

Mails are bouncing from Kathmandu

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JUST as everyone was reeling from the shock of the fallout of the Kibria assassination episode, the situation turned grim in Nepal without anyone much noticing it. It got some attention when the Saarc summit was put off after the Indian PM cited the situation there and here in Bangladesh for his inability to attend. In Nepal, it signaled the return of direct monarch after many years.

Street agitation had led to its end over a decade back. That occurred under the previous monarch, King Mahendra who with his entire family was wiped out in a shoot out. The new monarch became the king when the previous Crown prince who was held responsible for the royal palace carnage was also killed. Earlier King Tribuhvan escaped to India after a putsch mounted by the hereditary Rana family who were the hereditary Prime ministers. Tribhuvan returned with Indian military support and reclaimed his throne in 1951. More than fifty years later Gyanendra was the King and head of the government as well. Things have changed a lot since Mahendra died and Gyanendra was crowned.

WHATEVER little bits of information trickle through from Kathmandu are second hand. First news came from Zee TV where the news of the dismissal of the Deuba government was broadcast. It was the last of a series of governments that the King put together and dismissed. As the Zee News said, it is a major embarrassment because the India Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran is a Nepal specialist and supposed to have very high level contacts there. He had no early warning and it really wrong-footed Delhi it seems. Indian media has also read Chinese hands in the matter. The new government has reportedly closed down the Dalai Lama's fund raising office and that has met with official approval from Han land. Concurrently, it has met with some anxiety in Delhi's South Block or Foreign Ministry.

From what I gather, the decision

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Kathmandu: People moving under tight security

not to attend the SAARC Summit by India was not an easy one. Foreign Minister Natwar Singh was reportedly not in full favour of this and some major media outlets have expressed unhappiness but clearly for India, for several reasons, Nepal is an important country and the crisis worth Manmohon's attention at the expense of what was threat-

ening to become a largely decorative meet. Nepal is like a poor relative to India's wealthy household. No important but holding some precious family documents which can cause discomfort. One can be dismissive of it but one can't ignore it at all. It's the country where the RAW and the ISI compete with each other for supremacy. It's the buffer

between China and India and that makes Nepal special. To this has been added the Maoist insurgency often threatening to spill over into India.

TO me all these are facts of international politics but there is a very human angle to the crisis there. I'm worried about my friends there. Some of them are also journalists and HR activists. No one supports any group but just try to occupy the permanently beleaguered space of HR activism. They support freedoms of various sorts but when emergency, war, martial law descend as it seems to have, the activists are often in trouble first. For me, it's a human situation, a situation where difficult times have fallen on my friends and the people of Nepal. It's been progressively getting worse since the Maoist insurgency scaled up and now seems to have peaked. It's anxiety and fear because I don't know what is going on.

TO understand Nepal is also to understand a hauntingly beautiful, sometimes lush sometimes-stark land. Where the snow of the hills, the jagged rocks of sub-Himalayan range compete with the green plain land of the terrain. Where the faces change from the Mongoloid hill people to that of the plains people who resemble the citizens of Bihar and Bengal. People have many ethnic roots but something that unites all Nepalese is their ability to withstand the difficulties of life and go on, asking for little even when what they get becomes smaller. Complaining about life is something they learn only when they have come across people like us. There is something stoic in their soul which but should not be confused with submissiveness. They may have taken much in time but they are capable of being fiercely aroused. The gentle Nepali is also the fierce Gurkha warrior.

WE hear that everything has been shut down but human spirit is such that they can overcome enormous odds and it on the first night is a stolen mail saying that "they are fine". My BBC friends

somehow manage to establish contacts and the normally not so hectic Nepali service is suddenly flung into a flurry of activity. BBC's South Asian service may not be the most pampered lot in Bush House but they are part of its crown jewels keeping the least listened to most informed. It's around this time that BBC's relevance becomes apparent with all its warts. I read the news on the net carefully. Are my friends OK?. I read that law enforcers have entered a hostel in Pokhra from which protesting students had emerged and firing has been heard. My stomach churns. I desperately mail all the still functioning mail addresses where news can be found. No answer.

Late at night a mail comes saying all are still OK. But things have happened and media is shuttered and some have been taken in.

It's martial law I tell myself. That's how it always is. And I try to see through a slow motion of my memory, the streets and roads I know so well and fondly dream of permanently returning one day.

FROM India I get more news. I realise that all of us who would like to see ourselves as friends of Nepal are busy distributing news, sharing information and sometimes channeling the mailed articles that have slipped out. The Nepalese jourmos are risking much to reach out to the outside world and many are assisting them. In India this is a far more serious matter. They are incensed and I learn that three attempts had been made in the recent past before the take over to have the King in Delhi for a meeting but it didn't come off. The Indian Foreign Office is not taking it lightly, the world opinion is against the takeover and the Nepal political parties have all been pushed to one side against the present new regime. This is not going to be easy for anyone there, it seems, including the new government.

DESPITE its failures, there is something fatally attractive about martial laws. We ourselves have seen several of them, seen the hard hand come down and then saw their inevitable decline. In the process the weakening of political institutions that matter happen. Pakistan has seen it many times and one can't say that they have walked away stronger from them. Like it or not, India has been spared the blushes and today is also the strongest democracy in the region. It's often boorish with its neighbours and the recent decision to postpone the SAARC meeting attendance was a good example of how not to gain friends. However, internally India is strong, surviving a variety of regimes with an ever growing economy and a robust judiciary supported by a legal power transfer system.

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I keep reading the mail inviting me for a week of rest there. I had planned to go. In the last moment something turned up and I didn't. I wish I had gone.

With a great deal of hope and anxiety I keep mailing Kathmandu at various addresses. My computers are filled with returned bounced mails. I know that unless Kathmandu calls, I can't hear but I keep trying. I shall keep trying. It's where my friends live.

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