Ramesh stays positive

Ramesh (name changed) had worked right through the pandemic at his job in Dubai until he tested positive. Ten of his room-mates in the worker’s camp have been placed in a separate building eight in one room. Ramesh who tested positive is in a single room, and the other infected person is in the hospital with chest pain.

There are nearly 700 Nepalis living abroad who have tested positive. Of the 14 who have died, eight are in Britain, five in the US and one in the UK.

“I had fever and headache that made it feel like my head was going to explode. So they took a swab and informed my employer after which I have been kept in isolation,” said Ramesh, who still has not informed his family in Nepal because they will worry. I try to keep myself distracted. I don’t have much here. I play games on my phone and try to stay positive because I don’t want the virus to win. I have to stay strong,” Ramesh said on the phone from Dubai. “I used to like writing poems, and I have written one about the virus and me.”

Ramesh does not know how he got infected. It could be the canteen where hundreds of workers crowd together. Or it could be the camp dormitory where one non-nation tested positive. “I know about social distancing, but how can I do that here?” he asks.

Ramesh adds: “At times like this you realise no one is really there for you. Not the embassy. Not the Nepali community groups. Not your employer. I talk to them everyday, and they take down my details. My case is still mild and so they haven’t taken me to hospital. Some of my friends have been going out of their way to help with food, I owe them.”

Upasana Shrestha

The poem Ramesh wrote in isolation in Dubai this week:

**My Path**

For many years I was walking alone along this path of life. Suddenly, I wanted to walk with me, it says with me. I don’t want that because I haven’t lived my life to the full.

It doesn’t agree with my persuasion but it just stands and looks at me. Maybe I am like me.

There is regret in my eyes. There is a limit to faith. We go at each other. My life in me as it was with me. Says with me.
Commercially Important People

There are tens of thousands of Nepalis in India, the Gulf region and elsewhere who have been laid off, whose resident permits have expired, or who are stranded, who want to come home. Many are on unpaid leave, or they are working in essential services with signs of exposure, and at greater risk of being infected. Some want to be with family, and do not want to continue living in crowded worker dormitories that are breeding grounds for infections. As the lockdown and global economic downturn continue, the pressure will grow from destination countries on Nepal and other South Asian nations, to repatriate their nationals.

Regardless of whether Nepali workers are being forced to go back, or they are returning of their own free will, the preparations to transport and quarantine the influx is inadequate. Even if all hotel rooms in Kathmandu are requisitioned for quarantine, it would not be enough to isolate workers. Not having a place to place to accommodate those coming back is a colonial oversight. To be sure, the logistics are going to be more difficult at night but there is no reason to be overly alarmist. The worst case is that the workers who have been stranded in the Gulf will come back to Nepal. Nepali workers from the Gulf are in India, and thousands will be returning home in coming days. The government has estimated that there are about 60,000 Nepali workers in the Gulf, 15,000 Indians in the Gulf and another 15,000 in Pakistan. This is a conservative estimate. The actual number could be as high as 100,000.

On Sunday, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) warned it would punish countries that refused to take back workers or did not return them to their countries. The warning was issued because the UAE was seeing a surge in requests to repatriate its workers. The UAE has around 4 million foreign workers, with most of them from Nepal and Bangladesh.

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Epidemics are nothing new in Nepal. In fact, the country’s history is littered with outbreaks of cholera, influenza, measles and other diseases that killed thousands at a time in Nepal.

Yet, despite knowledge about prevention or the availability of vaccines, Nepal still continues to die in large numbers. An outbreak of dengue killed 35 people, mostly children, in Jajarkot in 2009. Last year’s unprecedented eruption of dengue in Kathmandu infected 13,000 and killed at least a dozen.

So, for Nepal the only difference between the coronavirus pandemic and previous disease outbreaks is that is it global in scope, and it has wrecked the economy.

The government has been more proactive this time, compared to previous epidemics in taking strict measures to prevent the spread, like the lockdown which has now lasted three weeks.

Even so, experts say Nepal’s response was unnecessarily delayed. Nepal was one of the first countries outside China to report a case of COVID-19 when a Nepali student who had returned from Wuhan tested positive for the virus on 28 January. He later recovered, but 15 new cases have been detected since, but it was only in the second week of April that the government finally began mass testing in western Nepal and Terai districts, where there had been returning migrant workers from India.

Dengue, the mosquito-borne haemorrhagic fever is already being reported in all seven provinces. Cases have been arriving in hospitals which are already on high alert of COVID-19. A double epidemic would mean medical facilities will be overwhelmed. “We are not new to epidemics. Thousands of children continue to die of easily preventable diseases every year and there will be another dengue outbreak this summer, but where is the preparedness?” asks Geshtali Tuladhar, a disaster expert and politician member of the ruling Nepal Communist Party. “It is a primary duty of a responsible government to prepare for any disaster or an epidemic before it strikes.”

It is ironic that a senior member of a ruling political party that commands a near two-thirds majority in Parliament is the one complaining about the government being lax. To be sure, the government has been strict in enforcing the lockdown, and in his latest address, Prime Minister Oli extended the lockdown until 27 April and all international flights have been banned till 30 April.

Also, local governments have been credited with taking effective preventive measures, including house-to-house surveillance and monitoring of high-risk individuals. Swab collection and mass testing of high-risk groups has started in earnest.

Still, Nepal’s lack of preparedness to fight public health emergencies has been similar to the apathy shown about enforcing building codes and having a rescue and relief strategy in place for future mega-earthquakes.

It took the devastating 2015 earthquake to finally push the policymakers to develop the Disaster Risk and Management Act in 2017 — more than five years after it was languishing in the legislature. Unlike the Natural Calamity Act 1982 that is centred on the relief, the new Act listed 22 kinds of disasters in Nepal focusing on preparedness. Epidemics however have been categorised under ‘non-disaster’ in the new Act.

Epidemics has been lumped together with famines, fire, pest or micro-bacterial attack, industrial accident, toxic gas burned, chemical radiation leakage, gas explosion, toxic feed intake, environmental pollution, deforestation, physical infrastructure damage and accidents during disaster relief.

“Placing stakeholder and outbreaks together itself shows that we haven’t really understood what an epidemic means. There is a huge difference in how we have to deal with them,” says Baburam Bhattarai, former head of the Epidemiology and Disease Control Division.

The emergence of COVID-19 on top of the recurrence of pre-existing diseases in Nepal where health institutions with medical staff equipped to deal with epidemics, research wing to undertake new studies on emerging diseases, and a strong system that can take immediate steps to control spread of a contagion.

“We need to make laws taking infectious diseases into account, strengthen local infrastructure as well as increase capacity of the health sector,” Massari says. “We have to turn COVID-19 into an opportunity to build a new health structure and strengthen existing laws.”

Chronic lack of coordination and turf battles between the Department of Health Services, National Public Health Laboratory, Epidemiology and Disease Control Division, Epidemiology and Epidemic Management Section, Teku Hospital and Animal Disease Investigation and Control Division have added to the problem.

Says public health expert Madhes Chaulagain: “We are unprepared not just for new emerging epidemics but for the pre-existing diseases and seasonal disasters too.”

Close to three years after Nepal adopted a decentralised federal structure, provincial governments have to buy COVID-19 samples to Kathmandu in lack of regional laboratories and hospitals specializing in infectious diseases.

The root of the problem is a culture not primed for prevention, but for cure. Also a ‘Kre gane’ (callous) fatalistic attitude that tends to leave solving a known problem until after the disaster hits.

“We think about building modern hospitals to cure people. What developing countries like us should really be focusing on is prevention and preparedness,” says Geshtali Tuladhar. “We are lucky we still have time to prepare for COVID-19. It is time to work on prevention.”
Unlocking the economy post-lockdown

Checklist of measures to help Nepal’s economy regain good health once the pandemic eases

Sanjib Subba

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused socioeconomic damage, with enormous repercussions for Nepal’s economy because of its reliance on overseas migration and tourism.

Nepal’s three-week lockdown has been extended till at least 27 April. Flights are not going to resume anytime soon.

The country’s remittance-fueled, consumption-led economy, low manufacturing capacity, unemployment, huge trade deficit, high reliance on import-based consumption have been presenting challenges even before the lockdown. The pandemic has made everything more difficult.

Tourism is the hardest hit, especially the hotel industry which is most vulnerable due to the fixed cost associated with not only salary and wages but also regular maintenance as well as loan servicing obligations. Tourism is cash flow sensitive, and its oxygen supply has come to complete halt.

It will take at least till 2021 for travel and tourism to revive, or rebound. Priority rescue measures are urgently required.

Transport is another sector that needs urgent attention. Once the lockdown is lifted, reconstruction work needs to be speeded up.

The industry needs support to manage maintenance and financial obligations.

Aviation witnessed a quick rebound after the double whammy of the earthquake and blockade, particularly for domestic movement. The situation is different this time.

The high cost of grounded aircraft due to leasing, fixed and variable costs will pose a major challenge. Big ticket loan exposure to the aviation industry may just kill some operators.

Most airlines have spin-offs on ‘Dry Lease’ that carry certain fixed costs ranging from US$100-150K per month for each aircraft.

Airtours has had losses for six months and there is a major revenue strain for operators, and with tourism down this will dry up.

Finance industry including the banking sector are operating at bare minimum, and only offering basic services such as cash depositions including remittance services and basic trade finance.

Two key banks have practically stopped all non-processing is being carried out.

A liquidity problem that predated the pandemic. Nepal banks have been long plagued by liquidity crunch, particularly after the real estate crash of 2009. After the earthquake, the industry faced a major credit crunch.

The capital hike, reconstruction demand, a stable government all led to a surge in loan demand. But an unstable liquidity supply was a chronic problem.

If prolonged, this could lead to assets price bust and real-estate could take the plunge. Banks would have to revalue risk assets, as most are backed by real-estate guarantees.

In short, non-performing assets need to be closely monitored.

Remittance dependence has fuelled consumption growth, and this could be affected as remittance outflows in destination countries for Nepali migrants like Japan, Malaysia, Kuwait and the Gulf. In addition, there is now uncertainty about labour demand because of the global downturn. Annual remittances could take a nosedive.

Construction could pick up as soon as the lockdown is lifted. But big ticket projects, particularly ones with foreign contractors, in hydro airports, highways could slow down and costs could overheat.

Banking sector’s exposure in the construction sector could also be hit. The non-funded instrument could see ‘Willful Claim’ capitalizing on gay area of force majeure, currently under discussion at the Nepal Rastra Bank and the banking sector.

Trade may rebound quickly because of Nepali goods, services, and consumption patterns. However, the dent in purchasing power capacity due to loss of business and employment could be a matter of concern.

The Health Sector ironically may see a slowdown due to the pandemic. The banks carry significant exposure in medical care in form of working capital, term loan and fixed assets.

Balance of Payments could be a more concern as remittances drop.

Tourism is another forex earner that is hit hard. Exports were always negligible, but even that will be slowed further with the lockdown.

Revenue collection could dry up due to shortfall in revenue targets. This could limit spending and development in infrastructure projects, creating problems in multi-year budget implementation, base level economic activities, consumption amongst others.

Small and Micro enterprises are key economic steppers and yet largely ignored by formal sector reach.

This impact assessment could be bit tricky and may require deep dive in to both formal and informal source of borrowings.

Perhaps linkage to cooperatives could be one way to establish the relationship so as to gauge the depth of the impact. The critical focus here should be on employment generation, domestic production and value addition.

GDG has 15 main sectors contributing to it. It may be wise to run a predictive analysis of each critical sector that may impact on employment, value chain, revenue among others.

These are trying times for the economy, and we must be strategic about pressing the right buttons to speed up the rebound.

Sanjib Subba was until recently the CEO of Nepal Bank有限

Also keeping financially healthy in a lockdown

Post pandemic the government must expedite the foreign investment process to show that Nepal is back in business

As we face an unprecedented and precarious pandemic that has caused uncertainty to the entire global economy, Nepal’s own response it will determine at what velocity our economy will hit the ground. We need to brace ourselves for a very hard landing.

Sanjib Subba

The effect of this contagion has not just been sector-specific, but has affected the entire value chain. In Nepal this problem is compounded as we are heavily import dependent, which has created severe disruption in intermediate (raw) materials and components for production.

All sectors of the economy are facing limitations. The tourism and hospitality industry has suffered immensely due to cancellations of visitor arrivals, hotel revenues have had to close down due to lack of business. Agriculture will be next to be affected due to the lack of forecast and other inputs. As the lockdown is extended, the state of the economy will progressively deteriorate.

The foremost sector for a private equity investor like us in a crisis like this is to ensure the management of impact on the workforce.

Human resource must be well taken care of and all our partner companies have preventive measures against this virus.

Secondly, we assess the financial health of the companies. Our advisory role is to give oversight on what they should do to alleviate the problem. It is no surprise that all are in a state of cash shortage for working capital and debt repayment compounded by receivables that seem improbable of getting paid on time.

We impress upon them to consolidate their accounts, manage expenses prudently and cut costs. Management of operational risk is very important at this juncture — this is not the time for bottom line expectations but to ensure top line sustainability.

Depending on the gravity of the state of their balance sheets, we support them to acquire bridge gap funding or, in the long run, increase our equity portfolio. The companies that are in a better situation have been active in providing philanthropic activities to the community.

Whether it is providing free lunches to the police and health workers or building and providing to medical workers at hospitals or setting up a call center that provides access to medical services and train the doctors in this hour of need. We encourage such endeavors and also provide linkages between the companies in our portfolio.

Never have private equity impact funds been more relevant than now. Patient risk capital with a hand holding mechanism that provides diffusion of knowledge along with the much needed capital is what private equity has been doing in Nepal for the past five years.

For a foreign direct investor (FDI), we are restricted due to the time taken by the government agencies for approval, which can take as long as three to six months. There are capital increment requests for investments that have been waiting for as long as 18 months for FDI approval.

Businesses still not have that long a gestation period if they are strapped for cash.

Therefore, the government needs to put in place a mechanism to expedite onward investments or top up for these companies to move forward. Furthermore, this will also have a positive impact on the balance of payments of the country.

We are in an awaiting approval at this moment. Post lockdown, this will be an opportunity for the government to show its sincerity and seriousness by expediting the process and demonstrating that FDI is an important component to Nepal’s development showcasing that we are open for business in action rather than words.

Siddhant Raj Pandey is Chairman and CEO of Business Nepal Pvt Ltd.
Nepal must hope for the best, prepare for the worst

Buddha Basnyat and Sudeep Adhikari

In sharp contrast to Europe and the United States, the Western Pacific, South and Southeast Asia have reported relatively fewer cases of COVID-19 despite having their first cases in January itself. As of 18 April Nepal has recorded 16 confirmed cases out of which at least 12 were imported infections. Despite being in the neighbourhood of the epicentre, the South Asian region have shown a relatively lower prevalence of the disease. Most of these countries have resource constraints, illiteracy, poverty, inefficient health system, and poor hygiene — all conducive to the spread of epidemics.

Cities like New Delhi, Karachi, Kathmandu and Dhaka are so densely populated that a virus capable of human-to-human transmission like COVID-19 would be expected to be rampant — just as tuberculosis is. Tuberculosis is primarily a respiratory illness spread by droplet infection in the same manner as the novel coronavirus. India has now detected more than 12,000 COVID-19 cases, nearly half of which in the last 6 days. There have been 414 deaths, 22 of them on Wednesday, 18 April, but this is still much lower per capita than in the United States (7 cases vs 91,000 cases per million population in India and the US respectively).

Is this lower prevalence a true picture, or is it giving us a false sense of security because we have not performed enough tests? Nepal had tested only 15,800 people till 16 April.

There is a possibility that the disease is circulating in the community, and more will be detected once testing is scaled up. However if this was true, there should have been reports of increased hospitalisation and mortality associated with some unlinked and unusual pneumonia. Most of the hospitals in Nepal have set up fever clinics, but none so far have reported an increase in the number of suspected patients.

Mathematical models are used to predict outcomes in infectious diseases. Crucially, most models predict that the exponential ‘wave’ has yet to hit our region. The lockdown may help in fact push the wave further back and bought us time. It is also possible that some element in the agent-host-environment interaction, could have hindered the virus from spreading. But this could be just a feel-good hypothesis.

Amidst the uncertainty, Nepal who are not known for following directions have taken to heart the importance of a lockdown, and the constant weeping of a mask. Nepal enforced a lockdown immediately after detection of the second case, while many countries in the West did it only after the disease exploded.

This prompt action by the government is praiseworthy. On Tuesday, the government announced the extension of the lockdown till 27 April. We have to use the time to prepare health facilities and scaling up testing and contact tracing. Otherwise, the lockdown will have been for naught.

Experiencing with partial lock downs in some areas may be a consideration. But how to deal with the tremendous impact of the lockdown on the livelihoods of vulnerable people and the economy is another question altogether. And if Nepal’s migrant workers are forced to return home from the Gulf and other countries the problem will only be compounded.

Medical data from Wuhan revealed that COVID-19 patients who needed a ventilator had a very high mortality rate, from 60-77%, and that patients in intensive care required about 10 days on the ventilator. With such long durations and high mortality rates, deciding whether or not to put a patient on a ventilator will be a critical decision.

Other seriously ill patients with other diseases like heart attacks with a potentially better outcome may be denied a ventilator due to the overwhelming number of severely ill COVID-19 patients. Renal failure also seems to be a prominent feature of severe COVID-19 patients, which is going to tax our limited dialysis capabilities.

These conversations should be carried out now by Nepal’s policy makers during this relatively calm period. Because once the storm hits, it will be all hands on deck to deal with the day-to-day emergency.

Pewar Horby from ISARIC (International Severe Acute Respiratory and Emerging Infection Consortium) and his team have enrolled almost 3,000 COVID-19 patients in the UK for a randomised controlled trial to study the efficacy of both commonly prescribed drugs like hydroxychloroquine, steroids, and medications used in hyper-inflammatory conditions.

The UK is in a unique position to deliver large clinical trials because of its unified National Health Service (NHS). Horby’s study is the kind that could quickly make available reliable and concrete treatment strategies even as we wait for an effective vaccine.

Not for nothing is this coronavirus designated as ‘harmless’. Even as our lives are dramatically transformed, the world will have to find new drugs, new vaccines, and new methods to cope with this and other future viruses.

Buddha Basnyat, MD and Sudeep Adhikari, MD are both from Academy of Health Sciences and Patan Hospital.
SELF-ISOLATION

Suggested Books:

The Tutor of History
Manjushree Thapa’s social saga is a compelling tale of idealism, love and ambition set in rural Nepal during the parliamentary elections in 1992.

The Royal Ghosts
A collection of short stories from Samrat Upadhyay, centered on the岁tlers middle class Nepali society and interweaves with historical events of Nepal’s recent past.

Three Men in a Boat
A comic gem of the 19th century, Jerome K. Jerome’s T seeks novel is an account of three men and a dog’s two-week boating holiday along the Thames river.

Storms of My Grandchildren
Climate scientists James Hansen’s first book about the threats to people and the habitability for life on earth because of global warming.

The Dreamers
An isolated college town in Southern California is gripped by a sweeping virus that triggers a perpetual sleep in Karen Thompson Walker’s 2019 sci-fi novel.

SUGGESTED MOVIES ON THE DIGITAL PLATFORM:

Appaloosa
Two friends hired to police a small town that is suffering under the rule of a conman find their job complicated by the arrival of a young woman.

Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy
The top-rated newsmen in the male-dominated broadcasting 1970s.

Doctor Strange
While on a journey of physical and spiritual healing, a brilliant neurosurgeon is drawn into the world of the mystical arts.

The Book Thief
Liesel, a young girl in Germany during World War II, finds solace by reading books and sharing them with others.

Kung Fu Panda 2
Warrior panda Po and his friends fight to stop a great villain from conquering China with a deadly new weapon.

Black Mass
The true story of Whitey Bulger, the most infamous violent criminal in the history of South Boston, who became an FBI informant to take down the Bulger family.

CONTAINMENT

Podcasts we like:

The Doors
A platform for successful Nepalese entrepreneurs to share their ideas and experiences on the world of business. Find The Doors on Listen Notes and YouTube.

BOOKCLUB

A group of readers talk to acclaimed authors about their best known novels in this podcast from BBC Radio 4. Find Bookclub on Stitcher.

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

KIRPA JOSHI!

Almost a third of the food produced globally for human consumption is lost or wasted. The primary reason for this phenomenon is not only the environmental effect, but also the need to protect against food loss and waste.

Our pick:

Sherlock
Created and written by Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss, Sherlock is a modern reimagining of the classic Victorian detective.

APPROPRIATE APPS

Nike training club
An excellent app that can be used to track your progress and set goals.

30 day fitness challenge
A home workout app designed for those looking to fit into that dress that no longer fits or a shirt that could look better without those love handles peeking through.

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

REDUCE FOOD WASTE

KIRPA JOSHI!

Almost a third of the food produced globally for human consumption is lost or wasted. The primary reason for this phenomenon is not only the environmental effect, but also the need to protect against food loss and waste.

Our pick:

Sherlock
Created and written by Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss, Sherlock is a modern reimagining of the classic Victorian detective.
Many foreigners stay put in Nepal

Nepal is home away from home for hundreds of tourists and expats during the pandemic

Sonia Awale
and Marty Logan

Three weeks into the lockdown, foreign embassies in Kathmandu are still trying to fly home the last of their remaining nationals from Nepal, but there are many expatriates who refuse to be repatriated. Since March 24, there have been more than 25 chartered flights flying tourists and expats back to Europe, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Malaysia, Bangladesh and Brazil. But many foreigners have chosen to stay back in Nepal and wait out the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I’ve made my life here for many years and the situation in Canada doesn’t seem better,” says Zachary Barton from Canada who has been propagating permaculture in Nepal since 2003. On the phone from Fikkal Bazar in Ilam, he told us: “In the past 20 years we’ve been through the Maoist war, a revolution, earthquake and blockade. Nepalis are extremely resilient. They’re not making things run for them, not panic buying toilet paper. I feel better being here actually — people deal with things without freaking out.”

On April 14, 341 Canadians were flown out from Kathmandu on Qatar Airways, but for some the $3,000 price tag for a one-way economy ticket to Toronto was not worth it considering uncertain times even back home. The New Zealand consulate also repatriated 25 nationals on 3 April, but twice as many Kiwis have decided to stay on in Kathmandu, Pokhara and other parts of Nepal.

“Canada took too long to repatriate its people and tickets were too expensive,” says 38-year-old Daniel Valdez, an English-language professor in China who came to Nepal after universities there shut down in early January. He adds: “Most of us who chose to stay back agree that people here have been nothing but friendly and understanding to tourists, and I don’t feel unsafe here.”

Indeed, guest houses in Thamel, Pokhara, Bandipur and other tourist spots have offered subsidised room rates and even free food for stranded tourists. Many have posted videos on YouTube full of praise for Nepali hospitality. The Department of Immigration has also said foreigners on tourist visas will not be fined for overstaying when they leave.

Some French and Spanish trekkers who were in the mountains when the lockdown was announced have decided to stay on in Piseang in Mustang. A dozen or so Europeans, Americans and other nationals are said to be chilling out by the lakeside in Pokhara and relaxing in the rustic charm of Bandipur.

A survey of various Kathmandu-based embassies this week showed that about one-third of staff are still in Nepal, but most with families have gone home. Foreigners working for bilateral agencies have kept only essential staff in Nepal.

“I was in India when all of this started happening and got back here by the skin of my teeth on the last day. I was so happy to be back,” says Gloria Jones from Canada who is an advisor at a monastery here. “I have friends and family in Canada and no one’s trying to convince me to go back. I think they’re a little jealous of how happy I am here.”

Desiree Kiran Soeting has been in Nepal for only three years but considers the Himalayan nation more of a home than his native Netherlands, and has decided to stay back helping at the Khagendra New Life Home where he supports 75 people with disabilities.

“While here, at least I can keep people informed, help them stay positive and make sure they have enough funding for food,” says the 41-year-old.

Cesar Monares was invited to train Nepali tennis players preparing for the forthcoming regional championships and the Olympics. He was supposed to travel to Spain and Italy before flying home to Chicago. “Nepal is still one of the safest countries to be in right now and people here have been wonderful. Flying with so many people and with multiple layovers back home to my parents who are 65 is a risk I cannot take,” Monares said from his flat in Satdobato.

British Lester D. Junak is waiting it out in Nepal until she can return to Bangkok. Freelance writer and photographer who previously used to teach at Thammasat University in Thailand spends five months a year in Nepal volunteering at King Chide Monastery in Kagbeni and Pokhara.

“I’m trying to make my time here worldwide, documenting the lockdown and how it has affected people here, which I hope will be useful for the future,” says Junak, who is now living in a guesthouse near Thamel. Graphic designer Tom Cesar from Austria has been volunteering in Tsum Valley since 2014. He is now in Pokhara with few other foreign nationals who have also chosen to stay back.

“There is xenophobia in many parts of the world during this crisis, but Nepal hasn’t had such a problem yet. This disease is no one’s fault, and all of us of different race and colours have to fight it together.”

not leaving on a jet plane: Austin graphic designer Tom Cesar (left) has decided to ride out the COVID-19 storm in Pokhara. Cesar Monares (right) was training Nepal’s tennis team for the Olympics when the lockdown was announced and says he would rather stay in Kathmandu than fly back to Chicago or Spain.
Wildflower app celebrates

Nepal is famous for its spectacular scenery of mountains and plains, rich cultural heritage. But no less wondrous is the beautiful flora that adorns it. It is the flowering season, and some of us lucky to be up in the mountains during the lockdown will wonder what that gorgeous rhododendron is called. Or what the story is behind that delicate carnivorous plant with leaves like the hands of the Buddha? How about the medicinal use of the lovely blue gentian?

Now, the answers are all within reach – literally in the palm of your hand, and it does not add a single ounce to your backpack.

The Flora of Nepal Project and the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation have partnered with vegetation ecologist Elizabeth Bye and High Country Apps to produce Wildflowers of Mount Everest, the first-ever wildflower identification app for Nepal.

Nepal’s flora is unique in the world, being specially adapted to survive at high elevations, through cold winters and wet summer monsoons. In spring, luxuriant displays of rhododendrons and primroses cover whole mountain sides with colour. Summer brings the beautiful and sometimes bizarre blossoms, such as Hippophae rhamnoides with its white-hairy pillars topped by clusters of golden flowers. The autumn trekking season is painted with the blue of gentians and the bright red and yellow autumn foliage of the shrubs and trees.

Wildflowers of Mount Everest, designed for iOS and Android devices, provides more than 2500 beautifully detailed images and over 1,000 local names for 587 wildflowers, shrubs, and trees that grow on the slopes and trails of Sagarmatha National Park and Buffer Zone. Many of the plants may also be found at upper elevations throughout Nepal. Wildflowers of Mount Everest offers easy-to-use graphical keys, botanical help, detailed descriptions, and plant lore to identify and explore Nepal’s remarkable flora. The app does not require a cellular or internet connection to run, so it can be used anywhere, whether on the trail or in your home. Users can create a list of the plants they see each day and email it to themselves or their friends.

“The app is suitable for students, educators, scientists, guides, and visitors interested in the beautiful wildflowers of Nepal’s Mount Everest region. It will be

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Nepal’s flora

a useful tool for park rangers and
scouts as they work to conserve the
park’s floral diversity,” says Dipak
Prakash Shrestha, Director General
of the Department of National Parks
and Wildlife Conservation.

Designed for people who are
complete beginners as well as
experienced botanists, Wildflowers
of Mount Everest will appeal to
anyone who wants to identify or
learn about plants in eastern Nepal.

Byers has spent much of
the last 40 years identifying,
photographing, and cataloging
species of subalpine and alpine
flora of eastern Nepal. “Two things
make this field guide special,” he
says. “First, the Sherpa elders who
have graciously shared plant lore
and stories to give us a glimpse of
the cultural importance of each
species. Second, the botanical
experts from all over the world who
have volunteered their knowledge
to help us understand the unique
and specially adapted plants of
Mount Everest.”

The Wildflowers of Mount
Everest app is available from the
Apple App Store and Google
Play Store for $7.99. The authors
will periodically update the app
to include new species and other
content at no additional charge to
users.

Elizabeth A. Byers, a vegetation ecologist
studying rare plant species and climate
change vulnerability of plants, has been
studying and photographing the flora of
Nepal for nearly 45 years.

http://www.tightcoupsy.com/
WildflowersOfMountEverest.jpg

Tourism down? Use the
pause to learn about flowers.

Tourists and trekkers will be
flocking back to Nepal before long. For
guide, now is the time to
learn new skills and increase
their confidence and knowledge
so that when business picks up
again, clients will rave about you
and about their experience in Nepal.

An app, called Nepal Flowers and
Wildflowers of Mount Everest, is
now available for both Android
and iOS devices. The app is
available for free throughout
the mountains, but also Nepal
beautiful flowers.

Flora of Nepal Project

The Flora of Nepal Project is an
international partnership
tackling a knowledge gap
identified in Nepal’s National
Biodiversity Action Plan. The project
is coordinated by the
Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh in
partnership with the Nepal Academy
of Science and Technology, the
Government of Nepal’s Department
of Plant Resources, Tribhuvan
University’s Central Department
of Botany and The University of
Tokyo, and draws on the
expertise of taxonomic experts
together worldwide.

The Flora of Nepal Project is
supported by the
High Country Apps, which is
dedicated to developing
applications that deliver high quality
natural history information with
an initiative, easy-to-use interface.
It partners with expert
taxonomists and photografer to
provide information of the highest
current in its mobile field guides.

High Country Apps will donate
a portion of the proceeds of
Flora of Nepal to support field
costs of students at buy field
equipment to allow them to
collaborate in botanical studies.

Link to High Country Apps:
http://www.tightcoupsy.com/WildflowersOfMountEverest.jpg

Direct link to the app in store:


NEPAL: WHEREVER YOU ARE.

Nepal Times
Living with cancer during the coronavirus

A young cancer survivor describes the ordeal of treatment during Nepal’s lockdown

Rinzin Norbu Lama

I felt like a shock wave. The world stopped, leaving me completely aloe and lost. It was the morning of the 13 June, 2017. “Your liver has developed lesions, the markings of a cancer,” said the doctor in a solemn voice. “You will need a liver transplant if you want to survive.”

Finally, I could speak. “How much would that cost?” I asked. He answered my question with a question of his own: “Do you have 40 lakhs?”

I am from the Tamang Valley, and the first generation from my family that went to school. I have always wanted to be an agent of positive change in my society and country, and to build a better future for the sacred valley which I was born.

During 2015 earthquake, I helped coordinate rescue and relief services and provided essential supplies to remote Tamang communities. That is why in 2017 I was nominated by the Nepa Shakti Party as a candidate for mayor of my rural municipality in Tamang. Campaigning was not easy, I had to walk up and down the mountains to meet constituents, we ate whatever we found, and slept wherever we could.

For years, I made a living guiding trekkers through the remote mountains of my boyhood. They would often be out of breath climbing the high trails, but I was never exhausted myself. The campaigning should have made me more fit, but I felt strangely weak. Something was not right with my body.

After the elections, I walked four days to reach Kathmandu to see my doctor. I had to find a matching organ donor. And where would I find Rs 4 million?

From Kathmandu, the news of the diagnostic spread through my village. A young monk from Tamang sent me a message, offering to donate a lobe of his liver. With his act of kindness came hope, encouragement, and a raised possibility that I might make it.

Unfortunately, he was not a compatible match. A friend offered. Then another. Indeed, I found out there are many kind and selfless people out there, and felt honoured and grateful for their boddhichitta compassion.

But I learnt that Nepal’s law only allowed close relatives to be organ donors. This made it next to impossible for me to have a life-saving operation in our own country. But then a miracle happened. My own brother, a Buddhist Lama came forward as a donor and he was a match. This man with a pure and compassionate heart offered to save my life by giving me a part of his.

Given the stage of my disease, it was not possible to have the surgery in Nepal, and I had to go to India. But first, I had to make it through all the government red tape. It took three weeks to first process my citizenship, then prepare and present documents to the district office and to the health department. I had to obtain a no objection letter from the medical board, and then collect documents from the Ministry of Health, Foreign Affairs, and the Embassy of Nepal in New Delhi. In the meantime, my liver was deteriorating.

Then there was the issue of money. My godfather and mother, who once funded my education in Kathmandu, stepped in once more to raise the money to pay for my medical costs. Through my go-fund-me campaign, people from all walks of life supported me emotionally and financially, making my transplant possible. It reinforced my belief that life is all about love and compassion.

I live near Swyambhunath and I can feel the spiritual energy of the shrine every day. While in India for the treatment, I took the 10 hour journey to Thalma and met His Holiness the Dalai Lama. His words: “I will bless you and pray for you” filled my spirit, making me feel physically stronger. His personal Anochi gave me traditional medicine using Sowa-Rigpa.

It has been a year and a half now since my transplant. But in March, I had symptoms of jaundice which meant my liver was not functioning as it should. On the day after Nepal went into COVID-19 lockdown, I was admitted to Teaching Hospital.

I was under high immune suppression medication, but was kept in the Emergency Room for six hours, at risk of opportunistic infections. In the evening they sent me to a COVID-19 isolation room even though I had not been tested, and had no fever or symptoms. A COVID-19 patient was nearby, coughing.

After complaining to the nurses and doctor-in-charge, they finally moved me to a general ward. There is no teamwork in this hospital, the level of care was poor and atrocious. The patient next to me had TB. Soon enough, I contracted pneumonia, I was rescued from the hospital just in time and am recovering at the home of my American godparents near Kathmandu.

Among the many lessons I have learnt from my ordeal is that Nepal needs to revise its laws. Many patients and their families are already struggling with financial stress due to lack of money, the least the state can do is make the paperwork easier.

The law about limiting organ donors to immediate family members is made to prevent commercial organ trade, but what if there are willing donors who are not family, like in my case?

It is also the responsibility of the state to make transplants affordable and accessible. I wish Prime Minister K P Oli a speedy recovery from his second kidney transplant, but he may not be aware of how difficult it is to navigate the bureaucracy for a transplant in this country. I do not want others to go through what I did. The disease is bad enough, but for ordinary people like us everything is made much more difficult.

The government needs to amend its laws and policies to allow affordable transplants in state-of-the-art facilities, so Nepalis do not have to go abroad. It would save costs for patient families, and prevent huge amounts of money from leaving the country.

There are many who emotionally, physically and financially helped me through this process, and I cannot thank them enough. Especially my soulmate Chadi, who left her job and family to be with me in Delhi. I pray for the long life of all these incredibly generous people. They have given me a ray of hope as an experience and explored the importance of life. There is no beginning and no end. Our body is a host and the soul lives on forever.

Rinzin Norbu Lama is a documentary filmmaker and youth politician from Tamang Valley Nepal.