Green revival

World Environment Day on 5 June is being marked amidst a COVID-19 lockdown, offering Nepal a chance to "build back greener.

The country can turn a new leaf on the economy, and most importantly on a sustainable growth path by redirecting energy policy. Also, Finance Minister Yubraj Khatiwada’s budget last week was back to business as usual.

It’s high time the tax on electric vehicles five fold, throwing a monkey wrench into any hope of a green growth model. (Page 3) At a time when the world is switching to electric transport, Nepal is regarded as increasing fossil fuel use.

Cutting diesel and petrol consumption by even 10% would save the country $20 billion a year imports, use domestically generated electricity that would otherwise be wasted, reduce air pollution and improves public health. In May alone, the Nepal Electricity Authority lost an estimated $15 million in ‘stolen’ energy.

"As the government forges efforts to build back the economy amidst the coronavirus crisis, these are important times to think ahead and consider options that enable us to also build back greener and better," says the World Bank’s country manager for Nepal, Paris Huda Zervas in a write up in this paper (page 12) on World Environment Day.

NPA chief Kishor Ghising had been pushing the Finance Ministry to reduce the tax on induction stoves, electric kitchen appliances and other plug-in devices. Khatiwada reduced the tax on Stücker and Mann bars, but not on equipment that could use Nepal’s surplus electricity.

There are other benefits to reducing pollution. The main complaint tourists make about Nepal is about air quality in Kathmandu. Many young Nepali professionals list health hazards due to pollution as a big reason for emigrating.

The marked improvement in air quality in the past two months of lockdown showed it can be done. Switching to electric transport will not happen overnight, but enforcing emission tests would show immediate results. If breathalyzers can stop drunk driving, police can easily extend that to testing and fining polluting vehicles.

However, Kathmandu’s air quality did not improve as much as expected, and one reason is brick kiln smoke seen in photos taken near Thudana last month. The budget speech could have subsidised viable alternatives like compressed stabilised earth bricks, or taxed the stacks right out of the Valley. But it didn’t.

The Bagmati can be turned into a river again by expediting the much-delayed drain network to divert sewage to land set aside in Gobhar for a water treatment plant. The garbage problem can also be solved. Sixty percent of Kathmandu’s trash is still biodegradable and can be converted and sold as compost. Of the rest, most is plastic that can either be recycled, or reduced at source by enforcing past bans on single use plastic thinner than 30 microns.

This is not day-dreaming, all these measures are easily and quickly doable. They just need political will that was so easily lacking in the Finance Minister’s budget speech.

Bhima Bhatt
UNLOCKDOWN

Nepal’s leadership showed considerable indiscipline by declaring a national lockdown on 24 March as a circuit breaker, even though only the first confirmed coronavirus infection was detected.

Since the case load was so low, perhaps they thought it was only for a week or two. More likely, it was a kneejerk reaction, and the government had no idea the lockdown should be the first step in a process leading to mass testing.

As we have argued in this space, before the lockdown, Nepal has outlived its usefulness. Public health experts tell us there is no way to stop this virus unless there is a vaccine. We have to learn to live with it.

The lockdown has unleashed mass job losses, increased suffering, and has contributed to thousands of preventable deaths from non-coronavirus diseases because of the lack of transportation and fear of infection in hospitals. Vaccination programs for children have been disrupted, and the rate of suicides, domestic violence and rape have increased.

So far, most of the confirmed cases are from people returning from India and most hotspot areas are districts along the border as well as villages they have gone back to without being tested and spread it to the community. Ill-equipped and crowded quarantine centers have themselves become incubators for the coronavirus and other vector-borne diseases like dengue and malaria.

Therefore, it is not the lockdown that has outlived its usefulness, it is time to get a move on.

Although it should have anticipated a mass return of Nepali workers from India, the government has not built the government for the lack of preparedness. Even the most efficient state apparatus would have been overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of returnees.

And given the sad state of infrastructure and service delivery capacity, it would have been foolish to expect a super-efficient quarantine-test-isolation protocol to be followed. Because iniquities in Nepal’s skewed state structure, as in every disaster, it is the excluded, disenfranchised, the poor and voiceless who are suffering the most - those who depend on daily wages, migrant workers who have run out of cash and food, women and children, disabled, patients, maternity cases, and those with pre-existing ailments.

Nevertheless, what seems to be working reasonably well is that provincial and municipal government are taking charge, and despite the lack of resources and proper guidelines, are doing their best to deal with the sheer numbers of returnees.

Perhaps, it is in Kathmandu where turf battles, lack of coordination and a reluctance to devolve decision-making and response to lower governments has cost valuable lives. Because of the delay in testing returnees, and the confusing reliance on the number of tests per day is dropping.

There are nearly 5,000 awash collections daily for PCR testing, but only 1,000 can be processed. Test machines are either broken, or have run out of RNA extraction. There are 3,000 samples in the queue to be tested, leaving people in quarantine for limbs for days. Private laboratories have the capacity to bridge the gap, but have been left out.

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Kathmandu has unfortunately decided that the best option now is to get local governments to enforce home quarantine for returnees, and only refer symptomatic cases to hospital isolation wards. But this means the Ministry of Health must scale up testing so cases can be detected and isolated, especially since about 2,000 Nepalis will soon fly into Kathmandu airport every day before being taken to holding centres, tested and sent to home districts.

People are now beginning to defy the lockdown, and there is growing public pressure on the government to relax rules. The Coronavirus Control and Management Committee headed by Defence Minister Ishwor Pokhrel is now said to be looking at a 10-phase exit from the lockdown in the next three months.

For this the government is planning to follow the ‘Georgia Model’ allowing small businesses to open first, do 120,000 PCR tests a month, arrange the airport and transport of 300,000 Nepalis from overseas, and finally restarting domestic and international flights and public transport.

The government had similarly relaxed restrictions in mid-April, but hastily clamped down again after confirmed cases spiked. This time, it is important that the new guidelines be clear, and enforced relentlessly and uniformly.

On the other hand, Nepal has generally obeyed the government’s shelter-in-place rules so far, but their patience is running out.

10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

(10 years ago this week, Nepal Times devoted an entire issue to 650 world leaders in a single image. The world leaders were in various countries and en route to Geneva for the 2020 IDAHOT. The issue, which saw the launch of the Timeslex initiative, was published on 18 May 2020.)

THE TIMESLEX

The government has no sutda (Lockdown, lockdown, repatriation, lockdown). It wasted 2 months doing nothing, no upgrading of medical facilities, no quarantine centers, no ramping up of PCR tests. That was the purpose of the lockdown. To prepare ourselves for the cases which would be born to us. People are dying of hunger, thieves have lost jobs, and economy is at all worst. The government needs to wake up from its slumber.

Rishi Saraf

Lockdown itself won’t work unless proper checkup and good quarantine practice is set up. People in the border area are suffering and pay the price for the negligence of the government.

Tushir Tamang

Coronavirus have no good food, exercise or work, people will only be depressed (‘Afarid of mean more than the virus’). (Unreal Chaudhary, page 10). Government needs to reassure people with no symptoms and allow them to self-isolate at home.

Abhi Sharma

ONLINE PACKAGES

VISITING NEPAL IN 2020?

Nepal’s serene natural greenery is up for grabs as visitors from around the world are on the move to explore the country’s diverse range of landscapes and activities.

Kathmandu airport gets facelift during lockdown

Kathmandu airport has taken the opportunity of being closed for the past year to undertake several improvement works.

What’s Trending

An electric shock to Nepal’s energy future

The decision to increase the cost of electric vehicles (EVs) has met with public outrage and a barrage of criticism from environmental groups. The 24-kV tariff hike may not only discourage the use of electric vehicles but also affect the environment and the air quality in the entire surrounding area.

QUOTE TWEETS

Nepal Times (@NepalTimes)

by taking risks Covid-19 can be stopped. Nepal to introduce electric vehicles and ban fossil fuel vehicles. The government will provide free electric vehicle every second time the government makes a decision to control the increasing pollution.

Sujeet M (@SujeetM)

No diversification, no threat about going by EV but not just apples.

Suresh Shakya (@SureshShakya)

On Kathmandu should rethink this. We are planning to generate more electricity and yet they are imposing more tax on electric vehicles.

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SOFAR SO GOOD
Lisa Chongyal
A polite, gentle, professional man commuting by train to the Forest of Dean in July as High Commissioner to Fiji, and until last November, British Ambassador to Nepal. On 6 May at 10am, Richard Morris took one of his last walks in the Allen Hill Forest, a vast woodland that stretches between Hampshire and Surrey, and once Nepal’s prime minister.

Richard is unforgettable due to the distinctive portmanteau birthmark on his face. You could not ignore it or pretend it was not there, but the strange thing was that after the initial shock, his charm and good looks dispelled the wintry atmosphere. He never noticed it ever again. We never talked about it, of course, but his sophisticated long-distance running journals went to the Changing Places charity of which he was an active supporter.

The weekend after they arrived in Nepal, we invited Richard Morris and his wife Alice to the Doctor Strange shoot in the heart of the earthquake-damaged Patan Darbar Square. It was early November 2015 when we first met, but he had already displayed great kindness, warmth, and all the paraphernalia of a movie set.

I had arrived early and been started into a state of excitement. The next to the unforgettable star of the Spanish-language movie, Alice was Alice, and Richard was Richard. He had even expended some of his charm with the entire Cotteril family, and his smile, as usual, was adored by all.

Working with the production, we decided to select a group of people to watch the shoot and be thanked by the Hollywood team — the British Embassy had helped with handling the language barriers, and a handful of minor scenes, as we were aware, were being filmed.

The Americans were super-supportive of the Disney Marvel production. Richard had become a bit of a local celebrity in Patan, and we all watched the shoot, including the rotundness of the Embassy’s chef, in the spirit of goodwill.

The US Ambassador was there that day, her son having secured a legendary place in the crowd in a famous American movie.

That same weekend David Beckham was kicking a football around in the beautiful grounds of the British Embassy. The New York Times reported that the British Embassy was the only of the American missions to be open for business.

The Sare Jahan Se Acha, also known as the Nepal earthquake, was a major disaster that devastated the country. Richard Morris, the British ambassador at the time, was moved by the tragedy and human spirit.

Richard Morris is the current high commissioner in 2021, ready to end his diplomatic career. His presence in the UK will be missed, and his efforts to enhance the UK-Nepal relationship will be remembered.

Richard Morris has been a vital part of the UK-Nepal relationship, and his contributions will be missed. His presence in the UK will be missed, and his efforts to enhance the UK-Nepal relationship will be remembered.

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Re-Cycling Kathmandu

One silver lining of the COVID-19 crisis could be that Kathmandu will move to being a cycle city.

Bhusan Tuladhar

Since 1923’s readies the sign in front of Paco Bike in elegant trim. The name of the store is a shortened form of ‘Panchanaryab Asthana’ the two early founders of the bicycle store.

But the history of bicycling goes even further to 1903, when some Ranas imported bicycles from India and rode them inside their palaces for pleasure, recalls Tirth Narayan Manandhar, the son of Asthana in his book Kathmandu Then and Now.

Over the past century, the bicycle has gone from being a leisure item for Nepal’s nobility to a symbol of deprivation. Bicycles have been displaced by motorcycles and cars.

Between 1991 and 2011, the percent of trips made on bicycles in Kathmandu decreased from 6.6% to 1.5%, while motorcycles almost tripled from 9.3% to 28% of all journeys. There are now more than 600,000 motorcycles in Kathmandu, and make up nearly 80% of the total vehicle fleet.

But bicycles have not disappeared completely, and may in fact be staging a comeback. Many young Kathmandu residents are taking up cycling, although mostly for recreation rather than for their daily commute. Most say they would happily pedal second in a bicycle if the streets were safer.

With a mild climate and the average trip distance of 5km, Kathmandu Valley is an ideal cycling city. But bicycle use fell because of the lack of separate lanes, and worsening air pollution.

On 31 October 2011, conservationist Pradip Yonzon was killed by a truck on the Ring Road while bicycling home from work. Supporters painted a mural in his memory at the site to highlight cycling as an alternative. A formal agreement was signed between the Department of Roads and a Chinese contractor responsible for expanding the Ring Road, which mentioned that cycle lanes would be constructed on both sides of Ring Road.

In June 2013, bicycle activists also made a model bicycle lane along the Ring Road at Thankot to demonstrate how it could be set aside within the green belt without cutting down trees.

The cycle lane was never built.

The mural commemorating Pradip Yonzon was built to make way for eight-lane of the new highway which were given over to cars. Today, the Ring Road is more dangerous than ever for cyclists and pedestrians.

Last week, at an interaction by the Nepal Cycling Society, the General Director of the Department of Roads announced that the Chinese contractor who constructed the road would be required to set aside a 1m-wide bicycle lane. This is a step in the right direction. The act of painting a bike lane on the road is a step that has been long overdue.

The lack of action in the past, however, shows how much needs to be done to make Kathmandu a cycle city. A silver lining of the COVID-19 crisis may well be that Kathmandu will finally realize the dream of many to turn to a healthier and more sustainable form of transport.

Bhusan Tuladhar

Pradip Yonzon was killed in an accident while riding his bike on 31 October 2011. This is a reminder of the importance of bike lanes and the need for better infrastructure for cyclists in Kathmandu.
An electric shock to Nepal’s energy future

Hike in e-car tax will increase dependence on imported petroleum, add to air pollution

Nepal Finance Minister Yubraj Khatiwada’s announcement in his annual budget speech on 28 May to increase the tax on electric vehicles fivefold has raised public outrage on social media, and a barrage of criticism from environmental groups and proponents of renewable energy.

Khatiwada went against President Bidya Devi Bhandari’s speech to both houses of Parliament last week in which she stated his own government’s policy to promote electric transportation. In fact, Bhandari drove to Parliament in her recently acquired electric SUV.

The finance minister justified his decision in a post-budget press conference on Thursday saying “Only a few electric vehicles were being imported, and the existing subsidy only benefited a specific class of people, while the government lost tax revenue.”

But electric vehicle importers said Khatiwada’s statement was incorrect on many levels. In an interaction on Sunday, they said Nepal’s middle class was finally able to afford to buy a car because of the subsidy and also because of the accumulated savings in fuel over the years. They said the foreign exchange outflow would actually increase because the hefty tax hike on electric cars would increase consumption of fuel and vehicle imports.

“Switching to importing small electric vehicles that motorcycle users could graduate to, and I passed my decision on the government’s tax subsidy on battery-powered cars. But this budget will now nearly double the price of the car, and it will be out of reach of the middle class that could finally aspire to owning a car,” said one electric vehicle importer.

He added: “There is no continuity in government policy, and there is such a dramatic policy departure no investor in their right mind is going to put money in Nepal.”

Four years ago, the government had scrapped excise tax on electric vehicles, reduced import duty to only 10% and reduced the value added tax (VAT) on road electric vehicles. The subsidy was a 72% and a new generation of battery technology that lowered cost and improved the range of electric vehicles, meant that sales took off. In the past year alone, 500 new electric cars have been sold in Nepal.

Now, the excise tax has been raised to 30-40%, depending on the peak power capacity of the car, and the customs duty also to 90%. Although electric vehicles are cheaper than a similar gasoline-powered car, the customs duty to be reimbursed and the tax on a peak output power are still lower than for petrol or diesel cars, with higher electric vehicles means that they will now be much more expensive than a petrol or diesel vehicle of similar size.

“In strictly cash terms a car cost of $20,000 will now cost $25,000,” said Urmish Shrestha of the Electric Vehicles Association of Nepal (EVAN). “This decision will very much affect the electric vehicles market in Nepal.”

One of the reasons manufacturers of electric vehicles like Hero and Hyundai had given Nepal priority for shipments even though the volume was small was because the tax subsidy made battery-powered cars competitive with petrol cars. “We were able to convince manufacturers that Nepal was ready to go electric because of our hydropower potential and the tax difference between electric and non-electric vehicles that proved there was strong government commitment to promote electric vehicles, explains Nirmal Shrestha of Lexmi Intercontinental which represents Hyundai in Nepal.

All this does not even take into account the improvement in air quality if even some of the diesel and petrol vehicles in Nepal’s cities were replaced by battery-powered cars. The number one complaint of tourists on TripAdvisor and Lonely Planet is Kathmandu’s air pollution.

Then there is the larger question of reducing Nepal’s burgeoning petroleum imports from India (see graph) by switching even partly to electric vehicles. This would reduce the import bill, and use domestically generated hydroelectricity that is in danger of being wasted.

Kulman Ghising of the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) has been trying to urge the public to switch to electric cooking stoves and to buy electric cars to use up surplus hydroelectricity. NEA is more than doubling its current generation capacity by adding another 1,300MW of hydropower in the coming fiscal year.

The government’s decision to raise taxes is expected to drive people away from electric vehicles, and could not have come at a worse time. Especially during the current lockdown, Nepal’s electricity supply has unstrapped demand. As a result, hundreds of megawatts are unused and wasted.

Of the 1,300MW currently produced, peak consumption has dropped to 700MW with night time consumption as low as 450MW. A lot of the energy produced is therefore ‘spilled’. With no notable change in demand and with supply doubling, much more energy will be wasted and NEA will lose money on every wasted watt.

Meanwhile, the US-funded Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) project is stuck because of fighting between factions in the ruling Nepal Communist Party, the transmission lines that were supposed to evacuate power from new powerplants in central Nepal to meet growth in urban demand and even export to India may now not materialise.

Ghising had been publicly appealing to the government to introduce policies that encouraged electricity consumption, including reducing the tax on electric appliances, increasing electric vehicle ownership and investing in fast-charging stations along the highways. But Finance Minister Khatiwada last week did just the opposite.

“The government’s decision is dangerous from financial, environmental and energy standpoint,” says environmental activist Bhishak Tuladhar. Two factors have been cited as third factor could be lobbying by the country’s powerful fossil fuel mafia. “It was not economically justifiable that fuel-based cars paid 300% in taxes and luxury electric vehicles were exempt,” argued Finance Secretary Shushar Kumar Dahal.

But environmentalists have accused the government of backing down from its own international commitments as well. The Ministry of Physical Infrastructure and Transport had laid down goals for the electrification of transport in its ‘Nationally Determined Contribution’ to meet global targets for the reduction of carbon emissions and the ‘National Action Plan for Electric Mobility’ in 2017.

Some of the goals set included a 26% electrification of transportation by 2020 and reducing fossil fuel dependence in the transport industry. The tax on electric cars directly counteracts those commitments, and goes against everything the government stood for in the past four years.

Ramesh Kumar

Nepal petroleum and vehicles imports
VIRTUAL EVENTS

Space4Women Webinar
The Nepal Space Research Association’s webinar “This Girls From Women in Space” will feature distinguished women in the space sector who will share their experiences as they pursue a career in STEM. Register for the webinar at the NSRA Facebook page.
Space4Women

Books beyond borders
Join readers across South Asia for a book reading and discussion session of “Mother Win Friends and Kill Men” People” by Male Carrige from Head to the Quaker’s Cave Facebook page to register for the event and get a digital copy of the book.
June 8

KIMFF 2020 submissions
Fill the KIMFF 2020 entry form and send relevant films directed or produced in the last two years. Go to the website for more details.
Deadline: 1 September

photo.circle grants
photo.circle is providing 10 grants to support Nepali-based Nepal photographers, journalists, and multimedia storytellers to document the COVID-19 pandemic. Stay tuned for the deadline of the 2nd cycle of applications. Head to the website for details on how to apply.

ONLINE ARCHIVES

Journeyman Pictures
Watch groundbreaking, award-winning feature films about some of the most burning issues across the globe including politics, the environment—and the current pandemic. Find journeyman pictures on YouTube.

Nepal Literature Festival
Listen to Nepali literary figures, artists, political figures, and people in the public eye talk about the Nepal Literature landscape. Watch on YouTube and start from the 2019 festival.

Khan Academy
Looking for educational material as a student or educator? Khan Academy provides free educational material for any subject from basic arithmetic to art and history on Khan Academy’s website, or head to YouTube for multimedia resources.

Access Mars
Take a virtual trip to Mars. NASA partners with Google to offer a tour of a 3D replica of the surface of Mars created by NASA’s Curiosity rover.

QUARANTINE DINING

PIANO B
Time the best of daily with PIANO B’s pastas, burgers, salads, and more. Head to Instagram and explore the menu.
Delivery: 7pm-11pm

Doko Deli
Look at the menu on Facebook and take a pick from a variety of appetizers, pizzas, and pastas. Try the Mustard Air Po Ade.
9863408372, 844995467

Bata Momo
Head to Food hadn’t and order all things momo from Bata’s menu. Or give the spicy vegetable or chicken noodles a try.
Delivery: 12pm-12am

Baskin Robbins
Baskin Robbins, with its summer assortment in lockdown, Baskin Robbins Facebook page has picked out a variety of flavors: sandwiches, cakes, and even cakes. Food hadn’t will also deliver.
Delivery: 10am-6pm, 9827115397

Cafe de Tukche
Tired of trying to figure out what to cook for lunch day after day? Get authentic Thai food delivered from Cafe de Tukche. Under the Thaifl, Almora, or take a break from it and try the Thai Flavoured instead. Check out the menu on Facebook.
Location: Bhatkoka, 8400077528

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

Glass is fully recyclable but we can save more energy by recycling glass bottles and jars. Glass containers are perfect for reuse because they are long-lasting, durable and corrosion-resistant. They are also made from nontoxic raw materials and have almost zero rate of chemical interaction. You could reuse glass bottles and jars to store food or stationary, turn them into flower vases or candle holders and even decorate them into artistic creations.

OUIR PICK

A Japanese Heritage consultant, Hiroko Kondo, has received immense admiration for her hit reality television series—Organizing Up with Tidying Up. In 2010, the series has been aired in about 170 countries and has helped organize and tidy their homes using her Konmari method. The eight-episode season stars Marie Kondo who acts as Marie Kondo’s mentor throughout the show.

Lockdown Town

Going places together - qatarairways.com

This is a satellite view image of Sauraha Chopper Heliport in Kathmandu, the second major city in the country. The airport is located about 150 feet above sea level and is the highest airport in the world. Expect heavy precipitation, strong wind and snow at higher altitudes. This is not the moment, though, that is all felt is worthy away.

AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU, 29 May - 4 June

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

KIRPA JOSHI

Piano B

Doko Deli

Bata Momo

Baskin Robbins

Cafe de Tukche

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Kathmandu airport gets facelift during lockdown

Nepal’s sole aerial gateway is spruced up and adopts precautions as it prepares to receive passengers

Raju Banskota

Kathmandu airport has the dubious distinction of being voted multiple times as one of the world’s worst airports. It has got consistently bad reviews for crumbling infrastructure, delays due to congestion, long lines at immigration and customs, and rude staff.

But passengers will be pleasantly surprised by improvements in the terminal buildings and the facilities once Nepal’s sole international gateway opens its doors after the COVID-19 lockdown is lifted.

Nepal’s lockdown is in its tenth week and has been extended till 14 June and both domestic and international flights are grounded till midnight of 30 June. But the airport authorities have used the time to give the facility a facelift.

“We have expanded the parking, extended the runway, added and upgraded the space in both the international and domestic terminals, and have them conform to WHO guidelines for physical distancing and other coronavirus prevention measures,” says Tribhuvan International Airport Director General Devendra KC.

The runway length has been extended by 300m at the 02 southern end, allowing heavy jets to take off without any load penalty for long-range flights. New runway and approach lights have been installed, the parking apron enlarged to accommodate 16 planes at a time from the nine previously, the taxiways have been resurfaced.

The much-delayed expansion of the international terminal is also nearly complete with a new pre-departure sterile area that can accommodate up to 1,500 passengers at a time. The arrival immigration hall has been upgraded, and painted circles on the floor ensure that passengers maintain a minimum distance while queuing up.

After customs, passengers will now no longer have to walk down a steep hill to get to the vehicle parking and public transport, a new concourse and escalator takes them down to the lower level where passengers can be received.

Some of these facilities are already being used for repatriation flights for foreigners stranded in Nepal by the lockdown over the past two months.

“We hope that the facilities will now be much more passenger friendly, and there will also be less congestion once the lockdown is lifted,” says airport spokesperson Dipendra Shrestha, who took a dozen journalists on a tour of the facilities on Sunday.

The airport was keen to show that it was prepared for operations during the pandemic, and had ensured physical separation of 1m between passengers and between them and immigration and customs officials.

Despite the runway upgrade, however, the airport has not yet extended the taxiways to the ends of both runways that would have cut the time between flights and reduced congestion. Because of terrain, Kathmandu is a one-way-in-one-way-out for bigger jets, and taxiway extension would have allowed planes to land and takeoff more frequently, shortening the holding time.

When the airport opens, passengers will have to get in three hours before their flights because of the delays caused by the new COVID-19 prevention procedures. The airport will also have a quarantine centre for incoming passengers who have a temperature or symptoms.

nepaltimes.com

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Early in February 2020 I left Kathmandu for a few week work trip to Europe at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic had registered less than 30,000 cases worldwide. It was becoming more of a news item, but in Europe there were only a handful of cases, and it seemed at the time that there was little to be concerned about. I travelled through seven international airports that would eventually bring me back to Nepal on 12 March, just two days before Nepal stopped issuing visas on arrival to visitors 12 May. By then I arrived in Nepal, worldwide cases had jumped to 130,000, and at Tribhuvan International Airport I was stunned to see a virtually empty arrival hall with just one luggage belt operating. The impact of COVID-19 was clearly being felt. I was happy to be back, but had a nagging feeling that Nepal would be facing more tough times ahead. Having read more about the asymptomatic transmission of the disease, I self-quarantined in my apartment in Boudha, except for brief visits to a local baby clothing project near where I live.

In 2015 I experienced the earthquakes of 25 April and 12 May. In the days that followed I became acutely aware of the impact that events of that magnitude can have on a developing country poorly equipped to handle widespread loss of life, the destruction of homes, schools and heritage sites, not to mention the stress on remote communities largely cut off from urgently required support. It was the efforts of individuals and youth groups that caught my attention at the time, proving to me that with few resources at hand, the willingness to serve the community was deeply ingrained in the Nepali psyche. While the government was struggling under the enormous weight of implementing disaster recovery, I witnessed a remarkable effort by these highly motivated young people to do whatever they could to bring medical aid, food and provisions for temporary shelter to all of the affected districts.

That disaster was visible, and the need was clear. This was an invisible virus. As a photojournalist from Finland and armed with a pass, I ventured out on my scooter in the following days to record the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown. Police and army checkpoints were everywhere. The streets, once bustling with cars, bikes and pedestrians were ominously empty.

During the earthquakes of 2015, a close friend and colleague, Rewati Gurung, had implemented two relief projects on her own initiative from her home near Boudha. The first of these provided tea and eggs to two hospitals in Jorpati over a ten day period immediately following the disaster, and the second focused on providing new school bags filled with books, pencils, and sandals to thousands of school children in remote communities worst affected by the earthquakes. The project is now five years running and continues to address the needs of school children in remote areas of the country.

In the summer of 2015, Gurung, a development studies researcher by education, attended Helsinki University Summer School on the theme ‘Gender, Culture and Politics’, exposing her to a variety of successful Finnish initiatives that have made a significant impact on Finland’s social welfare system.

Inspired by the story of the Finnish maternity package provided by the government to all mothers on giving birth, Gurung started her own commercial enterprise in early 2018 – Kokosma, making baby clothing and accessories from 100% cotton woven by Nepali prisoners and sewn by women in her neighbourhood in Kathmandu. Gurung’s aim was to create a unique brand with raw materials sourced from Nepal in a market saturated with cheap imports from China and India. In the last two years I have seen Kokosma grow, attending dozens of promotional and networking events focused on supporting startups in Kathmandu.

For many entrepreneurs, the sudden loss of income has been catastrophic. A significant number of people in Nepal rely on day to day income, and the impact of lockdown is evident in the long queues of people in communities around the city receiving daily prepared meals by youth organisations, religious institutions and private individuals.

For Gurung, the lockdown provided an opportunity to take time to assess the potential impact on her business. Well stocked with raw material from the prison, and already in the planning stages of product development, she gave her staff a two weeks paid leave and set about pattern making for new products to be made when lockdown ended.

By continuing to work from home, and proactively working on new designs, looking toward an uncertain future, she maintained a positive attitude. By keeping up to date on the global situation, and the evidence from WHO that face masks were helping to prevent the spread of the disease, Gurung concluded that she could make a positive contribution in the early stages of the pandemic by shifting her production from baby clothing to masks. At the end of the two weeks, she was prepared for production with the first order of 1,500 destined for shipping to the USA on a refrigeration flight from Kathmandu.

Through her social media channels word got around, and in the last six weeks she has shipped more than 6,000 cotton masks to NGOs, religious institutions, children’s homes and private individuals in Nepal. She has received donations from abroad and also donated directly from Kokosma’s profits to those in need in the community. Her staff are fully employed and working from home, staying safe and delivering completed masks once a week to the office. Just in time for the lockdown, this would have seemed impossible.

No other situation has provided the kind of insight into the potential beauty of this city than this lockdown. The views of the snow covered Himalayas are the very ones that the tourists dream of seeing when they land at Kathmandu airport.

As the country settles into another month of lockdown, the jacaranda trees burst into bloom like silent fireworks and paint pale blue indigo patterns as they fall on the empty streets below.

Gary Wornell is a long term Resident of Nepal, author of the book Because of Nepal and a photographer. He has been in Nepal since 2013.

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Lockdown brings out the best in Nepalis
Youth volunteer groups and charities spring into action to help those in need

Alisha Sijapati

S
ince the announcement of a nationwide lockdown ten
weeks ago, Ajsa Kurmi has been working nearly non-stop
every day. He gets up before dawn and with the help of other young
volunteers prepares and distributes meals for those in quarantine. It is
late at night when he gets to bed.

Kurmi works with Sano Palia in Birganj which had been mobilising
young Nepal to help with rehabilitation, relief and rescue even before the
lockdown. But for the past two months Sano Palia, which means ‘small’,
has launched the Feeding Nepal program to provide proper meals to
the displaced, stranded and those in quarantine in Birganj, Jhapa
and even the Karnali region of western Nepal.

The number of Nepalis who have tested positive for the virus
has exceeded 2,300 with 200 new cases daily, and there have been
a total of nine deaths. Most of the positive cases have been along
border districts among recent returnees from India. But the virus is
now spreading in communities in the hinterland.

There are currently 116,000
people in quarantine centres all over the country, and the facilities
are basic without adequate food and water. Sano Palia provides four
meals a day at quarantine centres, but it also feeds hospital workers,
daily waged and displaced people.

This needs sustained effort, it is
not a one-off help. The need is
great, but every small step helps,” explains Jai Kumar Sah at Sano
Palia in Birganj) which is offering meals to 800 families a day,
including for Dalit families who have lost their source of income
after the lockdown. In Siraha (picture), Sano Palia provides two
meals a day to 2,810 people every day. In four-mass meals include:
rice, fruits, lentils, vegetables and a meat dish.

Other non-profits have also
re-channelling their efforts to
lockdown relief work. In Dhanusa, the Mithila Wildlife Trust,
which is involved in biodiversity conservation through community
forestry, has redirected its effort to help families in districts in 15
districts in Province 2 and beyond.

With support from the UK-based
conservation charity Chhus Choel, it is helping families in Dhanusa,
Sunsari, Saptari, Bara, Siraha, Mahottari, Rautahat, Saptari,
Parsa, Mokhapan, Nawalpur, Kailpun, Garhwal and Butwal.

“We are trying to reach the
unreached, and are getting calls for help from the Musherai,
Duma, Chamgar, Tana, Khalsi, and Cheopan, Dhangar and Dalit
communities,” says Dev Mandal of Mithila Wildlife Trust which has
distributed food to last two weeks at a site for 1,000 families.

The Trust’s package includes
15kg of rice, 3kg of lentils, 2.5 litres of cooking oil, 2.5 kg of
cotton, 1kg of potato, 1kg of sour fruit, 1kg salt, and two bars of soap.
It augments the package with beans, eggs and fruits to meet the needs of
the most vulnerable even within these groups like pregnant women and infants.

Both Sano Palia and Mithila
Wildlife Trust have faced their own share of hardships, and the foremost
among them is funding. Since feeding the vulnerable population is an
ongoing effort, and families have lost their sources of income, it needs
continuous support.

While Sano Palia is raising
funds through word of mouth and social media, Mithila Wildlife Trust
benefits from Chhus Choel’s community worldwide for funds.

Another group that has benefited
from international crowdfunding is BlinkNow, a charity started
by American Maggie Doyle
of Kopila School in Surkhet. When

thousands of families from the
Karnali returning from India were not allowed to enter the province
without a certificate showing they were coronavirus-free, the charity
sprang into action to help families camped by the highway with food,
washing, shelter and get the local government to organise tests so they
could travel to their home districts.

In Birganj, Sano Palia’s
Jai Kumar Sah says that if the lockdown is extended, the funding
situation will be precarious: “We are working on distributing relief
food through our reserve funds at the moment, and we will surely
need more help in the future, if the lockdown continues to extend
we will have a problem. People here are now defying the lockdown
rules.”

Dev Mandal in Dhanusa says
funds are always short since the
need is so great, but the Mithila
Wildlife Trust is managing for now
with a lifelong of support from
Chhus Choel.

“If the lockdown ends by
14 June, we will be in a much better place in terms of funding and
transportation of relief distribution, but if it is extended it will be big
challenge to keep up our feeding program.”

The volunteers continue to
work despite the risk of infection
for themselves, and they also have
to fight stigma from neighbours for
helping those in quarantines after
contact tracing.

Says Sah: “We are living and
working among those who are
at risk, and it is very tough for us. We are using precautions
and protective gear, but one never knows.”

Most vulnerable among
the vulnerable

Many people with disabilities
are already vulnerable to the
government’s push to get help
to those who are already
vulnerable. The lockdown has
made it difficult for the
people with disabilities and
those in special needs. It has
also made it difficult for those
who are already vulnerable to
those who are already
vulnerable.”

One group particularly
needy are the deaf and
hard of hearing, many of
whom also have
missed school and are not able to
speak or read, and thus have
been left behind.

Dev Mandal explains: “There is
no sign language in Nepal, and
even the text is in NCS.

The parents are always in
The volunteers continue to
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“Will we ever make it home?”

Hungry and tired, mothers arrive with babies by the thousands at the Indian border

After travelling for two days from Delhi, Manisha Chunara arrived on 21 May at the border in Gauripatra. Stepping on Nepali soil, she was welcomed by two emotional happinesses at being home, and worry about her children who had not eaten properly for two days.

“They have been hungry ever since we left Delhi,” says Manisha, who is among the average 5,000 Nepalis crossing just this one border post every day after it was opened ten days ago.

Kailali district administration says one third of them are women — mostly young mothers with children, and all have similar stories. While some have husbands with them, many others are travelling just with their children.

Kumala Saud returned from Mumbai after a 3-day journey with her 10-month baby. She is tired and hungry, and says she was unable to breastfeed her child throughout the journey.

Kumala’s ordeal is not over; she now needs to find her way to her village of Bannihi of Achham district, but has neither money nor food for the 24-hour journey. There are some buses, but they are charging up to Rs8,000 for the journey. “Will we ever make it home?” Kumala asks, cradling her baby in the oppressive mid-day heat. Hungry, tired and hot in the 40 degree heat of the plains, the returning families are also fearful they may catch the coronavirus from the thousands of others crowding the bus stations.

The local government appears to be overwhelmed by the numbers, but there are some local volunteers that have begun to distribute food and water to those arriving at the border. Women are also being given grocery bags with sanitary pads and baby food.

Most of the women are from Karnali Province, and have been desperate to find transport, and even if they find a bus they have to have enough cash to pay the exorbitant fare.

Afraid of men more than the virus

Aali Reiwal, 22, travelled for a week to reach the Nepal border from Delhi on 21 May. But the border was closed and the Indian police sent her to a quarantine centre in Palpa.

She was so desperate to get home, she fled and sneaked into Nepal walking 12 hours through paths in the jungle.

“I was so happy to be in Nepal, but the border did not last long,” said Aali, who was later kept by Nepali Police in a female-only quarantine centre in Palpa. There are many women in the quarantine, and they are made to sit on concrete benches.

The quarantine centre is a college in Palpa, and has 12 women and three children. Aali is one of 16 quarantine centres in Kailali which have 688 women residing in India, 78 of them are women and 93 children.

Aali and Sushma Mohit said it was difficult to find a separate quarantine for women, and she is trying to coordinate with the police to have women guards at night. The fear among women is lifted by the fact that the population of the world’s largest prison is of young students in Palpa who have not been released even after three years.

The business opportunity in Kailali has started handing out grey bags for women returning to India with medial necessities. But the facilities in Kailali do not meet even the minimum standards in the government’s own guidelines which require quarantine centres to have medical officers, food and water every day, two main meals and two snacks a day. They are also supposed to have an ambulance on call, adequate water and sanitation and beds at least 6m apart.

Kailali is 220km from Delhi and has a border post in Nafli. It is not transparent about anything. It will probably be 10 days because of the lack of food,” she says.

As India relaxes lockdown and train services restart, the number of Nepali women returning from India has seen to 5,000 a day, and a third of them are women. Unnati Chaudhary
Nepal quarantines are hotspots for disease

Western Nepal may be seeing spike in COVID-19 as returnees from India head home without tests

Ramu Sapkota in Gulmi and Kamal Paudel in Baglung

Nepal’s new budget has allocated Rs2 billion to improve healthcare facilities, that is money urgently needed in western Nepal where the public health infrastructure remains fragile to the point that school buildings have been used as risky makeshift quarantine centres.

Here in Gulmi and Baglung districts, the classrooms serving as quarantine centres are used to isolate Nepalis who have returned from India after losing their jobs. Many lack proper medical equipment, food, drinking water and sanitation facilities.

Some are so crowded that they are incubators to the virus itself. Despite government directives to ensure proper quarantine measures, none have been implemented so far in these makeshift centres.

For example, the guidelines stipulate that every 100 people in quarantine must have at least one doctor, one nurse and one paramedic. They must get health checks twice a day to see if they have fever, and should be referred to hospitals if they develop symptoms.

Kathmandu Secondary School in Gulmi of the Nepal Education Board, which has received letters from authorities instructing it to quarantine students who have been in contact with infected persons.

As India relaxes its lockdown, tens of thousands more Nepalis have been departing at the border every day and many of them will find their way up to Gulmi and Baglung - two districts with some of the highest out-migration rates in Nepal.

Khanal also says the lack of support from the municipality has forced people to take matters into their own hands. “We have no expertise in quarantine management and we lack logistical support from the municipality,” he adds.

In the same municipality, Kudhaiwali Primary School is isolating 10 returnees from India and faces the same problems of lack of water and proper toilet. Returnees are forced to sleep on the floor and get their own provisions. None of those quarantined has been medically checked.

There is a shortage of health workers, with none available in the 91 quarantine centres and one municipal isolation ward in Mustang. Mayor Sumanta Sapkota says, “We requested the provincial government to provide one MBBS qualified doctor, but have received no response so far.”

As of now, 599 people have arrived in Muskot from India, while the number is 376 from India and 33 from overseas via Kathmandu airport. With a new wave of one thousand Nepalis expected to arrive from India in Gulmi in the coming week, the district is just not prepared to deal with the numbers.

The national government has set aside Rs10 million for relief to vulnerable families, including medical equipment and other paraphernalia. Most of that money has been spent, and there is nothing left for the upkeep of quarantine centres.

Baglung district is also in danger of being overwhelmed by a new influx of returns from India. In Gorkha, Tribhuvan Secondary School has 17 people and Mannasa Basic School houses nine, some of whom are children.

“Medical tests have been done, and many are crammed into one room and forced to use the same taps and toilets. Those in isolation have to manage food and water by themselves,” says Tham Bahadur BK who made a difficult journey back from India.

Chief Consultant of Sukruja Tropical and Infectious Disease Hospital in Kathmandu, Rupa Bastola says the unhealthy and crowded conditions do not just expose healthy people to the virus, but they could also contract other infections including dengue, malaria, diarrhoea and tuberculosis.

“We should actually be pushing for home quarantine because it will be safer, and only those with COVID-19 symptoms should be taken to hospitals isolation wards,” says Bastola.

Two years ago, the government had stipulated that every one of the 90 municipalities in Nepal have at least one MBBS doctor, but that policy never got implemented.

Districts like Gulmi are now suffering because of the lack of trained medical professionals during the pandemic.

The DPO of the Epidemiology and Disease Control Department in Kathmandu, Rabin Ram Malla says the whole of western Nepal is in danger of being hit by a second wave of COVID-19 spread.

In Nepal, the government has asked local governments to arrange for quarantine facilities.

“Migrant workers are very important to the economy and need to be reached out to as soon as possible,” says Limbu.
Build back greener

Five reasons why Nepal’s COVID-19 recovery should be green

Bishwa Nath Oli, Maheshwar Dhakal and Rudriksha Rai Parajuli

As Nepal and the world face unprecedented risks and hardships due to the coronavirus, we are all focused on immediate responses to the pandemic. The crisis highlights how vulnerable we all are to over-exploitation of our natural environment, and the increase in the risk of transmission of animal diseases. As we mark World Environment Day on Friday 5 June with the theme ‘biodiversity’, our attention is drawn to reduce such vulnerabilities and to use economic recovery efforts to ‘build back greener’. This is particularly important for Nepal, whose economy is highly reliant on natural resources, whether in agriculture, forestry, hydropower or nature-based tourism.

All four sectors have been impacted adversely by the coronavirus lockdown, adding to existing environmental pressures and creating real hardships for millions.

Day for day, the country faces a three-pronged challenge. First, to bring the pandemic under control, and to do so in the shortest possible time. Second, to support people and businesses that have been hit hard by the restrictions. Third, to build back in a more sustainable and resilient manner.

For example, the cancellation of MI Everest expedition has brought the economies of towns like Namche Bazaar to a grinding halt, adding to the existing risks from climate change.

“As the government forges efforts to build back the economy amidst coronavirus crisis, these are important times to think ahead and consider options that enable us to also build back greener and better,” says Field Stashed Zverov, World Bank Country Manager for Nepal. “This will help contribute to the sustainable development of Nepal, in ensuring long-term social, economic and environmental co-benefits to build prosperity and resilience of Nepal.”

Growing back greener may seem to be something for the future, given that millions of people are only just beginning to recover from the loss of their livelihoods. However, there is increasing recognition that growing back cleaner can generate jobs now – while ensuring that the recovery is sustainable.

Here are five reasons why this approach is very applicable to Nepal:

1. **Resilience.** Investment in rescue control and cluster working systems can be effective and can save up to 80 per cent of lives, according to the World Resources Institute. Such protection can also be built quickly and cheaply, not only to reduce vulnerabilities but also to reduce the impact on the environment. This has allowed countries to build better infrastructure, market access, and insurance and reduce costs associated with such measures.

2. **Clean energy.** Nepal’s substantial hydropower, solar and geothermal resources can be used to create sustainable jobs that have positive economic returns. Global surveys show that every $1 invested in renewable energy and energy efficiency brings long-term benefits; even in the US, generating 12 jobs for every $1 invested. By sustaining reforms for clean energy development as part of COVID recovery, Nepal can secure international investment and create recovery jobs that fuel a greener recovery.

3. **Nature-based Solutions.** Nepal is abundant and sustainable examples of nature-based solutions can help protect and sustain the millions of flora and fauna that exist in the country. These solutions include water harvesting, reforestation, and agroforestry, which can provide economic opportunities for farmers and landowners while also protecting and restoring natural ecosystems.

4. **Green Policies.** Incentives are needed for green job creation by providing grants and other mechanisms to encourage businesses to move to greener sectors. These can include tax breaks, subsidies, and other financial incentives. Green policies can also ensure protection of ecosystems and the rights of communities that depend on them. The latter can be a key driver for sustainable development in the post-COVID recovery.

5. **Cooperation.** Green recovery of all levels is critical to respond effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the national level, cooperation is needed between local, provincial and federal governments, and between the private and public sectors. At the regional level, cooperation and coordination in Nepal and the Himalayas, says UNDP Director General Gerd Miller, can help achieve the goals.

*Nepal’s force is its youth, several hundred used to quit the country daily before COVID. As we write, thousands are returning looking for livelihoods and hope*, says UNDP Resident Representative Ayush Lee. Nepal is full of nature-based opportunities that can provide jobs to connect nature and technology to create livelihoods. Recovery efforts should seize that chance to meaningfully engage the Nepali youth, girls and boys alike, so that they become resilient.

The local government can act by promoting solar energy, water harvesting, and reforestation through finance and co-financing. This also provides a viable opportunity for private sector investments. We need to meet these challenges with a meaningful and sustainable recovery package.

Nepal is already investing in developing many of these natural resources, using both domestic and international sources. However, investments in COVID-19 economic recovery efforts provide both the need and the opportunity to look for more innovative forms of financing. These could include issuing green bonds for job-intensive green infrastructure and developing financial instruments for risk mitigation.

In addition, addressing additional climate finance for renewable energy, like Nepal’s Central Renewable Energy Fund or raising revenues through the Forest Development Fund can help support the green recovery and meet Nepal’s sustainable development and climate commitments while creating the jobs that help the country back on the path to a Prosperous Nepal and Happy Nepal.

Vanya Laxi, Honorary Country Director of Oxfam Nepal, says: “The UK is already supporting Nepal to build its resilience, improving health and early warning systems, supporting disaster management and building climate resilient infrastructure for the most vulnerable. At the same time the UK is also working with Nepal to develop its hydropower, solar power and forestry resources. We now want to adapt this work to support Nepal create sustainable jobs and ‘green its recovery’ so it can act as a global example of sustainable, low carbon response from the coronavirus pandemic.”

Bishwa Nath Oli (SP) Secretary of the Ministry of Forestry and Indigenous, Maheshwar Dhakal (SP) Secretary of the Ministry of Forest and Environment, and Muddhakaru Rai Parajuli (SP) Lok Sabha member, are in Nepal for official policy talks, and it is supported by the Ministry of Forest and Environment, Himalayan Finance, Himalayan Development, United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank.