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WITHOUT FEAR OR FAVOUR

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Janakpur Jumla

Archaeologists call for halt to defacement of Lumbini heritage sites

Concerned over the construction of structures, Unesco threatens to put Lumbini on 'Heritage in Danger' list.

□ DIPENDRA BADUWAL & MANOJ PAUDEL
LUMBINI, FEB 11

The Department of Archaeology (DoA) has issued directives to the authorities concerned for the immediate removal of statues constructed in Sagarhawa and a cowshed in Dohanikot of Kapilvastu district.

Stating that the recently sculpted stone statues and the new cowshed affect the heritage sites with historical, archaeological and cultural significance, the department wrote to the Lumbini Development Trust (LDT) and Kapilvastu Municipality instructing the removal of the structures.

The construction of the stone sculptures and the cowshed compromises the structure and integrity of the archaeologically important places, said Ram Bahadur Kunwar, the DoA spokesman. "The stone sculptures and the cow shed are not in suitable places. We, therefore, instructed their removal," said Kunwar.

In recent years, new structures have been built in places related to Gautam Buddha and the ancient Shakya dynasty in Kapilvastu, Rupandehi and Nawalparasi West districts.

According to archaeologists, increase in human activities and the construction of new structures put the historical artefacts and their knowledge under threat of erosion.

The government instituted the trust in 1985 with the goal of exploring, excavating and conserving archaeological sites, including Lumbini, in

Rupandehi, as well as areas in Kapilvastu and Nawalparasi districts. The trust is also responsible for implementing the Lumbini Master Plan.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) enlisted Lumbini, the birthplace of Gautam Buddha, in the World Heritage List in 1997. Unesco has also expressed its concerns regarding the human activities and construction of various structures in the Lumbini area.

Experts say increased human activity in the area endangers historical artefacts.

The extended 45th session of the World Heritage Committee held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia from September 10-25, 2023 decided to seek a clarification from the LDT.

Accordingly, the World Heritage Committee wrote a 10-point letter to the Lumbini Development Trust seeking clarification before February 1, 2024. The trust has replied to the World Heritage Committee before the set deadline. It is learnt that Unesco repeatedly wrote to the LDT expressing serious concerns about ongoing construction of several structures in the Lumbini area.

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A man milks a mountain goat as the herd stops at Thulidaha of Takasera in Uttarganga-11, Rukum West in this recent photo.

POST PHOTO: MAHESH KC

Khan-backed independents lead in final Pakistan poll count

□ REUTERS
ISLAMABAD, FEB 11

The final results of Pakistan's national election put independents, backed by jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan, in the lead with 93 of 264 seats.

The party of another former prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, was second with 75 seats after Thursday's vote, lacking a clear majority but it was the largest single party in parlia-

ment as Khan's independents ran as individuals.

According to the final results announced on Sunday, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) won 54 seats, and the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) 17. Ten minor parties mopped up the remaining 17 seats, with two remaining vacant.

As coalition talks were held and protesters blocked roads in the north of the country, it was not clear who would form a government. The final

tally of votes was published by the election commission more than 60 hours after voting ended, raising questions over the delay.

The former prime ministers and bitter rivals have both declared victory, adding to the uncertainty as the country faces numerous urgent challenges, including negotiating a new International Monetary Fund programme to keep a struggling economy afloat.

A prime ministerial candidate has

to show a simple majority of 169 seats in the National Assembly when the house is called in the coming days. This will be determined by coalition talks and whether Khan-backed candidates are able to join a smaller party in parliament to form a single bloc to gain reserve seats.

Khan's PTI party had threatened to hold nationwide peaceful demonstrations on Sunday if the vote tally was not released overnight.

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The health ministry has asked its departments to prepare the new budget within the ceiling of the current fiscal year. Officials say their focus is on making existing programmes more effective. Pg 3

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□ SPORTS

Athletics dominated the NSJF Pulsar Sports Award 2023 as Deepak Adhikari claimed male player of the year, Rajpura Pachhai won female player of the year and Chandra Gurung coach of the year awards. Pg 7

Alliance plans to push TJ bill via vote if no consensus

Multiple attempts to build consensus have failed as ruling and opposition parties refuse to budge from their stands.



The UML's position largely aligns with the concerns of conflict victims and rights activists.

□ POST REPORT
KATHMANDU, FEB 11

The ruling alliance is preparing to amend the Enforced Disappearances Enquiry, Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act through a vote as months-long efforts at an all-party agreement failed to yield positive results.

The bill to amend the Act, registered in Parliament in March last year, is under consideration at the Law, Justice and Human Rights Committee of the House of Representatives. Multiple attempts to build consensus have failed as the ruling and main opposition CPN-UML have refused to budge from their positions.

"Years have passed since we started preparations to amend the Act but it hasn't been possible for various reasons," said Ramesh Lekhak, the Nepali Congress chief whip who is also a committee member. "We are still trying to build consensus with the main opposition. The amendment will be made in consensus but if that effort fails, due parliamentary process will be followed."

Members of the House committee said a last-ditch effort is being made for consensus but signs are not encouraging. The government wants the bill to be endorsed from the House session that commenced last week. The ongoing session will continue for a maximum of two and a half months.

The parties have differences mainly on four points of the bill. The House panel is struggling to decide whether to categorise arbitrary killings or all killings except those that occurred during clashes as serious violations of human rights. It also has been unable to settle what happens in case the victims of human rights violations refuse to reconcile.

The parties also have differences in ways to address the concerns of those who were affected by the conflict even though they were not directly involved in it. Also, cross-party lawmakers have differences over reduced sentencing. Though there is an agreement that the penalty for the perpetrators who cooperate in the investigation can be reduced, they have yet to agree on the extent of such reduction.

Currently, the main opposition's position largely aligns with the concerns of the conflict victims and human rights activists.

>> Continued on page 2



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BRIEFING

Nepali Congress calls central working committee meeting

KATHMANDU: The Nepali Congress has called a meeting of its central working committee. Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba called the meeting to discuss the preparations for the meeting of the Mahasamiti, the party's highest policy-making, scheduled for February 19-22. According to Krishna Prasad Paudel, the party's chief secretary, the meeting will be held at the party's central office in Sanepa at 1pm on Tuesday. Around 2,500 leaders and cadres from across the country will participate in the meeting to be held at Godavari, Lalitpur. As per the party statute, the Mahasamiti meeting should convene every year but the Congress has been deferring it ever since its 14th general convention in December 2021. (PR)

CIAA awards Kantipur journo Dahal, three others

KATHMANDU: The Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority on Sunday awarded four journalists including Matrika Dahal of Kantipur daily. During a function marking CIAA's 33rd establishment day, Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal felicitated the journalists with the Good Governance Award. The journalists were awarded for recognition of their contribution to corruption control and the promotion of good governance through news, according to the CIAA. Subash Gotame, Ajay Anuragi and Sudarshan Acharya were the other awardees. (PR)

Open border does not mean no regulation, says home minister

KATHMANDU: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Home Affairs Narayankaji Shrestha has said he does not agree that the border between Nepal and India should be closed. Responding to the queries posed by parliamentarians in a meeting of the State Affairs and Good Governance Committee of the House of Representatives, Shrestha, however, reiterated that keeping the borders open does not mean not paying attention towards regulation. "It does not mean that the bordering areas between the two countries go unmonitored. This issue should be resolved at the diplomatic level. We are holding talks on the same." He said the government would not unilaterally take decisions on the matter. It would rather take the matter to a conclusion through talks with India. Shrestha suggested that a system could be established at the integrated security check point where both countries keep records of the people crossing their territories. Shrestha argued that seeking identity from those incoming and outgoing people at the checkpoint would serve both countries in curbing cross-border crimes. (RSS)



A cyclist is seen crossing the makeshift wooden bridge over the Babai river which connects Bardiya district headquarters Gulariya and Barbardiya, in this recent photo.

POST PHOTO: KAMAL PANTHI

Ministry instructs agencies to prepare the health budget within previous ceiling

In the current fiscal year, 35 percent of national health budget was slashed. This hampered several healthcare programmes including maternal health, child health, family planning, and nutrition.

POST REPORT
KATHMANDU, FEB 11

The Ministry of Health and Population has directed the agencies concerned to prepare a budget for the next fiscal year within the ceiling of the current fiscal year.

Officials said they received directions to focus on making the existing health programmes effective instead of introducing new ones.

"Though we have not yet got the ceiling of the national budget, we have directed concerned agencies to start preparations within last year's ceiling," said Dr Roshan Pokhrel, secretary at the ministry. "It is not possible to introduce new programmes sticking to the ceiling of the health care budget for the current fiscal year."

Some officials said they were told that they could raise the ceiling by 10 to 15 percent of the current fiscal budget, as fund cuts seriously impacted several priority programmes.

"It is not possible to start new programmes with a slight increase in the national budget," said Lila Bikaram Thapa, chief of the nutrition section at the Family Welfare Division of the Department of Health Services. "We will instead focus on making the existing programme effective, which has maximum participation of the public."

Officials say that the budget will be allocated to generate demands of health care services from the public, budget growth or progress monitoring.

The government presents the annual budget in Parliament on Jetha 15 every year (it falls on May 29 this year).

In the last fiscal year, the Ministry of Finance slashed the health budget by 35 to 42 percent, which hampered several healthcare programmes.

The government had also downsized the total budget by a substantial 13.59 percent to Rs243.83 billion

for the fiscal year 2022-23, citing a plunge in revenue collection.

Officials said that a major cut in the national health care budget this fiscal year hit the country's priority programmes, including those of maternal health, child health immunisation, nutrition, HIV, tuberculosis, epidemic control, control of non-communicable diseases, mental health, ayurveda and alternative medicines.

Health facilities also lacked funds to procure contraceptives such as condoms, pills, implants and emergency pills. Without sufficient budget, health authorities failed to expand verbal autopsy, a method of determining the cause of maternal death when no medical record or formal autopsy is available, in the current fiscal year.

In Nepal, this method is being used to determine the causes of maternal deaths in 42 of the 77 districts.

According to officials, budget cuts for mosquito nets and testing kits

have already affected the malaria elimination programme.

They say the plan was to procure 180,000 lasting insecticide-treated bed nets for the ongoing fiscal year, but only 120,000 pieces could be purchased. The Epidemiology and Disease Control Division had planned to buy 500,000 malaria testing rapid diagnostic kits this fiscal year, but it could purchase only 315,000 units.

Officials say that budget cuts will also affect the awareness drive, which is crucial to reducing the burden of diseases.

The total impact of the downsizing on the national health budget is unknown, but experts have warned that the government's decision to cut the budget has jeopardised achievements made in the health sector over the past several years.

"A lot of priority programmes have been affected by the budget cut," said Dr Bibek Kumar Lal, director of the Family Welfare Division.

'Chemyeon': The role of 'face' in shaping Korea's cultural dynamics

Fear of losing face, desire to appear significant are powerful motivations at personal, family and even national levels.

SHIN JI-HYE
SEOUL, FEB 11

Lee Jung-ah, 36, recently ended her yearlong relationship with her boyfriend, mainly due to her parents' opposition.

They told her they disapproved of him because he did not match up to her professional and educational background. They worried that they would lose face in front of their relatives and acquaintances if she married him.

Now, Lee is hoping to find someone who can uphold the "chemyeon" of her father, who is a university professor, although she believes the chances of finding such a person are slim.

Just like Lee, numerous South Koreans give up their true desires out of fear of damaging their chemyeon, or social standing.

They worry about losing their standing in the eyes of others when making all sorts of decisions—from choosing a life partner to selecting clothing, food or a means of transportation, extending even to their choices of friends to hang out with, schools to attend and neighborhoods to live in.

"Koreans assess a person's success or failure based on how important they look on the surface, rather than their inner side," said Han Seong-yeul, an emeritus professor of psychology at Korea University, discussing the influence of chemyeon, one's outward facade, on the decisions of many South Koreans.

Chemyeon, the Korean 'face'

The concept of "face"—one's public image and social standing—is not exclusive to Korea. It is a universal human tendency to want to appear respectful to others and to be respected.

Canadian-American sociologist Erving Goffman defined face as the positive public image one seeks to establish in social interactions.

In China, the concept of "mianzi" is intricately linked with preventing a loss of social respect and avoiding embarrassment in social contexts. Similarly, in Japan, there is the notion of "tatemae," the practice of not expressing one's true thoughts explicitly, but rather prioritizing how others might feel or react to those thoughts.

Contrasting with Goffman's definition of face, which often centers around personal self-image and individuality, however, Korean chemyeon extends beyond the individual to encompass family, colleagues, the company and other in-group associations. Korean chemyeon also places a greater emphasis on formality and superficiality than the equivalent

in other Asian societies to the extent that Koreans sometimes maintain this facade even at a financial loss.

"Koreans tend to buy luxurious or large cars instead of what is convenient for their lives," said Han, adding that chemyeon focuses more on observable actions or rituals, emphasizing "formality and appearance" over "practicality and authenticity."

"They prefer larger apartments if possible and strive to live in neighborhoods that are recognized and respected by others, even if it means overstretching themselves."

South Koreans are the world's biggest spenders on luxury goods. According to Morgan Stanley, South Koreans' spending on luxury goods saw a 24 percent increase in 2022 to \$16.8 billion, or about \$325 per capita. That is far more than the \$55 and \$280 per capita spent by Chinese and American nationals, respectively.

Last year, 1 in 3 imported cars sold here cost over 100 million won (\$74,649).

"The worse the economy, the better high-end cars tend to sell," an official from a luxury carmaker said.

In 2022, the country with the highest sales of German luxury car Maybach worldwide, following China, was South Korea.

Powered by shame

The concept of chemyeon can be traced back to the Joseon era (1392-1910), which was divided into four classes and based on neo-Confucian ideals and rituals, as evidenced by Korean proverbs.

An old proverb, "Even if a yangban falls into water, he does not doggy-paddle," suggests that a yangban would avoid doing anything undignified or unrefined, even in a dire situation. The yangban were the aristocratic, scholarly class in Korea during the Joseon era.

Another proverb goes, "Even if a yangban is freezing to death, they will not warm themselves with a fire of rice husks." Burning rice husks was something poor commoners would do to overcome the midwinter cold.

In contemporary Korea, while the same four Joseon-era social classes no longer exist, there is an invisible social class system based on one's wealth, education and occupation. People often strive to be perceived as rich and socially important, sometimes even resorting to exaggeration to maintain such an image.

"Even in modern society, the culture that values chemyeon has not changed much," said Kwak Keum-joo, a professor of psychology at Seoul National University. "This is because the collectivist culture still remains strong, mean-

ing individuals are highly conscious of others' perceptions and opinions," she said.

"They are expected to hold a college degree, marry a suitable partner and secure a job that is esteemed by others," she said. "They should wear clothes that are perceived as appropriate by societal standards, rather than opting for comfort."

What lends power to chemyeon is the mechanism of shame, according to the late Choi Sang-jin, a former psychology professor at Chung-Ang University and a pioneer in deciphering the Korean collective psyche.

In his book, he detailed some of the things a dented chemyeon and the ensuing shame can



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lead to: students who fail university entrance exams and their parents avoiding social situations; people of lower social status feeling reluctant to attend school reunions where more successful peers are likely to be; and numerous Koreans experiencing shame in various circumstances, such as when their partners have weaker educational backgrounds than they do.

Chemyeon's influence extends beyond individuals to include the groups they belong to and even the nation as a whole.

When news reports disclosed this month that lawmaker Bae Hyun-jin was attacked with a brick by a teenager from Daechong Middle School in the affluent Daechi-dong area of Gangnam, a student vice-chair of the school immediately took to Instagram to protect the school's reputation.

He posted, "I shared this story to prevent our school's reputation from being tarnished by the actions of one individual, and I hope reporters will direct their questions here."

In 2007, a devastating shooting occurred at Virginia Tech in the United States, resulting in 32 fatalities and 29 injuries. The perpetrator was identified as 23-year-old Cho Seung-hui, a US permanent resident who had emigrated from Korea at the age of 8. He killed himself after carrying out the massacre.

Koreans both here and in the United States experienced a collective sense of shame upon learning that the gunman had been Korean.

Immediately after the tragedy, Koreans and Korean government officials issued public apologies for Cho's crime. The Korean ambassador to the US even urged members of a Korean church in the Washington area to undertake a 32-day fast as a gesture of repentance.

The response from Koreans here, which linked the actions of an individual to the reputation of the nation, was met with surprise by Americans, who come from a more individualistic culture, said Seol Dong-hoon, a professor of sociology at Jeonbuk National University.

"Korean people often use the term 'kuk-kyeok,' a combination of 'kuk' (nation) and 'kyeok' (level of dignity), to express the belief that a nation, like an individual, should possess a certain level of dignity to the outside world," Seol said. "Consequently, Koreans seem to uphold a certain ethical standard of responsibility for their nation."

Positive side of chemyeon

Although chemyeon often carries a negative connotation, scholars assert that chemyeon itself cannot be described as either 100 percent negative or positive.

"It cannot be definitively said that a culture which places great importance on chemyeon is entirely positive or negative," said Lim Tae-seop, a professor of communication from the University of Wisconsin, who wrote "Jeong, Chemyeon, Connections and Korean Interpersonal Relationships," in 1995.

"The very existence of consciousness about face or social standing reflects the fact that humans are social animals," Lim said. "A soci-

House panel directs government to revoke decision to lease Ramgram Stupa area

POST REPORT
KATHMANDU, FEB 11

The Public Accounts Committee on Sunday directed the government to revoke the permission granted to two private companies to unearth the historical area and construct stupas, Vihars and other structures in Ramgram Stupa, which is said to contain the corporeal remains of Gautam Buddha.

The Lumbini Development Trust had agreed to lease out a total of 120 bigha (81.27 hectares) of land for 99 years to the Singapore-based Moksha Foundation and Nepal-based Promised Land. Of the total 120 bigha, 116 bigha (78.56 hectares) belong to local residents and need to be acquired.

Recently, the vice-chairman of the Lumbini Development Trust, Lharkyal Lama, unilaterally decided to lease out the Ramgram area to private companies ignoring written objections by the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, the Ministry of Finance and the Department of Archaeology.

The meeting of the House panel on Sunday instructed the government to cancel all the processes and also to investigate individuals involved in the decision-making process. The committee has also instructed the Commission for Investigation of Abuse of Authority to investigate.

The committee said that handing over the Ramgram area to private companies is illegal and an attack on public faith.

"The committee draws the serious attention of the government, the Office of the Prime Minister and the Council of Ministers to the fact that there should be mutual coordination and cooperation between three tiers of the government on the issue," the committee said.

The committee chair Rishikesh Pokharel said the agreement to keep the historical heritage under the control of a certain company for a century was done covertly.

The committee directed to cancel all the process immediately as it is against the national interest, said Pokharel.

Ramgram Stupa is one of the eight original relic stupas where the corporeal remains of Gautam Buddha were enshrined. The stupa is a 7-metre high brick mound situated in ward 7 of Ramgram Municipality, around seven kilometres south of Parasi, the district headquarters of Nawalparasi West.

Some historians and archaeologists believe the ruins and artefacts date back to the Maurya era. Relics recovered during excavations in Ramgram and its surroundings suggest the area could have been the capital of the ancient Koliya state, the parental home of Buddha's mother Mayadevi.

Lumbini in Rupandehi district is the birthplace of Siddhartha Gautam. He spent his princely life in Tilaurakot palace of Kapilvastu district while Ramgram Stupa is the revered relic stupa for Buddhists. This historic stupa lies on the bank of the Jharahi stream in the village of Ujjaini.

According to archaeologists and historians, Ramgram is the only stupa among the eight relic stupas to be left untouched to respect its sanctity.

ety without such consciousness of face would inevitably degenerate into a more animalistic society."

Lim said chemyeon is composed of appearing dignified, one's socially proven capabilities, the quality of one's personal character, one's maturity and autonomy as an adult and how much one's behavior adheres to social norms. The crux lies in which elements of chemyeon are emphasized and which are overlooked.

"If a society prioritizes appearing dignified and one's socially proven capabilities but neglects the quality of one's character, one's maturity or how one's behavior adheres to social norms, it becomes a society where material aspects are considered more important than spiritual or moral values," he said.

"Conversely, if the quality of one's personal character, one's maturity and autonomy and how one's behavior adheres to social norms are valued more than appearing dignified and one's socially proven capabilities, that is likely to lead to a healthier society."

Korea University professor Han asserted that chemyeon even played a role in Korea's rise from poverty into prosperity within a single generation.

"Behind Korea's remarkable development in such a short time lies the underlying desire not to be disregarded by others and to ensure a better life for children by their parents," he said.

In the 1950s, after having gone through Japanese colonization and the Korean War, the majority of Koreans were illiterate. But they worked relentlessly and devoted themselves to their children's education, hoping to spare them from the shame of ignorance and to secure them a decent life.

Despite lacking in natural resources, a hard-working, well-educated workforce set Korea on a path to fast economic growth. Its nominal gross domestic product surged from 47.7 billion in 1953 to 2,170 trillion won in 2022, marking an approximately 45,000-fold increase.

"That generation of parents, despite their lack of educational opportunities, worked diligently to educate their children. They believed that their children's success would not only improve their lives but also raise the chemyeon of the family," Han said.

"A to Z into the Korean mind" traverses the complexities of the Korean psyche, examining an array of mental and emotional phenomena and their cultural nuances through keywords in alphabetical order. — Ed.

— The Korea Herald

OPINION



OUR VIEW

Conventional wisdom

At a minimum, Dahal should declare that he will step down as the head of his party after a specific time.

Good luck solving the problems in the CPN (Maoist Centre) at its statute convention slated for Feb 13-15 in Kathmandu. The convention will apparently help resolve the party's ideological and organisational challenges. But where do you start? The most glaring contradiction in the Maoist Centre is that an outfit whose USP was defending the rights of the marginalised communities has abandoned them. Senior party leaders who once took up guns to fight against an 'exploitative' state and build a more equal society have become silent supporters of crony capitalism. The party already had its hands full fighting traditional nemesis in the Nepali Congress and CPN-UML. Now, it also has to compete against vigorous new entrants like the Rastriya Swatantra Party and the Janamat Party. As of today, Pushpa Kamal Dahal's outfit has nothing with which to entice voters. Even its name creates suspicion and cynicism. The Maoist tag was fine for a party out to overthrow a state. Nearly two decades since the guns went silent, the nomenclature has outlived its utility and is now more of a burden.

Perhaps the biggest problem is the sclerotic Maoist Centre leadership. The same person has been the party head for 35 years, and he shows no willingness to hand over command to a younger comrade. Top leaders clinging to their posts past their expiry date is a problem in all of Nepal's major parties. But there is a vital difference in the Maoist Centre: unlike the Congress and the UML, which elect their heads from the floor of the general convention, the Maoist Centre has never elected its chairperson. Every time, Dahal pretty much picks himself the chair. These are just a few of countless anomalies afflicting the Maoist Centre. In the lead-up to the statute convention, some second-generation leaders dare murmur the need to institute a system for a more natural and periodic change of party leadership. Among the other issues being discussed is the downsizing of the mammoth party committees. For instance, the proposal is to hack down the central committee from 600-strong to 151. There is also a proposal to involve leaders and cadres in various 'productive activities' so that the party does not have to rely on outside donations that come with strings attached.

But these cosmetic changes will no longer suffice. If the (distant) third biggest party in the national parliament is to revive its electoral fortunes, it must completely overhaul the organisation. As the Maoist Centre is a one-man show, at a minimum, Dahal should declare that he will step down at a specified time and that in the meantime he will focus on grooming next-generation leaders. The other must-do for the Maoist Centre is to renew its commitment to taking up the issues of the marginalised communities. To start with, people from these communities should be adequately represented in the party's important organs—above and beyond the representations of such communities in other parties. Unless Dahal is ready to make some tough calls in order to help his organisation build a solid and distinct identity, the Maoist Centre, we are afraid, is a spent force.

Investment in road infrastructure is a prerequisite to attracting local and international tourists.

ROSHEE LAMICHHANE



In this piece, I explore the relationship between road infrastructure, tourism and economic prosperity, drawing from my personal experiences and global examples. Studies demonstrate a positive relation between the quality of road infrastructure and per capita income. Although the importance of improved roads for facilitating enhanced markets, education and healthcare services cannot be denied, my main focus here is the significance of better roads for robust tourism infrastructure, driving sustainable economic development.

My recent visits to Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, and Phnom Penh and Siem Reap Provinces in Cambodia, further highlight the transformative impact of sturdy road connectivity on tourism. In Ho Chi Minh, the efficiency of road travel was apparent. The road distance from Ho Chi Minh to Phnom Penh in Cambodia is 226 kilometres, a journey taking approximately five hours, including an hour for immigration at the border. Similarly, the road distance from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap in Cambodia is 318 km, requiring around 4.5 hours of travel. Further from Siem Reap to Bangkok, Thailand, the 400-km road took around eight hours, including a two-hour stop at the border. The quality of the buses, restrooms, excellent parking facilities, and smooth roads made the journey comfortable. Compared to air transport, the lower cost of road travel provided an incentive for budget-conscious tourists to travel freely.

Official statistics underscore the impact of superior infrastructure on tourist numbers. In 2023, Vietnam attracted about 12.6 million international tourists, Cambodia welcomed around 5.43 million international visitors, and Nepal lagged with only 1.14 million foreign tourists. Although Cambodia lacks direct flights from

Paving the path to prosperity



POST FILE PHOTO

Europe, North America, Australia and South Africa, most visitors to the country opt for connecting flights in Southeast Asia and East Asia. The notable increase in the number of tourists in recent years can be attributed to the commendable state of the country's road infrastructure. Conversations with tourists from Europe, the US and Canada revealed that they stay around 27 days on average. Most visitors expressed a preference for road travel, citing its cost-effectiveness, safety, and convenience compared to air travel.

Roads and economic success

As early as 1999, research documented a strong correlation between infrastructure and productivity in the United States and Western economies, particularly focusing on roads. In the contemporary landscape of vacation experiences, road travel has evolved as a crucial component, offering a unique blend of relaxation, mobility and adventure. Scholars emphasise the integral role of road and transportation infrastructure in fostering tourism and economic development. Beyond facilitating smooth journeys, well-developed road networks contribute to increased business activities, thus elevating local communities' living standards. This connection is exemplified by successful models globally. For instance, a study in Ghana found that a decrease of ten percent in travel duration between 2000 and 2015 would lead to a 1.2 percent rise in the wealth index between 2003 and 2016. Research has also shown the rise of market towns during the early medieval period and the modern era as a resilient mechanism sustaining the long-lasting

impacts of the Roman road network.

Another recent research suggests the positive effect of transportation infrastructure on economic growth in China at both aggregate and regional levels over a period from 1990-2017. A study conducted in Kosovo found that the enhancement of road infrastructure in the tourism sector impacts the ability to cover long distances, thereby reducing travel time for tourism. Tourists' selection of commercial destinations primarily relies on accessibility, appeal and arrangement. This illustrates that having a well-developed road infrastructure is essential for attracting a significant influx of tourists.

Countries like India, with substantial investments in road networks, showcase the positive economic impact of such endeavours. India boasts the second-largest road network globally, surpassing China, France, and other nations. To reach its 2025 economic growth target of US\$5 trillion, India continues to enhance its infrastructure. In June 2022, the Minister of Road Transport and Highways inaugurated 15 national highway projects worth INR13,585 crores (US\$1.7 billion) in Patna and Hajipur, Bihar. Unfortunately, Nepal has struggled to keep pace with its counterparts in road infrastructure development.

The United Nations projects that by the year 2050, around six billion people will live and work in urban settings. There is a pressing need to foster advancements in innovation, intelligent transportation systems and autonomous vehicles to facilitate the safe, sustainable and efficient movement of large populations and goods. Thus, smart roads with integrated technol-

gies contribute to safer travel, efficient traffic management and enhanced overall travel experiences.

The way forward

Although good road infrastructure usually improves the overall tourist experience worldwide, Nepal faces challenges due to its inadequate road conditions, which prevent it from fully realising its potential as a desirable tourist destination. The stark contrast is evident when comparing the smooth roads of Vietnam and Cambodia to the challenging conditions on the route from Kathmandu to Pokhara in Nepal, where a mere 200-kilometer distance can take 8-12 hours to traverse. The disparity in road infrastructure is mirrored in economic statistics.

Nepal, with the lowest road density in South Asia, records a mere 47 km of road per 100 square km (km²) and 2.5 km of road per 1,000 people, according to the Asian Development Bank (ADB). This lags significantly behind neighbouring countries in the region. Nepal's road density remains the lowest in South Asia, raising concerns about the nation's ability to attract and cater to tourists effectively. The lack of efficient road networks impacts international and domestic tourism and hinders overall economic progress.

Nepal must embark on a comprehensive approach to road connectivity, considering engineering efficiency, cost per person and vehicle. The focus should shift towards preventing road accidents and overloads and ensuring roads are constructed based on scientific evidence rather than personal whims. Challenges such as corruption and bureaucratic hurdles are not unique to Nepal. For instance, political meddling in India elevates the expenses associated with road construction and heightens the probability of road disappearance. Such instances have become a possibility and must be averted in our case.

The call is for accountability, proper geological tests and timely planning to ensure capital expenditure on roads aligns with the nation's progress. Efforts to enhance road infrastructure must also prioritise safety. Nepal has witnessed increasing road accidents, often attributed to poor road conditions. Timely action is crucial to prevent roads from becoming hazardous, ensuring the safety of both locals and tourists. Thus, investment in road infrastructure is the basic prerequisite to attracting a large number of tourists both locally and internationally.

MONDAY INTERVIEW SWARNIM WAGLE

Demography, digitalisation and diaspora will catapult RSP to power

The party doesn't equate an inclusive liberal democratic order with federalism. We should worry more about the ends, not the means.

The emergent Rastriya Swatantra Party, the fourth largest force in the federal lower house, has of late been trying to add clarity to its ideological and organisational orientations. In the parliament, it has also been a vocal advocate for reforms in a number of sectors and issues. Yet, there is also no shortage of controversy surrounding the party. The *Post's* Thira Lal Bhusal sat down with Swarnim Wagle, a celebrated economist and now an RSP lawmaker and vice-chair of the party, to discuss these issues. Meanwhile, Wagle also dissects the country's political-economic malaise. Excerpts:

The poor governance of the cooperative sector has been a challenge for at least two decades. MPs with vested interests have diluted the provision by saying that the Rastra Bank can come in only at the request of the cooperatives department. The distinction is that the central bank is one of Nepal's most professional public institutions. One can easily remove the head of the cooperatives department. Thus, the provision of keeping the central bank out till the very end is aimed at continuing the ongoing malpractices. This is not an isolated incident. Even former special court justice Gauri Bahadur Karki, who was tasked with investigating the irregularities a decade ago, has clearly pointed out how the current Cooperative Act was brought. As many as 693 amendments were registered to water down the bill. The interest groups that didn't want the cooperatives sector to be tightly regulated tried to weaken the law.

Rampant malpractice in the cooperative sector has become a national problem. Many noted personalities are linked to such cases. Even your party chair Rabi Lamichhane courted controversy over a transaction from a cooperative before he joined politics. Since your party entrusted you with studying the matter, what did you find?

Our party chair himself did a press conference recently and explained the circumstances. So, I don't need to talk much about it. In fact, not a shred of evidence has linked him directly to those allegations. He has been very forthcoming as a leader of a national party to answer the questions publicly raised about him. He has asked the state to investigate the matter and prosecute him if he has embezzled funds as alleged. Our party believes this is an unwarranted attack on a hugely popular leader.

We find so many informed and even noted people courting controversy on cooperative issues. Why are such incidents taking place?

Lax regulations, intense politicisation of the sector for easy credit, and some economic shocks enabled unscrupulous people to abuse the public's money and trust. Common people have been duped by high interest rates. The major reason for such malpractices is that politicians have sabotaged much-needed reforms



Swarnim Wagle, lawmaker and RSP vice-chair

POST PHOTO: DEEPAK KC

in this sector for over a decade.

Of late, ruling leaders have been claiming that the country's economy has significantly improved, and they often cite the increase in foreign exchange reserves as a success. Is the national economy really on the up?

Our economy remains stagnant. The exodus of about one million youth annually continues, which is rare for any nation in peacetime. The youth have lost hope in the country's economic revival. They don't see prospects for decent jobs here. State agencies are becoming dysfunctional. There is an environment of social unease and normlessness in society. There is reform stasis. After all, the increase in foreign exchange reserves shows that more and more youths are leaving this country and sending money to meet the basic needs of their family members. The piling of money

suggests a lack of investment. The government is not delivering, and I don't see any credible hint of a substantive departure anytime soon. The production of cement, steel and other concrete items is down by 30 to 40 percent. There is a massive drop in the sales of items like mobile phones, cosmetics and laptops that young people use. The scenario in the development sector is bleak as well. Again, slow credit adoption, hollowing out of the young middle class, and poor capital expenditures by the state are dampening economic growth.

Some experts suggest we are entering a stage of recession. Is the situation that alarming?

We need to be careful with the use of such words. The economy worsens in a sequence: A slow-down, then a recession before entering a full-blown crisis in the form of a depression. I believe we are in a state of *mandi* or slow-

down. As a responsible political economist, I cannot sound alarmist. But I reject all claims that the economy has improved notably. The ruling coalition has a comfortable majority, but there is no appetite or desire to improve things. We are in a social state of anomie, politically dysfunctional and economically stagnant.

How do you evaluate this government in terms of governance?

Governance has become hostage to a venal coalition that is inept and idle. In my two recent meetings with Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, he exhibited a drive to show results during this tenure, but he is dependent on the Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba, whose political incentives are quite perverse. Leadership that does not inspire confidence fuels public frustration.

Let's move on to politics. Many are still curious about your party's policies on key political matters. You also recently said that the RSP is not a party of pro-monarchists. Could you elaborate?

Our party has been clear from the beginning. From the Jaleswar meeting in November, we gave more clarity to our policy, leadership and organisational issues. Our party statute, election manifesto and other documents have already made our political orientation clear. We clearly adhere to the current constitution of Nepal, which is a republican constitution. On federalism, we will nominally retain the current set up but we are critical of the provincial layer, which seems redundant. It is costly and burdensome and has been designed mainly to accommodate the second-tier party cadres of old political parties. We will radically overhaul this aspect of the constitution the day we attain the requisite strength.

We are clear that we will be a socially just liberal economy. We will be the most private sector-friendly party that Nepal has ever had. We believe in a social market economy that has a dynamic middle class that is enterprise friendly, investment compliant, and pro-competition. That is our line. We are a centrist force that seeks socially just outcomes in a liberal economy that is governed by a robust regulatory architecture.

Even on culture and religion, we are equally clear. We will adhere to the

definition of the constitution that respects *sanatana dharma* while being plural and inclusive.

How will it be different from the present system?

Our country today is trapped in a shady version of crony capitalism. All organs of the state are hijacked. There is not a single regulatory or constitutional body that isn't under the influence of politics. The system we envision is completely different: meritocratic, fair and devoid of corruption.

How can a federal system work effectively with a weakened provincial layer?

We don't equate an inclusive liberal democratic order with federalism. We should worry more about the ends, not the means. There is no text in political science that states that to be democratic, you have to adhere to federalism. We don't subscribe to the view that you have to adhere to the federal system to be progressive. We reject that. We will retain the seven-province setup for now. We are critical of the way the provincial layer has been designed. We aren't against federalism as it is one of many forms of devolving power.

How can the RSP break the grip of traditional political parties and emerge as a bigger force?

The dynamics of the three Ds will catapult the party to power. First is young demography. The youths support us even if their parents are Congress or Communist party members. Second is digitalisation. In the past, you needed to reach people's doorsteps and meet them in person. This involved years of political toil. I became a federal lower house candidate from Tanahun, which was new for me, just weeks before the vote. I won the election from the district, which was a Congress bastion, where the current President, Ramchandra Paudel, won repeatedly. Digital access helped me reach the common people in just two weeks. Third is diaspora. The youths abroad have a hunger for an aspirational society. They have seen how open, democratic countries have prospered with good leadership. These three Ds will make a big difference in Nepal and are RSP's currency.

For a longer version of the interview log on to kathmandupost.com.

FOREX	
US Dollar	133.16
Euro	143.60
Pound Sterling	168.15
Swiss Franc	152.23
Australian Dollar	86.87
Canadian Dollar	98.93
Singapore Dollar	98.92
Japanese Yen (10)	8.92
Chinese Yuan	18.51
Saudi Arab Riyal	35.51
Qatari Riyal	36.51
Thai Bhat	3.71
UAE Dhiram	36.26
Malaysian Ringgit	27.95
Korean Won (100)	10.00

Exchange rates fixed by Nepal Rastra Bank

SHARES	
Nepse (in percent)	2,085.82pts -0.50%
HIGHEST LOSERS	
NICGFZ	-10
UNL	-7.14
GLBSL	-7.13
GMFBS	-4.66
KLBSL	-4.47
NICA	-4.11
MODERATE LOSERS	
NFS	-0.09
NLIC	-0.08
ULBSL	-0.07
SPDL	-0.04
MCHL	-0.03
GILB	-0.02
MODERATE GAINERS	
EBLDBE	0.1
PRIN	0.07
NHPC	0.06
PRVU	0.06
SSHL	0.06
NYADI	0.03
HIGHEST GAINERS	
SAMAJ	10
KBSH	9.99
TIVL	6.71
DORDI	5.08
MRHC	4.9
USHEC	4.56

BULLION		PRICE PER TOLA
 Fine Gold		Rs 118,000
 Silver		Rs 1,390

SOURCE: FENEGOSIDA

BIZLINE

Israel's Tower proposes \$8 billion chip plant in India

BENGALURU: Israel's Tower Semiconductor opens a new tab has submitted a proposal to India's government to build an \$8 billion chip-making facility in the South Asian nation, the national daily Indian Express reported on Sunday. Tower, seeking government incentives for its plan, is looking to manufacture 65 nanometre and 40 nanometre chips in India, the report said. The company and India's IT ministry did not immediately respond to requests for comment. Chip manufacturing is a key plank of Modi's business agenda, but initial bids to offer \$10 billion in incentives to the industry have floundered, with some proposals stalled or cancelled. (REUTERS)

Andean farmers use age-old technique amid climate change

ACORA: From the sky, they look like huge, circular patterns made by aliens—but in fact, they are an age-old technique farmers have brought back to fight the climate crisis on the Andean plateaus of Puno. On the border of Peru and Bolivia, the Waru Waru—an indigenous Quechua word that means ridge—are once again protecting potato and quinoa crops as they did in the region 2,000 years ago. "It is an agricultural system that lets us face climate change, which has changed the seasons of the year. It is very beneficial in times of drought and frost," farmer Cesar Cutipa, 42, told AFP. Puno lies on Lake Titicaca about 3,812 meters (12,507 feet) above sea level. Farmers have made six Waru Waru nearby in flood-prone fields. Furrows form a rectangular platform, where planting is done. Surrounded by water, the planting beds are up to 100 meters long, between four and 10 meters wide and one meter high. The water around the plants creates a microclimate, absorbing heat from the sun during the day and radiating it back at night to ward off frost in sub-zero temperatures. (AFP)

UN's IMO working 'tirelessly' to solve Red Sea crisis

LONDON: The International Maritime Organization (IMO) is working "tirelessly" to solve the Red Sea crisis, which is severely disrupting the global transport of goods, its head Arsenio Dominguez told AFP. Yemen's Huthi rebels, supported by Iran, have launched dozens of attacks against ships in the Red Sea since November, targeting boats headed for Israel in an act of "solidarity" with inhabitants of the Gaza Strip, which is in the grip of the war between Israel and Hamas. Despite retaliatory strikes by the US and UK, the rebels are still launching attacks, firing at US ship "Star Nasia" and UK vessel "Morning Tide" on Tuesday. The IMO, the United Nations agency responsible for security at sea, is working to ensure that "parties continue to talk so that the situation does not degenerate any further, and we can return to a safe maritime environment." Panama-born Secretary General Dominguez told AFP on Thursday. (AFP)

Government tightens rules on microbreweries

The new policy says restaurants should have a seating capacity for at least 200 people to operate microbreweries.

POST REPORT
KATHMANDU, FEB 11

The government has tightened the rules for restaurants operating microbreweries.

The Department of Industry amended the standards to establish microbreweries by restaurants last Thursday. The amended rule includes a new condition that restaurants should have a seating capacity of at least 200 people to operate microbreweries.

In September 2015, the Industrial Promotion Board under the Industry Ministry allowed restaurants to establish microbreweries for the first time. It allowed restaurants with a seating capacity of at least 20 people to operate microbreweries.

The new policy, however, has allowed such microbreweries to produce up to 3 million litres of beer annually, from an earlier limit of 2.5 million litres.

A microbrewery is a small unit that produces beer in limited quantities for captive consumption and is found mostly in establishments such as hotels and restaurants located in tourist hotspots.

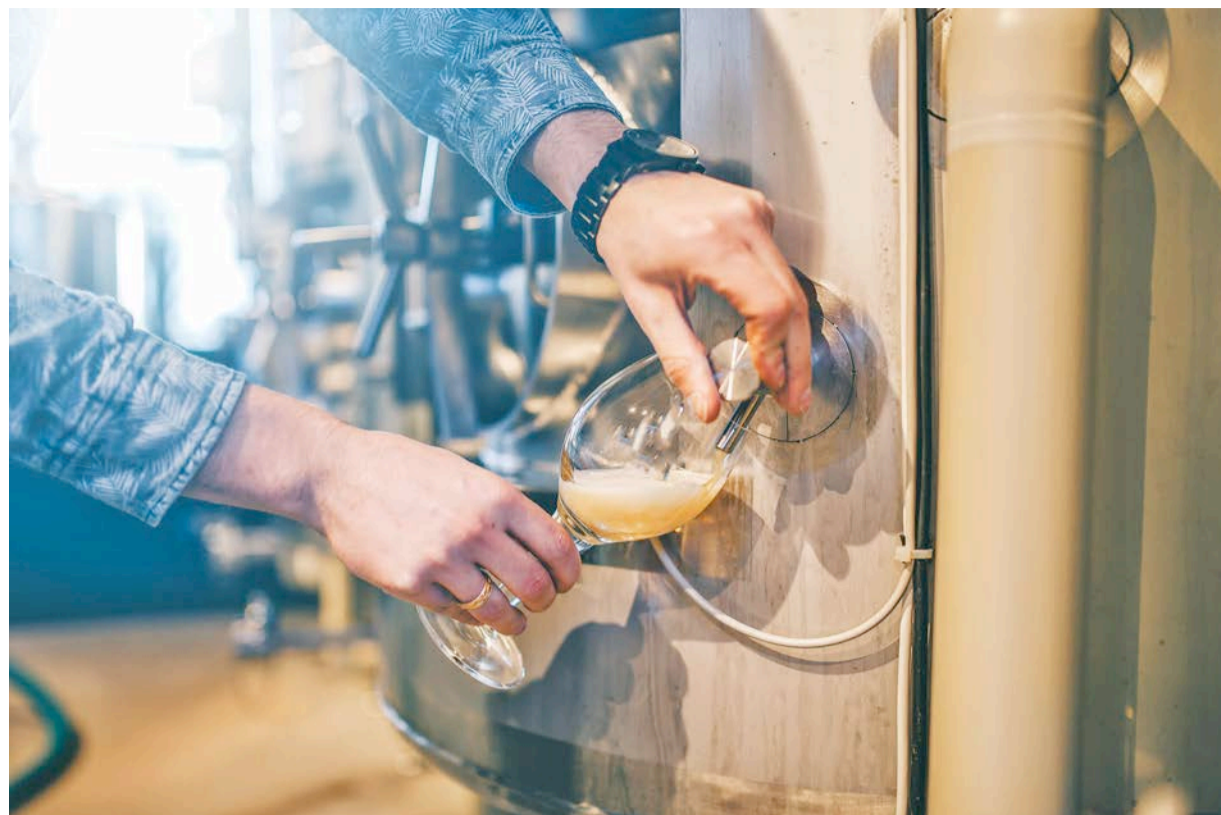
In 2015, the government had for the first time decided to issue licences for operating microbreweries demanded by tourism entrepreneurs.

The amended policy has set a slew of conditions for establishing microbreweries in restaurants.

According to the standards, restaurants intending to open a microbrewery should have an area of 2,400 square feet, with a brew house area of 1,200 square feet, and an additional 900 square feet designated for utilities.

All types of waste produced by such microbreweries should be managed in an environmentally friendly manner.

Beer produced by microbreweries should have a maximum of 6 percent alcohol. In 2015, the permissible alco-



SHUTTERSTOCK

While applying for permission to establish a microbrewery, the applicants should deposit Rs1 million as security deposit.

hol limit for beer produced by microbreweries was 7 percent.

A microbrewery should be set up within a brick-and-mortar house.

The storage of raw materials, production area and storage of produced goods needs to be managed separately.

The microbrewery needs to use certified malt. In Nepali malt is to be used, microbreweries should source the malt from certified companies, the new policy said.

According to the standards, tanks and pipelines used in the microbrew-

ery need to be of stainless steel and its boiler should be powered by electricity. "With this development, customers will get fresh beer at low cost," said Uddhav Dhakal, secretary at the Restaurant and Bar Association Nepal. He said that despite the issuance of licences, restaurants have yet to produce beer on a commercial scale.

According to the new policy, water used by microbreweries needs to meet the quality standards determined by the Department of Food Technology and Quality Control, the country's

quality watchdog. Sugar should not be mixed as an adjunct.

While producing beer, microbreweries need to get quality assurance certificates from alcohol technologists or food technologists.

Before establishing a microbrewery, restaurants need to complete the initial environmental examination and such examination needs to be approved by the related agency as per the existing law. The effluent (liquid waste) produced by microbrewers

needs to be disposed of only after

Xiaomi says India's scrutiny of Chinese firms unnerves suppliers

REUTERS
NEW DELHI, FEB 11

China's Xiaomi has told New Delhi that smartphone component suppliers are wary about setting up operations in India amid heavy scrutiny of Chinese companies by the government, according to a letter and a source with direct knowledge of the matter.

Xiaomi, opens a new tab, which has the biggest share in India's smartphone market at 18 percent, also asks in the letter dated February 6 that India consider offering manufacturing incentives and lowering import tariffs for certain smartphone components.

The Chinese company assembles smartphones in India with mostly local components and the rest are imported from China and elsewhere. The letter is Xiaomi's response to a query from India's information technology ministry asking how New Delhi can further develop the country's component manufacturing sector.

India ramped up scrutiny of Chinese businesses after a 2020 border clash between the two countries killed at least 20 Indian soldiers and four from China, disrupting the invest-

ment plans of big Chinese companies and drawing repeated protests from Beijing.

While Chinese companies operating in India are reticent to speak publicly about the scrutiny, Xiaomi's letter shows that they continue to struggle in India, especially in the smartphone space where many critical components come from Chinese suppliers.

In the letter, Xiaomi India President

The Chinese company assembles smartphones in India with mostly local components.

Muralikrishnan B. said India needed to work on "confidence building" measures to encourage component suppliers to set up operations locally.

"There are apprehensions among component suppliers regarding establishing operations in India, stemming from the challenges faced by companies in India, particularly from Chinese origin," Muralikrishnan said, without naming any companies.

The letter said the concerns were related to compliance and visa issues that it didn't elaborate on and other factors. It said, "The government should address these concerns and work to instil confidence among foreign component suppliers, encouraging them to set up manufacturing facilities in India."

Xiaomi and the IT ministry did not respond to queries for further information and comment.

Indian authorities last year accused Chinese smartphone company Vivo Communication Technology of breaching some visa rules and alleged it siphoned \$13 billion in funds from India.

India has also frozen more than \$600 million in Xiaomi assets for alleged illegal remittances to foreign entities by passing them off as royalty payments. Both Chinese companies deny any wrongdoing.

Other than regulatory scrutiny of the likes of Xiaomi and Vivo, India has since 2020 also banned more than 300 Chinese apps, including ByteDance's TikTok, and halted planned projects such as those planned by Chinese automakers BYD, opens new tab and Great Wall Motor, opens new tab.

Israel-Hamas war 'devastating' Palestinian economy, IMF chief says

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
DUBAI, FEB 11

The Israel-Hamas war has devastated the economies of both the embattled Gaza Strip and the occupied West Bank, the International Monetary Fund's chief said Sunday, adding that only "durable peace" would improve the outlook.

"The Palestinian economy's dire outlook is worsening as the conflict persists," managing director Kristalina Georgieva told the World Governments Summit in Dubai.

"Only a durable peace and political solution will fundamentally change it". "Economically, the impact of the conflict has been devastating," Georgieva said.

In the war-ravaged coastal territory, economic activity dropped 80 percent from October through December compared with a year earlier, the IMF chief said.

In the West Bank, the drop was 22 percent, she added.

The larger Palestinian territory has been hit hard by Israel's withdrawal of 130,000 work permits, the prolifera-

tion of checkpoints that has heavily disrupted transportation, the loss of tourism, being cut off from Gaza and Israel's withholding of tax revenues from the Palestinian Authority.

The Gaza Strip has been under intense Israeli assault for over four months, in retaliation for the October 7 Hamas attack on southern Israel.

Hamas's unprecedented attack resulted in the deaths of about 1,160 people, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally based on official Israeli figures.

Israel vowed to destroy the militant group and launched air strikes and a ground offensive that have killed at least 28,176 people, mostly women and children, according to the health ministry in the Hamas-run territory.

Georgieva spoke at the opening of the World Government Summit, an annual gathering of top business and political figures in the United Arab Emirates, which runs until Wednesday.

Beyond the Palestinian territories, the Israel-Hamas war has also hit the tourism sectors of neighbouring countries such as Egypt and Lebanon, she said.

Climate change parches Morocco breadbasket amid policy pitfalls

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BERRECHID, (MOROCCO), FEB 11

Around this time every year, Moroccan wheat farmer Abderrahim Mohafid is usually preparing for his spring harvest, but this year his fields lay unusually bare.

On the road leading up to his hamlet in Berrechid province, Morocco's historically breadbasket situated some 40 kilometres (about 25 miles) southeast of Casablanca, vast fields languish as the country grapples with its sixth consecutive year of drought.

"The harvest is already lost," said Mohafid, 54, as he glanced at his 20-hectare (nearly 50 acre) field where almost nothing has grown.

"Wheat should already be at 60 centimetres."

In a neighbouring village, Hamid Najem found himself in the same predicament.

His 52 hectares (about 128 acres) that have yielded soft wheat and barley in past years "are no longer good for anything", said the 50-year-old.

"We've never had such a tough year."

More than 88 percent of Berrechid's vast agricultural lands are not irrigated, with farmers relying instead on rain, according to Morocco's agriculture ministry.

Yet so far this year, the North African country has seen only about half the rainfall it did during the same period last year. Morocco's water minister Nizar Baraka told AFP.

This has occurred in parallel with



AFP/RESS

A farmer checks his dry cereal field in Berrechid, Morocco's historically wheat-rich province situated some 40 kilometres southeast of Casablanca, on February 7.

temperatures in Morocco increasing by an average of 1.8 degrees Celsius (3.2 degrees Fahrenheit) compared to the period between 1981 and 2010, he added.

In recent weeks, Moroccan authori-

ties have restricted the opening of hammams and car wash stations in several cities and prohibited the watering of golf courses or gardens with drinking water, as the country's dams are only at 23 percent capacity,

compared to around 32 percent last year. The successive years of drought are "compromising" this agricultural season, says Abderrahim Handouf, an agronomist.

Fearing the effects of the prolonged water scarcity, farmers had already reduced the size of areas in which they sowed cereals, according to the expert.

In November, they had sown 2.3 million hectares compared to between four and five million hectares on average in previous years, he said.

The situation, Handouf added, will have a "serious impact on the economy" of the country where a third of the population works in agriculture.

The sector also accounts for 14 percent of Morocco's exports, with exported produce seen as more profitable than that sold in domestic markets. Mohafid said he hoped to make up for losses in previous seasons by adapting new sowing techniques, such as planting seeds without ploughing the field first, allowing the soil to preserve its natural humidity.

"The harvest is already lost, but I hope it will rain in February and March at least to have enough to feed the livestock," he said.

For some larger-scale farmers, the prospects aren't as gloomy, but irrigation has become essential.

Hamid Mechaal says he can count on irrigation to save his 140 hectares in the east of the province of Berrechid, where he grows wheat, carrots and potatoes.

"With drought, we are forced to irri-

gate at 85 percent, whereas before, irrigation was only complementary," said the farmer.

Like 500 farmers in the region, he is supplied with a fixed allocation of 5,000 tonnes of water per hectare "to better manage" the coveted resource.

Morocco's agricultural model—tunnel-ventilated on exports for the past 15 years—is yet again faced with challenges at a time when the country sees "an absolutely declining water supply", said Mohamed Taher Srairi, an agronomist.

It has nonetheless been focused on water-intensive crops, like carrots in Berrechid, he added.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has similarly warned of a "disorderly intensification of irrigation" in Berrechid over the past two decades.

"Between 2007 and 2017, carrot production, for instance, increased nearly 500 percent," it noted in a November report, noting that the Berrechid aquifer was "one of the most depleted in Morocco".

The North African country's needs are estimated at more than 16 billion cubic metres of water, including 87 percent for the agricultural sector, but it has only had five billion cubic metres over the last five years, according to the water ministry.

"Agricultural policy should be reviewed from top to bottom," said Handouf. "Today, I'm under the impression that the government is looking in one direction while reality is in the opposite direction."

WORLD

Egypt 'warns to suspend' key peace treaty if Israel pushes into Rafah on its border

A ground operation in Rafah could cut off one of the only avenues for delivering Gaza's badly needed food, medical supplies.



A Palestinian mourns a relative killed in the Israeli bombing of the Gaza Strip in Deir al Balah, Gaza Strip, on Sunday.

ASSOCIATED PRESS
RAFAH, GAZA STRIP, FEB 11

Egypt is threatening to suspend its peace treaty with Israel if Israeli troops are sent into the densely populated Gaza border town of Rafah, where it says fighting could force the closure of the besieged territory's main aid supply route, two Egyptian officials and a Western diplomat said on Sunday.

The threat to suspend the Camp David Accords, a cornerstone of regional stability for nearly a half-century, came after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said sending troops into Rafah was necessary to win the four-month war against the Palestinian militant group Hamas.

Over half of Gaza's population of 2.3 million have fled to Rafah to escape

fighting in other areas, and they are packed into sprawling tent camps and UN-run shelters near the border. Egypt fears a mass influx of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees who may never be allowed to return.

The standoff between Israel and Egypt, two close US allies, took shape as aid groups warned that an offensive in Rafah would worsen the already catastrophic humanitarian situation in Gaza, where around 80 percent of residents have fled their homes and where the UN says a quarter of the population faces starvation.

Hamas' Al-Aqsa television station quoted an unnamed Hamas official as saying that any invasion of Rafah would "blow up" talks mediated by the United States, Egypt and Qatar aimed at achieving a cease-fire and the release of Israeli hostages. Netanyahu,

in an interview on ABC News' "This Week with George Stephanopoulos," suggested civilians in Rafah could flee north, saying there are "plenty of areas" that have been cleared by the army. He said Israel is developing a "detailed plan" to relocate them.

But Israel's offensive has caused widespread destruction, particularly in northern Gaza, and heavy fighting is still taking place in central Gaza and the southern city of Khan Younis. In Gaza City on Sunday, the remaining residents covered decomposing bodies in the streets or carried bodies to graves. Some streets were piled high with sand from bombings. Smoke billowed from destroyed buildings.

A ground operation in Rafah could cut off one of the only avenues for delivering Gaza's badly needed food and medical supplies.

All three officials confirmed Egypt's threats, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to brief reporters on the sensitive negotiations. Qatar, Saudi Arabia and other countries have also warned of severe repercussions if Israel goes into Rafah.

"An Israeli offensive on Rafah would lead to an unspeakable humanitarian catastrophe and grave tensions with Egypt," European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell wrote on X. The White House, which has rushed arms to Israel and shielded it from international calls for a cease-fire, has also warned against a Rafah ground operation under current circumstances, saying it would be a "disaster" for civilians.

Israel and Egypt fought five wars before signing the Camp David Accords, a landmark peace treaty brokered by then-US President Jimmy Carter in the late 1970s. The treaty includes several provisions governing the deployment of forces on both sides of the border. Egypt has heavily fortified its border with Gaza, carving out a 5-kilometer (3-mile) buffer zone and erecting concrete walls above and below ground. It has denied Israeli allegations that Hamas operates smuggling tunnels beneath the border, saying Egyptian forces have full control on their side.

Egyptian officials fear that if the border is breached, the military would be unable to stop a tide of people fleeing into the Sinai Peninsula.

The United Nations says Rafah, normally home to fewer than 300,000 people, now hosts 1.4 million more who fled fighting elsewhere, and it is "severely overcrowded." Netanyahu said Hamas still has four battalions there. "Those who say that under no circumstances should we enter Rafah are basically saying lose the war; keep Hamas there," he told ABC News.

Israel has ordered much of Gaza's population to flee south, with evacuation orders covering two-thirds of the territory, even as it regularly carries out airstrikes in all areas, including Rafah. Airstrikes on the town in recent days have killed dozens of Palestinians, including women and children.

Russia launches 45 drones in mass barrage of Ukraine

ASSOCIATED PRESS
KYIV, UKRAINE, FEB 11

Russian forces launched 45 drones over Ukraine on Sunday in a five-and-a-half-hour barrage, officials said, as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy continued the reshuffle of his war cabinet as the war enters its third year.

In a statement, the Ukrainian air force said it had shot down 40 of the Iranian-made Shahed drones over nine different regions, including on the outskirts of the country's capital, Kyiv. The five-and-a-half-hour attack targeted agricultural facilities and coastal infrastructure, officials for Ukraine's southern defence forces wrote on Telegram. They said that a strike in the Mykolaiv region had injured one person, sparking a fire and damaging nearby residential buildings.

Another person was injured in Ukraine's Dnipropetrovsk region when a blaze broke out due to falling debris from a destroyed drone, said the head of the region's military administration, Serhiy Lysak.

The strikes come as Zelenskyy continues his shakeup of military commanders in a bid to maintain momentum against attacking Russian forces.

Kyiv announced Sunday that former deputy defence minister Lieutenant General Alexander

Pavlyuk would become the new commander of Ukraine's ground forces. The post was previously held by Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyy, who was named Thursday as the replacement for Ukraine's outgoing military chief, Gen. Valerii Zaluzhnyi.

New presidential decrees also named Yuriy Sodal, the former head of Ukraine's marine corps, as the new commander of Ukraine's combined forces; Brigadier General Ihor Skibiuk as commander of Ukraine's air assault forces; and Major general Ihor Plahuta as commander of Ukraine's territorial defence forces.

Incoming commander-in-chief Syrskyy has signalled that his immediate goals include improving troop rotation at the front lines and harnessing the power of new technology at a time when Kyiv's forces are largely on the defensive.

Ukraine's military intelligence service said Sunday that attacking Russian forces had been found using Starlink terminals to aid their attack. It released what it said was a recording of an intercepted conversation between two Russian soldiers as proof.

Starlink terminals, which use a series of satellites run by Elon Musk's company Space X to provide high-speed communications, have been vital in giving Ukraine's military an edge over invading Russian troops.



Firefighters extinguish a fire after a Russian attack on a residential neighbourhood in Kharkiv, Ukraine on Saturday.

BRIEFING

UK's King Charles attends Sunday church service

LONDON: Britain's King Charles III attended church on Sunday in his first public outing since Buckingham Palace's shock announcement almost a week ago that he has cancer. The 75-year-old monarch was photographed walking into St Mary Magdalene Church on the royal country residence of Sandringham, eastern England, where he is currently staying. Charles waved to waiting media as he walked alongside his wife Queen Camilla before being greeted by the church's rector, Reverend Paul Williams, with the pair shaking hands. The appearance came after the king released a message late Saturday expressing his "heartfelt thanks for the many messages of support and good wishes" he had received since Monday's announcement. (AFP)

Indonesia scraps plan to buy Mirage fighter jets from Qatar

JAKARTA: Indonesia has ditched a controversial plan to buy 733 million euros (\$790 million) worth of Mirage 2000-5 fighter jets previously used by Qatar, the defence ministry spokesperson said late on Saturday. "There is no purchase of Mirage jets. Even though it was planned, it has been cancelled ... meaning there is no active contract," spokesperson Dahnil Anzar Simanjuntak said in a statement, but did not elaborate. Last month, the ministry said the deal to purchase the 12 fighter jets was delayed due to fiscal constraints and that the military would order a retrofit for its existing Sukhoi and F-16 aircraft instead. The planned purchase garnered controversy when it was announced last year, as lawmakers said the secondhand jets were old. (REUTERS)

Myanmar junta enforces mandatory military service for young people

YANGON, MYANMAR: Myanmar's junta made military service mandatory for all young men and women, state media said, as it struggles to contain armed rebel forces fighting for greater autonomy in various parts of the country. All men aged 18 to 35 and women aged 18 to 27 must serve for up to two years, while specialists like doctors aged up to 45 must serve for three years. The service can be extended to a total of five years in the ongoing state of emergency, state media said on Saturday. "The duty to safeguard and defend the nation extends beyond just the soldiers but to all citizens." (REUTERS)

In bid to curb immigration, France to scrap birthright citizenship in Mayotte

REUTERS
PARIS, FEB 11

Children of immigrants born in Mayotte, the French overseas territory situated between Madagascar and the African mainland, will no longer automatically become French citizens, Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said late on Sunday.

"It will no longer be possible to become French if one is not the child of French parents", Darmanin told journalists upon his arrival on the island, announcing the scrapping of birthright citizenship there - a first in recent French history.

Located close to the impoverished Comoro islands off the East African coast, the former French colony has become the centre of fierce social unrest, with many residents blaming undocumented immigration for the deteriorating conditions.

Much poorer than mainland France, Mayotte has been shaken by gang vio-

lence and social unrest for decades. The situation has recently worsened amid a water shortage.

Since January, island residents have been staging strikes and erecting roadblocks to protest against what they say are unacceptable living conditions, paralysing large parts of local infrastructure.

The reform, which Darmanin said was the idea of French President Emmanuel Macron, will require a change of the constitution.

It comes less than three weeks after France's highest court scrapped large parts of a new immigration law designed to toughen access to welfare benefits for foreigners and curb the number of new arrivals into the country.

Immigration is a hot-button issue in France, one of Europe's strongholds for far right anti-immigration parties.

Darmanin said, however, that "there is no question of doing this for other territories of the Republic."

US Senate faces new test on Ukraine bill

REUTERS
WASHINGTON, FEB 11

A narrowly divided US Senate will try to move closer to passing a \$95.34 billion aid package for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan on Sunday, while hoping to show enough bipartisan support to propel the measure all the way through Congress.

The legislation needs 60 votes to overcome a procedural hurdle and continue toward Senate passage in the coming days. It could move more quickly if Democrats and Republicans reach an agreement to fast-track the measure, though even then it would face stiff opposition in the Republican-controlled House of Representatives.

The money is viewed as crucial by Kyiv as it grinds toward the second anniversary of a Russian invasion. Democratic President Joe Biden, who has been seeking the aid for months, on Friday said Congress would be guilty of "neglect" if it failed to pass the measure.

Voting is expected to begin around 1 pm EST (1800 GMT).

Donald Trump, the dominant Republican White House candidate, railed against the legislation on social media a day ahead of the vote, saying

"no money should be given to any country unless it is done as a loan."

It was not immediately clear whether his criticism could strengthen opposition among Senate Republicans, most of whom have endorsed the former president. Trump also drew criticism from European officials for suggesting he would encourage outside aggression against NATO members that do not pay their dues to NATO.

The money is viewed as crucial by Kyiv as it grinds towards the second anniversary of the Russian invasion.

House Speaker Mike Johnson, who has a slim 219-212 Republican majority, has indicated that he could try to split the aid provisions into separate measures once the bill arrives from the Senate.

But a standalone aid bill for Israel fell victim in the House last week to opposition from Democrats who favour the broader Senate legislation

and from hardline Republicans who wanted compensating spending cuts, in a pair of humiliating defeats for Johnson. During a visit to Kyiv on Friday, a bipartisan delegation of House lawmakers vowed to do their part to pass the measure.

Senate Republicans believe bipartisan passage would help stir support among Republicans in the House.

"It will shape the environment such that ... more Republicans will feel comfortable advancing the bill," Senator Todd Young, an Indiana Republican, told reporters. The Senate legislation overcame a major procedural step last week, passing 67-32 votes, with 17 Republicans crossing the aisle to support the measure.

Young said those 17 votes represented a "strong number" that could help the package in the House, if that support can be maintained.

The bill includes \$61 billion for Ukraine, \$14 billion for Israel in its war against Hamas and \$4.83 billion to support partners in the Indo-Pacific, including Taiwan, and deter aggression by China. It also would provide \$9.15 billion in humanitarian assistance to civilians in Gaza and the West Bank, Ukraine and other conflict zones around the globe.

Fleeing Gaza family killed along with the medics sent to find them

ASSOCIATED PRESS
JERUSALEM, FEB 11

The sound of gunfire crackled over the phone as the teenage girl hid in the car and spoke. An Israeli tank was near the vehicle as she and her family were trying to heed Israel's call to evacuate their home in Gaza.

Israeli troops were firing on the car, the teen said in terrified calls to relatives and emergency services. Everyone in the vehicle was killed except her and her 5-year-old female cousin, Hind, she said.

"They are shooting at us," 15-year-old Layan told the Palestinian Red Crescent. "The tank is next to me."

And then there was a burst of gunfire. She screamed and fell silent.

That call on January 29 began a desperate rescue attempt by medics with the Palestinian Red Crescent, one of many during the war in Gaza. But after the organization sent an ambulance, it lost contact with the crew.

On Saturday, 12 days later, the ambulance was discovered, blackened and destroyed.

The two medics were dead. The Palestinian Red Crescent accused Israeli forces of targeting the ambulance as it pulled up near the family's



This undated image made available on Sunday, shows Hind.

vehicle. The organization said it had coordinated the journey with Israeli forces as in the past.

The family car was found as well with six bodies, including Layan's and Hind's. There was no immediate comment from Israel.

Movement around the tiny enclave carries deadly risk as Israel presses its ground and air offensive. Israel's prime minister has announced plans for a ground invasion of the cramped southern city of Rafah and said well over a million people would need to move.

The Health Ministry in Gaza says about two-thirds of more than 28,000 people killed since the start of the war have been children and women. The ministry does not distinguish in its count between civilians and combatants.

Israel says it strikes Hamas targets and holds Hamas responsible for civilian casualties because the militants fight from civilian areas.

The Hamada family was among more than 80 percent of Gaza's population evacuating their homes. On Jan. 29, near a gas station in Gaza City, in an area designated by Israel as a combat zone, the family encountered a tank.

The circumstances of the shooting

remain unclear. But in a frantic call to her father's brother, Omar, the teen Layan said troops were firing on them, Omar told the AP. Her great-uncle Bashar Hamada, his wife and two of their children were killed. Layan was wounded.

She pleaded with Omar to send an ambulance. He connected her with the Palestinian Red Crescent office in Ramallah, which hoped to instruct her how to save herself and anyone else alive.

It was too late. The Palestinian Red Crescent dispatched an ambulance after Layan went silent. Hours later, it lost contact with the medics, Yusef Zeino and Ahmed al-Madhoun, as they arrived at the scene.

For days, the organization shared the story of Hind, her family and the missing medics on social media—even posting audio of the phone call with Layan—in a plea for help.

On Saturday, after Israeli troops withdrew from the area and civilians told the Palestinian Red Crescent about the bodies, it shared video of the ambulance, crumpled and burned. Nearby was a car said to be the family's, smashed and riddled with bullet holes.

Athletes Adhikari, Pachhai win player of the year awards

Athletics' Gurung wins coach of the year, cricketer Khanal wins youth player of the year and table tennis's Suwal Shrestha bags people's choice award.



(From left) Photo journalist Sudarshan Ranjit, table tennis player Sikka Suwal Shrestha, athlete Deepak Adhikari, athletics coach Chandra Gurung, athlete Rajpura Pachhai, olympian and weightlifting coach Rajendra Kumar Pradhan, cricketer Dev Khanal, paraolympian Maiya Bisunkhe and Chinese journalist Cheu Chan Fai during the NSJF Pulsar Sports Award ceremony in Kathmandu on Sunday.

SPORTS BUREAU KATHMANDU, FEB 11

Athletics dominated the annual NSJF Pulsar Sports Award 2023 as Deepak Adhikari claimed male player of the year, Rajpura Pachhai won female player of the year and their coach Chandra Gurung clinched coach of the year awards during the gala award function at Hotel Yak and Yeti in Kathmandu on Sunday.

The trio were feted for their success at the 16th edition of the Asian Cross Country Championship held in Gokarna, Kathmandu last year.

Cricketer's Dev Khanal won the youth player of the year award, while table tennis player Sikka Suwal Shrestha secured the people's choice award.

Athletes Adhikari and Pachhai, athletics coach Gurung, cricketer Khanal and table tennis's Suwal Shrestha were rewarded with a Pulsar motor-bike each.

Three nominees in each male, female, youth and coach of the year categories were shortlisted for the final rounds from eight initial nominations.

There were five nominations in the people's choice category.

According to organiser Nepal Sports Journalists Forum (NSJF), the winners of the four categories—male, female, youth and coach of the year—were announced on the basis of their performance and outcome in the past Nepali calendar year (2079 BS).

The winner of the people's choice award was decided through eSewa voting, points allocated by sports journalists and chief coaches of 27 sports associations affiliated with Nepal Olympic Committee and Facebook likes.

Adhikari was a double gold medalist at the Cross Country Championship, winning the 10km cross country golds in both men's individual and men's team events. Adhikari, who also set national record in men's 10km race on his way to the gold at the Ninth National Games in Pokhara last year, finished ahead of national cricket captain Rohit Paudel and his teammate Aasif Sheikh.

"I want to dedicate this award to my club, athlete Rajendra Bhandari, who brought me to the Army club, and my coaches," said the Tribhuvan Army Club athlete after winning the award.

Middle and long distance runner Pachhai secured the women's top honour. Pachhai won silver medals in the women's 10km individual and team events at the Cross Country Championship. Her teammate Pushpa Bhandari and basketball vice-captain Anusha Malla were other nominees in the category.

"I want to remember my family and coaches for showing me the right path and guiding me to success," Pachhai said.

Athletics coach Gurung guided the Nepali contingent to two golds and silver medals each and one bronze

medal in the senior category. He also led the Nepali team to two silvers and a bronze in the junior category. He fought off the award from boxing coach Deepak Maharjan and cricket's Jagat Tamata.

"I have received this great opportunity to stand at this stage because of the dedication and hard work of the players. I also want to thank the NSJF family for recognising my efforts," Gurung said.

Nepal national U-19 cricket captain Khanal led the Nepali youth team to the 2024 ICC U-19 Men's Cricket World Cup after eight years as the champions of Asia Regional Qualifier. Athletics' Ram Maya Budha and boxing's Sushma Tamang were also nominated for the youth award.

"I am feeling very proud to have received this honour. I thank my family, coaches, supporters, friends and everyone who supported me during my crickering journey," Khanal said. Sikka Suwal Shrestha, who left behind footballer Ananta Tamang, volleyball player Niruta Thagunna and karateka Biplav Lal Shrestha for the people's choice award with 44.8 percent votes, won the Stag Global Champions League last year.

"It's an honour to be nominated here and win this award. I want to thank my coach Purushottam Bajracharya for always motivating me," said Suwal Shrestha, who is also the national champion at the Ninth National Games and a bronze medal-

ist at the 13th South Asian Games.

Photographer Sudarshan Ranjit bagged the special award. Ranjit, the winner of the ICC Photo of the Year award during the ICC Global Awards 2008, is also a sports campaigner and has remained active in sports journalism for more than four decades.

Paraolympian Maiya Bisunkhe, who was born without a right hand, claimed the para-athlete honour. Bisunkhe, a gold medalist at the 2006 National Championship, represented Nepal in the 2009 Asian Youth Para Games in Japan, 2010 Asian Para Games in China and 2012 London Paralympics.

Pradhan honoured with lifetime achievement award

Rajendra Kumar Pradhan, Nepal's first weightlifter to participate in the Olympics, was honoured with the Lifetime Achievement Award. The 69-year-old Pradhan, who cannot speak or hear, has been actively involved in sports for the past five decades.

Also a bodybuilder, Pradhan's sports journey began at the age of 17 when he won the titles of Mr Kathmandu and the Strongest Man of Kathmandu. Pradhan made history by becoming Nepal's first weightlifting champion in 1978. Two years later, he further solidified his legacy by becoming the first Nepali weightlifting Olympian at the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games.

Pradhan's dedication to the sport

extended beyond his own achievements. He was a weightlifting coach and referee at the 1990 Beijing Asian Games, the 1999 South Asian Games in Kathmandu, and the 2006 South Asian Games in Sri Lanka.

Chan Fai feted with Asian Sports Journalist Award

Chinese sports journalist Cheu Chan Fai, also known as Raymond within the sports fraternity, was honoured with the Asian Sports Journalist Award. Chan Fai, 66, has been actively engaged in sports journalism for three and a half decades. He has covered numerous sports events since the 1988 Seoul Olympics and has the distinction of covering five FIFA World Cups, beginning with the 1990 Italia. He has covered four editions of Asian Games since 1990.

Chan Fai is a pioneer in youth sports reporter training programmes in Asia. He served as the former president of the Hong Kong Sports Press Association (HKSPA) and currently acts as the chief mentor of the International Sports Journalists Federation (AIPS).

A prominent figure in Asian sports journalism, Chan Fai has served as the first vice president in AIPS Asia. Presently, he holds the position of senior project manager at Hong Kong-based NOW TV and also serves as the general manager of Fukushima Production Hub, dedicated to sports production in Asia.

ACC WOMEN'S PREMIER CUP

SCOREBOARD

GROUP D, KUALA LUMPUR TOSS: Nepal, field first. Bhutan 65-4 (20/20 overs) Ngawang Choden 25 (50), Dechen Wangmo 17 (21); Kabita Kunwar 4-1-7-1. Nepal 66-2 (11.5/20 overs) Sita Rana Magar 32 (37), Rubina Chhetry 17* (24); Anju Gurung 2-0-9-1. Nepal win by eight wickets. Player of the match: Sita Rana Magar

GROUP D TABLE

Table with 5 columns: TEAM, P, W, L, PT, NRR. Rows: Nepal, Hong Kong, Bhutan, Maldives.

The top two teams progress into the quarter-finals. The two finalists of the Premier Cup will qualify for the 2024 Women's T20 Asia Cup.

ICC MEN'S TEST TEAM RANKINGS

Table with 2 columns: Rank, Team. Rows: 1. Australia, 2. India, 3. England, 4. South Africa, 5. New Zealand, 6. Pakistan, 7. West Indies, 8. Sri Lanka, 9. Bangladesh, 10. Zimbabwe, 11. Afghanistan, 12. Ireland.

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE

RESULTS

Table with 3 columns: Team 1, Score, Team 2. Rows: Liverpool 3-1 Burnley, Forest 2-3 Newcastle.

ICC U-19 CRICKET WORLD CUP



Australia players celebrate after winning the ICC U-19 Cricket World Cup in Benoni, South Africa on Sunday.

SCOREBOARD

FINAL/WILLOWMOORE PARK, BENONI, SOUTH AFRICA TOSS: Australia, bat first. Australia 253-7 (50/50 overs) Harjas Singh 55 (64), Hugh Weibgen 48 (66), Oliver Peake 46* (43); Raj Limbani 10-0-38-3, Naman Tiwari 9-0-63-2. India 174-10 (43.5/50 overs) Adarsh Singh 47 (77), Murugan Abhishek 42 (46); Mahli Beardman 7-2-15-3, Rai MacMillan 10-0-43-3. Australia win by 79 runs. Player of the match: Mahli Beardman. Player of the series: Kwena Maphaka, South Africa (21 wickets).

HOROSCOPE

ARIES (March 21-April 19) Get an early start on your responsibilities, dear Aries, motivating you to take on the workweek with gusto. You'll feel energized and exuberant, bringing freshness to your perspectives and actions.

CANCER (June 22-July 22) Consider rising early to start the day with spiritual practices and a bit of self-care, dearest Crab. Your vibe takes on a more serious tone, motivating you to get serious about personal goals and the responsibilities.

LIBRA (September 23-October 22) Put your physical needs and sense of wellness first this morning, dear Libra. Luckily, you'll find it easy to maintain harmony while tackling Monday's chores, creating the perfect balance of invigoration and grace. You'll have a chance deepen bonds.

CAPRICORN (December 22-January 19) You'll feel inspired to take notes and put action behind your ideas this morning, dear Capricorn. You'll feel more emotionally invested in your relationships and all that you do, unleashing your nurturing side. Connect with your gratitude.

TAURUS (April 20-May 20) Do a good deed this morning, dear Taurus, scoring good karma points by bringing support to your community. You'll feel more closed off, putting you in a fiery yet introspective mood. Use this energy to get motivated internally, and reflect on personal goals.

LEO (July 23-August 22) Your energy levels and optimism benefit from a celestial boost, activating the sector of your chart that governs spirituality, luck, and growth. Passions intensify later tonight.

SCORPIO (October 23-November 21) Though Mondays are one of the most dreaded days on the calendar, you'll have a chance to kick off the workweek with a bit of fun. Use this energy to bring some drama into your look, or consider playfully chatting with peers before tackling to-do lists.

AQUARIUS (January 20-February 18) A quiet start to the work week suits you best, dear Aquarius. Though you may not actively showcase the efforts being put in, the moves you make now will manifest great things. Clear your throat and speak up.

GEMINI (May 21-June 21) Consider starting your day by implementing boundaries and clearing your aura, dear Gemini. However, you'll need to reconnect with your social side as the morning unfolds, highlighting your role within the community.

VIRGO (August 23-September 22) Start your workweek on a playful and sweet note, dear Virgo. These vibes pair well with extra cuddling, solo dance parties, and good music, elevating your mood before heading into the office. Your intensity increases, making it important to focus on productive actions.

SAGITTARIUS (November 22-December 21) Move slowly, dear Archer, starting the workweek with a bit of leisure and personal pampering. You'll perk up, making it easier to find motivation and fun in all that you pursue.

PISCES (February 19-March 20) The moon takes its final steps through your sign this morning, dearest Fishy, forming a sweet connection to amplify your popularity. However, don't feel like you must give all your attention away to others, emphasising the value of conserving energy.

CROSSWORD

- ACROSS: 1 Toad relative, 5 DDE successor, 8 Baby elephant, 12 "Dr. Zhivago" role, 13 Ski equipment, 15 Kitchen staple, 16 Face sketcher's start, 17 Bedside noise, 18 Just for guys, 19 Unruly, 22 Each and every, 23 Hula accompaniment, 24 Consequence, 28 Kind of agent, 30 Harper Valley org., 31 Aussie jumper, 32 Granted approval, 33 Accelerator (2 wds.), 35 Layered cookie, 38 Costa — Sol, 39 Old Norse poem, 40 Table, 43 Baron — Munchausens, 45 Ref's kin, 46 Levin or Gershwin, 47 Warning, 50 Dangerous job, 52 Mucho money, 53 — Alamos

PREVIOUS PUZZLE SOLVED grid with words like LOLA, AMOS, NABS, GROUSED, SPIGOT, EIDER, TLYC, FLASHED, LAO, CAPITAL, ALIBI, MATER, SARE, COAGULATE, SOULMATE, BIRD OF PREY, COMICS PENGUIN, FRISK ABOUT, SPOT, FORENSIC, NEEDLE DROPPER, GILLS AND LUNGS, TRAVELING BAG, KITCHEN APPLIANCE, HOOP, RECESS, BARNSTORMED, LIKENESS, LESS POLLUTED, MARINA SIGHTS, CLOY, CHEW, DELI UNITS, GEOLOGIC DIVISION, WOOSNAM OF GOLF.

Large crossword puzzle grid with numbers 1-66.

SUDOKU

Sudoku puzzle grid with numbers 1-9 and difficulty rating stars.

Winning with passion and grit

National table tennis player Sikka Suwal Shrestha talks about her sports journey and how setbacks make her work even harder.

ANISH GHIMIRE
KATHMANDU

Nepal's Sikka Suwal Shrestha faced off against Bangladesh's Rahima Akter at the 13th South Asian Games in 2019. Playing in front of home fans, Shrestha was under pressure to deliver a medal for her nation. She felt her grit slowly slipping away when she was behind in the game as the score read Bangladesh-10 and Nepal-6. The visiting nation's player needed one point to clinch the game, but when Shrestha realised that her opponent was trying to finish the game off quickly, she decided to play the waiting game.

She refrained from aggressive moves, allowing the Bangladeshi player to counterattack. Despite being behind, Shrestha remained composed. In a surprising turn of events, she managed to tie the score. As she prepared to serve, her natural aggressiveness took over, and she delivered a powerful shot, securing a bronze medal for Nepal.

"I am a naturally aggressive player," Shrestha says. "So the way I finished the game was the icing on the cake."

Born in Dharan in 2000, Shrestha has been athletic since childhood. Growing up, when asked what she wanted to do with her life, she always replied she wanted to be a sports person. "I had no idea which sport in particular, but I saw myself doing

nothing other than sports," she says.

Even though she was born in Dharan, she spent her childhood in Gorkha. "My family has an athletic history, as everyone has been involved in sports one way or another," she says. Her nurturing in such an environment introduced her to the world of sports early on. Following in her father's footsteps, who played basketball, she decided to play the same sport. "I also used to play a lot of football when I was growing up," she recalls.



WHY DO IT

After completing seventh grade, she moved to Kathmandu and enrolled in Bal Deeksha Sadan School in Gwarko. She continued playing basketball and even helped her school win an inter-school basketball tournament.

However, a persistent ankle injury hindered her sports journey. The pain from her ankle troubles led her to leave the basketball court and compelled her to take up other outdoor sports.

One day, she wandered into a table tennis court and was captivated by the preci-

sion and skill of the players.

It was during this time that Mohandas Vasukala, the table tennis coach at her school, noticed her interest and encouraged her to explore table tennis further. Encouraged by this, she left behind the basketball court and immersed herself in table tennis.

"Vasukala sir pushed me to pursue the sport, and I am thankful to him," she says. She began to play every day at school and even joined the Lalitpur Table Tennis Club to practise more on weekends.

While training at the Bal Kumari club, she caught the eye of Purushottam Bajracharya, a national player who worked as a coach at the club. Bajracharya noticed her potential and assured the 9th-grade student of admission with a scholarship to Adarsha Vidya Mandir School (AVM) for the 10th grade. She happily took the offer, and in 2015, she joined the school, making the most of the opportunity by training three times a day. That transition proved fruitful to her because to this day, she credits the school for making her the athlete she is today.

"This school cares not just about education but sports as well. There is a futsal ground, a basketball court, a table tennis court and so much," she says, and because of her training and support from coach, being part of that school played a big hand in her career.

She won the People's Choice honour at the annual NSJF Pulsar Sports Award, on Sunday.

All the hours of training proved worthwhile, as in 2017, she got to participate in the Asian Junior Championship held in Pakistan. This, she claims, was a turning point in her career and her gateway to international sports.

The following year, she received an offer to play in the second-division league in Australia. However, she couldn't obtain a visa to participate.

However, 2019 proved to be a memorable year for her as she made her debut in the senior team at the Asian Championship



Sports Council. This statement of hers didn't sit right with one of the officers working in the governing bodies and he started giving her mental torture.

This took a toll on her and Shrestha began taking medications. She stopped playing for a while. However, she pushed through and is still striving to better herself. She couldn't let this stop her, so she picked herself up and began training even harder.

As a result, when the 9th National Games took place in 2022, she won medals across many tennis categories, including doubles and singles. She also participated in the 19th Asian Games in Hangzhou, China, in 2023.

Currently, Shrestha coaches aspiring table tennis students at AVM school. "There are so many kids who are passionate about the sport and AVM provides an excellent platform for these students," she says, adding, "As the school prioritises sports, it has good resources, coaches and areas separated for various sports such as football, basketball and table tennis."

On Sunday, she was announced as the winner of the People's Choice honour at the annual NSJF Pulsar Sports Award. "I am grateful for the award, but for me, the real reward is playing the game and representing my country. I will continue to do so in the upcoming days with great enthusiasm," she says.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SAROJ SHRESTHA

A forgotten stop on an old trade route

A witness to the shifting times, Dapcha Bazar is on the verge of death.

DIVYA ADHIKARI

When I embarked on my journey to Dapcha, an old town in the Kavrepalanchok district, my purpose was to obtain my citizenship papers. I had no idea my trip would transcend bureaucratic needs and become a moving inquiry into a place where time, tragedy and resilience were entwined.

I took a bus from Banepa at eight in the morning. After an hour's ride, I could see a neat row of buildings on either side of the long, narrow street, unlike the scattered Tamang and Newar settlements on the way.

Dapcha was once a buzzing market. But today, it is shallow and empty—just a shadow of its glorious past. The buildings that remain still retain Medieval Newa architectural heritage, setting them apart from the modern designs of city buildings. Dapcha has fallen into the crack between shifting times.

It was once the business hub of eastern Nepal and served as the principal commercial centre for the residents of Bhojpur, Okhaldhunga, Sindhuli and Ramechhap districts. People from these districts walked for days to reach Dapcha and buy goods. Locals say Juddha Shumsher had opened this route. Sudil Das Shrestha, a local, describes Dapcha as 'purba ko dhoka' (gateway to eastern Nepal).

If we trace the lengthy branch of Dapcha Newa ancestors, it would connect them to Bhaktapur Newas. People from Bhaktapur migrated to Banepa, and later on, seven founding members travelled to Dapcha for the sole purpose of business. The long history of Dapcha Bazar started from a shop on *Nanglo*.

There weren't any shops further from Dapcha. Every supply from the east got emptied there, and they never had to go any further. The retailers from the valley came there for salt, clothes and grains: *daal*, *tori*, *gedagudi*, *bhatmas*, *ghiu*. Some people came all the way from Kathmandu Valley to buy tobacco.

No life elsewhere

Sudil is one of the few people who still owns a grocery shop in the Dapcha. According to him, his father, Yagya Das Shrestha, was employed in the Dhulikhel Land Revenue Office and opened the shop in the early 50s (2008-2010 BS). He had to cross Dapchha Bazar while coming back and forth from his village in Ramechhap,

Manthali. He later moved to Dapchha after marrying a local girl and opened a Kirana shop.

After the death of Yagya in 2040 BS, Sudil continues to run the shop to this day. He studied at Shree Krishna Madhyamik Bidhyalaya, just a few minutes away from his home, and never had the urge to leave the village. Unlike himself, he sent his two sons to study at Banepa—one is in grade 12, and the other is getting a bachelor's degree.

"There used to be a time when people of all ages filled up this road. Nowadays, only a few individuals are seen—mostly children, old people and married women," says Shrestha.

Sudil explains how difficult it was to supply goods to his shop. People



PHOTO: COURTESY OF SAROJ SHRESTHA

either had to carry the goods by themselves or with the help of *bharyas* (porters) or had to wait for the rare passing trucks and ask for a lift. It generally took five days to carry the goods.

Sudil recalls the magnificent Jatra of Krishna Asthami and Devi Bhairav Naach. People from all the nearby villages used to come to see *lakhe naach* and enjoy the festive moments of Jatra.

The Jatra in Dapcha was more than just a cultural event; it was a lifeline for local businesses like Sudil's. The bazar came alive as the celebrations approached. People from nearby towns would flock in, and buy a bunch of things—from food to festive necessities.

An uncertain future

Indra Bahadur Shrestha has a grocery shop at Godam Chowk, Banepa. In 1986, he moved to Dapcha Bazar and opened a grocery shop there. He is originally from Timal Hill, just

Caught between the rebels and the police during the Maoist insurgency, locals fled Dapcha and relocated to Bhakunde Beshi.

across Dapcha. He and his wife wanted to do something other than agriculture and animal breeding. So they decided to come to Dapcha and open a shop.

At that time, the route buses weren't a thing, and it was difficult to commute goods due to poor road conditions. But that didn't stop Indra Bahadur from running his shop. Selling products such as lentils and beans produced in his village, made him a popular vendor there.

"People still come to my shop for the beans. Even people from Kathmandu visit my shop and buy a few kgs when they are passing this route," says Indra Bahadur.

"I was sad to leave Dapcha Bazar, but we couldn't stay because the

market was dead. I saw the horrific (2015) earthquake as a hint to escape and start again." Dapcha's population was dense before the BP Highway and the Maoist insurgency, and his business was prosperous. But everything changed after these two events.

Killing fields

People were afraid. Dapcha, like all villages near Kathmandu Valley, was significantly affected by the Maoist insurgency. Kidnappings and murders were common occurrences. Maoist curfews emptied the streets. By sundown, every window and door was slammed shut. People dreaded not the quiet streets but a possible knock on their door.

By the end of the month, Maoists extorted donations. Living a "normal" life as a young adult was quite impossible. Maoists tried to recruit young adults, or they suspected them of being army spies. And the army labelled them Maoists.

Min Bahadur Lama, an 11-year-old boy, died in the middle of a street as he removed a Maoist flag from a pressure cooker. Rati Shrestha had to see the beheaded corpse of his 18-year-old son, Sanat. The story of Arjun Bahadur Lama's murder grabbed headlines in major publications and media houses. Many more were killed and maimed, and their stories remain untold. On the streets of Dapcha flowed the blood of innocent people.

Caught between the rebels and the police, locals fled Dapcha and relocated to Bhakunde Beshi. Those with means went as far as Banepa and Kathmandu. Due to easy road access to the BP highway, people no longer had to travel uphill to Dapcha. The highway made everything faster and easier for people living in eastern districts.

Sudil watched from the corner of his little shop as thousands of new faces were reduced to only a few familiar ones. He has witnessed all forms of Dapcha Bazar, from the glory days of a bustling market and Jatras, when he made handsome profits, to living in horror and chaos, and now a forgotten village. He observes still, from his small shop, what the roads will lead into the Bazar tomorrow.



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Tommy Hilfiger's 'New York Moment'

ASSOCIATED PRESS
NEW YORK, US

Tommy Hilfiger threw himself a welcome home party Friday night at Grand Central's Oyster Bar with Questlove as his DJ and Jon Batiste serenading Anna Wintour on his melodica while a bevy of global celebrities looked on.

Turning the iconic restaurant into 'The Tommy' club for a night, Hilfiger called his New York Fashion Week show 'A New York Moment', rolling out roomy, '90s prep classics for the bash. The last time he hit town for fashion week was in September 2022, when his crowd braved rain for his 'Tommy Factory' show at a Brooklyn drive-in theatre.

This time, happy and dry underground beneath the transportation hub's vaulted ceilings, fans lined ramps for a glimpse of K-pop's Nayeon, her countryman Junho Lee, Indian actor Sonam Kapoor and various other friends of the brand: Sofia Richie Grainge and Damson Idris among them. Sylvester Stallone popped in at the end.

As the crowd sipped cocktails in booths, Hilfiger stuck to what he knows on models walking through: rugby shirts, blazers, chinos and varsity jackets in corduroy and herringbone. There were tailored women's coats in wool, checks and earth-toned tweeds, and chunky cable knits and mini-dress polos in cashmere.

Hilfiger put some of his famous guests in pieces that were shoppable as he continued to embrace a "see now, buy now" approach to fashion shows.

Who's wearing his take on so-called affordable luxury?

During a preview Thursday at his Madison Avenue offices, Hilfiger ticked off his primary markets of today: Germany, France, Italy, England, Turkey, various parts of Scandinavia and Greece among them.

"That business is now bigger than the US business," he told The Associated Press. "We're going to bring it back in the States now because we have really focused a lot on international growth. And this is a statement we're making, that we're coming home, and we're taking it very seriously."



AP/REX