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WITHOUT FEAR OR FAVOUR

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Janakpur Jomsom

Congress vows to keep pressing for home minister probe

Plans to raise the demand in the budget session too.

POST REPORT
KATHMANDU, APRIL 14

The Nepali Congress has criticised the government's "abrupt" prorogation of the winter session of parliament without heeding the opposition parties' demand for a high-level parliamentary investigation into Home Minister Rabi Lamichhane's alleged involvement in misuse of cooperative funds. The main opposition party said its demand for a parliamentary probe is non-negotiable.

A Congress parliamentary party meeting on Sunday concluded that the prorogation was an undemocratic and unparliamentary step taken with the intent of thwarting an investigation into the home minister.

"Abruptly ending the House session will only weaken the democratic system and the federal parliament," reads the party's statement issued after the meeting.

"There is no reason [for the government] to avoid constituting an investigation panel if Lamichhane had no involvement [in the scam]."

The largest party in the lower house has been claiming that it has enough evidence to substantiate the home minister's involvement in cooperative funds embezzlement.

The ruling parties on the other hand claim that the Congress is making a mountain out of a molehill by insisting on a parliamentary investigation into the scam.

"The Congress is demanding the formation of a parliamentary panel just to satisfy its ego," accused CPN-UML chair KP Sharma Oli talking to reporters outside Parliament on Sunday.

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People of Thimi celebrate Suthenshiya Jatra parading idols of various deities around town on palanquins and smearing vermilion on each other on Sunday as part of the annual Biska Jatra celebrations.

POST PHOTO: SUKARYA LAL SHRESTHA

Laws on marital rape still murky in Nepal

The separation of rape law and marital rape law, and other legal loopholes have denied victims of spousal rape real justice, rights activists say.

MANUSHREE MAHAT
KATHMANDU, APRIL 14

On August 2, 2022, a 26-year-old woman from Baneshwar in Kathmandu filed an FIR against her husband for subjecting her to a series of sexual violence immediately after their marriage. The victim stated that the husband forced her into sexual acts repeatedly against her wish. The

series started nine days after their wedding, the statement charged.

This was one of the 2,387 marital rape cases filed in Nepal that year. As of mid-March, 2023, the number of complaints stood at 1,567.

The issue made headlines earlier this month when Ravi Oad, winner of the second season of the reality TV show Nepal Idol, was accused of marital rape with a complaint filed against

him at the Kanchanpur Area Police Office in Jhalari. A day before the case against Oad was filed, the Supreme Court had ordered the detention of judge Bhuwan Giri, who is accused of marital rape, revoking the High Court decision to release him on bail.

Marital rape law has undergone several amendments, with jail terms and sentences extended over the years.

>> Continued on page 2

Escalating Middle East crisis threatens Nepali economy

Remittances, the biggest source of foreign currency, could take a hit along with trade and tourism, experts warn.

KRISHANA PRASAIN
KATHMANDU, APRIL 14

Remittance-dependent Nepal may face a dizzying sequence of shocks, particularly in the labour market, due to escalating tensions in the Middle East following Iran's attack on Israel on Saturday, experts have warned.

Reports show that Tehran has warned it will strike again with greater force if Israel or the US retaliates for the Iranian strike on Israel. The Iranian attack, which involved more than 300 drones and missiles, were carried out on Saturday night.

In India, several leading airlines have cancelled flights to Iran and restricted their use of Israeli and Iranian airspace amid rapidly escalating tensions.

This has spurred worries for Nepal, which is mostly dependent on remittance earnings that make for a substantial portion of its economy.

Most rural households now depend on at least one member's earnings from employment abroad. Due to remittances, according to the latest living standard survey, the average annual spending on consumption rose by 66 percent in the past 12 years, reaching Rs126,172 in 2023 from Rs75,902 in 2011.

According to the Nepal Rastra Bank, the remittance inflow stood at \$9.33 billion in the last fiscal year, the record-high earnings that have taken the coun-

try's foreign exchange reserve to a historic high.

In the last fiscal year, 774,976 Nepali left the country for foreign jobs.

According to the Nepal Rastra Bank, the central bank, Qatar is the top source market for Nepal, hosting 133,262 workers in the last fiscal year,

Most rural households depend on at least one member's earning from foreign employment.

followed by the UAE (116,160), Saudi Arabia (112,777), Kuwait (43,508), Oman (5,294), Bahrain (7,690) and Jordan (1,019).

Israel hosted 1,084 Nepali workers in the last fiscal year.

>> Continued on page 5

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2	Nepalgunj	21 Apr 2024	22 Apr 2024	Hotel Siddhartha, Nepalgunj	JC Aditya Gupta 9858036658 Nepalgunj JCI
3	Surkhet	23 Apr 2024	24 Apr 2024	Siddhartha Sunny Resort, Surkhet	Mr. Keshav Thapa 9811522927 IRIS Dance Studio
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DISTRICT DIGEST

Rescued pangolin released

KHOTANG: A pangolin rescued by a local woman of Halesi Tuwachung Municipality in Hattiban Community Forest on April 11 was released in nature by the Khotang Sub-Division Forest Office on Saturday. According to Dharam Chaudhary of the office, the woman had initially taken the pangolin to her home, but upon learning that it was an endangered species and it was illegal to pet it or kill it, she handed the animal over to the office. The pangolin was a male weighing six kg, and is in healthy condition, the forest office said. The pangolin was released around the Sapsu River in Diktal Rupakot Majhuwagadhi Municipality, said Chaudhary.

Lightning downs phone services

SANKHUWASABHA: Telephone service has been disrupted in northern villages of Bhotkhol Rural Municipality, Sankhuwasabha, after a lightning strike damaged a repeater tower of the Nepal Telecom at Makpalung. Local residents of Kimathanka, Chepuwa, and Hariya among other remote settlements, are hugely affected due to disruption in cell phone services. The Khandbari branch of the Nepal Telecom said technicians have been dispatched to repair the damaged tower, but the team has yet to reach the site due to adverse climate and difficult terrain.

Murder suspects nabbed

RAUTAHAT: On Sunday, police arrested 52-year-old Sheikh Nurullah, a resident of ward 1 of Dewahi Gonahi Municipality, who was accused of murder and orchestrating another murder. He had been absconding for ten months. The Rautahat District Police Office said Nurullah was accused of killing a priest on August 19, 2020, and orchestrating a murder on January 1, 2024. After being arrested in 2020, Nurullah got out on bail of Rs 200,000 on August 6, 2021.

Work begins to dredge silt to restore Geruwa River

Conservationists have been raising concerns about the dire situation of wildlife in Bardiya National Park due to water shortage.

DIPENDRA BADUWAL & KAMAL PANTHI
BARDIYA, APRIL 14

Authorities have taken initiatives to dredge silt and increase water flow in the Geruwa river, an offshoot of the Karnali. The move comes as conservationists have been raising alarms as wildlife in the Bardiya National Park (BNP) have been highly affected by the drying up of water sources, mainly in the Geruwa area.

The Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation and the Water Resources and Irrigation Development Division Office in Bardiya started clearing silt in the Lalmatiya area to increase water flow in the Geruwa river that passes through the national park.

Lumbini province has allocated Rs20 million to clear silt in the headwaters of Geruwa.

"We got permission from the department to dredge the silt. The silt-removal work in the Lalmatiya area will start from Monday. We could not start the work on time due to the delay in obtaining permission from the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation," said Krishna Bahadur BK, chief at the Water Resources and Irrigation Development Division Office in Bardiya. According to him, the task will be completed in about a month.

On Sunday, a joint team of the Bardiya National Park and the Water Resources and Irrigation Development Division Office inspected the Lalmatiya area and completed the survey. It is estimated that around 90,000 cubic metres of pebbles and



The waterless riverbed of Geruwa River, where raft boats used to sail until a few years ago, pictured recently. Now buses drive through it.

stones are piled up in Lalmatiya. "We will remove the silt by using excavators in four different places," said BK.

The Karnali, the country's longest water system, is the main source of freshwater for the wild animals in the Bardiya National Park. A sharp decline in the water flow in Geruwa river, an offshoot of the Karnali River a few kilometres downstream from Chisapani, has affected wildlife in the western part of the national park.

Over the past few years, Geruwa

River has been gradually shifting its course away from the main stream of Karnali. As a result, the water flow has declined sharply, as floods in the past have deposited much silt in Lalmatiya, and unchecked extraction of riverbed materials along the offshoot in the Kailali side.

Until seven years ago, Geruwa was the main offshoot of the Karnali river. According to conservationists, dolphins and various fish species were found in the Geruwa when water was

abundant. Water flow in the Geruwa river started declining over the past seven years.

There are several offshoots of the Geruwa river; among them, the Khauraha is the main. Several other offshoots that pass through the national park area have already turned into sand beds, causing troubles to animals as well as the local residents.

Various irrigation canals that drain water from the Karnali river are drying up now. People are dependent on

underground water, but the level of underground water is also dwindling in the area over the past three-four years.

"Several irrigation canals in Thakurbaba, Madhuwan, Geruwa and western Rajapur areas are drying up now with the decreasing water flow in the Geruwa river. Farmers as well as tourism entrepreneurs are hugely affected," said Jaman Singh KC, chairman of Geruwa Rural Municipality.

Authorities have yet to find a permanent solution to increase the water flow in the Geruwa river. While the authorities carry out partial silt clearance annually, but the floods replenish stones and sand. According to conservationists, silt should be removed before mid-March, but the work has been delayed this year.

"The authorities should find a long term solution as the riverbed materials are deposited, forming a natural dam, obstructing water flow in the Geruwa. Decreasing water flow in the offshoot has hugely affected wildlife and aquatic animals," said Ashok Ram, chief conservation officer at the Bardiya National Park.

As the wild animals in the national park are affected from the dwindling water sources, the Lumbini provincial government allocated Rs 20 million as contingency fund to clear silt in the headwaters of the Geruwa river. However, the Water Resources and Irrigation Development Division Office could not start the work to clear the silt due to delays in obtaining permission from the department.

According to Hemanta Acharya, chairman of Thakurbaba Buffer Zone Consumers' Committee, the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation issued permission to clear the silt after various broadsheet dailies including The Kathmandu Post published news about the hardship of wildlife due to water sources depletion.

Two from Nagarik Unmukti vie for Sudurpaschim chief minister

Longstanding dispute between party chair Ranjita Shrestha and her husband Reshamlal Chaudhary leads to parallel claims from the party.

ARJUN SHAH
DHANGADHI, APRIL 14

Two lawmakers from the Nagarik Unmukti Party on Sunday staked their claims to the post of Sudurpaschim chief minister.

Provincial assembly members Kailash Kumar Chaudhary and Laxman Kishor Chaudhary from the same party presented their claims before Provincial Head Najir Miya.

Kailash submitted his proposal for leadership to the provincial government with the support of the CPN-UML, the CPN (Maoist Centre) and independent lawmakers. Earlier, Laxman had laid his claim with the support of the Nepali Congress and the CPN (Unified Socialist).

Two different claims from the same party are an outcome of a longstanding dispute between the Nagarik Unmukti Party chair Ranjita Shrestha and her husband Reshamlal Chaudhary.

Laxman is from the Reshamlal-led faction while Kailash belongs to the establishment faction. Of the seven Nagarik Unmukti members in the provincial assembly, five are close to party leader Reshamlal and two are close to Shrestha.

In the 53-member assembly, the Congress has 19 members, the Maoist Centre has 10, the UML 9,



Kailash Kumar Chaudhary (in the left photo) and Laxman Kishor Chaudhary (right) want to be the chief minister of Sudurpaschim.

the Nagarik Unmukti Party 7, the Unified Socialist has three, and the RPP has one. One member is independent. Any party claiming the government's leadership must secure the backing of at least 27 assembly members.

The Province Head made the call for government formation after Kamal Bahadur Shah of the Nepali Congress resigned from his position on April 4. Shah, who had been

rallying to gain a majority in favour of his government, tendered his resignation before Province Head Miya after the failure of his weeks-long effort.

Court stays Indira Giri's dismissal as Sudurpaschim assembly member

The Supreme Court on Sunday stayed the decision to relieve Indira Giri, a member of the Sudurpaschim provincial assembly representing



POST PHOTOS

the Nagarik Unmukti Party, of her position.

A single bench of Justice Prakash Man Singh Raut issued an interim order asking the Speaker not to sack Giri as a provincial lawmaker while responding to a writ petition filed by her.

The court ordered not to implement the notice published by the Speaker until a final verdict, stating that the decision to recall the

petitioner as a provincial assembly member lacked justifiable grounds. The court expressed concern that such action would hinder the petitioner's ability to serve as a people's representative.

On April 8, Giri, who served as the Minister of State Minister for Land Management, Agriculture, and Cooperatives in the outgoing Kamal Bahadur Shah-led provincial government, was relieved of her position by Speaker Bhim Bahadur Bhandari.

Ranjita Shrestha, the chairperson of the Unmukti Party, had formally written to the Speaker on April 2 requesting to remove Giri from her position. Giri, who was elected to the provincial assembly under the proportional representation quota, was relieved of her duties as per the request of the party.

A notice mentioning that Speaker Bhandari has relieved the lawmaker of her position as per Section 35 of the Political Parties Act was published by the Provincial Assembly Secretariat.

Sudurpaschim politics grapples with prolonged disagreement persisting between Nagarik Unmukti Party chair Shrestha and her husband Reshamlal Chaudhary. On Sunday, two lawmakers from the Nagarik Unmukti Party staked a claim to the post of chief minister.

India gifts 35 ambulances, 66 school buses

Since 1994, Indian governments have provided 1,009 ambulances and 300 school buses to Nepal.

POST REPORT
KATHMANDU, APRIL 14

The Indian Embassy in Kathmandu on Sunday gifted 35 ambulances and 66 school buses to various organisations.

The vehicles were handed over by Indian Ambassador Naveen Srivastava in the presence of Minister for Finance Barshaman Pun, the embassy said in a statement.

Out of the total 101 vehicles gifted, two ambulances were handed over on location in the earthquake-affected Jajarkot and West Rukum districts by the representative of the Indian embassy in the presence of district officials and local residents.

The Indian government has been gifting ambulances and school buses on the occasion of Independence Day and the Republic Day of India for the past three decades to various organisations in different parts of Nepal.

Speaking at the event, Minister Pun appreciated India's help and support to various ongoing developmental projects in Nepal and said these gestures will continue to strengthen people-to-people relations between the two countries.

Ambassador Srivastava said the initiative will bolster the efforts of the government of Nepal to strengthen its infrastructure in the health and education sectors.

Since 1994, India has gifted 1,009 ambulances and 300 school buses to Nepal.

Lack of awareness hinders help for marital rape victims in Nepal, says expert

>> Continued from page 1

"If the husband commits rape on his wife during the existence of marital relationship between them," the Section 219 (4) of National Penal (Code) Act, 2017 states, "he shall be liable to a sentence of imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years."

As opposed to previous laws regarding marital rape in the country—especially after the Supreme Court in 2006 declared marital rape a crime punishable by 3-6 months of jail term—the current law seems to acknowledge the severity of the crime. But increased jail term hasn't ensured justice for the victims, experts say.

In Nepal and its neighbours, rape laws and marital rape laws are two separate codes. While the maximum jail term for rape in Nepal can exceed 10 years, the maximum sentence for marital rape is no more than five years.

Despite amendments to marital rape law in the country, there is a loophole in its implementation and that has been depriving victims of total and true justice, says Meera Dhungana, senior legal adviser at the Forum for Women, Law, and Development, an NGO working for women's rights.

Dhungana blames vague wording of Section 219 of the Penal Code for leaving loopholes in the law's implementation. According to Dhungana, due to the 'up to 5 years' provision of the

code, the convict can face jail term anywhere from a few months to years, as the wording doesn't set a mandatory term.

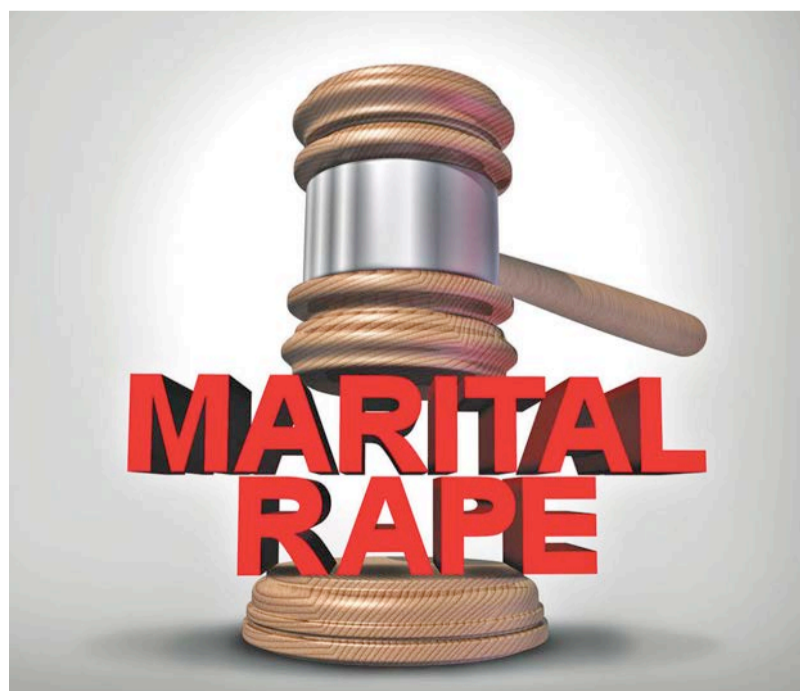
Nepal's Supreme Court acknowledged the existence of marital rape in 2002 when it passed a judgment on a petition filed by the forum. Following a lengthy Public Interest Litigation (PIL), which demanded equality to victims of marital rape on the grounds that nonconsensual intercourse is rape even though it's between spouses, the court acknowledged the existence of marital rape.

However, the judgement didn't specify any punishment or jail term. It was only in 2006 that a jail term of 3 to 6 months was declared for those convicted of marital rape.

This wasn't enough. A jail term of mere months did little to prevent a second-time offence, Dhungana says. "Victims told us how their spouses had returned and begun their abuse once again," she says.

After the Constitution of Nepal came into effect in 2015, the landmark Act to Amend Laws to End Gender Violence and Ensure Gender Equality increased the jail term for marital rape, from a minimum of 3 years up to 5 years.

However, the National Penal (Code) Act, 2017, changed things yet again as it left the minimum sentence for marital rape convicts unspecified. Now convicted could get away with a jail



term of a few months.

"This is a glaring loophole," Dhungana says. "It's very difficult for the convicted to get more than six months of jail term. The separation of rape and marital rape means those suffering violence from marital rape barely get justice, which shouldn't be

the case. Home is the place where you go to feel safe, and when violence occurs at home, the severity and mental and physical toll can be so much worse."

The murky laws surrounding marital rape have their roots in social stigma. With the 'reputation' of fami-

lies on the line, women who do file complaints are often compelled to back down.

"A lot of the victims end up withdrawing their statements and FIR due to familial pressure," Dhungana says, adding that this often leads to out-of-court settlements.

Victims of marital rape face profound mental and psychological challenges after being abused at their own home, and the subsequent pressure to remain quiet about it. Research has shown marital rape to be associated with clinical depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and, in extreme cases, suicidality.

Despite the gravitas of the subsequent mental health problems, seeking psychological treatment for their trauma isn't nearly as common among victims. Rupa Pradhan Chhetri, a trauma counsellor who has been treating victims of sexual assault for over 12 years now, says she has never encountered a victim seeking help for marital rape.

"I think a major reason for this is lack of awareness of marital rape itself, as well as societal pressure," Chhetri says. "A large section of our society doesn't acknowledge marital rape as an issue, which means most victims aren't even aware of the assault they may have suffered. It's no wonder then that seeking help isn't common among the victims."

Women's rights activists say they

have observed general lack of awareness among victims on several occasions. Sulochana Khanal, programme coordinator at Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC), says that during counselling sessions a large number of women seeking help for domestic violence often reveal details of spousal sexual abuse without realising it as such.

"We've handled cases and counselled survivors who specifically seek help for marital rape. But what's also saddening is the number of women who do not realise the sexual violence and coercion they've been subjected to," Khanal says. "We'd be counselling women on domestic abuse, and through these sessions, we hear stories that they have also been sexually exploited by their spouses."

Advocate Sarita Pokhrel also states that many of the victims she has worked with have sought legal help only after years of spousal abuse.

"I think when it comes to marital rape, you rarely hear it occur as a one-time incident," Pokhrel says. "It's often accompanied by years of spousal violence before the victims report it."

Pokhrel also says that the victims she's worked with rarely feel the sentences their spouses have been handed down to be enough. "Justice may be dealt with legally, but for the victims, it's not what they hoped for," Pokhrel says.

Sujan Baga Shrestha gets tongue pierced for second time

28-year-old had his tongue pierced as part of the Biska Jatra tradition.



POST PHOTO: ANGA DHAKAL

POST REPORT
KATHMANDU, APRIL 14

Sujan Baga Shrestha, 28, got his tongue pierced on Sunday to maintain an age-old tradition observed during the Biska Jatra.

Sujan, a resident of Madhyapur Thimi Municipality-8, did the ritual a second time this year.

Sujan's family has carried on the tradition of tongue piercing during the annual festival for more than two decades. His father Buddha

Krishna pierced had his tongue pierced nine times and his uncle Krishna Chandra 12 times.

The tongue-piercing festival is observed on the second day of the Nepali month of Baisakh (April 14 this year) as part of the Biska Jatra.

Around 3.2 million children under 5 to be given vitamin A

2.9 million children above one year will be administered deworming tablets. Campaign is estimated to have reduced deaths among children under five by 23 percent.

POST REPORT
KATHMANDU, APRIL 14

Around 3.2 million children between six and 59 months across the country will be administered vitamin A supplements in a two-day nationwide campaign scheduled for Thursday and Friday.

Every year, the Ministry of Health and Population launches the nationwide vitamin A supplementation campaign in the third week of April.

The Nutrition Section of the Family Welfare Division of the Department of Health Services, which is responsible for running the campaign, said that 2.9 million children between one and five years of age will also be administered deworming tablets.

"All necessary preparations for the campaign have been completed," said Lila Bikram Thapa, chief of the section. "We will request all parents of eligible children to ensure that they get vitamin A supplements and deworming tablets."

Around 52,000 female community

health volunteers are deployed nationwide for the campaign conducted in April and October every year since 2003.

It is because of supplementation campaigns like these that night blindness among children, which used to be very high until two decades ago, has been almost eliminated, according to Thapa.

Two-day nationwide campaign this year is scheduled for Thursday and Friday.

Vitamin A deficiency is responsible for nearly a fourth of global child mortality from measles, diarrhoea and malaria.

The campaign is a success story in Nepal, as it has helped tackle the deficiency of vitamin A among children,

which used to be a major public health concern. Regular supplementation campaigns are estimated to have reduced deaths among children under five by 23 percent.

Deworming tablets are crucial to preventing many childhood diseases and reducing the mortality rate among children under five, according to child health experts.

The vitamin A supplementation and deworming campaign had coverage rates of over 94 percent, the highest among all health campaigns run in the country in the past. However, the coverage declined to just over 80 percent in recent years.

In 2020, a lot of children missed out on vitamin A supplementation and deworming because of the pandemic.

According to the World Health Organization, vitamin A deficiency causes visual impairment (night blindness) and vulnerability to illnesses like measles and diarrhoea among children. The supplement boosts immunity and ensures children's natural growth.

Five secretaries transferred

A Cabinet meeting decided their responsibilities, says government spokesperson.

POST REPORT
KATHMANDU, APRIL 14

The government has transferred five secretaries.

A Cabinet meeting on Friday took the decision, said Minister for Communication and Information Technology Rekha Sharma, who is also the government spokesperson, while making public the Cabinet's decision on Sunday.

According to Minister Sharma, Dinesh Bhattarai, secretary at the Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers, has been transferred to the Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens. Secretary Suman Raj Aryal of the ministry has been deputed to the Ministry of Youth and Sports.

Arjun Prasad Pokharel, secretary at the Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers, has been sent to the National Statistics Office. This move follows the resignation of Toyam Raya, the former secretary of the Statistics Office, who has been recommended for the position of auditor general.

The government also transferred Secretary at Vice President's Office Mukunda Prasad Niraula to the Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration, while Secretary at the ministry Vinod Prakash Singh has been transferred to the National Natural Resources and Fiscal Commission.

Congress terms House prorogation abrupt

>> Continued from page 1

"No parliamentary investigation is needed [against Lamichhane]."

Parliamentary proceedings have been sabotaged by the ruling and the opposition parties remain divided over the formation of the House panel. The Congress, backed by the Rastriya Prajatantra Party and a few fringe parties, have been preventing discussion of bills in the lower house.

The last meeting of the winter session also ended without even entering the day's agenda following their warnings. "A probe panel is our bottom line. We will raise our demand during the upcoming budget session as well," said Min Bishwakarma, the party's spokesperson. "Whether we allow the House to function depends on the government's response to our demands. No probe committee means the House cannot move ahead."

Although the winter session will conclude on Sunday night, the budget session must be called by the first week of May. Bishwakarma said it is the responsibility of the government to create a conducive environment to make the House effective through negotiations and discussions with the parties. But the present government has completely failed to fulfil its responsibility, he said.

Last week, Speaker Devraj Ghimire made failed attempts to clear the deadlock through discussions with the top leaders of various parties. He also held rounds of meetings with party whips and chief whips, but to no avail.

The Congress leadership claims that deposits of six cooperatives were diverted to the Gorkha Media (where Lamichhane was once the shareholder and the managing director of a TV network under its wing). The Congress has been demanding parliamentary investigation against Lamichhane since he took charge of

the home ministry earlier last month.

The ruling parties, on the other hand, accuse the Congress of a double standard. When the Congress was still in government, it had stood behind Mohan Bahadur Basnet, then minister for health and population who was being investigated by the Commission for Investigation of Abuse of Authority for his suspected involvement in corruption in the procurement of the Telecommunication Traffic Monitoring and Fraud Control System (Teramocs) for the Nepal Telecommunication Authority.

The Congress claims over Rs800 million of 50,000 cooperative depositors has been embezzled. Victims of cooperatives on February 5 had filed a complaint at the District Police Office, Kaski against three people including Lamichhane. An investigation by the Pokhara Metropolitan City found that over Rs1.35 billion in public deposits in the cooperatives was embezzled.

Kantipur daily, the Post's sister publication, ran a series of stories on Lamichhane's involvement in the alleged misuse of cooperative deposits to buy shares of Gorkha Media Network, a media company.

Lamichhane, a former television host and managing director of the television channel co-founded by Gitendra Babu (GB) Rai, has been accused of embezzling hundreds of millions of rupees in collusion with Rai from different cooperatives in Kaski, Chitwan and Rupandehi.

Rai, who chaired the Gorkha Media Network, the mother company of the television channel, is accused of illegally transferring Rs300 million from the Kaski-based Surya Darshan Cooperative, Rs110.71 million from Chitwan-based Sahara Cooperative, and Rs 100.74 million from Supreme Cooperative in Butwal (Rupandehi), without providing any collateral.

BJP's 'Sankalp Patra' vs Congress' 'Nyay Patra': Major planks of two parties

While the main element in the BJP manifesto is 'Modi ki Guarantee', the Congress party's 'Nyay Patra' is centred around 'work', 'wealth' and 'welfare'.

THE STATESMAN
NEW DELHI, APRIL 14

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on Sunday released its poll manifesto called 'Sankalp Patra' at the party headquarters in New Delhi. The saffron party's manifesto was unveiled by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

This comes eight days after the principal opposition Congress announced its 'Nyay Patra' for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

While the main element in the BJP manifesto is 'Modi ki Guarantee', the Congress party's 'Nyay Patra' is centred around "work", "wealth" and "welfare".

Now that the manifestos of the BJP and the Congress are out, we bring you the major poll planks of both the parties.

Below are the key promises of BJP and Congress:

BJP on jobs: The saffron party has promised to make Bharat a global manufacturing hub and enhance employment in this crucial sector.

The BJP said that unprecedented investment in infrastructure has created a large number of employment opportunities.

"We will continue this investment for employment growth," the BJP 'Sankalp Patra' promised.

Besides, the BJP has also promised to create employment opportunities in tourism and several other sectors.

It also said that government vacancies will be filled "in a time bound and transparent manner."

Congress on jobs: The Congress party has promised "a new Right to Apprenticeship Act to provide a one

year apprenticeship with a private or a public sector company to every diploma holder or college graduate below the age of 25. Apprentices will get 1 lakh [rupees] a year."

It will also provide "fast-track courts to adjudicate cases of leaking question papers for job examinations and provide monetary compensation to the victims."

The grand old party has also promised to fill the nearly 3 million vacancies in sanctioned posts at various levels in the central government.

The Congress will restructure the Fund of Funds Scheme for start-ups and allocate 50 percent of the available fund, as far as possible equally among all districts, for providing funds to youth below 40 years of age to start their own businesses and generate employment.

BJP on women: In its manifesto, the saffron party said that it will empower 30 million rural women to become Lakhpati Didis.

"We will empower women Self-Help Groups (SHGs) with the skills and tools in key service sectors like IT, healthcare, education, retail and tourism with an aim to increase their income and integrate women Self-Help Groups (SHGs) with ongoing initiatives such as One District One Product (ODOP), Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs), Ekta Mall, ONDC, GEM, One Station One Product, enhancing better market access for their products.

The BJP has also promised to ensure development of infrastructure such as working women's hostels, creches etc. with the specific focus on locations near industrial and commer-

cial centres to facilitate increased participation of women in the workforce.

Strengthening 112 women helpline and ensuring participation of women in Parliament and state assemblies are also among the BJP's key announcements on women welfare.

Congress on women: The Opposition Congress has resolved to launch a Mahalakshmi scheme to provide 1 lakh per year to every poor Indian family as an unconditional cash transfer.



The Congress has also promised 50 per cent reservation for women in Central government jobs. It has also promised to double the salaries of Asha, Anganwadi and mid-day meal cooks.

The grand old party has also promised "same work, same wages" in order to prevent discrimination in wages for women.

BJP on health: BJP "will strengthen our network of AIIMS to provide quality healthcare across the country." The saffron party has also promised to increase the number of UG and PG seats in medical education.

PM-Ayushman Bharat Health Infrastructure Mission) further expand for robust health care.

Congress on health: In its poll



(From left) Rahul Gandhi of the Congress and Narendra Modi of the BJP.



PHOTOS: THE STATESMAN

manifesto, the Congress promised that healthcare will be universal and free in public health centres such as hospitals, clinics, primary health centres, mobile healthcare units, dispensaries and health camps.

The Rajasthan Model of cashless insurance up to 25 lakhs will be adopted for universal healthcare.

Primary Health Centres (PHC) will be upgraded according to Indian Public Health Standards norms, and diagnostics will be added in each PHC.

BJP on farmers:

Strengthening PM KISAN
"We are providing annual financial assistance of 6,000 under PM Kisan

Samman Nidhi Yojana. We are committed to sustained financial support for our farmers."

Strengthening PM Fasal Bima Yojana

"We will further strengthen the PM Fasal Bima Yojana through more technological interventions to ensure speedy and more accurate assessment, faster payouts and quicker grievance resolution."

Increase in MSP: "We have ensured an unprecedented increase in MSP for major crops, and we will continue to increase MSP from time to time."

Congress on farmers: The party has promised to give a legal guarantee to the Minimum Support Prices (MSP)

announced by the government every year, as recommended by the Swaminathan Commission.

The Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP) will be made a statutory body.

MSP payable to the farmer-seller at the procurement centres and APMCs will be directly credited digitally to the bank account of the farmer.

BJP on education:

In its manifesto, the BJP said, "7 IITs, 16 IIITs, 7 IIMs, 15 AIIMS, 315 Medical Colleges and 390 universities have been set-up in the past decade. We are committed to strengthening these institutes and further increasing the number of institutions of higher learning. We will continue to upgrade the existing institutions through focused funding, capacity building, infrastructure upgradation and dedicated research grants.

It has also promised to implement the 'One Nation, One Student ID' through the Automated Permanent Academic Account Registry (APAAR) to store academic qualifications, credit scores and certificates, among others for students from pre-primary to higher education.

Congress on education: The party has promised to amend the RTE Act to make education from Class I to Class XII in public schools compulsory and free. It has also announced plans to revisit and amend the New Education Policy. "For greater equity, affordability and transparency in school fees charged by private schools, we will encourage state governments to establish fee regulation committees," the Congress announced.

OPINION



OUR VIEW

Wasted winter

Worst fears about the winter session of the federal parliament have unfortunately come true.

As he declared an end to the winter session of the federal parliament, Speaker Devraj Ghimire could barely hide his disappointment. "When it comes to law-making and taking up issues of public interest, this session, I feel, was more productive compared to earlier ones. Yet, we could not do enough," he said. For someone in Ghimire's position, this was as close to admitting complete failure as you get. The truth is, even in law-making and taking up issues of public concern, the winter session fared awfully. Before the sessions' commencement, the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs had claimed that various ministries were working on as many as 109 bills. But, as things unfolded, the session could clear a paltry three bills. This is troubling as that the winter session is generally devoted to law-making while the budget session, as the name suggests, is mostly aimed at fine-tuning the annual budget. Now, as the government has had to forcefully end the winter session owing to continued protest of the Nepali Congress, the main opposition, there are doubts over the fate of some vital bills, for instance, those related to the long-delayed transitional justice process, management of employees at the three levels of the federal government, and the impending investment summit.

There were 24 bills in consideration at the two houses of the federal parliament. The ruling alliance seems minded to pass some laws through ordinance, in which case these laws would have to be endorsed by the budget session within 60 days of its first sitting. But law-making through ordinance is a dubious exercise that should be resorted to only in emergencies. Without the safety valve of parliamentary discussion and review, ordinances often become tools to serve vested interests and sneak in undemocratic measures. As we have written in this space before, both the ruling coalition and the main opposition are at fault for this state of dysfunction. The ruling parties have refused to consider a parliamentary probe into Home Minister Rabi Lamichhane, despite a steady stream of reports of his involvement in the embezzlement of the funds of various cooperatives. As the opposition says, if the home minister is innocent, what does he have to fear from a parliamentary probe? And yet, the Congress has also been rather pig-headed. Obstructing the House has never been in the party's DNA; as befits its image of a moderate democratic force, it has always stood in favour of open and honest discussions on the House floor. This time, the party has resorted to obstruction, refusing to consider other forms of protest.

The country does not have the luxury of frittering away its demographic dividend which won't last beyond the next two or three decades. The singular goal of statecraft at this time should be to persuade the best and brightest young minds from Nepal to work for the development and prosperity of their homeland. This in turn entails quickly setting outstanding political issues like transitional justice and implementation of federalism, thus clearing the path for Nepal's development and prosperity. Yet the functioning of the country's main law-making body only inspires despair among the youth. In their narrow-minded quest to score brownie points against each other, both the ruling and opposition parties are failing their country.

Depleting nutrition in our food

|| STARTING POINT ||

Rising CO2 concentration causing nutrient depletion in crops raises serious concerns about future food security.

MADHUKAR UPADHYA



The frequency and intensity of weather-related hazards have progressively increased, posing threats to our food security. But the growing climate concerns do not seem to stop at floods, droughts, delayed or early monsoon rains and above or below-average annual rains. There is another layer on top of the already competing interests of policy responses to address climate impacts—nutrient deficiency in food caused by increased carbon dioxide (CO2) concentration in the atmosphere. More and more studies now suggest that a higher concentration of CO2, which helps plants grow bigger and faster, often producing too many carbohydrates, also directly impacts the overall nutritional content, especially that of protein, iron, zinc, calcium and other essential food nutrients.

Health connections

With no substantial progress in cutting global emissions despite repeated pledges made during international climate summit meetings, the problem of nutrient deficiency will only deteriorate in the future. This will hurt low-income countries like Nepal, which are already facing the consequences of micronutrient deficiency. According to the 2016 Nepal National Micronutrient Status Survey, about 21 percent of children below five and about 24 percent of non-pregnant women aged between 15 and 49 are already zinc deficient. About 20 percent of non-pregnant women also suffer from iron deficiency.

Predictably, these nutrient deficiencies cause health problems. For instance, zinc and iron deficiencies have been known to cause chronic health issues, usually associated with stunted growth in children, impaired physical and cognitive development, depressed immune function, increased vulnerability to and severity of infection, anaemia, adverse outcomes of



SHUTTERSTOCK

pregnancy and neurobehavioral abnormalities. Zinc is also important for skin health. Additionally, rice and wheat, staples of a significant section of the population, are affected more by higher CO2 concentration. Controlled experiments have shown vegetables being similarly affected; calcium in green beans dropped significantly, vitamin A levels in asparagus plummeted by almost half, and broccoli stalks were found to have less iron.

So far, nutrient deficiency has been regarded as a result of improper diet, poverty and poor access to food. However, this will change as the food itself will have less nutritional value due to climate impacts on the nutrient content of cereals, pulses and vegetables. Even when one has access to a proper diet and adequate amounts of food, it may still result in nutrient deficiency because of lesser nutrients in the food. A paper titled "Micronutrients deficiency, a hidden hunger in Nepal: Prevalence, causes, consequences and solutions", published in 2015, indicates that the underlying cause of zinc deficiency is the low content of vitamins and minerals in food.

The far-reaching implications of nutrient deficiencies are that as floods, droughts and heatwaves lower agricultural productivity and as higher atmospheric CO2 levels reduce the concentration of essential micronutrients in food, existing micronutrient deficiencies worsen, leading to greater

numbers of malnourished people. The economic loss in Nepal, according to an estimate, is already about 2 to 3 percent of GDP on account of existing vitamin and mineral deficiencies alone.

Remedial options

There are various ways to respond to these emerging food nutrition issues. Some of them are quick while others take time to yield results. One of the most sought-after solutions is adding micronutrients directly into the seeds. This, however, is only a quick fix and does not provide lasting change because the technique focuses on one or two micronutrients at a time, whereas the state of other micronutrients will continue to be affected by higher CO2. In addition, it will take away the freedom of farmers to produce seeds, instead making them dependent on imported seeds, which may be out of reach for small farmers. It also raises the question of what will happen to varieties of crops adapted to the local environment.

Another way is to apply nutrient-rich fertilisers or soil amendments to infuse the plants with particular minerals. An effective and low-cost way of enhancing growth by treating the seeds and using bio-fertilisers already exists in Nepal. However, adding nutrient-rich fertiliser without addressing soil erosion is unlikely to help. Numerous studies in Nepal since the 1970s have highlighted soil erosion as a major

impediment to enhancing agricultural production, but no effective measures have been taken to address it. Erosion tends to deplete the soil of both major and micronutrients. Consequently, we have started to see the results of not responding to the call for conserving soil.

Farming is being abandoned due to the continued loss of farm productivity, largely caused by erosion of soil nutrients. Institutionally, the responsibility of formulating soil conservation policies and advocating for their implementation lies with the forestry sector which currently bears no responsibility for managing agriculture soil. If we address the unchecked soil erosion of farmlands before applying nutrient-rich fertilisers, we may help address nutrient content in food in both the short and long term. For this, we must facilitate better soil management, including soil conservation, on a massive scale.

A third approach could be selective plant breeding, which has also been suggested as an effective way to develop seeds less affected by higher levels of CO2. Nepal's institutional set-up and pool of expertise in plant breeding are well-placed for that purpose. They have developed flood- and drought-resistant rice, maize and millet varieties to protect crops against submergence and droughts. A combination of soil conservation backed by plant breeding would be a better answer to the impacts of higher CO2 concentration.

Expanding adaptation scope

In sum, our food security is being threatened by an avalanche of issues, from water scarcity, floods, wind storms, landslides and plant diseases, to impacts on the nutritional content of food. Food security will no longer be merely a question of access to food, as is generally understood; it will be a question of food availability with the required amount of nutrients. The national policies and strategies on nutrition highlight the issue of existing nutrient deficiencies and their health impacts, which increase with rising CO2 concentration.

Many people are already nutrient-deficient, and the likelihood of depleting nutrients in the future due to rising CO2 concentration raises serious concerns regarding our food security. This is an emerging issue that hasn't been part of our climate response yet. Given that we are confronted with multiple climate-related agricultural issues, it's time to start identifying and weaving implementable measures to address the nutritional content of food into our adaptation plans.

MONDAY INTERVIEW NEEL KANTHA UPRETY

I am for a fully PR system with a five percent threshold

Leaders don't want overseas voting because that will swing results in unpredictable ways. But technically, online voting is feasible.

Of late, Nepali Congress leaders have publicly emphasised the need for a change in the current mixed electoral system to ensure political stability in the country. They argue that the two largest parties—the Nepali Congress and the CPN-UML—should now join hands to reform this system. The UML leaders haven't opposed the idea. The *Post's* Thira Lal Bhusal talked to former chief election commissioner Neel Kantha Uprety on such proposed reforms of the country's electoral system.

Of late, leaders of the Congress have been blaming the mixed electoral system for producing hung parliaments and thus resulting in political instability. Has time come to revisit our election system?

Any electoral system cannot be faulty in and of itself. Its success depends on its users. There is no ready-made electoral system perfect for a particular country. Also, there are no textbook models we can instantly employ. You must factor in fundamental realities of a society while picking and implementing an election system. Voters' education level and experience, the country's economic parameters, its social composition mainly of ethnic communities and also the geography are to be considered while coming up with an electoral modality. We have to create a strong foundation and lay the ground to put that design into practice. The role of actors is vital in this process.

Our election system has evolved in the past seven decades. We introduced the multiparty election system in our first parliamentary election in 1959. We, however, had practised electing representatives through voting in different forms even before that. In 1959, we imported the multiparty election system from India. It arrived in our neighbouring country from the United Kingdom during the colonial period. We practised the same electoral system in three multiparty democratic elections after the restoration of democracy in 1990.

We imported the system as it was, without modifying it to suit our reality. It was only after the success of the 2006 People's Movement that people strongly demanded that the electoral system be reformed to ensure representation of historically underrep-

resented sections of society. Inclusion was a demand of the movement. In the elections previous to that we had failed to ensure candidacy, election and representation of women, and those from marginalised and backward groups and communities. Then the issue of ensuring election of diverse communities to the Constituent Assembly and their participation in the constitution making process became a major agenda.

The election of the first CA had to be postponed multiple times due to major parties' differences over electoral provisions. Eventually, all sides agreed to adopt a mixed electoral modality consisting of the first-past-the-post (FPTP) and the proportional representation (PR). It was introduced in the first CA polls. Women and various historically underrepresented groups made it to the CA. It was in fact a leap forward in representation. Only the FPTP electoral system wouldn't have created this inclusive picture. So, the credit for the present inclusive representation goes to the PR system. But our leaders have tried to shift the blame for political instability to the electoral system.

When it comes to the question of whether time is ripe to revisit the electoral system, we should remember that we adopted this system in the course of post-conflict management. Some countries have employed multiple electoral systems successfully. Take South Africa. After the end of apartheid in early 1990s, it adopted a fully proportional representation electoral model. The system has helped them manage the conflict properly. It has given them majority governments. Conversely, in our case, political parties and leaders misused our mixed system. If it is to be revisited, let's do it in a way that would remove anomalies seen in the mixed system. We should mainly have a provision that bars actors' [leaders'] manipulation of the system.

What anomalies of the mixed electoral system have been seen in the past four elections and how can we remove them?

There were electoral anomalies in previous systems as well. But at the time we were happy that the country had democracy and we didn't bother about other things. In the new system, lead-



Neel Kantha Uprety, former chief election commissioner

POST PHOTO: DEEPAK KC

ers misused the seats allocated under the PR category. They used it against its spirit of ensuring proportional representation of all communities and groups. Powerful leaders used this system to promote their family members, those loyal to them and even sold the seats to well-off people. Moreover, they put the names of their close ones on top of the list to boost their election chances.

How successful has the system been in ensuring representation of historically marginalised groups?

It has succeeded to an extent. For example, women have been elected in around one-third of the total seats in federal parliament. The representation in local units is even better. However, their representation is weaker when it comes to the decision making positions. Dalits representation has increased but it is still not in proportion to their population. This is also so for other marginalised communities. It became possible only after the mandatory legal provisions.

Political leaders have manipulated the system to promote their closed

ones to positions even under women, Dalit and other categories. Is it due to legal loopholes? Can a law completely stop leaders from doing so?

No law can ensure that. It is because of the leaders' bad intent, which cannot be mended. We have to find a solution from within the system.

What will such a solution look like?

No system or law will work unless the political parties, candidates and voters correct themselves. Many prefer the FPTP system as under it unscrupulous candidates can buy candidacy as well as voters and win elections. Rich candidates even buy out other candidates who don't have enough money to fight elections. Some politicians reportedly spent over Rs100 million to become mayors and tens of millions to be ward chairs as they take it as an investment to earn more. Therefore we have to go for a fully PR system.

But will a fully PR system not give leaders even more room to handpick their near and dear ones?

There should be a provision to select candidacy through primaries, and leaders should not get to handpick candidates. Party members from respective areas would select their candidates with options through voting. The Election Commission will conduct the primaries as well. And the proportional representation method should be applied at the local level itself while selecting the candidates, so that the PR system can be implemented ground-up. Thus the candidates themselves will be fully inclusive as per the social composition of the respective area or constituency. But, at present, votes are collected from across the country and all candidates are picked from the centre, as the current PR method takes the entire country as a single constituency.

Some have proposed to make the FPTP system more inclusive by allocating certain constituencies for women, Dalit and other clusters. What is your view on it?

Yes, there is that school of thought. But it can't be done permanently, so the constituencies are fixed on a rotation basis. Some countries including India are trying to implement it, but it hasn't given expected results.

Some others are for electing all the National Assembly members through the PR system and all the lower house members through the FPTP. Is such an arrangement feasible?

That is meaningless as lower house representation is important in every respect. Political parties and leaders have already made the upper house a chamber to place their closed ones as well as those rejected in elections.

There is one more proposal to increase the threshold to qualify to get the PR votes, which would help big parties accumulate more votes and secure more seats. Is that the right approach?

We find thresholds of up to 10 percent in some countries. Our threshold should be increased. Let's go for a fully PR system and increase the threshold to at least five percent. Why do we need so many political parties? While there are just a couple of political parties active in developed coun-

tries, why are over 100 parties registered in a poor country like Nepal? Are there so many political philosophies requiring so many parties?

Why keep changing election systems even as developed countries have been using the same system for a long time?

In fact, the present system is a complex one. Fully PR system will be easier and less expensive. The Election Commission's expenditure will come down by 40 percent. The expenses of political parties and candidates will also be drastically reduced.

But won't this bar the entry of popular leaders in parliament and make the top leaders of political parties more powerful?

No, those who are unpopular will be filtered out from their area in the primaries. Only those selected from the primaries will be eligible for inclusion in the PR list. Party members elect candidates of their respective party, not the leaders. Such candidates will be inclusive based on the social composition of the same place.

Leaders have pledged voting rights for Nepalis abroad. How feasible is it?

It is feasible, if the leaders really want to do it. But they don't. See, election results are mostly decided by small margins. Here in the country, the leaders work hard to convince swing voters. The votes from overseas will be more unpredictable as it won't be easy to contact and convince Nepalis staying in over 100 countries. They are out of local politicians' control and can't be influenced based on local dynamics.

So, the leaders don't want overseas voting because that will swing the result in unpredictable ways. Technically there is no problem with online voting. People are sending and receiving money through their mobile on the basis of OTP numbers. Those staying abroad can be connected to their booths at their respective villages through the internet. They can vote through their mobile and the list will be updated at the booth automatically.

FOREX

US Dollar	133.77
Euro	142.37
Pound Sterling	166.56
Swiss Franc	146.32
Australian Dollar	86.48
Canadian Dollar	97.11
Singapore Dollar	98.26
Japanese Yen (10)	8.73
Chinese Yuan	18.48
Saudi Arab Riyal	35.66
Qatari Riyal	36.69
Thai Bhat	3.66
UAE Dhiram	36.42
Malaysian Ringgit	28.04
Korean Won (100)	9.69

Exchange rates fixed by Nepal Rastra Bank

SHARES						
Nepse (in percent)						
2,023.35pts						
-0.11%						
HIGHEST LOSERS						
GLSSL	H8020	TPC	TRH	GIBF1	NICGF	
-10	4.41	4.38	-3.93	-3.91	-3.8	
MODERATE LOSERS						
NICGF2	NMB50	SICL	SAHAS	HPPL	KSBBL	
-0.13	-0.11	-0.1	-0.08	-0.07	-0.06	
MODERATE GAINERS						
RMF1	CHCL	FOWAD	LICN	SCB	SMH	
0.13	0.11	0.09	0.07	0.02	0.01	
HIGHEST GAINERS						
SHLB	NICLSSL	DOLTI	RHGCL	MLBBL	KMCD8	
10	9.72	9.35	9.23	8.7	8.12	

BULLION PRICE PER TOLA

Fine Gold	Rs 136,800
Silver	Rs 1,700

SOURCE: FENEGOSIDA

BIZLINE

After long peace, Big Tech faces US antitrust reckoning

WASHINGTON: After more than a decade of leaving Big Tech largely to itself, US antitrust enforcers have cranked up the heat, with several high-profile cases underway that could radically change the way the industry's giants do business. Launched under both the Trump and Biden administrations, five major cases from the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Department of Justice (DOJ) are moving forward against major US technology companies—including two against Google that could see the company split up. The most recent came in March against Apple by the FTC, which alleges the iPhone maker abuses its dominance of the premium smartphone sector. Washington had largely remained silent on Big Tech cases since its wars with Microsoft that began in the 1990s and ended in a settlement in the early 2000s, after a bruising battle with the DOJ. (AFP)

Venezuela voices outrage over new oil lease off Guyana

CARACAS: Venezuela on Saturday said it "strongly" rejects a new oil concession Guyana has granted to US giant ExxonMobil in waters disputed by the two South American neighbors. ExxonMobil announced Friday that it received the green light from Guyana for exploitation in the Stabroek block, an offshore area with huge deposits. The project, known as Whiptail and with an estimated investment of \$12.7 billion, "will bring the country's production capacity to approximately 1.3 million barrels per day," ExxonMobil president Liam Mallon said in the statement. ExxonMobil said production at Whiptail would likely not come online until 2027. Venezuela "strongly rejects the illegal oil production license granted by... Guyana to oil companies in the Stabroek Block," Venezuelan Foreign Minister Yvan Gil said in a statement. (AFP)

IMF greenlights further \$360 million in Ghana aid

ACCRA: The International Monetary Fund on Saturday said it had validated a fresh tranche of aid of \$360 million for Ghana as the country seeks to exit an economic crisis. The latest aid comes as part of a second review of the IMF's \$3 billion assistance package to Accra, which was approved in May last year, to help Ghana shore up its public finances and better manage its heavy debt load. "IMF staff and the Ghanaian authorities have reached a staff-level agreement on the second review of Ghana's economic programme under the Extended Credit Facility," said IMF mission head for Ghana Stephane Roudet, referring to an aid programme for political services and economic reforms. The latest package means total IMF financial support released under the agreement since May 2023 is worth about \$1.5 billion, the IMF stated. In 2022, Ghana endured its worst economic crisis in decades, with inflation racing past 50 percent which forced Ghana—a major gold, oil and cocoa producer—to take out a loan and also restructure its debts. (AFP)

Tension in Middle East spells disaster for Nepal's economy

>> Continued from page 1

Experts say that a crisis in the Middle East, which employs nearly half of the migrant workers from Nepal, will potentially hit Nepal and suggest preparing strategies to absorb the emerging geopolitical shocks.

"Tensions in the Middle East are not a good sign for a country like Nepal whose income largely depends on remittances," said Ganesh Gurung, a migration expert.

Besides, say economists, conflict in the key oil-producing countries pushes up inflation.

The Asian Development Bank said in its recent report that any intensified geopolitical turmoil could disrupt supply chains, increasing global inflation and tightening financial conditions worldwide.

This may lead to tightening of domestic monetary policy, which will undermine investment and consumption and may drag down growth for the ailing Nepali economy.

"As we see, 1,200 to 1,500 Nepalis are leaving daily for Gulf countries for jobs. The conflict will stop many Nepalis from going to such countries. If these countries stopped hiring workers, the number of unemployed will rise," said Gurung. "Greater unemployment at home could bring social disturbances."

Experts say the decline in remittances will reduce Nepal's foreign currency reserves, which may cause severe stress on the economy as domestic production has stagnated.

"The government needs to start preparing to absorb the potential shock," said Gurung. Some countries are already working out strategies to avoid potential economic impact.

On Sunday, the South Korean government announced heightened vigilance against potential domestic repercussions in light of the escalated tensions in the Middle East following Iran's attack on Israel, according to media reports.



POST FILE PHOTO

1,200 to 1,500 Nepalis are leaving daily for Gulf countries for jobs. The conflict will stop many Nepalis from going to such countries.

Also on Sunday, the Embassy of Nepal in Tel Aviv, Israel issued a notice requesting Nepalis to follow the local protocol directed by the Israeli Home Front Command.

Nepal's foreign ministry said in a statement that it is closely following the development in West Asia.

"We are seriously concerned at the rising tensions and escalation of hostilities in the region. The government of Nepal firmly believes in a peaceful

resolution of disputes and deplores the use of force. We call on all the parties concerned to exercise maximum restraint and use dialogue and diplomacy to restore peace," the embassy statement said. Oil prices have also started going up.

On Sunday, the Brent crude oil price reached \$90.21 per barrel. Oil rose 1 percent on Friday on geopolitical tensions in the Middle East.

Last week, oil prices neared a six-

month high on concerns that Iran, the third-largest producer in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), might retaliate for a suspected Israeli warplane attack on Iran's embassy in Damascus last Monday, according to the reports.

The conflict's impact on global oil markets is significant, as any risk of supply disruptions could lead to a price hike. Nepal is still bearing the

Race for AI isn't zero-sum, says Amazon cloud boss

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE SAN FRANCISCO, APRIL 14

As Google races with Microsoft and OpenAI to create world-changing generative artificial intelligence, some critics see Amazon as lagging behind.

"I respectfully disagree" with that viewpoint, said Adam Selipsky, Amazon's cloud chief, in an interview with AFP.

Tech giants like Microsoft, Google and Meta have made headlines talking about their own foundational models, or those of their close partners, that are key to AI and its ability to produce written works, images, videos or even computer code from simple user prompts.

But "there is simply not going to be one model to rule them all," argued Selipsky. AWS, Amazon's industry-leading cloud branch, is already seeing customers "needing multiple models for multiple different use cases," he explained.

He cited the capabilities of various AI models available on the AWS Bedrock platform, such as Meta's Llama and Claude from Anthropic, as well as some from Mistral in France and Amazon's own Titan brand.

Generative AI is regarded in Silicon Valley as poised to revolutionize the way people get jobs done.

And cloud computing companies, which have massive computing power, troves of data and AI expertise, now host generative AI models. They are in a prime position to capitalize on the new technology—but they have a lot to lose if they don't cough up the latest

innovations. A pioneer of e-commerce, Amazon also dominates the cloud. AWS had 31 percent of the cloud computing market at the end of 2023, according to Stocklytics.

But rivals Microsoft and Google are gaining ground with their cloud businesses, with 24 percent and 11 percent market share respectively.

A pioneer of e-commerce, Amazon also dominates the cloud.

Thanks to a \$13 billion investment in ChatGPT-maker OpenAI, Microsoft is "in the driver's seat" of an ongoing cloud revolution, according to Webdash analyst Dan Ives.

Microsoft and Google compete with their in-house, AI-infused digital assistants to help with creating content—emails, presentations, ads—and applications (especially chatbots).

AWS is less known to the public and its digital assistant Alexa is not yet as conversational as ChatGPT.

But Amazon has been in the AI business for more than 25 years, said Selipsky. "If you go back to personalization on the retail website in 1998—we called it personalization, but it was AI."

The Seattle firm has long had thousands of people working on the technology and has pivoted some of them

to the new frontier of generative AI, Selipsky said.

"We've moved rapidly on new generations of our (AI) chips like Trainium, and building Amazon Bedrock, and getting it adopted quickly and coming out with exciting applications on top of the models, like Amazon Q," an AI assistant, he said.

Selipsky, who took command of AWS in 2021, replacing Andy Jassy, who stepped into the chief executive role vacated by founder Jeff Bezos, was confident Amazon would remain a leader in cloud computing.

As proof, he points to AWS customers and partners, including Nvidia.

The high-profile chipmaker recently announced it is building a "super-computer" on AWS using Nvidia's own high-performing processors, the ultrasophisticated and coveted GPUs.

Most notably, Amazon has invested \$4 billion in Anthropic, an OpenAI rival that is also backed by Google. The start-up will use AWS and its Trainium chips to build AI models and help "improve our technology," said Selipsky.

When asked about exciting aspects of generative AI, Selipsky cited examples of ramped up productivity for its clients.

AWS user pharmaceutical giant Pfizer estimates that it will launch more powerful drugs faster, achieving as much as a billion dollars in annual savings due to AI, according to Selipsky.

Airlines and other industries are already using generative AI to power chatbots that interact with customers.

Somali pirates free ship after Bangladeshi owners pay ransom

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE CHITTAGONG, APRIL 14

Somali pirates freed a Bangladeshi-flagged cargo vessel and its 23 crew early Sunday after sackloads of US dollars were air-dropped to them in ransom, the company and relatives said.

The bulk carrier MV Abdullah was transporting more than 55,000 tonnes of coal from Maputo to the United Arab Emirates when it was seized by dozens of pirates around 550 nautical miles (1,000 kilometres) off the Somali coast a month ago.

The seizure came amid a surge in Somali pirate activity, with international naval forces diverted from the Gulf of Aden into the Red Sea to guard against attacks on shipping by Yemen's Iran-backed Huthi rebels. Negotiations for the ship's release were led by Meherul Karim, CEO of its owners KSRM.

"The pirates called us when they reached near the Somalia coast" and one of them spoke English, he told reporters in Chittagong on Sunday.

"He communicated with us till we finalised the negotiation," he added. "We will not discuss or reveal the amount of ransom money."

Video footage had been provided to show all the crew were safe, and early Sunday around 65 pirates left the ship on nine boats, he said. The MV Abdullah was on its way to its original destination escorted by two European

cost of high oil prices which has pushed up inflation.

Rising conflict has become a major concern for the disruption in the supply chain as Iran has threatened to shut down the Suez Canal. The disruption of shipping routes in the Red Sea will result in higher shipping costs, according to media reports.

The World Bank said in its recent report that the cost of shipping from Asia to Europe has jumped to over US\$3,000 for a 40-foot container, a threefold increase over the lowest rate in 2023 (about US\$1,000).

"The rise in tensions in the Middle East means trade disturbances globally," said Chandramani Adhikari, an economist. "For Nepal, most of whose remittance comes from the Middle Eastern nations, it could spell disaster."

The government is happy with the improvements in external sectors which is mostly due to the boost in remittance.

"But as soon as the labour markets get hit, there will be a direct impact on the country's income," said Adhikari. "People who are working in the conflict-hit countries might experience reduced savings due to the rise in the cost of living in the destination countries," Adhikari said.

"The rise in tensions will have an impact on the tourist arrivals as countries will issue travel advisories," Adhikari said.

"More polarisation among powerful economies, as they spend more on war, will also affect the foreign aid being provided to Nepal, besides foreign investment," Adhikari said.

The international conflict also has the potential to strengthen the dollar.

The rise in oil prices and dollar rate will affect Nepal's economy side-by-side as it impacts consumption and increases inflation, Adhikari said.

"So, all these phenomena will hit Nepal's economy."

Scholz walks tightrope on trade and politics in China

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE BEIJING, APRIL 14

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz arrived in China on Sunday, kicking off a trip in which he faces a tough balancing act as he aims to shore up economic ties with Berlin's biggest trading partner.

Scholz touched down in the southwestern megacity of Chongqing on Sunday morning, Chinese state broadcaster CCTV said, accompanied by a large delegation of ministers and business executives.

As Western allies are cranking up pressure on Beijing, Scholz is expected to underline that Germany remains committed to doing business with the world's second-largest economy and rejects US-led calls for "decoupling".

His friendly overtures towards China risk sparking ire among Washington and EU partners, which have been pushing back against Beijing's heavy subsidies for industries. "China remains a really important economic partner," Scholz told journalists on Friday, adding that he would try to level the playing field for German companies in China.

On the geopolitical front, Scholz will also use his visit to persuade Chinese President Xi Jinping to exert



AFP/PRSS

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Beijing in November 2022. He arrived in China on Sunday.

his influence to rein in his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin and help bring an end to the war in Ukraine.

"Given the close relations between China and Russia, Beijing has the possibility to exert its influence on Russia," said a German government

source in Berlin. The three-day tour through Chongqing, Shanghai and Beijing is Scholz's second trip to China since he took office.

His first in November 2022 took place under intense scrutiny, as it came swiftly after Xi strengthened

his grip on power, and marked the first post-pandemic visit by a G7 leader to China.

Stung then by painful supply chain disruptions during the health crisis as well as by China's refusal to distance itself from Russia despite Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, Western allies had been scrambling to reduce their reliance on Beijing.

Scholz's visit comes as many of Germany's Western allies confront China on a range of trade issues.

A slew of probes into state aid for Chinese solar panels, electric cars and wind turbines are ongoing in Brussels.

The United States is meanwhile investigating national security risks posed by Chinese technology in cars.

With tensions rumbling over Taiwan, US President Joe Biden this week made defence pledges to Japan and the Philippines, while describing behaviour by Beijing in the South China Sea as "dangerous and aggressive".

Two days before his visit, Scholz held talks with France's President Emmanuel Macron, whose office said the leaders "coordinated to defend a rebalancing of European-Chinese trade relations".

But China is a vital market for Germany, where many jobs depend

directly on demand from the Asian giant. Both economies also badly need a boost.

The German economy shrank by 0.3 percent last year, battered by inflation, high interest rates and cooling exports, and for this year, the economy ministry expects just an anaemic growth of 0.2 percent.

Beijing has set an annual GDP growth target of around five percent for this year, but exports plunged more than expected last month.

German MPs and analysts urged Scholz to take a firm line.

The Green party's Deborah Duering warned Scholz against viewing China just as an economic opportunity.

"Those who ignore long-term risks for short-term profits risk repeating the mistakes of the past, misguided Russia policy," said Duering, in reference to past dependency on Moscow for cheap energy supplies.

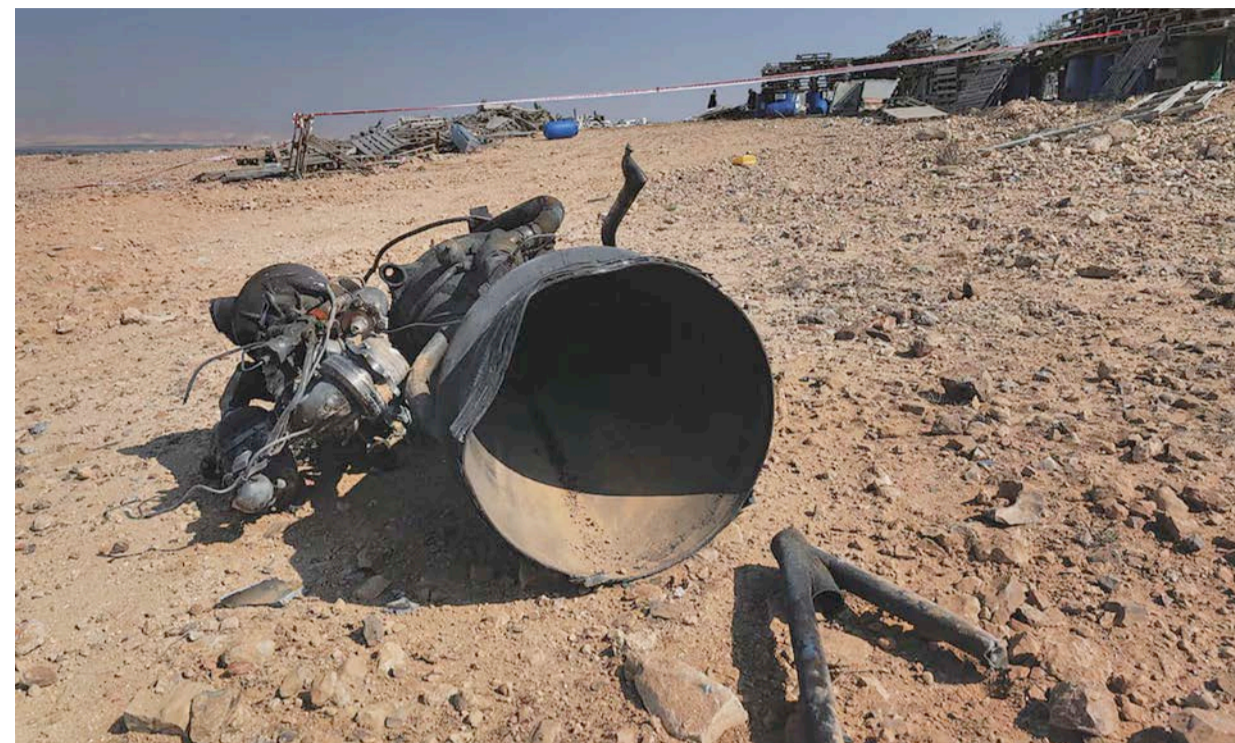
Max Zenglein of the Mercator Institute for China Studies said Germany should not hesitate to be more assertive.

"As countries such as the USA and Japan are positioning themselves much more sharply against China, Germany has an important role to play," he said, adding that Germany was "in a position of strength".

WORLD

US will not take part in retaliatory action against Iran, White House says

Two senior Israeli ministers signalled on Sunday that retaliation by Israel is not imminent and it would not act alone.



The remains of a rocket booster that, according to Israeli authorities critically injured a 7-year-old girl, after Iran launched drones and missiles towards Israel, near Arad, Israel, on Sunday.

REUTERS
JERUSALEM/DUBAI/WASHINGTON, APRIL 14

President Joe Biden warned Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu the US will not take part in a counter-offensive against Iran if Israel decides to retaliate for a mass drone and missile attack on Israeli territory overnight, a White House official said.

The threat of open warfare erupting between the arch Middle East foes and dragging in the United States has put the region on edge, triggering calls for restraint from global powers and Arab nations to avoid further escalation.

US media reported earlier on Sunday that Biden had informed Netanyahu he would not participate in retaliatory action in a phone call overnight.

The remarks were confirmed to Reuters by a White House official. The US will continue to help Israel defend itself, but does not want war,

John Kirby, the White House's top national security spokesperson, told ABC's "This Week" programme on Sunday.

Iran launched the attack over a suspected Israeli strike on its consulate in Syria on April 1 that killed top Revolutionary Guards commanders and followed months of clashes between Israel and Iran's regional allies, triggered by the war in Gaza.

However, the attack from more than 300 missiles and drones, mostly launched from inside Iran, caused only modest damage in Israel as most were shot down with the help of the US, Britain and Jordan.

An Air Force base in southern Israel was hit, but continued to operate as normal and a 7-year old child was seriously hurt by shrapnel. There were no other reports of serious damage. Two senior Israeli ministers signalled on Sunday that retaliation by Israel is not imminent and it

would not act alone.

"We will build a regional coalition and exact the price from Iran in the fashion and timing that is right for us," centrist minister Benny Gantz said ahead of a war cabinet meeting.

Defence Minister Yoav Gallant also said Israel had an opportunity to form a strategic alliance against "against this grave threat by Iran which is threatening to mount nuclear explosives on these missiles, which could be an extremely grave threat," he said. Iran denies seeking nuclear weapons.

Iranian army chief of staff Major General Mohammad Bagheri warned on television that "our response will be much larger than tonight's military action if Israel retaliates against Iran" and told Washington its bases could also be attacked if it helped Israel retaliate.

Iranian Foreign Minister Amir Abdollahian said Tehran had

informed the United States its attack on Israel would be "limited" and for self defence and that regional neighbours had also been informed of its planned strikes 72-hours in advance.

A Turkish diplomatic source said Iran had informed Turkey in advance of what would happen.

Iran said the attack was aimed at punishing "Israeli crimes" but it now "deemed the matter concluded."

Russia, China, France and Germany as well as Arab states Egypt, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates urged restraint and the UN Security Council was set to meet at 4 pm ET on Sunday.

"We will do everything to stop a further escalation," German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said on a visit to China. "We can only warn everyone, especially Iran, against continuing this way."

Turkey also warned Iran it did not want further tension in the region.

Analysts debated how far Iran's attack was calibrated to cause genuine devastation in Israel, or to save face at home after vows of revenge while avoiding a major new war.

"I think the Iranians took into consideration the fact that Israel has a very, very strong multi-layer anti-missile system and they probably took into consideration that there will not be too many casualties," said Sima Shine, a former senior Mossad official at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv.

But if Iran was hoping for a muted response, like with its missile attacks on US forces in Iraq after the killing of Guards commander Qassem Soleimani in 2020, she warned "I don't think Israel sees it this way".

On Saturday Iran's Revolutionary Guards seized an Israel-linked cargo ship in the Strait of Hormuz, one of the world's most important energy shipping routes, underscoring the risks to the world economy of a wider conflict.

Some flights were suspended in countries across the region and share prices fell in stock markets in Israel and Gulf states.

The war in Gaza, which Israel invaded after an attack by Iran-backed Hamas on October 7, has spread to fronts with Iran-aligned groups in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and Iraq.

Gulf states, vulnerable but influential, seek to stop new Iran-Israel war

REUTERS
DUBAI/RIYADH, APRIL 14

Gulf states are pushing to stop a full-blown regional war after Iran's unprecedented retaliatory strikes on Israel, sources in the region said, fearing new escalation could put them on front lines of a conflagration and ruin plans to reshape the region.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in particular may be well placed to triangulate between Iran, Israel and the United States after diplomatic advances in recent years that benefited all those countries.

Allies of Washington, Gulf monarchies have sought to stabilise ties with Iran and Israel to resolve longstanding security concerns and allow them to focus on national projects.

The UAE and Bahrain signed a normalisation deal with Israel in 2020 and Saudi Arabia was considering a similar agreement also involving a U.S. defence pact until the Gaza war torpedoed diplomacy. Riyadh also buried the hatchet with Iran last year after years of feuding.

However, the policy of detente now faces its greatest ever threat as the risk to wider regional peace raised by Israel's conflict with Iran-backed Hamas in Gaza since October 7 comes to a head.

A direct war between Israel and Iran could swiftly expand to Gulf states whose air space lies between the pair, and which host several military bases

of the United States, which has vowed to defend its ally Israel.

"Nobody wants an escalation. Everybody wants to contain the situation," said a Gulf source close to government circles, adding that there was probably wide telephone diplomacy under way.

"The pressure is not on Iran alone. The pressure is now on Israel not to retaliate," said the source, adding that the fallout of an Israeli attack on key Iranian sites "will affect all the region".

Another Gulf source with knowledge of official thinking said Gulf states, Iraq and Jordan are pushing both Iran and Israel's main backer the United States not to escalate. Washington was already pressing Israel to show restraint, both sources said.

At the same time, the United States was using Gulf countries to convey messages to Iran not to escalate any further, the source with knowledge of official thinking added.

"It is clear that America is using Gulf Arab allies to convey messages between Iran and the Americans. Saudi Arabia is maintaining contacts with Iran and there is an understanding to contain things," the source said.

Reuters has requested comment from both Saudi Arabia and the UAE on how they are handling the crisis.

Still, both the sources as well as analysts in the Gulf believed the most dangerous moment may have passed.



Iranian demonstrators attend an anti-Israeli gathering in front of the British Embassy in Tehran, Iran on Sunday.

Chicago shooting kills child old girl and wounds 10 people including small children

ASSOCIATED PRESS
CHICAGO, APRIL 14

Eleven people standing outside a family gathering Saturday night were shot including a young girl who was killed in what Chicago police believe was gang-related violence on the city's South Side, police said on Sunday.

Four victims were children. An 8-year-old girl was shot in the head and died, while a 1-year-old boy and a 8-year-old boy were each shot multiple times and listed in critical condition. A 9-year-old boy was also injured with a graze wound to his finger and hospitalized, police said Sunday.

The department's Sunday statement updated the number of shooting victims to 11 from 8 and gave new ages for the victims compared with a news conference late Saturday.

No one was in custody Sunday. Department Deputy Chief Don Jerome told reporters Saturday that the shooting happened when

shots were fired at a crowd standing outside a family gathering around 9 pm.

"This was not a random act of violence. It was likely gang-related," Jerome said. "The offenders' actions, make no mistake, are horrific and unacceptable in our city."

Police responding to a gunfire alert applied tourniquets and chest seals to victims, who also included adults between the ages of 19 and 40, Jerome said.

A 36-year-old man who was shot in the arms and back was listed in critical condition. The other adults were listed in good condition, police said Sunday.

The investigation was still in the preliminary stages but witnesses told police that a black sedan approached and someone fired shots into the crowd before fleeing, police said Sunday. Jerome also told reporters Saturday that witness accounts described two possible shooters on foot.

Vigil held for victims of Sydney mall attack

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
SYDNEY, APRIL 14

A small evening vigil was held on Sunday for the six people killed in a knife attack at a busy Sydney shopping centre, which police said was carried out by a local man with a history of mental illness.

Mourners gathered in silent reflection outside the Westfield mall in Bondi Junction, which had been packed with weekend shoppers when 40-year-old itinerant Joel Cauchi went on a stabbing rampage on Saturday.

Police said five women and a Pakistani security guard were killed in the attack, which lasted for about half an hour, until a solo policewoman tracked down Cauchi and shot him dead. Inspector Amy Scott was hailed by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese as a "hero" who "no doubt" had "saved lives through her action".

Among Cauchi's victims were a designer, a volunteer surf lifesaver, the daughter of an entrepreneur, and a new mother whose nine-month-old baby is still in hospital with serious stab wounds.

As night fell Sunday, a group of about 40 people from a local Muslim association placed flowers on the

ever-growing pile outside the shopping centre.

They remembered 30-year-old Faraz Tahir, who had been working as a security guard when he was stabbed.

They stood for a minute of silence with their hands clasped, heads bowed and eyes fixated on the flowers.

Police say five women and a Pakistani security guard were killed in the attack.

The mourners then raised their hands in a moment of prayer. Many wiped away tears.

Australians, largely unaccustomed to violent crime, are still coming to terms with an attack that shattered a city better known for its famed beaches and laid-back bars and restaurants.

On any given weekend the Westfield shopping centre is packed with people shopping for clothes or groceries, with families grabbing a bite to eat or a movie.

Health officials said it would take

many eyewitnesses a lifetime to come to terms with what they saw and felt.

"The sound of people screaming was horrific," said one eyewitness, Daphi Kiselstein, who was shopping at the time of the attack and took refuge in a store with other terrified shoppers. Despite early social media reports falsely linking the attack to events in the Middle East, New South Wales police Assistant Commissioner Anthony Cooke said there was no evidence that Cauchi was "driven by any particular motivation, ideology or otherwise". Police said he was diagnosed with a mental health issue at age 17.

In a pained statement, Cauchi's parents offered thoughts for the victims and said their son's actions were "truly horrific". "We are still trying to comprehend what has happened. He has battled with mental health issues since he was a teenager."

The parents also sent a message to the officer who shot their son dead.

"She was only doing her job to protect others and we hope she is coping alright," they said.

Cauchi is believed to have travelled to Sydney about a month ago and hired a small storage unit in the city, according to police. It contained personal belongings, including a boogie

board. He had been living in a vehicle and hostels, and was only in sporadic contact with his family via text messages, his parents said.

A Facebook profile said Cauchi came from Toowoomba, near Brisbane, and had attended a local high school and university. A distinctive grey, red and yellow dragon tattoo on his right arm was used to help identify him.

One victim, 38-year-old mother Ashlee Good, succumbed to her injuries after desperately passing her bleeding baby to two strangers in the hope they could save the child's life.

Good's family described her as "a beautiful mother, daughter, sister, partner, friend, all round outstanding human and so much more".

"To the two men who held and cared for our baby when Ashlee could not—words cannot express our gratitude," they said in a statement to Australian media.

The baby, named Harriet, was said to be recovering well after lengthy surgery. Prime Minister Albanese said Australians were struggling to understand an "unspeakable" attack that is "really just beyond comprehension".

"People going about their Saturday afternoon shopping should be safe, shouldn't be at risk.

Decorated 'Hero of Ukraine' learns to live with bionic arms

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
KYIV, UKRAINE, APRIL 14

Valeriy Kucherenko is a decorated "Hero of Ukraine" but the battle he is currently fighting is learning how to eat and use the toilet alone.

Seriously injured in October, the burly 30-year-old is a double amputee with two prosthetic arms.

More and more Ukrainian soldiers like him are losing limbs in a war that has dragged into a third year, and being forced to adjust to life in a country with few disabled facilities.

"I have new arms and I need to get used to it. And you have to realise that this is for the rest of your life. This is your whole future," Kucherenko told AFP, the sleeves of his army uniform rolled up.

The Protez Foundation, a US non-profit, fitted Kucherenko with bionic prosthetic arms after a fund-raising campaign. Made by a Ukrainian startup called Esper, they have chargeable batteries and are operated via muscles in his stumps.

Kucherenko was visiting Protez Foundation's Kyiv clinic for adjustments because the prosthetics had

become loose. This is normal due to loss of muscle mass, explained Jim Henrichsen, the US specialist who fitted his arms.

Kucherenko served in the army from 2015 to 2017, and then rejoined when Russia invaded in 2022. A junior sergeant, he was injured leading troops as they stormed Russian positions in the eastern Lugansk region.

Shrapnel from a hand grenade peppered his arms, leg and eyes, one of which now only sees light and dark.

Kucherenko was awarded Ukraine's highest honour: the Hero of Ukraine medal. President Volodymyr Zelensky told him in hospital: "You are a hero. In Ukraine, no one forgets such heroes." Kucherenko talks openly about his difficulties. After his new arms were fitted, "the very first thing I wanted to do was go to the toilet independently because this was a big problem for me," he told AFP. "That was one of the greatest joys."

But it is a work in progress said his 25-year-old wife, Veronika. With prosthetics, "it's easier, he can eat on his own," she said.

But the hardest thing is "going to the toilet. He still can't go by himself".



Junior sergeant of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, a participant in the Russian-Ukrainian war, Valeriy Kucherenko with his wife and the daughter on April 2.

The couple have daughters aged seven and two. Testing his bionic hand, Kucherenko raised a bottle of water to his mouth. It slipped and Veronika caught it.

At the next attempt, his fingers

gripped the bottle so hard it scrunched up. Veronika grinned. This is why he is so afraid to pee by himself, she said.

"He needs more time, he needs to learn, to train. Then there'll be a result," she said.

Prosthetics give amputees "a chance" says a poster at the Protez Foundation, which has a waiting list of 1,600 soldiers. "It's a dream," says one soldier getting a prosthetic arm.

Soldiers "are in good shape, they are strong... They make me look good because they are really sharp," said Henrichsen. "Valeriy was just like, 'Let's go!'" he said of Kucherenko.

But many may not realise the difficulties ahead, added the specialist. "I don't know if they're necessarily aware of that: the usage of the (prosthetic) hand, how much work it takes to get familiarised with it. Just the learning curve, you know."

In central Kyiv, Kucherenko's black and silver hands attracted curious glances. "Most people who come across someone like me are understanding and supportive... But there are many people who don't yet understand what it is," he said.

Until recently he used a wheelchair and found the city "not adapted at all".

Panoramic windows at the Protez Foundation clinic allow passers-by to see amputees. This is deliberate, because a wounded soldier "is a hero twice over", said CEO Yuriy Aroshidze.

"I'm all for it. Ukrainians and Kyiv residents must see and understand the consequences of war," said Kucherenko. As a Hero of Ukraine, Kucherenko should receive a flat, but now lives in a small rented apartment in Bila Tserkva, a city south of Kyiv.

An AFP reporter spent a day with the family. In the morning, his wife helped him into tracksuit bottoms and strapped on his prosthetic arm.

For everyday tasks, Kucherenko prefers a mechanical prosthetic with hooks to grip a cup of tea or a cigarette. At breakfast, his elder daughter Valeria poured him milk and fed him with a fork. Going out later, Kucherenko put on a bionic arm. He collected Valeria from school and she walked by his side, holding his hook.

Kucherenko plans to return as a military instructor. "I won't be able to fight, but I'll still be able to help the armed forces," he said. He recently visited his unit "to show them that I'm here, I'm alive. I can do it."

He even fired an assault rifle. "He will go back. He lives for this," said Veronika. "But first he needs to learn how to go to the toilet by himself."



WHY DO IT

Crafting stories that resonate with youths

Writer Subin Bhattarai discusses his writing journey and how he is always keen on creating stories that captivate the youth.

ANISH GHIMIRE
KATHMANDU

In 2011, writer Subin Bhattarai, fresh out of his master's in environmental science, decided to pursue his passion for storytelling by publishing a collection of stories titled 'Kathaki Patra'. Unable to secure a job, he took the plunge and launched his debut book at a small gathering in a café in Kathmandu.

"I gathered the stories I had written since high school and decided to compile them into a book," he explains. To achieve this, he taught himself how to type in Nepali and meticulously typed out each story on his computer. Despite his hardwork, the book failed to capture a wide readership. "While there were a few comments from the critics, my book didn't gain traction, and I suffered a huge financial loss," he recalls.

He dedicated the next year to studying the market and tried to find out the kind of stories youths were interested in reading. He found inspiration close

to home. "I decided to write about my surroundings. My environment in college and what I saw on a regular basis," he says. And so he locked himself away from the world for three months and prepared 'Summer Love'.

The acclaimed 2012 novel is a story of two characters in love, Saaya and Atit. "I fell in love with Saaya," Bhattarai tells me with a spark in his eyes. "As I began writing about her, I couldn't get her off my mind. The character felt so real that readers often asked me for photos of her. But she is a product of mind."

The novel published by FinePrint became popular overnight and gave Bhattarai a place in the Nepali literary scene. But something most of his readers don't know is that long before 'Summer Love', Bhattarai had already earned his name as a child actor.

Hailing from Khotang, he moved to Kathmandu early in his childhood. Poetry fascinated him. Ever since he was in the first grade, he remembers writ-

ing. By the time he was in the third grade, his poetries were selected to be recited in a literature program at Radio Nepal. "Every Friday there used to be a literature programme focusing on children in Radio Nepal and I often sent out my poems. When they got selected, I went to the studio to recite them," he says.

Slowly he moved to TV. In 1995, when Bhattarai was in the eighth grade he acted in a TV serial called, 'Twakka Tukka' which aired on Nepal Television. The character he played was likeable and he remembers being recognised by people while walking on the streets. "But academic responsibilities took over and I had to leave that profession altogether. If I had kept going, who knows how different my path would have been today."

Long before 'Summer Love', Bhattarai had earned his name as a child actor.

Bhattarai regularly played different characters in radio dramas that aired on Radio Nepal. He was inspired by the characters he played, scripts he read and the stories he heard. His fascination with stories doubled when he began reading BP Koirala.

"There are very few writers like Koirala," says Bhattarai, adding that few writers have consistently put out good books like Koirala. To this day, he fantasises about meeting Koirala, talking to him for hours or travelling with him.

And when he finds himself in writer's block, he sits back with a Koirala classic and something comes alive inside of him. "His books always bring out the writer in me," he says.

After SLC (now SEE) he had to study science due to familial pressure. "When I expressed my interest in studying arts at home,

it was immediately rejected as being a non-practical choice of career," he says. So he went about studying science but not taking his eyes off literature. He regularly wrote poems and often recited them to his friends.

His literary career began with the launch of 'Kathaki Patra' but it took off after 'Summer Love'. Especially the youths gravitated towards the book. A year and a half later, Bhattarai wrote the sequel named 'Saaya'. This 2014 book has the point of view of three characters—a storytelling tactic inspired by Koirala's 'Babu, Ama ra Chhora'.

"When we launched this book, it was like a concert. So many people attended (the launch) that I felt overwhelmed and looking back, that is one of happiest days of my career so far," he recalls with a smile.

After another romance novel named 'Monsoon' which came out in 2016, Bhattarai realised his work might have become too repetitive. So, he took a "risk" and launched 'Priya Sufi'. This 2018 book focuses on sisterhood and mental health. More than the romance, this book focuses on familial ties, addressing suicide and beating long-term illness. "To my relief, the audience gladly accepted the book even though the story was a bit different than what readers expected of me," he says.

In 2022, he launched his sixth book 'Joriya' and this novel's story is based in the Maithili community. Before presenting this book to the market, Bhattarai researched quite a bit about the community. He is keen on giving people a fresh story or a relatable story. Looking ahead, he hopes to expand his literary expertise and work on other forms of literature as well, such as poetry and film script writing.

"Writers need to be recognised more," he says. Bhattarai doesn't subscribe to the popular notion of writers wanting to stay in one corner, not wanting to be recognised. "Writers need to come forward and be more expressive in their writings because we are people with a voice," he says.

The triumph of vinyl

Barely one million new vinyl albums were sold in the United States in 2006 but that figure has soared to just over 49 million units in 2023.

JOSH GREENBERG

Previously relegated to the dustbin of media history, the vinyl LP has undergone a revival during the past decade to once again become the best selling physical format for recorded music today.

Where barely one million new vinyl albums were sold in the United States in 2006, that figure has grown every year since, soaring to just over 49 million units in 2023. One in every 15 vinyl albums sold last year—approximately 7% of all sales (more than three million units)—were by Taylor Swift.

This is a global media comeback story. It is so significant the BBC recently reported that after a 30-year absence Britain's Office of National Statistics has placed vinyl records back into the basket of goods it uses for tracking consumer pricing and measuring inflation.

How is it that a media format as clunky, costly and fragile as vinyl would become so popular in an age of ubiquitous digital content? How is it that of all forms of recorded music, vinyl is the first to return to dominance from a state of near extinction? Why is it that an artist like Taylor Swift, whose core fan base is more familiar with

companies like Apple or Spotify than high-end record turntables made by Thorens or VPI, would be the biggest selling artist of vinyl music?

There is no single reason behind this vinyl revival. One thing is clear, however: the massive growth in demand is a marketing triumph that is being driven by promotional culture. Old media is new again, vinyl is vintage and advertisers are adept at repackaging the past and selling it back to us for profit in the present.

From apocalyptic thrillers like *Leave the World Behind* to period music dramas like the criminally underrated *The Get Down*, and popular TV shows situated in the present—like *Hijack*, *Suits*, *Transparent* and *Bosch*—the presence of turntables and vinyl collections in their respective set designs delight vintage hi-fi enthusiasts and vinyl nerds.

Saturated in nostalgia

As these examples illustrate, today's pop culture mediascape is saturated in nostalgia. Media companies, brands, marketers and even artists themselves are skilled at turning our longing for the past into desire in the present that can be satiated with consumer goods. We immerse ourselves in reconstructions of bygone eras and enact the sociocultural imaginaries of earlier times by latching to their products and incorporating them into our everyday lives.

Jazz music played on a turntable is an important component in the Prime TV series 'Bosch.' Beyond the culture shaping influence of the promotion industries, there are also compelling sociological reasons for why vinyl is back in such a big way.

Advertisers are adept at repackaging the past and selling it back to us for profit in the present.

As a media sociologist I'm compelled to think about how seeking, acquiring, collecting and displaying one's music collection—and one's vinyl collection, in particular—are sociocultural activities that enable the creation and expression of identity.

One doesn't simply become a vinyl collector automatic-

ly. The process of becoming a collector is a communicative phenomenon requiring the enactment of various ritual ordeals that are performed to convey authority, expertise and specialised knowledge about the distinctions between first pressings and reissues, the best techniques for cleaning and maintaining one's collection, the backstory behind The Beatles' infamous 'butcher cover' artwork on their 1966 studio album 'Yesterday' and 'Today' and other issues.

Collecting records is a form of identity

For many audiophiles—those who prioritise sound quality, the provenance of sound recordings and the science of sound reproduction above all else—vinyl is considered an essential medium because of its allegedly superior sonic properties.

A clean pressing of my favourite Herbie Hancock album played through a quality hi-fi system arguably offers a warmer, fuller, more transparent reproduction of the original studio performance than can be provided by a CD or streaming service.

Although digitally encoded music delivers technically better signal-to-noise ratio and frequency response, vinyl provides a distinctive aural feel for the music and a qualitatively different (some might say superior) sonic experience.

So much of the music we listen to now is transmitted from the cloud to apps on our mobile devices via compressed audio files that sound flat and unexpressive. There is something to be said about listening to a format like vinyl that, by contrast, sounds more open, dynamic and alive.

Repackaged memories

Memories are not permanent or fixed. They are, rather, constructs that are entangled with the media technologies that shape the events and rhythms of our lives. Perhaps this is why they are so easily repackaged and sold back to us.

When I play a copy of Iron Maiden's best-selling 1982 album 'The Number of the Beast' (the first record I ever bought with my own money), I experience more than just a recording of the band's breakthrough studio performance.

A premature death

In 1984, Rolling Stone contributing writer Fred Goodman prematurely published vinyl's obituary when he wrote 'Record Industry Preparing to Bury the Vinyl LP' just as CD technology and cassette use were becoming the dominant media of choice for popular music fans.

Though vinyl sales plummeted in the two decades that followed, the format's storied comeback and meteoric rise in popularity over the past 15 years are in some respects confounding.

For one thing, we live in a time of digital ephemera where rapid access to media content is reasonably affordable. Moreover, the digital mediascape generates its own consequences that help explain why vinyl has become so vital again.

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SHUTTERSTOCK



Bhattarai at the launch of his latest book 'Joriya'.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF SUBIN BHATTARAI

A fusion of global sounds at KatJazz Festival 2024

POST REPORT
KATHMANDU

The annual KatJazz Festival is back, promising an exciting journey through the world of jazz from April 22 to 30. Under the theme 'The Jazz Trail to Kathmandu: Past Voices, Global Sounds, Future Harmonies', this year's event invites music enthusiasts to immerse themselves in a fusion of contemporary beats and traditional melodies from Nepal and beyond.

The festival will kick off with nightly concerts, building up to the grand celebration of International Jazz Day on April 30. Attendees can expect a lineup featuring renowned international acts like Juliana Rodrigues from Brazil, the Ben van den Dungen Quartet from the Netherlands, and Enji hailing from Mongolia and Germany.

Local talents will perform in the nine-day event as well, with performances by Jhuma Limbu and Raithane Music, Samyog Regmi and Co, and featured musicians, including Tomás Carrasco, Shree KC and Manice Gandarva.

Organised in collaboration with Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory, Seen and KGarira, and supported by Little Star Records, the Spanish Embassy and UNESCO, the festival promises diverse performances at different venues across Kathmandu, including Alliance Francaise, Jazz Upstairs, Moksh and Mandala Theater.

Festival schedule:

- April 22:** Piano Explorations with Javi Galiana and Juliana Rodriguez at Alliance Francaise, Dhobighat, Lalitpur
- April 23:** Samyog Regmi and Co at Jazz Upstairs, Lazimpat, Kathmandu
- April 24:** Ben van den Dungen Quartet at Dhokaima Cafe, Patan Dhoka, Lalitpur
- April 25:** Enji at Moksh, Jhamsikhel, Lalitpur
- April 26:** Versados Despiastados at EDN, Sanepa, Lalitpur
- April 27:** 'The Diverse Voices of Women in Jazz' featuring Juliana Rodriguez, Enji Trio and Maria Fajardo at Yellow House, Sanepa, Lalitpur
- April 29:** Jhuma Limbu Raithane Music at Mandala Theater, New Baneshwar, Kathmandu
- April 30:** International Jazz Day Concert (presentation of Gyan Residency) at Moksh, Jhamsikhel, Lalitpur



COLLAGE: COURTESY OF KATHMANDU JAZZ CONSERVATORY

A collage of all the performers for KatJazz 2024.

What: KatJazz Festival 2024
When: April 22 to 30
Time: 7:00 pm everyday
Tickets: Rs5,000 for full festival pass, special discount for students