We are being tested

Nepal has been spared the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic so far, and Kathmandu Valley has been among the least affected areas of the country. But there has been a worrying increase in the capital since the lockdown was partially eased two weeks ago.

The detection of 23 new cases on Wednesday has brought the tally to 288, with 196 in Kathmandu, 32 in Lalitpur and 60 in Bhaktapur. From Thursday, three wards of Lalitpur’s Maharajgunj Municipality have been put under strict lockdown after nine people were tested positive in those localities this week.

Public health officer Tek Raj Ojha said the nine were all returnees from abroad, patients at hospitals, and two were health workers themselves. They have been kept in isolation, and all are asymptomatic.

“Until we can conduct mass testing and find out where they were infected, we cannot say that there is community transmission,” Ojha says. Forty others who had been in contact have been traced and are being tested.

The three wards of the municipality are back in lockdown with all shops closed, although provisions stores and pharmacies are allowed to open from 7:00 AM. The daily bombardment of total new cases does sound alarming. However, Nepal’s PCR test rate per capita is one of the highest in South Asia, the fatality rate of 0.2% is one of the lowest, hospitalisation and ICU admissions are normal. Nepal’s positivity rate is at 8% for PCR, little lower than India at 9%.

The Ministry of Health and its agencies keep track of the trends, but make blunders. For example, on two days last week several labs showed 100% positive cases among those in PCR tests. The daily tallies are transmitted by labs at 1 PM to the National Public Health Laboratory, then to the Epidemiology and Disease Control Department, which then passes them on to the Health Emergency Operation Centre at the Ministry of Health, which then announces them at a daily press briefing. None of the agencies detected the anomaly.

After it created a stir on social media, the government finally admitted that there had been an “error in the submission” of the figures by the labs which had bundled all positive cases without giving the total samples tested.

Teaching Hospital’s Niranjana Shah says he had tested 340 samples on 1 July of which 214 were positive. “But the Ministry published the table with only the positive figures without the total numbers tested,” he said.

Faced with the growing numbers in Kathmandu, the government is now increasing surveillance testing in crowded areas to confirm if there is community transmission. Although not all the results have come in, as far they show that the virus is not spreading in this way yet.

However, public health experts warn that Nepal should look at worrying trends in India. The country recorded its highest ever daily new cases with 26,000 positives on Wednesday — two weeks after the government loosened its lockdown. This brings India’s total caseload to 770,000 with 21,000 fatalities.

More worryingly, the daily cases are now spiking in states bordering Nepal. West Bengal now has 807 deaths from COVID-19, and Uttar Pradesh also has 800 and counting. And even though these numbers are small compared to India’s total population size, experts say it shows how quickly COVID-19 can spread in crowded cities where citizens do not comply with precautions.

Kamal Sapkota
Open and shut case

Nearing the 18th week of the lockdown is a decisive milestone to take stock of what India and Nepal is positioned vis-a-vis the coronavirus pandemic. The discussions are shifting across the world, with some countries like the United States "kneeling in the first wave," while the country's top infectious diseases expert Anthony Fauci described it this week. India's President Ram Nath Kovind, who recently tested positiv...
Light at the end of the Melamchi tunnel

Surendra Phuyal in Sindhupalchok

Nearly 25 years after it was first mooted, there is light at the end of the tunnel for Melamchi, Nepal’s biggest and most expensive infrastructure project that will pipe glacier water from Langtang National Park to Kathmandu Valley. The $1.4 billion undertaking has been under construction for several years, but government interference, corruption, and extension have taken their toll.

The headworks construction was now half finished here at Ambhuarka, 70km by road north of Kathmandu where the roar of the Melamchi River drains out the sound of excavators that will allow the water into the tunnel.

On Sunday, the project sent water 800m down the tunnel to its first adit tunnel as a test from the overflow reservoir at Ambhuarka. At this rate, project officials say the first Melamchi water could flow down to Melamchi by September.

They say 96% of the 26.5km long tunnel and the treatment plants at Sindhupalchok in Kathmandu Valley are complete. Kathmandu roads have been dug up and used to be shielded in a perpetual pall of dust as new water mains were laid to distribute the water when it arrives.

The new target date for consumers to actually get Melamchi water flowing through their pipes is late 2020, but even that could be delayed due to the COVID-19 lockdown.

The Melamchi Water Supply Project is the largest infrastructure scheme in Nepal today, and with a $800 million price tag, including the future extension, the costliest as well. Its 26.5km-long and 3.7m-wide tunnel in Phase 1 is the second longest tunnel for water supply in Asia.

It is being built with a soft loan from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and will bring 170 million litres a day to Kathmandu. A proposed Phase 2 of the project could also connect the Yangri and Larke Khola through two more tunnels and nearly triple the daily water flow (see map).

The project has been plagued by chronic delays due to political meddling, the 2015 earthquake, the Indian blockade and most recently by the COVID-19 lockdown. It was 2019 when a Chinese contractor finally started digging the tunnel but could only finish 6km in three years. It was replaced by the Italian CMC di Ravenna company which took over where the Chinese had left off. The earthquake and blockade led to more delays.

But the project could not meet its completion date of March 2018 because the government cancelled CMC di Ravenna’s contract, reportedly because it refused to pay extortion to bureaucrats in Singh Durbar. China’s Sinohydro then took over, and had been rushing to catch up with the schedule when the COVID-19 lockdown hit.

Contrary to popular belief, the water will not be gushing through the tunnel. In fact, it has a gradient of only 1% between the intake in Melamchi and the outlet in Sindhupalchok, giving it a water velocity of only 0.1m/second which means it will take 44 hours for the water to complete its underground journey.

This is the monsoon, and the water flow in the Melamchi makes it a raging torrent. However, in the dry season flow goes down to 2.4 cubic meters per second (cusecs) of which only 2 cusecs of water will be diverted into the tunnel. There are 1.5 km of access tunnels located near the intake in Ambhuarka, in Gyalshum and Sindhupalchok.

On 5 July, the first water was let into the tunnel amidst a religious ceremony. Tirtha Khatri of the Melamchi project said: “This is a milestone, we will be doing more tests and hopefully water will reach Kathmandu by September.”

However, engineer Shekhar Khanal said there still a lot of unfinished work that will take months. His estimate for water to reach Kathmandu: early 2021.
The interface of politics and science

Nepal's politicians study neither biology nor political science, and we are paying the price during this pandemic.
US visa rule leaves Nepali students in a lurch

Thousands of Nepali students in the US may have to return if colleges go fully online

Pratishtha Rijal

The sudden announcement by the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) on measures to cut international students will not be issued visas if they are enrolled in schools that solely offer online classes. This has left thousands of students from Nepal in a lurch.

The move, which says students already enrolled in such schools or sponsored by them, or take measures such as transferring to schools with part or complete in-person instruction, will be allowed to remain in the US.

Between 2017 and 2018, the number of Nepali students studying in the US rose by 14.3%, the highest growth among international students studying in the US during this period. In 2019, over 13,000 Nepali students were enrolled in colleges and universities across the US.

Currently, one-third of all college students in the United States take at least one online course. About 10% of all US colleges and universities are planning to operate fully online, including Harvard University which is only conducting online classes, even for students who want to attend.

About 10,000 Nepali students may be affected by this rule. No one interviewed by the Tribune expressed worry about the students' desire to return home.

One Nepali student at Mount Holyoke college in Massachusetts said she must return to Nepal as her college is holding only online courses, but Nepal is under lockdowns and not open for regular international flights. She says, “There are no flights and even charters are ridiculously expensive and hard to book. And I have to test for COVID-19, which is so hard to access in the US unless you are actually very sick. By travelling, I am risking exposure to myself and my entire family.”

Only students enrolled in in-person training programs with in-person instruction or hybrid programs will receive visas or be able to maintain their visas as long as they take only “one class or three credit hours online,” the ICE announcement said.

Nepalese student at Penn State University has opted to learn remotely even though PSU is offering in-person instruction. She explains, “If COVID-19 cases spike and my university switches to online operations, I might get deported. This new policy adds to the uncertainty and panic. International students were already feeling about their academic plans and visa status.”

A stable option seems to be hybrid instruction — a mix of in-person and online classes. ICE will allow students to keep their student visas as long as they are “not taking an entirely online course load” and are making “normal progress in their degree programs.” This would allow US colleges and universities to primarily operate online and halt the spread of COVID-19 while being in-person on surface, therefore retaining international students.

However, many Nepali students that Nepal Times contacted are doubtful about hybrid instruction as well.

A student at Dickenson College in Pennsylvania says, “I am an F-1 Visa so this impacts me directly. I might have to leave the US if Dickinson switches to remote learning. I was planning on applying to grad school but this throws everything up in the air.”

ICE’s announcement arrives shortly after H-1B visas were suspended, barring hundreds of thousands of foreign workers from working in the US. This suspension severely affected Nepali, the fifth largest foreigner community to receive H-1B visas between 2012 and 2018.

The general anti-immigrant rhetoric adopted by the Trump administration was already making Nepali students wary of the United States, and many now say they may be applying to European or Australian universities.

A Nepali PhD student at the University of Pennsylvania says: “The immigration process in the US is very confusing, and the communication has been terribly inconsistent. International students and scholars can’t see as people with dreams and goals, but rather as some remote entity that the government can just slap any rule on or they wish.”

At Colorado State University, another Nepali student is also outraged: “I am appalled by how oblivious these rules and regulations are to the fact that we’re living through a pandemic and many students don’t have any means of getting back home.”

Reports in the media with international students from other countries also show that the ICE’s new rules have forced them to reorganize their plans to study in the United States. Reports have said that this will ultimately hurt American universities.

International students contributed an estimated $45 billion to the US economy in 2018-2019, and the ICE’s new announcement directly contradicts efforts by American colleges to attract international students.

A Nepali Master’s student at the University of Massachusetts Lowell summed up the mood: “I should have gone to Australia rather than come to a country that clearly doesn’t want me.”

Elshad Airways

Elshad Airways is gradually resuming services to more destinations across global network following the easing of travel restrictions by the US regulatory authorities and robust travel demand by citizens and residents. Through July and August, the airline plans to fly to 56 destinations worldwide.

NIBL Bank

NIBL Bank has concluded a Special General Meeting after its proposal to acquire Kathmandu Development Bank. With the acquisition, NIBL Bank’s total capital will be valued at Rs 64.84 billion, while its reserves will be valued at Rs 30.15 billion. The bank has also launched NIBL Green Fixed Deposit, where customers will have a qualifying start of their name for every new NIBL Green Fixed Deposit opened.

Ford Endeavour

Ford has introduced the 2020 Endeavour with a new 2.0-litre EcoBlue engine and a 10-Speed Automatic Transmission. The new Ford SUV allows up to 15% improvement in fuel efficiency.

Sunrise Bank

Sunrise Bank Limited and Australia-based WBC Overseas Finance Limited have signed an agreement to provide a financial facility over the Royal Remittance service, through which Nepali living in Australia will be able to send money to their relatives and friends in Nepal.

Daraz & Esewa touch

Daraz has joined hands with Esewa to enable users to top-up for goods bought on the Daraz App via the digital wallet service in an effort to reduce the time spent in the checkout process and to improve digital security. To use the e-wallet feature on Daraz, customers will need to link their e-wallet amount to their Daraz account.

Ncell

Ncell has introduced a new offer for Ncell Postpaid customers under its new ‘Momo Theme Plan’. It has made the option to be connected to the internet at home or on-the-move available at a discounted rate. Interested customers can now enjoy ncell postpaid access to YouTube without the worry of consuming heavy data at a cost of Rs 120.

Nepal Ventilator Service

The first batch of ventilators, which has been sent to the province, has been equipped to treat the most-affected
Events

Sunday Sessions
In the ongoing talk series, readers and writers join journalists Pratibha Tewdekar in conversation about writing, expression, and meaningful communication. This week, writer and educator Niranjan Kulkarni will be talking about issues faced by the LGBTQ+ community. Tune in to the livestream on the Facebook page of the Quintessential Copy Factory. Page 72, July 10

Online Archives

Nature Picture Library
The Nature Picture Library provides access to more than 500,000 images and videos covering every aspect of the natural world: animals, plants, landscapes, environmental issues, marine life, pets and native peoples. Browse through the galleries.

King Falls AM
A bimonthly podcast, King Fall AM features interviews on a variety of topics and lectures, and other conversations that the podcast's Facebook page post in the form of text, photos, and podcasts.

British Council Library
The British Council Digital Library is making it easier to download books for free and start listening to them on the go. Sign up for free and unlimited access to books, audiobooks, newspapers, magazines, comics, and short films from around the world. Registrations are free until 31 March 2021. View British Council Nepal's Facebook page for more details and register at bit.ly/BCNLIBRARY

Online Archives

Katha Treks
Some of Katha's memorable plays are now on YouTube. Watch them online now! Katha’s plays are also available in print and at Katha’s website.

Virtual Street Festivals
Saigon's colorful street fests and cultural events are a virtual tour of the city, which is a virtual tour of the world. The celebrations include the La Tomatina food fight in Spain, Oktoberfest in Germany, and the Mardi Gras celebration in New Orleans.

Air Quality Index

Kathmandu, 3 - 9 July

We have been breathing moderately healthy air for the last few days, thanks to the decrease in the number of vehicles on the road. Daily Air Quality Index (AQI) of Kathmandu city center will hover between 50 and 120 throughout the week.

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

Koshi River

Most sick-minded people can easily do without straw. Removing single-use plastic straws doesn’t require too much of an effort as only water bottles can have a huge impact on the environment. Metal straws really are way better for the environment. They are durable and can be washed and used more than 1000 times. They are also reusable and need not be thrown in the trash. If you are using straws, then you are doing great for the environment. If you are not using straws, then you need to try straws. If you are sick-minded, then you are doing it right. If you are doing it wrong, then you need to try straws. If you are doing it correctly, then you are doing it right. If you are doing it wrong, then you need to try straws. If you are doing it correctly, then you are doing it right.

QR Code

Our Pick

The 2016 movie based on the book of the same name, The Leftovers features a parapsychologist investigating the mysterious disappearances of his former colleagues. The series is a must-watch for anyone interested in paranormal activity.

Quarantine Diaries

Little Tibet
Escape the monsoon rain with a piping hot bowl of noodle dumpling soup, dumplings, momos, and momos. Find them on Facebook under Little Tibet.

Sweet Fix
Choose a pastry and a cup of tea or coffee, and enjoy a sweet and savory meal in the comfort of your home. Get the menu on Facebook under Sweet Fix.

Praadha
Enjoy Praadha’s selection of special dishes and continental cuisine, along with a variety of delicious Italian dishes. Go to Foodmantra for details.

Saigon Pho
Experience ultra-fresh flavours of Vietnamese dishes, prepared by Vietnamese chefs. Try the 100% pure, Abaca rice noodles with the creamy fish cake and freshly baked broth. Look at the menu on their Facebook page for more details.

Qatar Airways

Going places together - qatarairways.com

This is the time during the monsoon when the flight is an essential part of the lifestyle in Mumbai. The plane also becomes a hidden source of income when pilotsCouple traveling in a luxury car. The road is covered by fog and the car is traveling at a slow pace. The fog covers the entire view, making it difficult to see anything in the distance.

Weekly Planner

Next week, we will be looking at the impact of technology on the way we communicate, with a focus on social media and its influence on our daily lives.
Helping hand for repatriated Nepali workers

The International Labour Organization steps in to help Nepal manage returning overseas workers

There should be a simple rule to deal with interventions in Nepal’s migration sector before they happen. As a first step, the government needs to ensure that interventions do not harm the interests of the migrant workers. However, the gap between policies and the ground reality is so wide that the most vulnerable migrants often fall between the cracks. Nepal announced free fibro-medicines, but workers still pay expenses to the amount of some dollars. The government has not been able to replicate this in other countries.

The ILO’s Nepal Country Director Richard Howard (below) spoke to Upasana Khasa at Nepal Times about the overall situation of migrant workers during the pandemic. The government has an obligation to support all workers regardless of their legal status. Many left voluntarily because of the bans in place and they did not have alternative options domestically and now they are stuck. It might be a tough sell for workers to return home.

Some migrants cannot afford to leave and even if the Foreign Employment Welfare Fund (FEWF) is mobilized to provide them with valid labour approvals who are the most vulnerable. Should we think beyond the Fund?

The government has an obligation to support all workers regardless of their legal status. Many left voluntarily because of the bans in place and they did not have alternative options domestically and now they are stuck. It might be a tough sell for workers to return home. Others are switching occupations, and transitions are easy only in some cases and maybe not in others. Even if workers return to Nepal, it is also the obligation of the government to help towards the demands of the global market as well because migration is not going to go away.

Nepal Times: What is so unique about this project?
Richard Howard: This is not a new project, but the key thing about this approach is the support from the Swiss government to help with migrant missions abroad for migrant workers during normal times. There are lessons to learn from countries like Sri Lanka and Philippines on their one-country team approach to support migrants in the destination country. In the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, even before the pandemic, has been keen on moving in that direction to strengthen Nepal’s missions abroad. It takes time to bring such changes, especially in the Gulf and Malaysia where the volume of workers is high. When COVID-19 came about, it showed more than ever the need to have services in place. We often realize what we don’t have during a crisis, and this pushed us to think about what we could do this year to help the missions respond better to the needs of the large share of vulnerable migrants.

What about countries where Nepal does not have embassies?
We had to start where the numbers are the biggest and we may have to make adjustments as we go along, such as add countries, but we need to move quickly. There are also other countries with stranded migrants even if the numbers are smaller and without missions where Nepal can tweak the model in response to the context and work with different types of partners there.

Some migrants cannot afford to leave, and even if the Foreign Employment Welfare Fund (FEWF) is mobilized, it would exclude those without valid labour approvals who are the most vulnerable. Should we think beyond the Fund?

The government has an obligation to support all workers regardless of their legal status. Many left voluntarily because of the bans in place and they did not have alternative options domestically and now they are stuck. It might be a tough sell for workers to return home. Others are switching occupations, and transitions are easy only in some cases and maybe not in others. Even if workers return to Nepal, it is also the obligation of the government to help towards the demands of the global market as well because migration is not going to go away. Creating 0.5-1 million jobs domestically takes long-term structural changes that will take years, so migration should continue to be a part of the strategy. We should not inhibit migration, but it has to be done in industries considered safe with a right kind of protection and we need to be creative in identifying new opportunities. The adjustments that need to be made in the recruitment process such as pre-departure training and medical tests are nominal changes. But it has to be done on a case by case basis depending on the situation of the destination country. We are all in unknown territory now, and it is hard to know what is coming. But the larger lesson is that social protection needs to be provided to migrant workers, both while working overseas and after their return. This should be built into ILAs and really implemented.

Bilateral, regional and global platforms exist on migration but what has their role been in the context of the pandemic? Do we need to rethink them?

Bilateral, regional and global platforms exist on migration but their role has been in the context of the pandemic. Do we need to rethink them?

The International Labour Organization exists on migration but what has their role been in the context of the pandemic? Do we need to rethink them?
Seema Subedi and Raju Bhandari

A

fter the COVID-19 pandemic struck Early in 2020, it was not immediately apparent that the world would turn upside-down as it did. As February came and went, people’s plans all over the world would have turned out to be the worse, including ours. The two of us had been in the United States to pursue graduate degrees, and were scheduled to return to Nepal on 19 May. But the flights had been grounded with Nepal in lockdown, and there was no word about when airports would reopen for regular flights.

Finally, Nepal started repatriation flights for its nationals on 15 June and full flight support was offered to us by JFK in New York on a Turkish Airlines charter flight to Kathmandu via Istanbul on 23 June.

We were at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, and although the United States has the highest number of cases and fatalities in the world today, the pandemic did not have the same degree of intensity all over the country.

Maryland state, in fact, was praised for being one of the first off the mark in COVID-19 response and for handling the pandemic as it evolved and spread on the east coast. Governor Larry Hogan, for instance, constantly took suggestions from experts from Johns Hopkins University.

In fact, the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Centre is regarded as the most credible global resource on the spread of the pandemic, and the figures in its live interactive website is quoted by academics and the media all over the world.

Maryland detected its first case in Maryland on 5 March, but within four days the state had passed an emergency legislation to shut down public schools, restaurants, bars, casinos, betting facilities, and other non-essential businesses.

Alongside that, the focus was primarily on contact tracing, and steps were taken to boost the health care work force. Hospital bed capacity was increased by 68,000, the authorities allowed interstate practice, and even let clinicians to practice without reinstituting their inactive license.

The federal government was also aware of the financial fallout of the lockdown on individuals and businesses. It provided a $1,200 cheque to all tax-paying residents, and gave unemployment benefits for those who lost jobs in proportion to income.

The governor ordered that tenants would be supported if unable to pay rent, and be ordered a bar on evictions by landlords and utility shutoffs for non-payment of bills.

By 30 March, as the cases multiplied, the governor issued a stay-at-home order, as well as a $175 million economic relief package for workers and small businesses. Essential functions like picking food, seeking urgent medical care, reporting to essential job or engaging in outdoor recreation within a safe distance from others, were allowed.

Ride-sharing services continued because the system is digitised and requires no touching or direct interaction. Some Uber drivers even put a plastic screen between the front and the back seats. Restaurants were open for take-out and contactless delivery. These measures ensured that people had essential supplies.

More importantly, the use of cloth face coverings over nose and mouth in public places like grocery stores, pharmacies and drug stores were enforced. Shores followed guidelines like maintaining physical distancing, limiting the number of people and sanitising shopping carts.

On 8 May, the seven-day average cases reached a peak with 1,098 cases, and after that steadily decreased for a week reaching 950 cases on 13 May. The stay-at-home order was changed to a safer-at-home suggestion, with gradual reopening of retail, manufacturing, worship houses, outdoor dining and outdoor activities like sports and camps.

One remarkable action alongside the easing of lockdown was to focus on testing asymptomatic cases. Free PCR testing sites were established, and by 6 June the positivity rate (7-day average reported) dropped to 9.6% for the first time since late March.

Those who watch general headlines on the news about the worrying trends in the United States, will be surprised to note that in June Maryland was gradually reopening indoor dining, outdoor amusement parks, workplaces and businesses. For frontline health care workers in the long-term care management, weekly PCR tests were enforced. At present, Maryland is one of the states that has met the positivity rate recommendations of 5% or below by the World Health Organization (WHO).

What worked was the focus on stringent testing, strict contact tracing, boosting healthcare personnel, and assistance to families with cash allowances. Later, as things improved, the restrictions were eased and the focus shifted to testing asymptomatic cases and enforcing precautionary measures.

As the day approached for our flight back to Nepal, we had been told that we need PCR tests before boarding to avoid a 14-day quarantine in Kathmandu on arrival, and would be eligible to go home quarantine without having to stay in a holding centre or hotel.

Again, things were so well organised that we got free PCR tests from the state of Maryland, and had negative certificated before boarding. Those without either PCR or RDT tests were required to present a certificate from a doctor that they were symptoms free. Although we had been told that we needed to present these at check-in, however, no one asked us for them before flying.

JFK airport was as crowded as it normally, and passengers all wore masks and maintained physical separation. Some were even wearing face shields and gloves, and were constantly using hand sanitisers. Passengers were very disciplined and keeping 6 feet distance even though there were no floor markers with circles.

The flight back from JFK to Istanbul was full of mostly elderly Nepalis, and we assumed they were parents who had been stranded in the US while visiting their families. Contrary to our expectations middle seats were not kept vacant to maintain distance, and all seats were occupied. All passengers kept their masks on and seemed to be aware of the need to maintain touching.

Prior to being seated, airline staff sanitised our hands, provided a packet including a sanitiser bottle, mask and wipes. All meals were provided with both a mask and sanitised wars, although they were not provided as in regular commercial flights. Every meal was the same (cheese/vegetable sandwich) even though we had been asked about our meal preference (veg/non-veg) while purchasing our tickets.

This food was fine for us, but we observed that many elderly passengers did not eat and probably went hungry throughout the long flight back to Nepal. There was no refilling of glasses or additional servings of fluids, and water was only provided to those who had their own bottles.

All public surfaces, door knobs and restrooms were cleaned frequently by cabin crew wearing personal protective equipment, masks and gowns. As with most flights in and out of Nepal, infrequent flies looked lost and were not accustomed to seeing the lavatories. Even when the cabin crew tried to help, there would be a language barrier among some elderly Nepalis.

There was a two-hour layover at Istanbul Airport, however passengers were required to stay on board and the same aircraft flew on to Kathmandu with a different set of crew. This was a good precaution since the plane did not have to be sanitised again, and passengers did not face the risk of additional exposure at the terminal building.

However, it did mean that passengers were cooped up in the same place for a long time. Medical advice is for passengers to stretch frequently during prolonged flights to prevent clot formations in the legs that can eventually lead to deep vein thrombosis.

This was especially important since many of the passengers were elderly and it was a straight 18 hours in the air with two hours inside the plane on the ground in Istanbul.

After takeoff from Istanbul, and as we reached Kathmandu the crew distributed the Traveller Public Health Declaration Form which was different from the Nepal Embassy’s form, but requested similar information about symptoms if any, and test results.

After landing at Kathmandu, airport health staff came on board first and made announcements about the process of disembarkation, especially about physical distancing measures and moving to holding centres. However, we noticed that most passengers were barely listening because...
they were busy turning on their phones to make family calls.

Much more effective would have been if an arrival video with instructions could have been screened while the plane was on descent to Kathmandu. Passengers were allowed to deplane after the announcements, and taken on ramp buses carrying only 30 passengers each to queues at the arrival terminal.

Here, we were required to submit two forms, the Health Declaration Form (available from the Nepal Embassy website) and the Traveler Public Health Declaration Form which had been distributed on the plane. Many elderly passengers had not filled the forms, and this resulted in passengers moving through the queues at a slow pace. It was the process of submitting the forms and immigration took two hours. The circles on the floor did help in keeping separation with other passengers.

The thermal gun temperature checks were taken after the forms were submitted, and then it was on to the immigration queue. The wait there and in the ‘metal free’ x-ray check was not much longer than during normal times at Kathmandu Airport.

The baggage trolley was as chaotic as it used to be before the lockdown, because the luggage conveyors were not working. Passengers crowded around in search of their bags. No longer were people keeping a safe distance. What surprised us was that the same passengers who stood in disciplined queues at JFK maintaining separation, were not following the rules at Kathmandu airport. The only saving grace was that since this was the only flight arriving the baggage area was not crowded.

Kathmandu airport is notorious for its usually and dirty toilets, and it was disappointing to see that despite all the reported improvements at the airport, the toilets were as dirty as ever. The washroom had no water, and there was no safe drinking water anywhere in the arrival terminal.

The elderly, already at greater risk of infection, were now tired, jetlagged and hungry. They also had not had enough water to counter the dehydration on the long flight. On top of that, they were forced to use a waterless restroom. Welcome home.

Finally getting our luggage, we made it out to buses that were designated by province. This was probably the most efficiently managed part of the arrival process, perhaps because it was handled by the Nepal Army.

The buses took passengers to separate province-wise holding centres which are also managed by the military. For example, passengers going to Kathmandu were taken to Saradithum pictured above.

We were inside the bus for an hour at the airport before driving off to the holding centre. However, just five minutes before reaching Basundhara, the bus took a U-turn and drove back to the airport apparently because some people were missing. So, we were inside the bus for about 2.25 hours for a ride that was just actually about half an hour.

Before getting off there were three staff assigned to take down our names and addresses. By this time, we had provided the same information four times during this journey. Not only was this a waste of time and inefficient, but it also exposed staff to unnecessary risk.

Here is a checklist of what passengers should expect when they reach the holding centres:

**Step 1:** Mandatory hand-washing on arrival.

**Step 2:** Queue up and have temperature taken and hands sanitised.

**Step 3:** Staff wearing plastic shields once more collect information from passengers.

**Step 4:** An NPCI prepaid SIM card is distributed in all passengers not just so they can all receive and also so our whereabouts can be monitored through geo-location.

**Step 5:** Passenger passports are scanned.

**Step 6:** Passengers are taken to a waiting room until a guarantor or companion arrives to take them home if they have PCR negative, or to hotel, quarantine if they don’t.

The information collected at the holding centre included temperature, name, age, sex, permanent address, temporary address, type and day of test done different symptoms of COVID-19, as well as information about parents. Once more, we realised that this was information that we had already provided, and this was the fifth time we were giving out the same details.

By this time, some of the passengers were losing patience and venting off steam. They were tired, hungry, thirsty and fed up with repeating the same information over and over again, with the long queues. We were really feeling bad for the elderly people because this housesitting was made unnecessarily difficult and stressful for everyone.

Each passenger is required to have someone to meet them. Guardians and receiving families have to also provide information about themselves and wait in a different area. Each passenger is also photographed with the guardian before going home.

Finally, we were let go. We were very curious and asked why our parents needed to come, as we would not have liked them exposed to the holding centre environment. The staff explained that it was important for contact tracing. Finally, more than seven hours after landing in Kathmandu, we were home.

The days since, we have been thinking about what could have been done better for arrival for the passengers to make it more convenient and less traumatic.

Finally, measures could easily have been taken so that the same information about each passenger was shared right down the line from the Nepali Embassy in Washington right till the holding centre. Why ask the passengers to repeat the same information ad nauseam? The same redundant information was collected multiple times.

Many passengers complained that although they had been tested negative before travel, they might actually have got infected during the 75 hour long process which demanded multiple exposure and interaction at different places and with different people from the airport to the holding centre.

We were surprised to learn that the Ministry of Health actually has the Hamro Swasthyo app which, with some modifications, can be just one electronic form that can be used everywhere for repatriated Nepalis. Making this app comprehensive by incorporating the information of health declaration and traveler declaration form together, it would digitise all the information that we were repeatedly providing on the same system.

Passengers can be told about this app by the Nepal embassies abroad while buying the ticket, and it could be mandatory to have it filled before boarding. For the people who do not own a smart phone or are not able to use the app, the same information can be entered in a web-based system by getting an assistance desk in the airport itself, by using the relevant human resources and logistics.

This would reduce the administrative effort as well as unseaweed exposure and interaction among people, and also save the information digitally to be accessed anywhere from the system.

The Nepal government can take very good individual initiatives, as we know, but lacks the coordination capacity to integrate them, and bundle them seamlessly together for effective implementation. Proper and efficient use of communication tools and technology can easily solve this problem online, make travel more efficient, and also minimise human contact.

The difference with Maryland is that Nepal, despite more than three months of lockdown, still lacks adequate testing, contact tracing and proper management of Nepalis returnees from India. Had there been adequate test evidencing, a decrease in seven-day average case could have been used to ease the lockdown safely.

Unfortunately, we in Nepal are relaxing restrictions despite the number of cases are going up. This is not a wise way to handle the pandemic, and actually reverses all the gains made by the lockdown. For now, the most effective thing the government can do is to increase testing, enforce mask use and physical separation in public places.

This is not easy to do even in America, as we all know. In Kathmandu, the use of masks is surprisingly common (probably because people are used to wearing them because of the pollution) although there is still a lot of crowding the markets and streets.

Wearing a mask reduces transmission by 14.3%, and a physical distance of 1 meter reduces it by 10.2%. The risk decreases with further increasing distance. This information needs to get out to the public in an easy-to-understand way – and not just on the mobile phone rings.

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Half a century after it was criminalised during the hippie era, activities in Nepal are trying to get cannabis legalised.

Medical marijuana

Marijuana is known to have therapeutic effects in per 100 illnesses ranging from cancer and Parkinson’s disease to chronic pain and spinal cord injuries. It is possible to use medicinal (HIV) patients is now getting cannabis regulation following recent

Grass is greener in Nepal

Sonia Awale

Nearly 50 years after American government pressure forced Nepal to outlaw the cultivation and consumption of cannabis, the Himalayan country is trying to bring back an important cash crop that also may have medicinal applications to fight COVID-19.

The pandemic was already apropos to former former law minister Jiba Bahadur Tamang of the ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP) registered a private bill in Parliament to overturn a 1973 ban on cannabis cultivation, sale and consumption.

“Ban is designed for the economic upliftment of poor farmers that depend on the cannabis crop,” says an optimistic Tamang. “So far we have received very positive responses from fellow MPs and I am sure there will be no single vote against it.”

Tamang’s bill proposes formation of a 14-member Marujuana Board chaired by the secretary of the Ministry of Health which will regulate commercial cannabis cultivation, its trade and sale. Individuals above 18 years of age can apply for annual license from the local government or their district to farm cannabis.

The Cannabis indica plant grows wild in Nepal, and especially thrives in the western mountains where the stem, leaves, resin and oil are used in household and medicinal purposes, or said.

The open sale of marijuana in Kathmandu in the 1960s was what drew the hippies to Nepal, and as the counter culture and the anti-Vietnam War movement grew, President Richard Nixon saw it as a security threat.

“America’s public enemy number one is drug abuse,” he said and vowed to wage a “worldwide offensive dealing with the sources of supply as well as Americans stationed abroad wherever they are in the world.”

Kathmandu has become a haven for anti-war “psychonauts,” draft dodgers, and Vietnam veterans. While House recordings from the early 1970s reveal Secretary of State Henry Kissinger warning Nixon: “They come from Nepal to demonstrate against you because up there they can get free pot ... or at least it is legal.”

Running cannabis drive the cultivation and use of this important cash crop underground and into the hands of criminals with police and political protection. Nepal’s subsistence farmers were pushed deeper into poverty, and may even have sparked the Maoist revolution in later years.

Campaigners in Kathmandu say no one senses why Nepal should keep the ban when the Americans who forced it on Nepal have legalised it in 25 states for medical and commercial purposes. The COVID-19 pandemic has added another reason to lift the ban. A Canadian study in April determined that cannabis found in the Cannabis indica plant could block SARS-CoV-2 from entering a person’s body.

Researchers at the University of Nebraska and the Texas Biomedical Research Institute also published a paper detailing the anti-inflammatory properties of chemicals in the cannabis plant that could be useful in treating lung inflammation in COVID-19 patients.

In Israel, clinical trials have been scheduled to use cannabis-derived Cannabidiol (CBD, the non-psychotropic component) in the plant to treat inflammation in COVID-19 patients.

Cannabis has cooling effect and is used in traditional medicine to reduce fever.

Unsurprisingly this aligns with the recent findings, says legalization activist Srijit Kafle. “It’s a strong believer that the use of chemicals in the cannabis plant can lead us to COVID-19 treatment.”

Although these are preliminary findings, they have added a sense of urgency to pro-cannabis activism in Nepal, and if Tamang’s Cannabis Cultivations (Management) Act is endorsed by Parliament, Nepali farmers could benefit.

The bill restricts farmers from cultivating only cannabis in their land and proposes that farmers with more land can use a smaller proportion for cannabis cultivation. It will allow farmers to sell marijuana directly to people with a doctor’s prescription, to pharmaceutical companies approved by the Board, and to authorised agents for export.

Explains Tamang: “Given the international demand for good quality marijuana for medicinal use, farmers here can easily earn up to Rs 1 million a year cultivating it in addition to hemp and other crops. It would reduce out-migration, reduce poverty and encourage tourism.”

Not everyone is happy with the bill to legalise cannabis. Critics say it takes the easy way out, focusing solely on cannabis sale by exporting the raw produce without exploiting indigenous use in traditional medicine. They say it also ignores Nepal’s potential in developing BY products like hemp fibre.

“The bill in its current state is invested in controlling marijuana and making money out of it. This is in fact reinforces bad associated with smoking weed,” says Saurav Dhakal of the sustainable agriculture group, Green Growth. “We should be studying various cannabis strains found in Nepal and build our capacity for value-added products because raw marijuana gives us no competitive edge.”

There is also a distinct lack of awareness about the difference between hemp and marijuana. In fact, cannabis (marijuana) has largely overshadowed the potential of hemp, the strongest natural fibre in the world.

Hemp is a subspecies of cannabis and contains 0.1% or less tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the naturally occurring psychoactive component that gives cannabis its narcotic property. It is used in textile, cosmetic, food, fuel, and even in construction. In its natural state, hemp can help conserve soil fertility and absorbs four-times more carbon dioxide than adult trees.

Marijuana is also a subspecies of cannabis but contains up to 30% THC and is used for recreational smoking. It is known to have therapeutic effect for over 100 illnesses.

“It is very important that we differentiate between hemp and marijuana but the proposed act doesn’t do in precise terms,” says cannabis consultant Kanti Pradhan. “We should make hemp legal for cultivation, consumption and sale. As for marijuana, we are still harbour false perceptions from 50 years ago. Nepal could benefit far more from both marijuana and hemp being legal.”

Medical marijuana now accounts for 7% of the global legal marijuana market, which by 2027 will be worth $76 billion a year, and activists say Nepal can be a major source of these crops.

Despite his reservations, Saurav Dhakal admits that the bill is a step forward: “The good news is that we have a bill in Parliament, people are finally listening to us and discussing cannabis as a beneficial crop rather than a drug. But we need to make sure that legalising cannabis benefits the indebted Nepali farmers.”