Uncharted territory

Nepal’s one week lockdown is supposed to go on till Tuesday 31 March, but it is likely to be extended till at least Nepal New Year on 13 April.

Although most people in the cities are staying home, there is growing worry about a prolonged shutdown leading to food shortages, economic hardship and even social unrest.

There is also concern about the urban poor who depend on daily wages and civil society has urged the state to quickly come up with a mechanism to distribute food or cash grants through local governments. Many Nepali migrant workers are stranded in the Gulf, Malaysia or Indian cities, and there is pressure on government from social media to allow them back.

With the country in lockdown to stop the spread of COVID-19, the Ministry of Health has decided to extend testing in Tuko and also in Nepalganj, Palpa and Dharm to those identified through contact tracing. As tests are expanded, the official total of those infected is expected to rise form the current three individuals.

The COVID-19 control committee headed by Defence Minister Ishwor Pokhrel met in a secret session at Singha Durbar on Wednesday and decided to also allow foreign embassies to gather their stranded nationals in Kathmandu and to fly them out. There are an estimated 10,000 tourists stranded in Nepal.

There are said to be 120 foreign trekkers and climbers stuck in Lukla because they could not get down from the mountains before the lockdown went into effect on 24 March, and flights to Kathmandu were cancelled. Another 78 tourists stranded in Mustang are being escorted by bus to Pokhara.

There are 60 mainly French nationals also stuck in Pokhara and the embassy chartered a plane to bring them to Kathmandu on Thursday. The British and Australian embassies have assured their nationals they are working on a ferry flight to get them back home.

The Committee also decided to streamline the supply of essential commodities by not stopping delivery vehicles. It said the Tsetepani and Ramche checkpoints on the China border would be open for cargo. While the border points with India are open, goods trucks are stuck because customs officials and clearance agents are staying home.

Meanwhile, police on Wednesday arrested the driver of a container truck in Birgunj with 92 people whom he had charged Rs 200 each to take them from Chilkan. No passenger vehicles and domestic flights have been allowed since the lockdown went into effect on Tuesday morning.

DIGITAL PAGES

From this Friday, Nepal Times is putting its weekly handout edition until the situation returns to normal. The page of the art foremost news will be available in digital format for free.

Readers who want to receive this weekly edition on PDF can send an email to editor@nepaltimes.com, or click on Subscribe To Our Newsletter box on our website.

You can also continue to read additional content on the Nepal Times home page (nepaltimes.com).

STAY HOME, STAY SAFE.
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 New Year on 13 April to match the duration of the Indian curfew.

Such a prolonged lockdown forces us to look beyond the present need for containment to plan for the crises that are sure to materialize 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 inequalities in Nepali society, exclusion and injustices.

This past New Year’s Day, an Indian doctor addressed the class dimension of physical distancing as applicable to the New Year. Social distancing is a privilege. It means you live in a house large enough to isolate. Afloat 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 provoked from entering their own country.

With the curfew likely to be extended for 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 autonomy to act.

The prolonged lockdown 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.

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 ensure the most vulnerable with cash grants if necessary.

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

ONLINE PACKAGES

A DIFFERENT KATHMANDU

Nepal has seen pockets under a weeks-long national lockdown, but this has been a complete contrast to what would have happened, predicted and going strong, full greens lie sleek and nile while following the crops is a precise 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. People who protect us from the epidemic must be protected.

The government must ensure that all health care workers are paid the proper salaries and have adequate protective gears.

Bhunun Tulsidhar

I work both ways (Far from home during a pandemic), Upasana Khadka, nepaltimes.com. The city has many who would be the safety net, but far for along in the spread, we would just rise against ourselves by attempting to travel and then probably others when we arrive.

Shrini Bhandari

The rich can afford to Work From Home (Kathmandu under semi-lockdown. Alisha Sijapati, nepaltimes.com). The poor cannot. The rich can afford social distancing. The poor cannot.

Shrini Bhandari

To save the world from virus demand either: generosity of the rich (taxes, charity) or sacrifice of the poor. Give us what will be the likely outcome.

Ahmed Dulla

Might be good to be a close look at the surveillance and health care system (COVID-19. Nepal and the hygiene hypester, Marty Logan, nepaltimes.com). The virus does not respect any administrative bostors.

Jon Miller Hansen

I read about the hygiene hypesters in the book ‘Let them eat oat’ This is a tricky step to expose to microbes that so healthy microbes colonizes our bodies and that enhances immune system. But the same should be true to the people living in the Watan market.

Sunita Babu Shrestha

This is an excellent informative article about the time of change. Tom Robertson, page 6. Look forward to the book coming out of the research.

Aashish Tiwari

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

Bhaskar Dhungana

I bear this will stop up more as an economic crisis than a health problem (Nepal closes border with India, China. nepaltimes.com).

Sylvain Stengel

Coronavirus shutdown gives Nepal’s nature a respite

But in turn, for all the planet is being challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic, is it possible that Nepal’s natural environment is enjoying a reprieve.

Most popular on Twitter

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS

Nepalis quarantined in Kathmandu for COVID-19

Some 2,000 Nepali migrant workers are being quarantined in a camp in the port of Jeddah in preparation to return to their home country.

Most commented

Nepalis quarantined in Kathmandu for COVID-19

Some 2,000 Nepali migrant workers are being quarantined in a camp in the port of Jeddah in preparation to return to their home country.

Most visited online page

Nepalis quarantined in Kathmandu for COVID-19

Some 2,000 Nepali migrant workers are being quarantined in a camp in the port of Jeddah in preparation to return to their home country.
The Nomadic Nepali

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

Suni’s eyes shine with excitement and his wavy beard blows in the southern hemisphere breeze. The churning ocean accounts for his queasy stomach, but he is thrilled by the squawking mass of seagulls and dense stretch of penguins on the rocky island before him.

SO FAR SO GOOD
Lisa Choogyal

The Nomadic Nepali

The names of New Zealand’s forgotten Subantarctic islands are unfamiliar to most of us - Campbell Island, Auckland Island, The Basks - 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 sciences at Lincoln University. His fellow Mingma Sherpa PhD student Meenal (MNSMS) scholar, Ngawang Thuptek Sherpa, only just made it on the last flight from Singapore before Nepal closed. Already the days of pre-COVID car travel seem long gone.

Sunil and Ngawang stayed in Christchurch long enough to settle in with the two new scholarship recipients, Pasang Lamos and Tsewung Nuro, 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 Ghana 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 23 houses in his home village of Old Syabru. “Tired of waiting for slow moving and ineffective government assistance, I initiated the project to rebuild the village.”

After helping Langtang, he joined IGIMOD 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 Kanchanjunga with $10,000 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 focused energy did not go unnoticed at Lincoln and he soon joined a summer project with his professors, assessing economic valuation of waterways of Christchurch. He has been spotted hiking in the hills, hanging out with bikes, and swimming off the coast with dusky dolphins.

When Mingma’s widow Phucho 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 near smile and Harry Potter glasses glinting with joy.

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 those 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 to search of birds, nature, botany and history, protected as World Heritage sites for their vast array of wildlife including albatross, penguins, penguins, prions and seals, lamantin and sheep.

I covered this trip at a lifetime to distant spots on the map.

While Sunil was fighting eels and seals, in these tiny inhabitable havens for some of the most unique 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 hotpot, the remote Chatham Islands. The cutting Coriolis wing span had an albatross hill painted onto its nose, parked in the furthest corner of the airport 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 mists 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 Mortel inhabitants and located overlooking rolling green sheep pastures, tree 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 gardened resident. “We shoot them regularly but they still proliforate, thinning out their local birds. Same as the waves.”

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

Along with plentiful seafood, glittering paua, kina shellfish and huge blue cod for which the Chatham Islands are renowned. Painful fishing stories abound, and Dave must be the only angler who never get a bite in an hour diligently spent trying on the Wairangi wheel, though a sinister shark-shaped shadow patrolling the harbour gives him a scare.

Swimming and beach activities are not encouraged at the Chatham’s feature as a popular 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 destruction, I doubt the black robin, mollusk and native penguin were to be found on our list. As the islanders compare to the wonders of wildlife that Sunil saw on his Subantarctic expedition.

So welcome back, the Nomadic Nepali flying the MNSMS flag. And keep up your exemplary energy and gusto now that you are home.
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, #SelfIsolation 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 380% 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 trying to log on to work from home failed 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 Kashav Nepal of WorldLink Nepal who says 86% 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%.

Nowhere else in the world is the infrastructure is made up of the international gateway and local networks. The international links are through underground fibreoptic connections that only 2 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 ‘prefetch’ traffic coming down 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.

"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 Shukla of Visnet Communications Nepal. "With higher consumption as we are seeing now, the aggregate traffic is going to strain our system to the absolute bottleneck that affects all the users."

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

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 Sanju Rakhawadi of Mercantile Communications.

With about 1.5 million Kamatham 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 ISP routers.

Most customers with fibreoptic ISP cable to homes are not facing the same bandwidth issues as those who rely only 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, 73% said they used mobile data to access the Internet against 20% who used broadband connection.

"As Sharecast’s Madhu Archarya: "It is still too early to tell for sure, but the coronavirus shutdown has accelerated people going online from home and 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 Kashav 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."

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

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

Ncell
Ncell has contributed Rs 10 million to the government’s COVID-19 Infection Prevention, Control and Treatment Fund to procure the personal protective gear, health equipment, PPE testing kits and other items for quarantine and treatment of COVID-19 patients. Andy Chang, CEO of Ncell, handed over the cheque to Hanuma Prasad Silwal, secretary at the PMO on 26 March.

Banking on banks
Himlayan Bank has adopted safety measures for staff, customers, and stakeholders as per government guidelines against the coronavirus including hand sanitizers and dividers at its premises. Nepal Bank is donating Rs10 million to the government fund to support efforts to stop the epidemic. Likewise, NCBS is providing mobile and internet banking services to its customers free of cost with debit card regulation. PKB’s registration, Visa Bank, Missed call banking, and Dharan services.

Jyoti Development Bank
Jyoti Development Bank officials opened its central office and a new branch in Kathmandu with the aim to expand its network. The central office was inaugurated by the mayor of Kathmandu Sub-Metropolitan City, Dr. Balkumari Dhakal and the chairman of Jyoti Development Bank, Hari Narayan Koirala.

Shangrila Bank
Shangrila Development Bank and the Mukhtesh Development Committee have set up a donation box in Mukhtesh Temple to collect and manage the monetary contributions by devotees.
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," Deelz explained. 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 270, 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 those 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 18 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 PPEs, but Mahendu Ghimiree, head of Department of Health Services, said they had not yet arrived.

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. Saug Kumar Rijal says doctors work about 12 hours shift at the Tiku hospital, and says PPE must have given the number of patients coming in for checkups every day. “In Brisbane, hospitals across Nepal have been treating patients with 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 Parka Pandey at Bir Hospital in Nepalgunj, who is in-charge of the NXIC, and has already made 200 PPEs at a local garment factory. The PPE gown is improvised from thin plastic, and the goggles have been made from transparent stationery, while the helmet is fashioned out of plastic window material. Pandey says other hospitals in the region have also copied the design.

Protective gear are being manufactured at four other sites, including the Innovation Centre of Mahabir Pun (see box), the Kathmandu Health Science Institute, the Pharmacy-based BP Koirala Health Science Institute. Although these Nepalese-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 Rs200,000, but a locally manufactured one costs only Rs20.

“We got local tallies to make 300 PPE on the first day itself, they are cheap but effective, and serve the purpose for now,” said Mangal Koirala of the Kathmandu 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 manufacturing of PPEs. He has already made two prototypes which could also be worn by ambulance drivers and helicopter pilots transporting infected people.

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

How Facebook came to the rescue

Mahabir Pun, the Magayac Award winning Nepali artist, knew that Nepal’s health system would not be able to function unless nurses, doctors and technicians had protective gear to treat patients.

Since India was the epicenter of the virus, Pun decided that he could start designing his PPEs. “I even bought 2,500 metres of fabric, but couldn’t find a single tailor shop even in my area,” he says.

On 23 March, he posted a message on his Facebook page asking for tailors. He received 100,000 messages, and the word spread quickly. Soon Pun started getting funding with phone calls from airlines and garment shops all over the city.

Garment factories in Biratnagar and Patan Sadak offered to stitch prototypes, which are made of six layers. “We will now give 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 Nepal Times.
Protecting those who protect us from the epidemic

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countries to respond because they are dealing with shortages themselves,” Deelid explained. 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 PPEs, 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 those 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 PPEs in the government.

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How Facebook came to the rescue

Mahabir Pun, the Magacay 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 canceled, Pun decided that his centre would start drumming up PFFs. He even brought 2,500 metres of fabric, but could only find a single tailor shop, so it took time.

So on 23 March, he posted a message on his Facebook page asking for tailors. He advertised 100,000 tailors, and the word spread quickly. Soon Pun started getting more than 100 calls from tailors and garment shops all over the city.

Garment factories in Bhairahawa, Butwal and Pokhara 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 Nepal Times.

Staff at the Sukrachand Tropical and Infectious Disease Hospital in Kathmandu which gets most of the referrals of suspected coronaviruses cases are most at risk. Sugar Kumar Rijhani says 12 hour shifts at the Tokhu hospital, and says PPEs are must have given the number of patients coming in for checkups every day.

“We used at least 100 PFFs within two weeks, although we have not got it yet,” says Rijhani. The anti-bacterial equipment includes respirator masks, sterile hoods, gowns, and goggles.

For the past month, hospitals across Nepal have been treating patients with 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 Paraj Pandey at Bheri Hospital in Nepalgunj who is not waiting for help from Kathmandu, and has already made 200 PFFs at a local garment factory.

The PFF gown is improvised from thin plastic, and the goggles have already been made from transparent stationary, while the helmet is fashioned out of plastic square 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 Kathmandu Health Science Institute, the Thame-based BP Koirala Institute of Health Sciences. Although these Nepal-made PPEs 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 Rs200,000, but a locally manufactured one costs only Rs239.

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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 PFFs. He has already made two prototypes which could be also worn by ambulance drivers and helicopter pilots transporting infected people.

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

Bhogendra Rij Deelid, at the Ministry of Health, is currently working to procure more PFFs.
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 7.5 km across and with about 10,000 people living in its dense core area. In-migration after 1867 and new Rana palaces after 1846 had started expanding the city. Suspension was poor, and conditions in Kathmandu were ripe for another disease outbreak.

The doctor at the British Residency in Leinachaur, Ghimel, did not pull punches in describing Kathmandu’s poor hygienic conditions. The filth of the city is indescribable, alleys stinking of garbage, lanes and streets run deep gutter, 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 at all times bad enough, but, on a warm morning in the rains, it becomes sickening. The houses are generally overcrowded and all ventilated.

Cholera had struck before – in 1843, 1851, 1853, 1856, 1862, 1874, 1876 and 1874. 1860 and 1878 outbreaks killed large numbers. In 1872, 200 to 250 people perished.

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 some concerted government action. Kathmandu had little of either.

The city was not required to feed itself. ‘Every scrap of available ground in the valley of Nepal is cultivated by its inhabitants,’ 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 the tropics, yellow fever, dysentery, typhoid, yellow fever, and dysentery.

It was ‘the fever of the tropics’ that the British doctor, Ghimel, seemed to be fighting in the time.

Ghimel, also worried about Nepali superstitions about cholera. One such outbreak had been blamed, he wrote, on the position of Saturn in the sky, another on the uncanny of the king’s 18th birthday coming in the Nepali year 1888.

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

In 1885 Nepal ‘had seen lots of rain’ and especially on the mountain heights. The city’s ‘vulgar and oppressive air’, Ghimel noted, ‘was undisturbed by the slightest breeze.’

The first early 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 repel the panic into action, making ‘frequent and urgent’ calls for temporary clinics to treat the sick. But his plea were ‘entirely disregarded’ by the Rana at the time.

Eventually the government gave a space for a small dispensary, but that fell far short of the what Ghimel 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 funeral two weeks later on 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 to the mountains.

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

By 14 June, cholera had invaded the capital. Of the over 200 people who died there, 25 were dead by evening, chiefly slave-girls and servants.

‘A panic ensued, and the Durbar was quickly emptied,’ Ghimel wrote. The dying were rushed to Patan. Others fled to the palaces of Patan and Bhaktapur which themselves soon gave into ‘fresh centres of the disease’.

On June 20th, after alternating days of heavy rain and high temperatures, the daily death rate reached its highest yet, and stayed there for several days. Ghimel made house calls, and visited the ghats daily. He observed ‘very few deaths, and the population left to itself in its humiliation.

He described the cremation ghats as ‘crowded with sick, dying, and dead. Many unfortunate wretches were simply, when struck, brought to the edge of the ghats and there abandoned’.

The scene was gruesome. The better off could afford to house 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, with sibilant and terrifying howls’.

Coastal temperatures in July gave the city the cool sheet, but the disease soon reared ‘back as bad as ever’. This time it devastated the city’s lower quarters. Only in August did the death rate reach its peak. A deep, the outbreak finally coming to an end in early September.

Over 9,000 people in Kathmandu Valley had died, the Durbar announced. Ghimel 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.

Ghimel warned that poor hygiene and government indifference would yield yet more contributions to the disease. The disappointing ‘incurable condition of Kathmandu and other towns’, he wrote, ‘is quite certain to breed epizootic in Nepal’. No efforts to remedy it are likely to be likely to be made by the Durbar, ‘leaving the cholera to lumber along the centuries’.

The furnaces are satiated with flesh, and the air is reeking with stench.

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 in Google to work from home. This has helped the virus to spread more widely.

British Army soldiers returning to India (sailors some of them could very well have been Gurkhas) brought the virus to Burma (where it spread along India’s railway network) and in 1919 every 1,000 Indians died of the virus.

The Spanish flu, or as it was called then, was an influenza epidemic. It was probably transferred from returning military personnel to humans in Europe’s spring of 1918 before jumping across the Atlantic to Europe. The spread slowed some due to the cold but was able to rekindle with a vengeance in the autumn that year.

Although there are many books about the Spanish flu, the Spanish flu was associated with ducks and pigs as it is usual for influenza viruses. The 1918 flu epidemic, which affected the world, was associated with the H1N1 strain.

Even Malala Gandhi was struck by the bug, and bodies were piled high along river banks in India as cremation sites ran out of firewood. While COVID-19, the 1918 flu strain had a spread in the 20-40 age-group.

First thing is to increase tests for COVID-19 and even 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 sero-epidemiological studies in communities to see if the virus has been introduced. This test (Unlike the WHO-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 kept experience which will train our COVID-19. The government would be well advised to seek Chinese help with antibody testing so we see a sudden surge in the days ahead. More than 10,000 people in the UK are testing for antibodies.

LEARNING FROM THE PAST: American Red Cross volunteers carry a Spanish flu vaccine in 1918. The vaccine was developed in response to a military health crisis in Kansas during the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918.

the tests need to be accurate, simple, affordable, and quick. Rapid diagnostics will not help find infected people, but also to decide on specific therapy that, unnecessary antibiotics and other treatments are not administered. Proper diagnostics will lead to proper guidance, another medical crisis afflicting the world today.

At present, diagnostic tests take many hours and it is safe if not, so hopefully after the test from COVID-19 is not, we all now work on rapid tests for these all-important ‘biobanks’ that diagnose us.

Another positive effect of the COVID-19 pandemic may be the restoration of people’s faith in effective treatment and vaccines in the future.

Rumours about side effects of vaccines gaining and social media have made people avoid vaccines, after their children, leading to outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases like diphtheria, polio and whooping cough in many parts of the world. The COVID-19 vaccine would set the record straight.

Families are like railways, they cannot be avoided. It is best we carry on a passenger craft to take as best and most efficiently we can. It is not optional, since there will be more pandemics in future.
Nepal locked down, now what?


Full marks to the Nepali 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 to a suit tailor, meet friends for chha and chat, or celebrate a birthday at a favourite restaurant. That made no sense; pandemics demand much more than half measures.

SOMETHING 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 these real 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 governments — 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. Weekly, officials have decided to not limit shopping hours, otherwise we would likely 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 roaming over to their local store daily to leaf through exquisite cakes.

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 8,454 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.

Who needs to be a government official, most of whom are unfortunately tainted with a party label that renders them suspect in 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 would be to explain in 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 untruthfully that testing is being broadened but it is unclear exactly by how much and to whom. 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 wondrous 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. It could be explained people 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.
Love in the Time of Cholera
Considered by many to be one of the greatest love stories ever told, Gabriel Garcia Márquez’s decades-spanning novel is a story of powerfull enduring love.

SINGHA DURBAR

Sourced from archival material, historical memoirs in Nepal, interviews with members of the Rana clan, and an unpublished diary of his father, Sagar Jai 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 end the existing apocalypse caused by the births of the Son of Satan.

Guns, Germs, and Steel
This Pulitzer-winning book by Jared Diamond is a global account of the rise of civilization, and the factors that shaped the modern world as we know it.

AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU, 20 - 26 March

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

THINK OF OTHERS

KRIYA 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 realizing how our actions impact the global community, near and far. When we refrain from littering, can 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.

CONTAINMENT

Start a journal
If you have always wanted to write but do not know where to begin, start by keeping a journal. Writing about your day might be therapeutic for you.

Learn a language
The language that you have always wanted to learn is right at your fingertips! Find which mobile application suits you best, and get learning.

Bored Games
Disengage from the internet for a while. Build out your own Cartam Board, play a Vendor game of charades with your family, or invent some new family games.

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

ART'S PODCAST

Aj’s Podcast

Listening to inspiring and extraordinary life stories from Nepal’s elderly community. Find Aj’s Podcast on his YouTube, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, or Spotify.

SUGGESTED PODCAST

Far Out
In this history of the evolution of Nepal’s tourist industry, Mark Lichfield traces Western foreigners 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.

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 what it means to be a true dragon

Rocketman
A musical fantasy about the incredible story of musical icon Sir Elton John’s breakthrough years. Starring Taron Egerton.

Ice Age
In the animated kids’ movie set during the Ice Age, a saber toothed tiger, a sloth, and an woolly mammoth find a lost human infant and set out to return him to his tribe.

Acts 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.

FEATURES

Air Quality Index

As air quality is 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 automobile dust and carbon black pollution is being produced, which forms a large proportion of particulate matter in the Kathmandu air.

https://epa.usembassy.gov/embassy-air-quality-monitoring/

Chernobyl

The 2019 HBO Miniseries ‘Chernobyl’ is a hauntingly powerful mini-series that dramatizes the events surrounding the 1986 nuclear disaster. Chernobyl tells the story of a nuclear power disaster, which occurred in the Ukraine region’s (then-Soviet) city of Pripyat, about 30 kilometers (19 miles) from the reactor. The series was written by Craig Mazin, co-written by Steven Soderbergh, and directed by Thomas Vinterberg.

Cernobyl, the true source of all stories, includes video testimonials and interviews by Irina Nesterova, Galina Churikova, and others.
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 acetic acid 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 for the season due to the COVID-19 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 Rights all grounded, there was 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 Shripur-Nagarjun, whose visitors have not been allowed since Sunday.

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

“We had to close the parks because there was an increase in visitors numbers, but with the announcement of the nationwide lockdown from Tuesday, visitors number will not be coming anyway,” said chief of Bardia National park Ananth Rai.

On Sunday, there were more than 400 visitors — about four times the daily average — at Shripur-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 birds and flock of them out in the open in Langtang,” Chalise says. Due to its terai and 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 865 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 jeeps 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’s very dangerous for the rhino to lose its fear of humans because they 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. Sindhur 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.

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

Leaving 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 national parks should be vigilant about increased activity of poachers taking advantage of the national shutdown to hunt wild animals either for meat or tasks, 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

Even 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 Pushpapati Briddha Ashram home for the elderly and Nepal Children’s Organisation (Bal Mandal) in Naxal have both been under quarantine since 14 March, with no visitors allowed.

The danger of COVID-19 has added on to the challenge of running the organisations which were damaged in the 2015 earthquake and have not been fully repaired.

The Pushpapati home for the elderly was actually built in 1883 and the structure has been housing senior citizens ever since.

A new wing has been added for those who need special assistance.

The Nepal Children’s Organisation (NCO) has dispersed to 19 different centres around Kathmandu Valley with 400 children under its care.

Their makeshift office and new building made by the group Abati stands next to its original historical building that was damaged in the quake five years ago, and is currently being restored 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 Pushpapati Briddha Ashram, the government had allotted land at Ghotka for a modern elderly home, but project has not got off the ground.

Due to lack of space, the Pushpapati 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 samples 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 Nirmal Shrestha, the acting director of 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, (photographed 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.”