Elected representatives of both houses of Parliament underwent swab tests for COVID-19 a day ahead of the first sitting of the Budget Session on Friday. But their real test will be to how to insulate the federal legislature from infighting within the ruling party during a national emergency.

As the country grapples with a public health and economic crisis, the federal budget will have to lay out priorities and offer ways to rescue the country from massive job loss, fall in tax revenue, reduction in agricultural production, and further delays in large infrastructure projects.

Finance Minister Yubraj Khatiwada hinted at what his priorities would be in the list of sectors which he said during a press briefing on Wednesday would be allowed to partially reopen during the lockdown, even though the Cabinet extended it till 18 May. These include food production, processing and transport, construction, industries and development projects. Precautions and physical distancing restrictions still apply.

Overshadowing the Parliament opening Friday is the power struggle within the ruling NCP. The cuts that came into effect last week ahead of a critical secretariat meeting is now in tatters with the two main factions seemingly at each others’ throats again.

Prime Minister KP Oli walked out of a NCP Secretariat meeting Tuesday after party chief Pushpa Kamal Dahal asked for the party’s Standing Committee meeting to be convened, but returned an hour later to say there had not been adequate discussion on the agenda.

The crisis in the party is not over; it has just been postponed for now, and it is not likely to be resolved soon because there is just too much bad blood between the top nine members in the party secretariat stemming from animosities that go back decades.

“The party has lost all its ideological bearings, it has no principles left, it is all about a power struggle for positions within the party,” sums up political analyst Shyam Shrestha, who says it is unaccountable for the infighting to go on at a time of such grave national crisis.

Finance Minister Yubraj Khatiwada is a staunch Oli loyalist, and has said that this year’s budget will have to focus on national recovery, and ensure that the Nepalis who are most vulnerable are provided for.

Critics say the Cabinet should have endorsed the proposal to continue with the lockdown in areas at high risk from community spread of coronavirus like Parsa, Nepalgunj and Udayapur, and a partial lifting of restrictions in areas where there have been no infections for four weeks.

**Unlock the Country in Phases**

PAGE 2
Unlocked the country in phases

Nepal was the first country in the South Asia to clamp a stay-at-home order on 24 March, after the second confirmed case. It was a bold move, sacrificing the economy to save lives.

That proactive decision to enforce a nationwide lockdown bought us time to prepare for possible outbreaks, and to prevent a peak. It worked well, and the lifted curfew deserves credit for daring to take the step.

Nepal has a relatively low number of confirmed cases, and no reported deaths so far.

However, public health experts interviewed for this editorial tell us there is no way of knowing what the real extent of infection is. They are concerned that the COVID-19 pandemic has killed people in Nepal, but they may not have died at home because of a lack of hospital beds, or they succumbed to co-morbidities like tuberculosis or pre-existing pneumonia.

The detection of clusters of 16 new cases in Nepalgunj and 17 people in one family in Panchase this week brought the total number of cases to 93. This number is sure to grow, but it is a simple message that there is no longer enough testing being done. The cases were mostly symptomatic, and only came about because of contact tracing a contact at risk.

As has been said, the lockdown was a balance between saving lives and saving livelihoods. But now after 6 weeks, it is a balance between saving lives, and saving freedom. Whose lives are we saving to keep the prosperity of the nation from the coronavirus as well as save it from poverty, hunger and disease.

Wednesday’s Cabinet decision to relax some restrictions and kickstart the economy, while welcome, lacks clarity. The provisions are vague, it is not clear what is allowed and what is not, and who will monitor the rules on distancing and conduct of the factories, offices and industries that open. For example, will small eateries and sweets stalls (hot spots like Nepalgunj) or duka-paath which allowed to operate or not? Why are the red zones not designated? At times like these rules need to be clearly clear without any ambiguity so they can be enforced.

Still, this is better than continuing with a lockdown nationwide lockdown, lockdown, lockdowns, lockdowns...and lockdowns are already people’s livelihoods even worse and some are doing more than just the basics to earn a living.

The economy is not going to return to normal after the lockdown because of the ongoing pandemic. The government needs to provide more support to the sectors that have been hit the hardest, like tourism and hospitality.

Nepal’s Environment Impact Non-Assessments

In Nepal, environmental impact assessments are a rarity, and those that do exist are often poorly executed. This is because of a lack of understanding of the importance of environmental impact assessments and the need for proper monitoring and compliance.

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Nepal in a state of lockdown due to COVID-19 lockdown

The government has announced a complete lockdown in the country to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Through the period of lockdown, schools and colleges have been closed, and movement restrictions have been imposed to control the spread of the virus.

Despite this lockdown, the country has been experiencing a significant increase in cases, with over 400 new cases reported daily. The government continues to work closely with international organizations and experts to provide support and guidance.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government has taken several measures to control the spread of the virus. These include the implementation of travel restrictions, the closure of schools and Colleges, and the imposition of movement restrictions.

During the lockdown, the government has been working closely with international organizations and experts to provide support and guidance. This includes providing medical equipment and supplies, as well as implementing quarantine and isolation measures.

The government has also been working to ensure that essential services such as healthcare and food distribution remain available.

Despite these efforts, the pandemic continues to pose a significant challenge to the country. The government remains committed to working closely with international organizations and experts to control the spread of the virus and protect the health and safety of its citizens.
Nepal’s future normal
Nepalis have come up with ways to cope with the COVID-19 because we are inherently laid back

Who would have thought that a time would come when the price of oil would be below zero, once mighty countries would crumble, and humankind would be brought to its knees? And all because of a microscopic strand of SNA.

The contagion has provided individuals, communities, countries and the world a chance to mend our ways, to live more frugally and sustainably, to be humble about our inventions and gadgets, and realize how epistemological our preoccupations are in the eternity that is nature.

We naturally appreciate doctors and nurses knowing that we may have to see them some day, but we need farmers to grow our food in all seasons. One way to change our attitude would be to bless our grandchildren to become farmers. Not just engineers and doctors. The other way to transform ourselves and the nation would be to go back to the village and change our attitude towards the land and natural resources.

There is cash in the city, but not much else. This crisis has woken up urban consumer to the fact that there are producers of food and essentials in a supply chain that they took for granted. The choices for the pizza that was home delivered came from Jiri or Langtang or even Gujjar’s Amul cooperative. The walnut is from Jumla, the large beans from Khumbu, the meats is from the hills, and rice from the Tarai.

This pandemic gives us a chance to identify where the supply chain is weak and what we need to do to secure them for the future. Not just for a future crisis, but for a future normal. Where is food we consume grown? How do we export for its import? What is the real cost of producing 30? Where are the warehouses, the cold stores, aggregation, processing plants, and management of wholesale markets? Who are the ‘middle men’ who control the supply and prices?

The world is now learning from people like Kamal Tuladhar that News traders who went to Lhasa 150 years ago had to be quarantined for 14 days upon their return to Kathmandu because of the diseases that they might have brought back. The ancestors survived famines and knew the value of water and dry and fermented food for difficult times. Chamdrak, saini, churpi, achar, tama, kheera and beans were literally life savers during food shortages following epidemics. We need to protect these recipes, and the processes to make them. Food does not grow in a supermarket. Milk does not come out of a carton. Chicken does not live in a freezer.

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo has become wildly popular for daily press show where he makes his warnings with hope. He appeals to people to take this opportunity to re-organize the future. This applies as much to New Yorkers as to Nepalis: every crisis provides us a chance to do things differently. At least one member of the family henceforth should be a farmer. Or a barber. The butcher, the grocery store keeper, the dairy and bakery have all become mini-Amazons overnight, doing home delivery. This resilience in the Nepali is what makes us confident about the future. Classes on Zoom, homework and grades online, and even virtual heritage tours have become normal in just one month. If we can bridge the bandwidth divide of mobile telephony so the digital economy is accessible and affordable, we can leapfrog into a future normal.

Once again, missing in this future is government. You, we get electricity and (occasionally) water, but little else. The way the government distributed relief to the needy was a farce, no one believes the numbers they claim to have served. Volunteer groups did a much better job. The way the district administration gave out passes for ‘essential service providers’ and ‘emergencies’ is a joke. The opening of supermarkets while arresting the neighbourhood Mom and Pop store owners has once again reminded Nepalis that some are still more equal than others. After all these years of capacity building, the government has only built its capacity for kickbacks, and increased dependency on outsiders. It fumbled procurement to test kits and equipment, ordered the wrong kind of kits and ordered with businesses to inflate the cost. Once more, citizens rose to the rescue by improving PPEs in Nepal from plastic sheets and transparencies. But just count the number of ICU beds in the country, minus the number of politicians and you can decide for yourself why you need to self isolate.

A theory says that if you want an easy solution to problems, find a lazy person for the job. It makes sense: work from home, online orders, online payments— they all look like innovations that have been invented by the lazy for the lazy. It could be that Nepalis have come up with ways to cope with the COVID-19 because we are inherently laid back. If that is the case we will survive the post-pandemic world as well.

Interests have flourished in the age of physical distancing, artists, writers, poets, chefs have been spending the most creative works of their lives. Cooking, baking, design work will all thrive in the future normal. The fact that we all wear masks means we do not need to smile at anyone we do not want to, and thank goodness those mussy handshakes and sweat-kissed hugs are a thing of the past.

And, oh yes, the rains have come. Happy farming.

Anil Chitrakar writes the fortnightly column ‘Bye’ for Nepal Times, and is President of Tribhuvan University.
The strangest Anzac Day ever

Marking the WWI anniversary in Kathmandu through earthquakes and lockdowns

Under a grey scud, the four of us stood for the Last Post on an expansive embankment above the Bagmati at Kathmandu, as the Nepali Army and British Gurkhas saluted smartly in their uniform, whilst the ambassador and I bowed our heads. The red poppies in all our lapels symbolised remembrance and acknowledgment of the ultimate sacrifice by all men and women in the armed forces during times of conflict.

It must have been the strangest Anzac Day commemoration ever. The grey, still soggy from yesterday’s rain, was dotted with crimson rose petals fallen from the luminous red awnings. In turn we had laid them between the two flagpoles, on the anniversary of the First World War Gallipoli landing by the ANZACs (Australia and New Zealand Army Corps), in remembrance of the dreadful battlefield losses that ensued on both sides and from enemy action. After the one minute silence in the deserted garden, the Kevass was trumpeted on an embassy iPhone.

Since services began on 23 April 1916, this year 2020 was the first Anzac Day ever that the Australians and New Zealanders were not able to gather nationwide to mark the anniversary, due to the social isolation battle against COVID-19. Instead, digitally shared messages urged individual calls to action—messages of solidarity displayed in home windows, the laying of virtual poppies at the online cenotaph, and alone standing at dawn in driveways, gates and front doors to mark the moment.

Every year the Australian Embassy hosts an Anzac Day service in Kathmandu, echoing solemn sunrise ceremonies all over Australia and New Zealand, with many young people as well as old brought together to mark this most important joint national occasion. Normally the garden is thronged with hundreds of Australians, New Zealanders, Nepal and the International community, well-worn by Nepali and Gurkha buglers and bagpipers, and followed by a slap-up Anzac breakfast that is part of the attraction.

Last year as well as long term residents and tourists, several mountaineers joined us including Gay Cattan, Robert Melt Anderson and a couple of Sir Edmund Hillary’s grandchildren — Russell Brice was absent, recovering from his fall from a rooftop restaurant. This year there are no expeditions and the mountains are closed to trekkers. Ambassador Pete and Emma boiled the kettle for coffee and offered us homemade Anzac biscuits in their empty house.

I’m not sure when the Australian-hosted Anzac Day tradition began in Nepal, but it must have been around 1950 when the embassy moved to its current compound in Baneshwor. Elizabeth Hawley regularly attended as New Zealand Honorary Consul before we had any. With no communication she admitted to having delivered the exact same Anzac address every year, claiming no one ever noticed. Although diplomatic relations between Nepal and Australia have existed since 1960, it was ambassador Diane Johnstone, affectionately known as ‘Call-mo’, who set up in Kathmandu from a cozy rented house in Thapathali in 1986 with a guitar-playing husband. The succession of early incumbents in the representations role were marked by life-changing events during their tenure—separation, divorce, engagement and marriage— including one emotional liaison with a Bollywood superstar that ended in tears. Over the decades, the mission has achieved many milestones in humanitarian and development aid, technical assistance and trade support.

The popularity of Australian wine in Kathmandu dates back to one inspired ambassador who offered to import cases for his diplomatic friends — and before the days of wine being available in the open market, he had many friends. Eventually both governments noticed when the embassy wine order exceeded that of much larger missions in London and Paris, dryly pointing out that every official Australian in Nepal must have been consuming about three dozen bottles a day. Aussie producers had the last laugh however, with their brands still established today as Nepal’s wine of choice amongst the chattering classes.

We wanted to do something special to commemorate the 100-year anniversary of Gallipoli on 23 April 2015. Thousands were gathering in Turkey, including the Prince of Wales and a ministerial delegation from Nepal. The UK had observed the outbreak of World War I with a dramatic moist-fu of 888,246 ceramic poppies around the Tower of London, representing all British and Commonwealth fatalities.

Now to achieve a similarly grand gesture, the Gurkha commander conspired with us to ship 120,000 poppies from the British Legion in London, the idea being to carpet the grounds of the Australian ambassador’s house with a sea of scarlet. Each paper poppy raised at least a pound each, but thanks to British Gurkha generosity and skilled negotiations, boxes of poppies were delivered to the Australians with the Kiwi consulate paying only a nominal amount. At the last minute, however, the ambassador’s wife vetoed the idea on the grounds that it would be hard to tidy up afterwards and make a mess of the garden.

The surplus of poppies, plenty for future events, was soon swatted from minds on that unforgettable 23 April five years ago. I had just returned home to Budhanilkantha, kicked off my shoes and settled on the terrace with my laptop watch when at 11:56 the earthquake struck. Terracotta tiles rained off the roof, my car careened violently beneath the magnolia tree, and in the distance far below a pall of dust rose eerily above the sacked city.

No doubt, we will remember exactly where we were and how we felt at that fateful moment on Anzac Day 2015, when our lives were rocked forever.
Nepal’s Muslims face stigma after COVID-19 tests

Members of the minority bear ostracisation after contact tracing shows spread in the community

Alisha Sijapati

A skaf Shah looked-formed as he knelt in prayer inside the Al Sadaqat Masjid in Kathmandu this week. The mosque would have been crowded and noisy during the holy month of Ramzan. But today, the only sound was the waaz prayer recited five times a day, which echoed through the empty chamber. Since Nepal’s strict nationwide lockdown went into effect on 24 March, the country has tested 99 people with COVID-19. Since many of them are from the Muslim community, the religious minority has been singled out for contact tracing especially in Nepalgunj, Birganj, Khatuwa and Udayapur where the cases were detected.

Ashraf is lost for words. “What a world are we living in now,” he says. Looking seyewad.

Ramadan has always meant a time of courtesies, celebration with friends and family, the coming together in the evenings to break fast. This year, there is anxiety and fear among Nepal’s Muslims because of fear that they will be blamed for the virus. Since many Nepalis watch Indian TV channels, some of the stigmatisation is due to the Indian media scapegoating Muslims for the spread of the virus.

“Muslims in Nepal are a minority and have peacefully coexisted without any conflict for centuries, but now I dread the future, and the rise of hate and intolerance spreading from across the border,” says Abdul Shami, head of Patel Juin Majidi.

As of April, 15 men from the Talibagh Juinati living in a mosque in Udayapur tested positive for coronavirus, and 15 of them were Indian nationals who had come for religious instruction. The district has been virtually sealed off since then, and there has been constant tracing of people who had been in close proximity with them.

Najmul Niam Khan, a rights activist in Udayapur, is worried. Although a majority of those who tested positive were Indians, locals have virtually ostracised the Muslim community there, she says.

“They try to avoid conversation and just look the other way when they see us passing by on the road, neighbours avoid any sort of conversation with us even from distance. Sometimes eyes speak louder than words,” she told us on the phone.

While world has been hit hard by the global pandemic, in India and Nepal it is mainly the Muslims in particular who find themselves bearing the brunt — largely because of the social media and tv networks stigmatising them. During such a crisis, Ramzan would have been a time for solidarity and bringing the community together, but even that is not possible because of the lockdown.

“We work hard and save money for 12 months so that we can lay out the best meals for ourselves for Ramzan,” says Shami, who blames coverage of the ‘Corona bomb’ on Indian TV for the stigma. The leaked Indian security memo naming Nepali national Jallim Mubarak for being involved in a conspiracy to infilitrate coronavirus-infected individuals to spread the pandemic in India was widely broadcast on Indian TV channels.

The stereotyping has spread faster than the virus itself to Kathmandu Valley. Last month, social media posts cited 13 Indians who were to travel to Nepal for a religious assembly being moved from a mosque in Smalik to Godavari for quarantine. When locals found out, they came out to oppose it.

“There are facts and there are rumours. Spreading misinformation stigmatises entire communities, making the world even more miserable than it is already,” Shami says.

Rapid Diagnostic Tests. They were all negative. But the fear among Muslims heightened this week after nine among 60 at a mosque in Nepalgunj tested PCR positive.

Says Abdul Shami, head of Patel Juin Majidi: “After these cases, whenever there is news of confirmed cases going up, people are always asking were they Muslims? When they caught in a mosque?” The media highlights Muslim positives, they never says a Hindu or a Christian tested positive.”

Smaller, quieter meals

Ramadan is not the same for 64-year-old Jesse Ramzan, who has been volunteering as a head chef during the month-long festival at the Kathmandu Majidi since 1983, preparing meals for more than 300 people every day during Ramzan.

This time Jesse is confined to his home in
Books Beyond Borders
'Books Beyond Borders' will kick off its next book reading, 'World Hijab Day'. The Aire
Aventur joins facilitators and other book
lovers from India and South Asia in sharing
your thoughts via Google Classroom. Goq
Quarters cafe's Facebook page and book
your slot by 8 May.

Coffee queries
A way virtually to connect with entrepreneurs
coming together to share their experiences,
expectations, and energies together.
In response to the ongoing pandemic, join
Every Monday morning,
17 May, 9am-10am

Photography contest
Be a part of the Nari Nepal photography contest,
and join in to share your picture of a place,
people, or things that represent your
surroundings in Nepal. For details, visit their Facebook page.

Astronomy webinar
Organized by the Nepali Astronomical Society, architect and amateur astronomer
Debesh Rai will share his experiences about
astrophotography in Nepal. Register for the meeting
on Tuesday, 19 May, 5pm

Going places together - qatarairways.com

The Central McKenzie is being followed by one through
the other, bringing in a rush a possible lockdown for
this time of year. The McKenzie, sister of the past few
weeks is expected to pick up in the western world with
patterns of clear mornings and afternoon built-up with
the thunderstorms. The maximum temperature has also
been 5 degrees below average, but will start rising into
the 20s by the end of next week.

One World Theatre
A few One World's plays are now on your
YouTube channel. Watch the play, The Fight,
and adapt a portion of the Russian play Three Sisters

Global film festival
20 film festivals have joined together to
stream movies from on YouTube as the We
Are One: A Global Film Festival. Featuring
comparisons curated by the Berlin, Cannes,
Venice, Sundance, Toronto, and Tribeca film
festivals, among others.

JSTOR
Need resources for your next project or research?
JSTOR has hundreds of e-books and academic journals on its platform as open
access content.

Quarantine Dining

The Workshop Eatery
Get your sweet and savoury treats. The
Workshop Eatery's yummy doughnuts
and bagels. Go to their Facebook page to
see their menu.
Delivery: 11am-6pm

Sapporo Japanese Restaurant
Enjoy authentic Japanese Cuisine freshly
made just for you, from the comfort of
your home. Order through Facebook
Delivering: 11am-9pm

Belgian Waffles
Get hand-rolled waffles delivered to your
doorstep from The Belgian Waffles Co. Call
them, or order through Foodmandu.
Delivering: 3pm-4pm, 967108194

Bride's Cafe
Order your favourite meal from
Erica Cal's Soulfood menu through
Soulfood or Facebook.
Delivering: 12pm-7pm

Trisara
Head on to Trisara's Facebook page for their
speciality curated menu and get everything
from pizza to Indian cuisine to baked goods
delivered to you.
Delivery: 10am-8pm, 070 8473500
Nepal grapples with bringing workers home

Government needs to be better prepared for the expected influx of thousands of its workers from the Gulf and Malaysia

Upasana Khadka

On 5 May, migrant workers repatriated at the gates of the Nepal Embassy in Abu Dhabi even before office hours. The Sharanath Gab Company in Sharjah had cancelled their contracts, and they had traveled 280km to seek help.

The UAE-based Nepal Association (NENA) is helping, but the workers are crammed into one apartment waiting to be sent home. Nabin Sen from the NENA says the workers are being looked after until they are repatriated, but he adds: “We will have to think about who will bear the cost of their return tickets once they are allowed to travel back.”

On Tuesday, the Embassy booked a bus to take the workers back to Sharjah. One of them has even posted a letter from the Embassy assuring them of their priority in future repatriation flights as the profile picture on Facebook, and says: “The letter has at least boosted our morale.”

Back in Kathmandu, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Labour Ministry have assumed Nepalis stranded abroad that a repatriation strategy is being planned, but there are no details. Embassies have started collecting data of those who wish to return from the Gulf and Malaysia. The government has extended the ban on international flights till 31 May.

The Foreign Employment Board estimates that over 120,000 workers from the Gulf and Malaysia will need to be repatriated immediately due to job loss, contract completion, because they are part of amnesty programs. These are 3,500 undocumented Nepali workers who have taken up an amnesty and free repatriation offer from the Kuwait government, and they are resting in packed makeshift dorms. In the UAE, 10,000 Nepalis have signed up with the Nepal Embassy in just the past week to return. For the Nepal government, prioritizing countries from where to repatriate workers first and selecting the ‘most vulnerable’ among them is not going to be easy.

There are also questions about whether the returns will be quarantined in Kathmandu after they arrive, or in their home municipalities. Nepal is already facing a shortage of test kits owing to delays in procurement.

Experience has shown workers may also have to deal with stigmatisation when they get home.

The Filipinos had started repatriating 2,000 of its workers daily, but on 3 May it had to cancel pre-scheduled flights for a week after running out of 14-day quarantine space in Manila. Pakistan has begun repatriating 7,000 citizens a week, but is also constrained by quarantine capacity. There are 100,000 Pakistanis stranded across 88 countries and 15,000 have been repatriated so far. Last week, 103 out of the 208 passengers in an Emirates flight from Abu Dhabi to Islamabad tested positive for the virus.

India is starting repatriation flights on Thursday for its nationals from 12 countries including, the Gulf, Malaysia and the United States, and is also using naval ships to bring them home. The plan is to bring back up to 2,500 workers a day to 16 airports in India where they will be quarantined for 14 days.

For the time being, Nepal will have to ask governments to take care of its workers before it can bring them back. The government could rectify a part of its COVID-19 response budget to Nepal’s embassies to address the needs of the stranded migrant workers. Otherwise, it may have a humanitarian disaster on its hands.

Not everyone wants to return

The Nepal government has started registering its migrant workers who want to return home, but there are many who have decided not to go back despite the uncertainties.

Nepali embassies in the UAE and Qatar are registering migrant workers intending to go home, while the embassy in Kuwait has completed the paperwork of 3,500 returning undocumented Nepalis.

Despite the double whammy of the health and economic crises, many of the 1.5 million Nepalis there seem to have decided to ride it out, and hold onto their jobs. “My duty has not been interrupted by the crisis and the lockdown,” said Surya, a Qatar-based Nepali telecom worker.

On and his security guard brother in Malaysia do not want to return either. “There is no way I can earn Rs70,000 a month in Nepal which is what I make here,” said Om, who works in a rubber gloves factory.

Rita who works in a resort in the Maldives has decided to stay put. “Tourism is in a crisis but it will resume sooner or later,” she says. “There is no guarantee things will be better in Nepal.”

Jobs abroad, although precarious, offer a steady flow of remittances that the families back in Nepal rely on even more during the lockdown. Many Nepalis are now in a wait-and-watch mode, and their future depends on how quickly economic activity resumes.

Back in Nepal, there are many who had come home on leave, and cannot get back to their jobs. A Nepali couple who have been in Kuwait for seven years had come home for holidays on 28 February, but have been trapped in Kattmandu since.

“I work in a remittance company and my husband works in Starbucks. We both want to return to our jobs,” says the wife. “We are hoping we can go back in the evacuation flights bringing Nepalis back.”
Pandemic impact on aviation may kill Nijigad

How the proposed airport’s environmental impact assessment green-washed the real cost of Nepal’s mega project

Sonia Awale

Nepal’s proposed new international airport has been mired in controversy ever since it was first proposed three decades ago, but what may finally put the plan to rest is the collapse of the aviation industry due to the global pandemic.

The proposed billion mega project in Nijigad, 75km south of Kathmandu, has been criticized for being an expensive white elephant and for threatening the last remaining tropical forest in the eastern Tana. But it is the long-term impact of the COVID-19 crisis on tourism and the international aviation industry that could kill it once and for all.

“Even before this global pandemic, awareness about climate change was starting to reduce air travel which means the need for huge new airport projects will have to be rethought,” climate specialist Emanul Aryal.

On paper, the Nijigad airport is the perfect alternative to the country’s only international gateway in Kathmandu, which had reached saturation point long before everything came to a standstill last March.

Construction on the runway meant plans went on hold, some having to divert to Indian airports after running out of fuel. Kathmandu’s air pollution reduced visibility, and added an extra hazard to an already challenging approach over the mountains.

Proponents of Nijigad airport which includes some enlightened state officials and the politicians said the airport would be a catalyst to pump Nepal’s economic growth into the future. They said distance was not an issue because the proposed expressway would cut travel time to Kathmandu to one hour.

They also played down the environmental concerns, saying some trees would be sacrificed for infrastructure development, and cited the 2019 Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report that gave the project green light.

However, the veracity of that EIA itself has been questioned because it failed to even acknowledge the impact of the falling of 24 million tonnes of boulders from a jungle that is habitat of over 500 plants, birds and animal species.

Even before the COVID-19 crisis, the Supreme Court in January issued a stay order on construction of the airport when a group of lawyers filed a public Interest Litigation citing what they said was a fraudulent EIA. Further hearings have been on hold due to the lockdown.

But more than the environmental concerns, criticism of Nijigad is on economic ground and, even if it is needed, for expediting alternatives. The project could easily be shifted to Simara without encroaching forests. Another alternative would be Murtiya of Sindhuli district which is 39km to the east of Nijigad and would require clearing only 2,700 hectares of newly-enslaved crops. The EIA ignores both alternatives.

A pre-feasibility study in 1997 was shelved because of the Maoist war. In 2008, the government decided to revive the project under a Build Own Operate and Transfer model, and in 2010 contracted the South Korean firm Landmark International to conduct a feasibility study.

But the company was not paid and its report in 2011 was never made public. Yet in 2016 the government went ahead and conducted a company specializing in hydropower projects to prepare an EIA.

Critics say that EIA is a cut-and-paste job that has beat science to make it sound like there is no alternative to Nijigad. It plays down the destruction of nature and long-term impact on biodiversity.

“EIA’s should be scientific, and must have a cost-benefit analysis and assess inter-generational equity. But the Nijigad EIA is riddled with logical and technical errors and is based on assumptions at best,” says Sanjay Adhikari of the group Pro Public that filed the writ at the Supreme Court.

Ironically, it looks like the government signed MoU with the Army even before the EIA was passed. The EIA was just a formality.

But the EIA is also based on a pre-feasibility study conducted two decades ago, rendering it obsolete. There is evidence that entire paragraphs of the EIA have been plagiarized from the Upper Tamakoshi Hydropower report, and mentions plant and animal species found at high altitudes, and not in the Tana.

The EIA does admit that the airport at Nijigad will ‘cause an imbalance’ in biodiversity, but does not mention any mitigation measures.

“Clearing the forest will destroy a crucial migration corridor for endangered wildlife and birds, disrupts the buffer zone of the Parka Wildlife Reserve, and removes vegetation that exchanges groundwater for farms in the Taran and India.”

The sound pollution from aircraft will also disturb wildlife in nearby forests.

None of this is discussed in any great detail in the EIA. Nor is the feared ‘snow island’ that flies across the project area become raging torrents in the monsoon season.

“The site chosen for the airport has seen a change in weather patterns with tormen, cloudbursts and floods, and the Nijigad project is right in the middle of it,” says activist Singh Shrestha.

The COVID-19 pandemic has once again reinforced the crucial relationship between the loss of biodiversity, new emerging diseases and the climate change.

Elsewhere in the world, large airport expansions projects have been scuppered due to their ecological costs. In fact, questions were asked in the Swiss parliament after Zurich Airport International AG was shortlisted for developing and operating Nijigad.

“From the perspective of climate change, we have seen new serious doubts if European countries would allow their aircraft to land in Nijigad knowing its environmental cost,” says Shrestha.

In Nijigad, local seminarians and squatters have already started clearing the forests in anticipation of the project going ahead, giving an indication of what the future holds in store for the three EIA’s note that the government does not care if the airport is feasible, they are only interested in giving commercial concessions and construction contracts.

The Nijigad International Airport’s proposed two runways will accommodate up to 60 million passengers annually – six times more than Kathmandu airport. The airport is based on a hub concept from 20 years ago so airlines can use it as a transit point for passengers moving from various parts of Asia to the rest of the world.

Aviation experts say the hub model is now obsolete and replaced by the polypoint concept because modern airliners can fly non-stop for 16-20 hours, unlike two decades ago when airports needed refuelling stopovers.

Andrey Kuznetsov of Aryal says global aviation will take years to recover from the impact of the pandemic, even before the pandemic, flight shaving was already starting to affect the aviation business, with the threat of more serious questions about whether Nijigad should be built at all, and such an expensive airport project.

Says advocate Sanjaya Adhikari: “The airport is not built but has run out of necessity, and if it goes ahead despite all these issues, Nijigad will not bring any benefit but will push future generations of Nepal to Nijigad. The crisis is a chance for us to pull out from this wasteful project now.”

Nepal’s Environment Impact non-Assessments

These incoherencies have put the reliability of the Nijigad EIA as well as all other EIs in Nepal into question. In an interview, ATC can, we will be receiving major impounds in the Chharka and Indra Tana.

In fact, the EIA reports have gone as far as to record species not found in Nepal at all. The environmental assessment of the lower Czaja Hydropower Project is convincing in its completeness and in its arguments that it would not disturb the species of birds found in Nijigad.

If we are to believe the EIA report, Taka Taks Hydropower project, for example, is unlikely to disturb the species of birds found in Nijigad.

“Serious mistakes would have been laughable if they were not serious. They show that there is a lack of basic scientific knowledge, and a modeless disregard for the importance of EIAs in ensuring minimal environmental damage in Nepal’s infrastructure projects,” said a government statement.

Careful assessments need to be built for preserving and mitigation measures. Far from green light to any development project, they remain as a formality with no meaningful protecting Nepal’s biodiversity.

Yadav Dhakal
Kidney patients dying due to the COVID-19 lockdown

A nationwide quarantine aimed at controlling one disease is causing deaths from another

S Dhiren

Over 30,000 kidney patients in Nepal are at risk because the COVID-19 lockdown is preventing them from travelling to hospitals for regular dialysis. Stuck at home, many are also not getting regular supplies of vital medicines for their condition. Some have died.

Nar Bahadur Sunar of Kathmandu needed regular dialysis, but the lockdown meant he could not travel to hospital because public transport was off the roads. His son in the Indian Army used to send him vital drugs from India, but even that stopped. Sunar died on the day after New Year on 14 April.

In another village in the district, the plight of a western Nepali kidney patient Chaudhary has been getting twice-weekly dialysis at the Seti Zonal Hospital. But because of the lockdown, the dialysis is only performed on Mondays.

This means that Saturdays and Sundays are unbearably painful for Chaudhary as his body fills up with toxins, and he struggles to breathe. He has reduced immunity, and is afraid he could catch coronavirus. His father Ghanshyam cannot bear to see his son suffer. “It is especially difficult to watch him as he struggles to breathe,” he says.

COVID-19

Over in Surkhet, Anita Raskoti has been receiving dialysis at home for the past four years, but her runs out of medicines because the government cannot provide them.

Last week, K returned to Nepal from Saudi Arabia after his kidneys failed, and he has been living in Pekhola where he gets free dialysis at the Gandaki Regional Hospital. “There are no buses, and I cannot afford an ambulance, so I have to walk two hours to get to hospital,” he says.

Even if the medicines he needs were available, he would not be able to afford the Rs 30,000 per month cost because there is no income from his wife’s shop.

Although patients seeking medical attention are allowed to travel during the lockdown, the poorest patients cannot afford transport, or cannot travel during the lockdown.

Although the government made dialysis free last year, it is not easy to get the service. There is a lot of paperwork needed from the ward office, District Administration Office, District Health Office, and hospitals have waiting lists. Only 38 hospitals in 20 districts provide free dialysis. But hospitals too are facing a shortage of medicines due to the lockdown.

Min Bahadur Bista from Kathmandu has shifted to a rented room in Pokhara just to be close to the Shrideh Dhamabhakti National Transplant Centre where he gets his free dialysis once a week. After every dialysis he needs a special medicine, which is now more expensive even when it is available.

“This lockdown is more difficult than the earthquake,” says Bista, who has been getting his dialysis regularly for the past five years. As if the treatment was not difficult enough, other patients have been forced out of their rented rooms because landlords are afraid they will bring the coronavirus from hospitals.

In a district, Dhiraya Pun must reach the Community Dialysis Center of Lamakati twice in a week for her treatment, but her travel cost has increased from Rs 30 to a public transport to Rs 70 for the roundtrip by ambulance. She used to reach the hospital in a scooter, but police seized it for breaching lockdown rules.

“Every year, there are 3,000 new kidney patients who need dialysis, and there just are not enough facilities to manage this demand,” says nephrologist Sanjib Nembheri. There are more than 1,000 patients in Kathmandu alone who need treatment, and the difficulties they face have multiplied after the lockdown.

Half of the 54 hospitals designated for kidney dialysis are in Kathmandu Valley, and of the total 246 dialysis machines in the country 278 are in the capital. Some of the machines in government hospitals are not working. Of the ten machines at the Seti Provincial Hospital, only five function.

Kidney patients from Karnali Province are now referred to Nepalganj or Kathmandu due to lack of machines. Kathmandu’s hospitals do not even treat patients from the Valley, but many from west Nepal.

Once a patient’s kidneys stop working there are only two options: a kidney transplant like the ones performed on Prime Minister K P Oli, or dialysis twice a week. It takes four hours to complete dialysis procedure, so the machines can treat only three kidney patients in a day.

This means there is a long queue, and hospitals cannot take on any additional patients because the machines are “Soaked”. In fact, a well-off patient gets a slot for dialysis only if the hospital arranges for additional machines; a patient gets a kidney transplant, or dies.

Hospitals are even reducing the four-hour dialysis to three hours, just so they can accommodate more patients. Most patients cannot afford transplants, so they have no option but to get regular dialysis.

There are 170 kidney patients waiting their turn at Sudh Dhamabhakti National Transplant Centre, 130 at Bir Hospital and 216 at TU Teaching Hospital. While the patients wait for new openings, they have to go to private hospitals where the service is supposed to be free but often is not.

Patients in the Tami who used to go to Indian hospitals for dialysis also cannot go now because the border has been sealed for a month.

Mohan Jha, from Kathmandu is staying in Burel in India after the lockdown just for his dialysis. “I want to be close to the hospital, but it is hard to survive and I am running out of money,” he said over the phone.

For Jais Nath from Kathmandu who has been taking care of his father undergoing kidney dialysis in Kathmandu, the lockdown has become a life-or-death issue. He says: “Poor kidney patients staying in rented rooms in Kathmandu are suffering the most. There are no medicines, and no more money.”
Namrata Sharma

Rights activists have reported an increase in cases of violence against women and girls in Nepal in the 7 weeks of the COVID-19 lockdown, and they fear the crimes will increase with the stay-at-home order now extended to last till 18 May.

Gender rights groups had predicted a rise in domestic violence since women and girls are trapped at home with their abusers, but they say the numbers are much more alarming than expected.

"There were 176 cases of violence against women and girls in just 18 districts since the lockdown began on 24 March up to 1 May, and this is expected to rise as the nationwide annual average of cases of domestic violence this year," the figures were collated by the gender rights group WOMEC (Women’s Rehabilitation Centre) from data provided by social counsellors, the Women Human Rights Defenders Network and other partners.

The types of violence during the lockdown period included sexual violence, rape, attempted rape, murder, attempted murder, suicide, attempted suicide, sexual misconduct, and cybercrime.

Nepal Police data shows that there were 211 reported complaints of child sexual abuse nationwide in 2018-19, whereas there were 46 cases in the WOMEC data for only 6 weeks of the lockdown period in just 18 of Nepal’s 77 districts.

"The figures are alarming, and prove that the kind of violence women and girls face in the home environment increases during the lockdown," says Lubhara Neupane, Executive Director of WOMEC.

"And there is also a need now to incorporate protection measures for women and girls in the quarantine centres."

WOMEC data shows that the perpetrators in the 176 reported cases in 18 districts include 78 husbands, and 37 members from the family of the victims. Among the 20 cases of rape recorded during this time, two were gang rapes involving the partner and friend of the survivor.

Most of the victims of violence were in the 17-25 age group, followed by women and girls aged between 26-35. There were 25 girls and children below the age of 16 among the survivors.

Most of the victims reported the abuse to police, others went to parents or relatives. The data was collected from Dhampus, Minang, Rukum, Kailali, Daang, Bardi, Siraha, Saptari, Udayapur, Sunauli, Banke, Syangja, Baglung, Malottari, Raastahat, Parsa, Katmandupur and Bhaktapur.

"The workload of women has increased during the lockdown, and this raises their vulnerability to gender-based violence," says Shriki Bholabahadur at WOMEC. "The current support mechanism is not adequate to deal with the abuse during the lockdown."

A similar rise in domestic violence was also reported by the Nepal Women’s Commission during the lockdown period. The office received 735 calls of which 289 dealt with domestic violence against women, an increase compared to a similar period before the lockdown.

The WOMEC data shows that women in all age groups are subjected to violence, and the perpetrators mostly are people they are close to and know well. The figures also show that the lockdown period has increased the vulnerability of younger women and girls.

Globally, there has been a sharp uptick in cases of gender-based violence after national lockdowns. Survivors are also experiencing challenges in accessing services due to limited movement and access to health services.

Data shows that gender-based violence has become a ‘shadow pandemic’ in many parts of the world, including Nepal.

Namrata Sharma is the past president of the Centre for Women and Gender Nepal, with headquarters in Nepal. Contact: nepaltimes.com

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