



# THE KATHMANDU POST

WITHOUT FEAR OR FAVOUR

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## TODAY

### NATIONAL

**Foreign Minister Narayan Kaji Shrestha said after meeting with the Russian ambassador on Tuesday that there are hurdles to bringing back the Nepali citizens who are serving in the Russian Army. Pg 3**

**CPN (Maoist Centre) candidate Narayan Dahal registered a comfortable victory as the National Assembly chair. Dahal got 39 votes while Yuvaraj Sharma of the Nepali Congress was limited to 17 votes. Pg 3**

### OPINION

**Given the rivalry between India and China and the unpredictability of the world order, it is understandable that South Asian countries want more regional cooperation, writes Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy. Pg 4**



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**India has rejected Chinese objections to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's weekend visit to Arunachal Pradesh, saying the northeastern border state has always been "an integral and inalienable part of India". Pg 6**

### SPORTS



**An all-round show from Kushal Bhurtel helped Nepal defeat Papua New Guinea by 85 runs and enter into the final of the Hong Kong T20I Series in Mong Kok, Hong Kong on Tuesday. Pg 7**



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Farmers cross a field of mustard in full bloom at Khokana in Lalitpur in this recent photo.

POST PHOTO: DEEPAK KC

## China had no role in change of ruling coalition, UML chief Oli clarifies

Former foreign minister Mahat blames PM Dahal for the delay in BRI implementation.

**POST REPORT**  
KATHMANDU, MARCH 12

Amid speculations that Beijing is behind the recent change in coalition in Kathmandu, former prime minister and chairman of the CPN-UML KP Sharma Oli has said that it is not China but the political parties of Nepal that brought about the change.

Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal ditched his yearlong political partnership with the Nepali Congress last week and joined hands with the UML, the Rastriya Swatantra Party, the Janata Samajbadi and the CPN (Unified Socialist) to forge a new alliance.

Following the change in power equation, Kathmandu's political and

diplomatic circles have been busy speculating whether Beijing again encouraged the two big communist parties—the UML and the Maoist Centre—to come together.

But addressing the UML parliamentary party meeting on Tuesday, Oli clarified that it was not China that engineered the change in the government.

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## Commission faces daunting task amid rising cases of usury

Settling thousands of complaints within a tight time frame will be difficult, says Gauri Bahadur Karki.

**PRITHVI MAN SHRESTHA**  
KATHMANDU, MARCH 12

A high-level commission to be formed by the government to address the concerns of loan sharking victims would face a herculean task in investigating all the cases within three months, a former chief of a similar commission said.

On Monday, the government and the protesting victims signed an agreement under which the government has pledged to set up the commission, which would collect evidence of loan sharking and recommend scrapping of fake loan documents and legal action against those involved in unscrupulous lending.

The three-member commission will be mandated to investigate issues such as whether the victims were forced to sign any documents that stated false amounts; whether the amounts were inflated; whether the lenders charged exorbitant interest rates; and whether similar other illegal activities had taken place.

The commission will study and collect such documents and categorise them based on their authenticity, including identifying forged or illegal documents. Then, it will forward the cases to the department of money laundering and the relevant government agencies.

It will be the second such commission to be formed by the government to investigate and address the concerns of loan shark victims.

According to Rudra Prasad Pandit, joint secretary at the Home Ministry, the commission will be given three months to complete these tasks.

"The commission to be formed will have an extensive mandate including to investigate individual cases," said Gauri Bahadur Karki, former chair of the Special Court, who had earlier headed a similar commission. "But based on my experiences, it is difficult to gauge the true magnitude of loan sharking."

**New 3-member panel will look into the cases of exorbitant lending along with documents.**

He said that determining the guilt of lenders involved in loan sharking was challenging, because the lenders usually have several documents of lending while borrowers often lack any documents.

On the other hand, there are already plenty of complaints on loan sharking. But those participating in the protests claimed more such victims are yet to come forward. The previous commission had collected around 28,000 cases of loan sharking. Of them as many as 21,552 were from eight districts of Madhesh province.

>> Continued on page 2

## Girls falling in love with wrestling, the fastest-growing US high school sport

Something of a niche sport, wrestling is unmatched in teaching inner strength and discipline.

**ASSOCIATED PRESS**  
MECHANICSBURG, PENNSYLVANIA, MARCH 12

Jody Mikhail was a sophomore at Pennsylvania's Cumberland Valley High School when a poster for a new girls' wrestling club caught her eye. So Mikhail, a senior now, tried the sport.

"I fell in love with it the first time," she said. Unlike previous generations, she's hardly alone.

Girls' wrestling has become the fastest-growing high school sport in the country, sanctioned by a surging number of states and bolstered by a movement of medal-winning female wrestlers, parents and the male-dominated ranks of coaches and administrators who saw it as a necessity



Benton's Callie Hess (left) battles Plum's Saphia Davis during the first round of the PIAA High School Wrestling Championships in Hershey, Pennsylvania on March 7.

and a matter of equality.

Where once girls wrestled on boys teams and against boys, increasingly they are wrestling on girls teams and against girls. And now that they are wrestling in sanctioned and official tournaments against girls, their names are going onto plaques on their schools' walls and into state record books.

This year, Kentucky, Rhode Island and Pennsylvania held their first state-sanctioned girls' wrestling championships, while Louisiana became the 45th state to sanction the sport. At the collegiate level, women's wrestling is designated as an "emerging" sport and is on track to become a championship-level sport in 2026, the NCAA said.

A rapidly growing sport in Pennsylvania—where the Penn

State men are ranked No 1 and the state's male and female wrestlers dominated last year's 16-and-under national team championships—the number of girl wrestlers in high schools nearly doubled this year as the state rocketed to more than 180 high school teams from none in 2020.

Hundreds of girls competed in Pennsylvania's first sanctioned state tournament, including Mikhail, after years of girls having no choice but to wrestle boys or, if they did wrestle girls, seeing the same handful of faces, year after year, in tournaments organised by local wrestling organisations.

Even for girls who compete nationally or hope to wrestle in college, wrestling in state-sanctioned tournaments brings status.

>> Continued on page 2



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## NATIONAL

## DISTRICT DIGEST

## Bara man found dead in Birendranagar

**SURKHET:** A 32-year-old man was found dead under suspicious circumstances at Laticoili in ward 9 of Birendra Municipality in Surkhet on Tuesday. According to Deputy Superintendent of Police Laxman Shahi, Anil Patel, a permanent resident of Bara district, was found dead in his rented room with his throat slit. A blood-stained chulesi, a Nepali kitchen knife, was recovered from the incident site. Detailed investigation is underway into the incident, said police.

## New suspension bridge thrills Tasinam residents

**DOLAKHA:** The local residents of Tasinam village in ward 9 of Gaurishankar Rural Municipality in Dolakha, are happy with the construction of a suspension bridge across the Tamakoshi river in the area. The 104-metre bridge has been constructed to link Tasinam village with Gongar of Bigu Rural Municipality. The villagers of Tasinam had to walk for two to three hours to reach the nearest health institution and school due to the lack of bridges in the area. With the financial support of Kadoorie Agricultural Aid Association and technical support of British Gurkhas Nepal, the suspension bridge was constructed at the cost of Rs12.6 million.

## 14 kg hashish, 84 kg marijuana seized

**MAKAWANPUR:** Police on Tuesday seized around 15 kg hashish and 84 kg marijuana from two different places in Makawanpur district. The security personnel confiscated 15 kg hashish from a motorcycle-borne man during the security check at Bhaise in ward 2 of Bhimphedi Rural Municipality. Motorcyclist Prashant Tamang, aged 31, of Dhading was held with the drugs, said police. Similarly, police seized 84 kg marijuana from a car with Indian registration number at Newarpani in ward 19 of Hetauda Sub-Metropolitan City. Driver Sabik Ansari of Simara in Bara district has been arrested for investigation, said police.

## Bird decline in Koshi Tappu alarms conservationists

A mid-winter census conducted recently shows decline in both bird species and population in the Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve and its vicinity.



Migratory birds at Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve in these recent photos.

□ **BINOD BHANDARI**  
BIRATNAGAR, MARCH 12

Conservationists are worried about the decline of aquatic bird population in the Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve and its vicinity, a major habitat of winter migratory birds in the country, this year.

A mid-winter bird census conducted a few weeks ago showed the decline in both bird species and bird population in Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve, the Koshi river and its surrounding areas. A total of 5,527 birds of 53 aquatic species have been recorded during the census.

Birding enthusiasts and ornithologists express their concerns as the country's major destination of birding tourism witnesses declining aquatic bird population for the third consecutive year. As per the record

available at the Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve, 56 bird species and a total 7,573 birds were recorded in 2023. The bird population was 7,664 in 2022.

"Some news species of aquatic birds used to be recorded almost every year during the bird census in Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve and its surrounding areas. But that did not happen this year. Compared to last year, there has been a decrease in three species of water birds, while more than 2,000 numbers of birds have been recorded in Koshi Tappu area this year," said Birendra Gautam, chief at Koshi Conservation Centre of the National Trust for Nature Conservation. "The gradual decline of the aquatic bird population is worrisome."

Every winter, birds migrate to several wetland areas of Nepal from Siberia, China, Mongolia, Turk-

menistan, Kyrgyzstan among other countries and stay here until February. Bar-headed goose, greater and lesser adjutant and falcated duck, among others, are found in Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve. The Koshi river, Nandan pond, Indian camp pond and Kamaldaha pond are the major places for bird watching in the Koshi Tappu reserve.

Conservationists and other stakeholders suspect that loss of habitat, mainly due to human encroachment, haphazard extraction of riverbed materials, use of insecticides and pesticides in agricultural fields, excessive fishing and hunting are the major challenges to bird conservation in Nepal.

"Obstruction of high tension lines along the birds' flight path and emergence of new habitats along their route could also be the reason behind



Stakeholders say habitat loss due to human encroachment is a big challenge to bird conservation in Nepal.

the decreasing bird population in the Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve. The reserve spanning across Sunsari, Saptari and Udayapur districts is like the capital of birds. The alarming decline in bird population here is concerning," said Gautam.

Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve, established in 1976, was declared a Ramsar site in 1987. Around 441 species of birds, according to the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation, are found in Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve, which spreads across 176 square kilometers in the eastern Tarai.

During this year's bird count, as many as 848 Lesser Whistling-ducks, locally called Silsile hans, were recorded in Koshi Tappu areas. Similarly, 506 Ruddy Shelducks, 455 Red-wattled Lapwings and 445 Great Cormorants were sighted.

Chakra Timsina, chairman of the

Koshi Bird Society, underscores the need for the conservation of wetland areas to check the dwindling aquatic bird population in Nepal. He argued that lack of food is the leading reason behind the decreasing bird population in the area.

The census of aquatic birds is held every year in January in various water bodies and wetlands. Nepal conducted its first water bird census in 1967 and has conducted it annually since 1987.

According to Timsina, the Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve areas are also a major destination of summer migratory birds. With the onset of the spring season, several species of birds migrate to Nepal from India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Malaysia and Indonesia, among other countries. Upon arrival, the migratory birds choose suitable locations in forests, farmlands and river banks to make nests, lay eggs, hatch them and fledge the babies.

According to the ornithologists, Asian paradise flycatchers (locally known as swargachari), Blue-tailed-bee-eaters (known as Nilpuchhre Muralichari in Nepali), White-throated needletail, cuckoo, Chestnut-headed Bee-eater and Indian Golden Oriole are major summer migratory birds that visit Nepal.

## Wrestling gaining momentum as new favourite among female students in US high schools

>> CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

"It really does bring this level of, I think, having these girls feel seen," said Brooke Zumas, a former wrestling coach who was active in the movement to get the sport sanctioned in Pennsylvania.

Girls who have competed for years are seeing new faces and big crowds in this year's state-sanctioned championship tournaments.

"There were never tournaments like this," said Savannah Witt, a state champion wrestler from Pennsylvania's Palisades High School who has wrestled for 10 years. "It's awesome to see. I've been used to running into the same, like, three faces at tournaments. Now you come here, I'm like, 'I don't know half these girls.'"

Over the past decade, the number of high school girls' teams quadrupled nationally and the number of girls wrestling in high school quintupled to over 50,000 through last year, according to figures from the National Federation of State High School Associations.

Last year alone, it shot up nearly 60 percent, the biggest increase for the sport in decades.

Still, the number of girls wrestling in high school was one-fifth of the number of boys last year and the 14th highest by participation, trailing the stalwarts of American girls' athletics — track and field, volleyball, soccer, basketball and softball — but also tennis, swimming, golf, lacrosse, cross country and cheerleading.

Another leap will likely vault girls' wrestling past field hockey.

## The world is changing

Wrestling is something of a niche sport: it has arcane rules and lacks a mass media presence that helps stoke

interest. For many, it takes a family tradition, a brother or a proselytising coach. And wrestlers and coaches describe it as a sport daunting for its extreme physicality — but a sport that is unmatched in teaching inner strength and discipline.

Some see the rise of girls' wrestling as part of a larger arc in women's sports: the US women's national soccer team has captured the nation's attention and the Big Ten's women's basketball tournament sold out after Caitlin Clark smashed the women's NCAA scoring record.

"When women first had a chance to participate in sports in an organised fashion, it was in sports that were considered feminine," said Jackie Paquette, who two years ago became the first female executive at the National Wrestling Coaches Association. "It was tennis, it was golf, it was swimming. It was considered graceful. Wrestling is the opposite of that in a sense, so it has been hard for some to accept women in that form. But we are finding out now that the world is changing."

Still, boosters say wrestling is accessible: there's a weight class for every body type, there are fewer competing winter sports and all a wrestler needs is a pair of wrestling shoes.

In 1990, barely over 100 girls were on high school rosters in the entire country, and before 2018 just six states had sanctioned it.

In 2016, national champion wrestler Sally Roberts founded the advocacy organisation Wrestle Like a Girl and began talking to USA Wrestling, the National Wrestling Coaches Association and the National Wrestling Hall of Fame — male-dominated organisations that nevertheless got on board for girls' wrestling.

Something else happened that year: American wrestler Helen Maroulis scored a shocking victory at the Rio De Janeiro Olympics to win a gold medal — the first ever for an American in women's wrestling.

"Other girls said, 'I want to be her,'" Roberts said.

Some never thought it would be sanctioned. That includes Serge Bouyssou, who recalled the vile things that coaches and parents said to his daughter when she wrestled in high school before graduating more than a decade ago.

"You thought people are never going to give in to the fact that girls are more than capable of participating in this sport," said Bouyssou, who last month coached girl wrestlers from Scituate High School in Rhode Island's first sanctioned state tournament.

Gary Abbott, of USA Wrestling, said wrestling is growing quickly at the youth level, too, and the organisation is encouraged by its highest Olympic medal count ever for women — four — in 2021. USA Wrestling hopes to see a day when as many girls are wrestling as there are boys, Abbott said.

In perhaps a decade or two, a new generation of mothers who wrestled on girls teams in sanctioned tournaments may teach their daughters to wrestle.

"It's really good for girls, especially that are new to the sport, to see like that's how it should be," said Aubrey Kraker, a state champion and senior at Pennsylvania's Easton Area High School. "It's very organised. ... It's nice to see that, especially for the upcoming generations, it's going to be better for them than it was for us. And that's what I would want for them."

Some who watched Ultimate Fighting Championship bouts saw Sara McMann and Tatiana Suarez —

collegiate wrestlers who won medals in international competition, including McMann's silver medal at the 2004 Olympics.

"And they'd look at their daughters and say, 'Oh, do you want to wrestle?'" Roberts said.

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## Expert says lenders' documents complicate loan sharking cases

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Of the total complaints, 5,188 cases were settled through a compromise decree. According to the past commission, lenders agreed to accept a payment of Rs1.72 billion out of the total claims of Rs7.62 billion, substantially reducing the burden on loan shark victims. It took the commission eight months to settle over 5,000 cases through a compromise decree.

"There are already so many complaints registered and more complaints are likely to be registered with the new commission," said Karki. "So, it will be a herculean task for the new commission to complete the task within the deadline."

The government is forming the new commission in three months since the earlier commission submitted its report in December last year.

Pandit said the new commission had to be formed in order to address the grievances of the victims that the previous commission could not resolve. "It may take around a week to set it up. The Cabinet should form it," he said.

Meanwhile, the agreement signed between the government and the loan shark victims on Tuesday does not mention anything about resolving the disputes through compromise decrees.

In fact, the previous commission led by Karki had recommended continuing the process of settling loan sharking disputes through compromise decrees by handing over the power to the chief district officers. However, after the commission handed over its report in December last year, there has been no progress in resolving the issue through compromise.

"In my view, there is a greater chance of loan shark victims getting justice through compromise decrees than legal proceedings," said Karki. "This is because loan shark victims often lack

evidence to prove that the lenders are indeed loan sharks even though loan sharking has been criminalised by amending existing laws."

The Criminal Code 2017 and Civil Code 2017 was amended last year to criminalise loan sharking. As per the amended law, it is a crime to engage in the practice of lending money for interest through unfair transactions.

Pandit said there have been discussions about granting the new commission all the powers held by the earlier commission. "The new commission will have greater authority, including the ability to recommend criminal charges against suspected offenders," he said.

Home ministry official says new commission is likely to get all powers held by past commission.

The law terms forcible transfer of a debtor's immovable property through the use of any threat or violence or exploitation for the purpose of debt recovery as an unfair transaction. Also, charging exorbitant interest to the extent that it exceeds the principal amount is a punishable crime. It has a provision that individuals who conduct transactions against the rules can face imprisonment for up to seven years and a fine of up to Rs70,000.

"It is also very difficult to prove loan sharking in the court," said Karki.

Joint Secretary Pandit, who is the head of the government talks team, and Abadesh Prasad Kushawaha, chairman of the struggle committee, signed the agreement on Monday in the presence of Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister Rabi Lamichhane, who had taken the initiative to resolve the issue through negotiations.

Hundreds of victims of usury—or 'metre byaj', as it is colloquially known in Nepal—arrived in Kathmandu by walking for days from faraway districts including Jhapa in the east and Kanchanpur in the west, two weeks ago, to put pressure on the authorities to resolve the problem.

They had been continuously staging protests near Singha Durbar, the central secretariat, and in front of Parliament building at Baneshwar since they came to the national capital.



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**Rajbiraj Municipality,**  
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## INVITATION FOR BIDS (IFB)

Date of 1st time publication: - 13<sup>th</sup> Mar 2024 (2080/11/30)

- Rajbiraj Municipality,** Office of the Municipal Executive invites electronic bids from duly eligible and qualified registered bidders for the procurement of Construction works under NCB Single - Stage Two - Envelope Procedure as specified in the table below.

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- Eligible bidders may obtain further information from [www.bolpatra.gov.np/eGP](http://www.bolpatra.gov.np/eGP) or at Rajbiraj Municipality, Office of the Municipal Executive, Rajbiraj, Saptari, Madhesh Province, Nepal. Phone No- 031-530643, 9816777341, 9807788786 Email: [rajbirajmunsaptari@gmail.com](mailto:rajbirajmunsaptari@gmail.com)



POST PHOTO: ANGAO DHAKAL

An farmer heads to the market carrying greens for sale on a kharpan—a traditional carrying pole—in Sanepa, Lalitpur on Tuesday.

## Bringing back Nepalis serving in Russian army difficult: Foreign minister

After meeting the Russian ambassador and victims' relatives on Tuesday, Narayan Kaji Shrestha said he wants to go to Moscow to study the situation of Nepalis in Russia.

POST REPORT  
KATHMANDU, MARCH 12

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs Narayan Kaji Shrestha on Tuesday said complications remain in bringing back the Nepali citizens serving in the Russian army.

Hundreds of Nepali citizens are reported fighting for the Russians against Ukraine. A small number of Nepali citizens are serving in the Ukrainian Army, too, but both conflicting nations have not shared the details with the government of Nepal.

Since the war between Russia and Ukraine has not stopped, bringing Nepalis back from the Russian army is still difficult, Shrestha told journalists. The minister on Tuesday held talks with the families and relatives of some of the Nepalis who have joined the Russian army. He also met with the Russian ambassador to Nepal Aleksei Novikov.

DPM Shrestha is learnt to have urged the Russian ambassador to provide details of the Nepali nationals serving in the Russian army, to stop recruitment of the Nepalis and provide compensation to the families of those who had died in the war. Shrestha also reportedly said that he wants to visit Russia and take stock of the condition of the Nepali nationals in Russia. He said he is keen to know how Nepali nationals were duped and brought to Russia and talk to Russian officials to resolve the issue. Shrestha also reportedly told the Russian ambassador that if Moscow does not listen and act on Nepal's requests, the government would seek support from other countries.

On March 7, Shrestha held a telephone conversation with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and raised the concerns of the Nepali side. According to the Russian foreign ministry, the ministers exchanged views on topical issues on the bilateral agenda and discussed the prospects of development cooperation between the two countries.

According to a network of the victims' families, 20 Nepali nationals are confirmed dead fighting for the Russians, more than 260 have gone missing or are out of contact. Around 700 family members have come forward stating that their family members or relatives have joined the Russian army and are seeking help for their safe return.

"We have repeatedly instructed our mission in Moscow to take up the issue of sending back the Nepali citizens serving in the Russian army," said Shrestha. "We have heard no concrete words from the Russian side regarding their commitment to sending back the Nepali citizens recruited into the Russian army."

Kathmandu has frequently asked the Russian government to terminate the

agreements signed with the Nepali citizens before taking them into the Russian army, said Shrestha. "We have also urged the government of Ukraine to send back the Nepali citizens they have captured. Some Nepali citizens serving in the Russian army are in the captivity of the Ukrainian army."

"Besides my telephone conversation with the Russian counterpart and my meeting with the Russian ambassador, the government has already made correspondence with the government of Russia for the safe return of the Nepali people, their safety, and compensation, among others," said Shrestha. "Our natural concern is that for those who died in the war, their family should conduct the funeral rites as per their culture and tradition. We have drawn the Russian authorities' attention to this."

The Russian government should treat the injured people well and they should not be reengaged in the job, he said. The relatives of the dead should be compensated.

Hundreds of Nepali citizens are reported fighting for the Russians against Ukraine.

Kirtu Bhandari, who leads a network of the victims' families, said the minister listened to their grievances seriously and assured them that he would take up the matter with the Russian side. On Tuesday, they also lodged a complaint with the Russian Embassy.

"We expressed our concerns regarding the insurance and issue of compensation with the Russian side," Shrestha said. "We also think it is our duty to know how many Nepali nationals are serving in the Russian army, how many of them are dead, how many of them are injured and how many of them are out of contact."

Shrestha continued, "To know and understand the situation of the Nepali nationals, we have taken up the matter at different levels and have been urging the Russian side to terminate the contract of the Nepali nationals with the Russian army and send them back to Nepal."

Some Nepali nationals were captured by the Ukrainian forces as prisoners of war, Shrestha said, adding that Nepal also demanded their safe release.

Recently, Russian officials communicated that they have initiated the process to compensate the family members of those who were killed in their war with Ukraine.

## Court orders government to appoint leaderships at transitional justice bodies

The top court has given a month for the government to start the selection process.

POST REPORT  
KATHMANDU, MARCH 12

The Supreme Court has directed the government to commence the selection of office bearers in the two transitional justice commissions that have been defunct for around two years.

Issuing the full text of the January 29 verdict on Tuesday, the top court has given a month for the government to start the selection process. Responding to a writ petition by a group of victims including Gyanendra Raj Aran, a division of Justices Mahesh Kumar Sharma and Kumar Regmi said there is no alternative to prompt appointments.

A five-member selection team led by retired justice needs to be constituted to select the chairpersons and members in the two transitional justice bodies.

"While the selection process continues, the Prime Minister's Office is directed to make an arrangement to constitute the task forces in the transitional justice commissions, in coordination with their secretaries, to

continue the investigation process," reads one of the points in the ruling.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons have been defunct since July 2022 after the government decided to extend the terms of the commissions without retaining their chairmen and members. Against the government's claim that the bill to amend the existing transitional justice law would be endorsed

by October 2022, which will also open the door for recruiting new office bearers, there has been no progress.

The amendment bill to the Enforced Disappearances Enquiry, Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act is under consideration in the Law, Justice and Human Rights Committee of the House of Representatives.

With no progress in the appointment of the office bearers, the victims led by Aran, who also is an

advocate, moved the Supreme Court demanding an order to allow the officials to carry out the preliminary investigation until the commissions get their chairpersons and members.

The court's order comes when the ruling parties have said concluding the transitional justice process by amending the Act is their top priority.

Through the order, the court has also reminded the government to immediately amend the law as per its earlier verdict. On February 26, 2015, the Supreme Court had directed the government to amend the Act's around half a dozen provisions that allowed amnesty even in cases of serious human rights violations.

The two transitional justice bodies were formed in 2015 with a mandate to investigate and prosecute conflict-era crimes within two years. Over the years, they have undergone several term extensions, but accomplished very little of their mandate.

While the truth commission has registered 63,718 complaints, there are around 2,400 cases registered with the disappearances commission.



POST FILE PHOTO

Supreme Court issued the full text of the January 29 verdict on Tuesday.

## Oli rules out Beijing's hand in change in ruling coalition

>> Continued from page 1

"It's us who changed the government," said Oli. "The credit [for this change] goes to us, not anyone else."

Some leaders from the main opposition Nepali Congress and other parties have been accusing Beijing of working hard to bring the leftist parties together. As a result, they say, Prime Minister Dahal was forced to change the alliance.

"The government was changed in Kathmandu under the influence of China and its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative," CK Raut, chairman of the Janamat Party, said last Wednesday. Raut added, "The ideological polarisation in Kathmandu has begun. The government change is linked with the power centre, whose interest is linked to the BRI. Fundamentally, the formation of the new government in Kathmandu is part of an ideological polarisation."

Such an unnatural alliance will only invite more foreign power centres to the country, Raut went on, and further divide Nepali politics for and against democracy.

Some ruling and opposition party leaders, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that China always encourages unity among leftist parties in Nepal and was unhappy with the dissolution of the Nepal Communist Party in 2021. They added that this is not new.

In the past year, China invited senior UML and Maoist Centre leaders. Meanwhile, senior leaders from the Communist Party of China also came to Kathmandu in droves, with one senior CPC leader even expressing her frustration about different powers trying to sabotage Nepal-China ties.

But at the parliamentary party meeting on Tuesday, UML chair Oli ruled out any foreign hand in the recent change in coalition.

In the meeting, some lawmakers had inquired about the speculation that China is behind the recent government change.

"Why did you link China?" asked Oli. "I hear things like, China is behind the government change, the Chinese are coming in a big way, China has penetrated Nepal. We should not be talking like that."

Oli added, "After a long and hard exercise, we formed a new alliance, so please

give us the credit."

Those familiar with the development said Oli took the initiative for government change with the main goal of breaking the Maoist Centre-Congress alliance.

But a UML lawmaker suspected that by ruling out China's hand, Oli also wanted to take greater credit for engineering the new coalition.

"That is perhaps why he asked us to give him, rather than China, the credit for the change in coalition," the lawmaker said.

The UML parliamentary party meeting also decided to give a vote of confidence to Prime Minister Dahal, who is going for a floor test on Wednesday.

Meanwhile, on Tuesday, the Nepali Congress Spokesperson Prakash Sharan Mahat, who recently exited the government after serving as foreign minister, said it was Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal who created a deadlock in implementing the BRI.

The two sides were expected to sign an agreement on the BRI implementation plan during Dahal's official visit to China in September-end. The plan is vital for funding projects selected under the BRI. But due to a disagreement between the two sides, the plan could not be signed and the two sides are still working on a text.

The immediate past finance minister Mahat accused Prime Minister Dahal of being a major roadblock to the BRI's implementation in Nepal.

"Prime Minister Dahal obstructed the signing of the BRI implementation plan," Mahat told journalists at the Nepali Congress headquarters in Sanepa, Lalitpur on Tuesday.

"I was not the prime minister and I did not control everything," Mahat said, responding to journalists' queries about speculations that he had obstructed the plan. "It was him [the prime minister] who went to China on an official visit and returned without signing it. So why blame me?"

Mahat added, "Neither was I part of the prime minister's delegation to China, nor did I pose any obstruction. Instead, I was the foreign minister in 2017 when we signed the BRI agreement and I have always supported the initiative."

## Dahal elected National Assembly chairman

Experts doubt his ability to lead the upper house effectively and impartially.

POST REPORT  
KATHMANDU, MARCH 12

CPN (Maoist Centre) candidate Narayan Dahal on Tuesday registered a comfortable victory as the National Assembly chairperson, defeating his opponent with more than double votes.

Dahal, a common candidate from the ruling alliance, got 39 votes while Yuvaraj Sharma of the Nepali Congress was limited to 17 votes. As many as 56 lawmakers of the 59-strong upper house took part in the election process. The position had been vacant after Ganesh Prasad Timilsina retired on March 3 after completing his six-year tenure.

Dahal's candidacy was supported by the CPN-UML, the CPN (Unified Socialist) and Janata Samajbadi Party and Bamdev Gautam, who was nominated by the President. Sharma, on the other hand, was supported by the Loktantrik Samajbadi Party, which has one seat in the House. Rastriya Janamorcha, which has one seat, abstained from the voting process.

Dahal's victory was certain as the ruling parties had reached an agreement to support the Maoist Centre's candidate for the position. The party led by Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal is the largest in the upper chamber of the federal parliament.

Speaking to journalists after being elected, Dahal said he would work to enhance the dignity of the upper house. "I will lead the chamber taking cross-party lawmakers together. I am confident that I will succeed," he said.

Dahal was nominated to the National Assembly in 2022 by then-President Bidya Devi Bhandari on the recommendation of the Sher Bahadur Deuba government.



National Assembly chair Narayan Dahal waves to his supporters after the election on Tuesday.

The newly elected chair and the prime minister became party "whole-timers" around the same time in the 1970s. They are cousins. Dahal, who started politics in the 1980s, became a Maoist central committee member in 1997. He first entered Parliament in the reinstated House of Representatives after the 2006 People's Movement. In 2008 first Constituent Assembly, he was elected from Chitwan-3 but was defeated in the second assembly elections.

Despite some reservations from some party leaders, the Maoist Centre office-bearers' meeting on Sunday picked him as their chairperson candidate. The decision met with widespread controversy. Constitutional experts say when the leadership is not widely accepted, the Assembly cannot function effectively.

"The Assembly cannot hold the executive to account if the chairperson is weak," advocate Raju Prasad Chhapagain, who also is a former chairperson of the Constitutional Lawyers' Forum, told the Post. "There is always fear that the legislature would act

as subordinate to the executive."

Before the National Assembly elections, the Maoist Centre had agreed to leave the chairperson to the Congress. Former Congress General Secretary Krishna Prasad Sitaula contested and won the polls held on January 25 with the hope of getting the position. However, the prime minister's party backtracked on its pledge, arguing his party will not have representation in the Constitutional Council once Deuba gets the government's leadership.

Led by the prime minister, the council holds the authority to pick the candidates in the constitutional bodies including the chief justice. Timilsina, who is close to then Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, was accused of abiding by what Oli said while picking names for the constitutional commissions "unconstitutionally."

Experts say the newly elected chair might do the same for Prime Minister Dahal.

"Let's give him a benefit of doubt but I am least hopeful that Dahal will lead the House effectively," Khimlall Devkota, a former

National Assembly member, told the Post.

When the Nepal Communist Party split in August 2021, Timilsina and Agni Sapkota, the then Speaker, clearly showed their party lineage. As a result, there was no coordination between the two chambers of the Parliament. They couldn't let go of their political biases. Experts say given the status of the incumbent Speaker and chairperson, history could repeat if the present coalition splits.

On March 4, while agreeing to allot chairperson to the Maoist Centre, the ruling parties agreed to support CPN-UML for the vice-chairperson. However, an agreement reached on Tuesday doesn't mention which party would get the position.

Speaking to the media, Prakash Jwala, the Unified Socialist deputy general secretary, has said his party will get the position.

The incumbent vice-chairperson of National Assembly, Urmila Aryal, who is a Maoist Centre lawmaker, will have to resign to clear the position for other ruling parties.

OPINION



OUR VIEW

The Gulmi way

The success of women entrepreneurs in the district offers lessons for the rest of the country.

While news on Nepali economy and labour force is most negative these days, women entrepreneurs are emerging as a welcome exception. In the 2011-12 agricultural census report of the National Statistics Office (formerly Central Bureau of Statistics), only 19 percent of adult women headed their homes and were the family's main earners. Fast-forward to the recent census, the figure has increased to 32.4 percent. According to the agriculture census report of the National Statistics Office, this rise can be attributed to the sluggish economy and a large number of men migrating abroad in search of work.

Thousands of women have now become the main breadwinners in their families. Satyawati Rural Municipality of Gulmi district stands out in this respect. Many women there are not only making good money but also convincing their husbands to give up their backbreaking work abroad to join them in their businesses back home. Together, they are involved in agriculture, livestock rearing, coffee farming, dairy production, poultry and apiary. One family there saves more than Rs50,000 a month from vegetable farming alone. Their products have gained a market in their village, district and neighbouring districts as well as in foreign lands.

Similarly, in other parts of the country, women entrepreneurs are taking centre stage in such entrepreneurial initiatives. As per the Federation of Women Entrepreneurs Association Nepal, there are more than 500,000 women entrepreneurs in Nepal. Visit any homestay in Nepal, and you will most likely see women manage them. They are also involved in other micro, small and medium enterprises, including knitting, pickle making, handicrafts, pottery and nurseries.

The government has introduced an integrated subsidised loan scheme for their support. However, challenges persist for women. One big hurdle is society's refusal to see women as entrepreneurs. A paper titled Policy Priorities published by UKaid reveals that even though banks are mandated to give loans to women without collateral, they are often hesitant to do so. This stems from the belief that women can't lead businesses. Women face further difficulties as they don't get support from their families to focus entirely on their startups while also having to juggle household chores and family.

The examples from places like Gulmi, however, are optimistic. Seeing the likelihood of profit, husbands supported their wives, and the women even received technical help from agricultural experts and local-level technicians. The technicians there also advise women and their families on how to solve disease-related problems in agriculture. The collective effort of people in Gulmi has led to the production of countless women entrepreneurs. In order to flourish, women entrepreneurs across Nepal need the same level of support.

More support for women interested in entrepreneurship of any kind could even, eventually, help lift the dark clouds looming over the Nepali economy. Society will benefit too. Families will reunite as migrated husbands return home and give women a hand in their businesses. Women-led businesses will give the concerned women greater autonomy over their lives and decisions. As remittances aren't a sustainable solution to the country's economic woes, there is no alternative to prioritising domestic growth. For this, policymakers should focus on supporting women entrepreneurs, encouraging them to do more by removing financial hurdles obstructing their way. We should make the most of this rare and exciting window of opportunity to revive the national economy.

THEIR VIEW

Energy politics

In international relations, energy policies often become threads woven into the broader narrative.

In the intricate tapestry of international relations, energy policies often become threads woven into the broader narrative. The revelation that funding legislation before the US Congress seeks to block China from purchasing oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) adds another layer to the complex dance between economic interests and geopolitical tensions. Fuelling this move is a bipartisan determination to establish a hard line on China, a sentiment that seems to be one of the few unifying forces in the polarised halls of Capitol Hill.

Amid the backdrop of escalating competition with the Chinese government, numerous Bills have been introduced, each vying to address the multifaceted challenge posed by the emerging global powerhouse. The focal point of this legislation, however, revolves around the SPR, a strategic asset with a history intertwined with both political and economic manoeuvres. President Joe Biden's decision in 2022 to sell 180 million barrels of SPR oil as a remedy for soaring gasoline prices post-Russia's invasion of Ukraine set the stage for the current controversy. The subsequent sale of a million barrels to UNIPAC America, a Houston-based arm of China's Sinopec, stirred the pot further.

This move is not unprecedented, as even under former President Donald Trump in 2017, SPR oil found its way to PetroChina International, a subsidiary of the Chinese state oil company PetroChina Company Limited. However, the latest attempt to curb such transactions signals a renewed vigour, reflecting an evolving stance on the interplay between economic cooperation and strategic rivalry. The SPR, currently holding over 360 million barrels of oil, is approaching historic lows due to the sales in 2022. While the desire to secure domestic oil resources is understandable, the question remains whether such restrictive measures are a pragmatic response or merely a symbolic gesture.

Last July, the Democratic-controlled Senate passed a bill to ban SPR oil exports to China, a move criticised by some, including Senator Chris Murphy, for its potential to create an illusion of problem-solving with minimal political impact. Beyond the legislative nuances lies the broader issue of US-China energy relations. In 2022, US oil companies sold a substantial 83 million barrels of oil to China, underscoring the interconnectedness of the two economies.

As we navigate this delicate geopolitical landscape, it becomes imperative to assess the potential ramifications of these legislative decisions on economic ties, global energy markets, and the overall stability of international relations. As the 1,050-page funding bill awaits the House vote, the Senate's subsequent consideration, and potential implementation, it underscores the intricate ballet of diplomacy and strategy. Striking a balance between safeguarding national interests and fostering global cooperation will be the key to ensuring a harmonious dance in the world of energy politics. The coming days will unveil whether this legislative move is a masterstroke or a potentially discordant note in the symphony of international relations.

— The Statesman (India)/ANN

Where is the rage against inequalities?

|| SOUTH SIDE ||

What public roads are for the Nepalis, airports are for the ultrarich in bigger plutocracies.

CK LAL



When it's the three-day-long prenuptial bash of the youngest son of the richest man in Asia, superlatives begin to flow as naturally as the oil from the biggest refinery in the world in Gujrat that the family of Mukesh Ambani controls. The Guinness Book of World Records features their house in Mumbai as the most expensive private residence in the world.

The guestlist of the extravagant show, which reportedly costed upwards of \$150 million, included Paula Hurd and Bill Gates, Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner, Priscilla Chan and Mark Zuckerberg and almost the entire Bollywood glitterati in addition to a host of other luminaries from all over the globe. Rihanna performed, purportedly for a fee of \$8-9 million and the superstar Khans danced as the select crowd cheered.

With a few exceptions, the right of the Ambanis to burn a tiny part of their humongous fortune on a pre-marriage celebration, went almost unquestioned. The Indian media seemed to be exulting over the food and drink, even something prepared for the elephants at Vantara, the private wildlife enclave said to be the pet project of the groom-to-be Anant Ambani.

After all, as American economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929) theorised, it is the conspicuous waste—defined as the “allocation of resources, time, and effort that detract from the life process”—that differentiates the contemporary ultrarich (assets over \$1 billion) from merely the wealthy (centi-millionaire superrich) of the productive class. Perhaps the Ambanis don't have any direct stake in the economy of Nepal and aren't contemplating to send an exploratory team to the scheduled investors' summit in Kathmandu.

It is not publicly known whether anyone from Nepal was invited to the private extravaganza, but the prenuptial pageant of the Ambani scion was the favourite topic of animated conversations at marriage receptions of the middleclass in several party palaces of Kathmandu. Most of such banquet halls—and quite a few hotels too—lack adequate parking space. Often an entire lane of a thoroughfare becomes the parking lot for the guests.

What public roads are for the



SHUTTERSTOCK

Nepalis, airports are for the ultrarich in bigger plutocracies. Guests of Ambanis were to arrive in their private jets. A section of the Indian Air Force base at Jamnagar, which is also used as a domestic airfield for civilian flights, was transformed into an international airport for 10 days. The existing terminal wasn't equipped to handle the flight load, so the Airports Authority of India erected a purpose-built structure. After depositing their passengers, luxury carriers of the guests were diverted to the airports of Rajkot, Porbandar, Ahmedabad and Mumbai for parking.

In a damning piece, political scientist Pratap Bhanu Mehta rues, “By any measure India is a grotesque plutocracy. But it is striking the degree to which the plutocracy is now so transparent”. In a similar vein, writer Arwa Mahdawi laments the “shift in the zeitgeist”, where “As the world burns, the ultrawealthy are spending like there is no tomorrow—and they've stopped hiding it”.

Desperate disparities

Inequalities in India are so transparent that it has ceased to even ignite public debate. The country where 800 million people survive on foodgrains doled out by the government also has the largest number of zero-food children—children between 6 and 23 months of age who did not get to consume any milk, formula, or food in the last 24 hours—by far in the world. Little wonder, it ranked 111th out of 125 countries in the Global Hunger Index 2023. Even in per capita income terms, it ranks 141st out of about 190 countries. Since whatever happens in India has a bearing on Nepal, it's impossible to ignore the festering disparities of Indian society.

The self-declared dollar billionaire Binod Chaudhary alone qualifies to be called ultrarich of Nepal by global standards. Considering the strato-

spheric real estate prices in the country and undeclared assets of several other wealthy merchants, it's possible that the number of centi-millionaires in Nepal is higher than publicly known. Most such super-rich merchants prefer to maintain a low profile and pull the strings of political economy from behind the scenes.

There is a showy stratum of the nouveau rich with considerable disposable income, comparable in assets to the Ultra-High-Net-Worth Individuals of India, that likes to flaunt its status and power through ostentatious living and conspicuous consumption. Direct beneficiaries of crony capitalism and shady deals, the showy stratum is perhaps confident that wealth can weather out any changes in the political regime, and it can buy fresh patrons to promote its economic interests. Contentedly ensconced between the centi-millionaires above and the comfortable class below, perhaps it feels protected against the possible eruption of suppressed frenzy of the oppressed poor.

The ultrarich, the superrich and the nouveau rich need not worry however: The process of depoliticisation and consequent populism all over the world has diverted the attention of the poor from their abject misery towards the spectacular opulence of heavenly and earthly deities. The proletariat has become the precariat, and it has lost the will to transform itself into the working class to fight the exploitative bourgeoisie for the control of the means of production.

On several Melanchied—a verb of Nepanglish neologism that means digging up a road to lay down pipes and leave it unattended—streets of middle-class neighbourhoods in Kathmandu, parked cars routinely take up half the space of narrow thoroughfares. In one such locality, it is possible occasionally to see a Model 3 Tesla

being watched over by the chauffeur in the front and a guard at the back to ensure that none of the motorcycles squeezing through the leftover space scratches its body even accidentally. The obscenity of opulence goes unnoticed as admiring glances of passersby appear awestruck by the logo and blood red colour of the fancy automobile.

Resigned withdrawal

Since assisting the East India Company crush the Indian Revolt of 1857, Nepal has had a long tradition of submitting its fighters at the service of the British Empire. It defies all logic, however, that thousands of youths have willingly enlisted into the Russian army to fight Ukraine. Some of them want to return and have appealed Indians rather than their own government to be rescued from the frontlines.

Millions of workers in their prime toil in the heat of West Asia and Malaysia to keep the economy of Nepal afloat through their remittances. Villagers from Rukum apparently paid human traffickers Rs6 million each for ‘backdoor entry’ into the United States, some of whom were deported back emptyhanded. Poverty and lack of appropriate job opportunities in Nepal are the push factors behind the exodus of human resources. The pull of easier jobs that human traffickers in different garb promise is also partly responsible for luring youngsters. But at least part of the reason is attributable to the demonstration effect: It's only people with money that matter in contemporary society.

In addition to depoliticisation of society and marketisation of workforce, perhaps it's the planned promotion of fatalism through propagation of religious orthodoxy that has dispirited the young from fighting to take control of political economy. The rage has been sublimated into religion.

Minilateral momentum in South Asia

The Nepal-India-Sri Lanka initiative could be used to pursue better people-to-people relations.

ADITYA GOWDARA SHIVAMURTHY



Speaking at the Raisina Dialogue on February 23, Nepal's former Foreign Minister, NP Saud, hoped to revive the South Asian Association for Regional Organisation (SAARC). The development closely follows his meeting with Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Mohamed Uvais Mohamed Ali Sabry in December 2023, where both countries discussed the importance of reviving and strengthening regional organisations like SAARC and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

Considering the ongoing competition between India and China and the unpredictability of the world order, it is understandable that South Asian countries are pushing for further regional cooperation. However, as the fate of these organisations is plagued with structural issues, the nudge seems to be going in the wrong direction. This calls for South Asian countries to embrace the trend of minilateralism to promote regional cooperation and collaborate with India on specific issues.

Since its origin in 1985, SAARC's fate has largely depended on India-Pakistan relations. The organisation has been in a stupor following the Pakistan-sponsored Uri attack in 2016; the last summit was almost 10 years ago. The 2019 Balakot airstrikes and India's abolition of Kashmir's special status have only exacerbated these differences. India, today, does not see any incentive to reconcile with Pakistan as it confronts arising challenges like China and emerges as a major power in this

evolving world order. New Delhi is also clear that “terror and talks cannot go hand in hand” while Pakistan's new government continues to rake up the issue of Kashmir. Little seems to have changed in the region, and SAARC has continued to bear the brunt of Pakistan's claims over Kashmir: Increasing tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan and the Taliban's return to power are only increasing the complexities of the already mouldering regional organisation.

BIMSTEC, another regional organisation deemed an alternative to SAARC, has also made no significant progress. Despite its recently increasing institutionalisation as the Bay of Bengal region grows in prominence.



SHUTTERSTOCK

The organisation has had only five summits since its establishment in 1997. It has not been able to meet the expectations of intra-regional trade, and the fate of the FTA has lingered since the signing of the framework agreement in 2004. Similarly, BIMSTEC's much anticipated Master Plan for Transport Connectivity is also witnessing hurdles as Myanmar—the link between South and Southeast Asia—is witnessing political and security turmoil. It is yet to be seen to what extent the organisation will serve its objective of fostering connectivity between South Asia and Southeast Asia and whether its members are willing to engage with Myanmar during the crisis.

Given the constraints with regional

mate resilience and maritime domain awareness.

In South Asia, too, India has preferred flexible cooperation with like-minded partners. It coordinates with countries like the United States and Russia to offer alternative development partnerships and promote critical infrastructure and investments in countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh. India will also soon start facilitating energy trade between Nepal and Bangladesh.

Nonetheless, South Asian countries have been less enthusiastic about tapping into this minilateral and like-minded engagement momentum. They need to reverse this course to promote action-oriented regional cooperation with select and like-minded

neighbours and have a better negotiating position against New Delhi, especially when regional organisations have become stale and are plagued with structural issues.

Countries like Nepal and Sri Lanka, which have advocated for regional organisation, should be forthcoming to promote a minilateral with India. For instance, the Nepal-India-Sri Lanka initiative could pursue better people-to-people relations, transport connectivity and cultural relations by tapping into their respective Ramayana and Buddhist circuits. These countries have already made some progress in this sector respectively. India has long discussed transnational Buddhist and Ramayana circuits with Nepal. In Sri Lanka too, there has been increasing interest in pushing for Ramayana and Buddhist circuits with India, especially following the economic crisis and the inauguration of the Ram Mandir. Recent discussions between Sri Lanka and Nepal have also reignited prospects of air connectivity between Lumbini and Colombo. The effectiveness of this trilateral cooperation could pave the way for more cooperation in sectors such as physical infrastructure, renewable energy, etc.

It is not to suggest that South Asian countries should do away with their regional ambitions and organisations; the geopolitical climate is not ripe for regional integration in South Asia. India has realised this well and is pushing for more minilaterals and flexible like-minded cooperation with select partners. On their part, South Asian countries should not hesitate to tap into this momentum. Countries like Sri Lanka and Nepal, which have been at the forefront of strengthening regional organisations, should promote minilateralism. These minilaterals will help South Asian countries push for regional cooperation and improve their negotiation and bargaining leverage vis-à-vis India, especially when regional organisations face challenges.

Shivamurthy is an Associate Fellow in Neighbourhood Studies at the Observer Research Foundation, India.

**FOREX**

US Dollar	132.74
Euro	145.15
Pound Sterling	169.81
Swiss Franc	151.48
Australian Dollar	87.83
Canadian Dollar	98.5
Singapore Dollar	99.75
Japanese Yen (10)	9.01
Chinese Yuan	18.5
Saudi Arab Riyal	35.39
Qatari Riyal	36.4
Thai Bhat	3.73
UAE Dhiram	36.14
Malaysian Ringgit	28.38
Korean Won (100)	10.13

Exchange rates fixed by Nepal Rastra Bank

**SHARES**

**Nepse** (in percent) **↑** 2,111.21pts  
2.85%

HIGHEST GAINERS					
JSLBB	USLB	WNLB	SMFBS	JALPA	SMB
10	10	10	10	10	8.95
MODERATE GAINERS					
ULHC	KPCL	PSF	PBD88	NSIF2	MKHC
0.18	0.17	0.12	0.11	0.11	0.03
MODERATE LOSERS					
H8020	MHCL	NVADI	HATHY	CKHL	BNHC
-2.57	-2.53	-2.42	-2.35	-2.34	-2.08
HIGHEST LOSERS					
TSHL	RHGCL	BEDC	IHL	SFEF	MEHL
-0.39	-0.27	-0.19	-0.13	-0.13	-0.13

**BULLION** PRICE PER TOLA

Fine Gold	Rs 126,000
Silver	Rs 1,485

SOURCE: FENEGOSIDA

**BIZLINE**

**EU states back second term for IMF chief Georgieva**

**BRUSSELS:** All 27 EU countries have endorsed a second term for International Monetary Fund chief Kristalina Georgieva, Belgium's finance minister said on Tuesday. Bulgarian economist Georgieva, 70, said last week she would be "honoured" to lead the Washington-based financial institution for a second five-year term. Her current term expires on September 30. "I'm very happy to announce that all European member states actually expressed that support for Kristalina," Belgium Finance Minister Vincent Van Peteghem said after a meeting with his EU counterparts in Brussels. (AFP)

**Moody's downgrades key Chinese property developer Vanke**

**BEIJING:** Moody's has downgraded one of China's largest housing developers' credit rating, as woes in the country's property sector show no sign of abating. China's real estate market is grappling with unprecedented challenges, with some developers on the verge of bankruptcy and lower property prices deterring consumers from making investments. Vanke—long considered to be financially stable—is one of several major Chinese developers to run into trouble, with Moody's on Monday downgrading its rating to "Ba1", indicating it has "substantial credit risk". (AFP)

**UK unemployment edges higher as wage growth eases**

**LONDON:** Unemployment in recession-hit Britain has nudged higher as growth in wages falls further, according to official data Tuesday that supports analyst expectations of an upcoming cut to UK interest rates. The unemployment rate rose to 3.9 percent in the three months to the end of January, up from 3.8 percent in the final quarter of last year, the Office for National Statistics said in a statement. Average regular pay growth, excluding bonuses, fell to 6.1 percent from 6.2 percent, the ONS added. Taking into account Britain's annual inflation rate during the reporting period, real wages rose by only two percent. (AFP)

**Microsoft to train Philippine women in AI, cybersecurity**

**MANILA:** Tech giant Microsoft said Tuesday it will train 100,000 Philippine women on artificial intelligence technology and cybersecurity. The programme was announced during a two-day trade mission headed by US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo. The women will use an online platform to learn how to use Microsoft's AI tools, including ones powered by OpenAI's large language models, in order to gain workplace skills and to be able to recognise cybersecurity threats. "We are very excited about the potential for the Philippines to drive economic advancement using enhanced AI technology in a positive way," Microsoft official Mary Snapp told a news conference. Microsoft will partner with government agencies and local schools to provide the training to government employees, said Snapp. (AFP)

# India launched Quick Response code two weeks ago. Nepal still discussing details

Starting March 1, Indians have been allowed to make payments for purchases through their mobile phone, but Nepal is still working on the daily transaction limit. The digital payment arrangement with China is also unidirectional.

**□ KRISHANA PRASAIN**  
KATHMANDU, MARCH 12

As Nepal's central bank struggles to decide to set the transaction limit for digital wallets, officials say it may take months for Nepalis visiting India to avail of the services there.

India has already launched a service where Indian citizens can make payments through the (quick response) QR code from their mobile phones in Nepal.

From March 1, Indians are allowed to make payment for purchases through their mobile phones, marking a milestone in cross-border digital payment between Nepal and India.

For the service in Nepal, two digital wallets, Khalti and Fonepay Payment Service, have partnered with India's NPCI International Payments (payment service operator of India) to launch the cross-border payment service using quick-response (QR) codes.

Immediately after India's launch, the central bank constituted a task force to set the transaction limit for digital wallet users in India.

"Our study regarding the daily transaction limit, including other issues and risks for cross-border payment is in the final stage," said a top official at Nepal Rastra Bank, who wished not to be named.

"We hope that the payment service in India will begin in May if things go as planned."

The foreign exchange department of the central bank is still discussing issues related to transaction limit, said the official.

The study will also include ways to mitigate the risk of cross-border transactions, said the official.

Currently, Nepalis can make payments using their debit cards. When it comes to mobile payment, it is simply a matter of adding the payment method, but what is important is the possible risks associated with cross-border transactions, said the official.

On June 1 last year, Nepal and India signed a memorandum of understanding for cross-border digital payment to ease digital transactions for business people, students, and tourists from both countries.

With the strategic partnership between two digital wallets, Khalti



Two digital wallets, Khalti and Fonepay Payment Service, have partnered with India's NPCI International Payments to launch the cross-border payment service using quick-response (QR) codes.

and Fonepay Payment Service with India's NPCI International Payments, Indian tourists now can make seamless transactions in the Nepali market by scanning Khalti QR code using their preferred digital wallets, such as PhonePe and BHIM UPI.

The digital payment system is expected to boost the country's trade and tourism.

Service providers say that the transaction has started to increase at a faster pace.

Divas Kumar Sapkota, CEO of Fonepay, said initially they recorded 300 transitions daily, which has now grown to 500.

"Our system shows that there is a daily transaction value of Rs1.2 million, especially in tourist areas like Kathmandu and Pokhara, including bordering towns of Nepal."

"If we tie up with Indian service providers to jointly launch promotional programmes, it may significantly increase the transaction numbers," he

said. Binay Khadka, CEO of Khalti, a digital wallet for instant online payments in Nepal, said initially when the service was launched they observed 10 transactions daily and have reached more than 40 daily transactions.

"The transaction number is growing," he said.

As of Monday, Khalti recorded around 400 transactions worth INR700,000 (Rs1.12 million) since the service was launched on March 1, said Khadka.

A higher number of transactions was made in Madhesh province and Sudurpashim province, he said.

On February 15, the Nepal Rastra Bank and Reserve Bank of India signed and exchanged Terms of Reference for interlinking the Unified Payment Interface (UPI) of India and the National Payment Interface of Nepal.

The integration is aimed at facilitating cross-border remittances between

India and Nepal by enabling users of the two systems to make instant, low-cost fund transfers.

The scan and pay service eliminates hassles associated with currency exchange, eliminates the need to carry physical cash, and ends complexities associated with currency conversion or visiting banks for currency exchange.

In June last year, Chinese digital payment service WeChat Pay and NMB Bank Nepal partnered to make the mobile payment system available in Nepal. It allowed Chinese nationals visiting Nepal to pay for their purchases using their mobile sets by scanning QR.

The service is available only to Chinese visiting Nepal and not to Nepalis going to China.

In May 2019, Nepal banned WeChat Pay and AliPay stating that online payments through unregistered systems were illegal and resulted in a loss of income for Nepal.

# Ukraine's drone industry seeks to tip scales against Russia

**□ AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE**  
KYIV REGION, MARCH 12

With suit-clad employees sipping coffees, Skyeton's offices in Ukraine's Kyiv region look like a typical tech start-up.

But the company—whose exact location is kept secret—is actually a drone-manufacturing hub for the Ukrainian armed forces, churning out unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to support the country's defence against the Russian invasion. "This is a drone war," Skyeton CEO Andriy Fialkovsky told AFP in an interview.

Both Ukraine and Russia have used UAVs extensively throughout the two-year conflict.

Above the battlefield in the east and south, drones fitted with high-definition cameras scope out enemy positions. At night, craft packed with explosives try to strike targets deep behind the frontlines.

Skyeton manufactures the Raybird, a long-range surveillance drone that can fly up to 2,500 kilometres (1,550 miles) in offline mode, and up to 120

kilometres while connected to an operator.

For Technical Director Maksym Levkivsky, drones will be crucial to Ukraine's chances of victory.

"The Russians have a huge advantage in terms of the number of people, tanks, planes and money," he said.

"So the only way for us to win is to have a technological advantage."

Ukraine is striving to ramp up its defence production, an effort it sees as essential as Western allies waver over providing additional vital military aid. But developing an entire modern arms industry is a costly, long-term task.

For now, Kyiv is banking on drones that are relatively cheap and easy to manufacture, with President Volodymyr Zelensky setting a goal of producing one million units this year.

Fialkovsky said more domestic production also allowed Ukraine to respond quickly to developments on the front lines.

"Ukraine is unfortunately the biggest playground in the world" in terms of weapons, he said, but "nobody

except us knows which equipment, which technologies we need."

Levkivsky served in the Ukrainian army, and the company wants to recruit more veterans.

Would-be employees have to pass a background check, with Ukraine's arms industry a prime target for Russian espionage and sabotage.

"We are constantly under the risk of being hit," Levkivsky added.

Skyeton's production is spread across several sites to make it less vulnerable, a common approach in the sector.

Working under bright white neon lights, around 10 employees were assembling drones at the Skyeton factory. Filming or photographing their faces was prohibited, another precautionary measure.

Nearby, other employees were testing and priming them for use. Every minute spent setting up in the field exposes soldiers to enemy fire, making rapid and successful launches essential, Levkivsky said.

The number of Ukrainian drone manufacturers has more than doubled to around 200 since Russia invaded in

February 2022, according to the Ukrainian authorities.

"There was a massive boom last year, when they just grew like mushrooms," said Vadym Yuniy, chair of a nationwide association of drone manufacturers and co-founder of drone maker ISR Defence.

Despite the production surge, Kyiv is still not self-sufficient, especially with regards to microcircuits and chips that need to be imported.

"It is currently impossible to assemble a 100 percent Ukrainian drone," Yuniy said.

Drone types also vary greatly, from cheap self-detonating kamikazes to more sophisticated multi-use craft.

ISR Defence's R18 can drop explosives over enemy targets or be used to transport ammunition or supplies to soldiers on the frontlines, when delivery over land is too dangerous.

And Vampire combat drones, produced by a company of the same name, were used to deliver medicine and food to stranded villages flooded after the Kakhovka dam explosion in southern Ukraine last year.

# Ancient community banking enters digital age in Cameroon

**□ AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE**  
YAOUNDE, MARCH 12

Joseph Ngonu's face lights up with a smile as he looks at his smartphone, where a payment worth \$830 has just appeared in his digital wallet.

Like many Cameroonians, the computer scientist pays in each week to a shared savings fund known as a "tontine"—an ancient system that start-ups are now bringing into the digital age.

This week it has paid out 500,000 Central African francs to Ngonu, who will use it to cover the final instalment of his children's school fees.

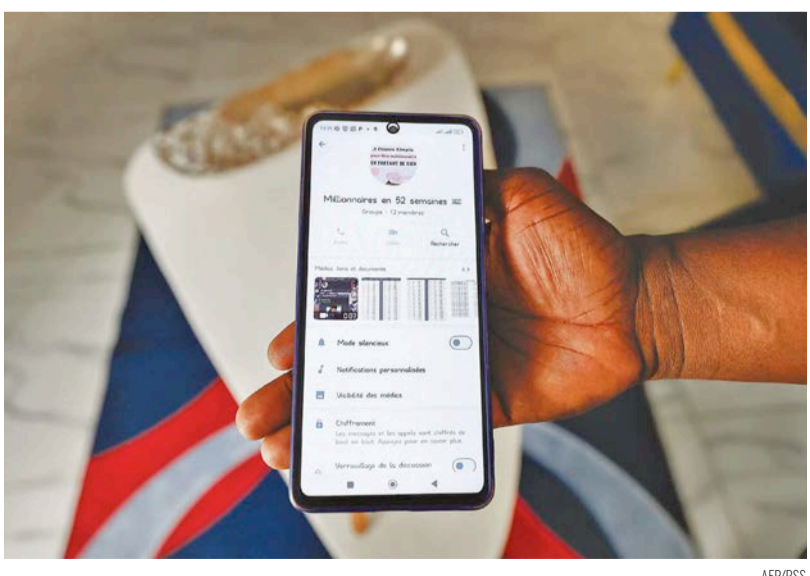
"Without it, they wouldn't go to school," he said.

Shunned by banks, many people in Cameroon turn to their communities for help in the form of tontines, such as the one Ngonu uses via the smartphone app Djanguui.

In its most common form, members pay money into a common fund and take turns collecting it after an agreed period—interest free.

Every week Ngonu, along with colleagues and strangers whom they sponsor, contributes 10,000 FCFA (\$16) each on Djanguui.

It gives crucial access to ready cash



This photograph taken in Yaounde, on February 17, shows an example of a Whatsapp group dedicated to discussions of tontines.

for Ngonu—his monthly salary of 150,000 FCFA (\$250) because his employer is "experiencing some cash-flow difficulties."

The system of "pooling savings...

between people united by connections of family, friendship, profession, clan" existed "long before the introduction of money," said a 2020 report published by the Global Development Research Center. It lists at least 30

African countries where tontines are used and 14 in Asia.

Launched in 2016 by Guilain Kenfack, Djanguui was one of the first tontine apps in the country.

"The idea came to me because I was in a traditional tontine and it was becoming very difficult. We weren't sure if some people had paid or not," he said.

Since its creation, Kenfack said the app has gained 50,000 users.

A number of imitators of Djanguui have sprung up and now there are several apps offering tontines online in Cameroon.

As in other countries in Africa, many Cameroonians struggle to get loans from mainstream banks.

The African World Institute wrote in a 2019 report that 85 percent of people on the continent are "excluded from the banking system."

In Cameroon and elsewhere the average interest rate for loans to individuals was 10 percent in 2022, according to the Bank of Central African States (BEAC).

It can exceed 20 percent elsewhere in Africa.

Banks also rarely give credit to those on small and medium sized incomes.

# Experts stress strong foreign policy tools to promote Nepal's trade

**□ POST REPORT**  
KATHMANDU, MARCH 12

Experts on Tuesday said Nepal needs a strong foreign trade policy tool to leverage its trade as the country is set to graduate from a least developed country (LDC) in 2026.

Strong trade helps any country's economic prosperity. Thus, Nepal needs to advance foreign trade policy tools for its national interests, they argue. Trade and foreign policy have been intertwined throughout history, with foreign policy often tailored to promote trade interests.

Speaking at a seminar entitled 'Contextualizing Nepal's Foreign Policy and Infrastructure Diplomacy in Changing Context,' organised by the Centre for Social Innovation and Foreign Policy, on Tuesday, former foreign secretary Madhu Raman Acharya said Nepal needs a strong foreign policy that guides domestic aspiration.

"We are in the process of graduating from an LDC where we can lose concessions and favourable conditions for the competitive advantage that we have been receiving. In this context, Nepal's foreign policy should be in the national interest rather than aligning with any other country's foreign policy."

NP Saud, a former foreign minister, said that economic diplomacy is now the core function and the focus is on foreign direct investment, trade, development cooperation and mobilisation of other resources as well as better connectivity—regionally and globally.

## The concern remains about how Nepal could adopt a pragmatic foreign policy in today's fast-changing world.

"As reflected in the visit of Nepal's prime minister to India last year, and the visit of the external affairs minister of India to Nepal this year, our relations are moving on a positive trajectory with a focus on economic deliverables of mutual benefit," Saud said. "We are also utilising significant resources from the Exim Bank of India to develop infrastructure such as road, transmission line and hydro-power projects," he said.

"With China, we seek to enhance economic cooperation, trade and connectivity," Saud said.

Saud said that Nepal has a vast network of infrastructure linkages with India that comprises border roads, railways, petroleum pipelines, and transmission lines.

"We are also working to add new dimensions of connectivity like inland waterways. We are continuously working to improve these hardware infrastructures and trade and transit facilitation software at the border."

Vijay Kant Karnia, executive chairperson of the Centre for Social Innovation and Foreign Policy, said Nepal can leverage its unique geopolitical position as a bridge between South Asia and beyond to harness economic dividends from trade, investment and technology transfer.

However, the concern remains about how Nepal could adopt a pragmatic foreign policy in today's fast-changing world, he said.

Multi-alignment or strategic alignment is a strategic choice of a large part of the economic growth, and infrastructure development, he said.

"It is necessary to establish the bottom line for our national interest, democratic values, and national security"

## WORLD

## Chinese Premier Li to skip meeting with global CEOs at key business summit

REUTERS  
BEIJING/HONG KONG, MARCH 12

Chinese Premier Li Qiang does not intend to hold a meeting with visiting foreign CEOs at the upcoming China Development Forum (CDF) in late March, three sources briefed on the matter said, raising concerns about Beijing's commitment to attract investment from abroad at a time of souring sentiment.

Organised annually by Beijing since 2000 at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse, the high-level forum traditionally serves as an opportunity for global CEOs and Chinese policymakers to meet and discuss foreign investment. Regular attendees include Apple CEO Tim Cook and Ray Dalio, founder of Bridgewater Associates.

The decision follows a surprise move last week to scrap the premier's news conference at the end of the annual session of parliament, one of the most-watched events on China's economic and policy calendar. This was viewed by some observers as a



Chinese Premier Li Qiang at the National People's Congress in Beijing last week.

sign of the country's increasingly inward focus and centralised control.

A key element of the CDF each year has been a meeting between the Chinese premier and the visiting CEOs for them to exchange questions and views. While Li still plans to attend the March 24-25 forum this year, he will not be holding that meeting, the three sources said.

The sources declined to be named as they were not permitted to speak to the press. Plans for the forum are still being finalised and could be in flux, they also added.

The CDF's organisers and the State Council Information Office, which handles media queries for the council, China's cabinet, did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

"From a global CEO perspective, this development may be somewhat disappointing. During a time of significant uncertainty, company leaders would definitely prefer a direct channel to China's top leaders to voice concerns and receive clear messages," said Yue Su, Principal Economist for China at the Economist Intelligence Unit.

Toshihiro Ueda, vice-chair of the Japanese Chamber of Commerce in China, told Reuters that the move was "obviously not a favourable sign" but the business association will "wait and see".

"We will continuously ask for meetings with top Chinese government officials for building up better business conditions," he added.

## Haiti's premier says he'll resign as violent gangs rampage. It's not clear who leads next

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
PORT-AU-PRINCE, MARCH 12

Haitian Prime Minister Ariel Henry announced early Tuesday that he would resign once a transitional presidential council is created, bowing to international pressure to save the country overwhelmed by violent gangs that some experts say have unleashed a low-scale civil war.

Henry made the announcement hours after officials including Caribbean leaders and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met in Jamaica to urgently discuss a solution to halt Haiti's spiralling crisis and agreed to a joint proposal to establish a transitional council.

"The government that I'm running cannot remain insensitive in front of this situation. There is no sacrifice that is too big for our country," Henry said in a videotaped statement. "The government I'm running will remove itself immediately after the installation of the council."

Henry has been unable to enter Haiti because the violence closed its main international airports. He had arrived in Puerto Rico a week ago, after being barred from landing in the Dominican Republic, where officials said that he lacked a required flight plan. Dominican officials also closed the airspace to flights to and from Haiti. It wasn't immediately clear who would be chosen to lead Haiti out of the crisis in which heavily armed gangs have burned police stations, attacked the main airport and raided two of the country's biggest prisons. The raids resulted in the release of more than 4,000 inmates.

Scores of people have been killed, and more than 15,000 are homeless after fleeing neighbourhoods raided by gangs. Food and water are dwindling as stands and stores selling to impoverished Haitians run out of goods. The main port in Port-au-Prince remains closed, stranding dozens of containers with critical supplies.

The urgent meeting in Jamaica was



Members of the G9 and Family gang speak while standing guard at their roadblock in the Delmas 6 neighbourhood of Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

organised by Caricom, a regional trade bloc that has pressed for months for a transitional government in Haiti while violent protests in the country demanded Henry's resignation.

Guyana President Irfaan Ali said that the transitional council would have seven voting members and two nonvoting ones.

Those with votes include the Pitit Desalin party, run by former senator and presidential candidate Moïse Jean-Charles, who is now an ally of Guy Philippe, a former rebel leader who led a successful 2004 coup and was recently released from a United States prison after pleading guilty to money laundering. Also with a vote is the EDE party of former prime minister Charles Joseph; the Fanmi Lavalas party; the December 21 coalition led by Henry; the Montana Accord group; and members of the private sector.

Before sharing details of the pro-

posed transitional council, Ali said, "I want to pause and thank Prime Minister Henry for his service to Haiti," as Caribbean leaders and others clapped.

Henry served the longest single term as prime minister since Haiti's 1987 constitution was approved, a surprising feat for a politically unstable country with a constant turnover of premiers. He was sworn in as prime minister nearly two weeks after the July 7, 2021, assassination of President Jovenel Moïse.

Critics of Henry note he was never elected by the people, much less Parliament, since it remains nonexistent after the terms of the last remaining senators expired in January 2023, leaving Haiti without a single elected official.

As Haiti prepares for new leadership, some experts question the role that heavily armed gangs who control

80 percent of Port-au-Prince will play.

"Even if you have a different kind of government, the reality is that you need to talk to the gangs," said Robert Fatton, a Haitian politics expert at the University of Virginia. "You can't suppress them."

He said officials will still have to deal with them and try to convince them to give up their weapons, "but what would be their concessions?" Fatton noted that gangs have supremacy in terms of controlling the capital. "If they have that supremacy, and there is no countervailing force, it's no longer a question if you want them at the table, they may just take the table."

Earlier, Blinken announced an additional \$100 million to finance the deployment of a multinational force to Haiti. Blinken also announced \$33 million in humanitarian aid and the creation of a joint proposal agreed on by Caribbean leaders.

## Indian troops begin Maldives pullout after quit order

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
MALÉ, MARCH 12

India has begun withdrawing military personnel operating surveillance aircraft in the Maldives after the new pro-China president ordered them to leave, defence authorities said on Tuesday.

An official of the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) said 25 Indian troops deployed in the southernmost atoll of Addu had left the archipelago ahead of March 10, the official start of the withdrawal agreed by both sides.

"We can confirm that the Indian troop withdrawal is underway," the MNDF said in a statement to AFP.

President Mohamed Muizzu came to power in September on a pledge to kick out Indian security personnel deployed in the Maldives to patrol its vast maritime border.

The two sides had agreed to complete a withdrawal of 89 Indian troops and their support staff in the Maldives by May 10.

Local officials said the three Indian aircraft—two helicopters and one fixed-wing plane—will be operated by Indian civilian staff, who have already arrived.

Last week, the Maldives signed a "military assistance" deal with China as the Indians prepared to leave.

The Maldivian defence ministry

said the deal was to foster "stronger bilateral ties" and that China would train its staff under the pact.

"We support the Maldives in safeguarding its territorial sovereignty," China's foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin told reporters in Beijing on Tuesday.

"We also support the Maldives in developing friendly exchanges and cooperation with all parties on the basis of its independence and autonomy."

India is suspicious of China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean and its influence in the Maldives as well as in neighbouring Sri Lanka.

The archipelago, better known for its white sand beaches and where tourism accounts for nearly a third of its economy, is also strategically placed halfway along key east-west international shipping routes.

Relations between Male and New Delhi have chilled since Muizzu took office.

New Delhi considers the Indian Ocean archipelago to be within its sphere of influence, but the Maldives has shifted into the orbit of China—its largest external creditor.

Muizzu, who visited Beijing in January where he signed a raft of infrastructure, energy, marine and agricultural deals, has previously denied seeking to redraw the regional balance by bringing in Chinese forces



Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi

to replace Indian troops.

The Maldives is set to hold parliamentary elections on April 21, the first national poll after Muizzu won the September presidential election on a promise to get rid of the Indians.

India last month said it was bolstering its naval forces on its "strategically important" Lakshadweep islands, about 130 kilometres north of the Maldives.

The Indian naval unit based on the island of Minicoy will boost "operational surveillance" of the area, the navy said.

## India rejects China's objections to Modi's visit to Himalayan border state

MUMBAI: India on Tuesday rejected Chinese objections to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's weekend visit to Arunachal Pradesh, saying the north-eastern border state has always been "an integral and inalienable part of India".

The Indian foreign ministry's comments came a day after Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said Beijing was firmly opposed to Modi's activities in the region and has lodged a diplomatic protest with India.

Modi visited Arunachal Pradesh on Saturday to inaugurate infrastructure projects, including a tunnel that will provide all-weather connectivity to the strategically located border area of Tawang.

The tunnel is expected to ensure faster and smoother movement of troops in the frontier region.

China claims Arunachal Pradesh to be a part of southern Tibet. New Delhi rejects the claim, saying Arunachal Pradesh has always been a part of India.

"Indian leaders visit Arunachal

## UN nuclear chief visits Japan to examine Fukushima wastewater release

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
TOKYO, MARCH 12

The head of the United Nations' atomic agency is in Japan to examine discharges of treated radioactive wastewater from the ruined Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, and to discuss further cooperation with Japan to promote peaceful use of nuclear energy and non-proliferation.

International Atomic Energy Agency Director-General Rafael Mariano Grossi is visiting the country Tuesday for the first time since releases of the treated water began in August. It also comes one day after Japan marked 13 years after the March 11 earthquake and tsunami struck, triggering the Fukushima disaster.

"This date has a special meaning in Japan," Grossi said as he met with Japanese Environment Minister Shintaro Ito, his first in a series of talks with top Japanese officials planned for the three-day visit.

The disaster caused many difficulties, but also led to "strengthening of the links and the cooperation between the IAEA and Japan," Grossi said.

A massive earthquake and tsunami in 2011 damaged the Fukushima plant's power supply and reactor cooling functions, triggering triple meltdowns and causing large amounts of radioactive wastewater to accumulate. After more than a decade of cleanup work, the plant began discharging the water after treating it and diluting it with large amounts of seawater on August 24, starting a process that's expected to take decades.

The discharges have been strongly opposed by fishing groups and neighbouring countries including China, which banned all imports of Japanese seafood immediately after the release began.

Japan has sought the IAEA's help with safety monitoring and evaluation to allay concerns over the discharge plan.

## Diversity is strength for expanding NATO. Troops know Russia is watching

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
ABOARD THE FRENCH FRIGATE NORMANDIE, MARCH 12

The French navy frigate, bristling with weaponry and powering through frigid Norwegian seas not so far from Russia, awoke at 7:30 am sharp to what, in the circumstances, was a surreal sound.

The 1967 "Summer of Love" hippie anthem "San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair)" was playing over the warship's public address system. Singer Scott McKenzie's voice reverberated through the passageways starting to bustle with sailors clutching coffee mugs: "All across the nation, such a strange vibration, people in motion."

It was a slice of Americana rousing one of France's most modern fighting vessels, beginning another day under Italian command, in war games involving 13 nations.

And that, in a nutshell, is NATO: a multinational alliance built around the idea that its 32 countries spread across three continents could turn their diversity into strength and fight as one if the need arose.

The Nordic Response 2024 exercises—bringing together more than 20,000 soldiers with different languages, equipment, habits and histories—are intended to foster the teamwork

necessary for the alliance to function.

They are training with the knowledge that Russia and other potential adversaries are watching for any weaknesses in NATO defenses and unity.

Among the nations drilling is Sweden, NATO's 32nd and newest member. Its induction last week and the addition of Finland last year dramatically illustrated how Russia's invasion of Ukraine, now in its third year, shifted Europe's post-Cold War security landscape.

From shunning military alliances, the two Nordic nations reached for NATO's security umbrella and its guarantee that an attack on any one member would be considered as an attack on them all.

In the frozen extremes of northern Finland, Norway and Sweden, the NATO drills are a test for troops and their fighting machines. Participating nations are Belgium, Britain, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden and the United States.

The nearly two weeks of drills conclude this week. They are part of a months-long program of NATO maneuvers dubbed Steadfast Defender 24 that are its biggest since the Cold War, with 90,000 troops. The alliance says the intention is "to demonstrate



A French sailor on the bridge of the French navy frigate Normandie stands guard as the vessel patrols in a Norwegian fjord, north of the Arctic circle, for reconnaissance, last week.

NATO's ability to defend every inch of its territory"—an unmistakable signal to Russia.

Certainly participating troops suspect that Russia is watching.

Aboard the French frigate Normandie, the crew of 146 scrambled to battle stations when an unknown aircraft that came from the direction

of Russia strayed too close for comfort last week, in international airspace north of the warship's Nordic Response patrol zone in Arctic waters.

The Normandie's commanding officer, Captain Thomas Vuong, told Associated Press journalists aboard that the flight appeared to have been a Russian test of NATO readiness.

Norway scrambled F-35 fighters to intercept the aircraft, which headed back in Russia's direction, he said.

NATO regularly scrambles jets to scope Russian flights, taking to the skies for more than 500 interceptions in 2022. The number dropped but was still more than 300 encounters in 2023, the Brussels-headquartered alliance says.

"These are manoeuvres that are fairly standard, manoeuvres where the Russians test the procedures," Vuong said, speaking exclusively to AP. Russia has "resources in the skies, at sea that are employed and which enable them to test the alliance's defences."

Listening to the NATO drills' radio traffic gives a flavor of the melting pot of nations and cultures in the transatlantic organization. Communications are in English but accents betray the array of nationalities: French, Italian, German, British, American and more.

"We have a technical vocabulary and everyone uses it," said Lt. Olivier, pilot of the Normandie's submarine-hunting NH90 helicopter. The French military withheld his family name for security reasons.

"As you can hear, it's not perfect English," he said. "But since it's always the same technical words, everyone is able to understand the

picture, the situation, and to react if necessary."

In the decades since its founding by 12 countries in 1949, NATO has worked to standardise procedures and equipment to enable troops to work and, if necessary, fight together more readily. The flight deck of the Normandie, for example, is equipped to receive other countries' helicopters.

The alliance "functions because there are military headquarters developing interoperability within NATO, which means we ensure that we have systems that function together, that communicate together," Vuong said. "This gives us the capability to operate together when we meet at sea."

Vuong added that he senses "a real willingness" from alliance sailors "to make sure we raise our standard within NATO as high as possible."

Lt. Sebastian, a German navy officer who hitched a ride aboard the Normandie to make a port call during the exercises, said working with and learning from other NATO nations helps alliance troops improve. He wouldn't give his family name.

"Of course you can do your job on your own, going to sea with just one ship," he said. But "NATO means a whole group of abilities and that is what we train here, to use all the abilities combined together."



PHOTO: COURTESY OF CAN

# Nepal meet PNG in final today

Kushal Bhurtel hits a fifty and takes 4-12 to give the Rhinos an 85-run win over PNG. PNG beat Hong Kong by 10 wickets in their second T20I of the day to progress.

Kushal Bhurtel (left) smashed 59 runs off 39 balls for his eighth T20I fifty, also becoming the second Nepali batter to cross the 1000-run mark in the T20Is.

SPORTS BUREAU KATHMANDU, MARCH 12

An all-round show from Kushal Bhurtel helped Nepal defeat Papua New Guinea by 85 runs and enter into the final of the Hong Kong T20I Series in Mong Kok, Hong Kong on Tuesday.

Nepal, invited to bat first, posted 198-6 in the allotted 20 overs after opener Bhurtel and Sundeep Jora scored half-centuries.

Bhurtel then took 4-12 in his magical four-over spell to restrict PNG to 133 all out in 16.1 overs.

Bhurtel smashed 59 runs off 39 balls, hitting four boundaries and four sixes. Bhurtel also became the second Nepali batter to cross the 1000-run mark in the T20Is.

The 27-year-old completed his eighth T20I fifty with a stylish six off Jack Gardener in the 12.4 overs and reached the landmark a ball later. Bhurtel then slammed another six to Norman Vanua to accumulate 1008 T20I runs before getting caught by John Kariko in the 14.3 overs.

Bhurtel has played 36 T20I matches for Nepal since making his debut in April, 2021 during the Nepal Tri-Nation T20I Series against the Netherlands.

Dipendra Singh Airee, who has been rested for the Hong Kong series, tops the chart of most T20I runs with 1476 runs. Airee reached his 1000-run mark from 34 innings during the

Nepal Tri-Nation T20I Series final against PNG in April 2022.

Bhurtel added 64 runs for the opening wicket with Binod Bhandari (27) to give Nepal a strong start.

Nepal lost three quick wickets of Bhandari, skipper Rohit Paudel (1) and Aarif Sheikh (4) adding just three runs and were in trouble at 70-3 in the 10th over.

But Jora played a crucial knock of 26-ball 56 that featured three fours and four maximums to steady the ship. It was Jora's second T20I half-century.

Lokesh Bam added 14 and Gulsan Jha contributed 19 not out before Bibek Yadav cracked three sixes off Vanua in the final over to guide Nepal to a big total.

Assad Vala took two wickets, while Nosaina Pokana, Kariko and Vanua picked a wicket apiece for PNG.

In reply, PNG plundered 32 runs in three overs to make an aggressive start to their chase.

But they soon ran out of gas.

Pratis GC (2-40) bowled Tony Ura for 13 in the last delivery of the third over to break their opening stand and Sese Bau followed Ura adding 21 runs three balls later after Bhandari stumped him.

Bhurtel got his first wicket of the innings dispatching captain Vala in the 17.5 overs.

Hiri Hiri, who had hit Karan KC with a six and four to make an explosive start to his innings, joined the

## HONG KONG T20I SERIES

GROUP STAGE, MONG KOK

TOSS: Papua New Guinea, field first.

Nepal 198-6 (20/20 overs)

Kushal Bhurtel 59 (39), Sundeep Jora 56 (26); Assad Vala 3-0-18-2

Papua New Guinea 113-0 (16.1/20 overs)

Hiri Hiri 28 (19), Kushal Bhurtel 4-0-12-4, Pratis GC 4-0-40-2

Nepal win by 85 runs.

Player of the match: Kushal Bhurtel

GROUP STAGE, MONG KOK

TOSS: Hong Kong, bat first.

Hong Kong 121-10 (18.3/20 overs)

Zeeshan Ali 55\* (29), Sese Bau 2-0-10-2

Papua New Guinea 124-0 (12.4/20 overs)

Sese Bau 61\* (43), Tony Ura 51\* (33)

Papua New Guinea win by 10 wickets.

Player of the match: Sese Bau

Table with 7 columns: TEAM, P, W, L, N/R, PT, NRR. Rows for Nepal, PNG, and Hong Kong.

dugout three balls later after GC checked him on 28 in the 9th over.

PNG were already reeling at 89-5 inside 11 overs and plunged into further trouble when they lost three wickets in successive deliveries.

Aakash Chand first got rid of Charles Amini (9) in the 10.6 overs

before Bhurtel dismissed Lega Siaka (5) and Vanua (0).

Bhurtel then completed his four-wicket haul taking the wicket of Kiplin Doriga in the 14th over.

The target was already out of sight for PNG, who then lost the wickets of Pokana (12) and Kariko to surrender the match.

Nepal will retake PNG in the final after Vala's men quickly forgot the pain and secured their spot in the title match, thrashing hosts Hong Kong by 10 wickets in their second T20I of the day.

A batting failure saw Hong Kong manage 121 all out in 18.3 overs, with Zeeshan Ali's unconquered half-century providing their highest individual score. Ali scored 55 runs facing 29 deliveries.

Nasrulla Rana (16) and Ehsan Khan (16) were the second highest scorers of Hong Kong innings.

Kabua Morea, Alei Nao, Vala and Bau took two wickets each for PNG. In the run chase, Ura and Bau scored unbeaten half centuries to overhaul the 122-run target in 12.4 overs.

Nepal progressed into the final as group winners with three points. Their opening match against Hong Kong was washed out by the rain.

PNG finished the group in second position with two points.

Winless Hong Kong remained third with one point.

The final takes place on Wednesday.

# Nepal name squad for FIFA World Cup qualifiers

SPORTS BUREAU KATHMANDU, MARCH 12

Coach Vincenzo Alberto Annese has announced a 23-member squad for Nepal's 2026 FIFA World Cup and 2027 Asian Cup Qualifiers second round matches against Bahrain.

Annese has called up six new faces in the squad.

Rohan Karki, Bishal Basnet, Abhishek Limbu, Ajay Chaudhary, Saubhagya Rai and Samir Tamang have made their cut for the first time.

Bharat Khawas has also returned to the national fold.

Annese has left out key players Deep Karki, Ayush Ghalan and Suraj Jui Thakuri as they were not present at the closed camp due to their engagement with other tournaments.

Nepal will play both their home and away matches against Bahrain at the Bahrain National Stadium on March 21 and March 26, respectively.

Nepal were scheduled to host Bahrain for the home fixture but the venue was shifted to Bahrain after the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) deemed Dasharath Stadium—country's only international-standard stadium—unsatisfactory for the World Cup qualifiers.

Before travelling to Bahrain, Nepal

Table titled 'NEPAL SQUAD' listing Goalkeepers, Defenders, Midfielders, and Forwards.

will tour Malaysia to play a friendly match as part of their preparation for the World Cup qualifiers game.

Nepal are pitted alongside the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Yemen in Group H. They are at the bottom of the group after losing their away match at the UAE 4-0 and home match against Yemen 2-0.

A total of 36 teams have been divided into nine groups of four teams in the second round. The top two teams from each group will qualify for the 2027 Asian Cup and the third round of the 2026 FIFA World Cup Qualifiers.

The bottom two teams from each group will head to the third round of the Asian Cup qualification.

# Atletico face Inter Milan challenge in crunch week

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE MADRID, MARCH 12

Atletico Madrid host Champions League runners-up Inter Milan on Wednesday boosted by key player Antoine Griezmann's likely return from injury.

Diego Simeone's side stumbled 1-0 in Milan in February in the last 16 first leg clash, with Griezmann spraining his ankle at the San Siro.

The French forward missed four games since, of which Atletico have won only once, but has returned to training and Spanish media say he is set to feature in the second leg.

Struggling Atletico face an uphill climb against the runaway Serie A leaders after Marko Arnautovic netted the only goal on Simeone's return to Italy to face one of his former teams from his playing days.

The Rojiblancos also have Spanish champions Barcelona's visit on the horizon on Sunday in La Liga, where Athletic Bilbao are battling to overtake them in fourth place.

Atletico were ousted from the Copa del Rey by Athletic and despite a strong start to the season, are 14 points

behind bitter rivals and current league leaders Real Madrid.

Perhaps with one eye—or even two—on the Champions League, Atletico fell to a dismal 2-0 defeat at lowly Cadiz on Saturday.

It was the Andalucians' first victory in 17 matches and first in La Liga since September.

Despite the woeful performance Simeone backed his men ahead of the Inter clash.

"I feel that the team is giving everything and it's me that is not finding the right way," said the coach. "I'll go to the death with the players because I know what they can give, I know they can do big things, and I will keep working with them."

Someone's last chance of silverware this season lies in Europe and the coach will be grateful for Griezmann's potential return.

The 32-year-old forward has 18 goals in 36 appearances across all competitions this season.

Atletico are also boosted by their strong home record. At the Metropolitan stadium they have won 18 of 20 matches this season across all competitions, tumbling just once—against Athletic in the cup.

# HOROSCOPE

ARIES (March 21-April 19) Find blessings and strategies in the present moment. The world blooms with beauty when and you'll find much joy in sharing your rewards. Feel free to indulge in the finer things, but be mindful not to overspend.

CANCER (June 22-July 22) Make room for peace by building walls to ward off negativity. A burst of luck showers down later today, and you'll find it easy to spread joy and share optimism. Avoid frustration if disorder fills your space.

LIBRA (September 23-October 22) Get organised alongside your romantic and business partners. Improve routines to transform your bigger picture. Take into account how your closest companions add to or take away from your overall sense of efficiency, adjusting your boundaries accordingly.

CAPRICORN (December 22-January 19) Tap into your natural brilliance and problem-solving capabilities, facing roadblocks face-on to conquer them. Invest in the relationships that matter most. Your confidence elevates later, nudging you into the spotlight.

TAURUS (April 20-May 20) Enjoy respect and recognition by demonstrating wisdom and maturity, dear Taurus. Luck is on your side today, urging you to reach great heights. Do your best to stay on task, but don't be too hard on yourself.

LEO (July 23-August 22) The day will help your professional evolution, giving you a chance to find empowerment through change. Push past obstacles later today giving you the stamina and luck to shatter glass ceilings. Don't hesitate to go further and longer.

SCORPIO (October 23-November 21) Connect with your deepest desires both creatively and romantically, creating structures that will bring joy. Discuss long-term goals if you're in a relationship. Your heart expands and the love shared will be multiplied and returned later today.

AQUARIUS (January 20-February 18) Focus on your finances and domestic goals this afternoon, dear Aquarius. Remember that prosperity usually can't be rushed. Just be mindful to touch base with your gratitude, appreciating the life you've built and those who fill it.

GEMINI (May 21-June 21) Encourage privacy around long-term goals and strategize from the shadows. Seek tranquillity creating an ambiance where healing and joy may sprout from within. Try not to let fears from the past shape your sense of self tonight.

VIRGO (August 23-September 22) Dear Virgo, seek partnerships that are supportive and find the motivation to build something great through mutual support. Bring more structure to your spiritual practices, reconnecting with any tools, techniques, or meditations that offer your soul support.

SAGITTARIUS (November 22-December 21) Outline new rules for yourself and your household, to maximise wellness and healthy living. It will be easier to make good choices for the mind, body, and spirit. Your hard work pays off with expansive rewards.

PISCES (February 19-March 20) Stand firm in your ideas, and needs, expressing them freely as they need to be stated. Sparkling vibes can also bring you closer to loved ones when positive messages are exchanged. Don't fear change or the unknown.

# CROSSWORD

- ACROSS: 1 Actor Alan —, 10 Trumpet part, 15 Books pro, 13 Bottle, 14 French spa, 15 "Ship —!", 16 Wicked, 17 Domain, 18 Spongy ground, 19 Outcome, 21 Dramatizes a famous battle, 23 Foray, 25 — Antonio, Texas, 26 Fields of study, 30 Conceals, 33 Days long past, 34 Spanish artist, 35 Knight's weapon, 37 State near Nev., 38 Ruled, 41 Like a — of bricks, 42 Blond lock, 45 Redact, 47 Old measure of length, 48 Some exams, 50 Ripples, 52 Mythical bird, 53 "The Green —", 54 Metric unit, 59 Skiing event, 63 Literary contest, 64 Prized violin, 66 Plunge, 67 Holding device, 68 Cookout locale, 69 Exude, 70 Before, 71 Gloss, 72 Shows assent, DOWN: 1 Say with confidence, 2 Dwell, 3 Platform in a hall, 4 Charm, 5 Upright, 6 — Maria, 7 Dishonest witness, 8 Low-lying land, 9 Tangle, 10 Stylish, 11 Harbor town, 12 Some votes, 15 Actress —, 20 Reach solid ground, 22 Fastener, 24 Lunchtime, 26 Denomination, 27 Mild cigar, 28 Goof-off, 29 Tendon, 31 — nous, 32 "Now go!", 36 Means justifier, 39 Dutch cheese, 40 Military group, 43 Island attire, 44 Work hard, 46 Kiss and —, 49 Orts, 51 Heavy destination, 54 Actress —, Hudson, 55 Composer —, Stravinsky, 56 Sole, 57 Eastern nurse, 58 Partner, 60 Stretched car, 61 Roman poet, 62 New York team, 65 Stalemate

Table titled 'PREVIOUS PUZZLE SOLVED' showing a crossword grid with words filled in.

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Large crossword grid with numbers 1-72 indicating starting points for clues.

# SUDOKU

9x9 Sudoku grid with numbers 1-9.

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

9x9 Sudoku grid showing the solution to yesterday's puzzle.

DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★



# 'Agastya' isn't your average action film

A few loopholes aside, the movie has a gripping storyline, complemented by great cinematography and life-like acting.

ANISH GHIMIRE  
KATHMANDU

When I sat down to watch 'The Unbreakable Agastya (Chapter 1)', I expected it to have a typical story, whose plot I would probably be able to predict without watching. Seeing the movie theatre a bit deserted, I figured the movie may not be that spectacular. Surprisingly, it concluded on such a high note that I found myself leaning forward in disbelief.

The beginning of 'Agastya' is pretty slow, with frankly too many shots in slow motion. Despite this, the cinematography shone from the beginning to the end. The shots were well taken and impressive compared to the usual cinematography in Nepali movies.

The movie opens with Nisan (Najir Husein), who is a cop, beating up bad guys in what looks like a brick factory. We quickly realise that he's looking for his co-worker Saurya (Saugat Malla) there.

Saugat Malla's performance redeems the sluggish start of the movie. His portrayal of a homeless man with a troubled past is compelling and painful to watch. His eyes do all the talking as his character doesn't speak much in the beginning. Malla, who consistently delivers his best, reaches new heights in this film, delivering one of the finest performances by a Nepali actor that I've witnessed.

Instead of slowly trying to develop the story with numerous slow-motion shots, it would have been more effective to invest that time in establishing the characters. By the interval, the movie lacked engagement, and a guy sitting next to me pulled out his phone and began playing Candy Crush.

However, the latter half of the film is more interesting, revealing multiple layers, all interlinked and unfolding in unexpected ways. Initially, it seems the story is



## The Unbreakable Agastya (Chapter 1)

Director: Saurav Chaudhary

Cast: Saugat Malla, Najir Husein, Malika Mahat

Year: 2024

Language: Nepali

Duration: 2 hours 40 minutes

Now showing in theatres



Saugat Malla as Saurya in a scene from the film. This is one of Malla's best onscreen performances.

SCREENGRAB FROM YOUTUBE

headed in one direction, drawing parallels between Saurya's plight and Sanjay Singhania from 'Gajini', mourning the loss of his loved one, Chadini (Malika Mahat). Yet, the narrative takes a surprising U-turn.

The movie lays bare Saurya's true motive, revealing he is not a lunatic, but rather on a crucial mission. Initially, the many sub-plots overshadow the main plot, but everything falls into place towards the end. The interconnected sub-plots converge into a cohesive main plot, catching the audience off guard with a surprise.

Pramod Agrahari, who plays the antagonist Tripathi, adds further charm to the film. His voice perfectly complements his character—deep and coarse. Tripathi, a criminal involved in murders and smuggling underage girls into India, becomes the focus when Nisan and Saurya discover the disappearance of underage girls from a particular village. The duo discreetly infiltrates the area, posing as ordinary people, to keep a close eye on Tripathi.

Tripathi is initially a suspect, not a confirmed criminal. Nisan cleverly infiltrates

Tripathi's trust by posing as a servant and closely monitoring his actions. Chadini, a doctor, joins the mission, pretending to be Saurya's wife, and they adopt a cover by residing in the village. However, a notable flaw in Chadini's heroic act arises—how can a doctor suddenly afford to take time off work to assist a couple of police officers? In reality, it seems implausible.

## Saugat Malla's portrayal of a homeless man with a troubled past is realistic.

Furthermore, when Tripathi discovers their presence and captures Nisan, the logical move from Saurya would have been to call for additional backup. Instead, he rashly enters the compound alone, risking his life and the lives of his colleagues. Despite their escape, the sequence is marred by inconsistencies, as Tripathi, armed with a collection of guns, opts to

engage in hand-to-hand combat.

Despite these loopholes and a few dubbing issues, the film excels in portraying sinister human intentions and the theme of friendship. The action scenes are skillfully shot and edited, even for someone not particularly fond of action movies. Husein, portraying Nisan, convincingly embodies the role of a police officer, evident in the compelling opening action scene.

The film's background music adds to the overall experience, effectively creating tension and escalating the suspense in tandem with the narrative.

The filmmakers showed immense confidence in their project, trusting that the audience would catch up by the end. This certainty led to a deliberate slow build-up, followed by a significant increase in pace, leaving us eagerly anticipating part two.

'Agastya' isn't your average Nepali movie and an average action film. It is much more than that. The movie has momentum and a compelling "what happens next" element, complemented by excellent cinematography and life-like acting.

## Soothing itchy skin

Xerosis happens when the skin loses its natural moisture and becomes dry and irritated.



SHUTTERSTOCK

POST REPORT  
KATHMANDU

Many of us are familiar with the irritating feeling that comes with dry, itchy skin during the colder months. Commonly referred to as 'winter itch', this disorder can be a bothersome companion throughout the cold.

Winter itch, medically termed 'xerosis', occurs when the skin loses its natural moisture and becomes dry and irritated. Skin may feel tight, dry, and itchy as a result of this deficiency of moisture. Dr Shirapa Bajracharya, a

consultant dermatologist and aesthetic laser surgeon, who currently works at Norvic International Hospital, further explains the common skin disorder.

### What causes winter itch?

Several factors contribute to winter itch. Firstly, the cold air outside, combined with the hot air indoors (such as through the use of heaters), creates an environment that strips moisture from the skin. Moreover, the dry air prevalent during winter further compounds the issue, resulting in the disruption of the skin barrier and leading to discomfort and itching.

### How does cold weather affect the skin's moisture levels and barrier function?

Cold weather significantly affects the skin's moisture levels and barrier function. The harsh environmental conditions during winter disrupt the skin barrier, leading to increased transepidermal water loss. This process essentially means that moisture is lost from the skin, resulting in dryness. As the skin becomes drier, it also becomes more prone to itchiness. Thus, cold weather exacerbates dryness and disrupts the skin's natural protective barrier, making it more susceptible to irritation and discomfort.

### What are the differences between winter itch and other skin conditions like eczema or psoriasis?

Winter itch primarily occurs due to dryness of the skin resulting from cold, dry weather conditions. It typically resolves with the application of a good moisturiser. On the other hand, eczema is characterised by sensitive skin that is prone to allergies. It can develop regardless of the season and is not specifically linked to winter weather. Eczema requires management with medications and proper skincare routines.

Psoriasis, another skin condition, is chronic and involves an overactive immune system, causing rapid multiplication of skin cells. This leads to thick, scaly rashes. Like eczema, psoriasis can flare up at any time of the year and is not solely triggered by winter conditions. Treatment for psoriasis often involves medications and specialised skincare routines.

While both eczema and psoriasis may flare up more frequently during winter due to the dryness of the skin, they are distinct conditions with different underlying causes and treatments.

### Are some skin types more susceptible to winter itch than others?

One's skin type significantly influences susceptibility to winter itch. Individuals with dry or normal skin during summer are more prone to developing extremely dry skin during winter. This is in contrast to those with oilier skin during the summer, who may experience less severe dryness during the colder months.

Dry and normal skin types lack sufficient natural oils to retain moisture, making them more susceptible to the drying effects of winter weather. The decrease in humidity during winter exacerbates this issue, leading to increased dryness and potential discomfort such as itching.

Conversely, individuals with oilier skin types naturally produce more sebum, which helps to retain moisture and provides a protective barrier against dryness. As a result, they may experience less severe symptoms of winter itch compared to those with drier skin types.

### What remedies do you recommend for mild cases of winter itch?

- **Choose moisturising cleansers:** Opt for facial cleansers labelled 'gentle' or 'moisturising' to ensure they add moisture to your skin rather than stripping it away. This helps maintain the skin barrier.
- **Use hydrating shower products:** Select a hydrating shower gel or moisturising soap to prevent moisture loss from the skin on your body. This is particularly important during the winter months when the air is dry.
- **Cream-based moisturisers:** Use cream-based moisturisers instead of lotions or gel-based products. Look for ingredients like hyaluronic acid, shea butter, jojoba oil, mineral oil, petrolatum, lanolin, and glycerin. Applying the moisturiser while the skin is still damp enhances absorption.
- **Exfoliate with lactic acid:** Limit the use of acids like salicylic and glycolic acids, opting for lactic acid for exfoliation. Lactic acid is generally milder and can help in maintaining skin smoothness.
- **Shorten shower time:** Keep your shower time short to avoid excessive exposure to hot water, which can contribute to skin dryness.
- **Thick moisturising cream:** Apply a thick moisturising cream in the morning and at night. This helps to keep the skin hydrated and soothes any itching.
- **Pre-shower coconut oil application:** Consider applying extra virgin coconut oil on your body 30-60 minutes before showering to prevent dryness.
- **Humidifier use:** If the air around you is very dry, using a humidifier can add moisture to the air, benefiting your skin.

## Miyazaki isn't ready to retire just yet, after latest Oscar win

YURI KAGEYAMA  
TOKYO, JAPAN

Ghibli, the Japanese studio that just won its second Oscar for feature animation for 'The Boy and the Heron', hasn't said yet what it plans next.

But founder Hayao Miyazaki, who at 83 was the oldest director ever nominated in that category, won't rule out making another film, even if his next project is a short instead of a full-length feature.

Miyazaki, according to a longtime confidante, is a bit embarrassed about having pronounced a decade ago that he would no longer make movies, citing his age.

"He regrets having announced to the world he won't make another film," producer Toshio Suzuki, the co-founder of Studio Ghibli, said after the latest win.

When the Oscar was announced early Monday in Japan, a cheer went up in the tiny, humble building that houses the studio on the fringes of sprawling Tokyo, where dozens of invited media had crammed in to watch the ceremony on a big screen.

It was a big day for Japanese filmmaking, with 'Godzilla Minus One' winning the award for best visual effects, marking Japan's first win in that category.

Japanese media heaped praise on both the Ghibli and Godzilla films, noting that a double win at the Oscars hadn't happened for the country since 2009. An editorial Tuesday in the mass-circulation Yomiuri newspaper heralded "a new page in the history of Japanese filmmaking."

Japan is also very much in the backdrop of 'Oppenheimer', which won seven Oscars, including best picture. The biopic centres on an American scientist working on the atomic bomb. The film has yet to be released in Japan.

Miyazaki celebrated his Oscar win in private at his atelier and did not attend the studio event, Suzuki said. When asked why Miyazaki had shaved off his trademark beard, Suzuki said: "He doesn't want to look important."

Suzuki said he spent time analysing why Ghibli's latest film was chosen, wondering if it was because of the Old Testament references in the storyline, which centres on a young boy dealing with his mother's illness and death, and the relationship he develops with a talking bird. Suzuki said Ghibli's hand-drawn illustrations were more effective than computer graphics in portraying the bird's metamorphosis.

Ghibli didn't do much publicity for the film, choosing instead a low-key approach for a work that was ten years in the making and released after Miyazaki had supposedly retired.

"We thought it was OK to make something we really wanted to make," said Suzuki.

— Associated Press

AP/RS  
Hayao Miyazaki during a conference in Tokyo in 2013.

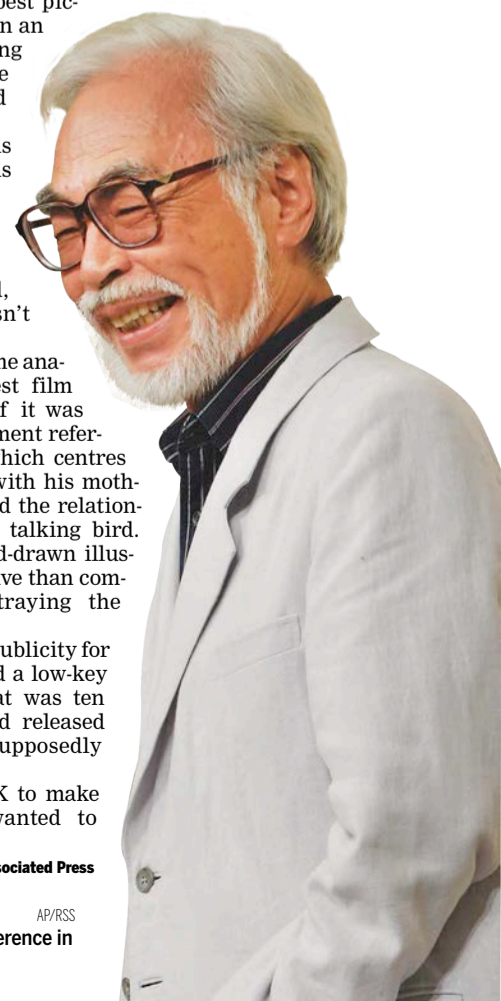


PHOTO: COURTESY OF SHIRAPA BAJRACHARYA

Consultant dermatologist Dr Shirapa Bajracharya