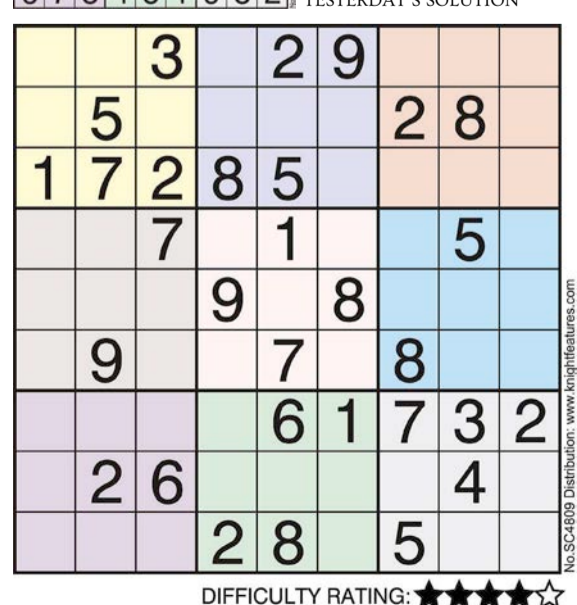
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26 Raises one's voice
28 Courtroom rituals
29 Nerdy
30 Grayish-brown
31 Started a poker game
33 Taking advantage of
34 Pub perch
35 Crowd
38 Stock holding
41 Crack-filling compounds

43 Recipe direction
46 Approve (var.)
48 Well-grounded
52 Closer
54 Aspect
55 Blank a tape
57 Shapeless mass
58 Honda rival
59 Ad award
60 Serving bowl
62 Become a donor
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64 Tear to pieces
67 Before marriage
68 Compass pt.



SUDOKU



DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

FICTION PARK

The killing kiss

After Dr Thapa followed his heart and failed miserably, he couldn't help but feel like a criminal.

SANDESH PARAJULI

Dr Thapa slouched on his swivel chair. His eyes were closed, but his mind was agitated. It had just been a fortnight since nurse Tulaja Shrestha joined the department. She, however, had not reported to the office for the last two days, and his trying to locate her social media accounts had been an utter failure. "I shouldn't have rushed. I should have taken some time to build a bond first by getting to know her better," he murmured to himself. He was achingly ashamed of being a moronic intruder into her life, and all he wanted now was to ask for forgiveness.

A grey telephone sat idly on Dr Thapa's table. Any distress call was imminent. Yet, there had not been one today. Yesterday, he received three calls from young men living in Kathmandu, all sadly wanting to commit suicide. One had failed in love, the second in his career, and the third had lost his family to an accident. Dr Thapa, who was 35 and single, was responsible for answering the suicide prevention helpline number in the outpatient psychiatry department of a reputed hospital. He knew it was a noble job, but not enough, given his ambitions. Having grown up in an orphanage, he never knew who his birth parents were. Yet, he used to be cheerful. He used to believe that things would fall into place. However, the belief has changed now, especially after his heart rushed desperately for love and failed miserably. Every single moment, he felt like a criminal, minutes away from an inevitable arrest.

The telephone's ringing jerked Dr Thapa back to reality. He opened his eyes and gazed at the telephone with his flat and dead eyes. He drew a few deep breaths to freshen up and extended his right arm to reach the handset.

"Hello, Dr Thapa speaking. It's a mental health helpline number, and I am here to help you," he said and hoped the caller would confirm that they had contacted the right place.

There was a brief moment of silence on the other side, and then a soft-spoken male spoke from the other end. "I guess you are a good man, doctor, as I am. It's already past your duty time, but you still chose to answer. I appreciate that."

"Thank you," said Dr Thapa as he peeked at the wall clock, which showed 5:05pm. Caught up in dead rumination, Dr Thapa had completely lost track of time.

"But doctor, when good men, like you and me, make mistakes, we make dreadful ones," the man said with an air of melancholy.

Dr Thapa felt a quick, anxious rush of



cortisol in his veins. He knew he had made a mistake but hadn't yet measured its magnitude. He was a professional and spoke in a warm and kind tone. "Everybody makes mistakes, sir. Rather than dwelling on the ceaseless dungeon of guilt and pity, we are supposed to learn from them. Let's not worry. I feel you are a very good man."

"I am a good man, doctor. I really am. In fact, I believe there are no bad men. There are only good men who make bad decisions simply because they have no other choices."

"Yes, that's true," Dr Thapa said. "Goodness has brought our civilisation here. See, the world is a beautiful place, and when everything around is so majestic, how can we not expect to stumble a few times?"

"Exactly, doctor."

"By the way, what is your name?"

"My name is Jaya Prakash Shrestha, doctor."

"Oh, what a coincidence! We have a common name," Dr Thapa said gleefully. The man laughed softly at the other end. "Now, please, speak your heart out to me Mr Jaya Prakash. I am here to help you."

Dr Thapa heard the caller take a long breath.

"I am in a huge dilemma, doctor," the man said. "What do you think? Should I kill myself?"

"Absolutely not!" Dr Thapa responded immediately.

The doctor knew he had made a mistake but was yet to measure its magnitude.

"But I have to kill one, doctor. If not for me, it has to be someone else," the man said with a mellow, ominous tone.

"That's a terrific dilemma, sir. But why would you want to do that?" asked Dr Thapa.

"I don't, doctor. The goddess wants."

"Goddess? Who?"

"Taleju Bhawani, doctor."

Cultural rhetoric had been set such that any common man feels some power in the name 'Taleju Bhawani' itself. Her temples are only open for one day a year. Dr Thapa had heard about the power the goddess held amongst kings, and the brutal sacrifices she demanded. Kings who worshipped and heeded her had strengthened and expanded their kingdoms, and those who disrespected her had crumbled and collapsed.

"Why would the goddess want a human sacrifice?" asked a concerned Dr Thapa.

"I do not know, doctor. She just asked."

"Can you tell me how exactly she asked?"

"Yes, doctor. I opened up my soul to the goddess while my body slumbered, and she spoke to me in my visions. She isn't happy with 54 male goats and 54 male buffaloes she was offered during Kalaratri Puja at the midnight of Ashoj Shukla Asthami. I reckon she needs some premium stuff now. And, what could be better than man's, who has almost tasted every flesh, sometimes obscenely," the man said, the last two words with a slow, husky, and dreadful tone.

Somewhere in the dubious corners of his heart, Dr Thapa began to feel that the man could be dangerous. If the prospective patient depicts any real probability of violence to oneself or others, then Dr Thapa was trained to inform the police immediately. However, the truth was not yet established, so he thought it reasonable to wait and watch.

"But sir, why would Taleju Bhawani want to drink the blood of a random innocent man?" asked Dr Thapa.

"Not a random person, doctor. She specifically wants a man who goes by the name of the last Malla king of Kathmandu, the king who grossly tried to seduce her one night while secretly playing tripasa with her," the man said.

"So, instead of searching for the man and taking his innocent life, you are considering committing suicide to free yourself from the goddess' expectations?" asked Dr Thapa.

"No, doctor. I have already found the man."

"Oh, have you?" asked Dr Thapa worriedly.

The man gave a soft dramatic laugh and said, "Doctor, I didn't expect you to be a bad student of history. Now just tell me, should I kill myself, or should I kill YOU?"

"What?" Dr Thapa got thunderstruck. He hastily Googled the name of the last Malla king and found it was Jaya Prakash Malla.

"You freaking stupid religious fanatic," Dr Jaya Prakash Thapa reproached the man with disdain, anger, and anguish. His heart had already developed some cracks, and with this ignition, it burst like an enormously compressed pressure vessel.

"Who the hell are you?"

The man let out a dreadful laugh and roared, "You think I am some stupid, ensorcelled man? I was just fooling around, old boy. Save yourself. I am coming for you. I am the husband of nurse Tulaja Shrestha, the woman you attempted to kill."

Dr Thapa immediately hung up the phone. He had simple fears, like a ruined friendship with Tulaja or, at worst, Tulaja making a police case against him. This fear, however, was new. It was the fear of the unknown that rippled his cells straight away.

He anxiously entered the washroom, turned on the faucet, splashed his face, and rested his hands over the granite-topped vanity sink. He looked at the mirror and watched his white eyeballs bulge between his temples as water dripped down his demented face. "I am a stupid human being messed up with foolish desires and distant hopes. Now, my mere existence hangs at a wretched precipice. Will I only wake up after a fall?" Dr Thapa murmured and slapped his face multiple times.

With each slap, guilt began to melt, and his mind flooded with questions.

Is it so punishable to love someone without knowing anything but their beauty?

I didn't know she was married. Why did she agree to go for dinner with me?

Why didn't she protest when I pulled my chair closer to her?

Why didn't it feel like a normal glance when she looked into my eyes?

When she spoke, why did it feel like a song, a poem, a whisper of an angel pulling me deeper and deeper into her soul?

And, how am I supposed to enter the soul? Isn't it through the lips?

The answers to these questions will remain as elusive as ever.

Parajuli is a student of aerospace engineering at IOE, Pulchowk Campus.

Pamper time at Tranquility Spa

The company's spa outlets offer dozens of massage options to choose from.



POST REPORT
KATHMANDU

In a city where spa choices are just endless, Tranquility Spa has made a name for itself. The company operates spas at some of the city's leading hotels, like Hotel Radisson, Shankar Hotel, and The Soaltee Kathmandu. Apart from hotel spas, the company also has its own standalone spas in Lazimpat, Thamel, Kupondol, and Pokhara.

If you are in the mood to beat those winter blues and pamper yourself with some blissful massages, head to Tranquility Spa. Apart from classic spa services like Swedish and trekker's massages, the centre also offers lesser-known services such as spinal massage, picu, and shirodhara. Tranquility Spa's outlets also provide salon services.

The company also has gift vouchers for those interested in gifting their loved ones spa massages. They also come up with packages for special occasions.

Location: Multiple outlets
For bookings: 01-4425386, 01-4420424, 9801021262

The delightful Nagomi Japanese Restaurant

Delicious Japanese food topped with impeccable service is what you get at this small eatery.



POST REPORT
KATHMANDU

In the last few years, Kathmandu's restaurant scene has become deliciously exciting, with so many restaurants serving cuisines from all over the world. One such cuisine that is gaining popularity among Kathmandu Valley's residents is Japanese. The Valley now has plenty of Japanese restaurants, many of which go to great lengths to ensure that their food remains as authentic as possible.

A Japanese restaurant in the city that has earned a loyal following for its offerings is Thamel's Nagomi Japanese Restaurant. The chef at this humble eatery has spent years mastering Japanese cuisine and now dishes out some delicious authentic dishes. During tourist seasons, the restaurant usually remains packed to the brim with Japanese tourists. While the food is undeniably good, another reason that makes you want to keep coming back is its impeccable service.

What: Nagomi Japanese Restaurant
Where: J P Marg, Thamel
Opening hours: 9am to 9pm
Contact: 01-4249053
Parking: Available

Staycation at Lavie Residence and Spa

The hotel's winter package is for those seeking a getaway within the city.

POST REPORT
KATHMANDU

If you are looking for a staycation in the Baudha area, head to Lavie Residence and Spa, Ramhiti, Baudha. The hotel has come up with a special winter package to cater to those looking for a getaway within the city.

At Rs 5,000 (including taxes) for two people, the package includes welcome drinks, a spacious deluxe AC room, Thakali dinner, and continental breakfast served with barista-made coffee.

The hotel's location also makes it a great base to explore Baudha. The famous Baudha stupa is less than a 10-minute walk from the hotel, and the locality's alleys that are famous for restaurants serving dishes like laphing and dry noodles are all within walking distance.

What: Winter Warmer Package
Where: Lavie Residence and Spa, Ramhiti, Baudha
Price: Rs 5,000 (including taxes) for two
Bookings: 01-4913613

