



# THE KATHMANDU POST

WITHOUT FEAR OR FAVOUR

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24.6° C -5.4° C  
Dipayal Jumla

## TODAY

### NATIONAL

Health workers manning the health desks at border points across Sudurpaschim Province have not been paid for six months. Amidst an increased workload and health risk, the employees feel cheated. **Pg 2**

Prime Minister Dahal on Wednesday defended the deals with India on long-term power trade and High Impact Community Development Projects signed during the recent visit by the external affairs minister of India. **Pg 3**

### OPINION

Despite his disastrous stints both as prime minister of the country and as leader of his party, were a poll to be held today to gauge the popularity of our leading politicians, KP Sharma Oli would top it, writes **Deepak Thapa**. **Pg 4**



### MONEY

Mustard farms are back. Nowadays, vast stretches of land in Chitwan are covered with yellow blossoms. The real estate boom of 2008 affected the cash crop's yield as farmers had shifted to vegetable farming. **Pg 5**

### WORLD

Ancient DNA helps explain why northern Europeans have a higher risk of multiple sclerosis than other ancestries: It's a genetic legacy of horse-riding cattle herders who swept into the region 5,000 years ago. **Pg 6**

### SPORTS



Iga Swiatek is in form as she seeks a maiden Australian Open crown, but she could face a stiff test from defending champion Aryna Sabalenka while two-time winner Naomi Osaka is making her comeback. **Pg 7**

## 'Buddha Boy' Bomjan to face rape trial at Sarlahi district court

Before taking him to Malangawa on Wednesday, police made him public in Kathmandu along with Rs33.43 million in confiscated cash.



Officers at the Central Investigation Bureau of Nepal Police present Ram Bahadur Bomjan (in white) to media in Kathmandu on Wednesday.

PRITHVI MAN SHRESTHA  
KATHMANDU, JAN 10

Police on Wednesday took controversial spiritual leader Ram Bahadur Bomjan to Sarlahi to face trial at the District Court, Sarlahi over a charge of raping a minor girl.

A team of the Central Investigation Bureau (CIB) of Nepal Police on Tuesday arrested him from a house located at ward 6 of Budhanilkantha Municipality in Kathmandu.

Police on Wednesday made him public at a press meet in Kathmandu before taking him to Sarlahi.

Besides rape charges, Bomjan also faces accusations of potential involvement in the disappearance of four of his disciples from his hermitages. But no cases have yet been registered at the court relating to the missing persons, police said.

"We will present him at the District Court in Sarlahi on Thursday," Senior Superintendent of Police Dinesh Acharya told the Post.

"He will be kept in police custody in Sarlahi on Wednesday."

Bomjan had been in hiding since the District Court, Sarlahi on February 6, 2020, issued an arrest warrant against him as per a police request. In July 2020, a case of sexual exploitation was filed against Bomjan in the District Court, Sarlahi.

In the chargesheet, the District Attorney Office, Sarlahi has demanded 12-15 years of prison for Bomjan and his two aides, Gyan Kumar Bomjan and Jit Bahadur Tamang, for their alleged involvement in the sexual exploitation of the minor. The chargesheet accuses Bomjan, the prime suspect, of raping a 15-year-old girl staying in his ashram (hermitage)

at Pattharkot, Sarlahi, as an Ani (nun).

The case filed against the main accused Bomjan stated that he raped the minor by luring her to his private quarters at 9:20pm on August 4, 2016. He has further been charged with threatening the girl with consequences if she disclosed the incident to others. After the victim turned 18, on February 23, 2020, a complaint against him was registered at the District Police Office in Sarlahi.

Before the rape complaint was registered with the police, other complaints about missing persons from several of his hermitages were also filed.

Other complaints about missing persons from several of his ashrams were also registered.

According to police, Chinimaya Tamang of Myagang Rural Municipality, who was one of his disciples, has been missing since 2012 from Bomjan's hermitage at Badegaun in Sindhupalchok. Sanchalal Waiba, another disciple from Hetauda, has also been missing from the same hermitage since 2015.

Phulmaya Rumba, who was known as Dolmo, from the Hetauda Sub-Metropolitan City, and Suresh Kumar Ale from Simara Sub-Metropolitan City are the others missing from his hermitages for a long time, according to the police. "They are yet to be found," said SSP Acharya.

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## Sandeep Lamichhane gets eight years in jail after rape conviction

His lawyers say they will appeal the district court's ruling.

BINOD GHIMIRE  
KATHMANDU, JAN 10

Kathmandu District Court on Wednesday sentenced cricketer Sandeep Lamichhane to eight years in jail and imposed a fine of half a million rupees for raping a girl in 2022.

A single bench of judge Shishir Raj Dhakal, which had convicted the former captain of the national cricket team on December 29, pronounced the jail term and fine after further hearing.

The jail term and penalty were determined considering the age of Gaushala-26, the name given to the victim, the social status of the accused when the incident happened and the mental stress the victim had to endure, according to Chandra Prasad Panthi, information officer at the district court.

"Eight years of jail term was determined as per Section 219 3 (e) of the Criminal Code Procedure while the financial penalty was fixed as per Section 228," Panthi said.

The half a million rupees—which Rs300,000 is fine and the remaining compensation—would be paid to the victim.

A person convicted under Section 219 could face a jail term between seven and 10 years.

On Wednesday, Lamichhane's lawyers demanded the lowest possible punishment, asking the court to consider his contribution to the country through cricket and his social standing.

The victim's lawyers, however, had asked his jail term be

increased by at least 50 percent as he had misused his celebrity status.

Lamichhane's lawyers have already announced that they will challenge the district court's ruling in high court. Even though he has been convicted, Lamichhane can continue his legal fight without being arrested.

"Sandeep is not guilty. We are against the verdict," said advocate Saroj Krishna Ghimire, Lamichhane's lawyer. "We will challenge the verdict in the high court."

After a 15-month-long judicial process, the court on December 29 convicted Lamichhane of raping the girl in a Tilganga-based hotel on August 21, 2022.

Citing his misuse of celebrity status, victim's lawyers had sought longer jail term.

After hearing the lawyers on both sides, the court ruled there was no dispute that Lamichhane and the victim had stayed in the same room of the hotel where she was raped.

"The accused had raped the victim taking advantage of her poor economic condition," the verdict said.

The court, however, had dismissed the victim's claim that she was a minor at the time. The court has also refused to accept the birth dates mentioned in her academic documents.

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## 2023 warmest year in Nepal in 13 years

Minimum temperature this winter has risen 1 to 2 degrees Celsius above normal.



Tourists enjoy themselves on the frozen Narchyang Panchakunda lake in Annapurna Rural Municipality of Myagdi in November, 2023.

ARJUN POUDEL  
KATHMANDU, JAN 10

The year 2023 is the warmest in Nepal in 13 years and the second warmest in the past 42 years.

According to the Department of Hydrology and Meteorology, which maintains records of temperature, precipitation and other meteorological activities, the country received lower-than-normal precipitation, with

the average maximum temperature rising above 0.7 degrees Celsius between January and October last year.

"The average maximum temperature of the country during January to October was 28 degrees Celsius, which is the second warmest year since 1981. It was +0.7 degrees Celsius above normal," said Sudarshan Humagain, a meteorologist at the department. "In 2010, the average maximum tempera-

ture was 28.1 degrees Celsius."

Officials say that the final data for November and December is yet to be updated, which could make some difference in calculating average temperature increase.

A report prepared by the department states that during the same 10 months, the country received 11 percent lower-than-normal rainfall, which is the sixth lowest precipitation since 1981. The average maximum temperature from January to October was 0.7°C above normal. The average minimum temperature in the period was 0.2°C above normal.

In the first two months of the year, the country experienced a significant deficit in monthly precipitation, registering 71 percent and 82 percent below normal. However, in March, there was a notable increase, with precipitation exceeding the normal levels by 58 percent. Subsequently, from April to July, the precipitation stayed from 16 percent to 21 percent below the normal level. August witnessed increased rainfall of 14 percent above normal, while September got lower-than-normal precipitation by 36 percent and October above normal by 39 percent.

The average maximum temperature was above 30°C in southern parts of the country, while in the northern parts, it was below 15°C.

>> Continued on page 2

## NATIONAL

## DISTRICT DIGEST

## Two killed, 10 injured in Tanahun jeep accident

**TANAHUN:** Two people died and 10 others were injured, some seriously, when a passenger jeep swerved off the road and fell around 150 metres at ward 3 of Sunakot Barathumki in Bhimad Municipality in the district on Wednesday. The vehicle was heading for Rampur of Palpa from Pokhara. Police identified the deceased as Rum Bahadur BK, 42, and Jemalal Darai, 55, of ward 2 of Baudikali Rural Municipality. The critically injured duo died in the course of treatment at GP Koirala National Centre for Respiratory Diseases in Belchautara, Tanahun.

## Motorcyclist killed in a road accident

**NAWALPUR:** A 22-year-old motorcyclist, resident of ward 10 of Machhapuchhre Rural Municipality of Kaski, died in a road accident in the Harakpur section of the East-West Highway in ward 12 of Gaiandkot Municipality on Wednesday. According to Deputy Superintendent of Police Bed Bahadur Paudel at Nawalparasi East District Police Office, the motorcyclist died after being hit by a truck on the East-West highway. Both the truck and the motorcycle have been impounded after the accident. The truck driver is in police custody, and further investigation regarding the accident is going on, said Paudel.

## Fire destroys houses, kills 45 goats in barn



**KHOTANG:** Two houses and a barn belonging to one Tulsiram Chaulagani, located in Khotang Bazar in ward 7 of Khotang Rural Municipality, were burned to the ground when a fire broke out at his house on Tuesday night. Forty-five goats in the barn were killed in the incident. According to Police Inspector Benu Karki, spokesperson of the District Police Office, the fire started at around 7 pm and was brought under control by the fire engine of the rural municipality after four hours at around 11 pm. The cause of the fire is still unknown. One person was arrested for questioning on Wednesday under suspicion of being involved in the incident, said police.

## Health workers manning Covid desks on Nepal-India border unpaid for six months

Amidst the increased workload and health risk following a resurgence of coronavirus cases, the health workers feel cheated.

□ **BHAWANI BHATTAR**  
KANCHANPUR, JAN 10

The health workers manning the health desks at border points across Sudurpaschim province have not been paid their salaries for the last six months. Amidst the increased workload and health risk given the resurgence of coronavirus cases, the employees feel cheated by the government.

The Gaddachauki border point in Kanchanpur reinforced testing for coronavirus among those crossing into Nepal from India through the border point last month in light of reports of the spread of coronavirus infections in India.

On Tuesday, two people returning from India tested positive for coronavirus in an antigen test at the Gaddachauki border point. The Ministry of Health and Population has instructed the health desks to tighten border crossings to stop the spread of the new variant JN.1 seen in India and also in Nepal.

The ministry issued a notice to increase surveillance at border checkpoints and to follow safety standards. However, the health desks are short on manpower and those who are working have not received their salaries since July last year.

According to Prem Singh Bhandari, in charge of the health desk in Gaddachauki, currently there are 12 health workers at the desk and they are in need of additional manpower.

"We are working extra hours without additional manpower, but we still have not received our salaries for six months," said Bhandari. "Every health worker here is going through financial problems and facing difficulties to manage their daily expenses. Now the government expects us



PHOTO COURTESY: GADDACHAUKI HEALTH DESK  
A health worker at the health desk at Gaddachauki border point in Kanchanpur collects nasal swab from a Nepali national returning home from India, in this recent photo.

to work longer hours without pay."

As of Tuesday, 12 people crossing into Nepal through the Gaddachauki border point tested positive in antigen tests for coronavirus.

Ganesh Saud, the in-charge of the health desk in Gauriphanta, two people entering Nepal through the Gauriphanta checkpoint tested positive in antigen tests for coronavirus on Tuesday.

"There are 11 health workers at the Gauriphanta border point. Among those crossing into Nepal, at least one or two have been testing positive for coronavirus daily. The risks have increased for us but the government has yet to pay us our salaries," said Saud. "The health directorate of Sudurpaschim province said that they don't have the budget to pay us. They said the Ministry of Health and Population and the Department of Health Services have not sent the budget to the directorate to pay our salaries."

Around 600 people enter Nepal from Gaddachauki and Gauriphanta border points daily.

According to Saud, in the third week of December nine people returning home from Delhi, Bangalore and Chandigarh tested positive for coronavirus. Their swab samples were sent to the National Public Health Laboratory, Kathmandu, for testing.

Saud said that according to the report of the National Public Health Laboratory, BA.1 and BA.2 variants of Omicron were found in the samples sent from the Gauriphanta border point. "At least 25 to 30 people are tested daily for Covid using antigen tests," said Saud.

Health desks have been set up in four places in the Sudurpaschim Province—Gauriphanta in Kailali, Gaddachauki in Kanchanpur, Jhulaghat in Baitadi, and one in Darchula. Although the

health desks were established by the local units, the Department of Health Services has been managing the staff and their salaries.

Hemraj Joshi, the Covid focal person of the Provincial Health Directorate, said that they have not been able to pay the salaries of the health workers due to a lack of budget.

According to Joshi, 27 health workers are working on a contract basis at the four health desks of Sudurpaschim.

"Last year, a budget of Rs11.8 million was allocated for the directorate by the department, but this year only Rs1.8 million was allocated," said Joshi. "None of the health workers have received their salaries since July."

According to the Ministry of Health and Population, 16 samples of different age groups collected from different areas were tested on January 7, and seven samples were found to have Omicron's sub-variant JN.1.

Due to the outbreak of the new variant, the ministry has been notified to increase testing at the border checkpoints and has also informed the health workers to stay prepared if the situation gets out of control.

The World Health Organisation classifies JN.1 as a separate 'variant of interest' given its rapid spread around the globe. The UN health body, however, said that based on available data, "the additional public health risk posed by JN.1 is currently evaluated as low".

Several countries, including China, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore, have reported upticks in new coronavirus cases. The JN.1 strain, first detected in September in the United States, is a descendant of BA.2.86, a highly-mutated variant of the Omicron strain of the coronavirus.

## Erratic weather getting more frequent in Nepal, experts say

>> Continued from page 1

Nepal observed a significant increase in monthly maximum temperatures, ranging from +0.8°C and +1.9°C above normal in January and February, respectively. In March, maximum temperatures were below the usual levels, while April recorded normal maximum temperatures, even as May experienced temperatures below the average.

As June unfolded, maximum temperatures exceeded the normal range by +1.9°C, and in July, the deviation was +0.7°C. August witnessed temperatures below the normal. September and October witnessed temperatures above the normal range by +1.5°C and +0.4°C, respectively. "Maximum temperature of the ongoing winter is also one to two degrees Celsius above the normal," said Humagani.

The minimum temperature was above 18°C in the southern parts and below 0°C in the northern parts. The average minimum temperature of Nepal between January and October was 16.1°C, +0.2°C warmer than normal. Monthly minimum temperatures in Nepal were above normal in all months from January to October except in April and May.

In the third week of April, hot days and mild to moderate heatwave conditions in the southern parts of the country lasted a week. A sudden increase in maximum temperatures by the end of May led to mild to severe heatwave conditions over large parts of the country and this continued until the second week of June.

The heat wave persisted over central and western parts of the country until the third week of June, before the onset of monsoon in the region. The temperature exceeded 42°C for a few days in some places in the southern parts, especially Kapilvastu, Rupandehi, Nawalparasi West,

Chitwan, Parsa, Bara, Sarlahi, Dhanusha, Mahottari and Siraha districts. The normal monsoon onset and withdrawal date in Nepal is June 13 and October 2, respectively. A period of four months, June to September, is considered the monsoon season. This year, the monsoon entered eastern Nepal one day later than the normal onset day and withdrew from eastern Nepal on October 15, a delay of 13 days. The duration of the monsoon was 124 days, which was 12 days longer than the normal monsoon period (112 days).

This year, several stations broke previous records of extreme temperature and precipitation. Bandipur in Tanahun, Chatara in Sunsari, Chautara in Sindhupalchok, Dharan Bazaar in Sunsari, Damkauli in Nawalparasi East, Gorkha, Janakpur Airport of Dhanusha, Kanyam Tea Estate of Ilam, Okhaldhunga, Chitwan, Simara Airport of Bara, and Siraha recorded extreme temperatures. The weather station of Diktel in Khotang recorded 158.6 mm rainfall in 2023, the highest daily precipitation ever recorded. Nepal is one of the countries most vulnerable to the climate crisis in the world and has witnessed extreme weather events over the past decade and a half.

Evidence indicates that the maximum temperature in Nepal is rising at a greater rate (0.05 degrees Celsius per year) than the minimum temperature (0.03 degrees Celsius per year).

"The year 2023 could be the warmest in the last four decades," said Humagani. "This winter is also among the warmest." Experts say extreme weather events—excessive rainfall in a short span of time, continuous rain for several days in the post-monsoon period, dry spells and droughts, below-average precipitation and above-normal temperatures in winter—have become more frequent in Nepal.

## Stash of cash found at Bomjan's hideout

>> Continued from page 1

In January 2019, police raided his hermitage at Kamalamai in Sindhuli district after complaints were registered by the families of those missing, but the police failed to locate Bomjan.

In the same month, the police had raided another of his hermitages at Sindhupalchowk, but once again failed to trace Bomjan.

The Sindhuli Ashram was again raided in June 2020, but the police failed to find Bomjan that time too.

During those raids, police had faced non-cooperation and even obstruction from his followers, according to police. According to SSP Acharya, despite their obstructions, police had reached his hermitages, but each time Bomjan would already have escaped.

Four years after the filing of the rape case against Bomjan, police could quietly arrest him from Kathmandu. "We reached the place where he lived, and there were not many followers protecting him," said SSP Acharya. "He was living a normal life with his wife and two children."

According to SSP Acharya, police were on the lookout for Bomjan in the

area based on a tip-off. "After we confirmed that he was staying there, we immediately conducted an operation to arrest him," he said.

When the police reached the house, Bomjan tried to escape again. "He jumped from the southern window of the fourth floor to the sloped land outside, but we did not let him get away this time," said Superintendent of Police Nawaraj Adhikari, the CIB spokesman.

CIB chief AIG Kiran Bajracharya said a high level of secrecy made Bomjan's arrest possible without much resistance by his followers. "In the past, he managed to evade arrest as such arrest attempts were rather public."

Along with his arrest, police also confiscated cash totalling Rs33.43 million including foreign currencies of 17 various countries worth Rs3.092 million. According to the CIB, a Toyota Hilux key, ownership documents of three two-wheelers, and multiple electronic devices including 14 mobile phones of different brands, laptops, pen drives, iPads, and tablets were also seized during the search operation.

SSP Acharya said that police would investigate Bomjan for possessing illegal money. "He can face charges of money laundering and foreign exchange misappropriation," said SSP Acharya.

According to the police, Bomjan had been using a Toyota Fortuner SUV registered in the name of Tularam Tamang. A Land Cruiser ZX, an expensive car, was also set to be purchased for Bomjan's use. The prospective buyer was Panit Maharjan, chairman of Bodhi Shrawan Dharma Sangh.

"The car was booked for Rs50 million," the police said. "They had already paid Rs30 million." According to the police, he had also been using motorcycles of various brands.

Bomjan had shot to fame in 2005 after purportedly meditating for months without food, water or sleep. He had been dubbed the 'Buddha Boy' by the media. After emerging from his meditation, he and his followers had set up ashrams in Bara, Sarlahi, Sindhupalchok, and Sindhuli districts where the alleged abuses took place, the police said.



POST PHOTO: ANGAD DHAKAL  
The Central Investigative Bureau of Nepal Police, at its office in Maharajgunj in Kathmandu on Wednesday, makes public wads of cash, including Nepali and foreign currencies, recovered during Tuesday's raid at Ram Bahadur Bomjan's hideout in Budhanilkantha on the north of Kathmandu.

## Lamichhane's lawyers to mount appeal

>> Continued from page 1

The documents show she was 17 at the time of the incident. "After evaluating Gaushala 26's birth registration at Raluka VDC, Nuwakot, migration registration at Shankarapur Municipality, Kathmandu, birth registration at Narayani Sub-regional Hospital, Birgunj and her own statement, the court determines that she was born on July 4, 2004, and was 18 years old when the incident happened," the court had said.

The victim's lawyers said they were not satisfied with the court's pronouncement that the victim was an adult at the time of the incident. "Existing documents clearly show the

victim was 17 when the incident happened," senior advocate Sunita Regmi, who fought the case on behalf of the victim, told the Post. "I believe the government will also challenge the district court's ruling in the high court."

Gaushala-26 had lodged her complaint against Lamichhane on September 6, 2022, two weeks after the incident.

When the investigation started, Lamichhane was in the West Indies to play in the Caribbean Premier League. He was arrested from the Tribhuvan International Airport upon his return on October 6, 2022.

On November 4 last year, the Kathmandu District Court ordered that Lamichhane be sent to the Sundhara-based Central Jail after a detention hearing.

Lamichhane had moved the high court, challenging the order.

On January 12, a division bench of high court judges Dhruva Raj Nanda and Ramesh Dahal decided to release him on bail while the investigation continued. Following the verdict, Lamichhane was released from custody on January 13 after posting a bail of two million rupees. The court, however, had barred him from travelling abroad and ordered him to inform the police beforehand if he had to leave Kathmandu.

Dissatisfied with the travel restrictions, Lamichhane moved the Supreme Court, challenging the high court's decision. On February 27, a division bench of justices Sapana Pradhan Malla and Kumar Chudal had ruled in favour of the cricketer's petition, allowing him to travel abroad to play cricket.

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Koshi Province  
Ministry of Health  
Province Health Logistic Management Center  
Invitation for Bids  
Date of publication: 11<sup>th</sup> January 2024  
Invitation for Bids No: PHLMC-KOSHI/G/NCB-6(Ayurvedic Medicine)/2080-81

- The Ministry of Health, Province Health logistic Management Center invites electronic bids from eligible bidders for the procurement of Ayurvedic Medicines under National competitive bidding – Single Stage Two Envelope procedures
- Under the Single Stage, Two Envelope Procedure, Bidders are required to submit simultaneously two separate sealed envelopes, one containing (i) the Technical Bid and the other (ii) the Price Bid, both in turn enclosed in one sealed envelope as per the provision of ITB 23 of the Bidding Document.
- A Bidder who chooses to submit their bid electronically may download the bidding documents for e-submission from PPMO's e-GP system www.bolpatra.gov.np/egp. Bidders, submitting their bid electronically, should deposit the cost of bidding document in the following Rajaswa (revenue) account as specified below. Or

Information to deposit the cost of bidding document in Bank:  
Name of the Bank: Rashtriya Banijya Bank, Biratnagar Office Code no. :3700113011  
Name of Office: Province Health Logistics Management Center, Biratnagar Office Account no.:1000100201010001  
Rajaswa (revenue) Shirshak no. : 14229

- Pre-bid meeting shall be held at Province Health Logistic Management Center at 1<sup>st</sup> February 2024 (Magh 18, 2080) Time: 1:00PM
- Electronic bids must be submitted through PPMO's e-GP system www.bolpatra.gov.np/egp on or before 12:00 noon on 11<sup>th</sup> February 2024 (Magh 28, 2080). Bids received after this deadline will be rejected.
- The bids will be opened in the presence of Bidders' representatives who choose to attend at 2:00PM on 11<sup>th</sup> February 2024 (Magh 28, 2080), at the office of Province Health Logistic Management Center. Bids must be valid for a period of 90 days from the date of bid opening and must be accompanied by a bid security or scanned copy of the bid security in pdf format in case of e-bid, amounting to a minimum of NRs. 375000/-, which shall be valid for 30 days beyond the validity period of the bid (i.e 12 June 2024)
- If the last date of purchasing and/or submission falls on a government holiday, then the next working day shall be considered as the last date. In such case the validity period of the bid and bid security shall remain the same as specified for the original last date of bid submission

S. N.	Contract Identification No.	Description of Items	Cost of Bidding document (Nrs)	Account No.	Amount of Bid Security (Nrs)	Bid Security
1.	PHLMC-KOSHI/G/NCB-2 (Ayurvedic Medicines)/ 2080-81	Procurement of Ayurvedic Medicines	3000.00	2120100202030000	375000.00	12 June 2024

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## Ex-Police DIG Shah sentenced to three years in jail

POST REPORT  
KATHMANDU, JAN 10

The Special Court on Wednesday sentenced former Deputy Inspector General of Nepal Police Mahesh Bikram Shah to three years in prison on corruption charges.

A bench comprising Special Court Chairperson Tek Narayan Kunwar and members Tej Narayan Singh Rai and Ritendra Thapa ordered recovery of Rs1.6 million that he embezzled and slapped an equal fine. Shah was found guilty of corruption when he was the chief of the then Mid Regional Police Training Centre, Dudhauri, Sindhuli.

The court also ordered an equal punishment for former Sub Inspector of Police Dipendra Paneru in the same case. Two other accused—accountant Sanjeev Bishunke and Police Head Constable Keshav Singh Airee—have been acquitted.

## World Bank projects 5 percent growth for Nepal in 2024-25

POST REPORT  
KATHMANDU, JAN 10

The World Bank has projected five percent economic growth rate for Nepal for the fiscal year 2024-25.

The bank in its report 'Global Economic Prospects, 2024', the estimated positive development in economic status in 2024/25 as compared to the previous year.

In the current fiscal year, the economic growth rate will remain 3.9 percent, it said, attributing improvements in industry and service sectors to the better economic growth rate. Similarly, flexible monetary policy and lift on the ban on selected imports will contribute positively, the bank said.

In the global scenario, tight monetary policies adopted by central banks of large economies and world trade and investment waiting for smooth recovery are behind low economic growth rates. The global growth rate is projected at 2.4 percent in 2024. (RSS)

# Dahal defends deals signed during Jaishankar's visit

On increased grant from India for small projects, the prime minister says other countries too have been spending in Nepal similarly.

POST REPORT  
KATHMANDU, JAN 10

Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal on Wednesday defended the agreements with India on long-term power trade and High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs). These agreements were signed during the recent visit of External Affairs Minister of India S Jaishankar.

During the seventh meeting of the Nepal-India Joint Commission held in Kathmandu last week, the two sides inked four different agreements. Two of the deals have created uproar in several circles whereby the prime minister was asked to clarify the government's position.

Defending the deals with India during a meeting of the Law, Justice and Human Rights Committee of Parliament, Prime Minister Dahal said that just like India, others like China, the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia had been running similar small grant projects in Nepal.

Though the procedures might be different, "we had a similar agreement with Japan some 60 years ago and the country has been carrying out its programmes through various nongovernmental organisations and UN agencies."

Similarly, in all its economic assistance provided to Nepal, China asks for its own consultants and contractors and the project is implemented through its own mechanism, said the prime minister.

The United States too has been picking its own implementing agency for the projects it finances, he said.

"The United Kingdom utilises the majority of its assistance via international consultants and Australia is implementing its projects through its own nongovernmental organisations," said Dahal.

"There is no provision in the agreement recently signed with India giving the latter the luxury of unilaterally selecting and implementing projects. And regular monitoring and periodic review of the projects that receive the funds under the HICDPs are carried out by the mechanisms of the Nepal government."

In the meeting, some lawmakers including CPN-UML whip Mahesh Bartuala, Pratiksha Tiwari, Sobita Gautam, and Dhruva Bahadur Pradhan sought clarifications on the agreement from the prime minister.



Prime Minister Dahal (centre) speaks in the parliamentary committee on Wednesday.

Jeevan Pariyar of the Nepali Congress said the government should regulate foreign assistance and receive aid as per its priorities and needs.

Bartula termed the agreement with India a "treason". "This is unacceptable," he said. "The new agreement with India, under which per project budget has been increased from Rs50 million to Rs200 million, should be scrapped immediately."

Given the historical context of the HICDP of India, the prime minister said it was launched in November 2003 and India provided Rs30 million to execute a project through the local bodies. When it was renewed in 2006, the budget increased from Rs30 million to Rs50 million.

The programme, known as small grant projects, was renewed in 2011 and 2014 but not in 2017 as the grant modality contradicted the new constitution Nepal promulgated in 2015. The constitution does not permit direct foreign aid to the local and provincial governments. Later, in December 2017, the small grant project was renamed HICDP with new terms and conditions.

In July, 2018 some modalities and terms of references were changed and brought under the ambit of budgetary support to Nepal. More changes were made in July 2018 and April 2019. As per the new modality, three agreements were signed in January 2020, August 2020 and January 2024, said the prime minister.

When the new modality was agreed in 2018 and 2019, then KP Oli was the prime minister and Yubraj Khatiwada was the finance minister.

He said other countries were spending money in Nepal in similar ways.

"Just because we have been taking assistance for a long time does not mean that we have to take it now... We have been taking this particular assistance for a long time but we have also tightened the conditions. If taking 50 million was not against national interest, increasing the assistance to Rs20 million is not against national interest," said the prime minister while responding to the queries of parliamentarians.

The ministry of finance also offered its clarification on the use of the Indian assistance on January 4, the day Nepal and India renewed the agreement. Some sections of the political fraternity and civil society opposed the agreement.

Dahal stated that there is no need to hide anything from Parliament and the government is ready to share each and every decision with the House. This particular agreement was ratified several times in the past and the current government has done nothing new, he said.

"This decision was given formality when the Indian foreign minister came here. The government had already made the decision from the Cabinet some 20 days back," the prime minister said. "It is not like it happened after Jaishankar came."

Besides the long-term power trade deal, more agreements were signed with India last week during Jaishankar's visit. They are related to putting Nepal's nano-satellite Munal in space with the support of India's space agency, and renewable energy.

Dahal claimed that the agreement

to export 10,000 megawatts of electricity to India in the next 10 years has opened another avenue for power trade between the two countries.

India has expressed reservations over buying electricity from Nepal's projects involving Chinese contractors and companies. Though everyone is free to invest and produce energy in Nepal, the Indian side has reservations over buying energy produced by the Chinese companies/contractors.

Nepal and India formalised a long-term energy deal during the seventh meeting of the Nepal-India Joint Commission. As per the long-term power trade deal, India will buy 10,000 megawatts in ten years and the agreement is valid for 25 years, subject to renewal every ten years.

India has reservations over energy produced directly by Chinese government companies, said Dahal. "The Chinese have asked us to tell India that it's not Chinese government-owned companies, but they were selected through global competitive bidding."

**The prime minister said the US too picks its own implementing agency for projects it finances.**

But in the agreement with India, there is no mention of buying energy produced only by Indian companies, said Dahal. "We have requested India to consider buying energy produced through competitive bidding no matter who produces it."

Nepal has not agreed to accept investments only from India, said Dahal. "We have a policy and arrangement that any country can produce electricity here."

"But the Indian government has reservations over buying electricity [generated by plants] with the Chinese government's investment."

Dahal said the government was trying to convince India to purchase the electricity produced even by Chinese companies. There is an ongoing discussion on whether India should buy electricity generated by projects Chinese companies bag through global bidding processes. Several Indian companies are now investing in Nepal's energy sector with the core

objective of exporting power to India.

An agreement has been reached for New Space India Limited of India to put into orbit the nano-satellite developed by Nepali students at its own expense, Dahal said. Another agreement signed between the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) and the NTPC of India is on carrying out capacity development works and conducting events including training in collaboration.

The PM claimed that preparations are being made to implement the Pancheshwar Multi-purpose Project by finalising its detailed project report (DPR) within some days. The Pancheshwar DPR is in the final stage of preparation, said Dahal.

"The atmosphere created during my visit to India was the reason why the Pancheshwar project is moving in a positive direction," said the prime minister, claiming that there will be a breakthrough in the next few days. He said the Pancheshwar project would have a long-term positive impact on Nepal's economy.

Prime Minister Dahal also said that in the recent meetings with Indian officials, the issues of the 1950 treaty and the border dispute with India were also raised prominently.

"We are always keeping the country's interests at the forefront and the economic interests of the country were given priority," said the prime minister.

On some issues, the Nepali side has maintained its position with India resolutely, Dahal claimed. "We have had some tough discussions with India on issues like replacing the peace and friendship of 1950". On the boundary issue, "we have maintained a very strong position."

But critics say the Dahal government has failed to build pressure on New Delhi to renegotiate issues like the peace and friendship treaty of 1950, boundary row and air entry routes for Nepal.

Later, the meeting directed the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs to produce the list of treaties and agreements signed with different countries within four days, according to Bimala Subedi, the committee president.

The meeting also urged relevant government agencies to provide full copies of agreements signed between the governments of Nepal and India to the committee secretariat within seven days.

# बुटवलको मज्जा ! र त्रिवेणीधाम प्रस्थान

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HUNTING FOOD ALL OVER NEPAL



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- PAYMENT PARTNER: NAMASTE PAY
- HYGIENE PARTNER: Pepsodent
- AIRLINE PARTNER: Yeti Airlines
- RIDE PARTNER: HONDA
- CELEBRATION PARTNER: KFC, Pizza Hut
- MARKETING PARTNER: ms media sense
- TRAVEL PARTNER: NETA
- HOSPITALITY PARTNER: Nanshe hotel

## OPINION



## OUR VIEW

## Of bogus 'babas'

Someone's public legitimacy, however big, should not come in the way of the criminal justice system.

Nepal Police finally "found" the godman who had gone missing for years right under their nose. Ram Bahadur Bomjan, aka "Little Buddha", had shot to fame in 2005 after allegedly meditating for months without food, water or sleep. After emerging from his meditation, he and his followers had set up ashrams in Bara, Sarlahi, Sindhupalchok and Sindhuli districts. But then his darker side started coming to light. He had repeatedly dodged the police despite him being slapped with criminal charges as heinous as rapes, sexual assaults, and murders. He is also charged with forcibly disappearing—and even allegedly killing—his disciples Rita Bot (Majhi) of Sarlahi District and Sancha Lal Waiba of Makwanpur District, among others. In addition, he faces charges of raping a 15-year-old girl who had been staying in his ashram as a nun.

Despite the Sarlahi District Court issuing an arrest warrant against him in February 2020, the police's attempts to nab him were half-hearted. Behind the garb of spirituality and religion, Bamjon continued to go scot-free as the state looked the other way. Moreover, he continued to live lavishly, in his ashram in Sindhupalchok and, lately, in Kathmandu. The police have confiscated Rs33 million in Nepali currency from his Budhanilkantha residence, in addition to currency notes from 16 countries, as well as 15 mobile phones, laptops, and a fleet of expensive motor vehicles.

Now that the accused has been nabbed, the families of victims have a renewed hope of getting justice. Bomjan's is not an isolated case, though. The empire of crime he allegedly created in his ashrams by exploiting the goodwill of a legion of his followers points to a larger nexus of spirituality and criminality in Nepal. In 2019, Krishnadas Giri, another spiritual guru, had been arrested on charges of raping his follower. Even earlier, in 2017, yet another spiritual guru, Tulku Lama, had been arrested on charges of molesting and raping his followers, claiming his divine power could cure their illnesses.

The spirituality-criminality nexus is not Nepal's problem alone. Next door, in India, several spiritual gurus are in jail for abusing power and exploiting their followers' trust. Asumal Harpalani aka Asaram Babu, Rampal, Gurmeet Ram Rahim and Nithyananda are some Indian spiritual gurus serving jail terms for crimes including rape. What these "babas" have in common, both in India and Nepal, is their misuse of public legitimacy earned through a huge base of followers. The fact that they count top political leaders as their followers hinders the justice process. By pleasing, even protecting, the babas, the politicians often translate the fans of the babas into votes in elections. Moreover, authorities often overlook the criminal nexus, fearing repercussions from many followers of the babas.

It is this coming together of politics, spirituality and criminality that has led to impunity even on allegations of heinous crimes against spiritual gurus. The arrest of the "Little Buddha" has brought a glimmer of hope for justice in several similar cases, some of which are almost a decade-and-a-half old. The police have finally taken a bold first step. Now, it is up to Nepal's court system to do the right thing. Someone's public legitimacy, even that of a famous spiritual leader, should not come in the way of the criminal justice system.

## THEIR VIEW

## Address rights concerns

Western criticism on Bangladesh's political and human rights situation has been there for a reason.

With Bangladesh's 12th parliamentary polls over, congratulations have been pouring in from China, India, Russia and other countries for the re-elected Awami League which is set to begin its fourth consecutive term in office soon. As expected, the United States (US) has termed the virtually opposition-less election "not free or fair," and the United Kingdom (UK) noted that the standards of democratic elections "were not consistently met during the election period." However, both countries also talked about moving forward and developing better and deeper ties with Bangladesh, which is a good thing considering our long-term interests.

Condemning the political violence that took place during election and in the months leading to it, the US urged all political parties to reject violence. Meanwhile, the UK emphasised on the need for creating conditions "for a sustainable political settlement and vibrant civil society" for long-term growth, which we have also been urging for quite a while. Western criticism regarding the political and human rights situation in Bangladesh has been there for some time for a reason. Perhaps the ruling party did not take it seriously before the polls as part of its election strategy. It should, however, now seek to address those. The West remains our biggest trading partner. Therefore, in the interest of continuing good relations with Western countries, we hope the government will not become a prisoner of its own mindset that all criticism is unhealthy.

The United Nations (UN), on the other hand, has been quite critical in its observation of Bangladesh's human rights situation and the government's "repression of opposition candidates and supporters." Drawing attention to the thousands of opposition supporters who have been "detained arbitrarily or subjected to intimidation" in the run up to the election, it has called on the newly elected government to take steps to renew the country's commitment to democracy and human rights. It has insisted on thorough and effective investigation of rights violations and irregularities during the campaign and on election day itself, including the use of mass arrests, threats, enforced disappearances, blackmailing and surveillance by law enforcement officials—many of which were highlighted previously in media reports.

We hope that the ruling party, in the euphoria of victory, will not ignore these very serious allegations and concerns that have been raised. The prime minister herself earlier said that Awami League is willing to correct any mistakes that it had made. Addressing the legitimate rights concerns raised by the UN and the West would be a good place to start.

— The Daily Star (Bangladesh)/ANN

## Oli and the hubris of 'great' Nepal

|| AS I LIKE ||

No one should bother reading about Oli's hallucinatory visions of Nepal's past.

DEEPAK THAPA



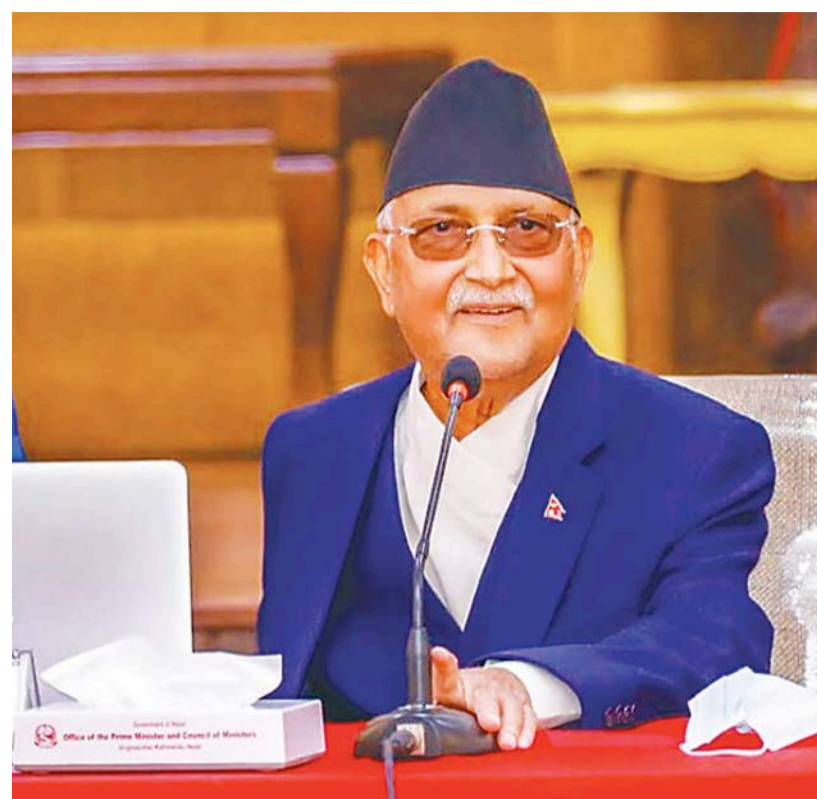
Despite his disastrous stints both as prime minister of the country and as leader of his party, were a poll to be held today to gauge the popularity of our leading politicians, KP Sharma Oli would top it. Not by a majority, no way, but by a plurality, given the fractured nature of politics. That is not because of what he is likely to achieve as a political leader but for all the outrageous things he manages to say all the time, and, increasingly nowadays, write as well.

An example of the latter is a piece by Oli in *Kantipur* a couple of weeks back. Since Oli is an occasional contributor—not to mention someone of such high stature—the paper probably had no choice but to publish the rather portentously titled, "Maile dekheko Nepal" (Nepal as I have seen it). For had it been submitted by anyone else, a swift rejection would have been the most logical outcome. Yet, I can only muse on the legions of Oli fans and imagine their lapping up the 2,000 words of nonsense as words of wisdom from what they believe is the sagacious one.

## Land like no other

There is one clear purpose to Oli's article, and that is to establish that Nepal is a country that stands above the rest of the world in all the ways you can think of. Since I would recommend no one waste their time reading Oli's article, what follows are snippets from the piece and a bit of commentary on the side to illustrate the kind of understanding of the world one of the most powerful men in Nepal has.

Setting the stage for the wonder that was and is Nepal, an early section reads thus: "There is no need to plant any vegetation; it grows by itself. No need to plant flowers; they grow by themselves. Trees, vines and creepers grow by themselves in the forest. There is no need to water them. They flower happily, smilingly. Some have thick green leaves, some have small ones. The birds roosting on them are born by them-



FILE PHOTO

selves. The butterflies and bees that suck their nectar are born by themselves. The different insects that play in the grass are born by themselves. The fish, frogs and earthworms that play in the water are born themselves. There are sub-species among them based on altitude and temperature and flow of water."

I guess the last sentence was Oli's attempt to prove his scientific credentials since the preceding part would have made no sense whatsoever unless they were the musings of a poet or a description of *swayambhu* in many forms. Further, he writes: "The environment here is just so amazing that the tiger can be found here as can the deer. What the deer eats can be found here and what eats the deer as well. It is a unique cycle of nature. A unique cycle of life. Life that uses oxygen is found here as is the vegetation that provides the oxygen. Two types of animals live here, warm-blooded and cold-blooded. Humans and other animals have warm blood while cold-blooded ones like snakes, fish, frogs and the like are also here. Whoever can arrange for warmth lives happily in cold places. Examples of these are the chauri, yak and sheep with their long hair. Apart from some commercial fisheries, no one needs to raise fish in the fields, rivers and lakes. They are at home in the water."

This is one paragraph with not even a word excised or inserted. One has to wonder if anyone would take Oli seri-

ously after reading this. For the true believers, there is a lot more through. As a "communist", he has his own take on society. Following Friedrich Engels, or so he would believe, Oli goes: "We had a self-sufficient economy in the Middle Ages. Each family had their own house and some fields. The fields would produce paddy, maize, wheat, mustard, buckwheat, potato and greens. Cattle-raising would happen by itself. People would raise chickens, goats, pigs and buffaloes and use them as needed. There would be an abundance of milk, curd, buttermilk and ghee for those who kept cows and buffaloes. Cloth would be woven from cotton. There was a tradition of keeping dogs. A dog would protect the house. It would not allow entry to anyone without the house-owner's permission. A dog would not only look after the house but also horses, goats, cows, buffaloes, etc. Animals like jackals would not even come close to a dog. A dog was of immense use then. It would also help during hunts."

Besides the erroneous fact that potatoes had not arrived in Nepal by the Middle Ages, this ramble is what Oli peddled as his [hallucinatory] vision of Nepal's past through the country's most widely circulated newspaper. I guess readers have got the gist of it although, of course, Oli is far from being done. He claims that Nepal is not only the fount of knowledge but also of consciousness, and the source of the most ancient

philosophy. Nepal is where the first musical instrument was heard and where the first song sung. Our ancestors were the first to use fire and teach the world how to eat cooked food. Our land gave birth to both the alphabet and numbers.

## More Indic than India

One does wonder about Oli's supposed anti-Indianness. I do not mean the opportunistic stance he took around the adoption of the 2015 Constitution to emerge as a "nationalist leader" after having hobnobbed with the same Indian establishment for years. I mean more about the manner in which he continues to find ways to needle those currently in power in India. Most notable was the somewhat unnecessary stunt to declare that the hero of the epic, the *Ramayana*, was born in Nepal even though Narendra Modi and his party are in power in New Delhi on the back of the belief of millions in India that Ram was born in the northern Indian town of Ayodhya.

I would venture that Oli is anti-India only in the sense that he firmly believes that the Indic civilisation originated not in the Western Asian steppes nor in the Indo-Gangetic plains but up here in the Himalaya. That is why he appropriates everything attributable to Vedic society as ours and ours alone. And, like the Hindutva rightists of India, he, too, is a firm believer that everything worth knowing or discovering or inventing is all there in the *Vedas* and the *Shastras*—all written here in Nepal, by the way.

But Oli is also from the land of the Buddha and hence Nepal is similarly blessed. "Why was Siddhartha Gautam born in this land and became the Buddha in this land itself?" he asks. "Why was Siddhartha Gautam not born in any other part of the world? When there was conflict elsewhere, why would the message of peace spread here?"

I feel for those CPN-UML comrades cringing while reading their leader's views and yet having to kowtow to Oli for fear of his well-known vindictiveness towards detractors. Equally so for the editor of *Kantipur* for having to carry such balderdash. Credit, however, is due to the latter for having published within days a very well-crafted and -argued rebuttal to Oli's overtly fertile imagination. Written by one Sandeep Thapa, it is as pleasant a read as Oli's is excruciating. It turns out Thapa is with the obscure Scientific Socialist Student Union. He is also visually impaired but proved much more insightful about the world than the much more senior Oli. An intellect definitely to look out for, and that discovery is perhaps the only positive outcome of having persevered through Oli's rant.

## Focus on road safety

Nepal's inability to fund road safety research hinders innovative solutions to control accidental deaths.

BHAGABATI SEDAIN & PUSHPA RAJ PANT



Nepal's roads are as unsafe as ever. The World Health Organization's (WHO) 5th Global Road Safety Status Report, published in December 2023, paints a grim picture of Nepal's roads. The WHO estimated 8,479 road traffic deaths in 2021; the Government of Nepal, however, reported 2,833 deaths in the same year, nearly three times lower than the WHO's data. Further, figures show a 71-77 percent increase in Nepal's absolute number of road deaths than in 2013. While the world witnessed a 5 percent decrease in the absolute number of deaths compared to a decade ago, with 108 countries reporting a decline between 2 percent and 50 percent, Nepal is drifting in the wrong direction, and the target of reducing road fatalities by 50 percent by 2030 seems far from reality.

Nepal supports the Global Plan for the Decade of Action for Road Safety 2021-2030, but it has failed to implement the recommendations of the Global Plan or a national strategy that sets a realistic trajectory target for the decade. An unbalanced and unsystematic focus on road construction safety is a significant failure, leading to persistently high rates of road traffic crashes, fatalities, injuries and substantial social and economic costs.

Economists have estimated that the economic losses of Nepal's road crashes have tripled each decade—from \$14 million in 1996 to \$41 million in 2007 and \$123 million in 2017. The 2021 national census recorded an increase in the absolute number of people with disabilities; however, data regarding the severity and type of disabilities caused by road crashes are still lacking.

Similarly, the second Decade of Action outlined the key areas for action and suggested action points aligning with the five road safety pillars (road

safety management, safer vehicles, safer road users, post-crash response and safer driving environment) and speed control. It describes the government's role and accountability towards safe systems, leading to the design of transport systems and the development of action plans. The lead agency, usually appointed by the government (absent in Nepal), coordinates and encourages individual or collective road safety endeavours of the private sector, civil society and academia. Equally crucial is capacitating and updating quality standards and law enforcement to evaluate the effectiveness of implemented interventions.



POST FILE PHOTO

The urgent endorsement of the 8-year-pending Road Safety Bill's draft is crucial for establishing a Road Safety Management apex body. This will lay the legal foundation for establishing an independent and fully-resourced National Road Safety Council. Once formed, the Council has to finalise the National Road Safety Action Plan (2021-2030). Nepal's failure to adopt the UN Road Safety Conventions and globally

recognised vehicle safety standards has resulted in the widespread use of unsafe vehicles, contributing to the severity of road crashes and fatalities.

Traffic law enforcement in Nepal is inconsistent and inadequate. This includes lax enforcement of helmet-wearing laws for motorcycle passengers, a lack of legislation for passenger seatbelt use and child restraints and the widespread use of mobile phones while driving. Safe and high-quality helmets reduce the risk of death from head injuries by over six times, eventually mitigating the risk of brain injury by up to 74 percent. Public awareness campaigns and educational

puts them in danger. In 2021, pedestrians and cyclists accounted for 26.3 percent of the total road fatalities. Installing proper pedestrian crossings, traffic lights, and speed control measures around schools and residential areas should be prioritised.

Research evidence, technological innovations and good practice guidance documents are available to guide, support and educate decision-makers on road traffic injuries. Utilising them could save scarce financial resources on road safety; however, the significance of primary empirical research remains crucial. Despite a 5 percent decline in deaths globally, Nepal saw a 77 percent increase due to failed actions.

Nepal's inability to fund road safety research and development limits evidence generation and hinders innovative solutions to the country's distinct road safety challenges. Owing to the limited capability of crash data collection, the WHO has to model standardised estimates for Nepal. The police recorded approximately 20,000 injuries, while the Ministry of Health OPD records indicated almost 100,000 road traffic injuries. However, for the year 2021-22, police recorded, on average, 108 crashes daily (nationwide), of which 56 percent were recorded in Bagmati Province alone, and Madhesh and Koshi provinces made up 36 percent. It is difficult to believe that the remaining four provinces (Gandaki, Lumbini, Karnali and Sudurpaschim combined) accounted for only 8 percent of the total crashes. These statistical gaps hinder the ability to accurately assess the scale of a problem and monitor progress towards achieving road safety targets. The road crash data collection system created by the Nepal government with the support of donor agencies urgently needs to be rolled out.

Nepal's emergency medical services, post-crash response and trauma care, are inadequate, causing delays in treating road crash victims and contributing to higher mortality rates and long-term disabilities among survivors. A sound emergency care system can save lives by strengthening the ambulance system and building the capacity of professionals and responders. A trauma hospital registry can provide data for evidence-based recommendations and help in continuous quality care improvements.

Sedain and Pant are road safety and injury prevention researchers.

FOREX	
US Dollar	133.16
Euro	145.74
Pound Sterling	169.38
Swiss Franc	156.22
Australian Dollar	89.26
Canadian Dollar	99.57
Singapore Dollar	100.03
Japanese Yen (10)	9.18
Chinese Yuan	18.57
Saudi Arab Riyal	35.51
Qatari Riyal	36.52
Thai Bhat	3.80
UAE Dhiram	36.26
Malaysian Ringgit	28.69
Korean Won (100)	10.09

Exchange rates fixed by Nepal Rastra Bank

SHARES	
Nepse (in percent)	2,089.62pts 0.45%
HIGHEST GAINERS	
MKLB 10	HRL 10
0.16	0.12
MODERATE GAINERS	
BBC 0.16	C30MF 0.12
MODERATE LOSERS	
LEMF -0.11	NICSF -0.11
HIGHEST LOSERS	
CBBL G 5.95	3ILD86/8 5.87

BULLION		PRICE PER TOLA
Fine Gold		Rs 118,500
Silver		Rs 1,410

SOURCE: FENEGOSIDA

## BIZLINE

### Tesla launches restyled Model 3 in North America

**BENGALURU:** Tesla on Wednesday rolled out the restyled version of its Model 3 compact sedan in North America at unchanged prices, months after the vehicle attracted healthy demand upon launch in China and Europe. The move will refresh Tesla's aging vehicle line-up in its biggest market and follows a price war last year that helped the company meet its annual deliveries goal at the cost of margins. The revamped version of the long-range and rear-wheel drive Model 3 variants include new features such as a rear display for backseat passengers, according to Tesla's website. Following the changes, the long-range variant can go 341 miles on a single charge, up from 333 miles earlier. Tesla has also refreshed its wheel designs, now available in two new colors, "Stealth Grey" and "Ultra Red." The Model 3 rear-wheel drive variant is priced at \$38,990, while the long-range variant costs \$45,990, after both became ineligible for a \$7,500 federal tax credit at the end of 2023, based on new guidance under the US Inflation Reduction Act. (REUTERS)

### Amazon's Twitch to lay off 35 percent of workforce

**SAN FRANCISCO:** Amazon.com's streaming unit Twitch is set to cut 35 percent of its staff, or about 500 workers, Bloomberg News reported on Tuesday, citing people familiar with the plans. The move could be announced as soon as Wednesday, the report added. The business remains unprofitable nine years after Amazon's acquisition of the company, the report said. Twitch did not immediately respond to a Reuters request for comments. Twitch CEO Dan Clancy said in December that the company would shut down operations in South Korea in February this year, due to high operating costs and network fees. The company had laid off more than 400 employees in March last year after its user and revenue growth did not meet expectations. (REUTERS)

### India's Maruti Suzuki to invest \$4 bln in second Gujarat car plant

**GANDHINAGAR, INDIA:** India's top car-maker Maruti Suzuki will invest 350 billion rupees (\$4.2 billion) to build a second car plant in Gujarat state and will add a new production line at an existing plant, the president of its parent company said. The investments will see the company's annual production capacity in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state jump to 2 million vehicles from 750,000 currently. The additional production line is expected to start operating in the 2027 financial year and the new plant about two years later. The maker of the popular Swift hatchback has said it wants to double its annual production capacity to 4 million units by the 2031 financial year. The plans were announced during the Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit, where thousands of chief executives, investors and diplomats have gathered for the three-day biennial event. (REUTERS)

# Chitwan fields in yellow bloom as mustard makes a strong comeback

This fiscal year, the area under mustard farming increased to 21,850 hectares, returning to its 1998-99 level.



POST FILE PHOTO

Nepal imported 38,195 tonnes of mustard seeds worth Rs3.98 billion in the last fiscal year, which were mostly used by Khokana's oil mills in Lalitpur.

□ **RAMESH KUMAR PAUDEL**  
CHITWAN, JAN 10

The real estate boom of 2008 in Chitwan had a direct impact on the cash crop production, particularly mustard, as farmers shifted to commercial vegetable farming amid rapid urbanisation.

1998-99 was a boom time as mustard farming covered 22,996 hectares in Chitwan, according to the report of the Agriculture Development Office, Chitwan, now Agriculture Knowledge Centre.

The production area declined to 11,130 hectares in 2008-09.

Mustard farms are back. Nowadays, vast stretches of land in Chitwan are covered with yellow blossoms.

Lalit Chaudhary of wad 3 of Madi Municipality has planted mustard on 2.5 bigha (1 bigha = 0.67 hectares) this winter, from 1.5 bigha last winter.

"We used to cultivate mustard on 6 bigha two decades ago. We were a joint family then."

The ownership of the land started getting divided among family members.

The mustard farming too declined as a result, said Chaudhary, 45. Chaudhary family is back to mustard farming.

The government's data too proves the fact that mustard farms in Chitwan have been on an increasing trend over the last few years.

Umrj Aryal, chief of the Agriculture Knowledge Center, Chitwan, said farmers have started switching to mustard for the last 5 years. "The area has increased sharply since last year."

According to Aryal, mustard farming in Chitwan covered 12,255 hectares

in 2019-20 and increased to 14,765 hectares in the last fiscal year 2022-23.

This fiscal year, starting mid-July 2023, the area under mustard farming has increased to 21,850 hectares.

Agriculture experts say that mustard farming has returned to its previous level, which is good for the country's economy as Nepal has been importing edible oil worth billions.

Nepal imported 38,195 tonnes of mustard seeds worth Rs3.98 billion in the last fiscal year, which were mostly used by Khokana's oil mills in Lalitpur.

In Chitwan, farmers have revived mustard farming. The productivity which used to be less than a tonne per hectare, has now increased to 1.3 tonnes per hectare.

Traders and farmers say that mustard farming gained traction in Chitwan due to the growing awareness about its health benefits.

Reports show that India imposed a ban on the sale of mustard seed oil that had repercussions in Nepal too.

In 1998, a mass-poisoning tragedy began to unfold in New Delhi, India. The authorities determined the illnesses were caused by the adulteration of mustard oil.

The symptoms included swelling of the feet, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, abdominal swelling, liver toxicity, kidney damage, breathlessness due to retention of fluids in the lungs and death due to heart failure. By early September, the official death toll was 41, and 2,300 people had been affected.

On August 27, 1998, the Indian government banned the sale of mustard seed oil and announced a policy to import foreign soybeans free of protective trade tariffs.

In 2012, in a controversial decision,

mustard oil was banned for edible consumption in the European Union, the United States and Canada, principally due to its erucic acid content. The United States Food and Drug Administration's website claims it contains erucic acid which can cause heart disease if consumed above the prescribed limits.

Its consumption in Nepal also fell.

By 2021-22, Nepal's imports of edible oils stood at Rs120.46 billion—crude soybean worth Rs56.25 billion and crude palm oil worth Rs39.39 billion, mostly to export to India using the loopholes of the zero duty privilege. For Nepal's domestic consumption, sunflower oil worth Rs18.10 billion was imported.

"Mustard is appropriate for the agricultural system in Chitwan," said Madhav Poudel, chief of the Prime Minister's Agriculture Modernisation Project.

But the expansion of mustard acreage has affected the wheat production areas in Chitwan, he said.

"Wheat requires well irrigation and it takes time to ripe. But mustard requires less irrigation and ripens in a short period which has attracted farmers towards mustard," said Aryal.

"Mustard farming does not require hard work," said Chaudhary, the farmer. "The wild animals in Madi forest destroy wheat crops, but do not damage mustard."

Bikram Sapkota, treasurer of the Chitwan Lok Oil Producers Association, said that mustard oil seed has been in high demand after the Russia-Ukraine war that disrupted supply.

According to Sapkota, mustard seed jumped to Rs17,000 per quintal, from

Rs11,000 per quintal after the war started in February 2022.

In Nepal, the mustard oil price reached Rs425 per litre, from Rs230 per litre, he said. "But prices have declined now."

"The mustard production increased due to the rise in its value," said Poudel.

From 1990 to 2000, the government encouraged mustard production.

The mustard production increased as a result in Chitwan, said Subash Subedi, senior scientist of the National Oilseed Research Programme.

But from 2000 to 2010, the mustard farm area started to shrink, he said. While urbanisation started at a rapid pace shrinking the agricultural land in Chitwan, farmers who continued agriculture switched to commercial vegetable farming.

"The use of fertiliser was high when farmers started adopting hybrid varieties. The soil fertility degraded. The mustard production was affected," said Subedi.

Aryal said that the government has again started encouraging farmers for mustard production.

A subsidy of Rs5 million has been provided to 12 agricultural groups this year for mustard seed, fertiliser, pesticide, irrigation and mechanisation purposes, he said.

The statistics of the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development show that Nepal produced 220,250 tonnes of mustard on 198,197 hectares in the fiscal year 2020-21. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, Nepal ranks at the top in mustard seed production globally, followed by Russia and Canada.

## German railways grind to near halt in drivers' strike

□ **REUTERS**  
COLOGNE, GERMANY, JAN 10

Hundreds of thousands of people faced train cancellations across Germany from Wednesday, as a three-day nationwide rail strike added to travel chaos in Europe's largest economy, where farmers' protests have blocked highways and snarled traffic.

The strikes, called by the GDL train drivers' union from Wednesday to Friday evening, have forced national rail operator Deutsche Bahn to run only stripped-back emergency timetables.

One in five long-distance high-speed rail services were running and regional services have been "massively thinned out", a Deutsche Bahn spokesperson told reporters at Berlin's central station, empty of its usual crowds.

At Cologne railway station in western Germany, commuters wrapped up against freezing temperatures checked departure boards for timetable changes. After Ulrich Linke's first train failed to show up, he said he would

hang around to see if the next one appears. "I'll wait for three-quarters of an hour at minus seven degrees here in the main station," he told Reuters.

"It's sad when you work in healthcare," said commuter Alex Mueller. "We work in a retirement home and we have to get to work."

The head of the German farmers' association DBV vowed to ramp up their protests on Wednesday, after convoys of tractors and trucks blocked roads across the country earlier this week.

The strikes and protests add to pressure on Chancellor Olaf Scholz's coalition government, which faces growing economic problems, including weak macroeconomic data, high interest rates and a budget mess.

The long-running row over train drivers' pay and working hours flared up again following a three-week truce over Christmas, and after an effort by Deutsche Bahn to block the latest strikes with a court injunction did not succeed.

## Met office, Ncell tie up for better early warning systems

□ **POST REPORT**  
KATHMANDU, JAN 10

The Department of Hydrology and Meteorology and telecom company Ncell have signed a Memorandum of Understanding on strengthening communication for early warning system (EWS) by expanding coverage in both hydro and meteorological disasters.

Under this extended MoU, Ncell and the DHM have joined hands to disseminate early warning alerts to the public covering 13 disasters triggered by hydrological and meteorological hazards, said Ncell on Tuesday.

This includes alerts for floods, flash floods, rainfall, thunderstorms, wind gusts, landslides, avalanches, snowfall, heatwaves, cold weather, forest fires, air pollution and tornados, the telecommunication company said. Ncell CEO and Managing Director Jabbar Kayumov and DHM Director General Jagadishwor Karmacharya exchanged the MoU on Wednesday at a function at



PHOTO: COURTESY OF NCELL

the Ncell office in Lainchaur, Kathmandu. Karmacharya thanked Ncell for its flood early warning system initiative in Nepal since 2016.

"Disseminating alerts in the event of impending disaster has proven to be a lifesaver for the survivors. This joint initiative is indeed a great example of grassroots-to-global action of putting the furthest-behind-first as envisioned in the recent UN's 'early warning for all' initiative," Karmacharya is quoted

## Saudi says value of mineral resources has nearly doubled

□ **AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE**  
RIYADH, JAN 10

Saudi Arabia said on Wednesday that the estimated value of its mineral resources had nearly doubled to \$2.5 trillion, highlighting a sector it hopes will help diversify its oil-reliant economy.

"I am delighted to announce that our estimation for the kingdom's untapped mineral potential has increased from \$1.3 trillion to \$2.5 trillion, an increase of 90 percent," Industry and Mineral Resources Minister Bandar Alkhorayef told a conference in Riyadh.

"This is based on new discoveries in the form of rare earth elements, and a combination of the increase of volumes of phosphate, gold, zinc and copper, as well as the revaluation of these minerals."

## Manara announced first high-profile acquisition, a 10-percent stake in Brazil's Vale, in July.

The earlier valuation of \$1.3 trillion had been cited by officials including Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, since at least 2017.

Under Prince Mohammed, the world's biggest crude oil exporter hopes to diversify away from fossil fuels, and the government is eyeing the mining sector as a potential source of billions of dollars in foreign direct investment each year.

Risk intelligence firm Verisk Maplecroft wrote last year that the focus on mining was "among the more feasible parts" of Prince Mohammed's Vision 2030 reform agenda, aided by existing mines, plants and infrastructure including railways.

Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman told the conference that rather than being called an oil-producing country, "what we are working on is that we would like to be an energy-producing country for all sources of energy."

Last year, the kingdom's deep-pocketed sovereign wealth fund, the Public Investment Fund, and state mining firm Ma'aden established Manara Minerals to snatch up global mining assets. Manara announced its first high-profile acquisition, a 10-percent stake in Brazil's Vale, in July.

But foreign investment in Saudi Arabia "remains far behind ambitious targets", said Torbjorn Soltvedt of Verisk Maplecroft.

## Bitcoin ETF hopefuls still expect SEC approval despite hack



US Securities and Exchange Commission logo and representations of cryptocurrency are seen in this illustration taken in June 2023.

□ **REUTERS**  
WASHINGTON, JAN 10

US asset managers remain hopeful the securities regulator will permit the trading of spot bitcoin exchange-traded funds (ETFs), even after a fake post on the agency's social media account saying they had been approved sparked confusion on Tuesday.

The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) will decide on Wednesday whether to approve an application from asset managers Ark Investments and 21Shares to launch a spot bitcoin ETF. More than a dozen bitcoin ETF applications, including from BlackRock, Fidelity and VanEck, are also pending with the agency.

The products would be a game-changer for bitcoin, offering institutional and retail investors exposure to the world's largest cryptocurrency with-

out directly holding it, and a major boost for a crypto industry beset by a string of scandals.

Several industry executives told Reuters earlier this week they expected the SEC will approve the Ark/21Shares product along with many others. They declined to be identified because the discussions are private. The SEC has not said how it will rule and a spokesperson said the agency cannot comment on applications.

Industry insiders and media outlets were caught off guard Tuesday evening when an unknown party posted on the SEC's X account that all the products had been approved, sending executives scrambling to figure out what was happening.

The SEC quickly disavowed and deleted the post, and has said the authorities are investigating the incident. X confirmed late on Tuesday that the SEC's account was compromised

and said it was because of an "unidentified individual" obtaining control of a phone number associated with the agency's account through a third party.

On Tuesday evening, several of the sources said they did not expect the apparent hack to derail the process.

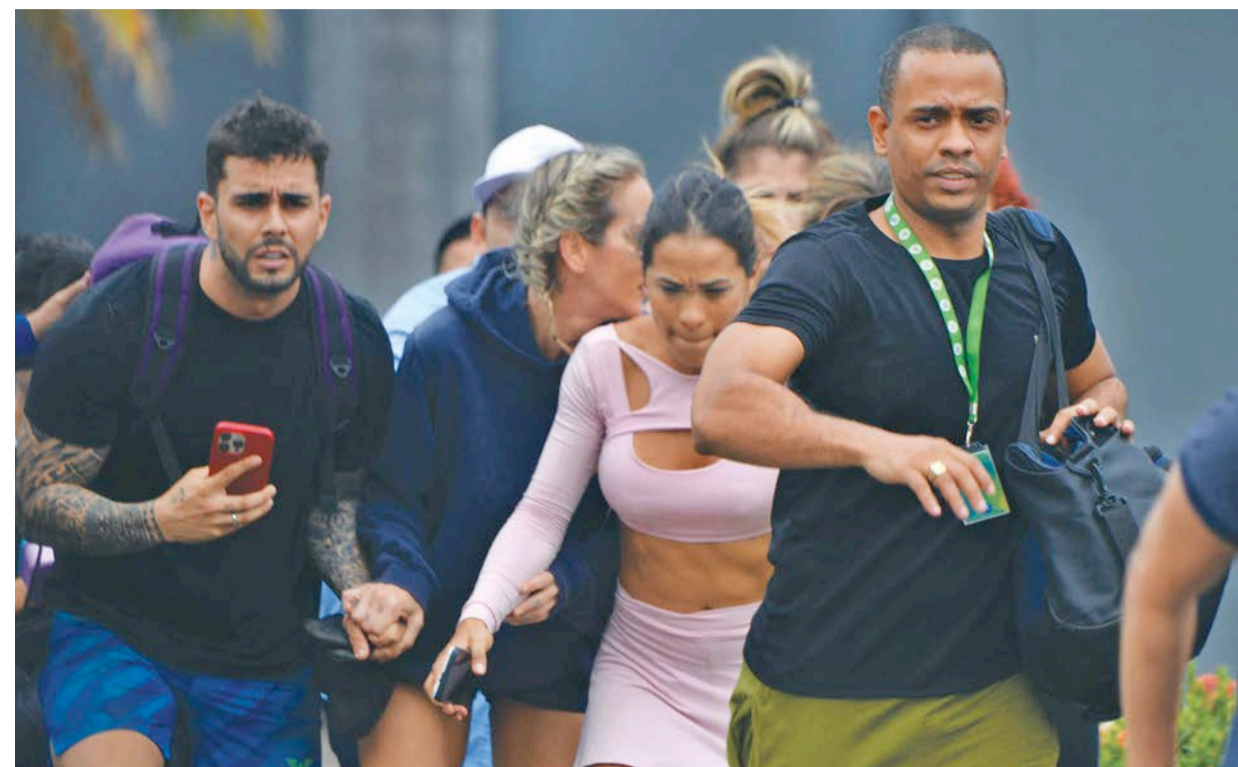
Issuers this week disclosed their planned ETF fees, usually one of the final details nailed down before a launch. At least three firms have filed or were preparing to file requests for SEC approval to launch their products on Thursday, said three sources.

Josh Gilbert, a market analyst at eToro, said Tuesday's hack had "undoubtedly rattled the bitcoin market" but that all the signs were that the SEC was poised to approve the products. Standard Chartered analysts this week said the ETFs could draw \$50 billion to \$100 billion this year alone, driving the price of bitcoin as high as \$100,000.

WORLD

# Ecuador president orders gangs 'neutralised' as gunmen storm TV studio

On Tuesday, they stormed a studio of state-owned TC Television in Guayaquil with guns and explosives.



People are helped out of the premises of Ecuador's TC television channel after unidentified gunmen burst into the state-owned television studio live on air on Tuesday.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
QUITO, JAN 10

Ecuador's president gave orders on Tuesday to "neutralise" criminal gangs after gunmen stormed and opened fire in a TV studio, as bandits threatened random executions on a second day of terror in the country.

Gangs declared war on the government when President Daniel Noboa announced a state of emergency following the prison escape on Sunday of one of Ecuador's most powerful narco bosses.

Noboa ordered military operations to "neutralize" criminal gangs, as the country exploded into what he called an "internal armed conflict."

Long a peaceful haven sandwiched between top cocaine exporters Colombia and Peru, Ecuador has seen violence explode in recent years as rival gangs with links to Mexican and

Colombian cartels vie for control.

In the port city of Guayaquil, men wearing balaclavas and waving weapons stormed a state-owned TV station during a live broadcast, taking several journalists and staff members hostage on Tuesday.

At least 10 people have been killed in a series of attacks blamed on gangs—eight in Guayaquil, and two "viciously murdered by armed criminals" in the nearby town of Nobol, police said Tuesday.

Three other officers were wounded in Guayaquil. After the escape of Jose Adolfo Macias, aka "Fito"—leader of Ecuador's biggest gang Los Choneros—Noboa on Monday declared a nationwide state of emergency and nightly curfew.

Gangs retaliated, taking police officers hostage, setting off explosions in several cities.

On Tuesday, they stormed a studio

of state-owned TC Television in Guayaquil with guns and explosives.

Hooded attackers fired gunshots during a live TC broadcast as a woman could be heard pleading: "Don't shoot, please don't shoot."

The intruders forced terrified crew onto the ground and a person could be heard screaming as the studio lights went out but the broadcast continued.

Police entered the studio after about 30 minutes of chaos. Noboa, 36, who was elected last year on a pledge to fight gang-related violence, ordered the military operations against gangs he described as "terrorist organizations and belligerent non-state actors."

Authorities reported multiple explosions and cars set alight on Tuesday, including in the capital Quito, and said seven police officers had been kidnapped.

A video circulating on social media

showed three of the kidnapped officers sitting on the ground with a gun pointed at them as one was forced to read a statement addressed to Noboa.

"You declared war, you will get war," the visibly terrified officer read. "You declared a state of emergency. We declare police, civilians and soldiers to be the spoils of war."

The statement added that anyone found on the street after 11:00 pm "will be executed."

There was panic on the streets, with shops and businesses in various cities closing early and residents rushing home as face-to-face classes were suspended nationwide until Friday.

The head of Ecuador's Joint Command of the Armed Forces, Jaime Vela, said that gangs had "committed bloody acts without precedent."

"Despite their brutal wickedness, this attempt will fail," he told media after a security council meeting in Quito headed by Noboa.

Brian Nichols, the top US diplomat for Latin America, said Washington was "extremely concerned" by the violence and kidnappings, and pledged to provide assistance and "remain in close contact" with Noboa's team.

Peru put its border with Ecuador under a state of emergency.

China's embassy and consulates in Ecuador announced on Wednesday that services to the public were suspended.

France and Russia both advised their citizens against travel to Ecuador.

A spokesperson for Russia's foreign ministry on Wednesday said Moscow trusts Ecuador "will be able to, on their own, without foreign interference, take back control... to restore peace and order."

Chile, Colombia and Brazil sent messages of support for Noboa. A manhunt is under way for Fito, who had been serving a 34-year sentence for organized crime, drug trafficking and murder. The 44-year-old is believed to have escaped just hours before police arrived to conduct an inspection of the Guayaquil prison where he was held.

On Tuesday, officials said another narco boss—Los Lobos leader Fabricio Colon Pico—also escaped since his arrest last Friday for alleged involvement in a plot to assassinate Ecuador's attorney general.

# US, UK forces repel 'largest attack' by Houthis in Red Sea

REUTERS  
WASHINGTON/LONDON, JAN 10

US and British naval forces shot down 21 drones and missiles fired by Yemen-based Houthis on Tuesday towards the southern Red Sea, the United States said, with Britain hinting at further measures to protect international shipping lanes.

British Defence Secretary Grant Shapps said it was the largest attack in the area by the militants to date as the three-month-long war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza spills over into other parts of the Middle East.

"This is an unsustainable situation," Shapps told reporters, adding "watch this space" with regards to further possible action by Britain and its international partners.

"This cannot continue and cannot be allowed to continue." US Central Command said no injuries nor damage were reported, adding that this was the 26th Houthi attack on commercial shipping lanes in the Red Sea since November 19.

Later in the day, Houthi military spokesperson Yahya Saree said the Iranian-backed militants fired a large number of ballistic and naval missiles and drones at a US ship that was "providing support" to Israel.

In a televised speech, Saree did not

say when the Houthi strike had occurred or what damage, if any, the vessel had suffered, but that the operation was a "preliminary response" to a previous US attack that killed 10 Houthi fighters.

The US Fifth Fleet, which is based in the Gulf region and has along with Britain deployed naval forces to protect Red Sea shipping from an upsurge in Houthi attacks, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

It was not clear whether the missile and drone salvo against the US ship reported by the Houthi official had anything to do with the US and British naval action.

The Houthis, who control most of Yemen, have been targeting Red Sea shipping routes to show their support for Hamas, a Palestinian Islamist group. Germany's foreign ministry said the latest attacks were a "clear escalation".

The attacks have seriously disrupted international commerce on the key route between Europe and Asia that accounts for about 15 percent of the world's shipping traffic.

Many shipping companies have been forced to reroute vessels, taking the longer journey around Africa, although several oil majors, refiners and trading houses have continued to use it.



A view shows the bridge of HMS Diamond, seen here firing her Sea Viper missiles in the Red Sea on Wednesday.

# Trump holds wide lead in race for nomination: Poll

REUTERS  
WASHINGTON, JAN 10

Donald Trump holds a wide lead over his rivals for the Republican US presidential nomination just five days before the state-by-state selection contest begins, according to a Reuters/Ipsos poll released on Wednesday.

The former president is the preferred candidate of 49 percent of self-identified Republicans, the poll found. Former South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley had the support of 12 percent of Republicans, with Florida Governor Ron DeSantis holding 11 percent support. Entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy was backed by 4 percent of Republicans, while no other candidate got more than 2 percent, the poll found. Some 18 percent said they did not know whom they would support.

The poll of 1,941 self-identified Republicans was conducted nationwide, meaning it may not necessarily predict who will win Monday's caucuses in Iowa, the first of the state nominating contests that will determine who will try to unseat Democratic President Joe Biden in the November 5 election. The broad outlines of the race have changed little since the summer, even as Trump's legal woes have mounted and his rivals have spent months on the campaign trail. Most Reuters/Ipsos surveys conducted since August have found that Trump has commanded the support of roughly half of the Republican electorate.

# Blinken meets Palestinian leader as Israel keeps bombing Gaza

The war rages on unabated as the army reports more deadly fighting in Gaza's central Maghazi and southern Khan Yunis areas.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
RAMALLAH, PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES, JAN 10

The Israeli army kept bombing the Gaza Strip and fighting Hamas militants on Wednesday as US top diplomat Antony Blinken met the head of the Palestinian Authority in the occupied West Bank.

The military said it killed dozens of "terrorists" and hit another 150 targets in Hamas-run Gaza, where the health ministry said 147 people had been killed over the previous 24 hours.

The bloodiest ever Gaza war started by the October 7 Hamas attack has raged on for more than three months and killed over 23,000 people in the besieged Palestinian territory, according to its health ministry.

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas spoke with Blinken of the need "to stop the Israeli aggression against Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank", which has also been torn by deadly unrest, said the official Palestinian news agency Wafa.

Blinken told Abbas that Washington supports "tangible steps" towards the creation of a Palestinian state—a long-term goal which the hard-right Israeli government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has opposed.

The secretary of state reiterated the US position that a Palestinian state must stand alongside Israel, "with both living in peace and security", said State Department spokesman Matthew Miller.

As Blinken arrived under tight security at Abbas's headquarters in Ramallah, a group of protesters held

up signs that read "Stop the genocide", "Free Palestine" and "Blinken out". Some scuffled with Palestinian security forces in riot gear.

Abbas was later set to discuss a "push for an immediate ceasefire" in Gaza in talks with Jordan's King Abdullah II and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in the Red Sea port city of Aqaba.



Protesters are confronted by Palestinian Authority security forces as they protest during a visit by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Ramallah in the Israeli-occupied West Bank on Wednesday.

Blinken was next headed to the Gulf state of Bahrain, home base of the US Fifth Fleet, for talks with King Hamad on preventing a regional escalation of the war, the State Department said.

Since the Gaza war started, fears have grown of a widening conflict between Israel and Iran-backed armed groups, especially Lebanon's

Hezbollah but also groups in Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels have carried out numerous attacks on passing merchant ships in the Red Sea, and the United States has set up a multinational naval task force to protect the vital sea lane. On Tuesday, the rebels "launched a complex" attack, US Central Command said, adding that US and British forces had shot down 18 drones and three missiles, with no casualties or damage reported.

The war started when Hamas launched its unprecedented October 7 attack, which resulted in about 1,140 deaths in Israel, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally based on official figures. Militants also took around 250 hostages, of whom Israel says 132 remain in Gaza including at least 25 believed to have been killed.

Israel has responded with a relentless military campaign that has killed at least 23,357 people, mostly women and children, according to the Gaza health ministry.

The Israeli army says 186 of its soldiers have been killed inside Gaza in its campaign to destroy Hamas.

The United Nations estimates 1.9 million Gazans have been displaced inside the territory that had already endured years of blockade and poverty before the war. Global concern has flared over Gaza's humanitarian crisis, and Blinken—while voicing continued US support for top regional ally Israel—has urged steps to reduce the suffering.

Dire shortages brought by an Israeli siege mean the "daily toll on civilians

in Gaza, particularly children, is far too high," Blinken said on Tuesday after his talks with Netanyahu.

Blinken called for "more food, more water, more medicine" for Gaza, where only limited relief supplies have been arriving from Egypt. Desperate Gazans on Tuesday climbed onto one truck carrying flour and canned goods and tossed the food to the crowd below, AFP footage showed.

Army spokesman Daniel Hagari said Israel is "ready and willing to facilitate as much humanitarian aid as the world will give".

The war raged on unabated and the army reported more deadly fighting in Gaza's central Maghazi and southern Khan Yunis areas.

Troops had found 15 tunnel shafts as well as rocket launchers, missiles, drones and explosives in Al-Maghazi and destroyed machinery for making rockets that have been fired at Israel, the army said. One of the many displaced Palestinians, Hassan Kaskin 55, told AFP: "We have lost our money, our houses, our jobs. We are losing our youths as well."

"We've sacrificed our children for our homeland."

Blinken is on his fourth tour of the Middle East since the outbreak of the war, and was later headed to Egypt, after earlier stops in Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Washington has floated a post-war scenario in which a reformed Palestinian Authority governs Gaza as well as towns and cities in the West Bank, which Israel has occupied since 1967.

# Ancient DNA hints at why a modern disease affects so many northern Europeans

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
WASHINGTON, JAN 10

Ancient DNA helps explain why northern Europeans have a higher risk of multiple sclerosis than other ancestries: It's a genetic legacy of horseback-riding cattle herders who swept into the region about 5,000 years ago.

The findings come from a huge project to compare modern DNA with that culled from ancient humans' teeth and bones—allowing scientists to trace both prehistoric migration and disease-linked genes that tagged along.

When a Bronze Age people called the Yamnaya moved from the steppes of what are now Ukraine and Russia

into northwestern Europe, they carried gene variants that today are known to increase people's risk of multiple sclerosis, researchers reported Wednesday.

Yet the Yamnaya flourished, widely spreading those variants. Those genes probably also protected the nomadic herders from infections carried by their cattle and sheep, concluded the research published in the journal Nature.

"What we found surprised everyone," said study co-author William Barrie, a genetics researcher at the University of Cambridge. "These variants were giving these people an advantage of some kind."

It's one of several findings from a first-of-its-kind gene bank with thou-

More than 230 genetic variants have been found that can increase someone's risk.

sands of samples from early humans in Europe and western Asia, a project headed by Eske Willerslev of Cambridge and the University of Copenhagen who helped pioneer the study of ancient DNA. Similar research has traced even earlier cousins of humans such as Neanderthals.

Using the new gene bank to explore MS was a logical first step. That's

because while MS can strike any population, it is most common among white descendants of northern Europeans and scientists have been unable to explain why.

The potentially disabling disease occurs when immune system cells mistakenly attack the protective coating on nerve fibers, gradually eroding them. It causes varying symptoms—numbness and tingling in one person, impaired walking and vision loss in another—that often wax and wane.

It's not clear what causes MS although a leading theory is that certain infections could trigger it in people who are genetically susceptible. More than 230 genetic variants have been found that can increase someone's risk.

The researchers first examined DNA from about 1,600 ancient Eurasians, mapping some major shifts in northern Europe's population. First, farmers from the Middle East began supplanting hunter-gatherers and then, nearly 5,000 years ago, the Yamnaya began moving in—traveling with horses and wagons as they herded cattle and sheep.

The research team compared the ancient DNA to about 400,000 present-day people stored in a UK gene bank, to see the MS-linked genetic variations persist in the north, the direction the Yamnaya moved, rather than in southern Europe.

In what is now Denmark, the Yamnaya rapidly replaced ancient farmers, making them the closest

ancestors of modern Danes, Willerslev said. MS rates are particularly high in Scandinavian countries.

Why would gene variants presumed to have strengthened ancient immunity later play a role in an autoimmune disease? Differences in how modern humans are exposed to animal germs may play a role, knocking the immune system out of balance, said study co-author Dr. Astrid Iversen of Oxford University.

The findings finally offer an explanation for the north-south MS divide in Europe but more work is needed to confirm the link, cautioned genetic expert Samira Asgari of New York's Mount Sinai School of Medicine, who wasn't involved with the research, in an accompanying commentary.

BRIEFING

Tottenham sign Werner on loan from Leipzig

LONDON: RB Leipzig striker Timo Werner has joined Tottenham Hotspur on loan until the end of the season, with an option to buy, the Premier League club said on Tuesday.

Alexander-Arnold sidelined

LIVERPOOL: Liverpool defender Trent Alexander-Arnold will be sidelined for three weeks because of a slightly torn knee ligament, the team said Tuesday.

Middlesbrough shock Chelsea

MIDDLESBROUGH: Chelsea suffered a surprise 1-0 loss at second-tier Middlesbrough in the first leg of their League Cup semi-final on Tuesday with Hayden Hackney's goal giving Mauricio Pochettino's wasteful side plenty to do in the return.

Swiatek eyes maiden Australian Open title

New mums Naomi Osaka, Angelique Kerber and Caroline Wozniacki are returning at the event this year.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE MELBOURNE, JAN 10

Iga Swiatek is in scintillating form as she seeks a maiden Australian Open crown, but she could face a stiff test from defending champion Aryna Sabalenka while two-time winner Naomi Osaka is making her comeback.

World number one Swiatek has won 17 of her 18 matches since she lost in the fourth round of her US Open title defence, going on to win the China Open and the WTA Finals.

The Pole has started the new season with a flourish, winning all five of her singles at the United Cup last week.

But the four-time Grand Slam champion knows Sabalenka, who last year became the first woman since Serena Williams in 2016 to reach at least the semi-finals of all four Grand Slams, is a huge threat.

The Pole has started the new season with a flourish, winning all five of her singles at the United Cup last week.

The best previous result at Melbourne Park for Swiatek, 22, was reaching the semi-finals in 2022.

The 25-year-old Sabalenka was on a 15-match winning streak in Australia before Sunday's 6-0, 6-3 Brisbane International final defeat to Elena Rybakina in a rerun of last year's Australian Open championship match.

The 2022 Wimbledon champion Rybakina, ranked third in the world, will also be one of the favourites for the year's first Grand Slam, which will start on Sunday in a bid to reduce the amount of late-night finishes in the early rounds.

"We always push each other and I think that's great," said the Russian-born Kazakh, 24. "We improve this way, so hopefully we continue."

New mums return

Japan's Osaka and Germany's Angelique Kerber are among a number of mothers returning at the event after giving birth, a group that includes the 2018 winner, Caroline Wozniacki of Denmark.

Another recent mum, Ukrainian Elina Svitolina, is seeking to build on her impressive form after coming back in April last year.

She was in great touch in her Auckland warm-



Top seed Iga Swiatek has won 17 of her 18 matches since she lost in the fourth round of her US Open title defence.

up last week, beating former Grand Slam champions Wozniacki and Emma Raducanu before losing a tight three-set final to American Coco Gauff.

Nineteen-year-old Gauff, who won her first major at the US Open in September, rounds out a powerful group of four at the top of the rankings.

Two-time Australian Open champion Osaka returned to the court last week after taking a 15-month break from the game, initially for mental health concerns. Last year she gave birth to daughter Shai.

The 26-year-old stayed upbeat after her second-round loss to Karolina Pliskova in Brisbane last week.

"I think for me even stepping on the court is a personal win because a couple of weeks ago I was even doubting if I could play with everyone," said Osaka.

"I know that if I keep training and if I keep putting in the work, then I'll eventually get to where I want to be."

Wozniacki, 33, who reached the fourth round at last year's US Open, is playing at Melbourne Park for the first time since 2020, having had two children while away.

"I have so many wonderful memories of Melbourne and, of course, winning the Australian Open is an all-time career highlight," Wozniacki, who was given a wildcard to compete, told the AO Show Podcast.

Britain's Raducanu is also on the comeback trail after an injury-blighted 2023.

The 2021 US Open champion, who boasts a huge media profile and lucrative endorsement deals, has only played twice in Melbourne and has never been past the second round.

Smith replaces Warner as Australia Test opener



Steve Smith

REUTERS LONDON, JAN 10

Steve Smith will take over from David Warner and open the batting alongside Usman Khawaja for Australia's Test team, selector George Bailey said on Wednesday ahead of a two-match series against West Indies later this month.

Australian media reported this week that Smith and all-rounder Cameron Green were among the frontrunners for the vacant opener spot following Warner's retirement.

"There were plenty within the team who were pretty keen to go on record and say that they weren't keen to do it," Bailey told reporters.

"So it was refreshing that Steve had come forward and said he wanted it and it was something that we'd been chatting about in the background as a selection panel with the coaches as well."

"It's selfless that someone who has had so much success in one position or a couple of positions in the middle order is open and willing and hungry to have a crack at something new and something different."

Smith, 34, moves up in the batting line-up.

Cricketer Australia said earlier on Wednesday that Green will play in the first Test against West Indies.

Bailey said Green would bat at

number four.

"The way the rest of that batting order is functioning left us feeling we have someone who we think is pretty talented who potentially was going to find it hard to get any test cricket in the next 12 months or so," he added. Matt Renshaw, who Warner has tipped as a potential successor, has also been called up to the squad while the Sheffield Shield's leading run scorer Cameron Bancroft misses out.

Apart from Renshaw's inclusion in place of Warner, there are no changes to the squad which beat Pakistan by eight wickets in the third and final Test to sweep the series 3-0 last week.

The series starts at Adelaide Oval on January 17 before moving to the Gabba in Brisbane from January 25.

Cricketer Australia also named the squad for a three-match one-day international series. Smith will captain the side in the absence of Pat Cummins and Mitchell Marsh, who was skipper for a series against South Africa in September.

Western Australia bowler Lance Morris received his first call-up in the 50-overs format, while Jhye Richardson, who last played an ODI against Sri Lanka in 2022, returns to the squad.

Marcus Stoinis, part of Australia's World Cup-winning squad in India, misses out.

AUSTRALIAN OPEN TENNIS

AUSTRALIAN OPEN 2024 WOMEN'S SEEDS

- 1. Iga Swiatek 17. Ekaterina Alexandrova
2. Aryna Sabalenka 18. Victoria Azarenka
3. Elena Rybakina 19. Elina Svitolina
4. Coco Gauff 20. Magda Linette
5. Jessica Pegula 21. Donna Vekic
6. Ons Jabeur 22. Sorana Cirstea
7. Marketa Vondrousova 23. Anastasia Potopova
8. Maria Sakkari 24. Anhelina Kalinina
9. Barbora Krejickova 25. Elise Mertens
10. Beatriz Haddad 26. Jasmine Paolini
11. Jelena Ostapenko 27. Emma Navarro
12. Zheng Qinwen 28. Lesia Tsurenko
13. Liudmila Samsonova 29. Zhu Lin
14. Daria Kasatkina 30. Wang Xinyu
15. Veronika Kudermetova 31. Marie Bouzkova
16. Caroline Garcia 32. Leylah Fernandez

AUSTRALIAN OPEN WOMEN'S SINGLES CHAMPIONS (SINCE 2000)

Table with 4 columns: Year, Champion Name, Year, Champion Name. Rows include 2023 Aryna Sabalenka, 2022 Ashleigh Barty, 2021 Naomi Osaka, 2020 Sofia Kenin, 2019 Naomi Osaka, 2018 Caroline Wozniacki, 2017 Serena Williams, 2016 Angelique Kerber, 2015 Serena Williams, 2014 Li Na, 2013 Victoria Azarenka, 2012 Victoria Azarenka.

AUSTRALIA SQUAD

TEST SQUAD

Pat Cummins (captain), Scott Boland, Alex Carey, Cameron Green, Josh Hazlewood, Travis Head, Usman Khawaja, Marnus Labuschagne, Nathan Lyon, Mitchell Marsh, Matthew Renshaw, Steve Smith, Mitchell Starc.

ODI SQUAD

Steve Smith (captain), Travis Head, Sean Abbott, Nathan Ellis, Cameron Green, Aaron Hardie, Josh Inglis, Marnus Labuschagne, Glenn Maxwell, Lance Morris, Jhye Richardson, Matt Short, Adam Zampa.

HOROSCOPE

ARIES (March 21-April 19)

Expect unforeseen plot twists today. Use this energy to embrace fresh starts, offer a sense of personal authority, or create healthy boundaries. A dreamy energy seeps in, helping you visualise alternative pathways toward success. Clear away dead weight.

TAURUS (April 20-May 20)

Today brings in one of the luckiest moments of the year for you. Keep an open mind when pursuing a better tomorrow. You will make an excellent social impression with dignity and benevolence. Release your fears this evening.

GEMINI (May 21-June 21)

Today governs transformation, dearest Gemini. Do not succumb to social pressures. You'll have a chance to dissolve barriers in the afternoon. A major release is in store this evening, and themes around intimacy could also come into play.

CANCER (June 22-July 22)

You'll have a new lease on love. The day offers social breakthroughs, making it an excellent time to flirt, make introductions, and network. Remember to keep healthy boundaries when making friends. Talks around commitment could come into play.

LEO (July 23-August 23)

Consider how your daily activities lead to a bigger picture, Leo. Make radical yet straightforward changes when pursuing wellness or success. Transformative vibes flow, making it easier to establish new habits. Clear away old junk and get organised.

VIRGO (August 23-September 22)

Virgo, be confident today. Artistic whims could take you down exciting new ventures. Love lingers in the air. Show your playful yet sweet side if you're currently courting or in a relationship. Consider where your true passions lie.

LIBRA (September 23-October 22)

Libra, changes to your home life could come. Consider how you can make space for intimacy within your abode and heart. Set the stage for romance, allowing your space to reflect you and what you hope to attract.

SCORPIO (October 23-November 21)

Be mindful of your thoughts and words today. Sometimes, your balance could be better when pursuing love, intellectual goals, or success. Planning can help you for the unknown. Collaborate, brainstorm, and speak to empower yourself and others.

SAGITTARIUS (November 22-December 21)

Set intentions around your financial goals. Alter habits to grow wealth and cut spending. Nurturing energy in the afternoon helps you further destress. Your wits sharpen, setting the scenes for riveting conversations while motivating you to pursue knowledge.

CAPRICORN (December 22-January 19)

Break through self-imposed barriers, moving toward your goals. Your words move like poetry before afternoon creeps in, so soften any rough situations you face. Treat yourself to a cleansing bath and a luxurious stretching session this evening.

AQUARIUS (January 20-February 18)

Empathetic energy enters, and people may divulge what lies beneath the surface. Remain grounded when dealing with sensitive topics. Find gratitude for where you are, considering where you've come from. Opportunities to let go of the past come.

PISCES (February 19-March 20)

Pisces, educate yourself on essential matters. Focus on what you can do to lead by example. You'll receive extra attention. Find empowerment by filtering out old friendships that have become negative. Schedule some alone time at night.

CROSSWORD

ACROSS

- 1 Ordinances
5 Greek alphabet
10 Really shake up
14 — Dinesen
15 Sudden fear
16 Poet's black
17 Time to take it easy
19 Crevice
20 Munch on
21 Out — limb
22 Kind of wrench
24 Gorillas or chimps
25 "Most Wanted" org.
26 Turned over and over
29 Anchor cables
33 Duelers' weapons
34 Diner coffee
35 Decree
37 — glance
38 Flu symptom
39 Hobo
40 Half of DJ
42 Ovid works
43 Oregon's capital
45 Dismay
47 Funny play
48 Sleazy newspaper
49 Hawaiian cliff
50 Kind of union

- 53 RN's group
54 — Paulo
57 Run away from
58 Triumphant
61 Picnic spoiler
62 Fill with happiness
63 Do some fencing
64 Room offerers
65 Big rigs
66 Guthrie of folk music

DOWN

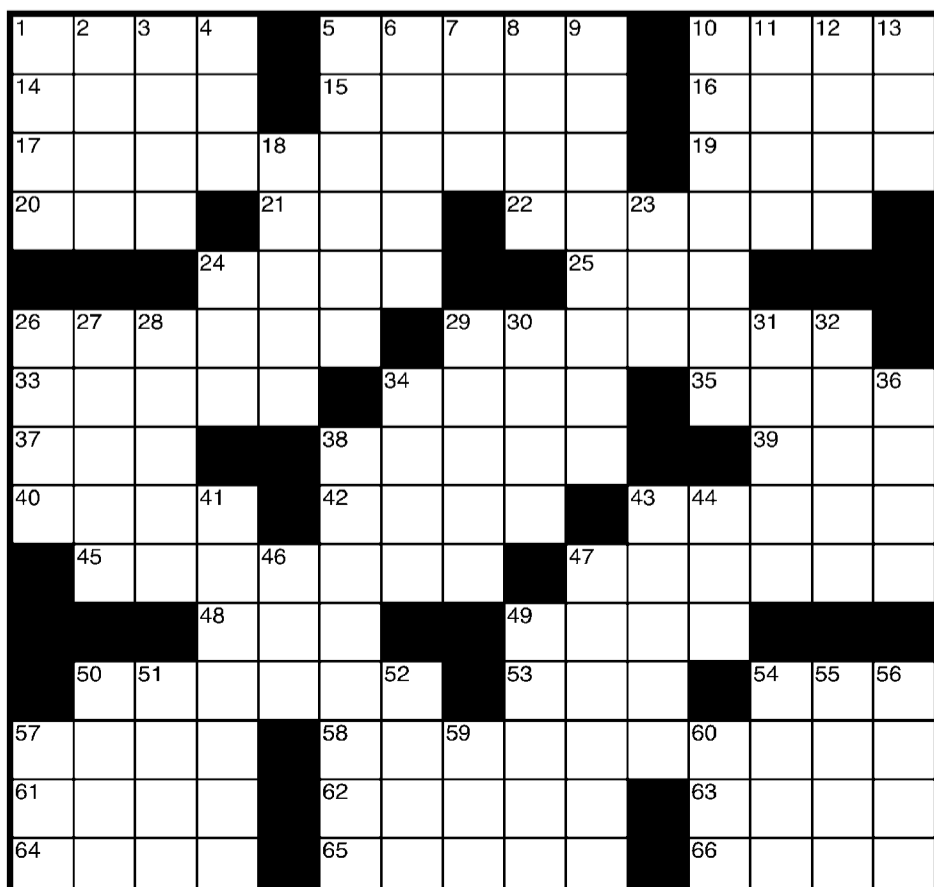
- 1 Trevi Fountain coins, once
2 On board ship
3 Lightbulb measure
4 Have winter fun
5 Raised the lid
6 Half the parents
7 Chemical suffix
8 Processes cotton
9 Invasion (3 wds.)
10 More erratic
11 Theater award
12 Garret
13 Explosive letters
18 Snags a dogie
23 TV network
24 Ginger —
26 Be a bookworm
27 Eye nerve

PREVIOUS PUZZLE SOLVED



4-24-23 © 2023 UFS, Dist. by Andrews McMeel for UFS

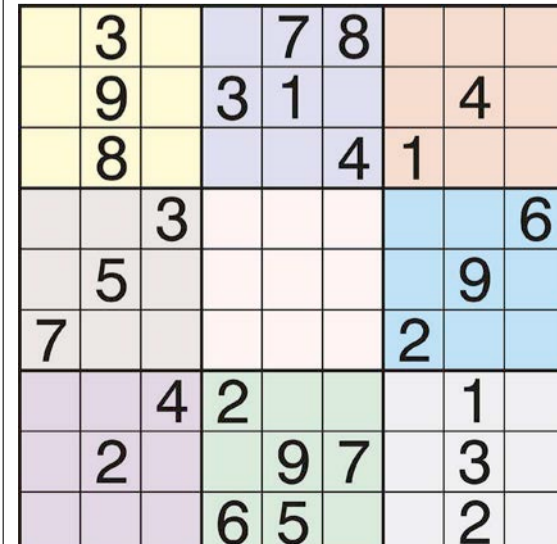
- 28 Dog owner's purchase
29 Refuge
30 Sts.
31 Ivan's dollar
32 Fishtailed
34 Darth Vader, once
36 Tube trophy
38 Buries the hatchet
41 Tips over
43 Kind of panel
44 " — seeing things?"
46 Ramble around
47 Paddles
49 Page or LuPone
50 Big family
51 Harness part
52 Mah-jongg piece
54 Bitter
55 Ayla's creator
56 Norwegian port
57 Wk. day
59 Rotating machine part
60 NW state



SUDOKU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION



DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

# Reading helps me breathe life into characters

Bijay Baral, a seasoned actor in Nepali cinema, shares how literature is a big influence in his acting journey.

**B**ijay Baral's reading journey is intertwined with his acting career. With active involvement in theatre productions and Nepali cinema, he initially sought books to improve his artistic skills. While it began as a professional ambition, his reading has evolved beyond a dedication to his craft; now, he reads simply because he has a genuine love for stories.



He has starred in a number of successful Nepali films, including the 'Kabaddi' franchise, 'Jaari', and, most recently, 'Dimag Kharab'. He is also the executive director of Mandala Theatre and has starred in a number of their productions. Although his Wikipedia page labels him as a 'poet', Baral firmly rejects the title. While he takes pleasure in poetry and often recites it, he prefers not to refer to himself as a poet.

In this interview with the *Post's* Manushree Mahat, he talks about his reading journey, the prospect of book-to-film adaptations in Nepali cinema and the impacts of reading on faithful portrayals of character in cinema.

**When did your reading journey begin, and how has it evolved over the years?**

During most of my childhood and subsequent years, I focused on reading course books and academic materials, as I aspired to become a doctor. It wasn't until 2009 that I ventured beyond my comfort zone. Unaware that reading was essential for actors, I initiated my journey with books on acting, entertainment, and biographies of Bollywood and Hollywood actors. To immerse myself in reading and cultivate the habit, I explored stories like Akbar and Birbal, as well as comic books. Even now, I find joy in reading folk tales and short stories, and have a particular fondness for poems—concise and expressive, they hold the power to convey much in a few words.

**You talked about how you didn't realise that actors had to read as well. How much do you usually read to grasp the essence of a character, and give justice to each of your roles?**

My reading approach varies based on the personality and characteristics of each role. Consider a character portrayed as an intellectual who deeply values reading; this trait is fundamental to their identity. To authentically portray such a character, I delve into the literature that the character would likely read. This includes understanding the vocabulary, knowledge and perspective of a dedicated reader, which significantly differs from those who do not share this trait. Character development is pivotal in storytelling, and an actor can genuinely capture the essence of a character only by aligning with their motivations and thoughts.

**Do you do this with each of your roles? How much does the character's backstory influence your reading?**

Yes, we have a thorough process where we develop backstories for each of the characters we play. And whether or not I need to read for the roles depends

on them.

You imagine a life for the characters you play: who they are as a person, in which part of the life they're in, what they have studied, what kind of environment they grew up in, are all the questions that we fill in for the roles we play. So, if I'm playing a character who comes from an environment that would not have allowed them to read, I wouldn't necessarily read to fit into that role.

You have to understand the personality and psychology of the characters you play. Characters that read are more prevalent in theatres than in cinemas, so I've had to read more for some of the characters I've played in theatre plays.

**Movies adapted from books are uncommon in Nepali cinemas, but there's potential for growth. As Nepali literature becomes more diverse, cinemas could benefit by bringing various stories to the screen. What, in your opinion, is the potential for Nepali cinemas if we adapt our books into films?**

I think there is a lot of potential. Theatres have adapted a lot of Nepali novels and stories, like those by Kumar Nagarkoti—'Palpasa Cafe', 'Ular', and most recently 'Damini Bhir'. There were even talks in the industry about adapting Nayan Raj Pandey's book into a movie. If we adapt books into films, there's a very big chance that the film will be successful, but the process of translating a book into a sound film is difficult.

The dramaturgical process, screenwriting, dialogue writing and screenplay are all crucial steps that need to be handled with the utmost understanding and adequacy to bring a book into cinema. If we can make good use of that script, then we can make some good films. But the thing is that the canvas is too vast when it comes to cinemas.

**Why do you think this is so difficult?**

Crafting a story, narrating it, and representing it on screen are distinct tasks. Writing dialogues and developing characters are part of this process. Screenwriters must maintain the authenticity of the novel while creating a screenplay. As actors, we can draw inspiration from the characters, but writers face a more extensive challenge. Industry professionals are making efforts, and with luck, we may see more films adapted from books in the future.

**Are there any books you wish were adapted into films?**

I wish I could portray characters from Nayan Raj Pandey's writings. His stories revolve around the Madhesi community, reflecting the experiences in Tarai. These narratives resonate with my own experiences, and I feel confident in bringing these characters to life.

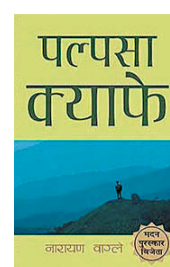
**Do you think the Madhesi community is adequately represented in literature and cinemas?**

Not at all. Presently, portrayals of the Madhesi community tend to be stereotypical and fail to capture the authentic Madhesi experience. When Madhesi characters appear in films, it seems as if the directors based their portrayal on a brief observation without delving into the nuanced reality of the community. While books often authentically depict Madhesi characters, there is still a considerable distance to cover in cinema.



POST PHOTO: KESHAV THAPA

## Bijay Baral's book recommendations



**Palpasa Cafe**  
Author: Narayan Wagle  
Publisher: Nepalaya  
Year: 2005

This book, set during the Maoist insurgency, helps us grasp the shifting political and social dynamics of Nepal at that time.



**Tumhari Auqat Kya Hai**  
Author: Piyush Mishra  
Publisher: Rajkamal Prakashan  
Year: 2023

'Tumhari Auqat Kya Hai' gives us a closer look at the person Piyush Mishra is. It offers insights into his identity as an actor, singer and writer.



**Nepali Lok Katha**  
Author: Tulasi Diwas  
Publisher: Nepal Pragya Prasthhan  
Year: 1974/1975

In 'Nepali Lok Katha', you can explore various stories that encompass different castes, backgrounds and regions of our country.



**Chuli**  
Author: Sarubhakta  
Publisher: FinePrint  
Year: 2012

A very interesting book about the struggles and bravado it takes to scale mountains. It details the experience of climbing Mount Everest in a very accessible way.



**Kumari Prashnaharu**  
Author: Durga Karki  
Publisher: Nepa-laya  
Year: 2020

'Kumari Prashnaharu' is a beautiful collection of short stories that helped me understand the experiences and struggles of women.

# 'Jaws' turns 50: Here's how the novel differed from its film adaptation

In the film, the main characters are likeable and heroic, whereas, in the novel, they're petty, broken and bitter, wading through the messes their personal lives have become.

ARI MATTES

**H**ow many times have you come out of the cinema and heard someone snidely remark they preferred the book, as though this somehow connects them to a richer, more highbrow tradition?

This might ring true when it comes to literary masterworks like F Scott Fitzgerald's 'The Great Gatsby', adapted into so-so versions nearly four decades apart (equally dull, for almost opposite reasons). But the reverse is often the case with popular fiction, which benefits from the immersive, visceral quality of the cinema.

Peter Benchley's 1974 novel 'Jaws', which turns 50 this year, was a smash. Despite critics' reservations, it was on the New York Times bestseller list for 44 weeks. Yet when we think of 'Jaws', images from Steven Spielberg's 1975 film adaptation are what come to mind—along with John Williams' iconic theme music.

Spielberg's 'Jaws' keeps the simple—and stunning—narrative architecture of Benchley's novel intact. A shark terrorises a small beach community that depends on wealthy tourists for sustenance. Brody, the chief of police, keeps the beaches open due to political pressure from Mayor Vaughan; when more attacks occur, marine biologist Matt Hooper comes to help. Together, they contract wild shark hunter Quint to help

them kill the great white.

But the tone of grand adventure that defines Spielberg's film marks a major departure from the novel. In Benchley's work, more energy is directed towards exploring the minor social and political lives of its small-town denizens than in staging an epic showdown between man and beast—and, crucially, it differs radically from the film in its characterisation. In Spielberg's world, the main characters are likeable, heroic, whereas in the novel they're petty, broken and bitter, wading through the messes their personal lives have become.

These differences are not simply evidence of a young director's desire to make the material his own. They map the changing consciousness of American popular culture in the 1970s, from a resolute focus on the violence simmering within United States society and policy (the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War) to an attempt to forget about these things through spectacular, anodyne entertainment.

**'The shark material is brilliant'**

At the novel's core is a swift, economically told tale of human versus beast: a classic American adventure in the vein of Jack London's 'White Fang' or Herman Melville's 'Moby-Dick'.

Benchley punctuates this drama with a keen interrogation of the social dynamics

of small American communities in the context of the economic pressures of capitalism.

A career journalist, Benchley effectively describes actions, events and scenery: shark hunting, the ocean, Quint's boat. The shark material is brilliant—the few times it cuts to the shark's point of view (recalling Spielberg's redeployment of the creature's point of view from 'Creature from the Black Lagoon'), the writing becomes electric, effortless. Benchley is at his best when describing the movements of the shark in the water.

But the material about people is less confident—the writing is uneven and trite in places, with moments between characters sometimes strained in order to generate the necessary action.

This includes two subplots Spielberg and team wisely cut from the film.

**Characters 'loathsome in places'**

One of the great joys of the film is the developing friendship between Hooper and Brody, culminating in their delightful final exchange. After the shark is dead and they are kicking their way back to shore, Brody laughs: "I used to hate the water." Hooper replies, "I can't imagine why." Both men are happy to have survived, and to have each other.

In the novel, it's more or less hate at first sight, with Brody immediately resenting Hooper because he grew up as a "summer person" in the area. Brody is ashamed he's not one of the wealthy summer people, and tries to hide this through a kind of pathetic machismo, which emerges most visibly in his competitiveness with Hooper.

**Is 'easy to swallow' better?**

Of course, populating a novel with unlikable characters and depressing family scenes is not a problem in and of itself. Popeye from William Faulkner's 'Sanctuary' is hardly likeable, neither is pompous Nick Carraway from 'The Great Gatsby'—and you'd be hard-pressed to find a Dickens novel that doesn't feature some degree of family strife.

But in 'Jaws', a "man versus beast" tale, a melodramatic thriller, it creates a flat feeling: we don't wholly mind the prospect of these characters being eaten by a shark.



Poster of the movie 'Jaws', released in 1975.

**Benchley's novel lingers longer**

One of the outcomes of 'Jaws' was at least a couple of generations of people who, if not exactly afraid to go back in the water, had a tendency to hum the film's theme to themselves when wading into the surf alone.

Benchley, horrified by the bad rap his novel gave sharks, would go on to become an ecological activist focused on shark protection. In 2015, a shark was named after him: *Etmopterus benchleyi*.

Benchley's 'Jaws' may not immediately grab one as easily as Spielberg's, and it's certainly not as technically accomplished. Its position in American literature is minor compared to the film's in Hollywood cinema. But despite—or, perhaps, because of—its flaws, the novel is worth reading at a time when the blockbuster has virtually decimated the middle of American cinema, churning out masses of pleasurable forgettable, interchangeable films that float like a thick slick of chum on the water's surface.

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## Call for contributions

The Kathmandu Post invites well-researched and creative pitches for 'Fiction Park' stories and feature articles—travelogues, book reviews, as well as pieces on technology, culture and lifestyle. To ensure your articles get our attention, please keep the following things in mind when inquiring about and submitting your pieces.

All your stories should be pitched to the Features desk, not the editor. Email your piece or pitch (along with a high-resolution headshot and a one-line bio) to [tkpfeatures@gmail.com](mailto:tkpfeatures@gmail.com).

We will respond only to well-written stories and pitches that have original ideas. Plagiarism will lead to blacklisting. We suggest that you google your pitch before writing to us. If you're submitting an article that the Post or other publications have already covered, tell us why your piece offers something new.

The Post receives dozens of pitches every day from aspiring writers and students. We cannot respond to every single email, but if we like your idea, we will get back to you.

— Editor



A still from the film.

SCREENGRAB VIA YOUTUBE