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GOING PLACES TOGETHER

Lockdown Fallout

Nepal's one week lockdown is supposed to go on till 31 March, but that appears to be an attempt by the government to convey the bad news to the public in small doses. It is likely to be extended at least till the Nepali New Year on 13 April, to match the duration of the Indian curfew.

Such a prolonged shutdown forces us to look beyond the present need for containment to plan for the crises that are sure to manifest themselves in the near future — food shortages, economic hardship, social unrest and political instability. The virus and its response have exposed and exacerbated existing socio-economic inequities in Nepali society, exclusion and injustice.

A post this week by an Indian doctor about the class dimension of physical distancing is as applicable to Nepal: 'Social distancing is a privilege. It means you live in a house large enough to practise it. Hand washing is a privilege too. It means you have access to running water. Hand sanitisers are

medical care and food.

The global nature of this pandemic has hit Nepal's economy hard because of our overwhelming reliance on foreign worker remittances and tourism. Many Nepali workers are stranded in Malaysia, the Gulf, or in Indian cities, and need to be rescued. Citizens cannot be prevented from entering their own country.

With the curfew likely to be extended by two more weeks at least, the High-level Task Force must now turn its attention to ensuring adequate supply of food and other essentials. Kathmandu cannot micromanage all ground level problems, local governments must be given the authority and the resources to act. Medical care workers need personal protective equipment (PPE), we need more ventilators and isolation wards so that they do not have to risk their lives while saving the lives of the sick.

It is just four days into the curfew, and for a lot of people it is finally sinking in that the world as we knew it has been turned upside down. One-third of the world's population is in lockdown, the global economy is shattered, and even though the virus afflicts rich and poor alike, it is the poorest in the poor countries who are most vulnerable to the economic aftershocks of the pandemic.

It feels like a nightmare, and it is hard to remember the pre-Corona days when all we had to worry about was climate change. Maybe one day when this virus is vanquished, there will be a new way of thinking and living. Let us hope that we mitigate the cause of the climate emergency with the same global resolve as we did this crisis. The projected number of deaths just from heat stress due to global heating in the next decades is going to run into tens of millions. The

COVID-19 lockdowns confine people to their homes, but as sea levels rise many will not have homes. And the climate crisis itself will unleash new kinds of pestilence.

And just like with the climate, there are countries which are still in denial about the pandemic, or leaders who have acted too late and let their citizens pay the price with their lives. A teleconference of G-7 foreign ministers was deadlocked on Wednesday over the United States passing all the blame of the pandemic on China.

Yet, we have also seen unprecedented international resolve. The World Health Organization has coordinated national responses so that most countries are in shutdown at least till mid-April. It now needs to pay special attention to poorer countries, and the poorest who live in them.



RSS

a privilege. It means you have money to buy them. Lockdowns are a privilege. It means you can afford to be at home. A disease spread by the rich as they flew around the globe will now kill millions of the poor.'

As has been underlined by Nepal's civil society, a caring government will not just lock down the whole country to defeat the virus, but also lay down a social safety net for those most affected by the economic standstill. Businesses and factories may need a stimulus package so jobs are not lost, but it is those who depend on day-to-day earnings who need urgent assistance.

Developing countries are not known for efficient service delivery and good governance at the best of times. But this crisis demands that they step up to the challenge of quickly finding a mechanism to rescue the most vulnerable with cash grants if necessary.

Even Europe and North America have been caught unprepared to deal with the scope and spread of this pandemic. It is now the urban poor in the Global South where new COVID-19 infection clusters will hit hardest, exposing pre-existing disparities in access to

The prolonged shutdown forces us to plan for new crises that are sure to manifest themselves in the near future — food shortages, economic hardship, social unrest and political fallout.

10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

10 years ago this week Nepali Times #495 of 26 March-1 April 2010 examined the fallout of the death of Nepali Congress leader and Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala who was responsible for bringing a dramatic political shift in Nepal was often termed as a 'National Guardian'.

An excerpt:

Throughout the last week, the media has been abuzz with the passing of former prime minister and president of the Nepali Congress. The weight of commentary has now shifted from the late Koirala's achievements and failings to the political vacuum that has been created at this critical juncture in Nepali politics.

But it is not just about who is going to succeed to the NC presidency: Sher Bahadur Deuba, Ram Chandra Paudel or Sushil Koirala.



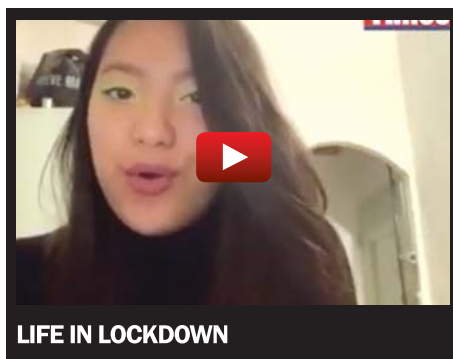
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ONLINE PACKAGES



LIFE IN LOCKDOWN

Aashna Lama was set to graduate from high school in 2015 when the earthquake hit Nepal. Now, exactly five years the COVID-19 pandemic caused her college close down as Italy went under complete lockdown. Go to our YouTube channel and watch what a typical day under quarantine looks like for a Nepali art student in Florence.



A DIFFERENT KATHMANDU

Nepal has been placed under a week-long national lockdown. But how does a complete shutdown of an otherwise crowded, polluted and growing city, Kathmandu look like? Find out while following the curfew to prevent the spread of the COVID-19.

COVID-19

While it is important to protect our health workers, there is also a need to protect our waste workers who will have to handle contaminated waste such as used PPEs, masks, gloves etc ('Protecting those who protect us from the epidemic', Ramu Sapkota, page 5). Besides protecting the workers, we also need to ensure that the virus is not transmitted through waste. Even during normal times, our medical waste management system is poor, now we need to urgently fix it.

Bhushan Tuladhar

■ It works both ways ('Far from home during a pandemic', Upasana Khadka, nepalitimes.com). There are plenty of foreigners still in Nepal, when many would think they would be safer going home. But so far along in the spread, we would just be risking both ourselves by attempting to travel and then probably others when we arrive.

Shirrin Barakzai

■ The rich can afford to Work From Home ('Kathmandu under semi-lockdown', Alisha Sijapati, nepalitimes.com). The poor cannot. The rich can afford social distancing. The poor cannot. Strategies to save the world from viruses demand either: generosity of the rich (taxes, charity) or sacrifice of the poor. Guess what will be the likely outcome?

Ahmed Dulla

■ Might be good to take a closer look at the surveillance and health care system ('Covid-19, Nepal and the hygiene hypothesis', Marty Logan, nepalitimes.com). The virus does not respect any administrative borders.

Jan Møller Hansen

■ I read about the hygiene hypothesis in the book Let them eat dirt. The idea is letting kids to expose to microbes so that healthy microbes colonise our bodies and that enhances immune system. But the same should be true to the people living in the Wuhan market.

Uttam Babu Shrestha

■ This is an excellent informative article ('Kathmandu in the time of cholera', Tom Robertson, page 6). Look forward to the book, coming out of this research.

Ashutosh Tiwari

■ My mother was talking about another outbreak when she was a small child, so about 60 years or so ago.

Bhaskar Dhungana

■ I think this will end up more as an economic crisis than a health problem ('Nepal closes land border with India, China', nepalitimes.com).

Sigmund Stengel

WHAT'S TRENDING



Nepali students abroad in pandemic limbo

by Sanghamitra Subba

As universities around the world close due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students from Nepal face uncertainty about their future. Go online for full story and find out how Nepali students abroad are adapting to lockdowns.

Most reached and shared on Facebook



Coronavirus shutdown gives Nepal's nature a respite

by Mukesh Pokhrel

While humans all over the planet are being challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic, it has given nature everywhere — including Nepal — a respite. Don't miss this refreshing take on the environment online at nepalitimes.com

Most popular on Twitter

Covid-19, Nepal and the hygiene hypothesis

by Marty Logan

Next to the epicentre in Wuhan and host to a large number of Chinese tourists and residents, Nepal has still only recorded three cases of the coronavirus. How can that be? The op-ed with expert analysis set off a debate online. Visit our website and join in the discussion.

Most commented

Nepalis quarantined in Qatar

by Upasana Khadka

Some 2,000 Nepali migrant workers are being quarantined in a camp in Doha as part of Qatar's measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This has had a direct impact on Nepal's already weak economy.

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Next to the epicentre in #Wuhan and host to a large number of Chinese tourists and residents, #Nepal has still only recorded one case of the #coronavirus, and the person recovered. How can that be? @martylogan on #Covid_19, #Nepal & the hygiene hypothesis

binita shah @binitashah4
Really @NepaliTimes?? Is this the time to put forward hypothesis that is not supported scientifically??

Smriti Shrestha, MD @theDermatologis
There is indeed 'hygiene hypothesis' that applies to Asthma & Allergic dis. It's not a new hypothesis. Doctors read this Hypothesis in med school. But the context is, whether Nepalese & low income countries are protected because of immunity gained forth, shall unravel with time.

Aman Pant @amanpant1
Good thing you put it forward as a hypothesis. I too believe that there's a certain element of truth to the "Hygiene hypothesis", but needs scientific backing yet! For Nepal, the risks are just too high to stick with that "belief" and not go all guns blazing to contain.

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
PUBLISHER'S NOTE
As public mobility is curtailed due to COVID-19 pandemic, Himalmedia has decided to cease publication of the print edition of the Nepali Times from next week until the situation becomes more normal. Meanwhile, visit our digital edition at <http://nepalitimes.com>

Stay safe, Wash hands, Do not discriminate@ NavitaSrikant
This is a good precautionary move. You have set the ball rolling. Dissemination of news and information will have to be innovative during a pandemic. #Nepal #Media #COVID19 #Impact

The Nomadic Nepali

Mingma Sherpa scholarship students return from New Zealand just before Nepal shuts down to COVID-19

Sunil's eyes shine with excitement and his wispy beard blows in the southern hemisphere breeze. The churning ocean accounts for his queasy stomach, but he is thrilled by the squawking mass of seabirds and dense stench of penguins on the rocky island behind him.



SO FAR SO GOOD
Lisa Choegyal

The names of New Zealand's forgotten Subantarctic islands are unfamiliar to most of us - Campbell Island, Auckland Island, The Snares - and about as far from the hills of Sunil's Langtang home as it is possible to imagine.

This month Sunil Tamang returned home to Nepal after two years in New Zealand completing his Masters degree in environmental science at Lincoln University. His fellow Mingma Norbu Sherpa Memorial (MNSMS) scholar, Ngawang Thapke Sherpa, only just made it on the last flight from Singapore before Nepal closed. Already the days of pre-COVID carefree travel seem long gone.

Sunil and Ngawang stayed in Christchurch long enough to settle in the two new scholarship recipients, Pasang Lamu and Tsewang Nuru, both Sherpas from the Khumbu who arrived

fresh and keen last month. These distinguished four are the most recent of 14 young Nepalis selected from dozens of applicants for the scholarship that honours the conservation legacy of Mingma Norbu, who was lost in the Ghunsa helicopter crash 14 years ago.

Specialising in disaster risk and resilience, Sunil came to our notice on the scholarship committee because of his outstanding response to the 2015 earthquakes when he single-handedly raised the funds and organised the rebuild of 22 houses in his home village of Old Syabru Besi. "Tired of waiting for slow moving and ineffective government assistance, I initiated the project to rebuild the village."

After helping Langtang, he joined ICIMOD to continue post-disaster reconstruction and recovery work across the country. I first came across Sunil when in January 2011 as a 20-year-old he set out on foot from Kanchenjunga with Rs28,000 in his pocket and trekked the Great Himalaya Trail all the way to Lake Rara. He was just the kind of village kid we thought would appreciate two years of life and study in New Zealand.

Sunil's focussed energy did not go unnoticed at Lincoln and he soon joined a summer project with his professors, assessing economic valuation of urban waterways of Christchurch. He has been spotted hiking in the hills, lounging by pristine lakes, messing about with bikes, and swimming off the coast

with Dusky dolphins.

When Mingma's widow Phurba and I visited last year, he showed us the Lincoln campus and exhibition he had helped assemble to celebrate 100 years since Sir Edmund Hillary's birth, his easy smile and Harry Potter glasses glittering with zeal.

Prompted by the university staff, Sunil entered the Heritage Expedition's True Young Explorer scholarship whose prize was a two week cruise on one of their purpose-built ships in the Southern Ocean. Heritage Expeditions is a family-owned New Zealand company committed to 'conservation through experiential learning' to create a league of 'ambassadors' inspired to protect the unique flora and fauna of these precious areas for future generations. And Sunil won.

Normally costing close to \$10,000, the privileged prize took Sunil with a few dozen clients to these remote rocky islands in search of birds, nature, botany and history, protected as World Heritage Sites for their vast array of wildlife including albatross, penguins, petrels, prions and marine mammals like sea lions, fur seals and elephant seals. I coveted this trip of a lifetime to distant dots on the map.

Whilst Sunil was fighting seasickness in these tiny inhospitable havens for some of the most abundant and unique wildlife on the planet, I was taking the two

hour flight back from a job in New Zealand's most eastern territory and another biodiversity hotspot, the remote Chatham Islands. The rattling Corvair prop plane had an albatross bill painted onto its nose, parked in the furthest corner of the airstrip as if in shame.

"I think I had better wash your hair three times!" The Wellington hairdresser was impressed. Dust from the gravel roads of the Chatham Islands was so thick I had scarcely been able to drag a brush through it for days. But I missed the wide-open windswept spaces - the tidy streets and dark suits of New Zealand's capital seemed tame in comparison.

Dave and I had been helping to sort out a failing tourist lodge in New Zealand's most eastern territory, owned by the original Moriori inhabitants and located overlooking rolling green sheep pastures, trees that grow horizontal in the perpetual wind, and a peaceful lake full of black swans. "Introduced from Australia, and breeding something terrible," we were told by a gnarled resident. "We shoot them regularly but they still proliferate, threatening to eclipse our local birds. Same as the weka."

Cherished as a protected native bird in New Zealand itself (never referred to as the mainland as you might expect), the squat brown wekas are so ubiquitous that we found weka pate and weka stew on regular island menus.

Along with plentiful seafood,

glistening paua, kina shellfish and huge blue cod for which the Chatham Islands are renowned. Fanciful fishing stories abound, and Dave must be the only angler who never got a bite in an hour diligently spent trying on the Waitangi wharf, though a sinister shark-shaped shadow patrolling the harbour gave him a scare.

Swimming and beach activities are not encouraged as the Chatham's feature as a favourite patrol of Great White sharks, as well as other less deadly species. One of the first islanders we met was a young chap missing an arm, the result of an accident diving for crayfish.

The archipelago, 'a land apart', boasts an array of endemic birds and unique flora that have developed differently in the Chatham conditions, as well as New Zealand species that have been blown there 800 km offshore in the midst of the empty ocean.

But although rare and rescued from extinction, I doubt the black robin, mollymawk and magenta petrel of the Chathams compare to the wonders of wildlife that Sunil saw on his Subantarctic expedition.

So welcome back, the nomadic Nepalis flying the MNSMS flag. And keep up your exemplary energy and gusto now that you are home. 🇳🇵

CHANGING THE WORLD: Sunil Tamang on New Zealand's Subantarctic Campbell Island where the Nepali environmental science student was greeted by a baby sea lion just after landing.

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Coronavirus and the World Wide Web

Internet bandwidth is struggling to keep pace with the rise in demand from homebound Nepalis

Sonia Awale

The COVID-19 scare has prompted a worldwide trend in working from home. #StayHome, #SelfQuarantine and #workingfromhome are among the most trending hashtags on Twitter. Since January, the video conferencing company Zoom has seen a doubling of new accounts and Microsoft’s Team registered a 500% jump in remote conferencing. Following the semi-lockdown from Monday, Nepal has also seen a big surge in home Internet use, putting a strain on the bandwidth offered by service providers. A *Nepali Times* reporter working from home tried all afternoon on Sunday to upload a photo feature before giving up.

“Working from home is the right step to arrest the pandemic but people working from home are not using the Internet only to work and communicate,” says Keshav Nepal of WorldLink Nepal who says 80% of Internet traffic is generated by watching video entertainment.

Unlike in the past when Internet use spiked in the evenings as people watched YouTube channels from home, every time of the day or night is peak hour now as people stream movies, play games or scroll social media. Nepal has seen an explosive growth in YouTube use – up from virtually zero in 2018 to 34% last year, and then almost doubling to 60%.

Nepal’s Internet infrastructure is made up of the international gateway and local networks. The international links are through underground fibreoptic connections that internet service providers (ISPs) have with India’s Airtel and Tata. Another fibreoptic link with China is still being tested.

The domestic network is made up of local caches for YouTube and Google, for example, that use artificial intelligence to ‘pre-fetch’ trending content in local servers so they do not have to depend entirely on international links. In fact, a third of all downloaded content in Nepal today is from Google and most of that is YouTube.

COVID-19

“Even under normal circumstances the Internet in Nepal is considered slow, mostly because our ISPs do not have a strong backbone and we do not have enough cache servers, which are centralised and shared by ISPs,” explains Sujan Shakya of Vianet Communications Nepal. “With higher consumption as we are seeing now, the aggregate traffic is close to our limit, leading to a bottleneck that affects all the users.”

As for international connectivity, there are limitations regarding Internet backhaul equipment (ISP routers). These can be upgraded by buying more bandwidth, and while costs are coming down they are still expensive given Nepal’s low local Internet subscription rates.



BIKRAM RAI

WIRED: Nepal has seen an explosive growth in YouTube use – up from virtually zero in 2018 to 34% last year, and then almost doubling to 60%.

Nepal’s ISPs have what they call ‘stock bandwidth’ which allocates capacity lower than that of their routers. However, when everyone is watching videos at the same time, the bandwidth is overstretched and the connection becomes slower. And the decrease in office Internet use does not seem to compensate for a rise in home use, since the peak Internet hours in Nepal have always been early morning and late evening from home.

“I do not see a bottleneck in the international gateway because ISPs can always buy extra bandwidth, but for local networks it is difficult to upgrade routers and switches when they are choked with saturation demand,” explains Sanjib Rajbhandari of Mercantile Communications.

With about 1.5 million Kathmandu residents having gone back to their home districts, the demand in the city has reduced and Internet use is spread more evenly across the country. However, most out-of-towners are using mobile data, and that has created another bottleneck.

Phone companies are not used to handling such a surge in capacity, and upgrading towers is more expensive and takes more time than upgrading ISPs routers.

Most customers with fibreoptic ISP cable to homes are not facing the same bandwidth issues as those who rely on routers.

Only 26% of respondents in a recent media landscape survey by Sharecast Initiative said they used the Internet every day. In a multiple response question, among those who did, 75% said they used mobile data to access the Internet against 30% who used broadband connection.

Says Sharecast’s Madhu Archarya: “It is still too early to tell for sure, but the coronavirus shutdown and people going online from home will increase Nepal’s Internet penetration rate, and there will be a further rise in those using mobile data.”

Mobile phones have also become useful during the pandemic for contact tracing infections in other countries, although it has not been fully used yet in Nepal where there have only been three confirmed cases. Geolocation of mobile phones are also a useful tool for the government to track the mass movement of people, for instance the emptying of Kathmandu this weekend before the ban on long-distance bus services went into effect.

Says Keshav Nepal of WorldLink: “We can upgrade our bandwidth capacity but this takes time. So the best thing right now is to use the Internet responsibly and prioritise what we surf on the net.” 🇳🇵

prabhu BANK BIZ BRIEFS

Jack Ma Foundation

The Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation are donating medical supplies to 10 more countries in Asia to aid in the global fight against COVID-19, including Nepal.

They will receive 1.8 million masks, 210,000 COVID-19 test kits, 36,000 units of protective clothing, ventilators and forehead thermometers.

Ncell

Ncell has contributed Rs100 million to the government’s COVID-19 Infection Prevention, Control and Treatment Fund for the procurement of personal protective gear, health equipment, PCR testing kits and other items for quarantine and treatment of COVID-19 patients. Andy Chong, CEO of Ncell, handed over the cheque to Narayan Prasad Bidari, secretary at the PMO on 24 March.

Banking on banks

Himalayan Bank has adopted safety measures for staff, customers, and stakeholders as per government guidelines against the coronavirus including hand



sanitisers and disinfectants at its premises. Nepal Bank is donating Rs10 million to the government fund to support efforts to stop the epidemic. Likewise, NIC Asia is providing mobile and internet banking services to its customers free of cost with debit card registration, PIN registration, Viber Banking, Missed-call Banking, and IVR services.

Jyoti Development Bank

Jyoti Development Bank officially opened its central office and a new branch in Itahari with the aim to expand its network. The central office was inaugurated by the mayor of Itahari Sub-Metropolitan City, Dwarika Lal Chaudhary and the chairman of Jyoti Bikash Bank, Hari Chandra Khadka.

Shangrila Bank

Shangrila Development Bank and the Muktinath Development Committee have set up a donation box in Muktinath Temple to collect and manage the monetary contributions by devotees.



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Ramu Sapkota

As the COVID-19 pandemic sweeps the globe, hospitals have been overwhelmed. Nepal is ahead of the curve, but if the case load is to rise steeply as it has done in Italy or Spain, the government needs to start preparing ICUs, ventilators, and protective gear for hospital staff.

At present, nurses, doctors, interns and resident doctors and other medical personnel in Nepal's hospitals lack personal protective equipment (PPE), and they fear for their own lives while treating patients with suspected coronavirus.

Patients can be carriers and spreaders of the virus without showing any symptoms. Thousands have been visiting hospitals to get tested, have chest x-rays done, and could be unknowingly infecting medical staff.

"If we find issues with the patient's lungs after the chest x-ray, we monitor them closely for infection," says a doctor at a medical college in Kathmandu. "By the time we confirm whether they have been infected, the virus could infect many others in the hospital treating them, like myself."

Many doctors and even interns do not have a choice, and treat patients without PPE. "If you don't go to work, the medical college won't give a certificate," the doctor complains.

COVID-19

Staff at the Sukraraj Tropical and Infectious Diseases Hospital in Kathmandu which gets most of the referrals of suspected coronavirus cases are most at risk. Sagar Kumar Rajbhandary works 12 hour shifts at the Teku hospital, and says PPE are must-have given the number of patients coming in for checkups every day.

"We need at least 100 PPE units right away, but we have not got it yet," says Rajbhandary. The anti-biohazard equipment include respirator masks, sterile hoods, gowns, and goggles.

For the past month, hospitals across Nepal have been treating with patients coronavirus symptoms without proper PPE, and the medical system is ill-prepared for a major outbreak.

"Since a few units of PPE are not going to be enough, and because they are so expensive we have no choice but to start making them locally," says Paras Pandey at Bheri Hospital in Nepalganj who is not waiting for help from Kathmandu, and has already made 200 PPE at a local garment factory.

The PPE gown is improvised from thin plastic, and the goggles



BHERI HOSPITAL

have been made from transparent stationery, while the helmet is fashioned out of elastic apparel material. Pandey says other hospitals in the region have also copied the design.

Protective gear are being manufactured at four other sites, including by the Innovation Centre of Mahabir Pun (*see box*), the Karnali Health Science Institute, the Dharan-based BP Koirala Health Science Institute.

Although these Nepal-made PPE are not as high quality as imported ones, they at least offer some protection to medical staff. One imported PPE can cost anywhere up to Rs20,000, but a locally manufactured one costs only Rs250.

"We got local tailors to make 50 PPEs on the first day itself, they are cheap but effective, and serve the purpose for now," said Mangal Rawal of the Karnali Health Science Institute.

Tourism entrepreneur Suman Pandey says if the government only gave him permission, he could get workers with experience in making trekking gear to start assembly line manufacture of PPEs. He has already made two prototypes which could be also worn by ambulance drivers and helicopter pilots transporting infected people.

The PPE also needs to be disposed of properly after use in the medical wards, the ICU or even in front of a patient getting tested for COVID-19. One doctor or nurse needs at least eight units of PPE every day.

Bhogendra Raj Dotel at the Ministry of Health, is currently working to procure more PPEs,

but there is a shortage in the world market. In any case, all flights have stopped, so there is no way to bring them here quickly.

"It is not possible for donor

Protecting those who protect us from the epidemic

Hospital staff in Nepal at the frontlines of the battle against COVID-19 lack protective gear

countries to respond because they are dealing with shortages themselves," Dotel explains. Suppliers who used to source PPEs from Singapore, Thailand, China and India are not getting new units because they have stopped exports.

Nepal's hospitals also have a chronic lack of oxygen cylinders and ventilators even at the best of times. If the pandemic hits Nepal with full force, medical facilities just do not have the equipment to treat critically ill patients.

Besides this, the government procurement process is cumbersome, and although a tender was issued for PPE, gloves, boots, digital thermometers and other essential items on 15 March,

delivery is uncertain.

The department had requested bids to supply materials for a 1,000 bed isolation ward and 235 ventilators. But even these would not be enough if the infection rate rises.

The Nepal office of Nick Simons Institute (NSI) flew in 11 portable ventilators from the United States and they arrived on 16 March. NSI is also committed to supply 1,000 locally-made PPE to the government.

China has also committed to help with medical supplies including PPE, but Mahendra Shrestha of Department of Health Services said they had not yet arrived. 🇨🇳

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How Facebook came to the rescue

Mahabir Pun, the Magsaysay Award winning Nepali activist, knew that Nepal's health system would not be able to function unless nurses, doctors and technicians had protective gear for treatment of patients.

Since imports were impossible because of flights being cancelled, Pun decided that his centre would start churning out PPEs. He even brought 2,500 metres of fabric, but could not find a single tailor shop open in Kathmandu Valley.

So on 23 March, he posted a message on his Facebook page asking for tailors. He has nearly 100,000 followers, and the word spread quickly. Soon Pun started getting inundated with phone calls from tailors and garment shops all over the city.

Garment factories in Balaju and Putali Sadak offered to stitch prototypes, which are now ready. "We will now show them to doctors, and if they approve we will start mass producing protective gear and distribute them to hospitals all over the country," Pun told *Nepali Times*.

Ramu Sapkota

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COVID-19

Staff at the Sukraraj Tropical and Infectious Diseases Hospital in Kathmandu which gets most of the referrals of suspected coronavirus cases are most at risk. Sagar Kumar Rajbhandary works 12 hour shifts at the Teku hospital, and says PPE are must-have given the number of patients coming in for checkups every day.

"We need at least 100 PPE units right away, but we have not got it yet," says Rajbhandary. The anti-biohazard equipment include respirator masks, sterile hoods, gowns, and goggles.

For the past month, hospitals across Nepal have been treating with patients coronavirus symptoms without proper PPE, and the medical system is ill-prepared for a major outbreak.

"Since a few units of PPE are not going to be enough, and because they are so expensive we have no choice but to start making them locally," says Paras Pandey at Bheri Hospital in Nepalganj who is not waiting for help from Kathmandu, and has already made 200 PPE at a local garment factory.

The PPE gown is improvised from thin plastic, and the goggles



BHERI HOSPITAL

have been made from transparent stationery, while the helmet is fashioned out of elastic apparel material. Pandey says other hospitals in the region have also copied the design.

Protective gear are being manufactured at four other sites, including by the Innovation Centre of Mahabir Pun (*see box*), the Karnali Health Science Institute, the Dharan-based BP Koirala Health Science Institute.

Although these Nepal-made PPE are not as high quality as imported ones, they at least offer some protection to medical staff. One imported PPE can cost anywhere up to Rs20,000, but a locally manufactured one costs only Rs250.

"We got local tailors to make 50 PPEs on the first day itself, they are cheap but effective, and serve the purpose for now," said Mangal Rawal of the Karnali Health Science Institute.

Tourism entrepreneur Suman Pandey says if the government only gave him permission, he could get workers with experience in making trekking gear to start assembly line manufacture of PPEs. He has already made two prototypes which could be also worn by ambulance drivers and helicopter pilots transporting infected people.

The PPE also needs to be disposed of properly after use in the medical wards, the ICU or even in front of a patient getting tested for COVID-19. One doctor or nurse needs at least eight units of PPE every day.

Bhogendra Raj Dotel at the Ministry of Health, is currently working to procure more PPEs,

but there is a shortage in the world market. In any case, all flights have stopped, so there is no way to bring them here quickly.

"It is not possible for donor

Protecting those who protect us from the epidemic

Hospital staff in Nepal at the frontlines of the battle against COVID-19 lack protective gear

countries to respond because they are dealing with shortages themselves," Dotel explains. Suppliers who used to source PPEs from Singapore, Thailand, China and India are not getting new units because they have stopped exports.

Nepal's hospitals also have a chronic lack of oxygen cylinders and ventilators even at the best of times. If the pandemic hits Nepal with full force, medical facilities just do not have the equipment to treat critically ill patients.

Besides this, the government procurement process is cumbersome, and although a tender was issued for PPE, gloves, boots, digital thermometers and other essential items on 15 March,

delivery is uncertain.

The department had requested bids to supply materials for a 1,000 bed isolation ward and 235 ventilators. But even these would not be enough if the infection rate rises.

The Nepal office of Nick Simons Institute (NSI) flew in 11 portable ventilators from the United States and they arrived on 16 March. NSI is also committed to supply 1,000 locally-made PPE to the government.

China has also committed to help with medical supplies including PPE, but Mahendra Shrestha of Department of Health Services said they had not yet arrived. 🇨🇳

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How Facebook came to the rescue

Mahabir Pun, the Magsaysay Award winning Nepali activist, knew that Nepal's health system would not be able to function unless nurses, doctors and technicians had protective gear for treatment of patients.

Since imports were impossible because of flights being cancelled, Pun decided that his centre would start churning out PPEs. He even brought 2,500 metres of fabric, but could not find a single tailor shop open in Kathmandu Valley.

So on 23 March, he posted a message on his Facebook page asking for tailors. He has nearly 100,000 followers, and the word spread quickly. Soon Pun started getting inundated with phone calls from tailors and garment shops all over the city.

Garment factories in Balaju and Putali Sadak offered to stitch prototypes, which are now ready. "We will now show them to doctors, and if they approve we will start mass producing protective gear and distribute them to hospitals all over the country," Pun told *Nepali Times*.

Kathmandu in the time of cholera

British resident recalls the cholera epidemic that killed thousands in Kathmandu Valley in 1885

Tom Robertson

Kathmandu in the 1880s was a small place, about 1.5 km across and with 50,000 people living in its dense core area. In-migration after 1768 and new Rana palaces after 1846 had started expanding the city. Sanitation was poor, and conditions in Kathmandu were ripe for another disease outbreak.

The doctor at the British Residency in Lainchaur, G H Gimlette, did not pull punches in describing Kathmandu's poor hygienic conditions: 'The filth of the city is indescribable; along each side of the narrow lanes and streets run deep gutters, a foot to eighteen inches wide, filled with a stagnant mass of black stinking mud, into which fecal matter and every sort of refuse find their way. The stench of the thoroughfares is at all times bad enough, but, on a warm morning in the rains, it becomes sickening. (The houses) are generally overcrowded and ill-ventilated.'

Cholera had struck before — in 1823, 1831, 1843, 1856, 1862, 1867, 1872, 1874, and 1875. The 1856 and 1872 outbreaks killed large numbers. In 1872, 200 to 250 people perished each day.

The dreaded disease which brought on dysentery and vomiting killed half of those who got it. People were just beginning to understand how to contain outbreaks. Health knowledge was needed, but also smart, concerted government action. Kathmandu had little of either.

The city strained to feed itself. 'Every scrap of available ground in the valley of Nepal is cultivated to exhaustion,' an 1880s visitor noted, 'to yield its utmost to support a population already too large for its limited area.'

The most common ailments at the time were typhoid fever chronic dyspepsia, goitre, and syphilis. With syphilis, the chronicler noted, it was 'rather the rule than the exception for a man to be infected at some period of his life'.

Gimlette, also worried about Nepali superstitions about cholera. One early



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outbreak had been blamed, he wrote, on the position of Saturn in the sky, another on the unluckiness of the king's 18th birthday coming in the Nepali year 1888.

He had a point, but was also displaying some colonial self-congratulation. It had not been many years since John Snow had identified dirty water taps as the source of London's cholera outbreak in 1849. Before this, and afterwards, many westerners advanced their own quirky, unscientific explanations for disease.

In 1885 Nepal had seen lots of rain and extremely hot weather. The city's 'sultry and oppressive' air, Gimlette noted, 'was undisturbed by the slightest breeze'.

The first ugly symptoms of cholera manifested themselves in mid May. Soon, five or six people were dying each day. By the end of May 10-12 people were dying. The British doctor tried to spur the palace into action, making 'frequent and urgent' calls for temporary clinics to treat the sick. But his pleas went 'entirely disregarded' by the Rana rulers at the time.

Eventually the government gave a space for a small dispensary, but that fell far short

of the what Gimlette really wanted — a 'place into which patients could be admitted and treated continuously'.

Another poor decision added fuel to the fire. Over 15,000 troops were gathered in Kathmandu for a possible deployment in India. Some soldiers got sick, and others were not dispatched home immediately. Only after a colorful parade two weeks later on 1 June 1885 were soldiers sent home. But it was too late.

The disease followed them around the country. Kathmandu saw 'a sudden increase' in cases, the death rate now topping 50 per day. Cases appeared in Patan and then Bhaktapur. Cholera spread into the mountains.

Meanwhile, the troops at the British Residency remained healthy, despite cases nearby. Gimlette credited good hygiene and a limited quarantine — soldiers were not allowed into the city, then a slight distance away.

By 14 June, cholera had invaded the palace. Of the over 300 people who lived there, 25 were dead by evening, chiefly slave-girls and servants.

'A panic ensued, and the Durbar was

quickly emptied,' Gimlette wrote. The dying were rushed to Pashupati. Others fled to the palaces of Patan and Bhaktapur which themselves soon grew into 'fresh centres of the disease'.

On June 29th, after alternating days of heavy rain and high temperatures, the daily death toll climbed over 100, its highest yet, and stayed there for several days. Gimlette made house calls, and visited the *ghats* daily. He observed a society struggling to maintain its humanity.

He described the cremation *ghats* as 'crowded with sick, dying, and dead. Many unfortunate wretches were simply, when attacked, brought to the edge of stream and there abandoned'.

The scene was gruesome. The better off could afford to burn their dead, but 'the bodies of the poor and low castes were thrown into the middle of the shallow stream by hundreds, to be pulled again piecemeal to the banks by the dogs, jackals, and vultures, who feasted on them'.

Cooler temperatures in July gave the city a short respite. But the disease soon roared back 'as bad as ever'. This time it devastated the city's lower quarters. Only in August did the death rate significantly drop, the outbreak finally coming to an end in early September.

Over 9,000 people in Kathmandu Valley had died, the Darbar announced. Gimlette thought this estimate high, but agreed that the loss of life 'must have been very great'. The city's population, before the outbreak, was approximately 50,000.

G H Gimlette worried that poor hygiene and government indifference would yield yet more killer epidemics. 'The disgustingly insanitary condition of Katmandu and other towns,' he wrote, 'is quite certain to breed epidemics in future. No efforts to remedy it are in the least likely to be made by the Durbar, nor would anything much short of burning the city to the ground suffice. The foundations are saturated with filth, and the air is almost thick with stench.'

Tom Robertson, PhD, is researching the environmental history of the Kathmandu Valley.

Remembering a pandemic 100 years ago

There are important lessons for the Subcontinent from the 1918 Spanish Flu outbreak

Buddha Basnyat

The current COVID-19 pandemic has forced many to Google other historic outbreaks, and the search usually brings them to the 1918 influenza epidemic that killed between 20-40 million people – half of them in South Asia.

Just over 100 years ago, as Europe was coming out of a ruinous four-year trench warfare, American soldiers brought the flu to the front lines from where it had spread like wildfire across Europe.

Although it is called the 'Spanish' Flu, the virus first appeared in North America and crossed the Atlantic on US troopships bound for the front lines. It is called Spanish Flu because the virus was making people sick in the Pyrenees long after it had subsided elsewhere.

After the war, British Army soldiers returning to India (some of them could very well have been Gurkhas) brought the virus to Bombay from where it spread along India's vast railway network. 50 in every 1,000 Indians died of the virus.

There were two waves of the influenza epidemic. It was probably transferred from returning migratory waterfowl to humans in Kansas in spring of 1918 before jumping across the Atlantic to Europe. The spread slowed over the summer, but returned with a vengeance in the autumn that year.

Although there are many books about the Spanish Flu in Western literature, in South Asia there is no properly archived documentation about the tragic pandemic that took many lives.



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Even Mahatma Gandhi was stricken by the bug, and bodies were piled high along river banks in India as cremation sites ran out of firewood. Unlike COVID-19, the 1918 influenza virus struck people in the 20-40 age group.

While it affected 28% of all Americans, killing 675,000 – of the US soldiers killed in World War I, half died of influenza. But surprisingly, the pandemic had very little effect on China.

Many viruses have an animal reservoir, and the Spanish Flu was associated with ducks and pigs as is usual for influenza viruses. The MERS coronavirus that affected the Gulf region in 2012 is associated with

camels, and the SARS coronavirus of 2003 transferred from civet cats. While the COVID-19 probably originated in bats like the other coronaviruses, its host is believed to be the pangolin.

As the 'Spanish' flu clearly showed, there is no evidence to show that we in South Asia have better immunity towards the novel coronavirus COVID-19. So, what can be done?

First thing is to increase tests for COVID-19 in suspected patients even without a travel history to affected areas. The more tests we do, the more we will know about the spread of the actual disease.

It is also crucial to do cross-sectional serological studies in communities to see if the virus has been introduced there. This test (unlike the RNA-based diagnostic test for a patient) can be done on asymptomatic

people in the community to check for COVID-19 antibodies in the blood, and could give us an idea about the extent of the exposure to the community.

Many of these antibody tests are new, and the Chinese have vast experience with them in treating COVID-19. The Nepali government would be well advised to seek Chinese help with antibody testing so that we are better prepared in the days and months ahead. Without more diagnostic and serological tests, we may continue to have a false sense of security as the virus continues to sneak up on us in South Asia.

The silver lining (if there is one) in this unfolding COVID-19 pandemic is the attention that it has attracted to the importance of rapid diagnostic tests for other neglected infectious diseases in South Asia like tuberculosis, typhoid, typhus, or leptospirosis.

LEARNING FROM THE PAST: American Red Cross volunteers carrying a Spanish Flu victim in 1919. Patients being treated at a military hospital in Kansas during the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918.

The tests need to be accurate, simple, affordable, and quick. Rapid diagnostics will not just help find infected people, but also to decide on specific therapy so that unnecessary antibiotics and other treatment are not administered. Proper diagnosis will lead to control of antimicrobial resistance, another medical crisis affecting the world today.

At present, diagnostic tests take many hours if not days, so hopefully, after the dust from COVID-19 settles, there will be more work on rapid tests for these still-rampant 'biblical' afflictions that plague us.

Another positive effect of the COVID-19 pandemic may be the restoration of people's faith in effective tried and tested vaccines in the western world.

Rumours about side-effects of vaccines going viral on social media have convinced many parents not to inoculate their children, leading to outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases like diphtheria, polio and whooping cough in the West. If successful, the COVID-19 vaccine would set the record straight for the proliferation of 'anti-vaxxers'.

Pandemics are like earthquakes, they cannot be wished away. It is best we prepare for a potential COVID-19 outbreak as best and resourcefully as we can. This is not optional, since there will be more pandemics in future.

Nepal locked down, now what?

Transparency. Concealing information fuels conspiracies, rumour-mongering and the 'fake news'.

Full marks to the Nepal government for imposing the much tougher lockdown that we are living under since 6AM Tuesday. As of Monday afternoon it was still possible for Kathmanduites to get a suit tailor-made, meet friends for *chiya* and chat, or celebrate a birthday at a favourite restaurant. That made no sense: pandemics demand much more than half-measures.



SOMEWHERE ELSE
Marty Logan

Inexplicably the coronavirus has not walloped Nepal yet while it has devastated countries from our northern neighbour China to Italy and the United States. With only three confirmed cases here we need to learn from those sad examples. Keeping people at home under lockdown will go a long way towards ensuring that no further social transmission occurs.

Broadening testing as resources become available from China and other well-wishers — starting with the most vulnerable individuals — will enable us to identify infected people and isolate them from the larger population.

Some details of the lockdown still need to be ironed out after it was abruptly announced Monday night. Shops providing essential goods will remain open but which ones and what hours they will work is still to be seen. Wisely, officials have decided to not limit shopping hours, otherwise we would likely



BIKRAM RAI

have seen a rush on stores that would negate the entire point of social distancing. Still, measures need to be put in place to ensure that people do not get into the habit of strolling over to their local store daily to leaf through *rayoko sag*.

We can expect most Nepalis to understand the inconvenience of living under lockdown and do their part. In turn, the government must exhibit true leadership by encouraging and informing us. The media must be permitted to continue its essential work of providing updates, and insights. Yet, we should not have to wait for

an enterprising journalist to reveal that the government has tested fewer than half of the suspected COVID-19 cases than we were led to believe. Concealing information further fuels conspiracy theories, rumour-mongering and the 'fake news'.

Canada's prime minister is in self-isolation since his wife tested positive more than a week ago. Yet he is giving daily press briefings to update the situation there (where there have been 35 deaths and 3,404 confirmed cases at the time of writing). We are not recommending that Prime Minister Oli do the

same, as he still needs to recuperate from his recent kidney transplant. However, we do need to see an authoritative, empathetic figure as spokesperson to provide daily updates via the media.

S/he need not be a government official, most of whom are unfortunately tainted with a party label that renders them suspect to a section of the population, but might well be a retired health expert. This regular flow of credible information would be an important step toward stifling the ill-informed or ill-intentioned voices that are being amplified via social media.

One of the first tasks of that spokesperson could be to explain what is expected of businesses, big and small, and ordinary people during the lockdown — and the consequences if those rules are not followed. What are the measures authorities are now taking to fight COVID-19?

We 'know' unofficially that testing is being broadened but it is unclear exactly by how much and to who. If that measure fails to identify new cases, what might the next steps be? If we are all in this journey together we deserve to know which direction we are moving in.

It is heartening to see funds established to finance the response of the health care sector in what is sure to be a long fight against the coronavirus. Thank you to all the frontline health workers who are labouring under sometimes woeful conditions to keep the rest of us healthy.

We would hope also that the Oli government swiftly announces compensation for the hundreds of thousands of people who will be without work, and pay cheques, in coming weeks. The poorest of the poor should not be left to fend for themselves, especially if economic assistance is provided to industries.

Local governments across Nepal have been working overtime in recent weeks to establish isolation wards in case of an outbreak. If we all do our part to respect the current lockdown, thanks to the measures that came into force since Tuesday it is now much more likely that we will not witness the sad spectacle of those facilities filling up. 🇳🇵

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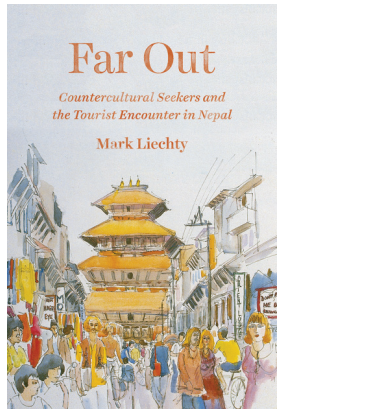
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Suggested Books:



Far Out
In this history of the evolution of Nepal's tourist industry, Mark Liechty traces Western fantasies that captured the imagination of tourists after World War II, asking how the idea of Nepal shaped the everyday cross-cultural interactions that it made possible.

SINGHA DURBAR

Rise and Fall of the Rana Regime of Nepal

SAGAR S.J.B. RANA

Singha Durbar
Sourced from archival material, historical memoirs in Nepali, interviews with members of the Rana clan, and an unpublished diary of his father, Sagar SJB Rana's narrative of the rise and fall of the Rana regime is meticulously researched and in places moves like a thriller.

Good Omens
Sir Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman's end-of-the-world comedy about an angel and a demon teaming up to undo the nearing apocalypse caused by the birth of the Son of Satan.

Love in the Time of Cholera

Considered by many to be one of the greatest love stories ever told, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's decades-spanning novel is a story of powerful, enduring love.

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KATHMANDU

Despite a broad westerly band encroaching into Pakistan and India from the Arabian Sea, weather in Kathmandu will be partly cloudy on Friday and fine over the weekend. In fact, summer is finally here, and the maximum temperature will climb up to 27 Celsius. The minima will also get into the mid-teens. We do not know if it will help in containing the coronavirus pandemic, but fingers crossed.

FRIDAY

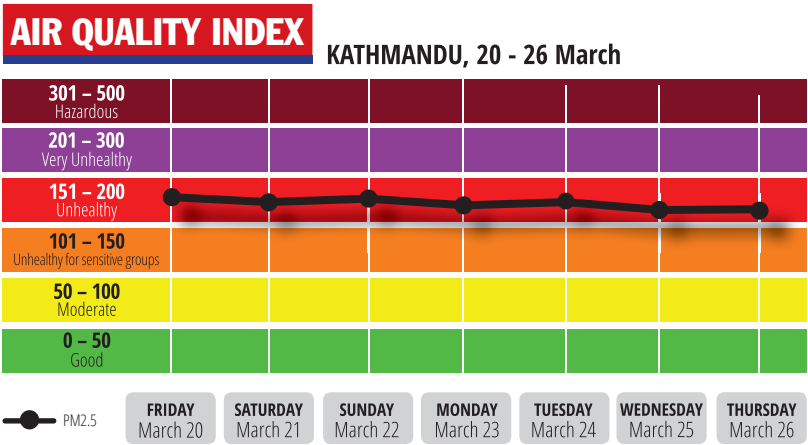
27°
15°

SATURDAY

27°
12°

SUNDAY

27°
11°



As to be expected with vehicles completely off the roads, Kathmandu's Air Quality Index has improved. But not enough. We are still not in the Green 'Healthy' Zone. This leads us to the conclusion that airborne dust and cross border pollution blown in by prevailing winds form a large proportion of particulates in the Valley's air. Stay safe and sanitised.
<https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/>

ON CABLE

How to Train Your Dragon
Hiccup, a young Viking who aspires to hunt dragons, forms an unlikely friendship with a young dragon himself, and learns there may be more to the creatures than he assumed.
Watch with your kids.
29 March, 8:35am, HBO



Rocketman
A musical fantasy about the incredible story of musical icon Sir Elton John's breakthrough years. Starring Taron Egerton.
31 March 8:45pm, HBO

Truman
Terminally ill actor Julián and his childhood friend Tomás set out to finalise Julián's funeral arrangements, settle accounts and find a home for Julián's beloved dog, Truman.
29 March, 3:30pm, Cinemax

Gone Baby Gone
Two Boston detectives investigate a 4-year-old girl's kidnapping, which ultimately turns into a crisis both professionally and personally.
30 March, 10:35pm, Cinemax

Ice Age
In this animated kids' movie set during the Ice Age, a sabretooth tiger, a sloth, and a woolly mammoth find a lost human infant and set out to return him to his tribe.
31 March, 4:15pm, HBO

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

KRIPA JOSHI

During this pandemic we are staying at home not only to save ourselves but also to save others. Caring for the environment also starts by caring for others and realising how our actions impact the global community, near and far. When we refrain from littering, use only the resources we need or take time to recycle, we are thinking of others- humans and animals- who also share this planet... our home.

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Aji's Podcast
Listen to inspiring and extraordinary life stories from Nepal's elderly community. Find Aji's Podcasts on YouTube, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, or Spotify.

CONTAINMENT

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Bored Games
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Arts and Crafts
Explore your creativity and brighten up your room with DIY handicrafts. You can find many helpful DIY instruction videos online.

Spring Clean
If you have been putting off cleaning your house or room because of other commitments, now is the time to do your spring cleaning.

Free online courses
You can access free online courses from different universities that can be completed in as less as a day. Explore your options online and expand your knowledge. Learning platforms include edX, Coursera, and more.

Take up Cooking
Take up cooking and create interesting dishes with the ingredients at hand. Find tutorials on YouTube.

OUR PICK

CHERNOBYL

The 2019 hit historical TV miniseries is Chernobyl is a nerve-wracking series that viewers can binge-watch during this lockdown. Based on a real-life incident, Chernobyl tells the story of a nuclear plant disaster, which occurred in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, the Soviet Union in April 1986. The series written by Craig Mazin discovers lesser-known stories of the firefighters, volunteers and those involved during the disaster. Chernobyl, the five-episode series, includes a stellar ensemble cast including Emily Watson, Stellan Skarsgård, Jared Harris and others

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Coronavirus shutdown gives Nepal's nature a respite

With no human disturbance, Nepal's national parks have a chance to spring back

Mukesh Pokhrel

While humans all over the planet are being challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic, it has given nature everywhere a respite.

Carbon emissions have dipped, there is almost no carbon monoxide in the air over large parts of India and China because vehicles are off the roads, NOx and sulphur dioxide concentrations in the air have dropped. The concentration of particulate matter like soot given off by industries and diesel trucks have also decreased, improving air quality over Asia's most-polluted cities.

Here in Nepal, Mt Everest and Himalayan peaks have got a much-needed respite after the government cancelled all expeditions and treks from the mountains for the spring climbing season. There had been an international uproar last year after photos of a traffic jam on the summit ridge of Mt Everest went viral. Garbage and corpses on the mountain have gotten a lot of media attention.

The sunny spring sky in Kathmandu was brilliantly clear on Tuesday, the first day of a week-long nationwide lockdown. With no traffic, and flights all grounded, there is no noise pollution in the street or the sky.

But the happiest must be wild animals in Nepal's national parks, including those popular with tourists like Chitwan, Bardia, Langtang and Shivapuri-Nagarjun, where visitors have not been allowed since Sunday.

After the government closed schools and offices last week, Kathmandu's residents had started arriving at Shivapuri and Chitwan by the busloads for picnics during weekend, prompting park officials to close entry on Monday.

"We had to close the parks because there was an increase in visitor numbers, but with the announcement of the nationwide lockdown from Tuesday, visitors will not be coming anyway," said chief of Bardia National park Ananath Baral.

On Sunday, there were more than 400 visitors — about four times the daily average — at Shivapuri-Nagarjun, the national park on Kathmandu Valley's northern and western rim.

Conservationists say the drop in human activity will be a relief to the park's wildlife, since any extra noise can disturb their habitat and movement. Naturalist Mukesh Chalise recalls how there was an increase in wildlife in Langtang National Park after trekkers stopped coming due to the 2015 earthquake.

"It used to be difficult to see resident fauna and birds, now there are herds and flocks of them out in the open in Langtang," Chalise says.

Due to its terrain and



KUNDA DIXIT

topographic range, Nepal has some of the richest biodiversity in a country with such a small area. There are 876 species of birds, 185 species of mammals and 651 species of butterflies in Nepal, some of them are only found here and nowhere else. National parks and protected areas cover 27% of Nepal's area.

There has been a big increase in park visitors in the past few years. Nepal's national parks and conservation areas registered 510,000 foreign visitors five years

ago, and this grew to 701,000 last year. There is no count of the number of Nepali visitors, and if this is added it would take the numbers to nearly 1.5 million per year.

There has also been little attempt to regulate the entry of sightseeing vehicles into national parks. In Chitwan alone, the national park issued 35 jeep permits every day for jungle safari into the core area. Bardia issued 22 jeep permits per day, with each vehicle carrying 10-14 visitors. Besides this,

both Chitwan and Bardia also issue dozens of elephant safari permits.

All this has now come to a halt, and has eliminated human disturbance. Chalise says this will allow wild animals and birds to be left alone for a while which will be good for nature to rebound.

"We had already started seeing rhinos interacting more and more with humans, and acting tame. It is very dangerous for the rhino to lose its fear of humans because this may expose them to poachers," adds Chalise, who says there

should be a permanent ban on human entry into national parks. Tourists should be allowed only into the buffer zone.

Sindhu Dhungana at the Ministry of Forests and Environment, however, says that if local people do not see any advantage of eco-tourism they may not help in conservation, and visitors should be allowed but in a regulated numbers.

COVID-19

"The main criteria should be how much human activity is disturbing wildlife, and if it is serious numbers should be regulated," Dhungana explains.

Lessening human entry into national parks will also prevent the spread of human diseases like tuberculosis to rhinos and elephants, and also stop viruses from wild animals infecting humans.

Chalise also warns that the nationals parks should be vigilant about increased activity of poachers taking advantage of the national shutdown to hunt wild animals either for meat or tusks, horns and pelts. 🇳🇵

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Shelters for senior citizens and orphans that survived the earthquake five years ago now have to deal with a bigger upheaval

Alisha Sijapati

Ever since the nationwide lockdown was announced on 23 March, the fear of being infected by COVID-19 has risen among those charged with taking care of the elderly and the very young.

Older people, and those with pre-existing medical conditions such as asthma, diabetes, or heart disease are said to be more vulnerable to becoming severely ill with the virus.

The Pashupati Briddha Ashram home for the elderly and Nepal Childrens' Organisation (Bal Mandir) in Naxal have both been under quarantine since 14 March, with no visitors allowed.

The danger of COVID-19 has added onto the challenge of running the organisations which were damaged in the 2015 earthquake and have not been fully repaired. The Pashupati home for the elderly was actually built in 1882, and the structure has been housing senior citizens ever since. A new wing has been added for those who need special assistance.

The Nepal Childrens' Organisation (NCO) has dispersed to 10 different centres around



MONIKA DEUPALA

COVID-19

Kathmandu Valley with 400 children under its care. Their makeshift office and new building made by the group Abari stands next to its original historical building that was damaged in the quake five years ago, and is currently being retrofitted by the Nepal Reconstruction Authority.

While the NCO plans to move back to old building after it is repaired in two years, the home for the elderly has made little progress. According to Krishna Prasad

Kandel, Administrative Chief of the Pashupati Briddha Ashram the government had allotted land at Gothatar for a modern elderly home, but project has not got off the ground.

Due to lack of space, the Pashupati elderly home has limited the intake of senior citizens since 2015. It now has 140 elderly people, mostly those abandoned by their families, or have no one to take care of them.

Both the elderly home and the NCO have taken examples from other countries for virus tests and fast-tracking their disaster management plans. The children and the elderly in the two shelters

have been briefed on preventing themselves from getting infected by the coronavirus. They have also got masks, soap and disinfectants from the Ministry of Health to last them two months.

While Niraj Shrestha, the acting director at the NCO finds it easy to communicate with the children, it has been difficult for Kandel and his team to make the elderly understand the importance of wearing masks and washing their hands with soap.

"It is always easier to make children understand, but elderly are tough cookies, we have to brief them over and over again, as they do not understand that



these measures will protect them," Kandel says.

Om Kumari Tiwari, 87, (pictured right) has been living at the shelter for 17 years, and does not understand the new restrictions: "We have not been allowed to go to the temples too and we haven't seen visitors too, but why?"

She also does not understand why she has to wear a mask. Kandel explains that many of the elderly have dementia or Alzheimer's which it makes it hard for them to understand and remember the precautions. Many of them also complain about shortness of breath while using the mask, and about not being allowed to meet relatives.

Although children are said to be less vulnerable to the coronavirus, they live in crowded dorms and mingle in the dining rooms, thus making it easier for the transmission of the virus.

Similarly, Shrestha also mentioned that children under self-quarantine make requests to play outside and mingle with their friends. But unlike the senior citizens, they comply with restrictions.

"We are not experts in this field, but we will make our best efforts to fight the virus," Shrestha says. "After having survived the earthquake we now have to deal with an even bigger upheaval." 🇳🇵

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