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TRIED AND TESTED: A woman getting swab samples taken at a school in Kalikasthan in Kathmandu on Wednesday, as the government conducted surveillance testing to detect community transmission.

BIKRAM RAJ

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 190 in Kathmandu, 53 in Bhaktapur and 45 in Lalitpur districts. From Thursday, three wards of Lalitpur's Mahalaxmi 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 provision stores and pharmacies are allowed to open from 7-9AM.

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 6% for PCRs, little lower than India at 7%.

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 1PM 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 249 samples on 1 July of which 114 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, so 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 rising 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. 🇳🇵

Ramu Sapkota

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Open and shut case

Nearing the 15th week of the lockdown is a decisive milestone to take stock of how Nepal is positioned vis-a-vis the coronavirus pandemic.

The epicentres have been shifting across the world, with some countries like the United States “knee-deep in the first wave”, as the country’s top infectious diseases expert Anthony Fauci described it this week.

Brazil’s President Jair Bolsonaro, who refused to let his country deal seriously with the pandemic even as it became the country with the second highest death toll, himself tested positive this week. In India, the virus has spiked in the country’s metros with record daily cases just after Prime Minister Narendra Modi started relaxing the lockdown last month.



BIKRAM RAI

For the lockdown to mean anything, Nepal needs to test-isolate-trace-treat.

However bad it may seem at the moment, Nepal is not doing too badly. Its PCR test rate in one of the highest in South Asia, the fatality rate is low, hospitalisation and ICU admissions are not above normal.

Public health experts say the positivity rate is going down and the total case load is plateauing.

Physicians, however, are not as optimistic. They have always pooh-poohed the idea that Nepalis have greater immunity because of our diet, or exposure to germs. The reason the case load is low, they say, is because there still have not been enough tests. And they warn that Nepalis are predisposed to diabetes and cardio-vascular diseases, and the prevalence of tuberculosis puts the whole population at high risk. The virus could just be waiting to strike.

But one thing both agree on is that full re-opening is not advisable even after the ‘eased’ lockdown is over on 22 July, and a full scale public awareness campaign should be launched about wearing masks in public and physical separation. The government seems to be listening — on Tuesday it announced fines and punishment for those caught without masks in public.

The dilemma for governments everywhere has been to balance lives and livelihoods. Countries that have lifted lockdowns too early have paid for it with a resurgence, those which maintained strict lockdowns without

widespread testing have squandered the sacrifice made by their citizens. As fear of hunger overcomes the fear of the virus, some leaders opened up dreading public anarchy and loss of political control.

The countries that have done well to quell the virus are the ones where politicians and technocrats have taken the advice of scientists, weighed the pros and cons, communicated clearly with their citizens, and eased restrictions in a carefully calibrated manner.

In Nepal, the government of Prime Minister K P Oli has been so busy with political fire-fighting that his administration has bungled the response. In a quintessentially Nepali way, the government has muddled along with no real plan. Worse, it has allowed greedy politicians, bureaucrats and crony businessmen to profit from the pandemic.

From the very start, it got the wrong testing kits. It was not prepared for the influx of returnees from India, it delayed overseas repatriation flights causing misery to tens of thousands of Nepalis stuck abroad. Even when it got the right PCR kits, they were not compatible with the machines already here. Valuable time was lost, and at one point there were 35,000 swab samples piled up at testing centres.

Even then, it refused to allow private labs to conduct tests. It did not want to listen to specialists who offered a cheap solution — get cartridges for the 100 GeneXpert PCR machines that are already there for TB surveillance.

And the latest scandal this week is that the Ministry of Health has been trying to cover-up its incompetence in the counting process which resulted in some government labs in Patan and Dhangadi showing 100% positivity rate on 1 July and 3 July. It did not even notice the error in its own daily tabulation, and when it did, tried to sweep it under the carpet.

As we go to press on Thursday morning, the total number of confirmed cases have risen to 16,423, with about 8,700 in isolation and 25,000 in quarantine centres. There have been 35 fatalities so far, mostly dying of co-morbidity. Most cases are asymptomatic, and there has been no marked increase in hospitalisation.

The good news is that quarantine centres are emptying as the number of returnees from India goes down.

The bad news is that the number of positive cases in Kathmandu is going up. Surveillance testing of focus groups and in crowded parts of the Valley may show community transmission.

If that is the case, there is only one way out: test-isolate-trace-treat.

ONLINE PACKAGES



THE END OF THE TUNNEL

Nearly 25 years after it was first proposed, there is light at the end of the tunnel for Melamchi. With 99% of the tunnel and the treatment plants at Sundarjal now complete it may be possible to send water to Kathmandu by September. Watch the progress for yourself in this video only at our YouTube channel.

Story: page 3.

OLI-GARCHY

Excellent recounting of the day (‘Nepal PM Oli under pressure to resign’, #1017). This editorial finally answered a lot of questions that have been coming to my mind since morning.

Namrata Sharma

■ Before we become enamoured of the second option, we may want those “second hand TTF” leaders to assure the Junta of their firm plans on how they will work with full transparency, a proper road map, timeline and milestones, their team, to work us through the morass that their own erstwhile leader has put this nation through. What are they going to offer ? Is it the same old stuff remixed? Whether we like it or not, we’re in some deep mess and we know the road out won’t be easy so no more big dreams.

Tashi Sherpa

■ True, Nepal has been recycling the same old failed political bosses forever (‘Bow out’, Editorial, #1017). All they do is enrich themselves and ignore the people and their needs.

Roger Ray

GOKYO

I enjoyed this read (‘Saving Gokyo from itself’, Ang Rita Sherpa, #1017)! Hopefully the right steps will be taken to protect and preserve the beautiful Gokyo Valley for generations to come.

Anna Pelino

■ A very good article highlighting important environmental issues. Having trekked many times in Nepal over two decades I feel sad I may never do so again as I don’t want to contribute to further environmental harm. However there are many trekkers who don’t expect or want ‘western style’ facilities of any kind. I really hope that some kind of balance can be made going forward so trekking can still be enjoyed with environmental impact reduced.

Karen Bowen

■ I visited in 1991. It was so beautiful and peaceful.

Gundel Platz

INDIA-NEPAL-CHINA

A good introspection (‘Gorkhas on the frontline between India and China’, Pratistha Rijal, #1017). We should not take sides between two giants but act as intermediary.

Rajesh Man Shakya

■ The problem with Indians on all matters relating to border conflict is that their only source of information and education is Bollywood style news reporting carried out by state controlled, funded and/or sanctioned media outlets. Take the time to educate yourself and learn about the broader issues please. It’s difficult to understand why the citizens of a country that was colonised for hundreds of years find it difficult to understand the natural and normative reactions of other countries who resist being annexed and colonised. Nepali domestic policy and its sovereignty has been manipulated by India for the many generations. We have had enough.

Bibhuti Willems

COLOURISM IN SOUTH ASIA

I think 90% of the information on TV is filled with Indian channels and advertisement for Indian products (‘Removing ‘fair’ from Fair & Lovely is not enough’, Suvecha Pradhan Tuladhar, #1017). What happens in India, happens in Nepal too. What India sees and believes, Nepal sees and believes in the same way. We asked for it.

Megha Tamang

■ And for so many decades it wasn’t a problem!!

Yukesh Chaudhary

■ In today’s world of political correctness and cancel culture, dropping ‘Fair’ should only be seen as a genius marketing plan and nothing more.

Karmu Lama Sherpa

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING

Gorkhas on the frontline between India and China

by Pratistha Rijal

The clash between Indian and Chinese troops at Ladakh’s Galwan Valley has drawn attention to more than 30,000 Nepali Gorkha soldiers who serve in the Indian Army, many of them deployed in frontline positions along their borders.

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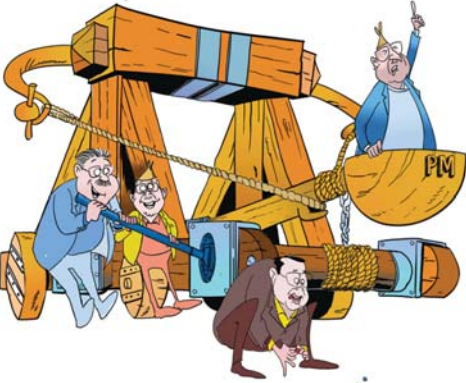


Saving Gokyo from itself

by Ang Rita Sherpa

Join us on a trek to majestic Gokyo Valley in the Himalaya to understand how COVID-19 offers a chance to rethink tourism in Nepal’s most fragile and scenic places. This ‘Nepali Times Weekend Longread’ was the most read story of the week and can still be accessed in our website.

🔍 Most visited online page



Bow out

Editorial

The best option for the ailing PM now is to bow out. What does not inspire much hope is that Oli’s would-be successors are all TTFs (tried, tested, failed) from the past. Read feedback at nepalitimes.com and join the online discussion.

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🐦 Most popular on Twitter

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Even as Nepal braces for the full socio-economic impact of the #COVID19Lockdown, the #monsoon brings the risk of yet another disaster – floods. Read @rijal_diya's report.



Navita Srikant @NavitaSrikant
#FloodRisk in Terai should be high up in priority for both Central and Provincial authorities. Let's settle political crisis this week as humanitarian crisis out of #COVID19 ramifications & #monsoon is knocking doors of #Nepal



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
More than 400 Nepalis in Cyprus signed up to return to Nepal after the onset of the #COVID19Pandemic. But the flights scheduled to bring them home have been repeatedly cancelled as Nepal Airlines remains in the EU #blacklist over aviation safety concerns.



Joe @joe_planet
People forget how many have been unable to return home in this crisis, despite desperately wanting to.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Nepali medical personnel @SeemaSubedi1 @Raju_Bhandaris recount their journey home to #Nepal from #Maryland, US on a repatriation flight in this Saturday's Nepali Times Weekend Longread. Also, lessons from one of best #COVID-19 responding American state.



B @mdbina13
It seems pointless to have a negative PCR upon leaving as each passenger is so much at risk of contracting COVID in 8 hour time frame after landing. Just disheartening to read this scenario time & time again.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Himani Tharu, the first female elephant mahout in the Nepal Army, works within a system unable to welcome gender inclusivity. She faces double discrimination: for being a woman and for belonging to an indigenous community. Read report by @mukeshjee



Sriramthilak Jawahar @sriramtamil
So Sad. People's mindset will change soon. Bravo Himani please don't lose your hope.

10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

In Nepali Times issue #510 9-15 July 2010, the Publisher's Note on the 10th anniversary of the paper listed Nepal's gains in public health, nutrition and environment despite the Maoist War, political instability and corruption. A decade later, our progress has stalled. In fact, the lockdown placed to reduce the spread of COVID-19 has reversed our past achievements: maternal and child mortality have spiked, so has malnutrition with thousands of families forced into poverty due to the continued shutdown. Excerpt:

In the past 20 years, even with the country mired in short-sighted politicking, corruption, war and its aftermath, not everything fell apart. The country's once sub-Saharan levels of maternal mortality have dropped by 40 per cent, under-5 child mortality has been halved, female literacy has nearly doubled and nearly 80 per cent of the population now has access to safe drinking water.

Imagine how much more progress we'd have made if there hadn't been a ruinous war, if the government had been cleaner and more efficient, and we actually ended up spending the development budget to deliver services.



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Light at the end of the Melamchi tunnel



KUNDA DIXIT

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 \$800 million undertaking has been near completion several times, but government interference, corruption and extortion have taken their toll.

The headworks construction is now half finished here at Ambathan 70km by road north of Kathmandu

where the roar of the Melamchi River drowns out the sound of excavators that will allow the water into the tunnel.

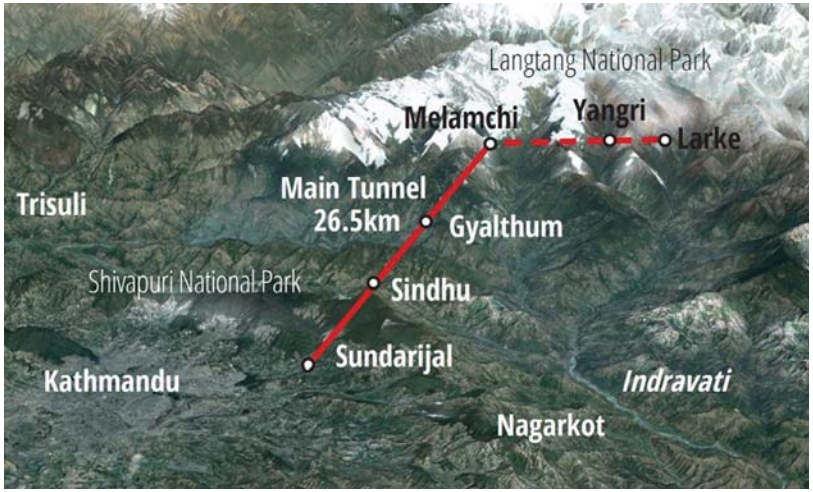
On Sunday, the project sent water 800m down the tunnel to its first adit tunnel as a test from the overflow reservoir at Ambathan. At this rate, project officials say the first Melamchi water could flow down to Melamchi by September.

They say 99% of the 26.5km long tunnel and the treatment plants at Sundarijal in Kathmandu Valley are complete. Kathmandu roads have been dug up and used to be shrouded 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 26.5 km 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 2010 when a Chinese contractor finally started digging the tunnel but could only finish 6.4km 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 Singha Darbar. 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 8m between the intake in Melamchi and the outlet in Sundarijal giving it a water velocity of only 0.5m/second which means it will take 45 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 (cumec) of which only 2 cumec of water will be diverted into the tunnel. There are 1.5 km of access tunnels located near the intake in Ambathan, in Gyalthum and Sindhu.

On 5 July, the first water was let into the tunnel amidst a religious ceremony. Tires 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. 🇳🇵

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The interface of politics and science

Nepal's politicians study neither biology nor political science, and we are paying the price during this pandemic



Enough Is Enough activists meet the press after ending their 12-day hunger strike on Tuesday afternoon.

shows on tv, or pontificating away on the op-eds -- but are never consulted when politicians have to make decisions based on science or expertise.

The current global crisis offers us a chance to explore and understand these issues, adopt best practices from elsewhere so we do not end up making the same costly mistakes others have made. South Korea and Singapore believe in science and make policies based on it, but the USA and Brazil patently do not. New Zealand's prime minister looks like someone who understands the interface of politics and science, the German chancellor is a biologist herself.

With over 140,000 Americans dead from COVID-19, should that country still be arguing over masks? Should that decision even be left to politicians? All around us we hear and read the works of amazing biologists and political scientists who are angry, and often frustrated because they are not taken seriously by politicians.

In Kathmandu there is a push to open up new roads and expand or widen existing ones so that the price of land will continue to go up. Land is limited in the valley, but an even more limiting factor is the air we breathe. If there is one take-away from the current pandemic it is that the virus attacks those body parts that are most vulnerable. Our respiratory system in the polluted valley was already at risk, the virus has increased it.

The science may be clear but we would rather buy oxygen cylinders and ventilators than clear the air, because it is good for the economy. Biologists tell us we need to protect remaining forests, cut emissions. This science needs to be translated into political policy.

George Floyd was gagged by a policeman's knee and could not breathe. We are gagged by policies that are also killing us. Even without the coronavirus.

Young Nepalis get it. They are out in Patan Darbar Square on hunger strike with 'Enough is Enough' placards. Essentially their message is that we have wrong policies, and even when we have the right ones, corruption, mismanagement and apathy gets in the way. They have had enough.

We have all had enough, but these youngsters are making their voices heard in creative ways to save the future. Nepal's obsolete politicians better sit up and listen.

Biology is a science, and political science or politics may be more of an art form. All three need to come together to fundamentally change the way we run our societies and pursue progress. A new post COVID-19 world is one in which humans co-exist with other species on the planet.

If we destroy the Chure Hills by removing its forests and extracting construction material from it, Birgunj, Janakpur and other cities in the Tarai will be inundated every monsoon. Local governments should be ready to spend all their tax revenue on flood relief and recovery for a long time if we keep electing politicians who do not understand the science of floods.

The past three months have displayed that neither the biology of a virus nor the political science of good governance took centre stage. Nepal needs to brace itself for worse to come because we did not. 🇳🇵

Anil Chitrakar is President of Siddharthinc and writes this fortnightly column 1/2 Full in *Nepali Times*.

As the lockdown enters its fourth month with no sign of any letup, many people (even city-dwellers) seems to be taking up roof gardening and food production because they have time to kill, and the need to stock up on food during the pandemic.



1/2 FULL
Anil Chitrakar

Indirectly, the lockdown has helped promote an activity we should have engaged in anyway. It has forced us to re-learn the experiments and projects from high school biology class.

As eager students we all studied germination by dropping a seed into the soil, and found out that no matter which side is up, the first green shoots shoot up to the surface to catch the sun. The roots instinctively fan out downwards to gather vital nutrients.

Plants cannot be convinced or corrupted to do things differently. In politics, however, everything and anything is possible. It really depends on how many votes can be mobilised to say and do anything a politician seeks.

In a country with a self-described communist party in government with a two-third majority, the opposition has become irrelevant. Question time in parliament is just a formality, and a video op for those who want to show off oratorical skills.

Biology is a science of all forms of life. Politics, it seems, is the art of manipulation and the end goals are to stay in power and accumulate wealth at any cost to perpetuate that power. Politicians study neither biology, nor political science.

Then there are political scientists who can tell us ten ways to run the republic with examples from all corners of the globe. They have almost no say in how Nepal manages the pandemic or how our country is governed. They can be seen in heated debates on political talk

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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

Pratistha Rijal

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

The directive said students already enrolled in such schools or programs must leave, or take measures such as transferring to schools with (partial or complete) in-person instruction to maintain their visas. Failure to comply will result in deportation, the ICE warned.

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 class online. About 10% of US colleges and universities are planning to operate fully online, including Harvard University which is only conducting online classes, even for students already on campus.

About 10,000 Nepali students may be affected by this rule. No one interviewed online for this report wanted their names revealed.

One Nepali student at Mount Holyoke college in Massachusetts said she must return to Nepal as her college is holding only online classes, but Nepal is under lockdown and not yet 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 universities and training programs with in-person instruction or hybrid programs will receive or be able to maintain their visas as long as they take only 'one class or three credit hours online', the ICE announcement said.

Another Nepali 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 operation, 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 program'.

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 Dickinson College in Pennsylvania says, "I'm on 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 H1-B visas were suspended, barring hundreds of thousands of foreigners from working in the US. This suspension gravely affected Nepalis, the fifth largest foreign community to receive H1-B 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 awfully inconsiderate. International students and scholars aren't seen as people with dreams and goals, but rather as some remote entity that the government can just slap any rule on as 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 reappraise 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." 🇺🇸

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Etihad Airways
Etihad Airways is gradually resuming services to more destinations across its global network following the easing



of travel restrictions by UAE regulatory authorities on outbound and inbound travel for citizens and residents. Throughout July and August, the airline plans to fly to 58 destinations worldwide.

NIC Asia
NIC Asia has introduced three special loans, the Super Chamatkaarik for home, car and business with an interest rate of



8.25% and an administrative fee of 0.25%. The rates will remain unchanged for a year. For more details, go to NIC Asia's website <https://www.nicasiabank.com/product/loans>

Nabil Bank & Huawei
Nabil Bank signed a strategic cooperation MoU with Huawei in Lalitpur on 8 July. The partnership will unlock a wide range of



collaborative opportunities to adding value to the bank and its customers as Nabil Bank embarks on a digital transformation process.

Everest Bank tree plantation



Everest Bank has conducted tree plantation in the Teku area in Ward No 12 with Kathmandu Ward 12 & PDSS Nepal.

Bank of Kathmandu
Bank of Kathmandu has been providing insurance coverage of up to Rs1.1 million to customers who open a fixed deposit



account under the BOK Safalta Muddati Khata. Customers who open the account are entitled to insurance coverage of

Rs500,000 for accidental death and permanent disability, Rs500,000 for 18 critical illnesses and Rs100,000 for medical treatments.

NMB Bank
NMB Bank has concluded its Special General Meeting after its proposal to acquire Kanchan Development Bank. With the acquisition, NMB Bank's Paid-up capital will be valued at Rs14.45 billion while its reserves will be valued at Rs7.05 billion. The Bank has also launched NMB Green Fixed Deposit, where customers will have a sapling planted in their name for every new NMB Green Fixed Deposit opened.

Ford Endeavour
Ford Nepal has introduced the 2020 Endeavour - with a new 2.0-litre EcoBlue



engine and a 10 Speed-Automatic Transmission Rs14.9 million. The new Ford SUV offers up to 14% improvement in fuel efficiency.

Sunrise Bank
Sunrise Bank Limited and Australia-based White Everest Private Limited have agreed to online remittance transfer through the Royal Remit service, through which Nepalis living in Australia will be able to send money to their relatives and friends in Nepal.

Daraz & Esewa tieup
Daraz has joined hands with eSewa to enable users to pay for goods bought on the Daraz App via the digital wallet service in an effort to reduce the time spent in the check-out process and to improve digital security. To use the eSewa Wallet on Daraz, customers will need to link their eSewa account to their Daraz account.

Ncell
Ncell has introduced a new offer Nonstop YouTube under its new umbrella theme Plus, to make it easy for users to be connected to the internet at home or on-the-go. All 4G customers of Ncell can now enjoy nonstop access to YouTube without the videos consuming heavy data at a cost of Rs100.

Nepal Ventilator Service
The Nepal Ventilator Service song has been launched to provide the much-needed



ventilators and medical equipment for the treatment of COVID-19 in Nepal. The newly launched philanthropic organisation will collaborate with the Nepal government to provide and operate ventilators in hospitals across the country.

Tata Ambulance
Tata Motors, has introduced its Winger Ambulance which has been designed for life care and support and is available in three different specifications: Common Life Support, Basic Life Support, and Advanced Life Support.





Dance Classes

Thinking about learning something new while stuck at home? Sushila Arts Academy hosts contemporary dance lessons via Zoom. Get details via Facebook, or call the academy. 9860588626

Writing contest

Submit a work of fiction or nonfiction in any genre in less than 1,000 words for a chance to win \$1,000 and publication in The Writer Magazine. Learn more at writermag.com/contests. *Deadline: 12 August*

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*

Sunday Sessions

In this fortnightly talk series, readers and writers join journalist Prateebha Tuladhar in conversation about reading, writing, expression, and meaningful communication. This week, writer and educator Niranjan Kunwar will be talking about issues faced by the LGBTQIA+ community. Tune in to the livestream on Facebook. More details on the Quixote's Cove Facebook page. *12 June, 2pm*

Virtual concert

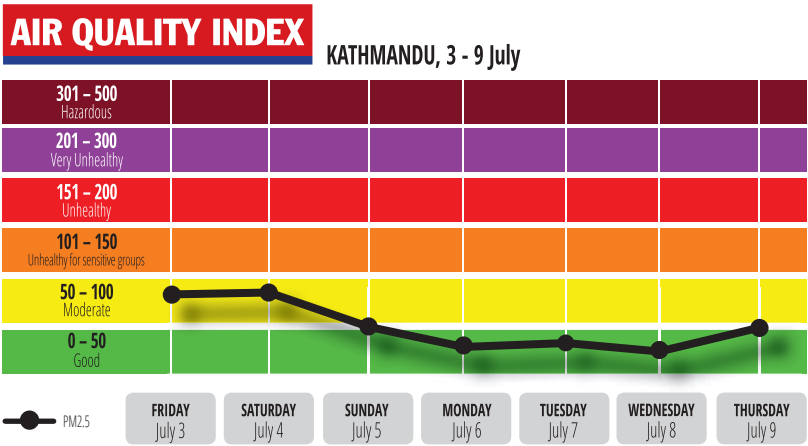
Diplo and Dillon Francis return with their Coronight Fever show, featuring sneak peaks of new music and back-to-back DJ sets from the pair. Details on where to watch are on Diplo's Facebook page. *12 July, 8:45am onwards*

Going places together - qatarairways.com

KATHMANDU

This is the time during the monsoon when the main branch of the monsoons from the Bay of Bengal and the other from the Arabian Sea merge over northern India. There was a large trough situated over the Gujarat that was pumping moisture to augment the water vapour already pouring into Nepal from the east. The result: heavy to very heavy precipitation on Friday and the weekend, especially in central and eastern Nepal. The Met Dept has issued flood warnings for the plains.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
24° 21°	25° 21°	25° 21°



We have been breathing moderately healthy air for while now, first because of the COVID-19 lockdown and now due to the strong monsoon. Daily Average Air Quality Index (AQI) of Kathmandu city centre was well below 100 throughout last week and with heavy rainfall projected into the weekend, the air is only likely to be washed clean. But please continue wearing masks during outings and in the company of friends, especially with new revelations about the novel coronavirus being air borne.

<https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/>

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI **KRIPA JOSHI**

Most able-bodied people can easily do without straws. Refusing single-use plastic straws doesn't require a drastic change in behaviour but can have a huge impact on the environment. Plastic straws rarely get recycled due to their light weight and frequently end up in the ocean. They can choke or get ingested by marine animals and birds. When they break down into micro plastics they enter our food chain and even the tap water. If someone does need to use straws, like for a health reason, then there are now many reusable or biodegradable alternatives, like paper, bamboo, stainless steel, silicone or treated glass. #FridayForFuture

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's wild animals, plants, landscapes, environmental issues, marine life, pets and native peoples. Browse through the galleries.

King Falls AM

A bimonthly podcast, *King Falls AM* centres on a lonely little mountain town's late-night AM talk radio show and its paranormal, peculiar happenings and inhabitants. Find on Stitcher and Apple podcasts.

British Council library

The British Council Digital Library is making it easier to download books for free and read it 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. Go to British Council Nepal's Facebook page for more details and register at bit.ly/2YsKRNF.

Katha Ghera

Some of Katha Ghera's memorable plays are now on YouTube. Watch *Same time next year*, *Night*, *Mother*, and *Dayalu Rukh*, the Nepali interpretation of *The Giving Tree*.

Virtual street festivals

Google's Colorful Street Fests & Carnivals is a virtual tour of eight of the most vibrant street festivals in the world. The celebrations include the *La Tomatina* food fight in Spain, *Oktoberfest* in Germany, and the *Mardi Gras* festival in New Orleans.

QUARANTINE DINING



Little Tibet

Escape the monsoon rain with a piping hot bowl of noodles, *da-pao* and mouth-watering Tibetan, Bhutanese and Nepali food. Find the menu on Bhojideals and Foodmandu. *Delivery: 12pm-6:00pm (01) 4242656*

Buingal

With a variety of both vegetarian and non-vegetarian options, Buingal has something for everyone. Give the *piro aloo* and *chicken sandeko* a try. Check out the menu on Facebook. *Delivery: 11am-6pm, Maitidevi (01) 4421393*



Sweet Fix

Chase away the gloom of rainy afternoons with healthy handcrafted popsicles. Get the three summer monsoon flavours - the Mango, Watermelon Lime, and Blackberry Yogurt pops. Head to Facebook for details on how to order. *9828583465*



Saigon Pho

Experience ultra-fresh flavours of Vietnamese dishes, prepared by Vietnamese cooks. Try the BBQ pork *Banh Mi*. Also order the cinnamon apple pie and freshly baked bread. Look at the menu online for more. *Delivery: 12pm-6:30pm, 9818441441, 9802043330*



Prazada

Enjoy Prazada's selection of special pizzas and complimentary beer, along with a variety of delicious Italian dishes. Go to Foodmandu for details. *Delivery: 12pm-6:45pm (01) 4410473*

OUR PICK

The 2018 miniseries based on spy novel of the same name, *The Little Drummer Girl* begins with Israeli intelligence agency Mossad recruiting an aspiring English actress in 1979 to infiltrate a Palestinian group plotting terrorism in Europe. The actress Charlie is taken to Palestinian refugee camps to be trained as a bomber but before long her loyalties are tested. The 6-episode adaptation boasts an impressive cast of Michael Shannon, Florence Pugh and Alexander Skarsgård.

बालबालिका माथि हुने हिंसा, दुर्व्यवहार, शोषण भएको, जोखिमपूर्ण अवस्थामा रहेको वा बालअधिकारको उल्लंघन भएको छ भने बाल हेल्पलाइनको पैसा नलाग्ने

फोन: नं. १०९८ मा खबर गरौं ।

नेपाल सरकार

सञ्चार तथा सूचना प्रविधि मन्त्रालय

सूचना तथा प्रसारण विभाग



GOVINDA REGMI

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 of thumb to decide whether interventions in Nepal's migration sector are useful: does it help the worker?

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-visa-free-ticket policy, but workers still pay exorbitant amounts to get jobs. Domestic work was banned, but workers bypass it.

The consequences of these policy failures are felt especially strongly by migrants during the crisis. Nepali migrant workers like Miya paid \$3,450 for a job in the UAE. Laxmi travelled overland through India to Kuwait to circumvent the ban on domestic work.

The lapses in the repatriation of workers have been well-documented. There are many players engaged in promoting worker welfare, and it is when there is a crisis like COVID-19 that society needs to step up to help fellow-Nepalis in need.

If a repatriated worker is thrown out of a bus taking female returnees from Kuwait home from a quarantine centre because she had no money, then it means the system is not working, and there are too many lapses.

A recent project initiated by the International Labour Organization (ILO) has taken a more practical approach towards addressing problems of repatriation. It has involved destination countries where migrants are stranded and embassies are overwhelmed, and in their management upon arrival. It engages unconventional partners like Nepal's embassies abroad and the Non-Resident Nepalese Associations (NRNA).

The project supports Nepal's embassies by adding volunteer staff, extending their reach outside the capital by setting up outreach camps in major migrant hotspots, providing paralegal support by adding legal staff to facilitate mediation with employers or providing short-term shelter support to those displaced.

At the Nepal end, the project

provides transfer and transportation to ensure more humane reception of returnees at the holding centres and their transportation to home districts. The initiative pushes more unconventional interventions at ground level among Nepali workers stranded in Malaysia, UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia and it can be replicated to other countries.

The ILO's Nepal Country Director Richard Howard (*below*) spoke to Upasana Khadka at *Nepali Times* about the overall situation of migrant workers during the pandemic.



Nepali Times: What is so unique about this project?

Richard Howard: This is not a new project, but the key thing about our approach with support from the Swiss government was to help Nepali missions abroad provide 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. And 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 realise 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 you can tweak the model in response to the context and work with different types of partners there.

Some migrants cannot afford tickets, and even if the Foreign Employer Welfare Fund (FEWF) was mobilised 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 irregularly because of the bans in place and they did not have alternate options domestically, and now they are stuck. FEWF might be a tough sell because it is based on contributions by workers that have paid into it. All of us have an obligation to help all workers, both the government and the big international donors. The latter would also be willing to support if the government moved in that direction. It also points to the need to reconsider policies like the ban that have made workers more vulnerable even if they were imposed to protect them.

What about the role of the private sector? Their business is impacted negatively, but they also have a history of fleecing workers.

First and foremost, foreign employers have an obligation to workers and

destination countries need to ensure that employers are held responsible to play their part. But those industries are also suffering, so it has to be a sharing of the burden between the government and private sector in the destination countries and in Nepal. As for recruiters, we need to recognise that they are a mixed bag, and it is not fair to characterise them in a singular way. They play a vital role and are needed for foreign employment. Even before COVID-19, they were already facing a crunch as outflow was declining. COVID-19 has reduced their revenue virtually to nothing so at this point, we do need to be realistic about what we can get from them. But this is a good time to think about reform of the industry in a way that allows them to stay in business, but also holds them accountable. And they have to be on the table as we come up with solutions.

What about redeployment programs in the destination country for migrants who are displaced but want to stay on?

In countries with a surplus of labour and a demand for workers, they could look at redeployment programs in a large way to channel migrants to opportunities, and that is the strategic thing to do by the labour ministry and the technical/vocational industries in the country. But the skill-sets of migrants needs to be considered, and transitions are easily possible in some cases and maybe not in others. Even if workers come to Nepal, it is also the obligation of the government here to help train workers to meet 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 the 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 BLAs 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 in terms of practical implementation on what it means for migrants are distant from their realities. They are necessary, but they are very much just at the starting point, and if we cannot deliver on the practical protection, we need to be more critical. Among the three, bilateral labour agreements are supposed to be the most practical, but they are not being implemented. We have to draw on lessons from countries like Philippines that have focused on the implementation of the agreements. It is possible, but it takes a lot of communication and follow up from governments and other related institutions. Regional frameworks have been a little disappointing during the crisis but we also need to look inwards to our own organisations including ILO and ask if we are practical enough.

All international standards, frameworks and forums mean nothing if we cannot protect workers in a crisis. And we need to do better at being quick, practical and responsive -- not just during the crisis, but every day after this. If we look at the history of ILO and history of standards over the decades and question whether the standards we set are making an impact, we see progress and impact because there are minimum wages in most countries, and workers are benefiting from measures like pensions and maternity insurance that are necessary, but we also need an adaptive side to us that is also more responsive and practical.



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THE LONG JOURNEY BACK TO NEPAL

Two Nepali medical personnel recount their flight home from the United States recently



Markings on the tarmac to enforce physical distancing upon landing at Kathmandu Airport.

Seema Subedi and
Raju Bhandari

After the COVID-19 pandemic struck in early 2020, it was not immediately apparent that the world would turn upside down like it did. As February came and went, people's plans all over the world would take a tumultuous turn for 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 Fulbright Nepal supported us to fly back from 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 of 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 60,000, the authorities allowed interstate practice, and even let clinicians to practice without

reinstating 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 he ordered a ban 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 an essential job or engaging in outdoor recreation within a safe distance from others, were allowed.

Ridesharing 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 ride shares were enforced. Stores 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 1,090 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 3 June the positivity rate (7-day average reported) dropped to 9.5% for the first time since late March.

Those who watch general headline 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 to 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 certificates 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 not as crowded as it is 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 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 minimise 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 ware, 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 fliers looked lost and were not accustomed to using 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 plane 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 neared Kathmandu the crew distributed the Traveler 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



Flight attendant moving through the aisles distributing sandwiches and sanitiser towels.



Tribhuvan International Airport with boxes marked on the floor for social-distancing.

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 queue at a slow pace. That is why 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 turnstile 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 more crowded.

Kathmandu airport is notorious for its smelly and dirty toilets, and it was disappointing to see that despite all the reported improvements at the airport, the toilets were as filthy 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, jet-lagged 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 is 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 Basundhara (*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 centre:

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 NTC prepaid SIM card is distributed to all passengers not just so they can all relatives but 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 guardian 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 homecoming 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 on arrival for the passengers to make it more convenient and less tortuous.

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

Many passengers complained that though they had been tested negative before travel, they might actually have got infected during the 7.5 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 Swasthya 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 or 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 resource and logistics.

This would reduce the administrative effort as well as unwanted 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 cases could have been used to ease the lockdown safely.

Unfortunately, we in Nepal are relaxing restrictions even while 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 have seen. 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. 🇳🇵



Seema Subedi is a Fulbright Scholar, an MPH graduate from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, and currently working as Faculty Associate at Global Disease Epidemiology and Control Division, International Health Department.

Raju Bhandari is a General Surgeon, an Alumni of Institute of Medicine, TUTH, currently working at Alka Hospital.



Nepali passengers waiting to board their flight to Istanbul at JFK airport, New York.



Passengers crowd at the holding centre in Basundhara, seven hours after landing.



GRASS IS GREENER IN NEPAL

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

POT VOCAB

- Marijuana:** Psychoactive drug made from the dried leaves and flowers of the Cannabis plant, contains tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). Also known as weed, pot, grass, Mary Jane.
- Hemp:** A variety of Cannabis plant that grows up to 3m tall and contains less than 0.3% of THC. Fibre is used to make clothing and bags.
- Hashish:** Also known as *charas* in the Subcontinent, is the resin made from rubbing Cannabis flowers and top leaves.
- Ganja:** Means marijuana in Nepali. Hindi and Sanskrit, used to denote both the drug and the Cannabis plant.
- Bhang:** Edible form of marijuana made by crushing green leaves and buds of the Cannabis plant. Smoked and eaten at festival time 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 spreading in March when former law minister Sher Bahadur Tamang of the ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP) registered a private bill in Parliament to overturn a 1976 law that criminalised the cultivation, sale and consumption of cannabis.

“The bill 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 response from fellow MPs and I am sure there will not be a single vote against it.”

Tamang’s bill proposes formation of a 14-member Marijuana 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 the household for medicinal purposes, or sold.

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 had become a haven for anti-war ‘peaceniks’, draft dodgers, and Vietnam veterans. White 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.”

Banning cannabis drove the cultivation and use of this important cash crop underground and into the hands of organised 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 now see no reason 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 chemicals found in the *Cannabis sativa* 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-psychoactive component in the plant) to treat inflammation in COVID-19 patients.

“Cannabis has cooling effect and it has been used in traditional medicine to reduce fever.

Medical marijuana

Marijuana is known to have therapeutic effects in over 100 illnesses ranging from cancer and HIV/AIDS to bipolar disorder and spinal cord injuries. Its possible use in treatment of COVID-10 patients is what’s getting cannabis legalisation activists excited.

Rajiv Kafle is an HIV/AIDS survivor and says marijuana has been particularly effective for people living with HIV. He says: “Former cocaine and heroin users who now use cannabis are now more stable, have higher quality of life and are economically sound.”

Earlier anti-HIV drugs such as didanosine and stavudine caused painful nerve condition called peripheral neuropathy as a side effect. Cannabis proved to be effective in relieving pain as well as in treating symptoms caused by stronger anti-retrovirals.

Despite obvious benefits, the prescription of marijuana is not easy. There is social stigma associated with using hashish because it is illegal. Nepal’s 1976 law allows medical use of marijuana but there is no prescribing standard and medical professionals are not educated to direct proper doses and quantities.

The proposed bill in Parliament allows households to grow up to six cannabis plants without permit. This means patients who need to use marijuana can easily grow the plant themselves.

Unsurprisingly this aligns with the recent findings,” says legalisation activist Rajiv Kafle. “I’m 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 Cultivation (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 Rs2 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 exploring 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 in fact reinforces fear 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 differences between hemp and marijuana. In fact, cannabis legalisation debate has largely overshadowed the potential of hemp, the strongest natural fibre in the world.

Hemp is a subspecies of cannabis and contains 0.3% or less tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the naturally occurring psychoactive compound that gives cannabis its narcotic property. It is used in textile, cosmetics, food and beverage, and even in construction. In its natural state, hemp plant restores 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 so in precise terms,” says cannabis consultant Ravi 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 71% 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 neediest Nepalis.” 🇳🇵