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Cancer patients pay steep prices for essential drugs

A dispute over government price caps has left hospitals without vital chemotherapy drugs, but the medicines are circulating in the market.

ARJUN POUDEL
KATHMANDU, AUG 24

Cancer patients are paying exorbitant prices for platinum-based chemotherapy medicines at private pharmacies because the drugs are not available at pharmacies in state-run health facilities.

As cancer treatment cannot be postponed or interrupted, families are forced to buy the medicines, including carboplatin, cisplatin and oxaliplatin, from private pharmacies, often at prices far above the government-set rates.

"The situation has improved compared to when these medicines were completely unavailable even outside the hospital," said Dr Uttam Nepal, acting executive director of the Chitwan-based BP Koirala Memorial Cancer Hospital. "Patients are now bringing the medicines from outside, even if they have to pay high prices."

> Some patients pay Rs15,000 for a Rs1,300 vial whose authenticity, quality are questionable.

Nepal saw an acute shortage of chemotherapy drugs about six months ago after their prices surged due to a rise in the cost of raw materials as a result of the West Asian conflict.

Suppliers stopped importing the medicines as the government's price cap prevented them from recovering their costs.

The shortage disrupted or halted cancer treatment, while patients' families were forced to buy the medicines on the black market at many times their government-set prices.

Some even travelled to India to buy the medicines. Patients' family members and relatives told the Post that they had to pay up to Rs15,000 for a 150 mg vial of carboplatin that normally costs around Rs1,300. Some patients were unable to complete their prescribed courses and had to use whatever medicines were available.

As the government has yet to adjust the prices of the medicines, suppliers have not resumed deliveries to state-run hospital pharmacies. Officials at the Chitwan-based Bharatpur Cancer Hospital said they cannot say when the medicines will be back in stock, as suppliers refuse to sell them at government-set prices. "Patients' relatives are bringing the medicines themselves," Nepal said, "but doctors are not confident about their quality."

>> Continued on page 2

Police response under scrutiny after Bara child murder

Family, lawmakers and rights activists question whether police acted swiftly after the three-year-old was reported missing.

GAURAV POKHAREL IN KATHMANDU & **LAXMI SAH** IN BARA
AUG 24

Initial information is often the most critical element for investigators attempting to prevent serious crime and rescue victims. Yet, recurring incidents across the country point to a disturbing pattern in which law enforcement agencies fail to demonstrate basic sensitivity when distraught family members approach them for help. The horrific rape and subsequent murder of a three-year-old girl in Bara has once again put investigation system under scrutiny.

On August 16, the three-year-old disappeared from her home at Bhaktinagar in ward 1 of Jeetpur-Simara Sub-Metropolitan City at around 8:30am. Her parents searched with neighbours before her mother submitted a written request to the Area Police Office in Simara at about 11:15am.

The family says police did not respond with urgency. The girl's father said the family had searched everywhere and a nearby locked house the child often visited. When he questioned why it had not been searched, they became angry and blamed the family.

"I also raised the matter with the police," he said. "But they said they could not proceed merely on what I was saying and asked me to file a formal complaint by naming suspects."

The father also told police the following day that another local man was missing and gave them his phone number, asking officers to trace his location. He said he could not understand why police did not act promptly on that information.

Three days after the child disappeared, neighbours noticed foul smell coming from the abandoned house, about 200 metres from her home. The family and locals alerted police. At around 5:45pm, officers entered the building and found the child's body.

Police later arrested a 16-year-old helper on a local passenger vehicle and 24-year-old owner. Several others were detained. Police say the teenager lured the child with chocolate before assaulting and killing her.

A post-mortem examination indicated that the child had likely been sexually assaulted and strangled with a rope, according to a doctor involved in the examination. The doctor said rumours of mutilation were inaccurate and that insects had caused the reported disfiguration.

> Past cases also raised similar concerns about police response when children went missing.

The case triggered protests in Simara, with residents demanding punishment and action against police officers accused of mishandling the search. The protests revived demands for the death penalty for heinous crimes.

Rights activists say the immediate concern is whether the state responds quickly enough when a child is reported missing. Mohna Ansari, a former member of the National Human Rights Commission, said police should have treated the initial report as an emergency. "The police response expected in such a heinous crime was not visible from the beginning," she told Kantipur. She also criticised the later decision to make the child's name, photograph and other details public.

>> Continued on page 3

PHOTO: ABHASH RANJIT/NEPAL PHOTO LIBRARY

People stage a demonstration at Maitighar Mandala in Kathmandu on Sunday, demanding justice for the three-year-old victim of sexual assault and murder. The child disappeared on August 16 and her body was found two days later on August 18.

A child's privacy is protected by law. Nearly everyone violated it

DAYA DUDRAJ
KATHMANDU, AUG 24

The brutal rape and killing of a three-year-old girl in Bara last week continues to shock the public. The case has raised questions not only about the government's handling of the incident but also about Nepal's existing legal framework.

Six days after the incident, the government on Saturday reached an agreement with the victim's family. But throughout the episode, the government, news organisations, social media users and rights activists have repeatedly failed to protect the deceased child's privacy.

Government ministers involved in the response themselves violated legal provisions requiring the victim's identity to be kept confidential.

Even the agreement reached between the government and the victim's family, which the government itself made public, contained details that exposed their identities. The official document—signed by Home Minister Sudan Gurung; Law Minister Sobita Gautam; Minister for Infrastructure Development Sunil Lamsal; Minister for Women, Gender and Sexual Minorities Sita Badi; and Minister for Agriculture, Forests and Environment Gita Chaudhary—named both the victim and her family.

In other words, five ministers responsible for making and enforcing laws signed a document that itself breached the law.

Section 6 of Nepal's Crime Victim Protection Act, 2018 requires the privacy of victims to be fully protected while serious crimes are being investigated. The provision applies to cases involving rape, incest, human trafficking and sexual abuse, covering investigation, prosecution and court proceedings. Subsection 2 of the same section states that no one may disclose the identity of a victim of such offences in any form.

Yet ministers and senior government officials themselves disregarded the provision by posting photographs of the victim's family on social media.

Home Minister Gurung's social media post not only described the incident but repeatedly identified the victim by name and age.

>> Continued on page 3

In China's AI boom, workers are learning where they fit

From programmers to translators, workers are seeing AI take over tasks they once did themselves.

CHAN HO-HIM & **FU TING**/AP
HONG KONG, AUG 24

Computer programmer Fei Zhaojun's boss asked him if artificial intelligence could soon replace humans in coding jobs. Two weeks later, he was laid off from his job in Beijing, together with about 160 of his colleagues.

It's an increasingly common scenario as artificial intelligence, supported by government policies, reshapes China's massive job market. Some economists believe that might eventually undermine the overall strength of the world's second largest economy.

Rapid adoption of AI in many fields, from computer programmers to script writing and physical tasks, is pushing people out of their jobs or leaving them afraid that it might. China is at the vanguard of AI adoption as government policies encourage people and businesses to use AI applications and robotics in all aspects of life, so people like Fei are figuring out how to adapt.

AP

Fei Zhaojun, a former software engineer, works on his computer at his home in Beijing on July 13.

"There appears to be far less anti-AI sentiment in China (than elsewhere). Most people seem either positive, neutral, or mildly interested in AI," said Shujing He, a Beijing-based senior analyst at advisory and research firm Plenum.

"Individuals who worry about being replaced, as well as those who have already left traditional workplaces, are often eager to experiment with AI-enabled businesses and independent ventures," she said. "The level of interest is striking."

Until recently, Fei had doubted AI could do programming work perfectly, even though his bosses thought it was close enough.

"Mid-level coders' jobs are essentially replaceable in most of the cases," said Fei, 40. "Even if it is a disaster that leads to replacing all humans, at this stage, you just have to use it as everyone else is using it."

Now he's making vlog-style short videos during a career break while figuring out what he wants to do next. He's not making a living off of his videos, which are about ordinary people's lives, but hopes that they might help others.

If you can't beat them, join them

Du Qinchun, a part-time translator, has been helping to train an AI model to do translations. That's brought him more work, at least temporarily.

"But it's true that the pay in the industry has been cut by more than half compared to what it was years ago," said Du, who is based in southwestern China's Chengdu city.

The trend is so evident that popular college programs in foreign languages have increasingly fallen out of favor as AI-powered translation tools have become more widespread.

The share of Chinese industrial enterprises saying they use AI models and "agents" jumped to 47.5% last year from 9.6% in 2024, according to the market intelligence firm IDC.

"China's vibrant open-source model ecosystem fosters greater AI application innovation in industrial settings, gradually closing the gap between foundational model capabilities and real-world enterprise value creation," said Yanze Du, an IDC senior research manager in Beijing.

>> Continued on page 2

Jajarkot landslide survivors endure hunger, illness and uncertainty

New mothers worry about feeding their babies and children have been cut off from school. Fear of more landslides is keeping families from returning home.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF INDRA BAHADUR THAPA

Local residents work through landslide debris at a home in ward 2 of Bheri Municipality, Jajarkot, last week.

KRISHNA PRASAD GAUTAM, MAHESH KC & SAROJ OLI
SURKHET/JAJARKOT, AUG 24

When a landslide destroyed her home last Saturday, 45-year-old Nayana Rokaya of Risang in ward 2 of Bheri Municipality in Jajarkot was forced to take shelter in a local school building with her one-month-old son.

Eight days on, life in the makeshift shelter remains difficult, particularly for new and expectant mothers, who have been without adequate food, privacy and comfort.

"We get cooked meals only in the morning and evening, but there is no provision for snacks or other nutritious food," she said. "My baby keeps breastfeeding, but a mother needs to eat properly to produce enough milk. It breaks my heart to see my son hungry, but there is nothing I can do."

Her husband, Bhadra Bahadur, spends his days caring for his wife, their one- month-old son and their 15-year-old elder son. Their older son, Santosh, has been suffering from a fever for the past three or four days, while their 22-year-old daughter is married.

"It has become difficult to look after all of them. I haven't even been able to check on the condition of our damaged house," he said. "When it rains, water leaks through the tarpaulin and we cannot sleep. When the rain is heavy, water pools on the floor. We have spent two or three nights awake."

The family had been living in a temporary shelter near their house, which had been partly damaged by an earthquake three years ago. As the rains intensified, they moved into the damaged house, only for a landslide to bury part of it and force them to take shelter at the school.

One side of their house has been buried by the landslide, leaving them unable to retrieve their food grain, clothes, or other belongings.

Rokaya is among 251 people displaced by landslides who are now taking shelter at Tribhuvan Basic School. Six new mothers and five pregnant women are among those living at the school, according to Bhim Bahadur Karki, ward 2 chair of Bheri Municipality.

Women, children and people with disabilities have been given space inside the school building, while young men are sleeping outside under tarpaulins, Karki said.

"Keeping so many people in such a small space is causing health problems among the displaced. Poor sanitation also increases the risk of infectious diseases," he said. "Most children, women and elderly people are suffering from cold, fever, diarrhoea and headaches. But there is no need to panic because health workers have been deployed at the school round the clock."

Sujata Khadka, 39, also from Risang, has spent the past eight days at the shelter with her six-year-old daughter and two-year-old son, after leaving home with only the clothes they were wearing.

> Landslides have affected 893 people from 168 households in ward 2 of Bheri Municipality alone.

"We get cooked meals in the morning and evening, and women and children have been given space to sleep inside the school," she said. "But it is so noisy that we cannot sleep at night. Mosquitoes keep biting us and rainwater leaks through the school's tin roof. There is no certainty about food, accommodation or even where we will sleep. How long are we expected to live like this?"

Her husband, Shankar Khadka, goes home during the day to tend their livestock and returns to the school at night.

Dr Sunil Pun, chief of the District Health Service Office, said people with minor health problems were being treated at the camp, while those requiring more specialised care were being taken to the district hospital.

The displaced families are trying to keep their daily lives going despite the difficult conditions at the school shelter. Indra Bahadur Thapa of Sisneri said as their stay at the shelter has stretched on, he goes back to his damaged home during the day to look after his livestock and returns to the school at night.

"It keeps raining, and we are constantly afraid that another landslide could come down from above or the ground could collapse beneath us," he said. "The landslides have torn the village apart. In some places, there is not even a path connecting one house to another. The houses had already been weakened by the earthquake, and after the landslides hit, it is no longer possible to live there. Still, we are trying to keep our daily lives going." He said 10 to 15 landslides, large and small, had struck the village and that the danger had not eased because the rain was continuing.

Landslides disrupt children's schooling

Rabin Thapa, 32, of Darnetaka in Risang, has been living at the temporary shelter for eight days with his wife Shanti and their two sons, 10-year-old Sandesh and eight-year-old Prabin, after their house was buried by a landslide.

The boys, who study in grades 5 and 3, respectively, at the same school where they are now sheltering, no longer have their textbooks or notebooks.

"All our belongings were buried," Thapa said. "We left home with only the clothes we were wearing. There are landslides all around the house, so we could not go back and recover anything."

He said the family would have to buy new books and notebooks when schools reopen.

Most children displaced by the landslides have similarly been unable to retrieve their school materials, disrupting their education, said Karna Bahadur Shahi, the school headteacher.

"Many children had to leave their books and notebooks behind when their families fled the landslides. Without learning materials, they have been unable to attend school properly," he said. "Now that the school itself has become a temporary shelter, there has been no decision on when classes can resume."

The landslides have affected 893 people from 168 households in ward 2 of Bheri Municipality alone, including 198 children. They are taking shelter at Tribhuvan Basic School, Bijay Primary School and Bishnu Primary School.

Rajesh Gharti, a teacher at Bishnu Primary School, said prolonged disruption to schooling could affect children's learning.

"Living in a temporary shelter is already affecting their mental wellbeing. Being away from school for an extended period could also cause them to forget what they have learned," he said. "That is why the shelters need to be moved out of the schools as soon as possible."

Chandra Prakash Gharti, mayor of Bheri Municipality, said 251 displaced people were staying at Tribhuvan Basic School, 28 at the Bheri municipal assembly hall, 27 at Bijay Primary School in Syala and 80 at Bishnu Primary School.

"We plan to move them to alternative sites and resume classes within two or three days," he said. "Moving the displaced families out of the schools should also make their living conditions somewhat easier."

Yagyashwar Khatri, head of the Education Development and Coordination Unit, said the disruption could further undermine the learning of displaced children, particularly after schools had already lost substantial teaching time.

"Enrollment campaigns were held from mid-April to mid-May, and classes ran throughout mid-May and mid-July. But there was nearly a 20-day monsoon holiday from mid-July to early August," he said. "The landslides struck less than two weeks after that holiday ended, and it is still unclear when classes will resume."

Displaced families to move to three camps

Authorities are preparing to shift the landslide-displaced families from the schools to three temporary camp sites to allow classes to resume, and provide the families more suitable living conditions.

"Because the landslide risk remains, we cannot send the displaced families back to their villages until permanent housing is available," said Chief District Officer Khadananda Adhikari. "We are therefore preparing to move them to temporary camps until conditions improve."

The displaced families will be moved to an area below the school in Risang, private land above the school and a site in Kalyanpur, he said. Work has begun to build temporary structures at the sites.

Tents, tarpaulins and other materials will be provided to create temporary accommodation, Adhikari said.

A team of eight officials from the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Authority, including geologists, travelled to Jajarkot to assess potential sites for the temporary camps.

The team examined the risk of further landslides, terrain, drainage and road access at the proposed sites before temporary structures were built.

The large number of displaced families means they will have to be divided among three sites, said Suresh Sunar, an undersecretary at the authority.

Bheri Municipality will pay rent for the land, while security personnel are carrying out construction work for the required temporary facilities, he said.

Cancer patients are caught between drug shortages and exorbitant prices

>> Continued from page 1

Doctors say the availability of the medicines in private pharmacies indicates that they are being imported despite prices exceeding the government cap. Such large quantities could not be smuggled into the country, and importers must pay customs duties on them.

"Government officials are certainly aware that traders have been importing the medicines at higher prices and paying taxes accordingly," said a doctor at Bharatpur Cancer Hospital, asking not to be named as he is not authorised to speak to the media. "Perhaps the government has turned a blind eye because it fears a backlash if medicine prices are increased."

The prolonged shortage has hit the poor patients the hardest.

"Even patients covered by health insurance schemes have had to buy expensive medicines out of pocket after reaching designated government hospitals for treatment," said Dr Guru Sharan Shah, head of the Medical Oncology Department at Bharatpur Cancer Hospital. "Poor patients take loans or mortgage their homes and land to pay for treatment… We can imagine what they go through when they have to buy medicines at exorbitant prices."

Most medicines used in chemotherapy, and many other medicines required for cancer treatment, are not manufactured in Nepal. Pharma companies say they have little interest in producing them because the technology required is expensive and the government-set selling prices are below production costs.

"If prices had been adjusted on time, patients would not have had to pay whatever they are being charged," said Dr Sudip Shrestha, executive chairman of Nepal Cancer Hospital and Research Centre.

Carboplatin, cisplatin and oxaliplatin are used to treat several malignancies, including ovarian, lung, head and neck, and breast cancers. Bharatpur Cancer Hospital wrote to the World Health Organisation office in Nepal about three months ago to help address the shortage.

Madhu Chitrakar, director of Prime Life Care International Pvt Ltd, a chemotherapy drug importer, said they haven't been able to import the medicines at all. "Manufacturers have stopped marketing them and told us they cannot supply the medicines at the old prices," he said, adding that any stock currently available in the market must have been imported at a higher price and sold accordingly.

Some medicines bought privately by patients' relatives have arrived without holograms, with broken seals, or torn labels, according to health workers.

"We are instructed not to use medicines without holograms, and we don't, but patients' relatives continue to bring such medicines," said Anupa Thapa, head of the Nursing Department at Bharatpur Cancer Hospital. "Patients have been forced to buy whatever they can find."

Meanwhile, the Department of Drug Administration said it was preparing a proposal to adjust the prices of medicines, including cancer drugs.

"We are working to finalise the proposal after another meeting of the Drug Advisory Committee," said Sachita Joshi, information officer at the department. "It has taken some time because suppliers have refused to sell medicines at the old prices, and several factors need to be considered. We will do it soon."

The department has already held discussions with the Ministry of Health and Food Hygiene, suppliers and other stakeholders.

According to the department, any increase in medicine prices must be approved by the Cabinet and published in the Nepal Gazette before it can take effect. The ministry must first submit the proposal on price adjustment to the Cabinet.

Nepal does not have exact data on the number of cancer patients, but the Global Cancer Observatory estimates that more than 22,000 new cancer cases are recorded in the country every year. About 60 percent of cancer patients undergo chemotherapy and around 14,000 people die of cancer annually in the country.

POST PHOTO: DEEPAK KC

A woman puts unbaked clayware out in the sun at Bholachhen tole in Bhaktapur, last week.

Jobs are changing faster and workers are learning to keep up

>> Continued from page 1

Humanoid robots can now, for example, sort parcels in postal centers, although still on a small-scale basis, and are pushing the boundaries in performing more human tasks such as directing traffic and making coffee. Food delivery robots are also gaining ground across the country, potentially threatening the livelihoods of millions of Chinese food delivery workers.

Generative AI increasingly is used for creation, production and distribution in China's short drama industry. The number of live-action short and vertical video series designed for mobile phones fell about 75% in the first quarter of this year from a year earlier, according to Chinese media reports.

"Tasks that once required specialized training can now be performed by almost anyone with access to AI tools. This is particularly evident in software development and multimedia creation," said Plenum's He. "As a result, workers whose roles are narrowly concentrated in these areas may face greater displacement risk."

A report from the International Labor Organization, meanwhile, found that women face higher risks of losing employment due to use of AI than men, as they tend to work in areas more suitable for automation, such as assembling electronics, and remain underrepresented in science and technology.

AI has mixed effects on the slowing economy

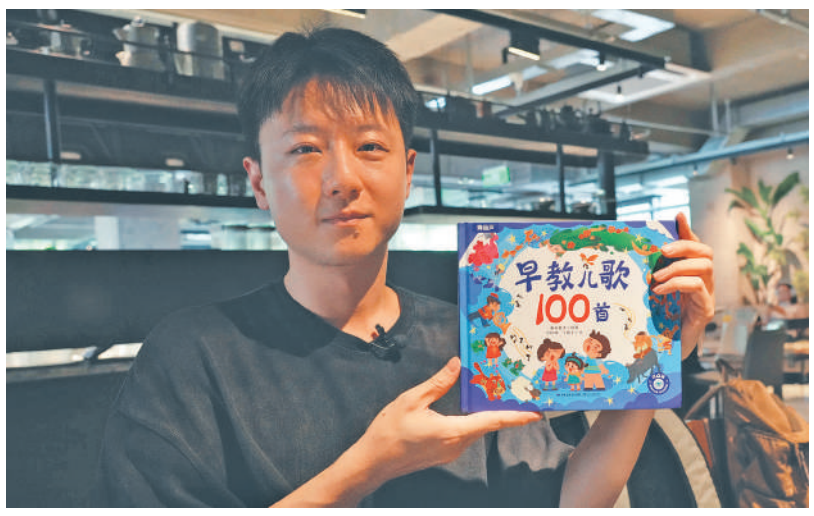
Under China's "AI Plus" initiative and its five-year plan through 2030, the government is pushing to infuse AI across many industries, aiming to gain an edge in China's technology rivalry with the U.S.

"What is specific to China is that the government is really into diffusing AI across the economy, so AI may get into different domains more quickly comparing to other countries," said Zilan Qian, a research associate at Oxford China Policy Lab.

China's economic growth has already been slowing. Consumer spending has lagged partly due to people becoming reluctant to spend because they're worried about losing their jobs. It's added to problems stemming from a prolonged downturn in the housing market that has undermined household wealth.

China's tech industries may be innovative with high productivity, but they may not generate many new jobs, said Eswar Prasad, a professor of economics and trade policy at Cornell University.

"AI is likely to lift productivity across the board but could have a severe disruptive effect on employment, worsening the employment growth problem and resulting in a detrimental effect on social stability," he said.



AP

Wang Zhicheng hold his book at a coffee shop in Beijing on August 4.

Similar to their U.S. rivals, Chinese tech giants have cut or restructured tens of thousands of jobs, partly due to AI. The outlook for the broader jobs market remains uncertain: China's overall urban unemployment rate hovers around 5%, but unemployment for people aged 16 to 24, excluding students, is roughly triple that.

That said, in the longer run, some experts say unemployment rates could fall, since China's population of 1.4 billion is rapidly aging and shrinking.

By 2050, China is projected to have fewer than two working-age adults to support each retiree, compared with more than 2.5 in the U.S., said Xuenan Cao, a professor at San Francisco Bay University whose focus includes technology and society.

"Automation could partially offset a shrinking workforce rather than being purely a threat to it," Cao said.

Some embrace AI to find new ways to make a living

Wang Zhicheng, 32, often used AI for brainstorming and fact-checking in his previous job as a scriptwriter for a company that produces 3D animated educational videos and interactive exercises for children.

After its parent company laid off roughly half of its 13 script writers, he chose to resign and work independently, making illustrated children's books.

While AI sometimes saved time the scripts it generated, they often felt strange, Wang said. Episodes tended to be repetitive and formulaic and the level of detail devoted to knowledge varied widely.

"You can treat AI as a tool just like (Microsoft) Word," said Wang, who has started his own studio making picture books and other creative works. "Humans are still the decision makers on which one to pick or pursue among all that AI generates."

High school chemistry teacher Yang Zheng said he doesn't consider AI as a threat to his job even though students use AI for help with their homework.

"Teachers cannot be there all the time," he said. "It is a good thing for students as it generates in real-time so that students can ask follow-up questions," said Yang, 29. "It often gets things wrong, but it improves over time."

She was missing for three days. The police response is now under scrutiny

PHOTO: NEPAL PHOTO LIBRARY

Youths stage a protest demanding justice for the three-year-old rape victim, in Pokhara on Monday.

>> Continued from page 1

"The entire society became agitated and people came to the streets, but the police showed further insensitivity by making public the child's name, photograph and other details," said Ansari. "We also need to examine how the family was treated when it first approached the police."

Ansari said police becoming active only after locals reported a smell roughly 58 hours later was particularly serious. "As soon as information about any incident comes in, Nepal Police must become active," she said.

Lawmaker Rahbar Ansari representing Bara also questioned the initial response. "Police did not search for the body. For 24 hours after being informed that the child was missing, no police personnel were mobilised," he said. "Only after neighbours noticed a smell did police and a sniffer dog arrive."

Police have rejected the claim that no search was conducted. Nepal Police spokesperson Abi Narayan Kafle said missing-person alerts were circulated and officers searched nearby forests and other possible locations.

"The police did not imagine that such a thing could happen in a nearby empty house," Kafle told Kantipur. "Everyone should have checked and searched the vacant house nearby. That was overlooked. But it is not that the police did not conduct any search."

He said investigators initially focused on the possibility that the child had been abducted or taken elsewhere. "Everyone in the police wanted to rescue her quickly, find her safe and identify the offender," he said. "All mechanisms were mobilised with sensitivity, but a tragic incident occurred."

The handling of the case also came under scrutiny after a video of the teenage suspect giving a statement during a medical examination was leaked on social media. Police arrested a head constable accused of recording the video and said four others were under investigation.

Two officers from the district police office and two other police personnel deployed at the hospital were also present when the statement was recorded. The room is where doctors privately ask patients about their health. "But we don't know who leaked the video or why," said Rahul Mandal, the hospital's medical superintendent.

Home Minister Sudan Gurung himself said at the initial stage that serious questions had been raised over police negligence and that the process of investigating and taking action initiated against the officials concerned. Deputy Superintendent of Police Sandeep Chhetri of the Area Police Office in Simara and Police Inspector Prakash Thapa have been recalled to Police Headquarters.

The leak raised questions about whether officers understand that sensitive statements involving minors must remain confidential. The Press Council Nepal also criticised the footage, saying an accused person's statement should not become viral material before a court reaches a verdict.

The most prominent example is the 2018 rape and murder of 13-year-old Nirmala Pant in Kanchanpur. Her family reported her missing on July 26, 2018, and she was found dead the following day. A Home Ministry probe blamed police for a lackadaisical approach and serious investigative weaknesses. Another police inquiry found negligence and attempts to frame an innocent man.

When Durga Devi, the victim's mother, went to the temporary police post in Bhagatpur at the time, a police officer told her, "She may have eloped; she will probably come home tomorrow." At the time, she said of the police response, "Perhaps this day would never have come if the police had started searching for her then."

Eight years on, Nirmala's case remains unresolved.

The case of 23-year-old Sujita Bhandari in Chitwan in 2021 provides another warning. Bhandari disappeared on June 25. Her family reported her missing, but police initially said there was insufficient basis to suspect abduction. Her body was found nine days later in a forest near her home, sparking protests and accusations of police inaction. Police said they had tracked her phone and conducted searches based on the information provided by the family.

Retired Nepal Police AIG Uttam Subedi said the first response is crucial. "Victims must be made to feel that the police are with them and that a search is under way," he said. "The police's first response is the most important thing for a family."

He says that although personnel at all levels had been briefed to verify any information as soon as it came in, the matter sometimes also depended on the role played by the commander in charge at the time. "That weakness should be treated as an individual failing, and those responsible for such negligence should be punished," said Subedi.

Advocate Kunjani Pyasi Pariyar said the problem goes beyond resources and technology. "There is a mindset within the police that if a girl of a certain age is a victim, she must have eloped or been in a relationship," she said. "Police often say they lack resources and technology. But they have not improved basic behaviour."

Rights activist Durga Sob said the Bara case was shocking. "When police fail to show sensitivity in such a case, it adds pain to the suffering," she said. Investigators should be especially careful with children and give families confidence that the state is standing beside them.

The Bara tragedy has become a test of whether lessons from earlier cases have been absorbed. Arrests and punishment may satisfy public demands, but the deeper question is whether the first call for help is treated as the beginning of an emergency investigation rather than a routine complaint in all similar future cases.

Internal rift widens in UML over policy and leadership reform

Senior party leaders push for structural and leadership changes, but party chair Oli refuses to back down.

POST FILE PHOTO

CPN-UML party chair KP Sharma Oli

GANGA BC
KATHMANDU, AUG 24

Calls for a sweeping policy and leadership overhaul in the CPN-UML are growing, but party chair KP Sharma Oli is digging his heels in, leaving the party's restructuring process in limbo.

While vice-chair Bishnu Paudel and general secretary Shankar Pokharel mount pressure on Oli to review policy and leadership, the former prime minister has brushed off the concerns, describing demands for a special convention or national representative council meeting as an 'untimely tune'.

Speaking at a programme organised by the party's Central Discipline Commission on Sunday, Oli argued that a review was unnecessary as the current leadership was elected by the 11th general convention held in December.

"I have made it clear that the party will not be restructured unless it faces a major crisis," Oli said. "The word 'restructuring' is now being misused… Talk of a special general convention or a representative council meeting is an out-of-season tune."

The intraparty dispute intensified after a task force led by vice-chair Ram Bahadur Thapa prepared recommendations on policy, leadership, organisation and working methods.

Based on discussions held in all seven provinces and the party's departments, the task force's member secretary Pokharel prepared a report of around 100 pages. It proposes a statute convention and a national general convention representative council meeting to discuss leadership restructuring.

A UML office-bearer said that Oli had objected to the word 'restructuring' and wanted it replaced with 'revival'. Paudel and Pokharel, however, believe the recommendations cannot be substantially altered because they were based on suggestions from the grassroots.

"If legitimate suggestions coming from below are ignored, how can the party be restructured?" the office-bearer said, under the condition of anonymity. "It is appropriate to implement those suggestions."

The report will be discussed at the next meeting of the central secretariat scheduled for the second week of September.

UML secretary Khagaraj Adhikari said that decisions regarding revival or restructuring cannot be made by any single leader. "Only the central committee can do that," he said.

The party statute provides two possible institutional routes. Article 11 provides for a statute convention between two national general conventions. Delegates to the national general convention also serve as delegates to the statute convention, where they discuss political, organisational and statute amendment proposals. Article 12 provides for a national general convention representative council. The council reviews reports submitted by the central committee and other central bodies.

In the second week of April, leaders of the UML's sister organisations—including the All Nepal National Free Students Union, Youth Association Nepal and Intellectual Council—had launched an informal signature campaign demanding a special general convention.

However, the party statute sets stringent requirements for organising such a convention. Article 72 requires a written demand, citing an agenda and reasons, from two-thirds of district committees or a majority of national general convention representative council members. If the conditions are met, the central committee must call it within six months. If it fails to do so, the demanding bodies can form an organising committee and convene it themselves.

This route is difficult because Oli retains a strong majority among delegates elected at the 11th general convention. Of 2,263 delegates, at least 1,132 would have to sign the demand. Ishwar Pokhrel, who challenged Oli for the chairmanship in the convention, had the support of roughly 600 delegates.

The restructuring debate gained force after the UML suffered a major electoral setback in March. Dissident voices grew, even if party arithmetic remained in Oli's favour. Paudel, previously close to Oli, has pledged to restructure the party's policies, leadership, organisation and working style in response to public expectations.

Meanwhile, UML secretary Mahesh Basnet has brushed off calls to remove Oli as party chair. "The rumour that the party chair would be replaced in the name of restructuring has now ended," Basnet wrote on Facebook.

But Khimlal Bhattarai, a central committee member close to Paudel, said the issue had not been settled yet. "The issue of party restructuring has not ended," he said. "The central committee will decide on that."

A child's privacy was breached at very turn

>> Continued from page 1

Ministers Gautam, Badi and Chaudhary followed a similar approach, posting photographs of the victim's family on their social media accounts.

In contrast, Minister for Information and Communication Bikram Timalsina was using social media to remind the public of the law.

"Publishing or broadcasting photographs or other material that reveals the identity of victims in serious crimes such as rape and sexual violence is an extremely sensitive and serious offence," Timalsina wrote on Facebook. "Making the identity of child victims of sexual violence public is an even more serious offence."

He urged media organisations, journalists and social media users not to publish, broadcast or repost photographs, videos or other material that could identify victims and called on them to remove material that had already been published.

Meanwhile, a video of a suspect being questioned is doing the rounds on social media.

Umesh Shrestha, chairperson of Press Council Nepal, also said making the video public was wrong.

"If a serious crime such as rape and murder is under investigation and legal proceedings are underway, it is natural for questions to be raised about the accused," Shrestha wrote on social media. "The truth must come out, and those responsible must be punished in accordance with the law. But making public a video of a minor's [suspect's] statement before a court has delivered its verdict is not part of the judicial process. We must never forget one thing: a victim's suffering is not content. An accused person's statement is not viral material."

Video of suspect's hospital questioning goes viral

The video of the teenage suspect that went viral on social media was recorded while doctors at the hospital were questioning him in the presence of a district police officer and two police personnel stationed at the hospital, according to a hospital source.

The questioning was conducted by doctors Paniya and Saroj, along with a female hospital staff member, Shivani, the source said.

"Videos of doctors conducting questioning without police presence are kept confidential but who recorded this video and why is not our concern," a hospital employee said. "If such a sensitive video needs to be submitted to a court, the hospital keeps it confidential."

The video shows two uniformed police officers, one carrying a rifle, recording the handcuffed teenager's statement on a mobile phone. Another uniformed officer, with a pistol holstered at his waist, is seen striking the teenager on the back of the head with his hand as he gives a detailed account of the incident. The officer is heard saying, "All right, that's enough."

The footage that was made public shows the teenage suspect giving a detailed account of the incident.

Police have already arrested the head constable who recorded the video.

"We have arrested the police head constable who recorded the video. Four others are also under investigation," Naredra Kunwar, chief of the Bara District Police Office, told Kantipur. "Criminal proceedings will be initiated against the officer."

Lawyer Prabin Bhatta says protecting a victim's privacy means more than simply withholding their name.

"Showing the family's photograph, identifying the village or naming the parents can also easily reveal the victim's identity indirectly," he said. "During an investigation, authorities must therefore ensure that parents' names are withheld, voices are altered, and no material that could identify the family is released. Otherwise, legal protection of privacy will remain only on paper."

Lawyer Biraj Thapa warned that such negligence by state authorities could create a false narrative around the case.

"Our criminal justice system and laws clearly require the victim's privacy to be protected in every respect," he said. "It is completely wrong for the home minister or other responsible officials to publish photographs or videos of victims or disclose their real names in agreements. Such actions can create a false narrative."

Article 28 of Nepal's constitution guarantees every citizen the right to privacy, while Article 39 guarantees children the right to special protection. The Children's Act, 2018 further specifies this protection. Section 11(3) requires the names, addresses, ages, sex, family background and any other information that could reveal the identity of children accused of or victimised by an offence to be kept confidential.

Nepal is also a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Article 17 of the ICCPR and Article 16 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child protect the privacy and dignity of children and their families.

Government agencies were not alone. Members of the public and media organisations also violated the victim's privacy. Her name and photographs have appeared across social media feeds and on placards carried in the streets.

Many media organisations have abandoned editorial judgement by using the victim's name and photograph in their reports. The Child-Friendly Media Directive, 2016 prohibits the disclosure of the identity of children who have been subjected to sexual violence or abuse. Section 4(h) bars the disclosure of their identity, while section 4(e) prohibits the use of photographs, drawings or audio-visual material that could reveal it.

The Journalist Code of Conduct, 2016, as amended in 2019, also prioritises the protection of victims' identity and privacy. Sections 5(5)(2) and 5(4)(2) prohibit the publication or broadcast of photographs that reveal a victim's identity.

For serious violations, the Press Council Nepal has the legal authority under section 7 of the code to take action ranging from issuing warnings to blacklisting media organisations.

Some may ask: if the victim has already died, why does privacy still matter?

Menuka Thapa, president of Raksha Nepal, an organisation that has worked for years to protect rape survivors, rejects that argument.

"Privacy must be protected to ensure that a victim's right to live with dignity is not violated," she said. "A person's body may die, but their dignity and their family's dignity remain. Respect for the law also requires that photographs and videos of victims not be broadcast."

Lawyer Biraj Thapa agrees.

"Victims' privacy must be protected so that, if they survive, they can live freely, safely and with dignity as adults without social stigma," he said. "Even when the victim has died, photographs and personal details that remain online can cause lifelong psychological suffering to surviving family members. That makes privacy an essential requirement."

Nepal's legal framework for protecting privacy is not particularly weak. The bigger problem is enforcement.

International practice shows that many countries treat the disclosure of sexual assault victims' identities as a serious offence.

In neighbouring India, the Supreme Court issued a landmark ruling in 2018 holding that protecting the privacy and dignity of victims of rape and sexual violence is an obligation of the state, the media and society. The court held that victims' identities should not be disclosed even if they have died or their families have given consent.

Interviews with minor victims are prohibited, and photographs cannot be published even after being blurred.

Section 72 of India's Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (criminal code) prohibits the publication of information that could reveal the identity of adult victims, while section 23 of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act prohibits disclosure of the identity of child victims. The Press Council of India's norms of journalistic conduct also instruct media organisations to protect victims' identities and privacy.

In the United Kingdom, the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act 1992 gives victims of sexual offences lifelong anonymity from the moment an allegation is made. Publishing any information that could identify a victim, including their name, address, school or photograph, can constitute a serious criminal offence, whether the victim is alive or dead.

Australian courts can issue suppression orders preventing the media from publishing details of a case or identifying victims. Strict protections also apply to children, including after their death, to shield families from media intrusion and further psychological trauma.

Canada's Criminal Code provides for mandatory publication bans in sexual offence cases. The Supreme Court of Canada, in R vs Adams, held that the central purpose of such restrictions is to provide victims with a lasting guarantee of privacy.

In the high-profile Homolka-Bernardo case, Canadian courts not only barred the public and media from accessing graphic videos of sexual abuse but later ordered the destruction of all such video evidence in 2001.

The United States takes a different approach. Because the First Amendment to the Constitution gives strong protection to press freedom, the country relies more heavily on voluntary media codes of conduct than on legal restrictions on publishing victims' identities.

Even there, however, privacy advocates argue that publishing a victim's name without consent can amount to another grave violation and humiliation of the victim.

कान्तिपुर पब्लिकेशन्स् लिमिटेड

KMG

Notice Regarding Newspaper Price Revision

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OPINION

OUR VIEW

Build energy sovereignty

With energy demands shifting, Nepal needs to ramp up transmission infrastructure and export agreements.

Nepal's hydropower potential is often touted as one of the highest per-capita power production in the world, boasting a theoretical potential of approximately 83,000 megawatts, of which around 43,000 are considered technically and economically feasible. Yet, with a total installed generation capacity of 4,200 megawatts and domestic demand hovering around 2,000 to 2,200 megawatts, the nation continues to struggle to exploit its potential.

In the last fiscal year, Nepal earned a record-high Rs29.32 billion from exporting electricity to India and Bangladesh. However, the current production and export model is fundamentally unsustainable as it remains heavily reliant on selling volatile monsoon surplus while importing power during the dry season. To secure long-term economic resilience, Nepal must capitalise on the Indian energy market while it lasts, forge proactive trilateral agreements to export power to Bangladesh, and accelerate domestic consumption.

The window of opportunity in India will not remain open indefinitely. Although India's electricity demand is projected to reach 458.7 gigawatts by 2036, the country is rapidly diversifying its own energy sources. Its solar capacity is projected to reach 211 gigawatts, with the nation targeting 100 gigawatts of nuclear power by 2047. Under these circumstances, India will increasingly assess Nepal's electricity based on strict parameters of price, reliability and availability. Kathmandu must acknowledge this reality.

To secure the Indian market, the state must immediately resume the stalled power purchase agreement (PPA) process, where projects representing roughly 16,500 megawatts currently languish. It is vital to negotiate long-term agreements of 5, 15 and 25 years. Furthermore, Nepal needs to invest heavily in transmission infrastructure as inadequate infrastructure currently wastes around 1,000 megawatts of generated electricity. Prioritising cross-border transmission networks, however, is not enough. Since most of Nepal's hydropower plants are run-of-river, fast-tracking reservoir-based projects like Upper Arun, Dudhkoshi and Budhigandaki are essential steps to provide consistent, year-round electricity.

Relying on a single export market, however, exposes Nepal to geopolitical vulnerabilities. Past bilateral tensions have led to economic blockades, notably in 1969, 1988-89, and 2015-16. Power-hungry Bangladesh, currently crippled by severe gas and electricity shortages, represents an ideal partner. Bangladesh's master plan seeks to import up to 9,000 megawatts of electricity from its neighbours. Crucially, Nepali hydropower is highly competitive. The initial bilateral agreement to export 40 megawatts to Bangladesh was priced at Tk8.35 per unit, which is 78 percent cheaper than Bangladesh's costly imports from India. Kathmandu must proactively seek trilateral agreements with New Delhi and Dhaka to establish stable cross-border corridors.

Yet, the ultimate goal of energy sovereignty lies within Nepal. It is strategically unwise to remain heavily dependent on imported fossil fuels while wasting clean energy. Replacing imported Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG)—which costs Nepal Rs60 billion annually and is prone to chronic shortages and hoarding—with subsidised domestic induction cooktops will insulate Nepali kitchens from international supply shocks. This transition will also significantly reduce the national import bill. Here, the government could incentivise electric power consumption for cooking by providing subsidies for induction cooktops.

To absorb surplus power locally, state authorities must implement future-oriented domestic reforms. For starters, the Tarai belt could be electrified by replacing diesel water pumps with electric irrigation. A nationwide network of hybrid refrigeration units could be built to preserve agricultural harvests. Furthermore, building pumped-storage hydropower and grid-scale battery systems will stabilise local distribution networks. Looking further ahead, surplus energy can power clean digital assets, support green data centres, and produce green hydrogen to manufacture domestic chemical fertilisers.

Nepal cannot afford to fall behind in the transition to energy sovereignty. If the nation wishes to capitalise on its power potential, it must engage in bold regional diplomacy, immediate infrastructure upgrades, and a domestic electrification campaign.

THEIR VIEW

Say no to impunity

Every child development centre must have a mechanism to report sexual misconduct.

We are deeply concerned by the allegations made against the former superintendent of the government's Child Development Centre for girls in Konabari, Gazipur. Reportedly, six residents of the centre accused Md Setaruzzaman of sexual harassment, including calling them alone into his room, touching them inappropriately and forcing them to watch pornography. There were also allegations of threats, bribery, and an attempt to make a pregnant girl undergo an abortion. The residents submitted a written complaint against him last July. Setaruzzaman was eventually suspended following an investigation, only to be cleared of the allegations at a subsequent departmental hearing on the grounds that the allegations were not proven beyond doubt.

The decision deserves careful scrutiny. Allegations involving vulnerable children cannot simply be dismissed without a transparent and credible investigation. Child development centres are meant to rehabilitate children and adolescents in conflict with the law and help them return to mainstream society. There are currently two centres for boys, in Jashore and Tongi, and one for girls, in Konabari, Gazipur. Concerns have long been raised about whether the environment, management, education, food, security and healthcare of these centres adequately serve the needs of children. The latest allegations further expose serious weaknesses in oversight at these centres. Previous investigations into deaths, violence, and other incidents have produced several recommendations, but many have not been implemented. As experts have pointed out, those responsible for running these institutions need proper training and a more child-centred approach.

The official who conducted the recent investigation in the case reportedly said that clearing Setaruzzaman was not justified. This makes an independent review of the case essential, ensuring that all relevant evidence, including the accounts of the girls and staff members, is properly examined. The investigation must also ensure that complainants are not intimidated or pressured. Allegations against other personnel, including a house parent who was also accused of sexual harassment, must be investigated as well.

The Ministry of Social Welfare and the Department of Social Services must strengthen oversight of these institutions through regular independent inspections and prompt probes into complaints against officials and staff. Most importantly, every child development centre must have a functional and confidential mechanism through which residents can report sexual harassment, abuse, threats or other misconduct. A complaint cell staffed by trained female personnel or other trusted professionals could help create a safer environment for girls to report. The authorities must also review the security arrangements in these centres and ensure that staff members follow the codes of conduct. The state cannot continue to falter on its responsibility to protect these vulnerable children.

— The Daily Star (Bangladesh)/ANN

The 'Panchayat-isation' of Deuba

Why does a political figure who fought for democracy begin to resemble the very political culture his generation had fought against?

HYPHEN

CHANDRAKISHORE

POST ILLUSTRATION

Sher Bahadur Deuba is among the figures in Nepal's democratic history whose political biography has always carried an uncomfortable contradiction. He fought against the Panchayat system, went to jail, struggled for democracy, travelled a long journey in the politics of the Nepali Congress, became prime minister five times and also served as party president. The contradiction is not that he remained in power for a long time; in democratic politics, power itself is no crime. The real irony lies in how a leader who struggled for democracy gradually began to appear, in his public presentation, close to the same political culture his generation had fought against. I would call this irony the 'Panchayat-isation' of Deuba.

This is not an accusation that Deuba has become a *Panch*. For the active workers of the Panchayat system, Panch was a political identity. In Deuba's case, it is a political metaphor.

A recent Congress meeting has once again brought his irony to the fore. Deuba's repeated assertion, "I am a Hindu", is, in itself, not unusual. Religious faith is a personal right. The problem begins when private faith becomes linked to the language of the reorganisation of a political organisation, national identity and political mobilisation. Then it can no longer be viewed merely within the sphere of private faith. This is where the major contradiction in Deuba's political journey comes to the surface.

A major feature of the Panchayat system was placing the individual above the institution. The king was not merely a symbol of the nation; he was the centre of the state's legitimacy. The space for political debate was limited. Leadership mattered more than organisation, discipline more than ideas, and power more than the citizen.

Democracy had promised exactly the opposite. In a democracy, leaders are not institutions. They are temporary representatives of the institution. A party is not the extension of any one leader, but a structure of ideas, organisation and collective decision-making. The citizen is not merely a voter but also one who questions. Yet, changing the institutional framework of democracy does not always change political culture. Panchayat-isation begins sometimes in the name of nationalism, sometimes in the name of religion, and sometimes in the name of a leader's popularity.

It means excessive reverence for leadership, discomfort with questions, the growing dominance of the individual over the organisation, the tendency to treat political succession as natural, and giving more importance to the convenience of power than to the citizen. In this sense, Panchayat-isation is not only Deuba's story. Deuba has become an interesting symbol of it because he belongs to the generation of leaders who had opposed the Panchayat.

His political legacy also faces another question. Should the future of a democratic party remain bound to one personality from its past? The crisis of the Nepali Congress is not only Deuba, but he has certainly become a symbol of that crisis.

It is useful to recall BP Koirala's Congress. BP did not regard democracy merely as the process of multi-party elections. At the centre of his socialism were citizen dignity, political freedom and social justice. There was space for dissent and debate. BP himself could be questioned. Therefore, merely taking BP's name repeatedly does not keep his political tradition alive. Sometimes the opposite happens.

Today, within the Congress, there appears a danger of BP being used as a certificate of political legitimacy. BP's name to prove the continuity of a leader, to sanctify a decision, to make a political turn historical. But what would be the most honest way of remembering him? Perhaps this: to preserve the freedom to question BP himself.

The question of religion in Deuba's recent presentation is contextual here. It is necessary to repeat that a leader calling himself a Hindu is not anti-democratic. Believing or not believing in a religion is an individual's freedom. But Nepal has already advanced on the constitutional journey of a republic, federalism and pluralism. That is why, when the top leader of an old democratic party links religious identity with the language of political restructuring and national identity, questions naturally arise. Even in the document that emerged from the meeting of Deuba's faction in the Congress, there appears an urge to link the *Sanatan Dharma* and cultural tradition with national identity. The problem is not religion itself, but its potential to become a political instrument.

The Panchayat too had constructed an official cultural imagination of the nation. It allowed space for diversity, but it did not insist democratically on the political equality of diversity. The challenge of the republic is different. The nation's cultural identity need not be one. Citizens must be equal. In Nepal's cultural heritage, the place of Hindu tradition is undisputed. But the constitutional identity of the modern nation must be kept separate from the religious majority's cultural self-confidence.

Nepal is not the country of only one culture. Madheshis, Janajatis, Dalits, Muslims, Tharus and many other communities are citizens of this republic, each carrying their own identity, memory and aspirations. Democracy's beauty is precisely that the state does not make any one identity the contractor of nationalism. Therefore, the question is not only of Deuba, but also of the Congress. Are we using the language of religion to embrace pluralism or to dissolve pluralism into a cultural majority?

Yesterday, there was the *jai-jaikaar* of the king. Today there can be the *jai-jaikaar* of the leader. Yesterday, being close to the palace was power. Today, being around the party leadership can become power. Yesterday, asking questions was uncomfortable. Today, dissent can be sidelined by labelling it as factionalism. The Panchayat has gone. But the *Panchayati* psychology has somewhere remained within us.

Perhaps this could be the greatest irony of Deuba's political life; he had struggled against the Panchayat, but history is now placing him before another test. Can he rise above his own political legacy for the institutional transformation of a democratic party? A leader's greatness is not decided only by how long they have led. Sometimes greatness lies in the capacity to leave the place they have created for others. In political life, there comes a time when a leader moves from the place of making history to the place of becoming history. When this transition cannot be accepted, even a democratic leader begins to create a small court around them. And it is from here that the question goes beyond Deuba.

We changed the constitution. But has political culture changed? We brought federalism, but did the centralised political mentality change? If the answers to these questions continue to remain negative, then the problem will not be only Deuba's. Panchayat-isation of Deuba will no longer remain a satirical expression used for one person. It will become the name of that old shadow that is still alive within Nepal's democracy. The Panchayat system has ended. But the end of the *Panchayati* mindset is perhaps still pending.

The author is a veteran journalist.

A thread tainted by caste

The celebration of Janai Purnima highlights an urgent need to critically examine traditions that uphold upper-caste dominance in Nepal.

MITRA PARIYAR

I prefer to describe the caste system in modern-day Nepal (and, of course, India) with the metaphor of the sewage system. Much of it is subterranean, invisible in public, but operative all the same. And it greatly influences every person, every home, every community and every government.

Whatever one may think of the incumbent government, sociologically speaking, there's been a significant paradigm shift. I don't just mean the generational change. After decades, a young Madheshi man from the lower stratum of society rules the country. In a long while, we haven't had a leader who doesn't wear a *janai*, a sacred thread.

It's an irony, however, that the same executive head seems intent on promoting Hinduism in public life. Otherwise, he wouldn't have held elaborate ceremonies with 108 Brahmins reciting Vedic mantras at his swearing-in.

Balendra Shah has little political will to strengthen the dignity and rights of the Madheshi communities and of the lower castes. We haven't seen any signs of that in the past five months. His Cabinet may be working for change on many fronts, but it has done nothing to tackle structural change. They don't talk about it, let alone do something about it. Nor do parliamentarians from the ruling Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) raise their voices for change in this area. Even some of the charismatic Dalit activists-turned-lawmakers, such as the controversial Khagendra Sunar, have remained silent.

People would appreciate even a small gesture towards challenging Brahmanism. Jettisoning the festival of *Janai* Purnima from the list of national holidays would, for example, win the kudos of many Dalits and ethnic minorities. *Janai* Purnima falls on August 28 this year, heralding the festive season. It's the day the upper castes change their *janai*, the sacred thread. The *janai* symbolises the ritual purity, cultural domination and political authority of the upper castes. So, this is strictly a celebration of Brahmins and Chhetris.

And yet, as a national holiday, the majority of the population that doesn't receive the sacred thread—mainly Dalits and ethnic groups—are also made to celebrate the day as a special occasion. In other words, these communities are forced by the state, as it were, to applaud and affirm their own domination.

This has been the case since the Puranic period. The unclean or lower castes are ritually excluded by denying them the sacred thread. Thus, a festival like Janai Purnima re-affirms and consolidates caste hierarchy—in contravention of the constitution and law.

POST FILE PHOTO

Yet, many people celebrate the festival uncritically. Even the seasoned advocates of Dalit rights refuse to raise a voice against such state-sponsored events and activities that implicitly strengthen caste hierarchy.

It's a pity, as aforementioned, that even a prime minister from the marginalised oil-pressing Teli community doesn't see any issues with festivities like Janai Purnima. Is he blinded by his faith? Or perhaps he doesn't dare do anything to upset the apple cart!

Time and again, the Madheshi communities witness inter-religious tensions, and the same happened a while ago. Opinion pundits, the media and the religious authorities were cautious not to inflame the situation and to maintain 'social goodwill'. That's the right approach, of course. Social goodwill must be promoted everywhere. It's good that, after initial criticisms, the government took appropriate measures to resolve the problems.

The discourse about maintaining goodwill, however, is limited. It doesn't focus on *intra*-religious issues—mainly caste issues—as much as on *inter*-religious issues. Both Hindu and Muslim communities must, of course, live in peace and harmony alongside each other, as they have always done in this country. The last thing we want is communal hatred and violence.

But the issues of caste hatred *within* the dominant Hindu communities are too great to ignore. It's sad that nobody gives it a thought when they stress on 'social goodwill'. In fact, inter-caste tensions have greater potential than inter-religious tensions. The way upper or cleaner castes exclude, humiliate and attack the lower or unclean castes is far worse than how a Hindu treats a Muslim in our country.

I was delighted to read a recent *Onlinekhabar* article by TU sociology professor and commentator Chaitanya Mishra. He hits the nail on the head by arguing that caste discrimination is a 'special' case of religious discrimination. I have been trying hard to bring religion into our debates about caste discrimination, with limited success. Even Dalit intellectuals refrain from problematising their clear religious injunctions that actively promote casteism.

Mishra's line is brave and objective and very useful for promoting 'social goodwill'. It targets the root problems. The slogan of social goodwill would mean nothing until caste-based ill-will and disharmony and even violence are allowed to persist, uncritically, like an open sewer.

Unfortunately, our line is still in a great minority. The majority attitude is reflected in another (emeritus) TU professor and well-known political commentator Surendra KC's recent observations. Reacting to Sher Bahadur Deuba's comments about the Hindu religion, KC argued that religion must not be brought into political debates and discussions. He said that we (that is, the elites from the dominant castes) must continue to follow our *kul dharma* at home and let people of different faiths and castes do what they want to do.

On the face of it, KC's observation may seem harmless, but it has sinister objectives. He wants to preserve the caste hierarchy silently, as a domestic tradition—the anti-caste laws notwithstanding.

If we want to eradicate the seeds of social disharmony and communal violence, rather than merely reacting when problems appear, we must follow Mishra's advice. We must problematise all social issues including those umbilically connected to the dominant religion and culture.

The religious and cultural matters are highly sensitive and challenging. They need to be re-imagined and reformed according to modern law. But not talking about them at all—as KC advises—is not a durable solution. People normally don't even think, let alone talk about the sewer. But what happens when it's blocked, broken or poorly managed?

Pariyar is a Dalit rights activist.

FOREX

US Dollar	153.5
Euro	179.05
Pound Sterling	209.28
Swiss Franc	191.31
Australian Dollar	109.98
Canadian Dollar	110.96
Singapore Dollar	120.83
Japanese Yen (10)	9.64
Chinese Yuan	22.83
Saudi Arab Riyal	40.88
Qatari Riyal	42.11
Thai Bhat	4.7
UAE Dhiram	41.79
Malaysian Ringit	37.97
Korean Won (100)	11.1

Exchange rates fixed by Nepal Rastra Bank

BULLION

	PRICE PER TOLA
Fine Gold	Rs 322,700
Silver	Rs 4,965

SOURCE: FENEGOSIDA

BIZLINE

Hyundai union back in wage talks after rare full-day strike

SEOUL: The union representing workers at South Korean automaker Hyundai Motor said on Monday it had resumed wage talks with management after staging its first full-day strike in a decade. The action at the country's largest carmaker on Friday saw around 40,000 employees walk off the job, according to union figures, after discussions over pay and retirement broke down. They have come against a backdrop of concerns over job security as artificial intelligence transforms South Korea's automotive industry, a pillar of the Asian nation's economy. A union representative confirmed to AFP on Monday that talks with management would restart from 2:00 pm. A planned four-hour walkout that day had been scrapped, but one slated for Tuesday may still take place, the representative said. "We will decide whether to stage a partial strike tomorrow depending on the outcome of today's negotiations," they said. The union has demanded a 149,000-won ($108) increase in the basic monthly salary, a 50 percent increase in bonuses and a hike in the retirement age. The workers have staged a total of 60 hours of strikes this year, causing estimated losses of around $1.6 billion, according to calculations by local news agency Newsis. **(AFP)**

Tourism boom pushes limits of Athens air traffic control

ATHENS: Green arrows representing tourist-laden jets pile up on the screens of the Athens air traffic controllers, a puzzle to solve at the height of tourist season. "Look at this sky, it's crazy, there's no room for any more planes!" exclaimed Olga Toki, vice-president of the Association of Air Traffic Controllers of Greece. There is no doubt that this is a busy summer for the overworked air traffic controllers. In the low season, Greece's airports typically handle between 1,000 and 1,500 flights per day, according to the Greek Civil Aviation Authority. In the first week in July, by contrast, they handled an average of 2,700 flights per day. Overall traffic in southeast Europe, which includes Greek airspace, has risen about 40 percent from 2019, according to Eurocontrol, the air navigation safety organisation. That underlined a boom in tourist arrivals in Greece, which last year were 23 percent higher than the 2019 pre-Covid peak, at 38 million, in a country of around 10 million people. Even before the summer rush, nerves were on edge; a January 4 breakdown in the communication system linking air traffic controllers and aircraft had laid bare a glaring weakness. **(AFP)**

Iran says finds new gas, after war hits energy sector

TEHRAN: Iran said on Sunday it had discovered more than 200 billion cubic metres of natural gas, months into the Middle East war that has hit the country's energy infrastructure and production. "New gas reserves were discovered in the south of Fars province," Petroleum Minister Mohsen Paknejad told state television, adding that over 160 billion cubic metres could be extracted from the field. He described it as sweet natural gas, which has very little of the toxic gas hydrogen sulphide, resulting in lower operating and development costs. According to Bloomberg, any new production from the site would likely be years away. Iran's energy sector has taken a hit since joint US-Israeli strikes on the Islamic republic launched the Middle East war in late February. The countries have struck Iran's energy infrastructure such as gas production facilities or oil depots, as well as transport routes. **(AFP)**

NADA Auto Show opens today with 200 stalls, 150-plus brands

The 18th edition of the auto show puts the spotlight on electric vehicles, locally assembled products and Nepal's potential to develop an automobile industry.

BIMAL KHATIWADA
KATHMANDU, AUG 24

As the autumn festive season approaches, the 18th edition of the NADA Auto Show 2026 is set to open at Bhrikutimandap in Kathmandu on Tuesday, showcasing new automobile technologies and brands of two- and four-wheelers.

Organised by the NADA Automobiles Association of Nepal, the show will run until August 30. This year's event marks the NADA's golden jubilee.

More than 150 brands are participating in the show this year, with over 200 stalls featuring vehicles, components, financial services and other products related to the automobile industry. This year's event is themed "From Industry to Employment."

NADA's president Surendra Kumar Upreti said the association has sought to make each edition of the auto show different. "The objective of the auto show is not merely to sell vehicles," he said. "It is also about exploring where Nepal's transportation and mobility sector can go and what its future potential looks like."

Alongside vehicles assembled and manufactured in Nepal, the show is showcasing component manufacturers and spare-parts suppliers and other ancillary businesses that have emerged around the automobile sector. "If the government formulates a long-term policy over the next 10 years, we could reach a stage where automobiles can be manufactured in Nepal," Upreti said.

The auto show has given special priority to vehicles made in Nepal this year. Upreti said after-sales services, spare parts, components, banks and insurance are equally important aspects of the automobile business.

Anup Baral, chairman of the NADA Auto Show Committee, said Nepal has significant potential for industrialisation in the automobile sector.

"This year, we are trying to home in on that message," Baral said. "Establishing a large-scale industry requires first building the capacity to manufacture small components. The auto show demonstrates that Nepal has that potential."

The show has a separate Nepal Pavilion for 'Made in Nepal' products. Vehicle batteries are now produced in Nepal, and key two-wheeler brands occupying a major domestic market share are assembled locally. New-generation electric vehicle concepts are also being developed in Nepal.

POST FILE PHOTO

This year, EVs are expected to remain a major feature of the auto show, reflecting their growing presence in Nepal's automobile market.

Even helmets for two-wheelers are now manufactured domestically.

The organiser said the auto show will also focus on Nepal's infrastructure needs and the potential for developing an automobile industry. The vehicle market has been expanding each year, with the growth of electric vehicles further increasing the sector's potential.

More than 14 two-wheeler brands are participating in the show, including those whose vehicles are assembled in Nepal.

"We have also included banks and financial institutions," Baral said. More than 70 different automobile components are being displayed at the show, he added. "Of these, 15 to 20 products are made entirely in Nepal. Starting production in Nepal is not a simple challenge."

He said the monetary policy and budget for the current fiscal year had created some optimism in the sector. The policy environment now allows financing of up to 80 percent for commercial vehicles.

"We are still urging the authorities to increase the loan limit in relation to vehicle prices," Baral said.

He said poor road and infrastructure conditions are creating additional risks and costs for commercial vehicle operators.

"Bringing a new vehicle from the Rasuwagadhi border to Kathmandu involves substantial costs," he said. "Once the vehicles arrive here, poor road conditions often lead to additional maintenance requirements. Electric vehicles are even more sensitive."

Baral said the automobile sector could play an important role in creating employment in Nepal at a time when many young people are forced to leave the country for work.

"The automobile sector is trying to demonstrate that industries can operate in Nepal and create employment here," he said.

The automobile sector currently generates around 100,000 direct jobs and more than one million indirect jobs, according to Baral.

This year, electric vehicles are expected to remain a major focus of the auto show, reflecting their growing presence in Nepal's automobile market.

Ankit Dahal, head of training and business development at BYD, said the company is planning to establish a battery repair centre in Nepal.

Compared to the situation two or four years ago, charging infrastructure for electric vehicles has developed significantly in Nepal, Dahal said. There is no longer a major shortage of charging stations along most major highways, with the charging network covering highways at intervals of roughly 50 to 60 kilometres.

Both the government and private sector are making substantial investments in charging infrastructure. The Nepal Electricity Authority is also operating its own charging stations, making long-distance travel in electric vehicles easier than in the past.

"However, there is still room for improvement. As soon as you move into relatively remote areas away from the main highways, charging infrastructure becomes scarce," Dahal said. "In some places, there is not enough electricity to operate charging stations. The transmission network is weak and voltage fluctuations are common."

Expanding charging infrastructure in remote areas remains a major challenge.

Various companies are working with the government and the Nepal Electricity Authority to improve electricity networks in remote areas and establish charging stations. But where electricity has not yet reached rural areas, installing charging stations is not possible.

"Nepal's adoption of electric vehicles is at a good level by global standards," Dahal said. "If we can now expand electricity and road infrastructure in rural areas, the charging problem will also be resolved to a large extent."

Battery management is another emerging challenge as electric vehicle adoption grows. Most automobile companies currently provide warranties of eight to 10 years for batteries.

Most four-wheel electric vehicles use lithium iron phosphate (LFP) batteries, which have a relatively long lifespan. Dahal said batteries do not necessarily have to be discarded immediately after their warranties expire.

"Even after the warranty expires, the batteries do not necessarily have to be discarded immediately," he said. "They can be given a second life. Although battery capacity may decline, the cells that retain capacity can be used for purposes such as solar energy storage."

Discarding and destroying batteries should be considered only as a final option, Dahal added. "For this purpose, we have already partnered with companies in China and India involved in battery management, repair and reuse." Nepal, however, lacks adequate infrastructure for battery repair and management.

"Therefore, we are planning to establish a basic battery repair centre in Nepal," Dahal said.

Initially, BYD plans to start on a small scale by opening batteries, separating damaged cells and reusing cells that can be repaired.

"Our target is to begin this work by the end of 2026," he said.

Supreme Court orders timely payments to dairy farmers

Court says government must ensure farmers are paid on time and warns that agreements should not become a tool to silence those without access to authorities.

POST FILE PHOTO

The Dairy Development Corporation currently collects between 95,000 and 100,000 litres of milk a day from farmers across the country.

KRISHANA PRASAIN
KATHMANDU, AUG 24

The Supreme Court has ordered the government to develop a system to ensure dairy farmers are paid regularly, in line with a tripartite agreement reached between the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development, dairy entrepreneurs and farmers in June 2024.

The court issued the full text of its verdict last week in a case filed against the government and private dairy companies. In December 2024, a division bench had ruled on a writ petition filed by advocates Punya Prasad Khatiwada and Dipak Bikram Mishra.

When the petition was filed in March 2024, dairy farmers were owed around Rs7 billion. Of the total, private dairy companies represented by the Dairy Industry Association and the Nepal Dairy Association owed around Rs6 billion, while the state-owned Dairy Development Corporation owed around Rs900 million.

The court said it was also the government's responsibility to ensure that dairy farmers receive their payments on time. It warned that agreements reached between the government and stakeholders should not become merely a means of diverting or suppressing the concerns of farmers who have limited access to authorities.

Despite the agreements, the court said it had not received evidence that the payment cycle had become regular or that all outstanding dues had been cleared. The government and stakeholders had reached agreements in March and June 2024 on various issues related to dairy farmers and the payment of their dues. The agreements sought to establish a payment cycle by setting deadlines for clearing outstanding payments and to minimise the impact of seasonal fluctuations in milk production.

Under the agreements, the government was also expected to support the production of milk powder and other dairy products when milk production exceeded demand and provide subsidies to promote exports of dairy products. The agreements also provided for loans to dairy entrepreneurs against their stocks of dairy products as collateral, with the Agriculture Ministry facilitating interest subsidies on such loans. They also called for improvements to livestock insurance programmes.

The court directed the government to conduct awareness campaigns on provisions in laws, policies and programmes related to dairy farmers. Such campaigns should cover access to finance, subsidised loans, veterinary services and technology under animal health programmes, quality feed for cows and buffaloes, and the nutritional value of dairy products.

The issue of delayed payments became particularly acute from December 2023, after the retail price of milk reached Rs100 per litre and prices of other dairy products also increased. Both state-owned and private dairy companies said an economic slowdown weakened demand, disrupting their cash flow and increasing their liabilities to farmers as dairy products remained unsold for months.

Although dairy companies struggled to sell fresh milk, they processed excess milk into powder and butter. However, demand for these products also weakened, leaving large stocks in warehouses. The payment crisis put farmers under severe financial pressure. With high inflation and delayed payments, farmers said they struggled to meet household expenses and feed their livestock. Many also became unable to service the interest on loans taken for dairy farming.

The Dairy Development Corporation currently collects between 95,000 and 100,000 litres of milk a day from farmers across the country. The corporation pays around Rs65 per litre. The collected milk is processed into pasteurised milk and other dairy products for domestic consumption.

According to the Nepal Dairy Association, the domestic market currently receives around 3.6 million litres of milk a day.

Sharan Kumar Pandey, general manager of the Dairy Development Corporation, said the corporation had cleared its outstanding payments to farmers and was currently paying them every 30 days.

"We don't have dues remaining to be paid to farmers. We are currently paying farmers in a 30-day gap and are aiming to make a cycle of paying farmers every 15 days," Pandey said.

He said the corporation had had outstanding dues of Rs680 million accumulated over three months, which it had recently cleared.

"If our business increases, there will be no problem making payments to farmers on time," he said.

The corporation currently holds stocks of butter and milk powder sufficient for 15 to 20 days, according to Pandey. It is also exploring overseas markets to reduce its stocks.

"We recently exported DDC products to Dubai and have already received a demand for two tonnes. Demand is also coming from Japan, South Korea and Malaysia," he said.

Private dairy companies have also claimed that they have cleared their outstanding dues to farmers.

"We have already cleared the dues and have been making payments to farmers every 25 to 30 days," said Prahlad Dahal, president of the Nepal Dairy Association.

Kenyan farmers turn to bugs as organic demand grows

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
KENYA, AUG 24

Kenyan farmer George Muturi says the stinky wooden shack teeming with redworms has helped rescue his land from the soil degradation caused by chemical fertilisers.

Agriculture is vital to east Africa's economy, but a 2025 soil report by the Heinrich Boll Foundation, a German think tank, found that more than 40 percent of the region's soils were degraded—in part by overuse of chemical fertilisers—costing more than $65 billion a year in lost productivity. Fertiliser prices have also increased this year due to the war in the Middle East, driving a search for alternatives.

In Kenya, 32 percent of cropland was classified as strongly acidic in the soil report. Changing climatic conditions and overly intensive farming practices are among the causes, but Muturi says moving away from chemical fertilisers has boosted his harvests at his farm in Lari, about 50 kilometres (30 miles) from the capital, Nairobi. He switched to "vermicompost"—using redworms that turn food and crop waste into a natural, nutrient-rich form of fertiliser.

"Vermicomposting was a breakthrough for us... our soil is much better in a way that we can be able to plant and sustain the crop even during dry season," the 31-year-old farmer told AFP during a visit to his farm.

About 70 beds, each filled with at least 5,000 redworms, hold layers of food and crop waste mixed with cow dung that the worms break down over six weeks, to create vermicompost.

Multiple studies have shown that vermicompost can improve soil structure, organic matter and water retention.

Muturi acknowledges that it is some way off being used on an industrial scale, since very large quantities are needed to match the effects of synthetic fertilisers.

But he says he has seen positive results on his vegetables and has started selling the compost to other farmers around the country.

About 200 kilometres away in Nakuru County, Robert Mwangi has taken a similar approach with the larvae of black soldier flies.

He collects waste from the city's main market and feeds it to the larvae, which break it down into frass, an organic fertiliser. The mature larvae are dried and used as animal feed.

In a nylon structure, a pungent smell hangs over drums of shredded food waste, which are emptied into plastic boxes where the larvae feed for about two weeks before the frass is harvested. "With conventional fertilisers, the more you use it, the more the productivity of the soil goes down, because (it) creates an acidic environment which is not good for the microbes that are responsible for maintaining and improving the soil fertility," Mwangi said.

"The organic fertiliser is a very good soil amendment so farmers are able to experience increased productivity over time and improved soil fertility which reduces their cost of production," he said, adding that it also helps deal with food waste.

As global and domestic demand for organic food grows, Kenyan farmers are seeking alternatives to chemical fertilisers.

AFP/RSS

Kenya-based Nawiri organics produces and distributes organic fertiliser. Workers inspect the progress of mature Black soldier fly pupae harvested from troughs of organic food waste in Njoro constituency, Nakuru county in July.

Indonesia intensifies aerial firefighting as forest fires scorch multiple provinces

The fires are driven by an intensifying El Nino pattern and a prolonged dry season.

ASSOCIATED PRESS
JAKARTA, INDONESIA, AUG 24

Indonesia on Monday intensified ground and aerial firefighting operations as huge blazes in central and western parts of the country scorched thousands of hectares of forests and peatland, created a choking haze that blanketed cities and crossed borders.

Authorities have been battling fires driven by an intensifying El Nino pattern and a prolonged dry season, generating dense smoke that crossed into Malaysia and Brunei, according to Indonesia's National Disaster Management Agency, or BNPB.

The BNPB said Monday that fires remain active in several regions, while large-scale suppression efforts continue in fire-prone provinces including West, Central and South Kalimantan on Borneo island and in Riau, South Sumatra and Jambi on Sumatra island. The fires are part of a broader surge in wildfire activity across Indonesia this year.

Drought, strong winds and dry vegetation have complicated efforts to contain the fires, BNPB said in a statement on Monday. Some hot spots remained inaccessible to more than 24,000 ground firefighters who were deployed on Sumatra and Borneo, prompting local officials to request additional water-bombing support.

Prabowo visits fire-affected areas

After visiting areas devastated by forest and peatland fires in Central Kalimantan on Saturday, Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto on Monday flew to fire-affected Riau and its neighboring province of South Sumatra, where more than 36,000 hectares (89,000 acres) have burned in 10 provinces, to encourage authorities to get the haze cloud under control.

Prabowo vowed the government would continue supporting firefighting operations, including through the deployment of additional water-bombing helicopters and oxygen supplies for firefighters. He urged authorities to "thoroughly document and report the work being carried out by firefighting teams" directly to him.

Prabowo also called for stronger public education and outreach efforts, saying the central government will deploy about 1,000 military and police officers to work alongside regional authorities in raising awareness and preventing forest and land fires.

The Environment Ministry satellite data on Monday showed South Sumatra recorded the highest number of hot spots nationwide with 1,429, followed by West Kalimantan with 1,226 and Central Kalimantan with 811. East Kalimantan logged 576 hot spots, ahead of Riau with 503, while West Papua and Jambi recorded 468 and 458 hot spots, respectively.

Forestry Ministry data indicated that nearly 94,000 hectares (232,000 acres) burned in July alone nationwide. The Transportation Ministry said it has authorized the use of 35 foreign-registered aircraft to support wildfire response operations, including water-bombing missions and aerial patrols. The ministry said the aircraft can be rapidly redeployed to disaster-hit areas as conditions change, while complying with Indonesian aviation safety regulations.

Indonesia and Malaysia boost cloud seeding against wildfires

Indonesia is actively intensifying weather-modification operations to help firefighters combat wildfire by inducing rainfall through the dispersal of salt particles into suitable clouds, with 30 aircraft for water-bombing and cloud-seeding over Kalimantan and another 22 helicopters covering Sumatra.

Malaysian authorities said Monday that Indonesia has granted permission for its aircraft to enter Indonesian airspace to conduct cloud-seeding operations along their shared border as the two neighbors step up efforts to tackle the worsening haze.

Malaysia's Environment Minister Arthur Joseph Kurup said the country was preparing an operational plan and could also offer Indonesia help fighting fires if requested. He said the measures were critical to ensure air quality improves as Malaysia prepares to celebrate National Day on Aug. 31, to mark the 69th independence day from British rule.

The country also celebrates Malaysia Day on Sept. 16, to mark the unification of the entire nation, and this year the commemorations will be held in its eastern state of Sarawak on Borneo island, one of the areas most affected by the haze, he said.

Nearly 600 schools in Sarawak were closed last week as air quality deteriorated and affecting about 200,000 students, while officials expect hot, dry conditions to persist into October. On Monday, data from Malaysia's Environment Department showed 20 areas with unhealthy air quality in parts of peninsula Malaysia and Sarawak. Fires are a regular problem during dry season in Indonesia, a vast archipelago nation of more than 17,000 islands, and often strain relations with neighbors.

AP/RSS

A man is silhouetted against the haze from wildfires that blankets Musi River in Palembang, South Sumatra, Indonesia, on Sunday.

UK will help Ukraine make long-range missiles by sharing classified tech info

Ukraine is already in talks with France to work toward assembly lines for the missiles in Ukraine so that Kyiv can produce its own version of the weapons.

ASSOCIATED PRESS
LONDON, AUG 24

British Prime Minister Andy Burnham said Monday that the UK will help Ukraine make its own long-range missiles by sharing classified technical information for British components.

Burnham, who was in Kyiv alongside other international leaders for Ukraine's Independence Day, said defense firm MBDA will release details on UK-made parts for the SCALP missile to Ukraine to help the country assemble the weapons.

Here's what to know about the missiles and how significant the announcement is for Ukraine:

What the SCALP missile is

The SCALP missile is the French-produced version of the UK's Storm Shadow, an air-launched, high-precision missile with a range of more than 250 kilometers (155 miles). Both use shared French and British technology.

Measuring 5.1 meters (16.7 feet,) the missile is hard to detect and is designed to hit fixed or stationary targets such as hardened bunkers and key infrastructure, according to MBDA. The defense firm says the missile uses an advanced navigation system and is exceptionally accurate.

Storm Shadow and SCALP missiles are in service with the British, French and Italian air forces, as well as other export countries. They have been used in conflicts in Iraq, Libya and Syria.

Ukraine and France have been working to set up assembly lines

Ukraine is already in talks with France to work toward assembly lines for the missiles in Ukraine so that Kyiv can produce its own version of the weapons. It is not known how far advanced the plans are, or when such missiles may start benefitting Ukraine in its war against Russia.

Douglas Barrie, a senior fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, said that while the UK's decision to share classified information was notable, much depends on the pace at which local assembly can be established.

"Any impact ... will in part depend on how quickly Ukrainian-assembled SCALP cruise missiles can be introduced into service," he said.

The news will not help Ukraine in the short term as it struggles to secure more Patriot interceptor missiles.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said on Sunday that his country is receiving substantially fewer of those missiles, even as Russian ballistic attacks are increasing. The shortfall is particularly serious because the United States and European partners are struggling to expand production.

Still, the British announcement on Monday drew ire from Russia. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov accused the UK of "fanning the flame" of the war on Kyiv's side — a claim Burnham swiftly dismissed.

"Who started the fire?" he asked reporters when asked about the comments on Monday.

The UK has supplied Ukraine with missiles since 2023

Britain became the first country to supply longer-range strike weapons to Ukraine in 2023 when it donated a number of Storm Shadow missiles to Kyiv. The missiles gave Ukraine capacity to strike targets in Russia well behind the front lines, as well as in Russian-occupied Crimea. The UK is also helping Ukraine develop low-cost strike weapons in other ways. Officials have been working with British defense companies to test a new ground-launched strike system that could hit targets more than 500 kilometers (310 miles) away while carrying a powerful 225-kilogram warhead.

AP/RSS

Britain's Prime Minister Andy Burnham (centre) appears also on a giant screen (left) as National Guard of Ukraine and European leaders attend a commemorative ceremony marking Ukraine's 35th Independence Day outside St. Sofia Cathedral in Kyiv, Ukraine, on Monday.

France readies high school phone ban for next month

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
PARIS, FRANCE, AUG 24

The French government said Monday it would press ahead with a ban on mobile phones in high schools from next month, but trade unions warned that the measure might be hard to implement quickly. In July, France's parliament approved legislation banning both social media access for children under 15 and mobile phone use in high schools.

It is part of a push by President Emmanuel Macron for children to spend less time in front of screens, which the government fears is arresting their development. But earlier this month, the country's top court struck down the social media provision, dealing a blow to Macron.

However the Constitutional Council did not rule on the separate provision banning mobile phone use in high schools.

On Monday, government spokesperson Maud Bregeon said Macron "has decided to promulgate the law" containing the ban on phones, despite the Constitutional Council striking down its flagship provision.

"As a result, the ban on mobile phones in high schools can take effect from the start of the new school year, with a stable, consolidated and statutory legal framework," she said after a cabinet meeting.

France's school year starts in September. France has already banned children from using mobile phones in colleges—the schools attended between the ages of 11 and 15—and in primary schools.

In early July, high schools had been instructed to prepare for the measure's implementation in September, ahead of its adoption by parliament later that month. In order to enforce the ban, schools must amend their internal regulations.

But many schools may struggle to implement the measure because they have had little time to prepare.

Francois Resnais, national secretary of SNPDEN-Unsa, France's top union of school principals, criticised the timing as "bad". "Schools are not ready," Resnais told AFP.

"Schools are starting the year with a rule that is not written into their internal regulations, except perhaps for those that tried to anticipate something, but that remains very limited."

Christelle Kauffmann, the union's deputy secretary-general, is among the minority of school leaders who anticipated the measure. At her high school, phones will be banned in corridors and school buildings from the start of term, but allowed outdoors.

She said it could take nearly a year before the ban could be fully implemented across all high schools.

"It is very difficult for a school community to impose a new rule on young people. Even if the law is supposed to apply automatically, it is not that simple," she said. "You cannot put a supervisor behind every student."

Kamel Chibli, vice president of the Occitanie regional council in southern France, said digital pouches and lockers used to store smartphones cost the regional authorities around 40,000 euros for a high school with 1,500 students. High school students regularly use their smartphones to check timetable changes, room assignments and other school information. Some teachers also rely on phones in class for research, exercises and document sharing. In its guidance, the education ministry allows exemptions from the ban for "educational uses" or for purposes "necessary for the proper functioning of the school".

Empire State Building climbers kiss outside court after viral proposal

Ivan Kuznetsov, 32, and Angelina Nikolau, 33, face several charges after their viral stunt on July 1 when they clambered up an antenna at the peak of the 1,454-foot landmark.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
NEW YORK, AUG 24

A couple who climbed to the top of the Empire State Building and got engaged appeared in a New York court Monday, before giving each other a lingering kiss in full view of the world's media.

Ivan Kuznetsov, 32, and Angelina Nikolau, 33, face several charges after their viral stunt on July 1 when they clambered up an antenna at the peak of the 1,454-foot (443-meter) landmark.

During the climb, the pair, clad in black outfits with their faces covered, unfurled a banner that read: "When the power of love beats the love of power, the world knows peace."

On the top of the building, Kuznetsov went down on one knee and appeared to propose to Nikolau, before they kissed and embraced as news helicopters swirled around them.

At Monday's brief hearing, the pair each wore black leather jackets with jeans and stood quietly holding hands behind their lawyers.

Outside the courthouse, they embraced one another with a deep, 10-second kiss in front of a pack of journalists and onlookers.

The couple have built a huge online following for their illegal climbing exploits and starred in the Netflix documentary "Skywalkers: A Love Story," which showed them scaling Malaysia's Merdeka 118—the world's second tallest building.

Facing US charges including reckless endangerment, burglary and criminal mischief, they have defended their latest climb as "art" in a series of Instagram posts.

"Whatever happens in court, we will respect the process and accept the consequences of our choices," the pair, who have not entered a plea, wrote online. A further hearing was scheduled for September 29.

The Empire State Building has an observation deck open to the public that offers stunning views of New York, but access to higher points is forbidden.

Blowing in the wind, humble balloon gets green makeover

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
LONDON, AUG 24

A global symbol of parties and celebrations but an environmental headache, the humble balloon is undergoing a green revolution thanks to UK researchers. Researchers at Imperial College London say they have developed the first fully biodegradable balloon and hope to bring it to market within two years.

"So there was hundreds of trials. We had many, many failures," said Juliana Cumming, a PhD student at the university and co-creator of the "Bioloon", a 100-percent biodegradable balloon. In a university laboratory, the 29-year-old proudly showed AFP a flask containing a precious yellow liquid.

Once solidified, it becomes a soft, elastic material with a texture comparable to that of a conventional balloon. But there is one crucial difference—it breaks down completely within nine months unlike traditional balloons, Cumming said.

The Bioloon is the result of a public-private partnership launched by Charlotte Melia, an events entrepreneur, who describes herself as environmentally minded. "I was a party planner for over 10 years and ... I was very sustainably focused. The final stumbling block for me was the balloon waste," she told AFP.

"We were putting out thousands of party balloons every single week," she said, but they were only there "for a matter of hours simply to be popped and thrown in the trash". The final straw came when she realised "balloons were non-biodegradable" even though the packaging said they would say break up "at the rate of an oak leaf". Convinced that a sustainable alternative was possible, Melia decided with an associate to put up some £30,000 ($41,000) to part fund Cumming's doctoral research.

Ecological risk

The environmental impact of traditional balloons, which despite their advertising do not degrade, is largely unknown to the general public.

But a number of studies have documented the dangers posed by balloons once they end up in nature, particularly for marine life and birds.

A 2019 study by the University of Tasmania, published in Scientific Reports, found balloons were "the highest-risk plastic debris item" for seabirds, carrying a mortality risk 32 times higher than ingesting hard plastics. Imperial College's department of chemical engineering estimates that between 20 and 25 billion balloons are purchased worldwide every year.

Cumming spent three years developing her formula.

The starting point is the same as for an ordinary balloon: natural latex derived from the sap of the rubber tree, native to the Amazon, and has changed little since the balloon was invented in 1824.

"In order to turn the natural latex into something that we refer to as rubber it goes through this process called sulphur vulcanisation," she explained.

That involves adding "sulphur accelerators, antioxidants, and activators into the material" which "prevents the biodegradation of balloons" and also leaks "toxic chemicals into the environment".

Gloves, condoms and clothing

It was this stage of the manufacturing process which became the focus of Cumming's research. "Our balloon is still made with natural latex, but we blend it with another biodegradable polymer and we don't add any of these additives that are used in traditional balloons," she said.

"So this retains the biodegradability," she added, declining to reveal further details of the patented process.

According to the creators, the Bioloon breaks down regardless of where it ends up. The researchers "tested it in soil, seawater and deionised water. It degraded in all of those conditions ... and we estimate that it would biodegrade within about nine months," she said.

Importantly for all those planning a shindig, the balloon inflates as easily as a conventional one.

For Melia, the technology's potential extends far beyond party decorations, and could be adapted for everyday and medical products, including household gloves, surgical gloves, latex clothing and condoms.

AFP/RSS

Bioloon CEO Charlotte Melia holds a sample of biodegradable rubber at a laboratory at Imperial College in London, on August 19.

सर्टिफिकेट हरायो
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ठेगानाः टिकाथली वडा नं. ५

Gauff beats Pegula for 2nd Cincinnati Open title; France's Fils beats American Tiafoe in men's final

AP/RSS

Arthur Fils of France hits a return to Rafael Jodar of Spain during his quarter final tennis match at the National Bank Open in Montreal on August 11. USA's Coco Gauff reaches for the ball against Kazakhstan's Elena Rybakina during a National Bank Open semi final tennis match in Toronto on August 12.

JEFF WALLNER/AP
MASON, AUG 24

Coco Gauff defeated fellow American Jessica Pegula, 6-2, 6-4, to capture her second women's Cincinnati Open title on Sunday, and Arthur Fils of France defeated American Frances Tiafoe 6-3, 1-6, 6-0, in the men's final for his first Masters 1000 title.

In Saturday's semifinals, Pegula beat defending champion Iga Swiatek and Gauff defeated Sara Bejlek to set up the first all-American women's final at the Cincinnati Open in 56 years. The last time two American women played in the Cincinnati final was in 1970, when Rosie Casals beat Nancy Richey.

Pegula's best finish in Cincinnati came in 2024, when she lost to Aryna Sabalenka in the final.

Gauff, who won the 2023 title beating Karolina Muchova, stormed out to a 5-0 lead in the first set on Sunday before winning 6-2. Pegula battled back to within 5-4 in the second before Gauff closed out the win. Gauff won five of six break points.

"I think it was a long journey, but I'm happy," Gauff said. "I think it's night and day, the player I was last year to now. I don't think that this is an indicator that I'm going to do well in New York. Just knowing the quality ones that I had this week, hopefully I can use that experience."

Gauff had five wins in straight sets in Cincinnati.

"I thought she just played at a really high level and didn't really have many dips," Pegula said. "I didn't really think I played bad. The more you construct the point (against her), the worse it is because she almost likes to run. It was tough today. A dangerous, confident Coco is going to New York."

The head-to-head series between Gauff and Pegula is now tied at five apiece. Sunday was their second meeting in a final, with Gauff winning at Wuhan last year.

The Fils-Tiafoe match was the first time two Black players have met in an ATP Masters 1000 final.

Fils is the third Black man to win a Masters 1000 title, joining Ben Shelton, who won twice in Canada, and Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, who won in Paris in 2008 and Canada in 2014.

At 22 years old, Fils is the youngest French champion in Masters 1000 history. He became the second French player to win a Cincinnati final, joining Guy Forget in 1991.

"Very happy with that," Fils said. "It's been a tough last year. I didn't play the French Open (due to a hip injury). I lost early in Washington. People think that I'm done. But here we are. I got the title."

It was the second time Tiafoe has appeared in the Cincinnati Open final, losing to Jannik Sinner in 2024. He was looking to become the first American male to win in Cincinnati since Andy Roddick in 2006.

"I'm going to have two Cincinnati finals trophies at the crib," Tiafoe said. "I wish they were both champion ones. Losing on Sunday sucks. I've had a tough summer. I was able to play five great matches and beat quality players." Fils overpowered Tiafoe early in the first set on Sunday, winning 12 of 13 points to take a 3-0 lead. Tiafoe was dominant in the second, rolling to a 3-0 lead.

Tiafoe used the time break before the third set to stretch and receive massage treatment on his upper left leg and lower back.

"My hip bothered me a little bit, but that's neither here nor there," Tiafoe said. "It's not about how I feel. I'll be alright in a week (for the US Open)."

Tiafoe saved three championship points in the final game before Fils closed out the victory.

The Frenchman had 11 aces and won 71% of his points on first serve. He improved to 10-0 in deciding sets this year and 8-0 against American opponents.

Fils also won his only previous meeting with Tiafoe in Miami last year, also in three sets.

"It feels very good to have a trophy next to me, especially Masters 1000," Fils said. "Never won one before. You just have to stay positive and find a way to make it work. Being positive is going to help me in the next weeks in the US Open."

Ryan Blaney wins second consecutive NASCAR Cup race at New Hampshire Motor Speedway

ASSOCIATED PRESS
LOUDON, AUG 24

AP/RSS

Ryan Blaney spins the wheels of his car after winning a NASCAR Cup Series auto race in Loudon on Sunday.

Ryan Blaney and his team wound up making the most of a major mistake Sunday at New Hampshire Motor Speedway.

The Team Penske star just needed a moment to vent on his team radio about a pit crew blunder before charging from 17th to first for his second consecutive NASCAR Cup Series win at New Hampshire Motor Speedway.

"Whenever I say those things after something bad happens, it's my relief valve," Blaney said about scolding his team with an expletive. "I have to get it out in the open, or I'll be stewing over it a while. That's how I have to get over things. I wish I wasn't that way, but I'd rather it be that way than have it be in the back of my mind the rest of the race, not thinking of the main goal. It takes me five or 10 seconds to move on." After shaking it off, Blaney recovered to lead the final 74 laps on the 1.058-mile oval, fending off runner-up Bubba Wallace by 0.586 seconds.

Josh Berry, who is trying to find a ride for the 2027 season, finished a season-best third, the fourth consecutive top 10 for the Wood Brothers Racing driver.

The top five was rounded out by Christopher Bell and Kyle Larson. Ryan Preece finished ninth and kept his Chase hopes alive by gaining 19 points on Shane van Gisbergen, who finished 20th and remains in the 16th and final spot for the 10-race title run.

It's the 20th career victory and third this season for Blaney, who led a race-high 115 of 301 laps. He had cruised to a big lead when a lug nut fell off the left-front tire of his No. 12 Ford during a pit stop under caution with 111 laps remaining.

The 2023 Cup Series champion picked his way through traffic and was back up to seventh when the yellow flag flew on the 226th lap for a three-car crash. Crew chief Jonathan Hassler made an aggressive strategy call for two right-side tires, and Blaney gained six spots in the pits to retake first place.

Hassler said the error "maybe was a little bit of a blessing in disguise" because Blaney emerged several spots ahead of the contenders who took four tires. Of the top 12 finishers, Blaney was the only driver who took two tires on his last stop.

His crew struggled often on stops earlier this season, losing 128 spots in the pits, but has been better with three top-five finishes in the past six races.

"It's really competitive on pit road, and if you're going to have any speed, you're going to have these sorts of miscues," Hassler said. "With the speed we've had, our goal has certainly been to eliminate those, even if we give up a little bit of speed to do that. But it's still going to happen to each of the best teams. We're fortunate that we're fast enough and up front enough that people take notice when that's going to happen."

NASCAR started the race on wet-weather tires after a midafternoon rain shower, but the track dried quickly, and drivers switched back to slick tires after 40 laps.

Hamlin top seed

Points leader Denny Hamlin also rebounded from a pit stop miscue that dropped the Joe Gibbs Racing driver outside the top 15 with less than 100 laps remaining. Hamlin rallied for a seventh place that clinched the top seed for the Chase. "We were just pedestrian today," Hamlin said. "We just didn't quite have it, but ultimately a decent crawl back."

Bell's scary moment

Bell dropped to 31st on a safety violation penalty after front tire changer Blake Houston got dragged from the team's pit stall while tightening the right-side tire. Bell said he exited the pits as the jack dropped, and Houston wasn't able to get back across the front of the No 20 Toyota.

"I saw him kind of flopping around in my rearview camera," Bell said. "I didn't feel my car jump up in the air, so I knew I didn't run him over. It's alarming and very eye-opening that these guys jumping across pit wall, they're risking it. I'm super grateful for all the pit crew members, especially my team. They do a real good job. I'm glad Blake is OK."

Chastain eliminated

A last-place finish extinguished the dim Chase hopes for Ross Chastain, whose No. 1 Chevrolet suffered a mechanical problem after only 40 laps.

"The speed has gotten better, so we'll hopefully keep moving forward on that," Chastain said. "That's the important part. With the things in our control, we were able to make them better through the summer. I've learned that's really tough to do in the NASCAR Cup Series. We did get better, but we've got a ways to go."

Up next

The NASCAR Cup Series will conclude its regular season at Daytona International Speedway with a 160-lap race on Saturday, August 29 at the 2.5-mile oval, setting the 16-driver field for the Chase.

HOROSCOPE

ARIES (March 21-April 19)
You'll begin to see more clearly how everything and everyone is connected, making you a better leader and team player. Go out of your way to learn new skills.

TAURUS (April 20-May 20)
You'll have a gift for making friends and gaining attention, darling Taurus. Appreciate who you are and what you bring to the table, especially if you have a habit of undermining your talents or accomplishments.

GEMINI (May 21-June 21)
You're due for a period of rest, dear Gemini. Keep a light schedule throughout the coming weeks, prioritising gardening, cozy movie nights, and family gatherings over busy outings on the town.

CANCER (June 22-July 22)
Return to the basics before seeking additional knowledge, and you may uncover information or details you'd forgotten. If you've been considering a career change, now is a good time to ask questions.

LEO (July 23-August 22)
If you've been stuck in a rut, you're cosmically called to claw your way toward progress. Impatience won't serve you during this time, but standing still will prove fatal to your dreams.

VIRGO (August 23-September 22)
Your ability to communicate, further personal goals, and perfect your public image is maximised by this planetary placement. Use spiritual practices to find peace, sharpen your intuition, or connect with your higher self.

LIBRA (September 23-October 22)
Pay more attention to the inner workings of your mind, dearest Libra. If you have a habit of finding flaws within yourself and others, combat this behavior by focusing on positivity and strengths instead.

SCORPIO (October 23-November 21)
Bring more intention into your social interactions, dearest Scorpio. You're blessed with abundant opportunities to network and meet the right people. Circulate unfamiliar environments.

SAGITTARIUS (November 22-December 21)
Keep a clear head and be prepared to ask plenty of questions as your star rises throughout the coming weeks. High performance marks around the office could result in a promotion or raise.

CAPRICORN (December 22-January 19)
Lucky breaks heighten your optimism, giving you the courage and creative savvy needed to take leaps of faith. Indulge if you deserve a touch of luxury, but don't go overboard with your spending.

AQUARIUS (January 20-February 18)
You'll be a formidable opponent within negotiations and intellectual debate, dearest Aquarius. If you've been working toward any major milestones recently, this planetary placement can help you advocate for what you deserve.

PISCES (February 19-March 20)
You'll be in a giving and romantic mood throughout the coming weeks, darling Pisces. Just be mindful to articulate your own. The more open you are, the stronger your relationships will become.

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CROSSWORD

ACROSS
1 "She Works — for the Money"
5 Drive back
10 Experts
14 Toward the sheltered side
15 "A Night at the —"
16 Observe
17 Water-filled trench
18 Slugger Hank —
19 Ripped
20 Butter or margarine
22 Frowned
24 Slices
26 Sheep
27 Go over old ground
30 Tennis great — Williams
34 Small dog
35 Moving about
37 Extend apart
38 Era
39 Zoo denizen
41 "— Got You Under My Skin"
42 Sudden forward movement
45 Dressed to the —
47 Owns
48 Calm
50 Like a diplomat
52 Careless
53 Shakespearean king
54 Certain bee participant
58 Demonstrated
62 Mafia VIP
63 Dinner item
66 Nil
67 Kiln
68 Human trunk
69 Coup d'—
70 Golf pegs
71 Bovine animal
72 Snout

DOWN
1 Showy actors
2 Crooked
3 Raise
4 Sense
5 Driver's exam (2 wds.)
6 Clean-air org.
7 Pay- — -view
8 Desire deity
9 Spears
10 City in Belgium
11 Chilly
12 Raison d'—
13 Spore
21 Unseen emanation
23 Is in the red
25 Gown material
27 Rascal
28 Correct a text
29 Single numeral
31 Education benefactor — Yale
32 Ship-related
33 Certain votes
34 Chums
36 Kidney-related
40 Sense organ
43 Liquid measures
44 Footnote abbr.
46 Asterisk
49 Puts forth effort
51 Princess Elsa movie
54 Highlander
55 Macadamize
56 Fencing weapon
57 Cheer
59 Nix
60 Notable times
61 Be too fond
64 Exist
65 Dir. letters

PREVIOUS PUZZLE SOLVED

A	M	I	S	S		A	L	T	A		M	R	S	
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H	U	E			I	R	I	S		W	A	V	E	R
A	G	A	R		D	E	C	O	R		L	I	V	E
L	E	V	I	S		N	E	N	E			T	E	N
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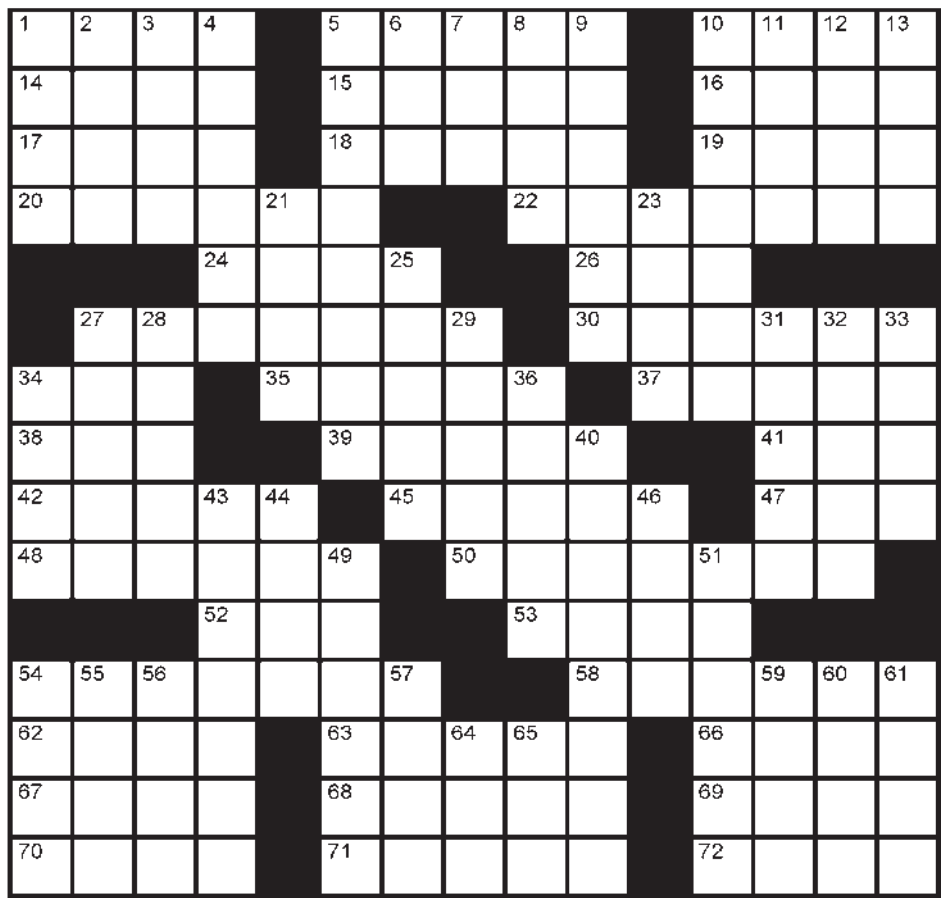

SUDOKU

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3	6	5	4	2	8	9	7	1
4	1	8	3	7	9	5	2	6
1	4	6	5	9	2	8	3	7
7	8	9	6	3	4	1	5	2
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YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★☆☆

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Let the trees interrupt your thoughts

From chemicals released by trees to the way greenery gives our minds a rest, nature may be doing more to our minds and bodies than simply helping us unwind.

SHUTTERSTOCK

The World Health Organization (WHO) also recognises that access to green and blue spaces can support mental and physical health.

DRISTY MOKTAN

There is something deeply calming about being in nature. I am sure you have felt this in one form or another.

Try to remember one of those days when your mind feels unbearably crowded. You have many thoughts running through your head; many things to figure out, without a sense of calmness. Then, somehow, you decide to step outside. You walk to a nearby park, sit beneath a tree, listen to the sounds of nature, and simply spend a few quiet moments with yourself.

What happens?

Somehow, you start to feel a little better.

Nothing outside of you has drastically changed. The problems may still be there. But your relationship with those thoughts feels different.

Perhaps this is one of the oldest forms of comfort we have overlooked: nature. For generations, people have turned to natural environments for rest, reflection, connection, and renewal. Yet, as our lives have become busy and disconnected from the natural world, we have forgotten just how much these moments can offer us.

This feeling is not simply in our imagination. An increasing body of scientific research suggests that spending time in natural environments can support both our mental and physical well-being.

The relationship between nature and health has been studied across psychology, medicine, public health, and environmental science. The World Health Organization (WHO) also recognises that access to green and blue spaces can support mental and physical health by providing opportunities for relaxation, physical activity, social interaction, and stress reduction.

But what is it about nature that makes us feel better?

Nature interacts with us in ways that go beyond what we immediately see. It influences our senses, emotions, stress responses, and even how we process our thoughts. Nepal is richly blessed with forests, mountains, rivers, and diverse landscapes. Yet, we often overlook the important role it can play in supporting our health and wellbeing.

Many countries, however, have long acknowledged the importance of nature in promoting wellbeing. Japan, for example, introduced the concept of Shinrin-yoku, or "forest bathing," in 1982. The practice encourages people to slow down, breathe deeply, and mindfully engage with nature.

Scientific evidence supporting this practice has continued to grow. A meta-analysis of 36 studies involving 3,554 participants found that spending time in natural environments reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety. These findings suggest that being closer to nature may play an important role in supporting mental wellbeing.

Another interesting thing about nature is what we cannot see. Trees such as conifers release natural chemicals called phytoncides. These chemicals help protect the trees from insects, microorganisms, and other threats. But when we spend time in forest environments, we breathe in these chemicals too.

Research suggests that phytoncides may help lower stress hormones such as cortisol, adrenaline, and noradrenaline and may contribute to stress management. This could be one of the reasons why we often feel calmer, more relaxed, and lighter after spending time among trees.

SHUTTERSTOCK

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MENTAL WELLBEING

But another important gift nature gives us is a break from the constant noise of everyday life. We spend so much of our day looking at screens, responding to messages, meeting deadlines, and thinking about what comes next. Our minds rarely get the chance to rest.

Nature offers a different kind of environment. The sound of leaves moving in the wind, birds singing, or the warmth of sunlight allows our minds to slow down and rest.

As a mental health practitioner, we often hear people share how difficult it is to stop the vicious loop of their thoughts. Their minds are constantly dwelling in the past or worrying about the future, making it difficult to come back to the present moment. One simple way to do this is by activating our five senses.

This is where nature can become a beautiful space for practicing mindfulness and grounding. Whenever you find yourself stuck in a cycle of thoughts, try stepping into a green space and focusing on what your senses are experiencing. A walk in your garden for example, provides several sensory experiences:

- **Sight** → greenery, flowers, and natural scenery
- **Smell** → the earthy smell of the trees and smells of flowers
- **Sound** → birds, wind, leaves, and flowing water
- **Touch** → the texture of leaves, grass, soil, or tree bark
- **Feel** → the temperature, breeze, sunlight, and air around you

You can try this simple activity. For a few moments, instead of letting your thoughts control you, simply notice what you can see, hear, smell, touch, and feel.

This is also linked to what psychologists call Attention Restoration Theory. The idea is that our ability to concentrate can become tired, just like our bodies do. Natural environments may help restore this attention by giving our minds a chance to relax without demanding too much from us.

And the benefits of nature are not limited to our minds. Being in nature often encourages us to move. A walk in the park, a hike through the hills, gardening, or spending time outdoors can become a form of physical activity. Even small amounts of movement can support our physical health while giving us a chance to step away from a sedentary routine.

Of course, nature is not a replacement for therapy or professional mental health support. But perhaps we can see it as another tool for taking care of ourselves. Just as we make time for sleep, movement, connection, and rest, we can also make space for nature.

So perhaps the next time your mind feels crowded, you don't always have to find an immediate solution. Maybe step outside first. Sit under a tree. Take a slow walk. Listen to the birds. Feel the sunlight on your skin. Put your phone away for a few minutes and simply be there.

Your problems may still be waiting for you when you return. But perhaps you will return to them with a little more space in your mind. Maybe nature has always been there, quietly reminding us that healing does not always have to be complicated. Sometimes, it can begin with simply stepping outside.

Moktan is a psychosocial counselor working at Fheal, a counseling hub for mindful healing.

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