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WITHOUT FEAR OR FAVOUR

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Simara Jomsom

NID failed to warn of unrest, PM sought police briefings instead

The National Investigation Department has long failed to provide timely intelligence on major security threats after years of neglect by successive governments.

GAURAV POKHAREL
KATHMANDU, AUG 4

When communal tensions flared up in Dewanganj of Sunsari and swiftly spread across neighbouring districts in Madhesh province, Prime Minister Balendra Shah summoned Inspector General of Nepal Police Dan Bahadur Karki and Armed Police Force chief Narayan Datta Paudel to his office for an emergency briefing.

During the separate high-level consultations held at the Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers on July 29, Shah notably excluded Tekendra Karki, head of the National Investigation Department (NID)—the country's sole civilian intelligence agency operating directly under his office.

During the meeting with the two security chiefs, Prime Minister Shah sought answers regarding the breakdown of order in Madhesh. "How did the situation in Sunsari go out of control? Under what exact circumstances were live rounds fired, and how did warning shots result in a civilian fatality?" Shah asked. A second victim succumbed to injuries the following day, July 30.

According to the briefings submitted by the two security chiefs, the initial confrontation erupted between two local groups in Sunsari at approximately 10:13 pm on July 26. A small police unit led by Assistant Sub-Inspector Prakash Kumar Shrestha from the Kaptanganj Police Post was dispatched to the scene.

As the crowd grew increasingly hostile, Shrestha requested urgent reinforcements. Inspector Rakesh Rai arrived shortly after from the Area Police Office in Dewanganj with an

eight-man team. However, both security details were ambushed by violent mobs armed with wooden logs, stones, and bamboo sticks, forcing an immediate retreat.

Under heavy assault, Inspector Rai fired three warning rounds from his pistol. The security heads stated that a subsequent Armed Police Force unit deployed to regain control of the perimeter fired at least 20 warning shots at around 10:45 pm.

A former chief investigation director of the NID said Prime Minister Shah missed a critical independent perspective by omitting the intelligence chief from these briefings.

"In Siraha, it remains completely unverified who actually fired the lethal bullet, as neither security agency has admitted that their personnel fired the fatal round," he said. "Had the prime minister consulted the NID chief, he could have received objective, unvarnished information distinct from the operational accounts offered by the frontline police forces."

However, Prime Minister Shah saw little utility in meeting NID chief Karki. By statutory mandate, the department is charged with gathering preemptive intelligence on matters threatening national security and alerting the executive before crises erupt. While law enforcement agencies act after the fact, the NID is expected to operate beforehand.

According to its official mandate, the department's core responsibilities encompass collecting intelligence on economic crimes, terrorism, and organised crime, as well as detecting threats to religious, cultural, and communal harmony.

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In office for four-and-a-half months, Shah administration faces mounting questions

The RSP government says it is moving quickly to reform the state, but a series of controversial decisions, delayed crisis responses and accusations of bypassing institutions have fuelled criticism over its commitment to democratic norms.



The Balendra Shah-led Cabinet pictured during a meeting last week.

SUDEEP KAINI
KATHMANDU, AUG 4

Four-and-a-half months after Prime Minister Balendra Shah took office, his government finds itself facing mounting criticism over its style of governance, with opponents, constitutional experts and political analysts accusing it of sidelining democratic institutions while pursuing rapid reforms.

Since assuming office on March 27, the government has presented itself as an administration determined to overhaul Nepal's governance system through swift structural changes. But many of its major decisions over the past 130 days have sparked controversy, prompting questions about transparency, accountability and adherence to constitutional procedures.

Critics say the government has

increasingly relied on social media to communicate major policy decisions, often creating confusion over official processes. The prime minister's Facebook posts have regularly featured policy announcements, political commentary and responses to controversies, leading opponents to accuse him of attempting to govern through social media rather than established state institutions.

One of the earliest controversies came during the joint sitting of Parliament on May 11, when Shah walked out while President Ramchandra Paudel was still delivering the government's annual policies and programmes. The move was widely criticised by opposition parties and constitutional experts as a breach of parliamentary decorum and state protocol.

Another dispute followed the government's decision to introduce a three percent tax on private education and healthcare services through the national budget. The proposal drew widespread public criticism, with opponents arguing that it would make essential services more expensive.

Amid growing pressure, the government withdrew the tax. However, the decision itself generated fresh criticism after Shah announced on Facebook that the "Education and Health Equity Tax" would be scrapped a day before the Cabinet formally approved the reversal, raising concerns that major executive decisions were being announced before completing official procedures. Arjun Dhooj Aryal, an assistant professor at Tribhuvan University's Central Department of Political Science, said governments must build consensus instead of relying on unilateral decisions. "An executive should move forward by taking political parties, institutions and society into confidence," Aryal said, arguing that governance through executive announcements and public messaging risks undermining institutional checks and balances.

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China border disruptions stall EV imports

Electric vehicle imports fell 24 percent last fiscal year as prolonged closures at Rasuwagadhi and Tatopani choked supplies. Dealers warn fresh disruptions could delay launches at this month's major automobile exhibitions.

KRISHANA PRASAIN
KATHMANDU, AUG 4

Months-long disruptions at Nepal's two main northern border crossings have slowed the country's fast-growing electric vehicle (EV) market, caused imports to fall sharply, and threatened the launch of new models ahead of this month's two biggest automobile exhibitions.

EV imports, which had expanded rapidly over the past five years and made Nepal one of the world's fastest adopters of electric mobility, dropped by 24.03 percent in the last fiscal year ended mid-July, according to the Department of Customs.

Overall imports of four-wheelers—including passenger buses, minibuses and private vehicles—declined by 19.07 percent during the review period.

Higher prices have pushed many EV buyers towards models below Rs4 million, dealers say.

Nepal imported 17,688 four-wheelers worth Rs40.44 billion in the last fiscal year, of which 13,004 units were EVs valued at Rs31.32 billion.

The supply crunch comes as disruptions continue along the China border, raising concerns that automakers may not be able to unveil new models on schedule at the NAIMA Nepal Mobility Expo 2026, which begins on August 11, and the NADA Auto Show 2026, starting on August 25.

"We couldn't import 400 to 500 EVs as planned in the last fiscal year because of disruptions at the China border," said Yamuna Shrestha, managing director of Cimex Inc, the authorised distributor of Chinese EV leader BYD.

Trade through Nepal's northern gateways has been repeatedly disrupted over the past year.

On July 8 last year, a flash flood in the Lhende river swept away the Friendship Bridge at Kerung, one of Nepal's principal trade gateways with China. It took nearly six months for China to construct a temporary bridge. Nepal's Rasuwagadhi customs point lies about 24 kilometres south of Kerung.

The Tatopani border crossing in Sindhupalchok was also shut for nearly three months last year after mas-

sive landslides blocked the route.

"The northern border points remained disrupted for four to five months in the last fiscal year, including the festive season. That itself was a huge loss for traders," Shrestha said.

"Although we managed to reroute some EV shipments through the Korala border point, importing from there was difficult."

She urged the government to act more swiftly whenever trade routes are disrupted.

"The government should ensure smooth trade whenever such obstructions occur. This is not only about importing EVs but all goods.

Major trade routes should be prioritised because we have not been able to deliver EVs on time as committed," she said.

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POST PHOTO: PARBAT PORTEL

Nepali Army soldiers out on a patrol in Dewanganj, Sunsari last week after a curfew order was enforced after communal violence erupted on July 26.

Nepali musicians challenge AI voice misappropriation

Artists say songs are being recreated with cloned voices and sold on digital platforms without permission, even as the technology quietly becomes the soundtrack of everyday life.

AARYA CHAND & RISHIKA DHAKAL
KATHMANDU, AUG 4

On June 29, singer Sugam Pokharel posted a status on Facebook with a stern warning. He issued an immediate demand for the removal of unauthorised AI-generated content utilising his or other artists' works. "If you ignore this request," he wrote, "we will have no choice but to bring you within the jurisdiction of the law, wherever you may be, in Nepal or anywhere else in the world."

The status included screenshots of AI covers of his originals uploaded on Youtube and Tiktok.

Pokharel says he first learned his songs were being run through AI months earlier, not from any platform notification but from listeners who told him directly.

He says he is not opposed to AI itself. He uses apps like Suno, the AI music creation platform, in his own creative process. He feeds in his lyrics and compositions to the app to sketch out arrangements before handing them to a producer. For an arranger, the work would take hours, if not days. Now it can be done at a fraction of the cost and time, he says.

What Pokharel objects to is the unauthorised use of his voice, melodies and lyrics. This distinction—AI as a creative tool versus a means of misappropriation—is a hot topic in

Nepal's music industry today.

The debate has reached law enforcement. Bimal Adhikari, who runs the label Bhavna Music Solution, recently took his complaint to Nepal Police's Cyber Bureau. He first noticed songs under his label being altered and re-uploaded about six or seven months ago and initially assumed the trend would fade out on its own. It didn't. His work was relabelled under different names and traded commercially; by the time he acted, somewhere between 40 and 50 of his songs had been altered with the help of AI, several traced to a single person operating 10 to 12 YouTube channels.

Adhikari is precise about what makes this different from AI music in general. "Even if a song is made by AI, the melody is 100 percent the melody I created," he says. "The lyrics are also the same. It isn't an AI-generated song. It is my composition and my words."

Deputy Superintendent of Police Gajendra Acharya said the Bureau categorises complaints based on the nature of the offence rather than under a dedicated AI music category.

As a result, it was unable to provide statistics on AI music-related complaints.

Adhikari adds he worries about what comes next. Automated copyright-detection systems, he fears, could eventually flag original artists for infringement on their own material, while the anonymous channels



SHUTTERSTOCK

that triggered the confusion disappear and resurface under new names, leaving the strike behind on the real artist's account.

Adhikari has so far filed an individual copyright complaint against around 95 YouTube channels for unauthorised use of his content. Many of the cases were later settled after those responsible apologised, acknowledged their wrongdoing and removed the

offending content.

Both Pokharel and Adhikari trace part of the problem back to the law itself. Nepal's Copyright Act was passed in 2002. Pokharel argues that it was never formulated to anticipate voice cloning. "If someone takes your house or your property, paints it a different colour, and then puts it on the market to sell, that's illegal, isn't it?" Pokharel says. Noting that current

prime minister, Balendra Shah, is himself a musician, Pokharel says the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology should prioritise updating the laws.

Not everyone experiencing the shift sees only loss in it. Santosh Chapagain, who owns Pass Café in Kathmandu, has played AI-generated music for eight or nine months now, a habit he traces to the period around the Gen Z movement. "Music is life for musicians," Chapagain says. "But for us, music is for entertainment, for peace of mind." He adds, "We play whichever music makes us happy."

From devotional songs in the morning to timeless classics or rap, he plays it all in his cafe. His customers have noticed this change, some have remarked that he used to play the old songs before, but he says there has been no real pushback, and he has found uses for the technology beyond convenience: AI-generated bhajans, or turning a sad Dashain song into a happy one on request.

According to Nepal's laws, and laws around the world, Chapagain says, using someone's copyrighted work without permission is illegal. He would support a labelling requirement if regulators introduced one for cafés, he says. But he doesn't see the original and the AI version as competing versions.

"Original is original. Gold is still gold," he said. "Its price changes over

time, but its value remains."

Utsaha Joshi (Uniq Poet), an artist who works with AI tools directly, says the popular image of how the music actually gets made—one prompt, one upload—is wrong. It starts with a human vision: humming a melody, writing lyrics, sometimes playing and recording instruments before any prompting begins.

Only after that groundwork comes AI-assisted production, which includes prompting, re-prompting, separating stems, and assembling the result "brick by brick." What gets automated, in this account, is manual execution, not creative direction.

If a generation draws on an artist's own data, Joshi argues, that artist should be paid for it, however small the amount, which would require music models to be trained alongside a genuine attribution system and a clear opt-out for artists.

The question—how to make AI's use of an artist's voice visible, if not yet compensable—is what a new global labelling initiative is also attempting to address, at least on paper. Announced by the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI) and the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), alongside other organisations including the Grammy Awards' organisers, the voluntary framework introduces two labels:

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NEWS

Shah government’s fast-paced reform push draws institutional scrutiny

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The government's handling of communal violence in Madhesh has emerged as another major subject of criticism.

The unrest began on July 26 in Dewanganj, Sunsari, after a dispute between two local communities escalated into violence. Police opened fire while trying to control the situation, killing Om Prakash Mehta. His death triggered protests that spread to several districts across Madhesh and Koshi provinces, disrupting normal life for nearly a week.

As tensions escalated, critics questioned the government's response, saying senior leaders were slow to engage with the crisis. Neither Prime Minister Shah nor Home Minister Sudan Gurung visited the affected areas during the early days of the unrest.

Shah addressed the nation only on July 30, five days after the violence began. On the same day, Gurung travelled to Madhesh to begin talks with local leaders. By then, however, the unrest had spread to Golbazar in Siraha, where another person had died.

The week-long violence claimed four lives, including 15-year-old Ganesh Yadav of Aurahi Rural Municipality. Dozens of protesters and security personnel were injured, while public and private property was damaged in arson and vandalism. District administrations imposed curfews and prohibitory orders in several districts from Parsa to Dhanusha to contain the unrest.

In his address, Shah promised an impartial investigation into the deaths, pledged action against those responsible for inciting violence and appealed to the public not to spread communal hatred on social media. Peace talks led by the Home Ministry gradually helped restore normalcy.

Even so, the delayed response drew criticism from local residents, lawmakers and opposition leaders, who argued that quicker political intervention could have prevented further escalation.

The government's handling of the crisis became a major political issue on July 30 when Rastriya Swatantra Party chair Rabi Lamichhane convened an all-party meeting at Singha Durbar to discuss the deteriorating security situation. Opposition leaders argued that such an initiative should have been led by the prime minister himself.

Before addressing the nation, Shah's only public comments on the violence had come through Facebook, where he wrote that the government's foremost duty was to ensure public security, punish those responsible and provide justice and compensation to victims.

Following the all-party meeting, opposition leaders accused the government of failing to provide timely leadership during one of the country's most serious security crises in recent months.

Nepali Congress president Gagan Thapa questioned the prime minister's absence during the early days of the unrest.

"Should a prime minister remain distant and act like an overlord during such a sensitive national crisis, when he should instead be leading the response?" Thapa told reporters after the meeting. Aryal also argued that prompt political leadership could have reduced the scale of the violence.

"If the prime minister had intervened immediately with empathy and decisive leadership, the communal tension in Sunsari and neighbouring districts could have been contained much earlier," he said.

Parliamentary absence and diplomatic controversy deepen scrutiny
Prime Minister Shah's relationship with Parliament has become another major source of political contention, with opposition parties accusing him of repeatedly avoiding legislative scrutiny while choosing other platforms to defend key government decisions.

Since the new Parliament convened, opposition lawmakers have repeatedly demanded that the head of the government appear in the House of Representatives to answer questions on government policy, national security and executive actions. Instead, critics say, Prime Minister Shah has often delegated those responsibilities to ministers or responded through pub-

lic speeches and social media.

The issue first came to the fore during deliberations on the government's annual policies and programmes in May. The parliamentary agenda circulated before the sitting indicated that Shah would respond to lawmakers' questions. However, the schedule was changed at the last minute, and Finance Minister Swarnim Wagle answered on behalf of the government.

The incident followed another controversy on May 11, when Shah walked out of the joint session of Parliament while President Ramchandra Paudel was still delivering the government's policy address. His secretariat and Finance Minister Wagle later said the prime minister had left because of a sudden health problem, but opposition lawmakers remained unconvinced, particularly as Shah stayed away from key parliamentary proceedings during the budget session.

After weeks of absence following the presentation of the national budget on May 29, Shah unexpectedly appeared in the House of Representatives on May 31 to answer

Communist Party, Rastriya Prajatantra Party and other parties protested in Parliament, accusing the government of failing to brief the legislature on one of the country's most serious security crises in recent months.

NCP lawmaker Gopal Sharma said that as the sovereign representative body, Parliament had the right to receive a full account of the government's handling of the violence.

"The Sunsari incident has shaken the entire country," Sharma said in the House. "In such a sensitive situation, the prime minister should have come to Parliament to inform the sovereign House about the incident and the overall situation. But where is our prime minister?"

Opposition leaders argue that Shah's repeated absence has weakened parliamentary accountability at a time when the government has been making far-reaching policy decisions.

Political analysts say the criticism is less about the number of appearances than about the message they send regarding the executive's relationship with the legislature.

Under Nepal's parliamentary sys-

tem, they argue, the prime minister is expected to defend government policies, answer lawmakers' questions and remain accountable to Parliament, particularly during national crises or controversies involving foreign policy.

tion leaders and governance experts argue that several appointments have instead reflected political considerations. One frequently cited example is the High Powered Committee for Integrated Development of the Bagmati Civilisation, where the government appointed Anand Singh Bhat as executive chairman despite another candidate topping the official merit list prepared by the selection committee.

Questions have also been raised over appointments to the Shahid Dashrath Chand University of Medical Sciences, the Security Printing Centre, the Guthi Sansthan, the Health Insurance Board, Nepal Scouts and the Tribhuvan University Service Commission.

Critics argue that some appointments favoured individuals with political links to the ruling Rastriya Swatantra Party, contradicting the administration's promise to depoliticise public institutions.

Another recurring criticism concerns the growing influence of the prime minister's secretariat.

Although the government won



POST FILE PHOTO

Several decisions of the Rastriya Swatantra Party government have been blocked by the Supreme Court.

lawmakers' questions.

Rather than easing tensions, the session triggered one of the government's most significant diplomatic controversies.

While responding to questions on border management and Nepal's territorial disputes with India, Shah told Parliament that he had learned after becoming prime minister that "not only has India encroached on Nepal's land, but Nepal has also encroached on India's land in multiple places."

The remarks prompted immediate criticism from lawmakers across the political spectrum, who described the statement as unsubstantiated and potentially damaging to Nepal's long-standing diplomatic position on border disputes.

Opposition parties demanded that the prime minister return to Parliament to clarify his remarks and apologise, arguing that such statements required clear evidence and careful diplomatic handling.

Instead of addressing the issue in the House, Shah responded weeks later at the inaugural convention of Rastriya Swatantra Party in Chitwan on June 21.

Speaking to party supporters, he defended his commitment to Nepal's territorial claims and said there should be no doubt about his nationalism.

"When we raise border issues, the neighbouring country naturally shows interest," Shah said. "We have evidence regarding Kalapani and Lipulekh. If we need to retrieve documents from the period of British rule, we will do so. We are not asking the British to mediate. We will resolve these matters directly with our neighbours."

His remarks, however, did little to satisfy opposition lawmakers, who argued that explanations on matters of national importance should be delivered in Parliament rather than at a party gathering.

The issue resurfaced on July 30, when opposition parties again demanded the prime minister's presence in the House, this time over the communal unrest in Sunsari and other districts of Madhesh.

Lawmakers from the Nepali Congress, CPN-UML, Nepali

praise early in its tenure for reducing the number of ministries from 21 to 18, opponents say the savings were offset by allowing ministers to retain large personal secretariats staffed with political advisers.

The prime minister's secretariat, in particular, has faced allegations of interfering in bureaucratic decisions, procurement processes and the work of independent institutions.

The most prominent example centres on the procurement of Nepal's new electronic passports.

The Department of Passports awarded the contract to German firms Veridos and Mühlbauer on June 6, 2025. Members of the prime minister's secretariat later questioned the procurement process, alleging financial irregularities and claiming the companies would be unable to deliver the passports on time.

On June 15, senior officials from the secretariat convened a meeting at the Prime Minister's Office attended by representatives of the Department of Passports, the two German companies and senior officials of the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA).

According to critics, the meeting placed pressure on the anti-graft body to investigate the procurement and initiate legal action against officials involved.

The CIAA arrested former department's director general Tirtha Raj Aryal the same day and later filed corruption cases against 18 people, including civil servants and representatives of the German firms.

However, the government's position came under renewed scrutiny on June 29 when the Special Court released Aryal and the other defendants on bail, citing insufficient grounds for continued detention.

Meanwhile, the German companies proceeded with the production and delivery of Nepal's electronic passports, despite earlier claims that they would be unable to fulfil the contract.

Subsequent reports also alleged that the PMO had pressed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Passports to cancel the procure-

ment process.

As AI-generated covers spread, Nepali musicians fight to reclaim their voices

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"Created by AI," for content where the main vocals or lead instrumental tracks were substantially AI-generated, and "AI-Assisted," for human-made music that used AI for specific elements, with a requirement to disclose clearly if a person did not perform the main vocals or instruments.

Some platforms are already moving. Deezer now automatically tags AI-generated uploads and reports that nearly half of new submissions to the platform are AI-generated, with a detection system it says is 99.8 percent accurate. An Apple Music official said earlier this year that more than a third of new uploads to the platform are fully AI-generated.

Spotify introduced a "Spotify-verified" label last April aimed at confirming official artist content and curbing AI impersonation. The Digital Media Association, which represents

Apple Music, Amazon Music and Spotify, has welcomed the framework, saying it will give listeners clearer information and strengthen the metadata attached to AI content.

None of this is specific to Nepal. No domestic streaming service or regulator has proposed a comparable disclosure system, even as Nepali listeners are, by several accounts here, already encountering unlabelled AI-generated music daily: in cafés, on buses, at devotional gatherings, without being told.

Suresh Manandhar, an AI scientist, sees the same divide from a different angle. In his view, AI has genuinely lowered the barrier to making music. From cutting the cost and time of composing and writing lyrics for artists who already create, while opening music-making to people who couldn't previously afford it.

"That is a very positive effect," he said. The problem, he said, isn't the tool.

It's that someone who is skilled with the tool but isn't a creator can take an original artist's lyrics or music and "twist it into their own creation," which is where questions of ownership and attribution—still unresolved in Nepal—begin.

Asked where the line should sit between creative use and unauthorised imitation, Manandhar reached for an analogy from his own field. "Just as we provide citations and references in academic work, any AI-generated content should be clearly labelled as 'AI-Generated,'" he said. Voice cloning, in his view, is the clearest case for mandatory labelling and attribution. Lyrics are trickier, since reworking existing lyrics or melodies into something new predates AI, Hindi film songs have long borrowed from English or Nepali ones. He argued that the ownership rules therefore shouldn't change just because AI was involved: if a person turns one set of lyrics into another using an AI

tool, the work, and the ownership, is still theirs, and the legal question should be judged exactly as it would be without AI in the picture.

But Manandhar also cautioned that labelling alone won't settle what Nepali musicians are asking for, because "what exactly we are protecting" is not one thing.

Lyrics, musical style, audio-visual style, and an artist's cloned voice each need their own rule, he said, rather than a single blanket policy. He offered his own hypothesis: turning a Narayan Gopal song into a rap track. That transformation was possible before AI—it would simply have taken longer by hand—so the financial and intellectual ownership of the original hit, he argued, should be treated no differently whether AI was used to do it or not.

Looking ahead, Manandhar expects the technology to move from a production shortcut to something closer to a

collaborator. Within the next year, he said, artists are likely to work with AI agents that hold a working knowledge of everything they've previously created, letting a musician describe a mood, an instrument, or a visual setting and have the assistant draft variations to refine into a finished song—an extension, he said, of what people are already doing informally with short-form drafts on platforms like TikTok.

For now, the burden of flagging AI-generated music falls on artists themselves, checking their own catalogues, filing their own complaints, writing their own warnings on Facebook. Adhikari says his own case is resolved, for now. But he does not think it is over: "Other friends have thousands of songs that are being used purely for trade," he said. "I believe this issue will be raised by many others in the coming days."

before Gurung's reinstatement. The home minister's return attracted further scrutiny after an NHRC panel investigating the Gen-Z protests of September 8 and 9 reportedly recommended action against him. NHRC Commissioner Lili Thapa later questioned whether investigations could remain impartial when an individual facing scrutiny headed the ministry responsible for law enforcement.

The government's handling of another high-profile case also came under criticism after the Department of Money Laundering Investigation arrested former finance minister and CPN-UML Vice-Chair Bishnu Prasad Paudel on June 22.

Paudel spent 25 days in custody before the Special Court ordered his release on July 17, citing insufficient primary evidence to support the prosecution's case.

Within the civil service, uncertainty over possible reforms has fuelled growing unease.

Reports that the government was considering mandatory retirement after 30 years of service or at the age of 55 prompted a wave of resignation requests from senior bureaucrats, although no such policy has been implemented.

The appointment of Govinda Bahadur Karki as chief secretary on July 8 also drew criticism after several more senior secretaries were overlooked. A day later, prime minister's political adviser Asim Shah presided over the farewell ceremony for outgoing chief secretary Suman Raj Aryal, an unusual role for a political appointee that some former bureaucrats described as a breach of administrative convention.

Tensions within the bureaucracy deepened following the arrest of former secretary Krishna Hari Pushkar over a text message sent to the prime minister, while proposed changes affecting civil service unions and increased monitoring of government employees further contributed to unease among career officials.

By mid-July, frustration had spilled into public protest, with hundreds of contract employees demonstrating inside the Singha Durbar complex before reaching an agreement with the government over their employment.

Judicial reversals and policy defeats

The administration's aggressive policy moves have repeatedly faced setbacks in the Supreme Court, exposing concerns over executive overreach and weak institutional consultation.

On April 1, the Cabinet approved a directive restricting all government advertisements and public notices to state-owned media outlets, effectively cutting off a major source of revenue for independent private media organisations. Media groups, press freedom advocates and constitutional lawyers challenged the move, arguing that it threatened media pluralism and violated constitutional protections. On July 14, the Supreme Court overturned the directive, ruling it unconstitutional and discriminatory.

The government also suffered a setback over its attempt to ban student political organisations. As part of its 100-point "governance reform agenda", the Cabinet issued a decree prohibiting political student unions and Free Student Unions (FSU) in state universities and educational institutions. The decision sparked protests and nationwide strikes by student groups. The Supreme Court later stayed the order, stating that the executive could not curtail constitutional rights of association through administrative decisions.

Political analyst Sanjeev Humagain said the government came to power with strong public expectations but has struggled to convert that mandate into effective democratic governance.

"This government came to power by rightfully questioning the political, economic and social failures of the past three to four decades," Humagain said. "But a popular mandate does not allow a government to ignore institutional processes, bypass Parliament or govern through executive decrees and social media announcements."

He said the administration's claim of being on a learning curve was becoming increasingly difficult for the public to accept. "Structural reform requires institutional consensus, respect for the judiciary and administrative competence, not arbitrary force," he said.

OPINION



End market neglect

Nepali households are left to battle surging prices alone. The government must monitor markets better.

The cost of daily essentials has risen again, making life more expensive for Nepali households. For instance, just three months ago, you could buy a bag of *Jira Masino* rice for Rs2,100, but the same strain now costs about Rs2,500. The price of leafy vegetables has skyrocketed in Kathmandu. Cooking oil and dairy products account for the largest share of people's expenditure, while fruits, once a daily purchase for many households, have become less frequent. Commuting to and from office, schools and universities has also become costly. Kathmanduites are grappling with the artificial shortage of cooking gas in the market. As a result, families are compromising on how they eat, spend and save, with the burden falling disproportionately on low- and middle-income families.

When people complain about a pricey market, traders have their answers ready: higher import costs, an increase in the price of crude oil in the international market, seasonal supply shortages, a natural rise in demand before major festivals and rising transport expenses. These reasons are undeniable. But the Nepali market is also filled with unscrupulous traders and middlemen who artificially raise prices, leaving consumers suffering. Every year, authorities promise to keep markets under control, assuring consumers that unscrupulous traders will be held accountable and that black marketing and artificial shortages will be curtailed by deploying more market monitoring teams. Yet every year, the same story repeats, indicating that authorities are not doing enough to protect people from the excessive impact of market anomalies.

Consumer rights advocates find no solid economic reason for the ongoing rise in prices of daily essentials—and rightly so. Price hikes during tensions in West Asia were understandable, but those tensions have since eased. International supply chains are also showing signs of improvement. Even after the Department of Transport Management announced a 2 per cent reduction in inter-provincial public transport fares effective from early last month, passengers are still paying the inflated price. Thanks to weak market regulation and ineffective monitoring, the public continues to bear the brunt of price hikes.

The government should not leave people to fight surging prices of daily essentials alone; it must take visible actions and come up with long-term solutions to alleviate the public woe. To begin with, it can withdraw its revenue-collecting policies such as 5 percent VAT on household electricity consumption above 50 units and 13 percent VAT on non-household use. Such policies are detrimental and will only erode trust in the government. Additionally, regular monitoring activities alone will play a big role in curbing the artificial surge in prices in the market. As the festival season approaches, the need for stronger market oversight should be dealt with urgency. Activities like spreading exaggerated predictions of food and gas shortages must be contained.

A resilient agricultural system, which is the backbone of our economy, is another essential, sustainable component for managing price hikes and reducing Nepal's dependence on imported food and agricultural inputs. For this, investment in irrigation, storage facilities, rural roads and cold-chain infrastructure is necessary. By addressing these needs, the state can instil hope among citizens that it is committed to protecting their well-being.

THEIR VIEW

Price of promise

Voters deserve a more honest conversation about the trade-offs inherent in every promise.

Every election season in India produces an escalating contest of promises. Monthly cash transfers, free electricity, subsidised transport and a growing catalogue of welfare guarantees have become as central to campaigns as ideology or leadership. Yet once the ballots are counted, the arithmetic of governance invariably intrudes upon the poetry of politics.

Manifestos promise universality; budgets enforce selectivity. This recurring pattern is revealing. It is not merely about governments reneging on commitments. It reflects the uneasy balance between democratic competition and fiscal responsibility. Political parties must persuade voters that they can improve lives immediately. Governments, however, must operate within the constraints of tax revenues, debt obligations and statutory fiscal deficit limits. The result is that ambitious electoral pledges often emerge from the legislative process as narrower, more conditional programmes than those originally advertised. The phenomenon cuts across party lines.

Whether governed by the BJP, the Congress, regional parties or the Aam Aadmi Party, states have discovered that campaign generosity collides with the hard realities of public finance. Eligibility conditions become stricter; verification exercises reduce beneficiary lists, payments are staggered, and schemes are redesigned to lower the burden on state exchequers. Political rhetoric speaks the language of abundance; administration speaks the language of affordability. That should not automatically be interpreted as a betrayal of welfare.

India remains a country where millions depend on public support for basic security. Cash transfers, subsidised food, healthcare and educational assistance have often produced measurable improvements in human development. The question is not whether welfare is justified, but whether governments are candid about its long-term cost and sustainable financing. The greater danger lies elsewhere. If election campaigns become auctions of ever-larger giveaways, parties create expectations that cannot be honoured without compromising investment in infrastructure, education, public health and productive capital formation.

Borrowing to finance consumption may produce immediate political dividends, but persistent revenue deficits eventually narrow the state's capacity to invest in future growth. A government that spends overwhelmingly on recurring commitments has progressively less room to build roads, modernise irrigation, strengthen public universities or expand industrial capacity. Equally significant is what this trend says about the evolution of Indian democracy. Elections increasingly resemble transactions in which immediate material benefits overshadow debates on institutional reform, employment generation, productivity or governance.

Political parties respond rationally to voter incentives, but voters also deserve a more honest conversation about the trade-offs inherent in every promise. The real test of responsible politics is therefore not how generously parties write their manifestos, but how transparently they explain the choices that follow. Welfare should protect the vulnerable without weakening the state's fiscal foundations. Democratic credibility is strengthened not by the size of promises made before an election, but by the integrity with which governments reconcile compassion with economic prudence after they assume office.

— The Statesman (India)/ANN

Can't give my life away to Zuckerberg

The algorithm knows you better than you know yourself. While it may feel harmless on the surface, the reality is far more invasive.

ABHIYAN CHAUHAN



About a year ago, I was burned out from classes, work and life in general. For nearly a month, I ignored everyone, friends and family included. I was too deep in my own head to care. One of those days, while mindlessly scrolling Instagram, an ad stopped me cold. A woman with apparent concern in her eyes calmly said, "Not picking up calls from your loved ones, not answering texts, staying in your room all day isn't normal, and it's not healthy." Of course, it ended with the usual 'buy our product' sales pitch. Suddenly, I started getting bombarded with similar ads.

I always thought these platforms used targeted ads based on my search history, my likes and what I watched. But I had neither googled nor had I watched reels of that kind. So why was I suddenly flooded with these ads? I felt violated. It was as if the phone's camera was its eye, watching me silently all this time, smirking in the dark, patiently waiting for the perfect moment to throw these ads in my face. I couldn't shake this off at all. After thinking about it for a while, I remembered all these apps I was getting calls on: Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp are owned by the same corporation: Meta and at the centre of it all, Mark Zuckerberg.

Meta's market cap is approximately \$1.55 trillion, and Mark Zuckerberg's net worth as of July is \$237 billion. But the services he provides are all free. I have never paid a dollar to use any of those apps. So where does all this money come from? The answer is simple. This is just the classic case of "If you are not paying for the product, you are the product." Meta and other tech companies are in the business of selling their users, which is you and billions of people. It sounds like ancient history now, but do you remember when entire families would gather in the living room to watch a movie or a big sports match together? During the ad breaks, we all saw the same commercials. I might have been into Nike



AI GENERATED

shoes, my brother obsessed with Jordans, and my mom might be into makeup kits, yet we all had to watch the same Pepsi ad. Your TV didn't know anything about you, and personalisation wasn't possible.

But today, even if we're all watching the same game or the same show, the experience is completely different. We're each staring at our own separate screens, and those screens know us too well. I'll get served the Nike ad, my brother will see the Jordan one, and my mom will get the makeup promotion. The ad break that once united us now divides us into perfectly targeted little bubbles. And some people might argue that this is a fair tradeoff, even a net positive. After all, the algorithm knows you better than you know yourself. It shows you exactly what you want, making it easier and faster to discover products, trends and content you think you need. While it may feel harmless on the surface, the reality is far more invasive.

Everything we do online is being tracked and measured. The algorithm knows exactly which image you stop on and how long you look at it. It knows when you're happy, when you're sad, when you're secretly looking at photos

of your ex, what time you go to sleep, and what time you wake up. It knows whether you're an introvert or an extrovert, along with many other aspects of your personality. Although these are only predictions, they are becoming increasingly accurate. Shoshana Zuboff, a Harvard Business School professor and author of *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, calls this 'behavioural futures markets', a system where predictions about what you will do next are packaged and sold before you even do them. These platforms have collected more information about us than has ever been imagined in human history. All this data that we constantly pour out is being fed into highly automated systems, building sharper models of who we are and what we think.

I am not a customer for Meta. That would be the woman in that ad, the one trying to sell me something while I was shut off from the world. When an advertiser pays Meta to run an ad, they are not just buying exposure. They are buying certainty. Meta doesn't just promise that your ad will be seen. It gives them certainty that the right eyes will see it, at the right moment, in the right state of mind. The woman paid

Majority World's AI wake-up call

From Geneva to Kathmandu, global AI talks are missing the voices of developing nations—and it's time to change that.

SANTOSH SIGDEL

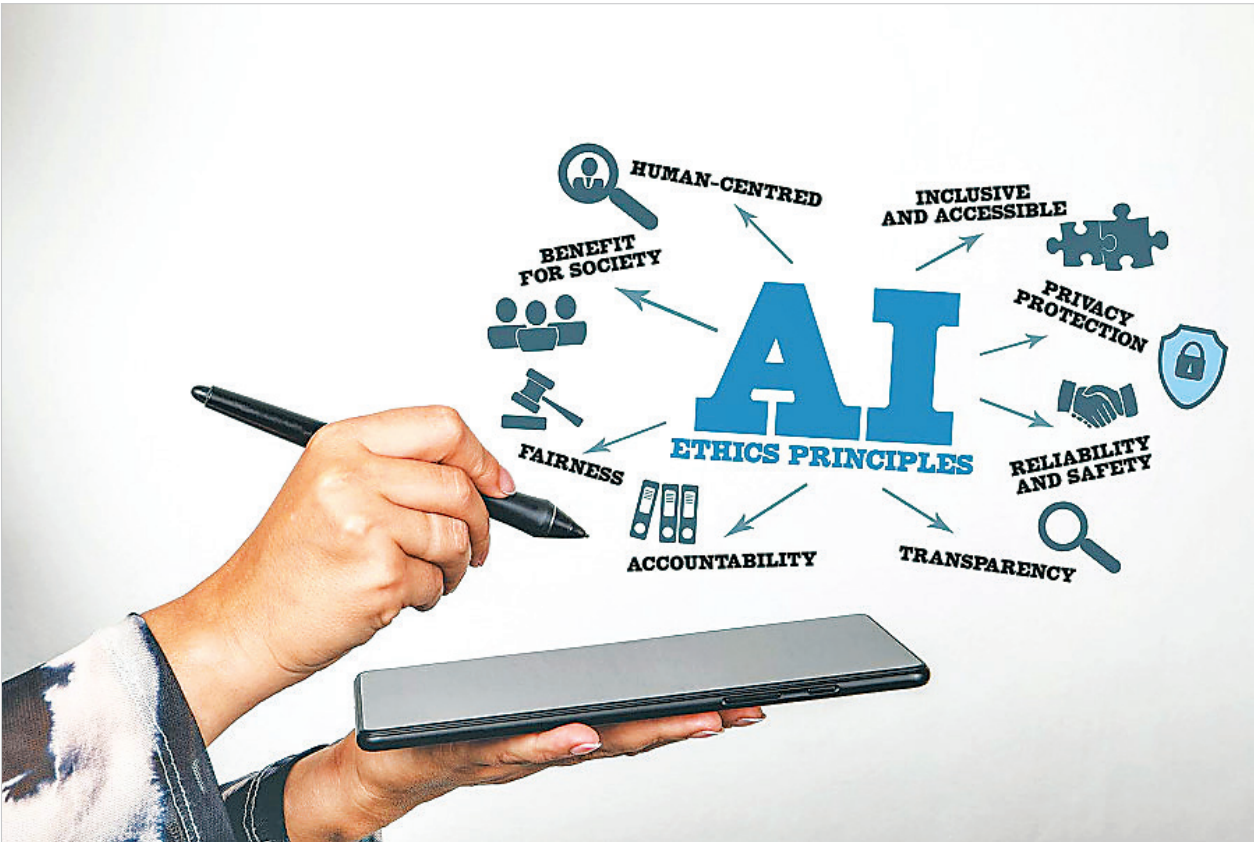


The inaugural UN Global Dialogue on Artificial Intelligence Governance (UNGDAI), mandated by the UN General Assembly, took place on July 6-7 in Geneva. The United Nations General Assembly established the global dialogue as an inclusive space within the UN for governments and stakeholders to deliberate on today's most pressing AI challenges, following intergovernmental negotiations and broad consultations with diverse stakeholders.

The four main themes of UNGDAI—AI opportunities, bridging AI divides, safe, secure, and trustworthy AI, and human rights—are highly relevant to least-developed countries and regions such as Nepal. With the growing adoption of ICT, the internet and AI in recent years, there is increasing excitement in the government and the private sector about reaping the benefits of AI. Similarly, the government's priority to regulate AI through laws and policies, including the recently adopted National AI Policy, the Data Centre and Cloud Service (Operation and Management) Directives, and its broader legislative agenda on AI, reflects the strong push by both government and businesses to capitalise on AI opportunities.

However, the discourse around bridging the digital and AI divide, ensuring AI systems are safe, secure, and trustworthy, and addressing their human rights implication remains overshadowed in Nepal. Nepal's AI Sector Maturity score is only 0.68 out of 100 as per the Government AI Readiness Index 2025 report prepared by Oxford Insights. In such a scenario, rather than treating AI as inevitable and pushing for blind adoption, Nepal should strive to build domestic AI capabilities and infrastructure; prioritise developing a comprehensive data protection ecosystem; build resilient cybersecurity systems and practices; and conduct economic, social, cultural and environmental AI impact assessments, to ensure that the AI systems and AI governance it adopts are just, inclusive and rights-respecting.

The UNGDAI was a useful multi-stakeholder platform where governments, including significant participation from technology companies, civil society and academia, came together to discuss the enormous opportunities AI has already created and is expected to create in the future. There appeared to be broad agreement on the need for a global framework for AI governance.



SHUTTERSTOCK

The discussions highlighted how nearly half of global investment is now directed toward AI and related sectors, and how AI is expected to transform virtually every sector, including healthcare, education, public service delivery and public governance. There seemed to be a broad consensus that AI is an ultimate game-changer.

However, questions concerning the realities of developing countries and the communities within them—those with comparatively limited stakes and agency in AI development and global AI policymaking—received less attention. Countries and communities that continue to struggle with the digital divide, and that are increasingly exposed to AI systems developed in the Minority World, in dominant languages and largely trained on data originating from those contexts, are often not even in a position to fully understand the potential repercussions of systems that may increasingly shape many aspects of their lives, including the exercise of their fundamental rights.

For many people in the Majority World, including Nepal, AI is largely understood as a tool for content generation, and ChatGPT effectively represents AI itself. In the UNGDAI, I also found limited discussion on the environmental impacts of AI ecosystems, as well as issues relating to Indigenous

communities, sexual and gender minorities, and persons with disabilities. As the United Nations is the primary international institution advancing the principle of leaving no one behind, giving limited attention to these groups in AI governance discussions risks deepening their marginalisation unless greater consideration is given to designing more inclusive dialogues.

There is a pressing need to strengthen AI governance and regulatory discourse at the national and regional levels, particularly across the Majority World, where governments and other stakeholders can collectively explore their AI capacities and opportunities while working toward equitable AI development. Communities should better understand the potential impacts of AI systems on their lives and their environment. The meaningful participation of minority groups should be ensured throughout AI governance and regulatory processes. Human rights principles and standards should serve as the benchmark for AI governance and regulation.

Between now and the next round of the Dialogue in May 2027 in New York, countries from the Majority World should identify their core national and regional priorities and develop common positions on key negotiating issues. Building strategic alliances

Meta to reach me at the time I was most likely to buy what she was selling. That makes her the customer, me the product, and Meta the middleman that brought us together. Its entire business model is built on this. Billions of users across Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp locked into an ecosystem they use every single day, the decades of accumulated behavioural data that no competitor can replicate and the ownership over the platforms and the ad auction system. Put all of that together, and the trillion-dollar valuation starts to make a lot more sense.

The User Interface (UI) is designed so the scroll feels effortless so that even at midnight, half asleep, your thumb keeps moving. There is no progress bar, no signal that time is passing. Every small decision in the interface, down to where each button is placed and how a video transitions to the next, was made by an engineer whose job was to keep you there longer. The app was not designed for your convenience. It was designed for your captivity.

Three years ago, Dino Ambrosi, a digital wellness speaker, in a TED Talk titled 'The battle for your time', presented a chart that mapped the life of an average 18-year-old. Assuming they'd *live* to 90, he calculated they'd have 864 months left. He calculated that an average person spends 288 months sleeping, 126 months at work and school, 36 months cooking, 27 months in hygiene, 36 months on chores, and 18 months driving. That leaves you with 334 months of free time. This is when you *live* your life. Realising that we can live only 334 out of possible 864 months of our lives, I am sure none of us wants to spend this time scrolling through social media.

According to DataReportal, the global average screen time sits at 6 hours and 40 minutes per day. That's every single person in this world giving away more than a quarter of their day to Mark Zuckerberg for the rest of their lives. Well, count me out. I want to live, take risks, make mistakes, fail on my own terms, and find my way through life. I only got this one life, and I don't want to give it away to Mark Zuckerberg. Do you?

Chauhan is a digital media student at the University of Arkansas.

ahead of the formal negotiations will further strengthen their collective voice and bargaining power.

Equally important is strengthening the AI literacy and advocacy capacity of civil society organisations, digital rights groups, academia, and other public interest stakeholders. As these actors gain a deeper understanding of AI technologies, their societal impacts, and emerging governance challenges, they will be better positioned to advocate for AI systems that are just, ethical, trustworthy and respectful of human rights. The United Nations and development partners should therefore prioritise investing in awareness-raising, knowledge-sharing and capacity-building initiatives that enable these stakeholders to meaningfully contribute to AI governance discussions and ensure that the interests and concerns of vulnerable and marginalised communities are effectively represented.

A coordinated Majority World strategy is therefore essential to engage more assertively in international negotiations and to advocate for an AI governance framework that addresses existing asymmetries in AI capacity, influence and the equitable distribution of AI's benefits.

Sigdel is a digital rights expert and general secretary of AI Association Nepal.

BRIEFING

Ter Stegen joins Ajax on loan

AMSTERDAM: Germany goalkeeper Marc-André ter Stegen joined Ajax on loan from Barcelona on Tuesday as he aims to revive his national-team career with new coach Jürgen Klopp. Ajax said the 34-year-old Ter Stegen signed a season-long deal that reunites him with the storied club's new coach Michel Sánchez. Ter Stegen had a complicated 12th season with Barcelona and moved to Catalanian neighbor Girona on loan in January. After three straight World Cups as understudy to Manuel Neuer, including a title in 2014, Ter Stegen was not selected for a fourth this summer. Germany went out in the round of 32 against Paraguay. Ter Stegen played the last of his 44 games for Germany in June 2025 at the Nations League final four mini-tournament. “Marc has an outstanding track record, and his qualities are widely recognised,” Ajax technical director Jordi Crujeff said in a statement. Ter Stegen is the second Germany international joining the Amsterdam club, which is seeking to rebound from a chaotic season that ended in fifth place in the Dutch Eredivisie.

Maccabi Tel-Aviv to play Europa League in empty stadium

NYON: UEFA punished Maccabi Tel-Aviv on Monday by ordering the Israeli club to play a Europa League home game in an empty stadium after fans lit fireworks at a game last week. Maccabi hosts CSKA Sofia on Thursday at the same stadium in Batumi, Georgia, where the team beat Sheriff Tiraspol 1-0 last week. Israeli national and club teams have had to choose neutral countries to host games in UEFA competitions for security reasons since October 2023, when conflict with Hamas started. Maccabi must pay a fine of 40,000 euros (\$46,000) and play its next home game “behind closed doors.” UEFA said Monday in an urgent ruling by its appeal panel. The attendance was 1,012 when Maccabi hosted Moldova's Sheriff last Thursday in the second qualifying round of the Europa League. In Monday's draw at UEFA headquarters for the qualifying playoffs round, the winner between Maccabi and CSKA was paired with OFI Crete, which hosts the first leg on August 20.

Chelsea lands Jordan Henderson

LONDON: Chelsea signed veteran England midfielder Jordan Henderson to a two-year contract on Monday following his departure from Brentford last week. The 36-year-old is Chelsea's oldest signing since BlueCo took over the club in 2022. “The midfielder, who has won eight trophies in his career, including the Premier League and UEFA Champions League, has signed a two-year contract with the Blues and will join his new team-mates ahead of the 2026-27 campaign,” Chelsea said on its website. Henderson won the Champions League in 2019 and the Premier League in 2020 with Liverpool. “Given the size of the club, the manager (Xabi Alonso), who I have great admiration for, and the quality of the players, this was a huge opportunity I couldn't turn down,” Henderson said. “I was also so impressed with how much the ownership want Chelsea to be successful and move in the right direction.” Henderson's off-season signing follows that of Danny Welbeck, Morgan Rogers, Maxence Lacroix, Marco Palestra and Geovany Quenda by the Stamford Bridge club. (AP)

Top FIFA officials Wenger and Grafström distance themselves from Infantino's World Cup sell-off plan



FIFA president Gianni Infantino (right) and Arsene Wenger, Chief Officer (FIFA), arrive for the Women's Euro 2025 quarterfinal match between Sweden and England at Stadion Letzigrund in Zurich, Switzerland, on July 17 last year.

GRAHAM DUNBAR/AP GENEVA, AUG 4

Two senior FIFA executives—coaching great Arsène Wenger and CEO-like secretary general Mattias Grafström—distanced themselves Tuesday from their boss Gianni Infantino's failed plan to sell stakes in future World Cup profits to private investors.

Wenger said in a statement he knew nothing of the \$20 billion plan and that it was “absolutely necessary” to drop the proposal, and Grafström sent an email to all FIFA staff—seen by The Associated Press—calling the last week a “sad and reproachable series of events.” He also said it created “turmoil which is difficult to comprehend and accept.”

Neither directly named Infantino nor offered support for the now-embattled president.

The comments by Wenger and Grafström had echoes of the direct criticism from FIFA chief operating officer Kevin Lamour, who said Friday that staff had been “deceived” by Infantino's private equity plan, which provoked a furore in global football. Lamour called it the “project of one person” and said FIFA staff “deserve better than contempt and intimidation.”

The three executives are respected and trusted figures among the 211 FIFA member federations who now hold sway over Infantino's grip on a presidency that looked unshakable after the World Cup ended barely two weeks ago.

UEFA legal threat to FIFA

Wenger, Grafström and Lamour also were named in a letter from UEFA's lawyers to Infantino among 18 executives whose data and communications should be retained as potential evidence.

“You do not need to worry,” Grafström wrote

Tuesday to the hundreds of FIFA staff based mostly in Zurich and Coral Gables, Florida. “I assure you that you as members of the administration, you will be defended and safeguarded from the political context we currently experience,” Wenger, who was hired by Infantino in 2019 and is FIFA's Chief of Global Football Development, said he was “not involved in this strategic plan and first became aware of the project through media reports.”

Infantino withdrew his \$20 billion proposal early Saturday after a furious backlash by global football officials, including European body UEFA warning of a boycott of all FIFA games and events. The plan would have created a subsidiary—known as FIFA Forward Enterprise (FFE)—to run the money-making parts of the not-for-profit football body's work: organising tournaments like the World Cup, selling broadcasting and sponsorship rights, tickets and hospitality. It proposed raising \$4.2 billion from investors by selling stakes amounting to about 20 percent in FFE, based on an equity valuation of \$20 billion. The “anchor investor” would have been Thrive Eternal, launched by Joshua Kushner, whose brother Jared Kushner is a son-in-law of US President Donald Trump.

“The decision to withdraw the project was absolutely necessary and beyond question, because I firmly believe in an independent FIFA that serves our game with commitment, transparency, and integrity,” Wenger wrote.

Cash offers to FIFA members

FIFA's 211 member federations—already effective owners of the governing body as a non-profit association under Swiss law—were offered \$20 million each. The deadline to accept was September 19.

They also were promised a doubling of their FIFA funding for the four years through 2030 to \$20 million instead of the previously announced \$10 million.

Infantino shared details of the project to FIFA management just one week after the July 19 final of the financially successful World Cup in North America that drove FIFA's revenues to \$15 billion for the 2023-26 commercial cycle—almost double the income tied to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

Grafström, a long-time loyal aide to Infantino since their work together at UEFA, urged FIFA staff to “all continue being proud and happy” about the first 48-team World Cup. “A sad and reproachable series of events—which were thankfully concluded with the FFE project permanently abandoned—for as much as we feel dismayed by them, should not overshadow this reality,” he wrote.

Infantino's ties to Trump

The World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico was judged a success on the field, though it had unprecedented issues linked to Infantino's close ally Trump, who received a specially created FIFA Peace Prize at the tournament draw in December. During the tournament, Iran's team could not stay in the US where it played three games, a Somali referee picked by FIFA was refused entry, and US forward Folarin Balogun was allowed to play against Belgium despite a red card in his previous game. “We have all been thrown into the middle of a turmoil, which is difficult to comprehend and accept, but, as secretary general, I urge you to remain focused on what has always united us,” Grafström wrote.

“I will continue to support our teams, our work and our mission every hour of every day for as long as my work is valued by those we serve.”

Waiting to hear from Infantino

Infantino has not commented in public on the schism in football since a FIFA statement early Saturday announcing that the proposal had been dropped. His official Instagram account has posted letters of support from several member federations, including 2030 World Cup co-host Morocco, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

Infantino has been president of FIFA for more than 10 years and had seemed sure to be re-elected unopposed next March in Morocco. FIFA has set a November 18 deadline for challengers to come forward, with Sweden's football leader saying Monday that UEFA is seeking a rival candidate.

Stokes reveals England coaching ambition

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE LONDON, AUG 4

Ben Stokes has revealed his ambition to coach England in the future, but ruled out any chance of ending his shock retirement from international cricket.

Stokes quit as England Test captain and retired from the international stage after a 2-1 Test series defeat by New Zealand in June.

The all-rounder had been dropped for the second Test against New Zealand after he and team-mate Gus Atkinson broke a team curfew in a nightclub incident following the opening match of the series. Stokes said his turbulent four-year reign as captain had left him exhausted.

He famously reversed his one-day international retirement to play in the 2023 World Cup and England managing director of men's cricket Rob Key last week said he “wouldn't be surprised” if Stokes were to return to Test action. But Stokes, 35, said he is “definitely” not coming back to the Test arena while speaking on the ‘For the Love of Cricket’ podcast.

“I'm doing my level three coaching now while I'm still playing, because when the day comes that I'm not playing anymore, I'd love to be able to have all that stuff signed off and done,” Stokes said.

On his coaching plan, Stokes added: “I know what I want to do in terms of staying within the game, which is to be a coach. “And would I love to be coach of England one day? Absolutely. I just really like the idea of being in some form of leadership away from playing.” Joe Root has been reappointed as England's Test skipper after Stokes' exit, with Harry Brook—who has served as vice-captain—overlooked for a promotion. Brook was given Stokes' endorsement but the white-ball captain's nightclub incident in New Zealand, hours before leading England in an ODI, continues to cast a large shadow over him. Stokes remains surprised that Brook was passed over, saying: “If you think someone's going to be a good captain or a good leader, then just give them it.

“Even when I missed that Test match, I was like, ‘Why is Brooky (not the captain?)—he's vice-captain’. And I sort of got it. I understood the reasoning why they were saying it.

“But I was still like ‘what message is that sending to him?’ He's vice captain. And then the captain is not playing, but he's not captain. What? I had no leadership or captaincy experience when I took over.”



Former England Test captain Ben Stokes.

HOROSCOPE

ARIES (March 21-April 19)

Your relationship with money and materialism comes into focus. A desire to keep up appearances or establish status through designer goods may also be a serious issue that needs addressing.

TAURUS (April 20-May 20)

Don't let negative emotions get the best of you this morning, darling Taurus. Trust that the problems before you are temporary and can be resolved if you are willing to try, fail, and learn from each experience.

GEMINI (May 21-June 21)

Explore your situation from multiple perspectives, using recent epiphanies to guide this process. Ask questions and delve into unfamiliar topics to make the most of these vibes.

CANCER (June 22-July 22)

Precarious relationships could crumble this morning, dearest Cancer. If it's been a while since you've fully taken in the great outdoors, now is a good time to do so.

LEO (July 23-August 22)

Beware of anyone who attempts to place restrictions on you, dearest Leo. Possessive or jealous characters are often skilled at hiding their true colors, so don't let any red flags slip by undressed.

VIRGO (August 23-September 22)

Get organised or crumble under the pressure of your own dreams, dearest Virgo. Removing yourself from busy environments will help you find the peace necessary to excel.

LIBRA (September 23-October 22)

Your shadow comes out to play this morning, dearest Libra. Show yourself compassion, but don't make excuses for cycles that need to be closed.

SCORPIO (October 23-November 21)

You're an intense lover and fiercely loyal companion, dearest Scorpio. Though these traits are endearing to those who have earned your love, you occasionally lower your guard too quickly.

SAGITTARIUS (November 22-December 21)

Be mindful of where your energy is best spent, and remember to keep a close eye on the time. Peers may offer to lend a hand when Jupiter stirs, but control issues might cause you to hesitate.

CAPRICORN (December 22-January 19)

Take note of who or what triggers a sense of unease, and don't let your confidence dip as surroundings shift. Excitement and creativity permeate the air, but jumping into the unknown could trigger big messes.

AQUARIUS (January 20-February 18)

Be mindful of how you react when emotionally charged situations emerge, sweet Aquarius. Taking the high road might not be the most tempting choice, but it will help you grow and evolve past unhealthy dynamics.

PISCES (February 19-March 20)

Try not to blurt out each thought as it emerges this morning, dearest Pisces. You may vacillate between zoning out and fixating on small details, which will ultimately slow progress.

CROSSWORD

ACROSS

- 1 Attempt
- 5 Rec room game
- 10 Minus
- 14 Corporate symbol
- 15 River in France
- 16 European capital
- 17 Prayer's end
- 18 Lustrous fabric
- 19 Platform in a hall
- 20 Container
- 22 Add together (2 wds.)
- 23 Eager
- 26 Times
- 27 Screamed
- 31 Places of sacrifice
- 35 Greek letter
- 36 India neighbor
- 38 Insert mark
- 39 Competent
- 41 White Cliffs of —
- 43 Wander
- 44 Rows
- 46 Striped animal
- 48 — culpa
- 49 Walks proudly
- 51 Tropical tree (2 wds.)
- 53 Bartlett, for one
- 55 Moon goddess
- 56 Armed conflict

DOWN

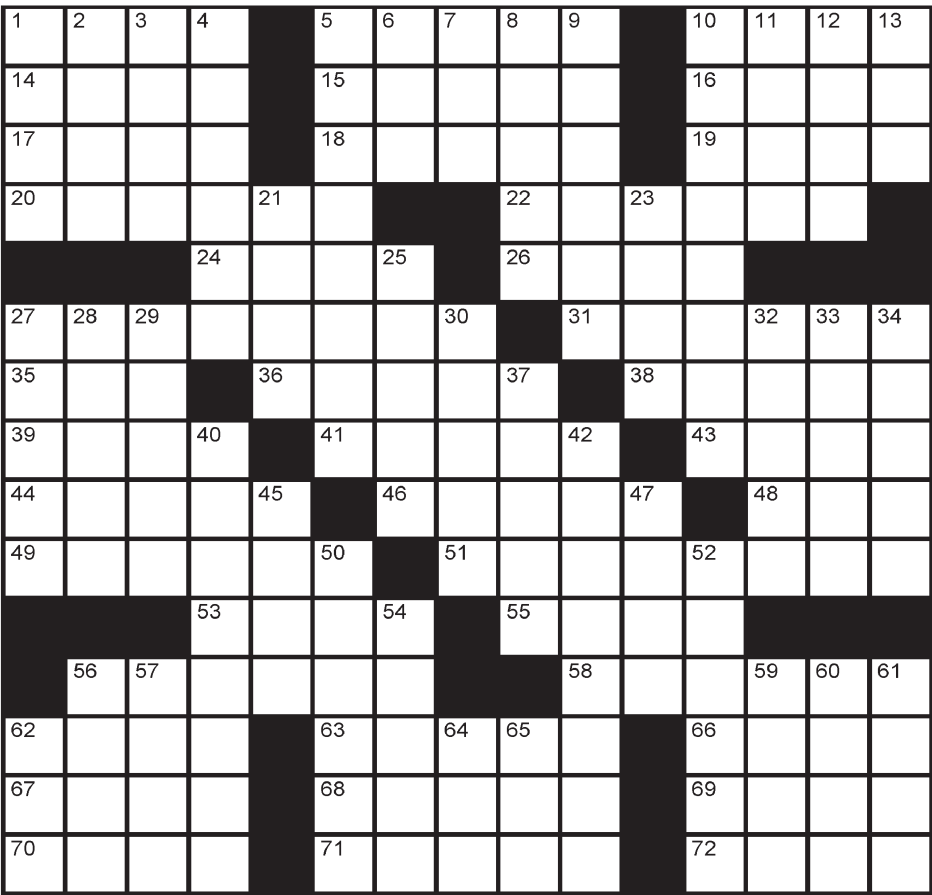
- 1 Eastern European
- 2 Big book
- 3 Gets older
- 4 Miniature tree
- 5 Out of favor
- 6 — matter of fact
- 7 On a pension (Abbr.)
- 8 Commonplace
- 9 Lady of Spain
- 10 Guiding principle
- 11 Jacob's twin
- 12 Error
- 13 Soap pad brand
- 21 Regular
- 23 Soapstone
- 25 Storage place
- 27 Data, for short
- 28 Custom
- 29 Monarch

PREVIOUS PUZZLE SOLVED



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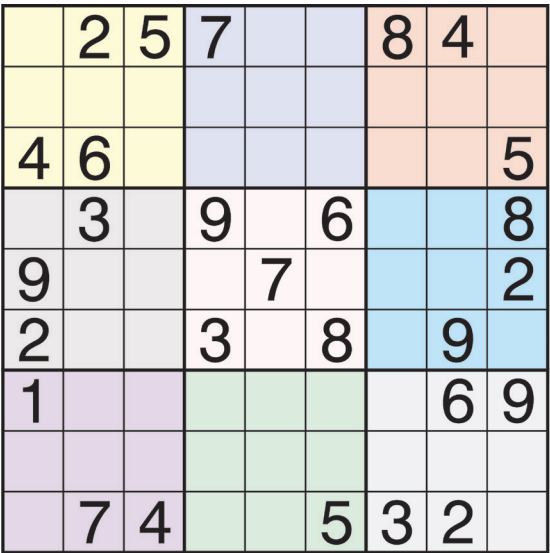
- 30 Statue by Michelangelo
- 32 Bouquet
- 33 Make merry
- 34 Water vapor
- 37 Licit
- 40 Volcanic event
- 42 Homecoming
- 45 “Let it stand!”
- 47 “— 911!”
- 50 21-gun —
- 52 Soft color
- 54 Of the kidneys
- 56 Poison
- 57 “The King — —”
- 59 Ripped
- 60 Black
- 61 Take a break
- 62 Liquor
- 64 Before omega
- 65 “— a bird ...”



SUDOKU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION



DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

