
IAN WALL

Nepal 2018-19



On the first ascent of Lapse of Reason on Kyajo Ri (6186m). (*Marek Holeček*)

In order to make the Nepal report more timely and logical, its time-frame will in future run from June of the previous year and so include the post-monsoon, winter and pre-monsoon season. In order to make that change, this year includes the pre-monsoon for 2019.

Everest 2018

In an indifferent winter season, Spanish climber Alex Txikon and Pakistan's Muhammad Ali Sadpara made an attempt to climb from the Nepal side without supplementary oxygen. The team was poised for a summit bid before being beaten by low temperatures and strong winds. As part of their acclimatisation cycle they summited Pumori (7161m) on the 20 January 2018.

As Nepal prepared to celebrate the 65th anniversary of the first ascent of Everest, officials at the tourism ministry were expecting a bumper year.

It was also the 40th anniversary of the first ascent without bottled oxygen. In early April, the surviving members of the 1978 Everest Expedition, including Peter Habeler and Reinhold Messner, assembled in Kathmandu and later went on to visit Everest Base Camp (EBC). Members of the expedition also scattered the ashes of Norman Dyhrenfurth, who died in 2017.

The route-fixing team, known as the Icefall Doctors, had left Namche Bazar in mid March to start work on the fixed lines. For this work each member of the team received a minimum wage of \$3,000, paid from the \$600 levied for the purpose on each foreign climber attempting Everest, Nuptse or Lhotse via this route. This team of fixers – Pasang Tenjing Sherpa, Pasdawa Sherpa, Lakpa Dendi Sherpa, Jen Jen Lama, Siddi Bahadur Tamang, Pemba Chhiri Sherpa, Tenzing Gyaljen Sherpa and Datuk Bhote – became the first to reach the summit in 2018. A serac collapsed in the icefall on 25 April injuring two Sherpas. One was treated at EBC's 'Everest ER' while the other was flown to Kathmandu for treatment for a back injury. The first commercial summit came on 29 April: four Sherpas with two Chinese clients.

Soon after, one of those dramatic but short-lived controversies so familiar on Everest burst into life when Willie Benegas and Matt Moniz skied down from 7,200m to 6,400m on 2 May without obtaining a the necessary ski permit from government authorities. All sorts of threats were issued by the Department of Tourism, but these were counter-balanced by a letter of support being sent to the DoT by more than 150 climbing Sherpa stating that the incident had 'not posed any threat to the mountaineering sector'. However the question, 'Where was the LO in all of this?', still remains unanswered. In the end the case was dropped and the pair was allowed to continue with their summit plans.

More than 500 climbers including 247 foreign mountaineers and the Sherpa Women Everest Expedition 2018 were well acclimatised and ready to make their summit push. Kenton Cool succeeded in summiting the peak for the 13th time, the most number of ascents by any British mountaineer, along with his client, television celebrity Ben Fogle. There was the usual crop of records set over the season. Kami Rita Sherpa, 48, from Thame made his 22nd ascent of Everest; Lhakpa Sherpa, 45, made her ninth, this time from the Tibetan side. Another 'record' set in 2018 was that Furtenbach Adventures only took 21 days on the mountain for their team to reach the summit, via the North Col, thanks to pre-acclimatisation in altitude chambers before reaching Nepal. A similar practice was used by Alpenglow, resulting in their guides and professional skiers summiting both Cho Oyu and Everest in 23 days. This comes with a high price. These expeditions were charging \$80,000 to \$110,000 per member, while Seven Summits expedition members paying \$130,000 had a mid-expedition break in Kathmandu. It's reported two members actually flew home during this period before flying back in to resume their expedition.

During the winter season of 2017-18 the Nepal government announced new guidelines for climbing and mountaineering activities, which included

a ban on double amputees and visually impaired climbers from attempting Everest. However just before the 2018 season these rules were relaxed after pressure from Nepal's supreme court, the public and the mountaineering fraternity. This caught Harti Budha Magar, an ex-British Gurkha and double amputee off guard and he was unable to activate his Everest plan for 2018 but 70-year-old double amputee Xia Boyu from China did accomplish his Everest ambition, standing on the summit on 13 May, the culmination of a 40-year struggle and his fifth attempt.

Highlighting the strength of Nepali female climbers, Nima Jangmu Sherpa summit Lhotse on 29 April and Everest on 14 May and then went on to summit Kangchenjunga on 23 May. Nima Jangmu has now set the world record of summiting all three of the highest Himalayan peaks of Nepal not only within one season but within 25 days. Nima is also the first Nepali woman to summit Kangchenjunga, a prize several other Nepali women had their sights on.

As with all mountain environments there are constant changes in Everest's topography; this season saw an unusual number of crevasses open up just above camp one on Everest together with an ice cliff several metres high whose verticality some expedition members couldn't manage. Some changes are advantageous. The Hillary Step has also now become the Hillary Ramp, following 2015's earthquake, further reducing the threat of delays through congested sections. But the 2018 spring season was blessed with an extraordinary period of 11 days of fine weather with little jet-stream activity and a high-pressure system sitting over the region.

These conditions boosted those heading for the summit, but some were caught out at 8,000m when a potentially lethal situation suddenly developed on both sides of Everest. Without warning several teams experienced oxygen equipment failure. All the systems were produced by the same manufacturer and without warning began releasing oxygen from regulators straight into the atmosphere. All but one expedition had sufficient regulators and oxygen bottles in reserve to allow the summit push to continue and the CEO of the British company flew out to Kathmandu to oversee the handling of the situation, to the satisfaction of the majority.

Among the summit climbers this year was Steve Plain, 36, who set the world record for climbing the Seven Summits in the shortest time: 117 days. He took just seven hours to reach the summit on Everest from camp four on the South Col. The weather on Everest was so good, outfitters in Kathmandu complained the season had ended too soon as expedition members returned early after a successful expedition and then immediately left Nepal. The high success rate also exposed a scam: two summit climbers on a Seven Summits expedition were found to be without permits. After investigation it turned out that junior office personnel in the ministry and the agency had conspired to pocket the peak fees, amounting to \$22,000, anticipating that some of the expedition would fail and names could be swapped out. Thanks to the good weather, everybody made it and the fraud was exposed. Seven Summits was fined and the personnel involved fired.

There were on average two or three rescues a day on Everest and its neighbours: Global Rescue alone reported 66 operations. There were also five deaths: Lama Babu Sherpa went missing near the south summit on 14 May and presumed dead; the Russian climber Rustem Amirov died at camp two on Lhotse on 17 May; Tshering Dorji Sherpa was seriously injured after he was struck by falling rocks and snow near camp two and airlifted to hospital in Kathmandu; Pasang Norbu Sherpa, 41, from Solukhumbu district died from a stroke at high camp while heading for the summit on the Tibet side on 18 May; Gjeorgi Petkov, from the Republic of Macedonia, died above camp three after suffering a cardiac arrest while heading for the Yellow Band on 20 May; Japanese climber Nobukazu Kuriki radioed for help suffering from a persistent cough and chest pain but it proved impossible to locate him during the night of 20 May and his body was found above camp two on 22 May; finally, IFMGA guide Damai Sarki Sherpa fell into a crevasse near camp two while accompanying a foreign climber to a waiting helicopter.

By the end of the season when the Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee (SPCC) had finished its clean-up operations 32,241kg of garbage generated by climbers at EBC and camp two had been collected. Combustible garbage was taken to the waste management facility in Namche Bazar. Non-combustible garbage, around 4,000kg of it, was taken to Kathmandu for recycling. At least 12,995kg of human waste and 4,010 kg of kitchen waste was collected from EBC. Sadly these figures showed an increase on previous seasons. The SPCC has partnered with the Everest Biogas Project to convert human waste into biogas through an anaerobic digester. Tara Air flew out at least 100 tonnes of waste from the Mount Everest region in 2018 as part of its commitment to sustainable development goals.

The SPCC has been working for more than 25 years to keep Everest and its foothills clean, building appropriate waste management infrastructure, setting up a system for waste segregation and disposal, strengthening community participation in waste management, disseminating public education and formulating policies for proper waste management in coordination with the government.

As usual there were issues with liaison officers who were reported absent from expeditions despite being paid handsomely to be on site from the outset right through to the end of an expedition. This happened despite a new government rule that a guide or liaison officer must accompany expeditions. LOs are still failing to show up despite expeditions having to pay for them. Guides on lower mountains often come to an arrangement to remain at 'high camp', allowing expeditions to continue under their own steam, or else don't set foot on the mountain at all.

A more welcome change involves Everest certificates. While I have difficulty in accepting the certificate scheme for those summiting Everest post 1992, when commercial expeditions got underway, I am pleased the government has finally awarded them to over 500 Nepali guides who made it to the summit of different mountains in recent years. For these guys it is a great

addition to their CVs when it comes to securing additional employment, not only in Nepal but around the world.

Nowadays, **Lhotse** is commonly included as part of the Everest itinerary with a dozen climbers summiting before going home. There were an estimated 50 members reaching the top including 79-year-old Matsumoto Tatsuo who became the oldest person to summit the mountain. Two Americans made a successful ski descent of the world's fourth highest mountain, a 7000m vertical ski line initially descending the Lhotse couloir before entering the steep open lower part of the face of the mountain.

The weather on Nepal's other 8,000ers was more difficult with **Dhaulagiri** seemingly getting hit the hardest. Carlos Soria, seeking his 12th 8,000m peak, had to abandoned his ninth attempt on Dhaulagiri due to bad weather. Ryan Kushner got to 7,620m before weather stopped his independent team. Italian Simone La Terra was sadly blown off the mountain to his death when a gust of wind hit his tent in an unprotected flat location. Also in the Dhaulagiri Himal, nine climbers including five Koreans died in a freak accident on **Gurja West** (7193m). Initially it was assumed a large landslide had killed them but further investigation revealed a large serac barrier high above base camp collapsed and the consequent displacement of air blasted base camp, sending expedition members into a deep ravine nearby where they died as a result of the fall.

Widely regarded as the most deadly of the 8,000ers, **Annapurna** was climbed by Hong-bin Kim with four Sherpas. The South Korean climber, 53, who lost all of his fingers to frostbite while climbing Denali in North America in 1991, reached the summit on 13 May. On **Manaslu**, a Swiss team abandoned their effort due to dangerous avalanche conditions. Yet Manaslu had a good autumn season with over 200 successful ascents although there was a strange incident reported that allegedly involved two Chinese climbers on separate expeditions who had a mega fallout resulting in crampons being used as weapons. One climber was airlifted to a hospital in Kathmandu for treatment while the other is said to have fled the scene. Many of those climbers who eventually reached the summit were initially stranded at lower altitude because of a dispute between the government and the ministry of tourism resulting in a lack of helicopters and a breakdown in the logistical supply chain. Needless to say the situation ended up with all sides blaming the other.

On **Cho Oyu**, Rolf Oostra and Bulgarian Atanas Skatov summited without supplementary oxygen or Sherpa assistance. On **Makalu** Thomas Lämmle summited without supplementary oxygen. The mountain was also summited by a team consisting of the female climber Gao Xiao-Dan, along with Nima Gyalzen Sherpa, Jit Bahadur Sherpa and Ang Dawa Sherpa who later died from altitude-related problems. Swedish mountaineer Carina Ahlqvist was evacuated from Makalu after she suffered snow-blindness.

On **Kangchenjunga** there were multiple summits in difficult conditions. Israeli climber Nadav Ben Yehuda narrowly escaped after being injured in a fall and left for dead. When fellow climbers later saw him move,

a complicated rescue ensued. He suffered spinal and rib injuries as well as severe frostbite. The Israeli was briefly famous in 2012 for helping a stricken Turkish climber on Everest. Chris Burke summited on 20 May and Asian Trekking managed to get 11 Indian clients to the summit.

Simone Moro arrived in Kathmandu in late December 2018 to attempt a winter ascent of Manaslu, without gas, along with Pemba Gyalje Sherpa but abandoned his expedition in January due to heavy snowfall and avalanche danger.

Away from the 8,000m peaks, **Ama Dablam** (6812m), technically a more challenging peak, saw a number of accidents during the 2018 season. Sherpa rescuers recovered the body of Malaysian climber Raman Nair Hachoodan, 41, from a gorge at around 5,300m after he went missing at 6,300m on 15 May. According to rescuers, the climber fell from high camp as he descended with two other climbers due to bad weather. In late November an American died as a result of altitude sickness, this followed the earlier death of an Australian climber who died as a result of rock fall cutting his abseil rope.

In October 1988 two Icelandic mountaineers, Kristinn Rúnarsson and Þorsteinn Guðjónsson who were 27-years-old at the time disappeared on **Khangri Shar (Pumori West)**. Both men set off leaving their British companion at base camp to monitor their progress. Unfortunately they disappeared into cloud above 6,600m and were not seen again. It has now been confirmed that the climbers reached the summit on 18 October 1988 but met with disaster on 19 October during their descent. The discovery of their bodies was made by American climber Luke Smithwick on 12 November. Smithwick abandoned his expedition as a result. Earlier he had completed a route on the north face of **Nirekha** but as yet there are no details.

Zsolt Torok, Teofil Vlad and Romeo 'Romica' Popa from Romania completed a new route on the south-east face of **Pumori** (7161m) in alpine style. They called their route *Le Voyage du Petit Prince*. Mixed climbing between the foot of the south-east face at 5,600m and the exit to the summit ridge at 6,700m was compared to the Eiger's north face, says Torok, 'with similar elements like The Ramp, the White Spider' and the Waterfall Chimney.' The Romanian trio spent five nights on this extremely steep wall where there was a lack of bivouac sites.

Two guided teams lead by Garrett Madison (USA) made the first and second ascent of **Tharke Kang** (6710m), a newly opened peak to the north of Gokyo in the Khumbu region. A helicopter was used to avoid its dangerous icefall near the Nup La and ropes were then fixed on steeper sections of the north-west ridge. The summit was reached on 3 and 4 November. On 25 October David Lama succeeded in completing the project that he and Conrad Anker had started on **Lunag Ri** (6895m). In 2016 Conrad suffered a heart attack and had to be evacuated off the mountain, ending the expedition. Lama reached the summit via the west ridge. Wolfgang Drexler Thalmair, Yokachi Tamang and Lawang Tamang made the first ascent of **Dhechyan Khan** (6019m) situated in the Damdor Himal via the south ridge.

The team went on to make the first ascent of **Nguru Far East** via the south couloir and west ridge.

In far western Nepal, a British expedition led by Julian Freeman-Attwood and comprising Nick Colton, Ed Douglas, Christoph Nettekoven and Bruce Normand made a number of first ascents in the Takphu Himal, including **Takphu** itself, **Til Kang** (6369m) and four other peaks. After resting in Kathmandu, Normand returned to the west to make three more first ascents of 6,000m peaks in Mugu district: his tally of 6,000er first ascents for the season was eight. See Attwood & Normand's article on page 281. A six-man Japanese expedition reported reaching the summit of a peak called **Pankar Hatani** in the Manaslu region but so far no details have emerged or, despite research, the exact location of their peak.

Disputes over Fees and Camping Charges

When Nepal adopted its new constitution in 2015, a federal system of government was put in place, prompting a struggle between central government and local communities over the distribution of funds collected from tourists: 'TIMS' trekking fees, national park fees, conservation area fees, camping fees and so forth.

In October 2017, Khumbu authorities imposed a \$20 fee for entering the region, collected in Lukla, and in the spring season of 2018 a community charge was levied on all tourists and Nepali staff staying in higher-altitude villages: a 'community room tax'. In October 2018 authorities in the Makalu region imposed a \$20 per night camping charge, a major hike in costs since you can't trek in the Makalu region without spending most nights camping.

In many cases and with a full understanding of the reasons behind these charges, they seem reasonable. However, these new taxes were imposed without notice and were seen as duplicated fees, resulting in continuing disagreements between all levels of administration, total confusion for agents and many angry trekkers who were faced with last-minute price increases. Discussions were continuing to resolve the situation this spring.

It's a similar story in the Annapurna region, where local municipalities want to manage their own finances, causing a three-way tug-of-war between local, provincial and federal governments. Despite the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) successfully balancing a local economy based on agro-forestry with the need to protect the environment, there has been growing resentment against restrictions on harvesting fodder and grass, grazing and the use of natural resources. There are also complaints that ACAP, and other centrally administered organisations, do not share tourist revenue with local governments for the benefit of local communities.

Areas affected within the Annapurna region include Manang, Mustang and Lamjung. Deputations from rural communities have presented their case to district offices in Pokhara requesting ACAP lifts its restrictions on developing local infrastructure, to allocate proportional tourist income to the most popular tourist districts. This situation can only escalate in the future with the local communities demanding access to funds generated

from trekking-peak fees. As yet the outcomes of these discussions have not been made public. In the meantime local communities will continue to implement ill-conceived schemes that will have an immediate but hopefully short-term negative impact on tourism.

2019

On 16 April, the tourism ministry issued a press release detailing permits to 824 expedition members belonging to 100 individual expeditions to climb 27 peaks. Of these, 377 climbers from 39 expeditions were seeking permission to climb Everest, not far off half. This number includes 364 foreign climbers from 34 expeditions and 13 Nepalis from five. As in 2018, many teams now include Lhotse as part of their Everest itinerary: 92 climbers from 10 expeditions had permission to climb Lhotse. Forty-nine climbers belonging to five different expeditions had acquired permission to climb Ama Dablam, 32 mountaineers from five teams had permission to climb Kangchenjunga and 53 climbers from three teams had permission to attempt Makalu. Three teams had permission to climb Annapurna and Dhaulagiri.

On 23 April a party including former Gurkha Nirmal 'Nims' Purja became the first team to reach the top of a Nepali 8,000m peak in 2019: **Annapurna**. His project of climbing all 14 of the 8,000ers in seven months was on a roll. It's worth noting that the three officials appointed as liaison officers to the three Annapurna expeditions were unable to provide any information on their respective expeditions since they never left Kathmandu. The rescue of a 49-year-old Malaysian anaesthesiologist Chin Wui Kin on Annapurna created a storm when it revealed his rescue could have been more efficiently handled had the supposed insurance company acted more swiftly. Sadly Chin Wui Kin succumbed to his injuries in hospital having been repatriated to Singapore. On the other side of Annapurna, Felix Berg and Adam Bielecki planned to attempt a new and technically difficult route on the north-west face but due to bad weather and the consequent lack of acclimatisation, the pair returned home without setting foot on the mountain.

Everest got more than its fair share of media exposure during the 2019 spring season but unfortunately for all the wrong reasons. Nepal issued a record number of permits and the route was eventually fixed on 14 May after a delay due to Cyclone Fani. With the ropes in, 150 expedition members rushed to the summit close on the heels of the rope-fixing Sherpa team. The jet stream returned causing more delays but during the next weather window almost 800 people were heading for the summit. The 'Mad Dash', which wasn't so much of a dash but more of a traffic jam was captured by Nirmal 'Nims' Purja in his now infamous summit-ridge image. The consequence was some people spending 20 hours above the South Col with many beginning to run out of oxygen causing stress and anxiety. By the time this photo was taken the death toll had already risen to 11 and would climb later to 12. There was a range of reasons for this: budget expedition packages unable to afford qualified and experienced guides; inexperienced expedition

members moving too slowly; and to a certain extent a falsely secure environment created by agents going over the top in providing luxurious base camp amenities. In a worsening trend, expeditions on Everest this year had a total of 73 oxygen bottles disappear, although Nepali operators denied these had been stolen.

There was some useful science done. On 13 June the National Geographic Society installed the world's highest weather stations on Everest to provide researchers, climbers and the public with real-time information about mountain conditions. The EverDrill Project is a joint venture between the universities of Leeds, Aberystwyth, Sheffield and Kathmandu and the Himalayan Research Centre. Working at 5,200m on the Khumbu glacier, the team used a pressurised jet of hot water to drill boreholes deep into the glacial ice. Strings of temperature sensors were installed into the boreholes and left to collect data for several months. Researchers found that there was evidence to suggest the ice was warming at a rate of around 0.5°C per decade suggesting floods and droughts were likely to become more common along with glacial lake growth.

An expedition consisting of two government surveyors along with Sherpa climbers summited Everest collecting data for the measurement of the exact height of the highest point on earth. There's been discussion that the height of Everest might have changed as a result of the 2015 earthquake. Begs the question, why mount an expensive expedition when there are satellites that can do the job more efficiently?

Two foreign expedition companies, Alpenglow and Furtebnach, continued with their use of altitude tents at home countries for pre-acclimatisation before reaching Nepal. Both companies recorded good results using this method. Everest ER, the temporary health post situated at EBC during the expedition season, reported a big increase in the number of inexperienced climbers they were seeing, registering their total number of patients as 582, 58% of them Nepali. It was the fourth-busiest season since they began operations in 2003.

Four of the 12 deaths were Indians: 78 permits were issued to Indian climbers, the largest group of permit holders. Indian mountaineering media expect 2020 to see an even larger number of Indians attempting Everest. Of the 21 deaths across the Nepal Himalaya eight were Indians. There were also fake summit claims by Indian climbers. With Indian climbers being offered government incentives for reaching the summit of Everest the question of motivation must be raised.

The Nepali government commissioned a huge clean-up operation, following China's decision to implement new rules for climbing Everest. Three tons of rubbish were removed from the mountain and four bodies. (See Jonathan Westaway, page 129.) From 1 April Nepal decided diverted all flights from Kathmandu to Lukla to ease maintenance work being done at Tribhuvan International Airport. Flights were moved to a rural airstrip four hours' drive away, although the option of an expensive helicopter flight was still possible from Kathmandu. This not only caused confusion

but the alternative lacked the necessary infrastructure to cope with the high numbers of tourists. At the time of writing there is a plan to keep this as the normal access route into the Khumbu region to ease flight congestion in Kathmandu.

On **Dhaulagiri**, Romanians Horia Colibasanu and Marius Gane and Slovak Peter Hamor were all set for their summit bid via a new line on the north-west ridge, but although they were above the crux of the route they had to retreat in the face of bad weather. Korean climber Hong Sung-Taek made his sixth attempt on the south face of **Lhotse**, and for the first time in spring, as opposed to the post-monsoon season. Over a period of two months he and his team set up five camps on the south face before striking for the summit. Strong wind, snow, and then an avalanche that almost swept the climbers away near camp three forced the team to retreat from around 7,700m, between camps two and three. After this close call, almost all members decided to descend. Only Hong and five Sherpa remained. The six braved deteriorating weather conditions as they continued toward the summit, before ultimately deciding to abandon the expedition.

Nirmal 'Nims' Purja, the former UK Special Forces member who opened the season with his ascent of Annapurna as part of his Project Possible had completed 11 of the 14 8,000m peaks as the *Alpine Journal* went to press. Those summits were: Annapurna on 23 April; Dhaulagiri on 12 May; Kangchenjunga on 15 May; Everest on 22 May; Lhotse, also on 22 May; Makalu on 24 May; Nanga Parbat on 3 July; Gasherbrum I on 15 July; Gasherbrum II on 18 July; K2 on 24 July; Broad Peak on 26 July. Purja has relied on helicopter transfers and bottled oxygen but the stamina required for this attempt is still exceptional.

Insurance Fraud

Over the last 15 years or so, many of us in the Nepal-based trekking and climbing world have been aware of insurance scams affecting our industry. Although the Nepali government has long fought shy of admitting the problem, media attention has gradually been building alongside insurance premiums. In 2013 the British Mountaineering Council published an investigation of the issue and last year the former AFP reporter Annabel Symington published the results of a nine-month investigation that showed how deep and extensive the problem is.

In an effort to generate business helicopter companies began years ago offering 'commission' to guides or agents calling for helicopter assistance in rescuing trekkers in the mountains. This practice has now developed to such an extent that by 2018 many organisations – hospitals, agencies, helicopter companies and others – were illegally profiting from inappropriate invoicing, raking in millions of dollars. Kaji Sherpa, known as Mr Speed, described the people responsible for the fraud as 'mafia'. Krishna Prasad Devkota, secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation was quoted as saying, 'High profile people are involved in the scam and they are now being investigated by the police and the tax authorities.'

In a frank admission, Devkota acknowledged that his own job was on the line for investigating irregularities within the government. An article published in the *Nepali Times* quoted a tourism ministry official admitting that some of the owners of unscrupulous companies involved in the scam enjoyed high-level political protection because they are party donors and offer politicians free helicopter rides during elections or complimentary hospital treatment.

Medical and security assistance company Traveller Assist released a dossier on ten high-profile persons and 23 companies that Traveller Assist believes orchestrated and controlled over 90% of insurance fraud in Nepal, with evidence including company registration documents, copies of shareholder agreements, details of offshore bank accounts, lists of assets purchased in part from fraudulently obtained funds, copies of emails discussing commission payments and written statements from key witnesses. Traveller Assist itself has faced questions after issuing strongly worded threats about insurance boycotts and demands to individual companies.

Some of the hospitals accused of irregularities include some of the best-known names in Nepali healthcare, including CIWEC, SWACON hospital and ERA hospital. Evidence was found of misdiagnosis and overtreatment, as well as exorbitant rates. These revelations about systematic fraud prompted more of them. TV producer Anthony Gordon, who had filmed the six-part series 'Everest Air' for the Travel Channel, used his first-hand knowledge to add to the evidence, 'out of frustration at the government's lack of action'. He described organising the rescue of a sick climber on the Lhotse face of Everest through Alpine Rescue Services, expecting a bill for around \$4,000. Instead, managing director Ram Nepal charged \$8,000, sending a second helicopter to collect the fee. Additional invoices were then presented for a flight from Lukla to Kathmandu and hospital admission and treatment there, even though the climber was treated in Lukla and made their own way back.

Gordon revealed witnessing instances of double billing and implicated both SWACON and CIWEC hospitals, as well as the well-known Nepali agency Seven Summits Treks. He also reported the shocking story of how the body of a dead Sherpa was recovered at a cost of \$20,000 after being commissioned by another film crew. The recovery was filmed but the Sherpa's body was then dropped in a crevasse because, Gordon claimed, the family were unable to meet the \$250 excess and told Ram Nepal of Alpine Rescue Services to leave the body on the mountain.

In May 2018, after facing the most expensive season on record for insurance claims in Nepal, international insurers joined forces to put pressure on the Nepal government to address the fraud issue. After a 90-day investigation, a committee appointed by the tourism ministry confirmed that fraud was happening. A spokesman told AFP: 'When we began our investigation we did not realise the magnitude of the problem.'

Despite promises to bring those responsible to justice, no charges have yet been brought. None of the changes to rescue procedures the ministry

promised to stop the fraud have been implemented. The struggles within government seem to be as blurry as the details of the investigation itself. Comments by government officials seem to contradict each other and relevant ministries blame each other. However, at the beginning of 2019, tourism minister Rabindra Adhikari told AFP: 'We are deeply committed to taking action against them. The government will make no compromises in this regard.'

In February, officials at three government agencies, the health ministry, the central bank and the Central Investigation Bureau (CIB) of Nepal police told the Kathmandu Post that the prime minister's office had ordered them to complete their investigation as soon as possible. On 27 February, tourism minister Rabindra Adhikari was killed in a helicopter crash in the Kangchenjunga region of eastern Nepal, along with the pilot Capt Prabhakar KC, tourism entrepreneur Ang Tsering Sherpa, owner of Yeti Airlines, security personnel Arjun Ghimire, Yubaraj Dahal, an official in the prime minister's office, the deputy director-general of Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAAN) Birendra Shrestha, and CAAN engineer Dhruba Das Bhochhibhaya.

The tourism minister's untimely death put the brakes on urgently needed reform and it seems likely that it's business as usual for Nepal's rescue fraudsters. Apart from the obvious criminality, these prominent individuals and companies are doing Nepal and its adventure tourism industry an incredible disservice. Most clients never ask why a trek is so cheap, only why it's so expensive. But unless the Nepali government takes strong action to solve this problem, in a few years' time the industry will run on corruption and decent businesses will close down. That will be a great shame for Nepal.