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Obscure trust links top firms with Modi's election war chest

❑ REUTERS
NEW DELHI, MARCH 14

Behind the doors of a small, non-descript office in the heart of New Delhi lies the headquarters of an electoral trust run by just two men that is the largest-known donor to India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), according to a Reuters review of public records.

The Prudent Electoral Trust has raised $272 million since its creation in 2013, funnelling roughly 75 percent of that to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party. The trust's donations to the BJP total 10 times as much as the $20.6 million it issued to the opposition Congress party, the records show.

Congress I government introduced such trusts in 2013 to allow for tax-free contributions.

The previous Congress-led government introduced electoral trusts in 2013 to allow for tax-exempt contribution to parties. It said the mechanism would make campaign financing more transparent by reducing cash contributions, which are harder to trace.

But some election experts say the trusts contribute to opacity around the funding of political parties in India, where this year's general election—due to be called within weeks—is expected to return Modi to power for a rare third term, polls predict.

While Prudent does not disclose how donations made by individual corporate donors are distributed, Reuters used public records from 2018 to 2023 to track flows from some of India's largest companies.

>> Continued on page 2

POST PHOTO: ANGAD DHAKAL

Depositors from around the country who lost their savings to unscrupulous cooperative organisations demonstrate at Bhrikutimandap in Kathmandu on Thursday. The message in the placard condemns cooperative operators who robbed the poor of their hard-earned money.

Foreign ministry confirms deaths of 7 more Nepalis serving in Russian army

The death toll of Nepalis fighting on the Russian frontlines against Ukraine reaches 21.

❑ POST REPORT
KATHMANDU, MARCH 14

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Thursday confirmed the deaths of seven more Nepalis serving in the Russian army.

Issuing a statement, the ministry identified the deceased as Purna Bahadur Gurung of Dhading, Nabin Shahi of Jajarkot, Padam Bahadur Ghimire of Udayapur, Ganga Ram Adhikari of Jhapa, Jit Bahadur BK of Baglung, Sanjay KC of Banke, and Sundar Moktan of Rasuwa.

The government has prioritised bringing home all Nepalis serving in the Russian army and has been making diplomatic efforts for the same, the ministry said. "Likewise, the Russian government has been requested again to compensate the families of all those killed in the war, bear the medical expenses of those injured and repatriate all Nepalis serving in the army," the statement further reads.

With this, the death toll of the Nepalis serving in the Russian army has reached 21.

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'No objection' letter seekers overwhelm education officials

Ever-increasing number of foreign education aspirants leave Nepali colleges desperately short of students.

❑ BINOD GHIMIRE
KATHMANDU, MARCH 14

As many as 2,000 students apply for the No Objection Certificates in peak days. However, the maximum number of applications the office under the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology clears in a day is around 1,000, even with the officials working 10 to 12 hours. As a result, thousands of applications pile up, leaving students to queue up for hours, sometimes for multiple days.

The ministry's reluctance to address the problems facing the office issuing the certificates led to its chief Shanti Ram Poudel, an under-secretary, resigning on Wednesday. On Thursday, the ministry secretary approved his resignation, saying he would not backtrack.

"Students accused me of failing to work promptly but my concerns with the higher authorities were not heeded. I therefore felt it was inappropriate to continue in the position," he told the Post. "I believe if you fail to perform, you just quit."

After Poudel's resignation, the ministry has deputed Basu Dev Osti to oversee the task.

Poudel said that besides the perennial problem of staff shortage, there is often a problem with servers, and the internet bandwidth is often too low to handle workload. He said he had made frequent requests for an increase in the capacity of the server and internet bandwidth along with deputing adequate staff, but all his requests fell on deaf ears. As of Wednesday, as many as 8,000 applications were pending.

If Poudel's claim is anything to go by, an official can verify 100-150 applications a day during their duty hour,

Each of the five duty officers can verify only up to 150 applications a day: Official who quit

and only five staff members are stationed in the office. "It is impossible to clear all the applications in a single day with the people and infrastructure we now have," he said. "Occasional problems on the server make things worse."

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DISTRICT DIGEST

Fire destroys three houses in Dhankuta

DHANKUTA: Fire destroyed three houses in Dharmashala area of Dhankuta Municipality-10 on Thursday. Two other houses were partially damaged in the incident. According to the District Police Office in Dhankuta, two houses of Meharman Moktan and a house belonging to Kamala Moktan were destroyed in the incident. The fire broke out from Kamala's kitchen at around 11:30 am. Preliminary police investigation shows that properties worth around Rs5.1 million were destroyed in the inferno.

Clash ensues in Ghorahi after locals vandalise hospital

DANG: Protesters and police personnel clashed in Ghorahi of Dang district on Thursday after the locals vandalised a hospital. Agitated locals obstructed traffic along the Ghorahi-Lamahi road section after a nine-year-old boy died in the course of treatment at the Buddha International Hospital on Wednesday. The demonstrators vandalised the building of the medical institute and hurled stones at the security personnel, following which the police lobbed tear gas to take the situation under control. Relatives of the deceased accuse the Ghorahi-based hospital of negligence in the child's death.

66,296 students received NOCs till March 6 this year

>> CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Following his resignation, Sumana Shrestha, the minister for education, visited the Sanothimi-based office and directed officials to increase the number of counters dealing with students. A team of scout volunteers was also mobilised to help the applicants. Moreover, the minister assured officials of necessary support.

The number of aspirants for foreign studies has soared recently while domestic academic institutions are struggling to get students.

A total of 66,296 students have received the certificate until March 6 of the current fiscal year. The maximum number of certificates was issued for Japan, followed by Canada and Australia. The United Kingdom and the United States hold the fourth and the fifth spots, respectively.

In the past few years, the highest number of applicants were for Australia but students have turned towards Japan and Canada after the Australian government imposed more stringent immigrant policies.

"No objection" is necessary to get clearance from the Nepal Rastra Bank to send money abroad.

As many as 110,000 students acquired "no objection" papers in the previous fiscal year. Nepali students spent Rs67 billion on their foreign studies in the year.

The number was 114,000 in the fiscal year 2021-22. It doesn't include thousands of students enrolled in Indian academic institutions. With four months remaining of the present fiscal year, the number of students acquiring such certificates could easily breach the 100,000-mark.

The huge outflow of students has become a headache not just for domestic educational institutions but also for the government. As the University Grants Commission reports, 555 colleges affiliated to various universities had less than 100 students in the academic year 2022-23.

An additional 270 such colleges had fewer than 200 students, according to the government entity overseeing tertiary education in the country. They jointly comprise more than half of the total—1,155—colleges in the country.

Tribhuvan University is already in the process of phasing out some of its programmes due to a lack of students. On their part, a number of colleges affiliated to the TU haven't renewed their affiliations for different programmes after student enrollment slipped.

Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal has expressed his worries on several occasions about the fast growth in the number of Nepali youths going abroad. However, the government has failed to introduce any concrete initiatives to retain them.

बिमालेख हरायो

मिति २०८०/११/०४ गते नेपालगंज देखि उढरपुर जाँदै गर्दा मेरो निम्न अनुसारको हिमालयन लाईफ ईन्स्योरेन्स गरेको बिमालेख हराएको हुँदा पाउनु हुने महानुभावहरुले तलको ठेगाना वा नजिक को प्रहरी चौकीमा बुझाईदिनु हुन अनुरोध गर्दछु ।

नाम :- गिता ढुंगाना

बीमालेख नं. :- १८१०००६४७७

ठेगाना:- उढरपुर -४, बाँके

सम्पर्क न :- ९८४८०३४४२७

'Bank Account for Daughters, for Secure Life' programme ineffective in Karnali

The provincial government has not deposited the promised amounts in the girls' accounts for the past two fiscal years.

❑ KRISHNA PRASAD GAUTAM
SURKHET, MARCH 14

Bhima KC of Musikot Municipality-3 in Rukum West gave birth to her twin daughters—Karishma and Ankita—in April 2021. Soon afterwards, the municipality facilitated the opening of the infants' bank accounts under the 'Bank Account for Daughters, for Secure Life' programme initiated by the Karnali provincial government. But their accounts have zero balance as of now.

"We were told that the programme was for the secure future of the daughters in which the provincial government deposits the amount regularly on their bank accounts," Bhima said. "It has been over two years but the government has not yet deposited any amount to their accounts."

She said she is now sceptical of the programme, which was launched amid much fanfare from fiscal year 2019-20. Bimala BK, a resident of Bangadkupende Municipality-4 in Salyan district, was impatient to open the bank account for her daughter Prabha who was born in July 2022. She hurried to the nearby bank as she heard about the 'Bank Account for Daughters, for Secure Life' programme.

"We opened the bank account but it remains useless," Bimala said. "The people's representatives and the employees assure that money will be deposited in the account soon. The government instilled hope to the impoverished people like us but they lied to us."

The Karnali provincial government had launched the programme with an objective to control child marriage and provide financial security to girls when they grow up. According to the working guideline of the programme, parents should file an application in the local unit to open a bank account for their daughters.

POST FILE PHOTO

Bank accounts of about 17,000 girls have been opened under the programme so far.

The programme was quite popular in the initial years. It was launched in all 79 local units of 10 districts in the province. All the girl children who were born after July 17, 2019 have been included as the beneficiaries of the programme.

According to the Ministry of Social Development, the bank accounts of about 17,000 girls have been opened under the programme as of now. However, the money has not been deposited in the bank accounts in the current fiscal year, nor was it in the last fiscal year of 2022-23.

The people's representatives in the local units express their displeasure at the provincial government for not depositing the amounts. "A total of 170 bank accounts were opened for the programme in our rural municipality," said Than Bahadur Rokaya, chairman of Sarkegad Rural Municipality in Humla. "The provincial government stopped depositing money. The beneficiaries vent their ire against us for the provincial government's failure to release amounts."

According to the programme, immediately after opening a new account under the programme, the provincial government deposits Rs1,000 in it. The government then deposits Rs500 in the account each month until the girl reaches 20 years of age. The account holder won't receive the amount if she marries before she reaches 20 or if she discontinues her studies before completing her secondary level.

However, the deposited amount can be withdrawn before the maturity period, according to the ministry, if the account holder dies or becomes completely disabled or unable to continue studies after the deaths of her parents due to financial constraints.

According to the Ministry of Social Development, approximately Rs190 million has been spent for the programme so far.

However, the programme has failed to make an impact in rural areas where the population is vulnerable to financial difficulties and where gender bias still persists. Many guardians, especially from the rural areas, are unaware of the government programme.

Anita Gyawali, woman development officer at the ministry, admits that the programme has not been as effective in recent years as expected. "The ministry also has some drawbacks," Gyawali said. "The ministry does not have good coordination with some local units. The annual budget has not prioritised the programme."

The province government allocated Rs25 million for the programme for the current fiscal year. But the government has not deposited the amounts in the bank accounts.

"The provincial government does not have records of the bank accounts opened in the current fiscal year. The local units have not sent us the details of the bank accounts so far," said Aananda Saru, secretary at the Office of the Chief Minister and Council of Ministers. He claimed that the programme has not been effective due to the lack of dedicated employees for the programme and lack of regular coordination with the local units, among others. Civil society leaders, rights activists and representatives of various political parties have urged the provincial government to implement the programme effectively.

Most of the settlements in the province are in remote locations and gender discrimination is still high there due to lack of education, said Manisha KC, a right activist.

"Programme like 'Bank Account for Daughters, for Secure Life' can be very effective to control gender discrimination, end child marriage and violence on girls and women," KC said. "This programme should be implemented effectively."

Police identify all eight killed in Udayapur jeep crash

Preliminary police assessment shows the vehicle had carried more passengers than its capacity.

❑ RASTRIYA SAMACHAR SAMITI
TAKSAR (BHOJPUR), MARCH 14

Police have identified all eight people who were killed in a jeep crash at Mainamaini of Belaka-7 in Udayapur district on Thursday.

The ill-fated jeep was heading towards Dakshin Ghoretar of Bhojpur from Dharan when it crashed at around 10.30 am. Police said the jeep fell some 300 metres below the road.

Seven passengers were killed on the spot while one died while undergoing treatment at Dharan-based BP Koirala Institute of Health Sciences.

According to a preliminary police assessment, the vehicle was carrying more passengers than its capacity.

According to the District Police Office, Bhojpur, the deceased are driver Man Bahadur Basnet, 40, of Itahari-9 in Sunsari; Parbat Maya Rai, 70; Chandra Prakash Rai, 23; six-month-old Bisang Chamling of Hatuwagadhi Rural Municipality-2 in Bhojpur; Raj Kumari Rai, 32, of Hatuwagadhi-5; Padam Bahadur Thapa, 68; Kamala Adhikari, 45, of Hatuwagadhi-9; and Kishan Rai, 42, of Hatuwagadhi-5.

Among them, Kishan Rai died in the course of the treatment, Deputy Superintendent of Police Sudip Raj Pathak said.

21 Nepalis fighting for Russia dead so far: Ministry

>> CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Earlier, the government had released the names of 14 nationals who were killed in the battle. Over 200 family members have registered separate complaints at the Department of Consular Affairs for the rescue of their relatives serving in the Russian army. Nepal has already made clear that it does not allow its citizens not to be recruited into any foreign army other than those it has signed bilateral agreements with, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement earlier.

The government, in two different notices issued earlier, asked its citizens not to visit Russia without taking a no-objection letter from the Department of Consular Affairs.

Last week, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs Narayan Kaji Shrestha had a phone conversation with his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov and discussed the issue of Nepali citizens serving in the Russian army.

Nepal government has asked its citizens not to visit Russia without a no-objection letter.

During the talk, the Russian minister pledged to act on the requests of the kin of Nepalis serving in the Russian forces. Shrestha requested Lavrov to expedite the repatriation of dead Nepalis, compensate the families of the deceased and facilitate the return of Nepali citizens serving in the Russian army, according to the foreign ministry. Russian authorities have agreed to provide compensation to the victims' families.

Kirtu Bhandari, who leads a campaign on behalf of the families of the Nepali nationals serving in the Russian Army, informed the Post last week that "as many as 116 Nepalis are injured, 274 have gone missing, and over 620 have joined the Russian army".

In an interview with the state-owned National News Agency, the then foreign minister NP Saud in January had said the number could be much higher, adding that the ministry has received complaints that around 100 Nepalis serving in the Russian army were either missing and injured while battling Ukrainian forces.

Political finance in India seen as murky with most donations undisclosed

>> CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Eight of India's biggest business groups donated at least $50 million in total between 2019 and 2023 to the trust, which then issued cheques for corresponding amounts to the BJP, according to the Reuters analysis.

Four companies whose transactions were identified by Reuters - steel giant ArcelorMittal Nippon Steel, telco Bharti Airtel, infrastructure developer GMR and energy giant Essar - have not given money to the party directly and do not appear on its donors' list.

GMR and Bharti Airtel said in response to Reuters questions that Prudent determines how their donations are distributed.

Prudent decides "as per their internal guidelines, which we are unaware of," said a GMR spokesman. He added that the company doesn't "like to align with any political party."

Bharti Airtel, which created Prudent before transferring control to independent auditors Mukul Goyal and Venkatachalam Ganesh in 2014, said it has "no influence on the decisions, directions and mode of disbursal of funds."

Spokespeople for the other groups did not respond to calls, text messages and emails.

Goyal and Ganesh did not respond to questions sent via email and post. When asked on a brief phone call about how Prudent functioned, Goyal said: "That is something we do not discuss."

Prudent—the largest of India's 18 electoral trusts—is legally required to declare how much it has collected from each donor and the total amounts disbursed to each party.

But it is the only one among India's four largest electoral trusts to accept contributions from more than one corporate group.

Trusts "provide one layer of separation between firms and parties," said Milan Vaishnav, an expert on Indian campaign finance at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a Washington-based think-tank.

Political finance in India is widely seen as murky, with most political donations in India undisclosed, Vaishnav added.

BJP said in its latest public disclosure in March 2023 that its political war chest—funds it had available including cash reserves and assets—was valued at 70.4 billion rupees ($850 million). That gives it a colossal financial advantage over Congress, which had 7.75 billion rupees in funds.

BJP spokespeople did not respond to repeated requests for comment for this story.

REUTERS

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi gestures as he speaks during an election campaign in New Delhi on April 8, 2019.

The records show that Prudent was also the largest-known donor to the Congress party in the decade to March 2023.

Layer of separation

India's Supreme Court said in a February campaign finance ruling that corporate contributions are "purely business transactions made with the intent of securing benefits in return."

Reuters was unable to establish if political parties know the identities of donors that give through trusts that receive contributions from multiple groups.

MV Rajeev Gowda, head of research for Congress, told Reuters that electoral trusts are a "semi fig-leaf" and that he believed parties knew the donors' identities. Gowda, who doesn't manage the party's finances, didn't provide evidence.

BJP's next largest known donor is Tata Group's Progressive Electoral Trust, which has given the party 3.6 billion rupees collected from the salt-to-airline conglomerate's companies. Progressive is also Congress's next largest donor, having given it 655 million rupees.

Progressive's by-laws require it to distribute funds proportionate to the number of seats held by each party in parliament. Prudent has no similar restrictions and Reuters' analysis of its donations found no such pattern.

Near-instant transfers

Trusts are allowed to retain a maximum of 300,000 rupees for annual operating expenses. Remaining funds must be disbursed in the fiscal year they were received.

In its analysis of contribution reports filed by Prudent to electoral authorities, Reuters identified 18 transactions between 2019 and 2022 in which the eight corporate groups made large donations to the trust. Within days, Prudent issued cheques for the same amounts to BJP.

Before the 18 contributions, which are not exhaustive of all the donations made by the groups to Prudent, the trust did not have sufficient funds for the payments to BJP.

Companies tied to billionaire LN Mittal's ArcelorMittal group were among Prudent's most prolific donors.

On July 12, 2021, for instance, ArcelorMittal Design and Engineering Centre Private Limited gave Prudent a cheque for 500 million rupees ($6.03 million). The next day, Prudent issued a cheque to BJP for the same amount.

ArcelorMittal Nippon Steel India also issued 200 million rupees to Prudent on November 1, 2021, and 500 million rupees on November 16, 2022. The respective sums were sent to BJP on November 5, 2021, and November 17, 2022.

A spokesman for ArcelorMittal did not respond to requests for comment.

Bharti Airtel, meanwhile, issued 250 million rupees to Prudent on January 13, 2022 and 150 million rupees on March 25, 2021. The trust sent out cheques to BJP for those amounts on January 14, 2023 and March 25, 2021.

And three companies in the RP-Sanjiv Goenka group—Haldia Energy India, Phillips Carbon Black and Crescent Power—cut cheques for 250 million rupees, 200 million rupees and 50 million rupees on March 15, March 16, and March 19, 2021 respectively. On March 17, BJP received a 450-million-rupee cheque from Prudent; a 50-million-rupee cheque followed on March 20.

The RPSG group did not respond to requests for comment.

Donations from Serum Institute and companies in GMR Group, DLF Ltd and Essar Group moved to BJP immediately after Prudent received them.

Reuters was unable to identify a similar pattern of funds being sent to the trust and transferred to Congress immediately afterwards.

However, Reuters found similar patterns involving two regional parties. Megha Engineering and Infrastructure transferred 750 million rupees to Prudent across three transactions on July 5 and July 6, 2022. The trust issued a 750-million-rupee cheque on July 7 to Bharat Rashtra Samithi, a centrist party in Telangana state, where Megha group is headquartered.

And property developers Avinash Bhosale Group, based in the western Maharashtra state, gave 50 million rupees to Prudent on November 27, 2020. The trust issued a cheque for that amount to the Maharashtra Pradesh Nationalist Congress Party, which is independent of the national Congress party, on November 30.

The corporate groups did not immediately return requests for comment. BRS's general secretary said he was "not aware" of specifics about the donations, while a senior NCP official said that the party had recently split and "every record will not be available with us.

Cause of concern?

Public records and party reports show BJP's war chest has swelled since Modi became prime minister in 2014, from 7.8 billion rupees ($94.09 million) in March 2014 to 70.4 billion rupees in March 2023. Congress' funds increased from 5.38 billion rupees to 7.75 billion rupees in the same time period.

The financing gap between the BJP and Congress is a cause of concern, said Jagdeep Chhokar of Association of Democratic Reforms, a Delhi-based civil society group that was the main petitioner behind the electoral bonds challenge in the Supreme Court.

"Level playing field is an essential part of democracy," he said.

Some BJP officials have said in the past that the large sums it has raised on its books are an example of its transparency.

BJP has been the major beneficiary of electoral bonds, a mechanism that allowed donors to give unlimited amounts to parties without public disclosure.

It received some 65.66 billion rupees of the 120.1 billion rupees worth of such bonds sold between their January 2018 introduction and March 2023. Such bonds made up more than half the contributions received by the BJP in all but one fiscal year since their introduction.

The Supreme Court called the mechanism "unconstitutional" in February and ordered the government-owned State Bank of India, which issued the bonds, to release buyers' details. Specifics are set for release by March 15.

POST PHOTO: SUKARYA LAL SHRESTHA

Kamal Thapa, the Rastriya Prajatantra PartyNepal leader, attends a demonstration at Dharahara in Kathmandu on Thursday.

Israel starts providing life-long support to families of those killed in Hamas attack

Israeli Ambassador to Nepal Hanan Godar declines to disclose the support amount but says it is 'decent' by Nepali standards.

❑ POST REPORT
KATHMANDU, MARCH 14

The Israeli government has started providing long-term financial support to the families of ten Nepali nationals who were killed in the Palestinian militant group Hamas' October 7 attack.

The Israeli government has also started providing financial compensation to the family of Bipin Joshi, a Kanchanpur local believed to be held hostage by Hamas in Gaza since October last year.

The Nepalis killed in the brutal attack had reached Israel under a 'learn and earn scheme'. As many as 49 other Nepali students from the Far Western University who had also reached Israel under the same scheme were also residing at the attacked kibbutz. The Nepal government rescued them days after the attack.

The families of the ten murdered students will get a monthly allowance from the Israeli government through the Israel National Insurance, Israeli Ambassador to Nepal Hanan Godar told the Post. The allowances will be given to the parents of the dead students or the widow of one of the victims.

"It will be sent directly to them for as long as they live," Godar said.

The ten Nepalis who were killed in the attack are Narayan Prasad Neupane of Ghodaghodi-4 in Kailali; Ganesh Kumar Nepali of Jayprithvi-6 in Bajhang; Dipeshraj Bista of Lekam-5 in Darchula; Ananda Sah of Sapahi-6 in Dhanusha; Rajesh Kumar Swarnakar of Madhuban-1 in Sunsari; Rajan Phulara of Pachnali-3 in Doti; Padam Thapa of Lamikhal-8 in Doti; Prabesh Bhandari of Sharada-3 in Salyan; and Lokendra Singh Dhami of Malikarjun-4 in Darchula.

Out of ten, one Nepali was married, so the Israeli government will provide monthly financial assistance to both his father and widow.

In a recent meeting with Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs Narayan Kaji Shrestha, the Israeli ambassador communicated that his government has started providing lifetime financial support to the family who were killed by Hamas militants, including the parents of Joshi who is believed to be in the captivity of Hamas.

The envoy added that his government is also committed to providing similar kinds of help to the injured, in case any of them are unable to do physical work and make a living.

> 'In Israel, the rights of Nepalis are equal to the rights of Israeli victims. [The] same also goes for people kidnapped by Hamas militant group,' envoy says.

"We have started providing compensation to the victims' families as well as the parents of Joshi," Godar said. "They will get the monthly compensation starting from last October."

While Godar declined to disclose the amount, he claimed that the compensation package is decent by Nepali standards.

As many as nine Nepali nationals were reportedly injured in the attack and they have already returned to the country.

"In Israel, the rights of Nepalis are equal to the rights of Israeli victims. [The] same also goes for people kidnapped by Hamas militant group," Godar said. "As many as 134 hostages, including Bipin Joshi, are in Hamas' captivity until now. The Nepali students came to Israel as our guests. After the massacre, they were part of our family and it was our duty to look after them."

The Israeli ambassador also went to Kanchanpur recently and met with the parents of Joshi. Godar assured them that the Israeli government was doing its best for the safe release of Joshi and 133 other hostages. The government of Nepal had expressed its solidarity with Israel in the wake of deadly attacks by the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas.

"The government of Nepal strongly condemns the terrorist attack in Israel that caused a loss of lives and injured many," the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement. "At this critical hour, we convey our solidarity with the Government of Israel."

Nepal is among the countries that first recognised Israel at the United Nations and decided to establish diplomatic relations with the country in 1960. Nepal has since maintained its support for the right of Israel to exist within secure and internationally recognised boundaries.

"The government of Nepal extends heartfelt condolences and deepest sympathies to the people and government of Israel as well as the victims of this cruel attack and their families," the ministry stated. "We wish for speedy recovery of the injured."

Over 4,500 Nepalis are currently working in Israel as caregivers. A total of 265 Nepali students had reached Israel under the 'Learn and Earn' programme of the Israeli government. A few days after the October 7 attack, the Nepal government sent a chartered flight to Israel and evacuated 254 Nepali students rescued from the country.

Nepali Congress seeks PM's answer over home minister

❑ POST REPORT
KATHMANDU, MARCH 14

The main opposition Nepali Congress on Thursday sought a reply from the government regarding Rastriya Swatantra Party President Rabi Lamichhane's appointment as deputy prime minister and minister for home affairs.

> Questions rise over the appointment of one facing charges of public cash misappropriation.

At the start of a House of Representatives meeting, Congress lawmakers stood from their seats, prompting Speaker Dev Raj Ghimire to grant Badri Prasad Pandey time to speak. Pandey expressed his concerns about appointing someone who is under investigation for his alleged involvement in misappropriating cooperative funds. He argued that such an appointment could potentially hinder a fair investigation into the matter. Pandey demanded the Speaker's ruling that the prime minister furnish a satisfactory reply to the House. The Speaker said the House's attention was drawn to the issue and expressed his hope that the government would also pay heed to it.

Probe commission on gold smuggling submits report

Home Minister Lamichhane pledges to take action against any entities and individuals responsible for wrongdoings.

❑ POST REPORT
KATHMANDU, MARCH 14

A high-level commission tasked with conducting an extensive investigation into the incidents of gold smuggling submitted its report to Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Home Affairs Rabi Lamichhane on Thursday.

The commission stated that the 485-page report was compiled after conducting field inspections of nine customs checkpoints, interviews with 68 individuals, and consultations with 61 experts during the five-month-long investigation.

The commission has recommended legal action against some individuals in this connection.

Upon receiving the report, Home Minister Lamichhane pledged to implement its recommendations. He assured that those responsible for the wrongdoings would be prosecuted, and the recommended improvement measures would be implemented.

Lamichhane's secretariat said the minister pledged to take action against any individuals or entities implicated in the report.

Lamichhane said those responsible for allowing the guilty to walk scot-free in the past will also be brought to book.

The government formed the commission on October 2 to conduct a detailed investigation into the recent incidents of gold smuggling in the country. The commission, led by Dilli Raj Acharya, a former High Court chief judge, was constituted after the major parties agreed on its jurisdiction.

The commission was tasked with the responsibility of investigating incidents involving gold smuggling concealed within electronic cigarettes and motorcycle brake shoes.

> Panel recommends legal action against some individuals linked with the crime.

Additionally, the commission was mandated to propose amendments to existing laws and enhance the investigation mechanisms to curb smuggling.

The body was entrusted with reviewing investigation reports concerning smuggling cases and conducting further inquiries as required.

Initially, the commission was given three months to study the issue and prepare a report. However, its term was later extended until mid-March.

Three Nepalis dead in Kuwait road accident

The trio was run over by a car while crossing a road.

❑ POST REPORT
KATHMANDU, MARCH 14

Three Nepalis were killed in a road accident in Kuwait on Monday.

Sujan Karki of Kathmandu, Surat Kumar Kadayat of Achham and Dhir Gurmachhan of Dhanusha died after they were hit by a car in Mahboula, a Kuwaiti district 36 kilometres south of Kuwait City.

According to Raj Malla Thakuri, president of the Federation of Nepali Journalists Kuwait chapter, the victims were crossing a road when they were hit by a car driven by a Kuwaiti citizen. Following the incident, the bodies were taken to Farwaniya Hospital for post-mortem examinations. An investigation into the accident has been initiated while the motorist involved was arrested, as reported by Arab Times. The embassy in Kuwait said it was coordinating arrangements to repatriate the bodies and to help the families claim compensation from insurance companies.

UNDP ranks Nepal 146th on HDI, 3 places higher than in 2021

Nepal's progress on HDI value is 0.010, higher than the global average of 0.004.

❑ POST REPORT
KATHMANDU, MARCH 14

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has ranked Nepal 146th on the Human Development Index (HDI).

In a statement on Thursday, the international agency said that Nepal's HDI value was 0.601, placing the country in the medium human development category and ranking it 146th out of 193 countries and territories.

Nepal's ranking was 149 in 2021. "As compared to 2021, Nepal's progress on HDI value is 0.010 which is higher than global average of 0.004," reads the statement.

Between 1990 and 2022, Nepal's HDI value changed from 0.395 to 0.601, representing a change of 52.2 percent.

During the same period, the South-Asian nation's life expectancy at birth increased by 15.7 years, expected years of schooling by 5.4 years, and mean years of schooling by 2.1 years. Nepal's Gross National Income (GNI) per capita changed by about 165.7 percent between 1990 and 2022.

The 2022 female HDI value for Nepal is 0.562, contrasting with 0.635 for males, resulting in a GDI value of 0.885.

"The HDI is projected to reach record highs in 2023 after steep declines during 2020 and 2021," the agency said.

However, the international organisation raised concerns about global inequality and gridlock on global challenges due to "rising political polarisation and distrust."

"Rich countries are experiencing record-high levels of human development while half of the world's poorest countries remain below their pre-crisis level of progress," the agency said.

Uneven development progress is leaving the poorest behind, exacerbating inequality, and stoking political polarisation on a global scale.

"Nepal performed progressively in the last five decades, yet fell into gridlock at times, particularly following the pandemic—be it related to decent jobs for youths, spatial and social inequalities, economic growth, as well as trust in institutions," the statement quotes Ayshanie Medagangoda-Labé, UNDP Nepal's resident representative, as saying.

"It is fundamental to collaborate not only between three levels of government, but also with the private sector, civil society, international community, and people at large," she added.

"The federal government could focus more on transparency, accountability, and integrity; provincial and local governments can enhance planning and service delivery."

50 years सँगसँगै अघि बढ्दै growing stronger together

EU and Nepal: 50 Years Growing Stronger Together

As the European Union celebrates 50 years of partnership with Nepal, I look forward to our shared journey towards peace, prosperity, and sustainability. Our relations that go back to 1974, have flourished over the years, embodying the spirit of collaboration and mutual respect. Today, as we face more than ever global challenges, our commitment to working together has never been more critical.

At its core, the European Union is a testament to the power of unity and cooperation. Born out of the ashes of World War II, the EU was founded on the principles of peace, prosperity, and solidarity. With 27 Member States today, the EU is a beacon of stability and prosperity, dedicated to improving the lives of its citizens and those beyond its borders. Through its more than 140 Delegations worldwide, including here in Nepal, the EU extends its hand in friendship, striving for a world where no one is left behind.

Our collaboration with Nepal is grounded in common goals: promoting green and inclusive economic growth, advancing quality education, upholding democracy, the Rule of Law, and Human Rights. To counter the existential threat of climate change, the EU has embarked on a transformative journey with the EU Green Deal, advocating for sustainable development that balances economic growth with environmental stewardship. Nepal, with its remarkable people, breathtaking landscapes and rich biodiversity, has a unique opportunity to lead by example and embrace sustainable growth models. The EU stands ready to support Nepal in this endeavor, recognizing the immense potential for positive change.

Education lies at the heart of prosperity and progress. Over the past two decades, Nepal has made significant strides in improving access to education, particularly for marginalized communities. The EU takes pride in having contributed to these achievements. However, our work is far from over. Quality education remains a priority, and the EU is committed to continuing its support to ensure that every Nepali has access to quality education that empowers and enriches their lives.

Fundamental to our partnership is a shared commitment to Human Rights, Democracy, and the Rule of Law. The EU believes that respect for these principles is not only a moral imperative but also a prerequisite for sustainable development. Together with Nepal, we are working to strengthen legal frameworks, promote accountability, and ensure that fundamental freedoms are ensured for all citizens. Our joint efforts, including the recently launched gender equality program, demonstrate our unwavering dedication to advancing human rights and empowering women and girls.

The EU also supports the implementation of the federal constitution and Nepal's efforts to improve public sector delivery of services to citizens. A key area of support has been capacity building, strengthening the institutional capacity of Nepal's federal structures, notably provincial and local governments. Enhancing service delivery at the local level, and fostering greater participation and representation of marginalized communities in decision-making processes is central to our common goals. Nepal has come a long way in a short time in terms of fiscal federalism to ensure that the three levels of government function adequately.

As we look towards the future, the EU will continue to shoulder Nepal as it strives for progress and prosperity. Our partnership is not just about diplomacy; it is about solidarity, friendship, and shared values. Together, we can build a world where peace, prosperity, and sustainability are not just aspirations but realities for all. The journey ahead may be challenging, but with determination and cooperation, we can overcome any obstacle and build a brighter tomorrow for generations to come.

●●●

Veronique Lorenzo
EU Ambassador to Nepal

OPINION

OUR VIEW

Elite capture

The usurpation of the PR system by imposters has sowed suspicion about the idea of representation.

The Supreme Court has made an important judgement in asking political parties to nominate lawmakers under the proportional representation (PR) system as per the spirit of the 2015 Constitution. At the same time, the top court has made a sensible decision not to disturb the current Parliament by dismissing the lawmakers already nominated. Instead, it has called on the parties to adhere to the spirit of Article 42 of the constitution while selecting the candidates in the next round of elections. This was an intervention the country was waiting to see from the top court at a time of great suspicion about the PR system.

When the political parties agreed on the constitutional provision of selecting a significant number of parliamentary candidates based on proportional representation, it was considered a sign of their maturity. After all, they had recognised the need to pave the way for justice and equality by ensuring the representation of people from minority communities in Parliament, which wouldn't have been possible in the normative environment of competitive politics. The PR system was a much-needed political reform in a country rife with monumental hierarchies based on class, caste, gender, and ethnicity, among others.

The country realised the benefits of the PR system early on when people from various communities and regions that had until then been sidelined in the state's decision-making bodies, were seen in large numbers in the Constituent Assemblies. Representatives from various marginalised quarters—Dalits, indigenous nationalities, and at least one queer person—spoke loud and clear about the kind of society they wanted to build to endure greater social justice. As parties scrambled at the last minute to find candidates in remote, marginalised places, they even happened to pick up illiterates and became a subject of ridicule. However, it soon became clear that even illiterates had things to say; just that they needed the mic.

Today, the PR system does not enjoy the same legitimacy it did during the time of the first and second Constituent Assemblies between 2008 and 2015. And if there is anyone to blame for the depreciation in the PR's goodwill, it is the political parties. A big section of the people believes the PR system should be revamped, if not removed altogether. And why would they not? After all, the space created for the marginalised has now been taken up by imposters who come in different shades—wives, sycophants and business tycoons with conflicting interests. Not only has this usurpation of the space of the marginalised in political affairs turned public opinion against it but it has also created a general suspicion about the significance of representation.

But these excesses of the political parties cannot be a reason to scrap the PR system, which remains a vital tool for some representation of marginalised communities. True, a by-product of the PR system has been a situation where none of the political parties can garner enough seats to form a government on its own. This has created the conditions for a hung parliament, turning a party that secured a distant third position into the kingmaker. But untimely making and breaking of governments have more to do with the political parties' and their leaders' lack of political morality than a fundamental flaw in the constitutional provision. Yet this is also not to argue that the constitutional provision on the PR system is perfect. Such a provision can and should change with the needs of the times.

THEIR VIEW

Deadly devices

A nationwide education campaign regarding cylinder safety can be launched.

The recent spate of deadly incidents involving gas cylinders must bring the authorities' attention to a daily hazard many across the country have been forced to live with. So far this week, 12 people, including five from a single family, have been killed and several others injured in two separate gas cylinder explosion incidents. Both occurred in residential buildings: one in Multan, the other in Quetta.

Unsafe gas storage cylinders seem to be becoming a major cause for the mounting toll from domestic accidents, yet the issue has not received as much attention from the authorities as it deserves. Women and children are most at risk because they are frequently in close proximity to spaces where gas cylinders are used in households. Tragically, children accounted for most of the dead in the blasts reported this week.

The onset of Ramazan has increased the risk of deadly blasts, mainly because unreliable gas supply around sehr and iftar times often pushes even more households to opt for cylinders. Purchasing gas in pressurised containers helps households ensure that cooking activities can continue unhindered during peak times, when line gas often becomes unavailable. Given that it is primarily a governmental failure that a large number of citizens have no access to piped gas, those responsible must at least take measures to ensure that citizens forced to opt for cylinders do not expose themselves to avoidable risks.

In this regard, a nationwide education campaign regarding cylinder safety can be launched, and the various Ramazan transmissions hosted by TV channels can be requested to include warnings for their viewers about the potential risks of using pressurised gas and what one may do to ensure their loved ones avoid harm. The unregulated cylinder-refilling industry also needs tighter monitoring and control, as smaller vendors operate without regard to any safety protocols. Gas cylinders are turning into a major health and safety issue, and the authorities must respond proactively.

— Dawn (Pakistan)/ANN

Plural histories of school education

POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE

Nepal needs more diverse historical works on schooling that go beyond state-centric perspectives.

PRATYOUSH ONTA

POST FILE PHOTO

Our knowledge of the history of school education in Nepal is rather limited. When some colleagues compiled a list of nearly 150 PhD dissertations completed by 2016 at various universities across the globe on Nepal's education, they found that only a few focused on aspects of the history of its school education. Popular histories of school education usually note that Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana started the Durbar School after returning from his Europe trip in the mid-19th century. They then note that one of Jung Bahadur's nephews, Dev Shamsher Rana, started *Bhasha Pathshalas* (namely, schools that taught in Nepali as opposed to Sanskrit) during his short reign in 1901 before his successor, Chandra Shamsher, shut down that initiative.

The Ranas continued to restrain the starting of new schools to the extent that when their regime ended in 1951, there were only about 500 schools in the entire country. After 1951, the number of community-established schools increased significantly, but their governance was nationalised by Panchayat's New Education System Plan (NESP) in the early 1970s. In 2001, Panchayat's mistake was redressed by the adoption of a policy to return the management of public schools back to the communities in which they were located.

This skeletal history of governmental policies and their politics regarding schooling needs to be filled with serious works that give us non-state-centric plural histories of schools and schooling in Nepal. How might we produce such histories? This can be done in many different ways. Let me point out a few possibilities. Such histories can be written from a number of social science disciplines, and their focus can be on specific schools as institutions, school localities (a village, city or region) and contributors (school founders and teachers). Since ours is a society with differential opportunities, the research can also focus on the histories of unequal access to schools based on gender or between members of various social groups.

We can also look at the historical discourses around school education. For instance, we can inquire about the voices that opposed school education for girls during the middle decades of the 20th century (covered in a 2022 article by Lokranjan Parajuli), but more research is needed, including how there was opposition to the idea of co-education of boys and girls later.

First, researchers could start by producing detailed histories of specific schools. Although there are a few memoir essays or chapters on the Durbar School—the memoirs of Balkrishna Sama, Bhim Bahadur Pandey, Kamal Dixit and others—it is a shame that we do not have even one full-length account of this important school. It is the same with many other older schools, even those in the Kathmandu Valley. Magazine-length *smarikas* about some of these schools have been produced to celebrate their golden and diamond jubilees, but their analytical histories have not been written.

There are examples from elsewhere that we could try to emulate. Take for instance, a book about a school in Delhi, *The Modern School (1920-2020): A Century of Schooling in India* (2020). Written by historian Rakesh Batabyal, this 400-page tome starts by declaring that Modern School "has been an integral part of the modern history of India's capital and a significant element of the sociocultural horizon of the nation itself." In the Nepali context, much the same could be said about Kathmandu's Durbar School or Juddhodaya Public (JP) School (founded about 85 years ago). Batabyal proposes a model of institutional study "that sees the school as intimately connected with the changing nature of family, society and nation over the past one hundred years." He then goes on to provide a good history of the Modern School by focusing not just on the school as an institution and the personalities that led it but also on the changing dynamics between the school and its sociocultural context.

Second, researchers can write about schools in a specific locality. Here Bhaveshwar Pangeni's documentation of schools in Kirtipur in *Shikshako Itihas: Kirtipur Kshetrako Shaikshik Itihas* (2073 BS) is a significant contribution. But upcoming works could document not only the institutional histories of schools per se but also analyse how a school or sets of schools in a specific location were "related" to the main social constituencies in the locality. Such research is being carried out by Sanjila Moktan, a researcher at Martin Chautari, for the case of Dapcha in Kavrepalanchowk, less than 40 km from Kathmandu. A *Bhasha School* was started in Dapcha in 1929, but the Bahuns, Newars and Tamangs in the area had differential relationships with it. As Moktan shows in a forthcoming article, Bahuns and Newars enrolled in the school in its early years. On the other hand, Tamang students had no access to this school until the post-Rana years, even when a few influential local Tamang men were involved in the school's governance structure.

Third, researchers can write about specific individuals and initiatives. A possible example here could be the case of Gopal Pandey "Asim" and his initiative, Nepal Shiksha Parishad founded in August 1951, claiming that Nepal needed a "Rastrabhasa Shiksha Pranali". Through the initiative, Pandey proposed a system of school and higher education based on the Nepali language. This Pranali was approved by the Government of Nepal in 1952, and the Parishad subsequently institutionalised it. Students could opt for this exclusively Nepali language-based system in place of the mainstream school system that included curricula in English as well.

Although Pandey could not implement his Pranali in higher education, his scheme operated at the school level for over 20 years until Panchayat's NESP shut it down. The major questions the research on this Pranali could seek to answer would include: What was the vision of Pandey in founding this initiative and what were the historical influences on him at work? How was the proposed system planned, socially and legally approved and realised? What were the contents of its curricula, and what inspired the students to enrol in this Pranali?

With respect to the founding of specific schools, researchers can document the demands that led to their establishment and look into the ideas of their founders. They can also ask how specific sets of individuals actualised them in the form of new schools or used existing schools to expand opportunities for education for students who had hitherto been "missing" from those schools.

What kinds of sources might researchers use to produce such histories? First, they will have to find existing unpublished documents held in old schools. Second, they must consult relevant newspapers and periodicals, some of which are now available online or can be read on microfilm reels. After that, researchers must read other published writings in the form of essays, memoirs and (auto)biographies. Among the published sources, *smriti-granthas* (collections of essays written by others on the remembered life of a departed person) will be very useful. Fourth, they will have to read regular publications of the concerned schools and the occasional *smarikas* brought out to celebrate various milestones. Finally, researchers will have to do oral historical interviews with former students, teachers and community members.

Possibilities galore, but are there any takers?

Trapped in the Darien Gap

In 2023, of the 520,085 people who moved through the region, Nepalis counted for 2,252.

SARA MCKINNON

The Darien Gap is a stretch of densely forested jungle across northern Colombia and southern Panama. Roughly 60 miles (97 kilometres) across, the terrain is muddy, wet and unstable. No paved roads exist in the Darien Gap. Yet despite this, it has become a major route for global human migration.

Depending on how much they can pay, people must walk anywhere from four to 10 days up and down mountains, over fast-flowing rivers and through mud, carrying everything they have—and often carrying children who are too young to walk—to make it through the pass. Those who make it through then take buses through most of Central America and make their way north through Mexico to the US border zone. Cellphone service stops once people enter the dense forest; migrants rely on the paid "guides" and fellow migrants to make it through.

In the decade prior to 2021, 10,000 people annually took this route on their way north to seek residence in the United States and Canada. Then, in 2021, the Panamanian government documented 133,000 crossings, a dramatic increase in human movement in such a volatile stretch of land. In 2023, more than half a million people transited through this part of the Isthmus of Panama.

Why is it so dangerous?

The route, and really the entire trajectory that people take when they migrate from South America to North America, is controlled by criminal organisations that make millions, if not billions of dollars, annually in the human migration economy. It is impossible to cross this stretch of land without the help of a smuggler, or guide because the criminal organisations who control the territory demand payment for passage.

Payment does not, however, assure safe passage. Sometimes the very people paid to facilitate the journey extort migrants for more money. There are also reports of armed groups ambushing those in transit to seize their belongings and steal what money they may have stowed away and sewn into clothing seams.

Extortion and kidnapping are common occurrences, and the medical aid charity Doctors Without Borders recently reported a surge in instances of mass sexual assault in which hundreds of people have been captured, assaulted and raped—often in front of family members. In December 2023, one person was sexually assaulted every 3½ hours while crossing, according to Doctors Without Borders.

The extreme nature of the swamp-like jungle also makes the journey dangerous. The paths can be very muddy, especially in the rainy season. In mountainous sections, it is often necessary to climb over steep rocks, or cling to a rope to not slip and fall off a cliff.

The Missing Migrant Project reported 141 known deaths in the Darien Gap in 2023, which is likely a fraction of the actual number due to the challenges in reporting and recovering bodies. Many of the people I interviewed who had made the journey talked about seeing bodies along the path covered in mud, likely the result of slipping or falling to their deaths.

Fellow migrants left markers close to the bodies, such as pieces of fabric tied to a tree, and took photos of the dead in the hopes that this evidence might someday help recover the bodies.

The rivers are also dangerous. Flash floods and rushing rapids mean that many people are swept away and drown in the muddy waters. Bruises, cuts, animal bites and fractures are common. The high humidity and heat each day, combined with a lack of clean drinking water, mean that many fall sick with symptoms of severe dehydration. Vector-borne, waterborne and fungal-related illnesses are also quite common.

The recent surge in crossings

Violence, insecurity and instability in their home countries cause many people to move. They may move to elsewhere in their region. But when the level of violence and insecurity is similar in that country, they keep moving to find a safer place to live.

Options for legally allowed immigration are increasingly limited for those in low-income countries. For example, when governments implement travel visa restrictions for certain nationalities, it impacts the options available to the people of that country for movement.

In 2021, with pressure from the United States, Mexico started requiring Venezuelans travelling to Mexico to carry travel visas. This meant that Venezuelans hoping to seek asylum in the United States could no longer first fly to Mexico as a tourist and then present themselves at the border to a US Customs and Border Protection agent to express their fear of returning to their home country.

Venezuelans had to find another route to move, and for many, that was and continues to be irregular transit through the Darien Gap without travel documents.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Who is making the journey?

In 2023, of the 520,085 people who moved through the region, Venezuelans counted for over half at 328,650. But the total also included 56,422 Haitians, 25,565 Chinese, 4,267 Afghans, 2,252 Nepali, 1,636 Cameroonians and 1,124 Angolans.

Human migration in the Americas is a global phenomenon.

It is also increasingly gender and age-diverse, as figures from the Panamanian government show. Adult men made up just over half of those moving through the Darien Gap in 2023, and adult women counted for 26 percent of the population.

Children under 18 constituted 20 percent of those crossing, with half of those children under the age of five. Parents may be carrying children for long stretches of the journey, or children may have to walk even though they are tired. The stress and fatigue add to the likelihood of injury along the way.

Response from authorities

The travel visa restrictions of many governments have only pushed more people to attempt this dangerous route. Governments have also been lukewarm to the presence of humanitarian groups who assist migrants in transit. On March 7, 2024, Doctors Without Borders reported that the Panamanian government would no longer permit the organisation to provide medical support to those in transit through the Darien Gap. This reduced access to health care will certainly mean a more dangerous passage.

In May 2022, countries across the Americas jointly announced the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection to improve regional coordination to manage migration.

Through this, the US government implemented a series of new legal programmes to move to the US and application processing offices in South American and Central American countries that give people the opportunity to apply for US refugee resettlement, humanitarian parole and family reunification, and have the visas processed while waiting abroad.

But these programmes are not available to people of all nationalities. And some of the programmes also require official documents like passports, a requirement that excludes many of those who make their way through the Darien Gap.

McKinnon is a professor of Rhetoric, Politics & Culture at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

— The Conversation

FOREX

US Dollar	132.82
Euro	145.32
Pound Sterling	170.12
Swiss Franc	151.07
Australian Dollar	88.01
Canadian Dollar	98.62
Singapore Dollar	99.73
Japanese Yen (10)	8.99
Chinese Yuan	18.47
Saudi Arab Riyal	35.42
Qatari Riyal	36.42
Thai Bhat	3.73
UAE Dhiram	36.16
Malaysian Ringgit	28.34
Korean Won (100)	10.09

Exchange rates fixed by Nepal Rastra Bank

SHARES

Nepse (in percent) ⬇ 2,080.87pts -1.32%

HIGHEST LOSERS

SMFBS	JALPA	DLBS	LICN	NICLBSL	JSLBB
-6.02	-5.66	-5.31	-5.2	-5.13	-5.03

MODERATE LOSERS

CKHL	RMF1	NHPC	NTC	NBLD87	MBLD87
-0.15	-0.13	-0.12	-0.12	-0.11	-0.1

MODERATE GAINERS

NMBD87/88	SMHL	PFL	SBID89	MHCL	MKJC
0.22	0.19	0.13	0.1	0.02	0.02

HIGHEST GAINERS

WNLB	MLBS	GLBSL	KRBL	SAMAJ	MKLB
10	10	9.92	7.71	7.2	6.17

BULLION

PRICE PER TOLA

Fine Gold	Rs 125,800
Silver	Rs 1,515

SOURCE: FENEGOSIDA

Large cardamom price recovers to Rs2,075 per kg

Prices are expected to rise further, but since farmers have already sold their cash crops, they will receive little benefit.

❑ LAXMI GAUTAM
PANCHTHAR, MARCH 14

POST FILE PHOTO

Ilam, Panchthar, Taplejung, Sankhuwasabha, Tehrathum, Bhojpur and Dhankuta are the major large cardamom-producing districts in Nepal.

The price of large cardamom, one of the most valuable spices in the world, has recovered from a drop. However, the rising prices will bring little to no benefits for the farmers who have sold their produce to traders.

According to the Federation of Large Cardamom Traders, the price reached Rs2,075 per kg in the first week of March, after falling to Rs2,000 per kg at the end of January from Rs2,150 per kg in the first week of January.

Known as Alaichi, large cardamom is one of Nepal's biggest export crops.

It is harvested from mid-August to mid-November.

On Tuesday, the spice fetched Rs2,075 per kg in Birtamod, Jhapa, a key trading hub in eastern Nepal.

Spice is a key source of income for farmers in eastern hill districts. The hilly districts of Koshi province are key alaichi-producing areas. Quality is one of the determinants of the price.

The high-quality crop is being traded at Rs2,075 per kg, while the medium quality fetches Rs2,050 per kg, and the normal quality sells for Rs2,025 per kg, said Khem Adhikari, a large cardamom trader in Phidim.

At the start of the harvest season, the spice could be bought for as low as Rs1,250 per kg.

Farmers say that despite a sharp rise in prices, they normally don't reap the benefits.

"We do not benefit from the rise in price after February," said Yam Kurumbang, a farmer in Phalelung rural municipality ward 8. Farmers normally sell their produce early to meet their needs.

Large cardamom traders said that the price is determined by the international market. "If the commodity's demand increases in countries like India, and Bangladesh, the price also increases. If the demand declines, the price falls," said Deepak Nepal, a large cardamom trader who is a central member of the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry.

"The price has increased because farmers in Sikkim, India and Bhutan witnessed low output this year," he said.

The federation has been expecting the price to breach the 2014 level this year due to low output and high international demand. In 2014, large cardamom hit an all-time high of Rs2,500 per kg.

The large cardamom output dropped by 60 percent year-on-year due to drought and pest problems in the key producing areas, according to the association.

Nepal is the largest producer of large cardamom, accounting for 68 percent of the global production, followed by India and Bhutan.

The spice is grown in Sikkim, Darjeeling and Bhutan. Large cardamom was introduced in Ilam from Sikkim in 1865.

Ilam, Panchthar, Taplejung, Sankhuwasabha, Tehrathum, Bhojpur and Dhankuta districts are the major large cardamom-producing districts in Nepal.

India is the biggest buyer of Nepal's large cardamom, absorbing 99 percent of its exports. The spice is re-exported to Pakistan and the Middle East where it fetches high prices because of local preference for the Nepali product.

Pakistan is the largest importer of large cardamom, purchasing roughly 60 percent of India's large cardamom exports. Large cardamom pods are used by the local Muslim community in biryani, a popular dish, as a symbol of prosperity and wealth.

"As the prices are determined by global markets, farmers are compelled to sell the spice at whatever price they are offered by the Nepali traders," said Ganesh Pokharel, former president of the Large Cardamom Farmers Association in Panchthar.

"There is no practice to fix the minimum support price of large cardamom like ginger and broom grass. As a result, farmers must sell the produce at the price fixed by the traders."

Traders, however, said that since it's a premium cash crop with global value and demand, prices keep fluctuating, so the minimum support price is not workable.

Birendra Yungya, a farmer in Panchthar, said they harvest, process and store the crop in November. Only a few farmers keep the stock hoping that the price may rise in the offseason or in March.

According to farmers, most sell their crops immediately after the harvest because they lack money to meet their daily household expenses.

Large cardamom is used as a spice, it is also used in biscuits and bakery products, fragrance oil and alcohol.

In Nepal, Singhadurbar Vaidyakhana and other ayurvedic medicine manufacturers prepare medicine using large cardamom.

According to the Department of Customs, Nepal exported 3,183 tonnes of large cardamom worth Rs4.44 billion in the first seven months of the current fiscal year ended in mid-February. The country exported 9,990 tonnes of large cardamom worth Rs8.27 billion in the last fiscal year 2022-23 ended in mid-July.

BIZLINE

New US climate envoy wants China to speed up coal transition

TOKYO: China should speed up its transition away from coal, the new chief US climate negotiator John Podesta said Thursday, calling for Beijing to "take their responsibility seriously". "China is the largest emitter (of greenhouse gases) in the world... They still have online in my view more coal than they need, and more coal than is good for the health of the world," Podesta said in Tokyo. He praised Beijing's role in the UN's COP28 conference in Dubai in December when nations agreed to triple global renewables capacity this decade and to "transition away" from fossil fuels. **(APF)**

AstraZeneca buys French biotech firm Amolyt for $1 billion

LONDON: Anglo-Swedish pharmaceuticals giant AstraZeneca on Thursday agreed to buy French biotech specialist Amolyt Pharma for about $1 billion, expanding further into the field of rare drugs. "AstraZeneca ... has entered into a definitive agreement to acquire Amolyt Pharma, a clinical-stage biotechnology company focused on developing novel treatments for rare endocrine diseases," it said in a statement. The London-listed group added that the transaction would bolster its rare diseases division Alexion. It will pay $800 million upfront for the Lyon-based company. **(AFP)**

World oil demand grows amid Red Sea shipping disruptions

PARIS: Global oil demand is forecast to grow more than expected due to a brighter US economic outlook and rising fuel needs of ships rerouted away from the Red Sea, the International Energy Agency said Thursday. Commercial ships have been taking longer and costlier journeys around the southern tip of Africa to avoid attacks by Yemen's Huthi rebels in the Red Sea, a vital international trade route. The IEA said world oil demand growth is now forecast to increase by 1.3 million barrels per day (bpd) this year, 110,000 bpd higher than in its previous monthly market report. **(AFP)**

Foxconn logs second straight quarter of profits as AI demand surges

TAIPEI: Taiwanese tech giant Foxconn on Thursday reported a second straight quarter of profit growth, with the Apple supplier boosted by demand for AI hardware and infrastructure. The firm—also known by its official name Hon Hai Precision Industry—is the world's biggest contract electronics manufacturer and assembles devices for several companies, most notably Apple's iPhones. It said net profit for October-December rose to Tw$53.2 billion (US$1.6 billion). CEO Young Liu said the company's overall performance was "better than expected", pointing to full-year revenues reaching Tw$6.16 trillion dollars as "the second-highest" after 2022. **(AFP)**

China says US TikTok vote follows 'logic of a bandit'

❑ AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BEIJING, MARCH 14

AFP/RSS

China on Thursday slammed the approval of a US bill that would ban TikTok unless it severs ties with its Chinese parent company, blasting Washington's "bandit" mentality and vowing Beijing would "take all necessary measures" to protect the interests of its companies overseas.

The short-video app has soared in popularity worldwide but its ownership by Chinese technology giant ByteDance—and alleged subservience to Beijing's ruling Communist Party—has fuelled concern in Western capitals. On Wednesday, the US House of Representatives overwhelmingly approved a bill that would force TikTok to divest from its parent company or face a nationwide ban.

The bill is yet to pass the Senate, where it is expected to face a tougher test in order to become law.

"The US should truly respect the principles of a market economy and fair competition (and) stop unjustly suppressing foreign companies," Beijing's commerce ministry spokesperson He Yadong said at a press conference on Thursday afternoon.

Washington should also "provide an open, fair, just, and non-discriminatory environment for foreign companies to invest and operate in the US", He added.

"China will take all necessary measures to resolutely safeguard its legitimate rights and interests," he said.

At a separate press briefing on Thursday, Beijing's foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said the vote "runs contrary to the principles of fair competition and international economic and trade rules".

"If so-called reasons of national security can be used to arbitrarily suppress excellent companies from other countries, then there is no fairness and justice at all," Wang said.

"When someone sees a good thing another person has and tries to take it for themselves, this is entirely the logic of a bandit."

Prior to the vote, Beijing had warned that the proposed ban would "inevitably come back to bite the United States".

US lawmakers voted 352 in favour of the proposed law and 65 against, striking a rare note of unity in politically divided Washington. The White House has said President Joe Biden will sign the bill—known officially as the Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act—into law if it reaches his desk.

But it faces a tricky path through the more cautious Senate, where some are wary of taking dramatic measures against an app with 170 million US users.

TikTok has consistently denied that it is under the control of China's Communist Party.

Its CEO Shou Zi Chew has urged users to speak out against the vote, and several TikTok creators interviewed by AFP voiced opposition to the proposed ban.

The app is at the centre of long-running tensions between China and the United States, which have butted heads in recent years over technology, trade and human rights issues.

Washington has cited national security concerns to limit the activities of some Chinese companies in the United States, as well as the export of certain technologies to China that it deems sensitive.

Beijing has repeatedly lashed out at what it views as a concerted attempt to "suppress" China's rise.

Foreign minister Wang Yi said this month that Washington's "desire to heap blame under any pretext has reached an unbelievable level".

Bosnia's lithium discovery raises hopes and fears

❑ AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
LOPARE (BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA), MARCH 14

In northeast Bosnia's rolling hills, the local community is torn between fears of environmental ruin and hopes of riches from huge deposits of the critical minerals Europe needs for its green transition.

The area around Lopare sits on an estimated 1.5 million tonnes of lithium carbonate, 94 million tonnes of magnesium sulfate and 17 million tonnes of boron—the stuff used to make everything from electric cars to wind turbines and electronics.

The potentially game-changing deposits could be a rare boon for this poverty-stricken corner of southeast Europe, with Bosnia's economy having largely stagnated following a devastating war in the 1990s.

Bosnia's fiery Serb leader Milorad Dodik has called the project—which would be located in the country's Serb statelet—"an opportunity for development that should not be missed".

But simmering local opposition over what would be a sprawling open-pit mine has threatened to pull the plug on the project as some fear the potential environmental fallout.

Lopare's city council voted in December on a motion against the project. "More than 90 percent of residents are against it," said Lopare mayor Rado Savic.

"People are afraid of leaks of toxic materials," he said. "We are clear, we do not want such a mine here." Environmental groups have launched a petition against the project.

"Everywhere in the world where there are these kinds of mines there is also, sooner or later, pollution to the groundwater and air," said Snezana Jagodic Vujic, the leader of a local environmental association.

In neighbouring Serbia, mass protests over a Rio Tinto lithium mine near the Bosnian border pushed the government to revoke permits for the multi-billion project in 2022.

Vladimir Rudic, the director for the Bosnian subsidiary of Swiss mining company Arcore AG, accused the opponents of the project in Lopare of "sowing panic".

"The operating conditions will be absolutely controlled," he told AFP.

Arcore hopes to break ground in the area by 2027. "These are exceptionally interesting quantities of raw materials for the European Union supply chain," Rudic said. The company said the mine would earn annual revenues of one billion euros ($1.1 billion) and create 1,000 direct jobs and more than 3,000 indirect ones.

The project aims to export around 10,000 tonnes of lithium carbonate annually by 2032—enough to make between 150,000 and 200,000 rechargeable batteries, according to experts.

The EU currently depends on China for 97 percent of its magnesium needs.

Niger River's ancient 'water men' under threat as silt piles up

❑ AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
NIAMEY (NIGER), MARCH 14

AFP/RSS

Fishermen from the island of Néni-Goungou cast their nets while fishing on the Niger River in Niamey on February 27.

Once again, the catch was meagre: two tiny fish escaped the nets and dropped into Ali Sani's canoe as he drifted down the murky waters of the mighty Niger River.

At nightfall, the Nigerien fisherman will try his luck again until dawn in the hope of catching a "gari" or a plump "salambale", two local delicacies. Time is of the essence for Sani because once the hot season arrives, the river level will drop. Within a few days, fish will be unable to survive in the remaining pools between the emerging sandbanks.

Soil erosion from housing developments in Niger's capital Niamey and increased rainfall in the region has led to a rise in the amount of silt deposited on the riverbed.

Over 4,200 kilometres (2,600 miles) long, the Niger River provides a livelihood for over 100 million people in the Sahel region. The primary beneficiaries of the river are the Sorkos, or "men of the water". These are fishermen, canoeists and occasional rescuers who have drawn their livelihoods from the river for centuries.

Since the 1980's the river has been silting up so much so that it is now possible to cross on foot in several places in Niamey during the dry season from March to May.

In most dry seasons, the government authorises trucks to collect sand from the river. Between 1960 and 2010, land used for farming increased by over 70 percent to boost food supply—matching Niger's fertility rate which is one of the highest in the world.

In 1985, alerted that the river had completely dried up for one 24-hour period, authorities in Niger called on the population to dig out the sand by hand.

According to a study published in 2022 by Nigerien researchers, the development of farmland and land clearing has accelerated the erosion of sandy soils which flow into waterways. Soil erosion in the Sahel region has also been exacerbated by increased and unpredictable rainfall since the 1980s. The phenomenon is turning the world of the Sorkos upside down and forcing them to turn away from ancestral activities. Roughly 50,000 people make their living from fishing in Niger, but it is not enough to meet the national demand—which relies on imports from neighbouring countries, according to Niger's National Network of Chambers of Agriculture (RECA).

"Burkina Faso and Ghana are two countries that have really developed fishing thanks to modern techniques. Here, the sector is going bad, it is not well organised, and the river is seriously threatened," Moussa Sanou, a representative of a fishermen's association in Niamey, said.

"To give a second wind to the sector, we must clean the river to allow fish to reproduce and adopt a modern fish farming system," Sanou added.

Several programs against soil erosion and to develop fish farming have been created by consecutive governments with the support of international partners. But insecurity fuelled by militant groups both upstream and downstream of the Niger River as well as diplomatic tensions since the 2023 coup in Niger, are jeopardising their future. The Sorkos in the fishing villages have not waited to adapt to their new reality.

"People are diversifying to earn a living," said Abdoul Rahamane, standing in front of his family's rice field.

"People have started gardening, rice paddies, and other activities such as sewing, mechanics, electrical work," he added. However, not all fishermen are happy to adapt.

"We are not farmers, we are not supposed to be growing rice, millet or maize, our livelihood is solely from the river," said Salou Anawar Neni, president of the Niamey fishermen's association. Neni lived through a prosperous era when a particularly fruitful catch could fetch up to 100,000 Central African Francs ($170) compared to just 20,000 ($33) today.

BRIEFING

US Senate leader calls for 'new election' in Israel

WASHINGTON: The leader of the US Senate called on Thursday for Israel to hold new elections in the most strident criticism yet by a senior American official of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's handling of the conflict in Gaza. The remarks from Chuck Schumer, the highest-ranking elected Jewish American in history and the head of the chamber's Democratic majority, came amid increased pressure from President Joe Biden over the mounting death toll in the conflict. "At this critical juncture, I believe a new election is the only way to allow for a healthy and open decision-making process about the future of Israel, at a time when so many Israelis have lost their confidence in the vision and direction of their government," the Senate Democratic majority leader said in a floor speech. Schumer said Netanyau had surrounded himself with right-wing extremists and had been "too willing to tolerate the civilian toll in Gaza, which is pushing support for Israel worldwide to historic lows." "Israel cannot survive if it becomes a pariah," Schumer, an outspoken ally of the Israeli government who visited the country just days after the attacks, told colleagues on the Senate floor. **(AFP)**

ICC has no authority to probe Philippines, Marcos tells Germany's Scholz

MANILA: Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. told German Chancellor Olaf Scholz the Hague-based International Criminal Court (ICC) has no authority to probe his predecessor's deadly war against drugs. Marcos discussed the ICC's probe during a bilateral meeting with Scholz on Tuesday in Germany where he was on a working visit, according to a readout from the Philippine presidential office published late on Wednesday. Former President Rodrigo Duterte officially withdrew from the international tribunal in 2019 after questioning its power to probe his anti-narcotics campaign, which had killed thousands. Marcos said Philippine courts continue to function and law enforcers are investigating the killings. "It is very difficult for the Philippines to accept that an outside court will, shall I say, dictate to our policemen who they will investigate, who they will arrest," Marcos said. **(REUTERS)**

Kyiv steps up border attacks as Vladimir Putin urges Russians to vote

Ukraine this week launched some of its most significant aerial attacks since the start of the two-year conflict.

❑ AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
MOSCOW, MARCH 14

AFP/RSS

This grab taken from a handout footage released by the Russian defence ministry on March 12 reportedly shows smoke rising from a destroyed military vehicle of the Ukrainian troops in the border area between Russia and Ukraine in the Belgorod region.

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday urged Russians to vote for him at a "difficult" time for the country, hours before polls open and as Kyiv launched a barrage of deadly attacks on Russian border regions.

The former KGB agent is set to extend his rule by another six years this weekend in a presidential election the Kremlin says will show that the country is fully behind his assault on Ukraine.

Ahead of the vote, Kyiv has ramped up its aerial bombardment of Russian regions just across their shared border.

At least two people were killed and several more wounded in a wave of attacks on the Russian region of Belgorod on Thursday.

And the Russian national guard said it was fighting off attacks from pro-Ukrainian militias in Kursk, the latest in a string of border clashes.

"I am convinced: you realise what a difficult period our country is going through, what complex challenges we are facing in almost all areas," Putin said in an address to Russians on the eve of the vote.

"And in order to continue to respond to them with dignity and successfully overcome difficulties, we need to continue to be united and self-confident," he said. All of Putin's major critics are dead, in prison or in exile, and authorities blocked the few genuine competitors who tried to stand in the March 15-17 contest.

Alexei Navalny, Putin's most high-profile opponent over the last decade, died February in an Arctic prison colony.

He was serving 19 years for "extremism"—charges widely seen as retribution for his campaigning against the Kremlin leader.

Kyiv has this week launched some of its most significant aerial attacks since the start of the two-year conflict.

The governor of Russia's Belgorod region, Vyacheslav Gladkov, said on Thursday that two people were killed and several more wounded in at least three separate waves of aerial attacks.

He accused Ukraine of trying to "sow panic, distrust, anger and resentment, in order to break the unit of our society". Shopping centres in the region were closed on Thursday and Gladkov urged residents to delay taking trips outside "to save your health and your life".

Pro-Ukrainian paramilitaries also claimed to be escalating attacks and incursions in Russian border regions.

In a joint statement on Thursday, three pro-Kyiv volunteer groups—claiming to consist of Russians who oppose the Kremlin and have taken up arms—called on authorities to evacuate civilians from the regions of Belgorod and Kursk.

"Civilians should not suffer from the war and any casualties in the process of fighting will be on the conscience of Starovoit and Gladkov," they added, referring to the regions' governors.

Russia has rejected the militias' claims to have gained ground.

The national guard said on Thursday that its units had beaten back "an attack by enemy diversion groups near the village of Tyotkino in the Kursk region".

The defence ministry said it had fended off another attack by Ukrainian forces trying to enter the Belgorod region via the village of Spodariushino, without saying when the clash had taken place.

It published video images showing a series of air strikes on what it said was a Ukrainian sabotage group.

The fighting come just hours ahead of polls opening in Russia's Far East for the March 15-17 presidential election. Victory will allow Putin to stay in the Kremlin until at least 2030, a longer spell in power than any Russian leader since Catherine the Great in the 18th century.

He called on Russians to use the election to show their unity behind his leadership.

"We have already shown that we can be together, defending the freedom, sovereignty and security of Russia," he said in a video message, flanked by flags of the Russian tricolour and the president's state insignia.

"Today it is critically important not to stray from this path," he said.

Early voting is already underway in occupied territories of Ukraine, and the vote will also take place in Crimea, the peninsula annexed by Moscow in 2014—a move that most of the international community has refused to recognise. Kyiv says staging the election on Ukrainian territory is illegal.

In the Ukrainian city of Mariupol—under the control of Russian forces—election officials on Thursday opened pop-up polling stations at small tables in the street and on the hoods of cars.

Banners were unfurled sporting a red, white and blue "V" logo—an army symbol used as a sign of support for the military offensive.

Ukraine's foreign ministry on Thursday dismissed the vote as a "farce" and called on the international community not to recognise the results. Russia's opposition has called for anti-Putin protests at midday on Sunday, the final day of voting.

India panel calls for simultaneous local and national polls

❑ REUTERS
MUMBAI, MARCH 14

A government-appointed panel on Thursday recommended India hold elections to state assemblies and the national parliament at the same time, saying the process would increase transparency and inclusivity and improve governance and growth.

The panel, appointed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government in September, submitted its report to President Droupadi Murmu on Thursday, days before an election date is expected to be set.

The report will not affect the upcoming elections, which have to be held by May, as a "one nation, one election" law will have to be passed by parliament and ratified by states, many of which are ruled by Modi's rivals and have opposed the idea as they say it violates India's federal politics.

Nearly one billion voters are eligible to vote in the general elections, but polls to the 28 state assemblies are spread out as they take place when their five-year terms end.

"Asynchronous elections cause uncertainty and instability, thwarting supply chains, business investments and economic growth," the panel, led by former president Ram Nath Kovind, said.

The nine-member panel said it found that real GDP growth was higher when simultaneous polls were held, compared to a decrease when they were not.

Simultaneous polls used to be the norm in India, but the cycle was disrupted decades back, resulting in the current staggered system.

The panel recommended that as a first step, simultaneous elections be held to the lower house of parliament and state assemblies, with the terms of state assemblies being curtailed or extended to synchronise with parliamentary elections.

In the second phase, elections to local bodies such as municipalities and village councils would be held within a hundred days of state and national elections.

Modi and his ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have pushed for combining state and federal elections as it would also help cut the cost of conducting polls in the world's most populous country and ensure politicians are focused on governance rather than electioneering.

Donald Trump launched CIA covert influence operation against China

❑ REUTERS
WASHINGTON, MARCH 14

Two years into office, President Donald Trump authorised the Central Intelligence Agency to launch a clandestine campaign on Chinese social media aimed at turning public opinion in China against its government, according to former US officials with direct knowledge of the highly classified operation.

Three former officials told Reuters that the CIA created a small team of operatives who used bogus internet identities to spread negative narratives about Xi Jinping's government while leaking disparaging intelligence to overseas news outlets. The effort, which began in 2019, has not been previously reported.

During the past decade, China has rapidly expanded its global footprint, forging military pacts, trade deals, and business partnerships with developing nations.

The CIA team promoted allegations that members of the ruling Communist Party were hiding ill-gotten money overseas and slammed as corrupt and wasteful China's Belt and Road Initiative, which provides financing for infrastructure projects in the developing world, the sources told Reuters.

Although the US officials declined to provide specific details of these operations, they said the disparaging narratives were based in fact despite being secretly released by intelligence operatives under false cover. The efforts within China were intended to foment paranoia among top leaders there, forcing its government to expend resources chasing intrusions into Beijing's tightly controlled internet, two former officials said. "We wanted them chasing ghosts," one of these former officials said.

> During his presidency, Trump pushed a tougher response to China than had his predecessors.

Chelsea Robinson, a CIA spokesperson, declined to comment on the existence of the influence program, its goals or impacts. A spokesperson for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said news of the CIA initiative shows the US government uses the "public opinion space and media platforms as weapons to spread false information and manipulate international public opinion."

The CIA operation came in response to years of aggressive covert efforts by China aimed at increasing its global influence, the sources said. During his presidency, Trump pushed a tougher response to China than had his predecessors. The CIA's campaign signalled a return to methods that marked Washington's struggle with the former Soviet Union. "The Cold War is back," said Tim Weiner, author of a book on the history of political warfare.

Reuters was unable to determine the impact of the secret operations or whether the administration of President Joe Biden has maintained the CIA programme. Kate Waters, a spokesperson for the Biden administration's National Security Council, declined to comment on the program's existence or whether it remains active. Two intelligence historians told Reuters that when the White House grants the CIA covert action authority, through an order known as a presidential finding, it often remains in place across administrations.

Trump, now the Republican frontrunner for president, has suggested he will take an even tougher approach toward China if re-elected president in November.

Spokespeople for Trump and his former national security advisers, John Bolton and Robert O'Brien, who both served the year the covert action order was signed, declined to comment.

Over 60 people drown in migrant vessel disaster off Libya: Aid group

❑ ASSOCIATED PRESS
MILAN, MARCH 14

Survivors rescued from a deflating rubber dinghy in the central Mediterranean Sea have reported that some 60 people who departed Libya with them more than a week ago perished during the journey, the humanitarian rescue group SOS Mediterranee said on Thursday.

The European charity's ship Ocean Viking spotted the dinghy with 25 people on board Wednesday. Two were unconscious, and were evacuated by an Italian Coast Guard helicopter for treatment. The other 23 were in serious condition, exhausted, dehydrated and with burns from fuel on board the boat.

SOS Mediterranee spokesman Francesco Creazzo said that the survivors were all male, 12 of them minors with two of those not yet teenagers. They were from Senegal, Mali and The Gambia.

Creazzo said the survivors were traumatized and unable to give full accounts of what had transpired during the voyage, adding that the number of missing and presumed dead was unlikely to ever be verified. Humanitarian organizations often rely on accounts of survivors when pulling together the numbers of dead and missing at sea, presumed to have died.

AP/RSS

Migrants are helped evacuate a partially deflated rubber dinghy by the rescue personnel of the SOS Mediteranee's humanitarian ship Ocean Viking in the Central Mediterranean Sea.

The UN International Organization for Migration says 227 people have died along the perilous central Mediterranean route this year through March 11, not counting the new reported missing and presumed dead. That's out of a total 279 deaths in the Mediterranean since Jan. 1. A total of 19,562 people arrived in Italy using that route in the period.

The survivors said the boat departed Zawiya, Libya with about 85 people on board, including some women and at least one small child. The motor broke sometime after departure, and they had been adrift for more than a week.

"These people saw many of the dear ones die," one of the rescuers, identified only as Massimo, said in a video distributed by SOS Mediterranee. "We have taken care of them. They were suffering from hypothermia, and burns from gasoline and sea water."

The Ocean Viking later Wednesday night rescued another 113 people adrift in international waters off Libya in a wooden boat, including six women and two children, after being alerted by authorities.

Zimbabwean schoolchildren cycle past elephant danger

❑ AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
HWANGE, ZIMBABWE, MARCH 14

Running into elephants or a pack of hyenas on the way to school is not an unusual experience for children living near a nature reserve in northwest Zimbabwe.

Still, it can be dangerous.

Wild animals killed 50 people and injured 85 more in the southern African country last year, and elephants are among the most dangerous.

In order to shorten the amount of time kids are exposed on the route to school, park authorities have come up with an unconventional solution: bicycles.

Joaquim Homela, 12, is one of about 100 children who received a brand new two-wheeler that allows him to set off later, and avoid the pre-dawn hours when animals are most active.

AFP/RSS

A relative pedals two students to school safely on a donated bicycle near Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park.

Until recently, he used to hurry on foot, accompanied by his grandmother.

"Wild animals, particularly elephants as well as lions often roam around our villages," said the woman, Siphiwe Moyo. "So we worry for our young ones."

The bicycle project was concocted by the national parks authority, Zimparks, and the International Fund for Animal Welfare, a charity.

They hope it will tame tensions between the park and nearby farming communities.

Deaths caused by wild animals in 2023 were down 26 percent on the previous year, but there are concerns the number might pick up again in 2024 as the tusked giants move further afield in search of water because of a drought exacerbated by the El Nino weather phenomenon.

"If left unattended, human-wildlife conflict poses a serious threat to the well-being of the communities and biodiversity integrity of the greater Hwange ecosystem," said Phillip Kuvawoga, IFAW landscape conservation director.

The group is also setting up "predator-proof" livestock enclosures in villages where farmers complain donkeys and cattle are regularly mauled by big cats. Such initiatives help locals "appreciate the benefits of their wildlife heritage," said ZimParks director, Fulton Mangwanya.

"Because the moment they don't see value in wildlife, you can be certain that it will be decimated through poaching and the like," he said.

With an estimated 100,000 animals, Zimbabwe has the second biggest elephant population in the world after Botswana—and it is growing.

Thanks to conservation efforts, Hwange is home to 65,000 of them, more than four times capacity, according to ZimParks.

Some can become aggressive, especially after interactions with farmers.

Following the example of Botswana, Zimbabwe has approved the creation of a fund to compensate victims of wildlife, but it is yet to become operational.

Meanwhile, hoping to see wild animals only from a safe distance, 12-year-old Homela now hops on his black and white bicycle shortly after dawn.

He cannot really sit on the saddle as the bike is still too big for him. But his determined pedalling on the uneven, winding gravel road that leads to the school betrays his excitement.

Along the way he passes some of his schoolmates walking. A few trot behind him.

Bournemouth hit back from three goals down to stun Luton

The Cherries are the first team for 21 years to win a Premier League game in which they trailed by three goals.

❑ REUTERS
BOURNEMOUTH, MARCH 14

Luton Town squandered a three-goal lead to lose 4-3 at Bournemouth as they blew their chance to climb out of the Premier League relegation zone on Wednesday.

It looked so good for Luton on an emotional night on the south coast as first-half goals by Tahith Chong, Chiedozie Ogbene and Ross Barkley put them in complete control.

That scoreline would have lifted Luton above Nottingham Forest into 17th place but Bournemouth, who were booed off at halftime were transformed after the interval.

Dominic Solanke struck immediately after the break and the hosts were level by the 65th minute thanks to goals by Illia Zabarnyi and Antoine Semenyo.

Luton were reeling and there was a sense of inevitability about Semenyo netting the winner in the 83rd minute.

The game was re-scheduled after the initial fixture was abandoned after 59 minutes in December when Luton captain Tom Lockyer suffered a cardiac arrest on the pitch.

Lockyer was present on Wednesday and received a standing ovation before kickoff as he met the medics who saved his life.

Luton remain in 18th place with 21 points from 28 games, three points behind Nottingham Forest who they host at the weekend in a crunch relegation battle. Bournemouth, who remain in 13th place with 35 points, are the first team for 21 years to win a Premier League game in which they trailed by three goals.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF HIMALAYAN CHESS ACADEMY

Member Secretary of National Sports Council Tanka Lal Ghising reveals the logo of Himalayan Chess Academy during the opening ceremony of the academy in Thapathali, Kathmandu on Thursday. The academy will foster young chess players.

Atletico into Champions League quarters

The Champions League represents Atletico's last realistic chance for a title this season. They were eliminated in the semi-finals of the Copa del Rey and sit in fourth place in the Spanish league, 14 points behind leaders Real Madrid.

AFP/RSS

Atletico Madrid's goalkeeper Jan Oblak stops a shot during penalty shootout against Inter Milan. (Above) Atletico Madrid's players celebrate after winning the penalty shootout 3-2.

❑ ASSOCIATED PRESS
MADRID, MARCH 14

With tears in his eyes, Diego Simeone stared at the Atletico Madrid fans celebrating in the Metropolitano Stadium stands.

Minutes earlier, the coach was pacing back and forth by the sideline, unable to watch the tense penalty shootout that ended with Atletico triumphing over Inter Milan and advancing to the quarter-finals of the Champions League.

Jan Oblak made two saves and Lautaro Martinez sent his shot over the crossbar as Atletico defeated Inter 3-2 on penalties after scoring a late winner in regulation on Wednesday.

"It was moving," Simeone said. "I'm happy for the players and for the fans. We are among the best eight teams in Europe again. That tells a lot about this club."

Oblak saved the penalties by Alexis Sanchez and Davy Klaassen before Martinez missed the final kick for last year's runner-up in the European competition.

Memphis Depay, Rodrigo Riquelme and Angel Correa converted their penalties for Atletico, with Saul Niguez having his shot saved by Inter goalkeeper Yann Sommer. Hakan Calhanoglu and Francesco Acerbi scored for the visitors in the shootout.

Atletico reversed the 1-0 first-leg loss after Depay scored an 87th-minute goal that gave Simeone's team a 2-1 win in regulation.

Atletico didn't make it past the group stage last season and were eliminated by Manchester City in the last eight in 2021-22.

Inter, who lost last year's final to Man City, had arrived at the Metropolitano Stadium enjoying a 13-game winning streak. They hadn't lost in 15 consecutive games in all competitions and had won all of their matches in 2024.

"We must be proud of what we did in this Champions League," Inter coach Simone Inzaghi said. "In the second half we should have done better. In extra time we had more energy but unfortunately we made too many mistakes."

Inter opened the scoring in regulation with Federico Dimarco in the 33rd, but Atletico equalised two minutes later with Antoine Griezmann in his return from injury.

In the other Champions League match Wednesday, Borussia Dortmund defeated PSV Eindhoven 2-0 at home to advance 3-1 on aggregate.

Jadon Sancho scored in the third minute and Marco Reus sealed the win in the fifth minute of stoppage time to send Dortmund to the Champions League quarters. The teams drew the first leg 1-1 in Eindhoven.

Dortmund, who reached the final in 2013, are into the last eight for the first time in three years.

The eight teams in the draw for the quarterfinals are Atletico, Dortmund, Bayern Munich, Paris Saint-Germain, Real Madrid, Manchester City, Arsenal and Barcelona.

It was an open match at the Metropolitano Stadium, with Atletico pressing forward from the start and Inter threatening on counterattacks.

The hosts dominated the final part of the match and created several chances until Depay broke through with the late winner with a low shot from inside the area after a nice set up by midfielder Koke Resurreccion.

Inter had increased their first-leg lead with Dimarco scoring with a low shot from the middle of the area after a pass by Nicolo Barella following a breakaway in the 33rd.

But it didn't take long for Atletico to answer, equalising a couple of minutes later with Griezmann scoring after picking up a loose ball inside the area.

Griezmann was making his return to action after spraining his ankle in the first leg in Italy three weeks ago. The France forward has been key for Atletico this season but hadn't scored in eight consecutive matches in all competitions.

Barella had a chance to add Inter's second goal in a breakaway in the 82nd but he got off a weak shot in a one-on-one situation with Oblak. Depay had hit the post in the 85th, a few minutes after coming off the bench to replace Alvaro Morata.

Riquelme came close to sealing Atletico's triumph in the third minute of stoppage time in regulation, but his shot from near the penalty spot missed over the crossbar.

Atletico arrived with a great home record but had won only two of their last nine matches in all competitions.

The Champions League represents Atletico's last realistic chance for a title this season. They were eliminated in the semi-finals of the Copa del Rey and sit in fourth place in the Spanish league, 14 points behind leaders Real Madrid.

2023/24 UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

LAST 16, SECOND LEGS		
In Madrid, Spain		
Atletico Madrid	2-1	Inter Milan
Tie level 2-2 on aggregate; Atletico Madrid win 3-2 on penalties.		
In Dortmund, Germany		
Dortmund	2-0	PSV Eindhoven
Borussia Dortmund win 3-1 on aggregate.		

QUARTER-FINALISTS	
Arsenal (England)	Atletico Madrid (Spain)
Barcelona (Spain)	Bayern Munich (Germany)
Borussia Dortmund (Germany)	Manchester City (England)
Paris Saint-Germain (France)	Real Madrid (Spain)
Draw will take place on Friday.	

LEADING SCORERS	
Goals	Player (Team)
6	Erling Haaland (Man City), Harry Kane (Bayern Munich), Kylian Mbappe (PSG), Antoine Griezmann (Atletico Madrid)
5	Rasmus Hojlund (Man United), Alvaro Morata (Atletico Madrid), Galeno (Porto), Julian Alvarez (Man City)
4	Evanilson (Porto), Gabriel Jesus (Arsenal), Lois Openda (Leipzig), Jude Bellingham (Real Madrid), Danylo Sikan (Shakhtar Donetsk), Phil Foden (Man City), Ciro Immobile (Lazio)

HOROSCOPE

ARIES (March 21-April 19)
If you don't have something nice to say, then don't speak at all. Consider pulling back to reset your heart and mind emphasising a need for solitude. Good vibes flow just before midnight, offering moments of clarity.

TAURUS (April 20-May 20)
Dear Taurus, find brightness and reset your psyche. Watch out for authoritative clashes within your community steering clear of anyone who asks you to pick sides. Allow your thoughts to quiet by indulging the senses in peace.

GEMINI (May 21-June 21)
Try not to let your ego get too wrapped up in the pursuit of success. Rather than focusing on what you don't have, look for opportunities to build alongside a community that is supportive and encouraging this midafternoon.

CANCER (June 22-July 22)
Take a moment for stillness and self-care before kicking off the morning. You'll feel secure in your decision-making capabilities, marking the ideal time to think deeply about your path toward success. Avoid drama and focus on peace.

LEO (July 23-August 22)
Power struggles will feel prominent amongst competitive peers. Rather than going toe to toe with others, look for opportunities to cultivate positive experiences and build community. Good vibes flow in the evening so focus on nurturing yourself.

VIRGO (August 23-September 22)
Block out negativity and connect with your nearest and dearest in meaningful ways. Try not to be put off by stoic behaviours this evening, taking and giving space as needed to promote healthy boundaries. Stress will be solved.

LIBRA (September 23-October 22)
Support your dreams through hard work and organisation. Just avoid unrealistic expectations, leaving room for improvement and improvisation as you move forward. Embrace positive conversations and spread love and seek joyful moments for yourself and your loved ones.

SCORPIO (October 23-November 21)
Try to find beauty in the messier parts of life, trusting that you'll reclaim order. If you feel a bit spread thin, get organised. Recommit to everyday wellness practices, inviting close companions to do the same.

SAGITTARIUS (November 22-December 21)
Try to make light of your situation, paving the way for good times when you actively embrace fun. Tensions could brew at home. Take a loving approach toward conflict resolution as the day comes to a close.

CAPRICORN (December 22-January 19)
Avoid nitpicking situations that have gone tense, taking a breather if needed. Maintain reasonable demands or expectations this evening, and consider journaling frustrations rather than reciting them. Lightness seeps into your space offering a much-needed reset.

AQUARIUS (January 20-February 18)
Focus on cultivating a positive internal dialogue, and consider connecting with your supportive allies. Your ego craves luxury, tempting you to abuse your budget, though it would be wisest to hold back. Moments of clarity find you later.

PISCES (February 19-March 20)
Give yourself space to let out your feelings, but avoid lashing out. Your heart levels offer a nurturing and stabilising energy. Embrace simple pleasures to connect with gratitude and the present. Your home feels lighter tonight.

CROSSWORD

ACROSS
1 Hairless on top
5 Beat wildly
10 Burn
14 Gothic arch
15 Get away from
16 Broccoli —
17 Carries with effort
18 Bland
19 Christmastime
20 "A Streetcar Named —"
22 Fought
24 "Absolutely!"
26 Short tail
27 Politically one-sided
31 Vagrants
35 Honest —
36 Type of orange
38 Plant life
39 Geller of "Friends"
41 Jeans brand
43 Strip
44 Vices
46 Man from Madrid
48 Stopped a fast
49 Mean
51 Happened again
53 Extensive
55 Valley
56 Keepsake
59 Front runner
63 Candid
64 Heavenly being
67 "— & Stitch"
68 Ringing sound
69 Tantalize
70 Flat hill
71 Wriggling
72 Inched
73 Goblet part

DOWN
1 Daring
2 Chills and fever
3 Limbs
4 Cease and —
5 About-face
6 State near Tenn.
7 Glass
8 Makes text emendations
9 Subtract
10 Geode lining
11 Schlep
12 Competent
13 Woodwind
21 Rack and —
23 Ride a wave
25 Roof border
27 Reduced
28 Up high
29 Plant secretion
30 "— on Sunday"
32 Tooth
33 Talk on and on
34 Filled
37 Wrinkled
40 Unkempt
42 In name only (hyph.)
45 Jazz musician — Getz
47 Law
50 Landed property
52 Domains
54 Moderated (with "down")
56 Sulk
57 Fencing sword
58 Ground grain
60 Everyday fare
61 If not
62 Rove
65 Joke
66 Pt. on a compass

PREVIOUS PUZZLE SOLVED

■	G	E	T	■	C	R	E	E	P	■	S	I	N	S
A	L	A	W	■	O	U	T	E	R	■	A	T	O	P
P	E	R	I	■	U	N	C	L	E	■	C	O	N	E
T	E	N	N	I	S	■	■	■	M	A	R	R	O	W
■	■	■	K	R	I	S	■	T	I	D	E	■	■	■
C	Y	C	L	O	N	E	■	R	E	A	D	E	R	S
H	E	L	E	N	■	A	L	A	R	M	■	L	I	T
R	A	I	D	■	F	L	O	G	S	■	D	I	N	E
I	S	M	■	I	R	A	T	E	■	C	E	A	S	E
S	T	E	T	S	O	N	■	D	R	E	S	S	E	R
■	■	■	H	I	N	T	■	Y	O	L	K	■	■	■
A	T	L	A	S	T	■	■	■	A	L	L	W	E	T
C	R	A	M	■	I	N	C	U	R	■	A	R	L	O
M	A	Z	E	■	E	R	A	S	E	■	M	I	S	T
E	Y	E	S	■	R	A	T	E	D	■	P	T	A	■

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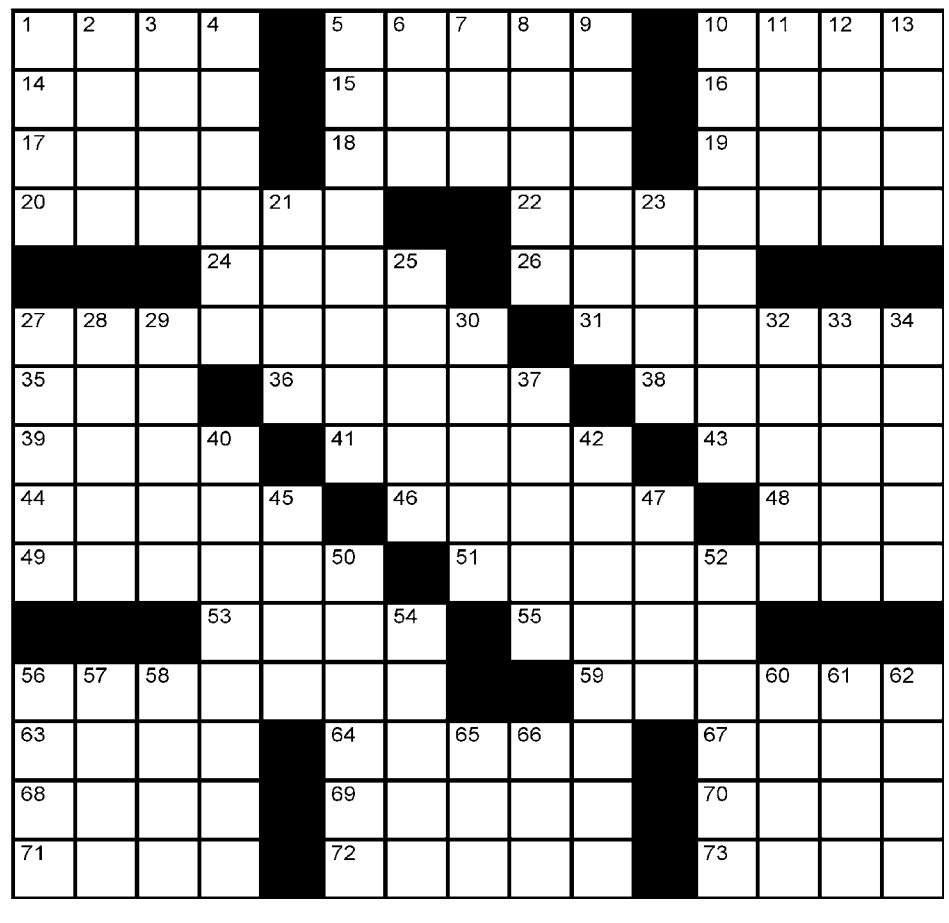

SUDOKU

8	1	5	2	3	7	6	9	4
3	4	9	1	6	8	7	2	5
2	6	7	9	5	4	1	8	3
1	7	4	5	8	3	2	6	9
5	3	8	6	2	9	4	7	1
6	9	2	7	4	1	5	3	8
4	8	1	3	7	2	9	5	6
9	2	6	8	1	5	3	4	7
7	5	3	4	9	6	8	1	2

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

		8		6				
9		7		2				
1			9		4			
8	9						2	
		2	4		1	8		
	1						5	3
			6		3			4
				4		9		1
				1		5		

DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★☆

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How to help indoor plants thrive

From choosing the right plants for your space to the secrets of fertilising—here is how you can cultivate a greener thumb.

❑ DR SAMUNDRA GURUNG

SHUTTERSTOCK

We've all been there: wandering into a plant shop, spotting a darling plant, and debating whether to take it home (while also considering the budget). Eventually, you give in to your desire and buy it because you want it perched on your windowsill or adorning your room. You then take it home and shower it with all the love and attention it deserves, only to find it droopy and wilting within a week. Disheartened, you declare plants aren't for you until another irresistible one catches your eye and the cycle repeats.

How do I know this? Because I have been that guy! The first plant that I ever took care of was a Golden Pothos (*Epipremnum Aureum*), commonly known as the Money Plant, a fixture in many Nepali households for its resilience and the supposed myth attached to it about how it brings financial prosperity. Sadly, my plant met a grim fate, turning into a yellow mush despite my best efforts. I was puzzled; if it thrived under neglect elsewhere, why did mine suffer despite my devoted attention?

Discouraged, I steered clear of houseplants for a while but remained determined to develop a green thumb. I researched a lot on houseplant care, experimenting with a lot of plants until I finally succeeded in nurturing one to flourish. Since then, I've grown my plant collection to over 80 specimens, and I'm eager to share the lessons I've learned along the way.

Before diving into the world of plant care, it's crucial to choose the right plants that match your lifestyle and living environment. Consider factors such as the sunlight exposure in your home, humidity levels and your availability for maintenance. Remember, the environment dictates the plant's needs. If we want a particular plant to adapt to our space, we may need to provide additional support, such as grow lights or a humidifier, to ensure it is thriving. Plants come in a delightful array of shapes, sizes, colours and textures, each with its own level of care requirements.

Some plants like Calathea, Fiddle-leaf Fig, Maidenhair Fern, Zebra Plant and Alocasia are notoriously challenging to care for indoors, posing a challenge even to experienced growers. On the other hand, plants like Snake Plant, Peace Lily, Spider Plant, Cast-iron Plant and Money Plant are easy to care for, thriving even with minimal attention, making them ideal for beginners. Starting with a beginner-friendly plant can provide valuable insights into houseplant care.

The key to nurturing any houseplant successfully is to replicate conditions similar to its native habitat. Assessing light and location is crucial. Like us, plants require their daily dose of sunshine. The direction of light entering your room matters; south and southeast-facing windows receive the most light, ideal for high-light-loving plants like cacti and succulents. Conversely, north-facing windows receive the least amount of light, suitable for plants like Snake Plant, ZZ Plant, and Begonia. However, it's essential to note that low light doesn't mean no light, as plants need light for photosynthesis and survival. If a plant doesn't receive enough light then it becomes leggy, not compact and bushy. The phenomenon is known as etiolation and this can be an excellent indicator of individualised light requirement for the given plant. Position your plants according to their light requirements, observing how sunlight filters through your windows throughout the day.

> **Different plants have different water needs. Overwatering can make the roots rot while underwatering causes wilting and yellowing of leaves.**

Some plants can thrive under artificial lighting. I've observed that Peperomias, Philodendrons, and Monsteras don't mind being kept in north-facing areas when supplemented with artificial lighting. A general rule of thumb I follow regarding lighting is that if a plant's main feature is flowers, it requires a minimum of three to five hours of natural light to thrive in your space.

One of the most common stumbling blocks in plant care is watering. It's a critical aspect, but there's no one-size-fits-all approach. Different plants have different water requirements. Overwatering can lead to the rotting of the root while underwatering causes wilting and yellowing leaves. Before watering, always check the soil moisture level by sticking your finger into the soil. Water thoroughly, allowing excess water to drain away, and ensure pots have drainage holes to prevent waterlogging. For beginners, I recommend using terracotta pots with drainage holes to prevent overwatering and root rot. Some plants, like those from the Marantaceae family or Venus Flytraps, can be picky about water quality. Using distilled or reverse osmosis water, or even rainwater, can help avoid issues caused by minerals in tap water.

All plants need nutrients to thrive, and while soil provides some, they may need an extra boost. Fertilise your plants during their active growing season (usually spring and summer) using a balanced, water-soluble fertiliser. Follow the instructions on the packaging to avoid over-fertilising, which can harm your plants. Vermicompost is my preferred choice for fertilising, but for flowering plants, additional fertilisers like a good NPK solution may be necessary. Remember to dilute fertilisers to prevent chemical burns and leaching of minerals from the substrate. A well-draining substrate is essential for healthy plant growth. I like to add perlite and charcoal to my soil mix to improve aeration and prevent bacterial and fungal overgrowth. Light substrates help plant roots thrive and establish themselves.

Regular pruning is essential for maintaining tidy plants and promoting healthy growth. Remove dead or yellowing leaves and pinch off leggy stems to encourage bushier growth. Many plants can be propagated from cuttings, allowing you to expand your indoor garden without spending money.

Despite our best efforts, pests may occasionally infiltrate our indoor oasis. Keep an eye out for common pests like aphids, spider mites, or mealybugs and take swift action to prevent infestations. Regularly inspect your plants and if you notice any unwanted visitors, treat them with natural remedies or insecticidal soap. My preferred method for treating houseplant pests is isolating the affected plant and spraying it with a mixture of liquid soap and neem oil diluted in water.

Paying attention to your plants' needs and cues is perhaps the most crucial aspect of caring for houseplants. Plants communicate through their leaves, exhibiting signs of stress or contentment. Yellowing leaves may indicate overwatering or insufficient light, while drooping can signal underwatering. By observing and responding to these signals, you'll develop a deeper understanding of your plants' requirements.

In our fast-paced lives, tending to houseplants offers a valuable opportunity to slow down, reconnect with nature, and cultivate mindfulness. As you embark on the journey of nurturing greenery within your home, remember that it's not just about the end result but the process itself—the daily rituals of watering, pruning, and observing subtle changes. Embrace the joy of cultivating your indoor garden and let your green companions bring serenity and beauty into your life.

Dr Gurung, who identifies as queer, is a doctor, artist, freelance writer and plant hobbyist based in Nepal.

A feminist book fair

PHOTO: COURTESY OF JALESHWORI SHRESTHA/NPL COLLECTION

Members of the women writers' collective 'Gunjan' at a monthly literary gathering.

❑ POST REPORT
KATHMANDU

Photo.circle and Nepal Picture Library are organising The Feminist Memory Project Book Mela at Nepal Art Council in Babarmahal, Kathmandu, on Saturday. The event will spotlight the works of numerous Nepali female authors, scholars, artists, bookmakers and publishers.

Since 2018, Nepal Picture Library has been collecting photographs and other archival materials with the objective of creating an open visual repository of feminist experiences in Nepal. 'The Public Life of Women: A Feminist Memory Project', originally curated as an exhibition, showcases selections from our archive. Put together from contributions made by over 150 individuals and organisations, a photobook carrying the same name was released late last year. The Feminist Memory Project Book Mela aims to bridge the gap between women writers and their readers, fostering connections and celebrating writings by women. The book fair commemorates female voices in literature and marks Women's History Month celebrations in March.

What: The Feminist Memory Project Book Mela
Where: Nepal Art Council, Babarmahal, Kathmandu
When: March 16
Time: 11:00 am to 5:00 pm
Entry: Free

What is the Japanese 'wabi-sabi' aesthetic actually about?

The juxtaposition of the two words as a single term is recent and it does not seem to have occurred in Japan.

❑ PAUL S ATKINS

On a recent visit to New York I stopped at a Japanese bookstore in Manhattan. Among the English-language books about Japan, I encountered a section of a shelf marked 'WABI-SABI' and stocked with titles such as 'Wabi Sabi Love', 'The Wabi-Sabi Way', 'Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers', and, in all lowercase, "simply imperfect: revisiting the wabi-sabi house."

What is wabi-sabi, and why does it rate its own section alongside such topics as sushi and karate?

Wabi-sabi is typically described as a traditional Japanese aesthetic: the beauty of something perfectly imperfect, in the sense of "flawed" or "unfinished." Actually, however, wabi and sabi are similar but distinct concepts, yoked together far more often outside Japan than in it. Even people who have been brought up in Japan may struggle to define wabi and sabi precisely, though each is certainly authentically Japanese and neither is especially obscure.

> **The word appears to fill a gap in the Western vocabulary for talking about art and life—a leaning away from perfection.**

As a scholar of classical Japanese language, literature and culture, I too, have a professional interest in wabi and sabi and how they have come to be understood outside Japan. A cursory search of Google Books shows that the term began to appear in print in English around 1980. Perhaps this was a delayed reaction to a book by Japanese art critic Yanagi Soetsu, 'The Unknown Craftsman', which was translated into English and published in 1972.

In it, in an essay titled, 'The Beauty of Irregularity', Yanagi wrote about the art of the tea ceremony and its simple grace. More broadly, as the title suggests, he was captivated by a sense of beauty apart from traditional ideals of perfection, refinement and symmetry. Behind "roughness," Yanagi wrote, "lurks a hidden beauty, to which we refer in our peculiar adjectives 'shibui,' 'wabi,' and 'sabi.'"

Shibui means austere or restrained, yet it was wabi and sabi that caught on abroad—perhaps because they rhyme.

PHOTOS: THE CONVERSATION

A Japanese couple in a 19th-century tearoom.

After taking off in America and other countries, the phrase wabi-sabi was imported back to Japan as a compound term; the mentions I found in online Japanese sources typically addressed such topics as how to explain wabi-sabi to foreigners. Wabi-sabi does not appear in standard dictionaries of the Japanese language.

Miserable poetry

Wabi is a noun derived from the classical Japanese verb 'wabu', related to the modern verb 'wabiru' and adjective 'wabishii'. Wabu means to languish or be miserable.

Here is a celebrated example from a ninth-century waka poem, the brief verse of 31 syllables that forms the backbone of classical Japanese poetry. The poet, a courtier named Yukihira, was a provincial governor who, by some accounts, was exiled to Suma Bay, a famous stretch of coastline in western Japan.

Should by chance
Someone ask for me,
Answer that I languish
At Suma Bay, shedding
brine upon the seaweed.

Suma Bay wasn't all misery for Yukihira; according to legend, he loved and was loved by two sisters there. But his poem well captures the pain of wabi—the misery of having been exiled from the courtly world he knew.

Miserable tea

Eventually, the misery of wabi made its way into one of Japan's most iconic traditions: tea.

The custom of drinking powdered green tea, called matcha, entered Japan around 1200. Zen monks returning from China brought the powder home, using it as a medicine and a stimulant. Over time, tea spread to the rest of the population; by the middle of the 16th century, it was a mundane part of everyday life.

It was precisely then that the preparation and serving of tea was sublimated to high art, now known as 'chadō' or 'sadō', the so-called Way of Tea.

As the tea ceremony gained in popularity, powerful warlords competed in acquiring the most coveted utensils, including braziers, kettles, scoops, whisks and the bowllike cups in which the tea was whipped and sipped. The tearoom itself might be decorated with rare works of art, such as paintings or calligraphy mounted on hanging scrolls, elaborate flower vases and incense burners.

Then there emerged a group of connoisseurs and teachers of tea who championed a more severe and austere style of presentation: 'wabi-cha', which literally means miserable tea. Whereas newly ascendant warriors and merchants used the tea gathering to flaunt their wealth, wabi-style tea emphasised subtlety, frugality and restraint.

It is not hard to see traces of wabi in old tearooms, with their patina of age and elegant but unobtrusive furnishings, and in the utensils themselves—in particular, the misshapen, cracked or sombre-hued teabowls.

Wabi-style tea perhaps reached its pinnacle in the 16th century, when the celebrated tea master Sen no Rikyūintroduced innovations still used today. These include bamboo tea scoops, black raku-style ceramic teabowls and the "crawling entrance": the 2-by-2-foot door through which attendees wriggle in order to enter the cosy, womblike tearoom.

A lovely loneliness

Like wabi, sabi is a noun: in this case, derived from the classical verb 'sabu'. Today, the verb 'sabiru' means to rust, with its connotations of age and decay. The modern adjective 'sabishi' means lonely.

Classical poems yield many examples of sabi but it really took off as an aesthetic ideal in the 17th century. Poets often tried to capture its particular kind of loneliness in the 17-syllable poetic form of haiku.

As the scholar Makoto Ueda remarked,

A perfectly imperfect tea bowl.

sabi is "not the loneliness of a man who has lost his dear one, but the loneliness of the rain falling on large taro leaves at night, or the loneliness emerging out of a cicada's cry amid the white, dry rocks, or the Milky Way extending over the rough sea, or a huge river torrentially rushing in the rainy season."

The juxtaposition of wabi-sabi as a single term is of recent, not ancient, vintage, and it does not seem to have occurred in Japan. Nonetheless, the terms originated in Japanese aesthetics: sabi out of poetry and wabi out of tea.

Combined, they appear to fill a gap in the Western vocabulary for talking about art and life—a leaning away from perfection, completion and excess, and a yearning toward leaving something undone, broken or unsaid.

– The Conversation

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