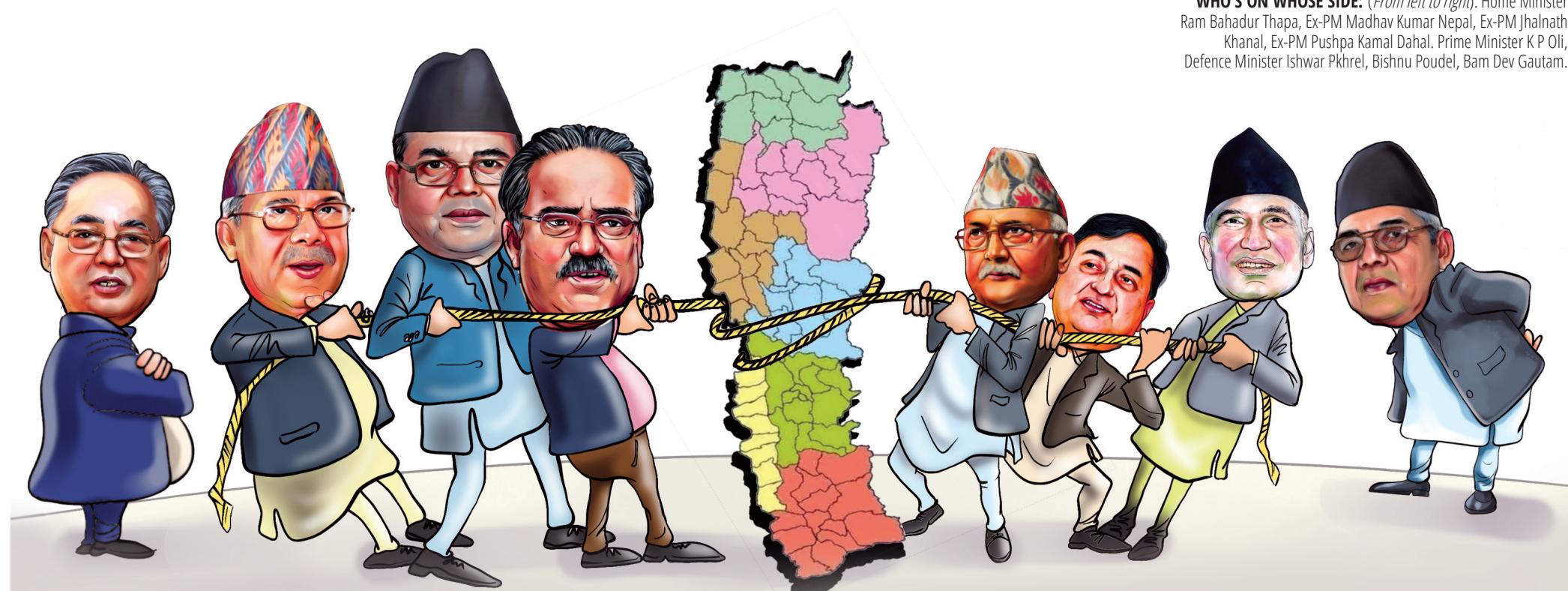




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BHANU BHATTARA

Tug-o-war during Covid-19 crisis

After six months of pressure, Prime Minister K P Oli has finally backed down to allow his ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP) rivals led by co-chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal to nominate senior leader Bamdev Gautam into the Upper House.

The fact that this internal power struggle in the party dragged on for so long at a time when the country was reeling under the Covid-19 emergency, is proof enough that Nepali politics is not about improving governance and service delivery to citizens, but about *bhagbanda* division of the spoils.

And it is when the bargaining hits a deadlock that the country is held hostage, as it has for over a year now. Prime Minister Oli wriggled out of every challenge to his leadership by either using anti-Indian nationalism, or threatening to split the party.

But on Thursday, outgunned in the NCP secretariat and running out of options to prevent a mutiny, he relented.

The party secretariat meeting on Thursday was supposed to decide on

Gautam's fate, and whether he would be nominated to the Upper House in place of Finance Minister Yubaraj Khatiwada whose term expires on Saturday.

Earlier meetings had been postponed because Defence Minister Ishwar Pokhrel and other Cabinet minister were in self-isolation after a member of the Covid-19 Crisis Management Committee tested positive for the virus.

The unelected Khatiwada was nominated to the Upper House and made Finance Minister by Prime Minister Oli, who has come to rely on him as a sounding board with the international community as well as on fiscal policy. Khatiwada also became the Information Minister and government spokesperson after the resignation of scandal-ridden Gokul Banskota in February.

Khatiwada's term in the Upper House has been extended once before, but it ends on 5 September. Gautam was angling for his party's nomination to the Upper House and to replace Khatiwada. But it remains to be seen if he will get it, because Prime Minister Oli can still renominate Khatiwada to the Upper House and retain him as Finance Minister.

One bone of contention between the Oli and the Dahal faction since January has been Gautam's future. He is the only senior leader in the NCP who has never had a chance to be prime minister, and has openly admitted that he would like to get a chance to serve as one.

Knowing this, Oli had been stringing Gautam along, first promising a Constitution amendment to make an Upper House member prime minister, then assuring Gautam's election to an NCP seat from Dolpo so he could become an MP and succeed him as prime minister.

Gautam allied with Dahal to put pressure on Oli, but the prime minister mollified him repeatedly by dangling carrots.

At a late night meeting at Baluwatar on Wednesday, Oli gave it one last try and offered Gautam the Dolpo constituency so he could succeed him as prime minister. But this time Gautam did not take the bait. He insisted on nomination to the Upper House, and be made deputy prime minister and finance minister.

Oli tried to find a way to convince Dahal about retaining Khatiwada at a meeting on Tuesday, but Dahal told Oli that he could not take that decision

on his own and would have to put it to the secretariat.

Oli is now in a bit of a bind. He realised that he was in a minority in the party secretariat, with even his staunch loyalist Bishnu Paudel said to be supporting Gautam, and Home Minister Ram Bahadur Thapa fence-sitting. Oli had to agree to Gautam's nomination to the Upper House, but he may still have something up his sleeves.

Khatiwada will have to resign from his finance minister position by Saturday, but insiders say Oli could still renominate him with President Bidya Bhandari's consent.

In the past, whenever he has been cornered in the NCP secretariat or standing committee, Oli has pulled a rabbit out of a hat. And given this track record, the Prime Minister still has options to retain Khatiwada as finance minister.

The NCP dissident's main irritation with Oli is that he does not consult them and wants to go it alone, and a decision to re-nominate Khatiwada would reinforce that distrust.

Oli's other option is to make Khatiwada and Bamdev's future position part of a package deal over

a proposed Cabinet reshuffle, and other pending political appointments. Midway through his term, Prime Minister Oli must know that there is widespread public disenchantment over his performance – especially in his government's handling of the Covid-19 crisis.

A change of faces in his government would buy him some time, appease party rivals, and allow him to continue unchallenged for a while longer. This has become important because it will determine who is incumbent as the country

faces another general election in 2022.

If he is unable to save Khatiwada this time, sources at the Prime Minister's Office said, one Oli lollipop would be to promise to make him ambassador to the United States.

The whole debacle has re-exposed the rent-seeking culture among Nepal's politicians to be obsessed about power, the country be damned. Thursday secretariat meeting was not about how to address the emergency the country faces, but about power and position. ☺

Ministry of Education gets an F

EDITORIAL PAGE 2

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Ministry of Education gets an F

A columnist recently described the state of education in the country as being characterised by the government's neglect of public schools and disdain for private schools.

This is nothing new. Those in power have always paid lip service to helping the poor, while doing everything in their power to ensure that the poor have no recourse. The added tragedy of the Covid-19 pandemic is that this dangerous populist proclivity has exacerbated



the education crisis, creating a bigger gap between private schools and government ones which have 80% of students.

The government has used the excuse of the 'digital divide' to discourage private schools from thinking out of the box on online classes. Vague and ambiguous policy decisions have not helped clear the confusion.

Now that it is clear that the pandemic is here to stay, the Ministry of Education has finally finalised a plan to grant formal recognition to remote learning classes. However, if not planned properly, this will further widen the inequity in Nepal's education system.

A survey in May showed children in 95% of households had stopped going to school, and 52% were not even studying at home. Only 29% had access to distance learning, of that only half were using it.

The attitude of the Ministry towards government schools which fall directly under its own purview is even more grievous. While the government school teachers, administrators and the entire education super-structure have remained fully salaried throughout the nearly six months of lockdown, they have nearly nothing to show in terms of remote teaching.

The government's inability and unwillingness to address the lack of education for nearly 6 million students that attend government schools is tantamount to criminal

negligence. The ministry's dynamism has long been eroded by the politicisation of the education sector, neglect by the education establishment from the federal minister downwards, and lack of accountability and institutional memory among donors who have practically guided the Education Ministry with its 'basket fund' over the past decade.

Even today, the ministry seems to be mainly concerned with passing the buck when it comes to pandemic response. Better-off private schools have access to internet learning, but most government school children have neither computers nor connectivity.

The most underserved mountain districts have negligible Covid-19 spread, and schools there are so sparsely populated that attendance is possible with physical distancing in the classrooms. Yet, it has been five months and the Ministry of Education has not acted on the basis of this simple reality.

For government schools in urban clusters and the densely-populated Tarai, the federal government had enough time to implement an emergency plan to let local governments ensure wifi availability and remote radio/tv classes. Some of these online classes could have been centralised, while the individual schools that had the capacity should have been encouraged to start their own. The lassitude is unbelievable, yet sadly predictable.

Minister of Education Giriraj Mani Pokhrel deserves an 'F' for not using the Covid-19 crisis to improve government school education. But the buck stops with his boss, Prime Minister K P Oli. They should both re-read the Constitution, which relegates the responsibility for school-level education to municipalities. Local governments would do a better job.

It is well known for decades that while Nepal's enrollment rate rose, literacy went up, and we have numerically more schools, there was abject failure on the part of the government in raising the quality of instruction. We had hoped that handing over education to the local governments was a way to improve quality. But alas, like everything else, education is still tightly centralised.

The Covid-19 crisis could still be turned into an opportunity if the federal Ministry of Education were to wake up and support urban and rural municipalities to restart remote and in-person classes, and raise the standard of instruction in government schools where it is most needed.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

20 years ago, the 6-12 September 2000 #8 edition of Nepali Times published an investigation of the government's mismanagement of taxpayers' money. Looks like not much has changed twenty years later, the government continues to waste tax payers' money on raising the living standard of its office-bearers.

Today, Nepal battles the global pandemic COVID-19. But 20 years ago the scourge was Japanese encephalitis which killed more than 100 people in August-September 2000. Two decades later, hospitals are still in a dilapidated state and it is the poorest who suffer the most.

Rajendra Daha's story on 'Lahureys' and their contribution to Nepal's remittance economy continues to stay relevant as Nepal still relies on migrant workers for remittance, money sent home by workers abroad equals the annual budget.

Excerpts:

Unaccounted for: Two years ago, ministers of His Majesty's Government said that rather than depend on their offices to settle personal utility bills, they would take the money from the government and make payments themselves. Between August 1998 and June 1999, 19 ministers took Rs 1,158,000 from the national coffers to pay their telephone, electricity and water supply bills, according to the Auditor General's report. Now it turns out many of them never cleared the bills. What's more, they have amassed more utility arrears. Rs 561,000.



Tarai fever: August and September are encephalitis months along the Nepal-India border. Thousands are in poorly-equipped, understaffed hospitals all along the Tarai. Many more are silently suffering far away from hospitals, undiagnosed and untreated. The only thing remarkable about this year's toll of 103 deaths so far is that it is four times less than last year. We have seen from past years that the intensity of an encephalitis epidemic tends to be determined by the intensity of the monsoon and its timing because of the ponds and puddles where the virus-carrying mosquitoes breed.

'Lahureys' prop Nepal's economy: Any Nepali migrant worker is known by the generic term, lahurey (from 'Lahore', where the British military cantonments were). Nearly 200 years after they first started enlisting in foreign armies, the descendants of lahureys are propelling up Nepal's otherwise stagnant economy. Remittances from Nepalis abroad today contribute more than Rs 70 billion annually to the economy – more than tourism, foreign aid and exports put together and nearly equal to this year's budget. There is now so much cash in the informal economy that when a commercial bank made an IPO worth Rs 175 million it was oversubscribed within a week to the tune of Rs 1.4 billion.

From the archives of Nepali Times of the past 20 years, site search: www.nepalitimes.com.

ONLINE PACKAGES



INDRA JATRA

Yenya or Indra Jatra dedicated to the lord of heaven is marked with much enthusiasm by Hindus and Buddhists alike in Kathmandu Valley. Here's heritage conservationist Anil Chitrakar's retelling of this colourful and vibrant festival and its connection to nature in Season 1, Episode 3 of his Walkabout series. Visit our YouTube channel for full video.



COVID EXIT STRATEGY

The lockdown has been extended once again for a week to contain the rapid surge of Covid-19 in Kathmandu Valley. Most of Nepal's 77 districts are under strict lockdown. But public health expert Mahesh Maskey says a complete shutdown is not an effective mechanism and that testing, contact tracing, treatment and the public's conscience are equally important. Full video in our YouTube channel.

NO LOCKDOWN

The lockdown serves no purpose as the pandemic is already out of control ('Economic cost of 5 months of Nepal lockdown', Ramesh Kumar, #1025). The only way to survive through this crisis is that we learn to live and work with it and educate ourselves on keeping safe. The lockdown will only lead to economic catastrophe and frustration among people, which in turn will increase incidents of suicides which will outnumber Covid-19 deaths by several folds.

Bhavna Rana

- It would not be wrong to say the economic shock caused by lockdown have proven to be more costly than the pandemic itself. Government cannot give monetary support to businesses like those in advanced economies. Zero revenue in the tourism sector which amount to 7.9% of GDP. The government has done its part in stopping the flow of people from outside the country, yet has failed to increase PCR tests, has just merely extended lockdown and restrictions.

Gyurme Sherpa

KULMAN GHISING

Right person at right place will definitely benefit to country and its people ('Kulman Ghising to stay on', nepalitimes.com). Thanks to the Energy Minister for his strong recommendation.

Amrit Tuladhar

- I wish he had moved on to Melamchi Water Supply Project.

Mahendra Saky

- Excellent decision. Nepal deserves to have clarity in leadership, not just corruption.

Sue Chamberlain

- He never claimed that he was the single entity to end power cuts. But he has been contributing to build credibility of his team and of the government.

Makalu Rai

- Kulman Ghising are needed in all the sectors. Our leaders and managers should wish to be the next Kulman and follow in his footsteps.

Krishna M Gurung

RACISM

I agree on wearing a label – however discriminatory and "oppressed" – proudly, but I reject on wearing a label subjected with an ill intent to repress/colonise. ('Race against time', by George Van Driem, #1025). It is not ahistorical to re-claim label which is germane to fighting oppression actively. But squarely casting off the label, positive or negative, altogether alleviates injustice.

Swadesh Subedi

PERIOD POVERTY

I was wondering if menstrual cups distribution would be a more sustainable solution in such communities since one cup lasts more than 10 years and it requires minimal hygiene compared to the cloth/reusable pads that need a lot of time/water/energy for washing/drying ('Pandemic deepens period poverty', Geeta Pradhan, nepalitimes.com). For a cup, you just empty the content, wash with soap and boil it for a minute once between the cycles. In African communities, menstrual cups have shown better results.

Sweta Koirala Adhikari

ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES

Congratulations to the Nepali Times for drawing attention yet again to 'the disappeared' by telling the stories of those who were the victims of war crimes and human rights abuse and of the families they left behind ('Disappearance of justice', #1025). I only hope that this will bring a new wave of support for the pursuit of truth, justice and reparation.

David Seddon

NEPALI Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



Race against time

by George van Driem



From Muluki Ain and caste discrimination in Nepal to #BlackLivesMatter and debates about Kamala Harris' ancestry, racism remains tenaciously prevalent across the world. This week's Nepali Times Longread on racial stereotypes and the etymology of mixed ethnicities was the most shared.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

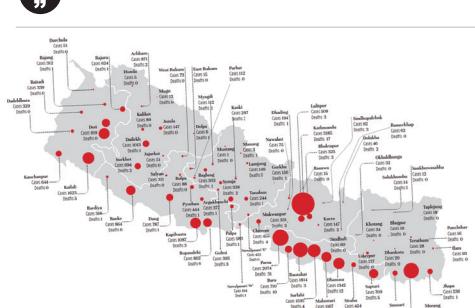


Economic cost of 5 months of lockdown

by Ramesh Kumar

As serious as the rapid spread in Nepal of the novel coronavirus looks, even more frightening is what the lockdown meant to prevent it will do to the country's economy. The analysis generated divided opinion. Go online to join the discussion.

Most commented



As India peaks, Covid-19 spreads rapidly in Nepal

by Sonia Awale

With over 75,000 new cases a day, India now has the world's fastest Covid-19 growth. Nepal is unlikely to control the virus until India does. Checkout the latest district-wise breakdown of cases and fatalities online.

Most popular on Twitter

Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Responding to international scrutiny, #Qatar makes landmark #labour reforms that will benefit Nepali workers there, including an increase in the minimum wage to QAR 1,000 (\$275). More about the reforms in this report by Upasana Khadka. @ilo @FIFAWorldCup

Kul Chandra Gautam @KulCGautam

Hope these reforms are faithfully implemented beyond the media glare of #FIFAWorldCup 2022. Besides wage protection, important to ensure proper housing & health care as #COVID19 cases in #Qatar & the Gulf states are concentrated among migrant workers & real end to Kafala system.

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

#Nepal has decided to allow international researchers to conduct #COVID19 vaccine trials in the country. But an exit strategy shouldn't just include #vaccines. Medical columnist @BasnyatBuddha assesses ongoing #research into diagnosis, therapy & vaccines.

Sujeev Shakya @sujeevshakya

Understanding the developments in the #COVID19 treatment and options for Nepal from @ BasnyatBuddha in @NepaliTimes. Always something new to learn from

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

"Everything is at a complete standstill, there are no transactions taking place except people buying food from day to day." #Nepal, on its 6th month of #lockdown, faces an even bigger challenge than #COVID19: economic collapse. Read @Raw_Ku's analysis.

Sameer Khatiwada @Khatiwada_S

Economic cost of lockdown has been severe. Agree @NepaliTimes But wish you had provided a more balanced perspective, also highlighting the public health benefits. Important to give a sense of the counterfactual, 'hidden benefits.'

Nepal must reboot human rights, rule of law

The goal of political stability does not remove the need for active promotion of human rights

Sometimes it can feel as though Nepal goes through endless cycles that bring us back every time to the place where we started. Maybe we just need more years to look back and see the progress.

But up close, we seem to stand still. If this country is ever to deal



COMMENT

Mohna Ansari

with impunity and injustice, we must not be diverted by petty politics.

It is now two-and-a-half years since the elections that led to the creation of the Nepal Communist Party. Many saw this as a decisive moment, a time when we left behind our turbulent past and unified Nepal to bring prosperity.

Some saw an opportunity at last for a 'peace dividend'. In the international community, many considered it as a harbinger of stability, which would allow them to finally fully implement development programs free from the disruption of war and political intrigue.

Very few were alert to the risks to human rights. It was almost as though political commentators and the diplomatic community shared the view that the political stability they thought was assured for the foreseeable future would automatically lead to a sudden respect for rights.

These days, the pandemic is occupying people's thoughts. Nepal faces grave risk as the disease spreads, and there is an urgent need for appropriate and effective countermeasures. But even before this massive unforeseen shock to our society, political stability and respect for human rights was looking less and less certain. In the past few months the uncertainty is even greater.

One of the costs of 'stability' has been transitional justice. Remedy for victims of the conflict was put on hold after 2006, and especially two years ago, before the pandemic appeared on the scene. The promised truth commission has failed to deliver. Many of us had hoped that the truth telling process would be the foundation for institutional reforms in the justice system that had been put off year after year since the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) of 2006.

The marginalised in our society are denied access to justice, notably minorities such as Dalits and women victims of violence. Legitimate public protest is still met with harsh and excessive use of force by the police. Convictions in the courts still largely depend on confessions under torture and cruel treatment rather than proper, non-coercive investigation — still a rare



JAN MØLLER HANSEN

skill in Nepal to the shame of all of those involved in efforts to improve public security for all.

Political, social and economic instability have gone hand in hand with violation of basic rights. They are mutually supporting dynamics.

Since 2006, more and more Nepalis have come to rely on remittances from family members working overseas for their economic survival. This safety valve is now in doubt because of the economic downturn caused by the global pandemic.

The idea that political stability and prosperity would put an end to human rights violations was always a pipe dream. A society with such entrenched discrimination is always going to find consensus difficult, and end up resorting to violence and coercion to maintain the status quo, or to resolve inevitable disputes.

We can all agree that Nepal faces a difficult short and medium-term future. All human rights defenders now need to consider some key fundamentals:

- Political infighting in the leadership can easily generate protests and counter-protests where human rights violations are common
- The power struggle can impact political harmony at provincial and local levels which can lead to a higher risk of conflict
- The health and economic crises risk endangering social stability. Medical staff are already at the frontlines of disputes and must get full support from the state and civil society to help them carry out their tasks, which are a matter of life and death not only for their patients but for the whole country.

All this is also happening in a wider context of rising geopolitical tension between our two neighbours. On top of all the crises at home, we are now also living in a region which feels a lot less stable than it did a year ago.

If we are to come out of this crisis stronger, some lessons need to be learnt, and fast. Discrimination is like a ball and chain on the ankle of the country, it slows our progress.

This should also be a moment

of reflection for our international friends who in the past have given such valuable support for the peace process and the defence of human rights. Law and order cannot be maintained by harsh policing and even more draconian legal restrictions on privacy and personal rights.

We need to learn from the crisis which is upon us after two years of false promises of stability and social peace. We are no nearer to our common goal of rule of law than we were 14 years ago.

Our international partners have to give top attention to the fact that without rule of law, it will be hard to achieve economic development and investment. Respect for human rights is the foundation of Nepal's economic progress and social harmony. We need our partners to be actively, constantly and transparently promoting transitional justice, human rights and rule of law.

The international community must make it clear to our leadership, with one voice, that they believe investing in Nepal is not an attractive prospect if a repressive and discriminatory justice system damages stability. The prospect of political stability does not remove the need for active promotion of human rights. The opposite is the case.

One starting point would be for human rights defenders and the international community to strongly urge a proper selection process, with civil society participation, for the new NHRC later this year.

The same is true for the transitional justice commissions and the constitutional commissions. The crisis of political stability must lead to a reflection on the errors of the past two years and teach us that without active promotion of human rights there is unlikely to be much progress in any sector in Nepal.

With rule of law and justice, there will be progress. Without justice and respect for human rights, there will be nothing. ☺

Mohna Ansari is Commissioner, National Human Rights Commission of Nepal.

End impunity, protect rights: HRW

Human Rights Watch (HRW) has once more urged the government to address allegations of recent extra-judicial executions and deaths in custody, as well as to respect the independence of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC).

The NHRC has filed reports of continued human rights abuses by Nepal's security forces, and HRW pressed the government to end impunity and be accountable for the abuses.

"Nepal is still trying to grapple with delivering justice for unlawful killings during the armed conflict, but abuses continue to mount," said Meenakshi Ganguly, HRW's South Asia director. "The government uses rule of law rhetoric to appeal to foreign diplomats and donors but actually fosters a culture of impunity."

In June, killed Kumar Paudel, 47, of the Biplav faction of the Maoists died in Police custody in Sarlahi. An investigation by the NHRC said police officers responsible should be prosecuted, but the Home Ministry rejected the report.

The NHRC also called for an investigation into the deaths of Raj Kumar Chepang, 24, after being detained by the Army in Chitwan National Park, and Bijay Mahara, 19, after being taken in by Police for questioning.

The human rights violations have continued mainly because earlier heinous crimes committed during the 1996-2006 conflict have gone unpunished due to the government's insincerity in pursuing transitional justice, rights groups have said.

Responding to the government's request to the NHRC to reconsider its recommendation in the case of Kumar

Paudel, secretary and spokesperson for the commission, Bed Bhattarai, told HRW: "The Home Ministry is asking the NHRC to rethink the recommendation of the commission but actually we have clear evidence.... The NHRC has investigated and concluded it as an extrajudicial killing."

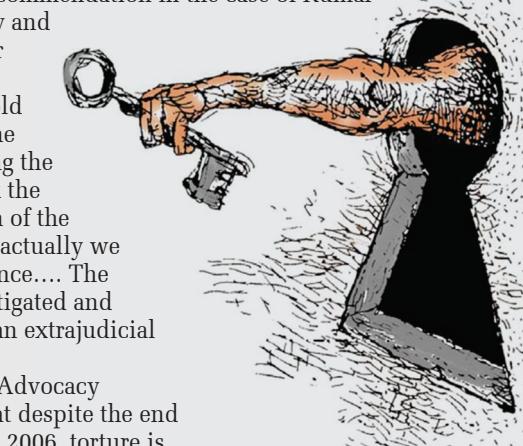
Research by Advocacy Forum found that despite the end of the conflict in 2006, torture is still widespread in Police custody in Nepal, and members of the Dalit and other marginalised groups are far more likely to be tortured than those of the 'upper' castes. Torture became a crime under Nepali law for the first time in 2018, but there have been no successful prosecutions.

The NHRC says the government has implemented only 12% of 810 commission recommendations in the eight years till 2019. The terms of the current members of the NHRC expire in October.

HRW is also critical of Nepal's donors for not addressing impunity in the country, saying funders of the Nepal Police 'should publicly and privately insist that Nepal meets its basic obligation to investigate and prosecute grave violations'.

When the country was elected to the current United Nations Human Rights Council, Nepal had said that it guaranteed the independence of the NHRC and the judiciary, and it was genuinely committed to pursue transitional justice for conflict-era crimes.

Six UN special rapporteurs have warned that the Nepal government has tried to 'severely undermine' the NHRC's independence and authority, and the government had failed to comply with repeated Supreme Court rulings to amend the transitional justice law to meet international standards, and instead has ignored numerous court orders relating to conflict-era police investigations and prosecutions. Nepal is now standing for a second term at the Council, and its record is coming up for review. ☺





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Drop in wildfires during lockdown

Satellite images show reduction in fires this spring compared to same period last year

Jayash Paudel

Comparisons of satellite images show that the Covid-19 lockdown has resulted in a reduction in the number of wildfires in Nepal in the spring of 2020 compared to the previous year.

Air pollution data for Kathmandu and other cities in Nepal also indicate an average of 38% improvement in air quality because of restrictions in vehicular movement since the first lockdown went into effect on 24 March.

However, there was a sharp deterioration in air quality mid April this year in Kathmandu Valley despite vehicles being off the roads. This has been linked directly to several wildfires burning simultaneously in the districts around Kathmandu which caused an increase in outdoor air borne particles.

In fact, NASA satellite measurements show a significant increase in gases like carbon monoxide and nitrogen dioxide from the wildfires in that period compared to the previous year.

The air quality satellite image (*see map, below right*) shows that the number of molecules of NO₂ per cm² was much higher in Kathmandu Valley in 9-14 April 2020 when compared to the same days in 2019.

But the fires in mid-April were an exception. The number of forest fires in Nepal, in fact, dropped drastically as the lockdown continued. A published study has found that restrictions on movement of people across districts in response to the pandemic likely caused a 5% decrease in the number of forest fire events and a 11% reduction in fire radiative power associated with the fires compared to the previous year.

These positive changes were more pronounced in districts with smaller areas of community-managed forests per capita. The difference across different areas of the country suggests that some districts are much better equipped in controlling fire incidence and its spread.

Districts including Arghakhanchi, Rupandehi, Sarlahi, Rautahat, Kapilavastu, Bara, Parsa



KUNDI DIXIT

and Dailekh implemented stricter control on movement of people during the lockdown. Other than the absence of humans in the forests, high pre-monsoon rainfall this spring may have also dampened the number of fires.

Among developing countries, Nepal faces the recurring threat of forest fires that damage around 200,000 hectares every year. A majority of these fires are human-induced and occur during the dry season, mostly between March and May.

Between 2000 and 2019, the Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer (MODIS) data shows that Nepal faced 47,000 unique wildfires averaging fire radiative power (FRP) of 29.88 megawatts.

These fires have been linked to deliberate burning by grazers and collectors of non-timber forest products, human negligence and accidents. Wildfires cause massive degradation and damage of physical infrastructure every year, affecting livelihoods of people all over Nepal.

Empirical estimates suggest that forest fires result in an annual economic loss of Rs5,000 per household, equivalent to 7.32% of

the annual per capita GDP in Nepal.

This year has been different. The outbreak of the novel coronavirus pandemic led the government to enforce a week-long lockdown on 24 March, which was partially lifted for a month before being re-imposed in 44 of Nepal's 77 districts.

A significant focus on precautionary measures over coronavirus during the nationwide lockdown raised questions about limited enforcement mechanisms among forest managers and a potential increase in illegal

forest activities. This motivated researchers to periodically study fire data in the Himalayan region via the Aqua and Terra satellites available from NASA's Fire Information for Resource Management System (FIRMS).

India also saw a similar trend this year: high annual rainfall this year exceeding the 15-year average coincided with the reduced number of forest fires in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh in the western Himalaya during the lockdown. This despite the fact that even in

NO SMOKE WITHOUT FIRE: A major wildfire burns out of control in Dolakha district in 2009, the year of huge conflagrations in the Himalaya because of a prolonged drought.

cases of high rainfall, the amount of moisture retained by the soil may still be the same compared to previous years.

Although the Nepali study takes fluctuations in rainfall and temperature into account, satellite data on real-time active fire locations have their set of limitations as well.

First, it is possible that multiple fire incidences within one-pixel area are reported as a single incidence. This problem occurs because the location of the fire is usually reported as the center of the pixel. Second, several factors such as land surface temperature, cloud cover and wind direction determine the minimum size of the fire a satellite detects.

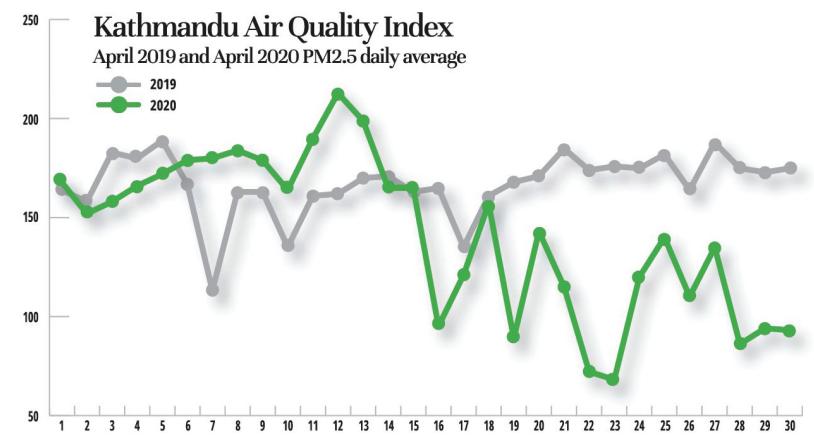
Finally, it is possible that fires may have started and ended between satellite observations, implying that actual forest fire events may have occurred but not observed in the data.

These caveats aside, my findings indicate that the pandemic led to a strong positive effect on the environment in the short-run. A back-of-the-envelope calculation suggests that the reduction in the number of forest fire events in the aftermath of the lockdown resulted in a short-term weekly economic gain of Rs360 per household in Nepal. This, however, does not imply that pandemic, in general, has been beneficial.

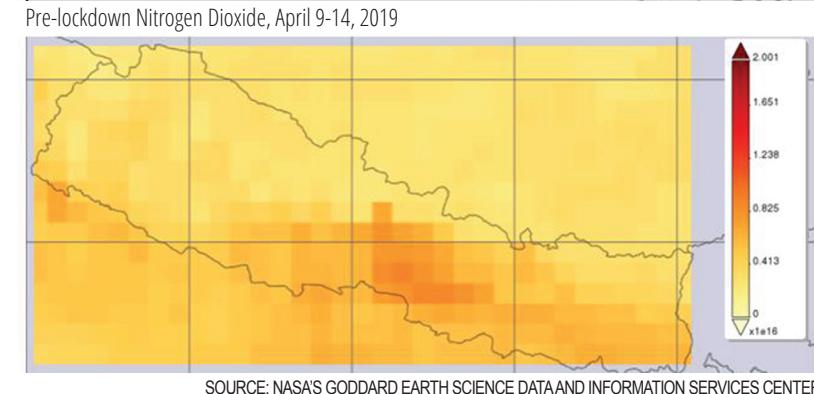
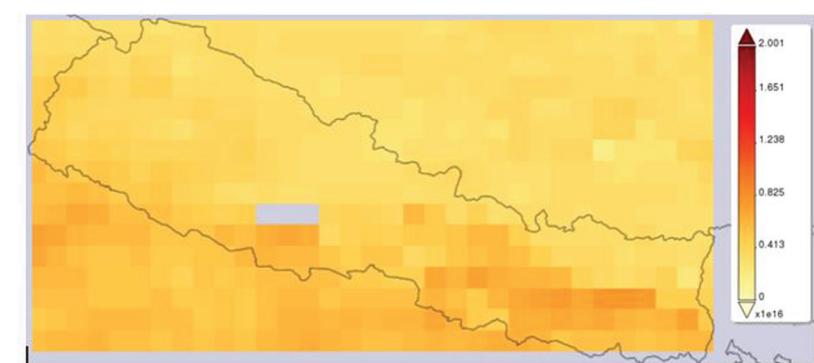
Rather, environmental benefits from reduced incidences of wildfires and improved air quality during the lockdown may partially offset the socioeconomic cost of pandemics across different parts of the globe.

The virus outbreak has direct repercussions on health and labour market outcomes. It would be interesting to see if the lessons learnt in reducing forest fires, air pollution and fossil fuel consumption can be adopted in planning for a 'better normal' for Nepal.

Jayash Paudel is an Economics Professor at Boise State University in the United States.

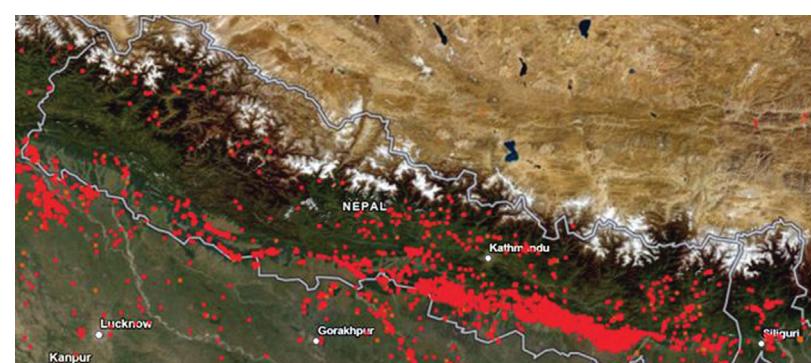


SOURCE: US EMBASSY KATHMANDU
The spike in air pollution in Kathmandu 9-14 April 2020 was an anomaly in the generally improved air quality. This was not due to vehicular movement, but caused by multiple wildfires around Kathmandu.



SOURCE: NASA'S GODDARD EARTH SCIENCE DATA AND INFORMATION SERVICES CENTER
Nitrogen Dioxide in Nepal during lockdown, April 9-14, 2020

Note: Air quality is measured by the number of molecules of NO₂ in an atmospheric column (from the Earth's surface to the top of the atmosphere) above a square centimeter of the surface.



Pre-lockdown forest fires in Nepal, March 24-April 10, 2019



Forest Fires in Nepal during lockdown March 24-April 10, 2020

SOURCE: NASA'S FIRE INFORMATION FOR RESOURCE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (FIRMS)

prabhu BANK BIZ BRIEFS

Turkish restarts flights

Following the government's directive to resume limited regular flights, Turkish has started Kathmandu-Istanbul connections that were stopped in March after the flight ban went into effect. Turkish Airlines operated its first scheduled flight on 3 September, and will be flying weekly on



Thursdays from Kathmandu to Istanbul on 10, 17 and 24 September. The flight coincided with the seventh anniversary of Turkish Airlines service to Kathmandu.

Turkish Airlines has created guidelines for safe travel during the pandemic, which include online check-in, fever checks, no contact boarding procedures, provision of a hygiene kit, new catering guidelines, and more. Passengers can get tested at the PCR centre in Istanbul Airport. During the flight, hospital-standard High-Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) filters will clean the air onboard. More information here: <https://www.turkishairlines.com/en-int/guidelines-for-safe-travel/>.

Everest Bank & CDL

Everest Bank has signed up with the Central Diagnostic Laboratory (CDL) per which the



bank's debit and credit card holders will get a 10% discount on RT-PCR tests if they

Scheduled flights resume

The Nepal government reopened regular flights after nearly six months on 1 September with a scheduled Nepal Airlines departure to Narita. Since March, there have been only chartered repatriation flights to take stranded tourists out, and bring back Nepalis.

The government is allowing regular flights only from countries where PCR tests are easily available. There will only be chartered flights from Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait for now, even though transit passengers will be allowed through Doha. All passengers on regular flights need to have RT PCR negative documents before boarding, but will have to self-isolate at home for one week after landing. Only diplomats and families will be allowed to fly to Kathmandu, no tourists and foreign visitors.

Nepal Airlines will be operating two more flights to and from Narita this month, as well as four to Kuala Lumpur and Dubai. Altogether there will be 14 flights during September to and from Kuala Lumpur by Nepal Airlines, Himalaya, Malindo and Malaysia Airlines. Most other airlines are flying once a week with limited passenger loads to comply with the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAAN) limit on the number of arriving passengers. Earlier, CAAN had set a limit of 500 passengers a day, but has now increased it to 800, which includes chartered flights.

International Airlines operating limited scheduled flights are Turkish Airlines, Qatar Airways, Etihad, Oman Air, Fly Dubai, Malaysia Airlines, Dragon Air, China Southern and Air China. Permission has not yet been given for flights from Indian cities because of the continuing rise in the number of Covid-19 cases there, airlines sources said.

get tested through CDL. The customers can also pay the amount from EBL mobile banking app EBL Touch 24 to minimise cash transactions.

Samsung

Samsung has announced the extension of pre-booking on flagship devices Galaxy Note20 and Galaxy Note20 Ultra until



4 September in light of the recent restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Galaxy Note20 is priced at Rs109,999 while the Galaxy Note20 Ultra is available at Rs139,999.

IME wallet

IME has mobilised its agent partners and enabled its digital wallet facility IME Pay mobile wallet app to make remittance directly available to users on their digital wallet during the COVID-19 crisis.



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VIRTUAL EVENTS

Pame Film Festival

The online Pame Film and Music Festival will screen feature films, short films and documentaries from Nepal as well as around the world. Watch the films on the Chalchitra TV app for free.

1 September onwards

**Sunday Sessions**

This week, psychological counselor and therapist Punjita Pradhan joins journalist Praeetha Tuladhar in a discussion surrounding mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Tune in to the livestream on Facebook. More details on the Quixote's Cove Facebook page.

6 September, 2pm-3pm

**ONLINE GAMES****Night in the woods**

Explore frozen forest, gather round the campfire, and trace the constellations in Lost Constellation and Longest Night, two games within the world the Night In The Woods game series by Infinite fall.

Roblox

Roblox is a global video game platform that hosts user-created games of multiple genres. Join the immersive 3D world and enjoy games created by players for players.

**Boardgame Arena**

Brush up on those familiar board games skills or learn new ones by choosing from among thousands of new games available in Boardgame Arena. Head to the website to start.

**80s arcade**

Travel back to the 80s with games like Pac Man, Donkey Kong, Galaga and more, and play games the old fashioned way. Visit the 80s arcade website to get started.

QUARANTINE DINING**Hankook Sarang**

Satisfy the hankering for Korean food during the lockdown and enjoy a variety of mouthwatering dishes like Tteokbokki, Samgyeopsal, Jeyuk Bokkeum and more from Hankook Sarang. Call for additional details.

(01) 4421711

**Grill Durbar**

At Grill Durbar, there isn't anything that can't be grilled. Try the signature grilled chicken and the Durbar fries. Check out Facebook for take away details.

9849777410

**Saigon Pho**

Experience ultra-fresh flavours of Vietnamese dishes, prepared by Vietnamese chefs. Try the Tofu summer rolls and the cold noodles with BBQ pork. Look at the menu online for more.

9802043330, 9803203119

Bota Momo

Thinking about making momo at home and enjoying them on rainy afternoons? Save time and get frozen momo from Bota. Bota's open momo and Gucha momo are also available to order.

9801116403, 9802055040

**The Cover Story****The Cover Story**

Released fortnightly, The Cover Story is a series of short audio bytes of writers, editors and poets talking about the cover designs of their books. Stay tuned to KathaSatha's Instagram and YouTube for regular updates.

Women in Comedy

In Breaking Barriers: Women in Comedy, 4 influential women in Nepali comedy: Elena Gurung, Loonibha Tuladhar, Sanjana Maharjan, and Yozana Thapa Magar, will share their experiences about working in a male-dominated industry and how they use their platform to bring social issues into focus. Learn more at bit.ly/3aFeLcn

4 September, 5pm-6pm



Going places together - qatarairways.com

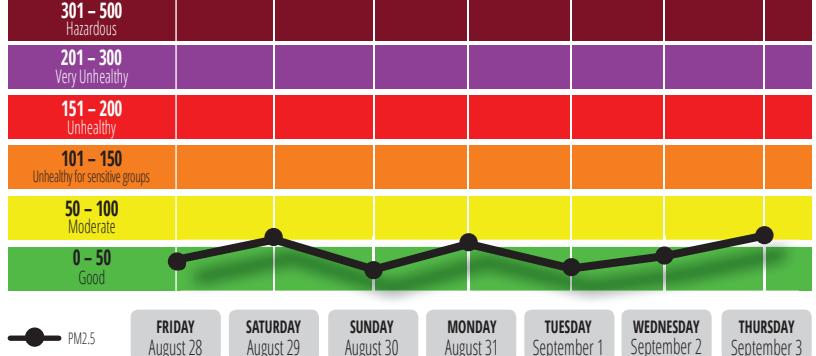


The monsoonal depression that traversed Central India brought renewed precipitation over the Himalaya this week, and it is looking a lot less wet for the weekend in Kathmandu. The minimum temperature will be dropping to 18 degrees, and we will start to see Dasain-like mornings. There is still a chance of short sharp bursts of evening rain, but the heavier showers will be concentrated in eastern Nepal.

FRIDAY 29°
18° **SATURDAY** 29°
18° **SUNDAY** 29°
18°

AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU, 28 Aug - 3 Sept



The daily average Air Quality Index (AQI) in Kathmandu's city centre was mostly clean throughout this week. That is because vehicles are off the roads, businesses are shut for at least one more week and there has been some rain with brisk afternoon breeze. While the average daily concentration of particulate matter smaller than PM2.5 microns is still low, we see an onset of an inversion layer in the mornings which traps polluted air. The morning spike in pollution can be seen in the hourly AQI live updates which are carried on www.nepalitimes.com <https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/>

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

KRIPA JOSHI

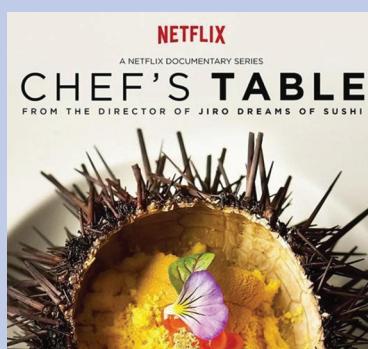
**BOYCOTT MICROBEADS**

Plastic debris come in all shapes and sizes, including microplastics that are less than 1mm long. These microbeads are often used as a bulking or exfoliating agent in personal care products like toothpastes and facial/ body washes. These tiny particles can't be captured by conventional wastewater treatment plants and once they are in the water they are almost impossible to remove.

When inadvertently consumed, the microplastics can block the digestive tracts of marine animals. This affects their growth, reproduction rate and even cause them to starve and die. Plastic particles can also kill corals, and end up in the human foodchain.

The good news is that many nations have now banned microbeads. We, as citizens and consumers, can also do our part by boycotting products that use microbeads and demand that the industry and government invest in alternatives to plastic.

#FridaysForFuture

OUR PICK

This original Netflix documentary series *Chef's Table* takes us into the kitchen of the world's top chefs, from Mexico and Italy to Thailand and Australia. Creator David Gelb focuses each episode on a specific chef, their personal philosophies and approach to cooking. With pandemic here to stay and lockdown still in place, the six-season long web series might serve as cooking inspiration for many.

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 गरौ।



नेपाल सरकार
सञ्चार तथा सूचना प्रविधि मन्त्रालय
सूचना तथा प्रसारण विभाग

The empty chairs

The passage of time, of existing and not existing, in portraits of conflict victims and their families

Text and photographs
by Guligo Jia

Nepal went through a protracted internal armed conflict from 1996-2006 after the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) launched a rebellion to liberate the country from feudalism and monarchy.

However, serious human rights violations and abuses were committed by both sides: the state security forces as well as the guerrillas. Over 17,000 people were killed on both sides, and more than 1,300 people are still listed as missing. The families do not know whether they are dead or alive, or who was responsible for their disappearance.

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) put an end to the conflict on 21 November 2006, with both sides agreeing to hold perpetrators accountable, and provide truth and justice to victims, including a commitment to investigate the whereabouts of those who were disappeared.

However, 14 years after the ceasefire, these promises remain unfulfilled. This photographic project focuses on the families of the victims of the conflict to mark the International Day of the Disappeared on 30 August.

My image making process involves a 'reunions' in which families who lost members are alongside projections of old photographs which include missing relatives. The passage of time, of existing and not existing, is layered within a single image.



Nijala

Nijala sits in front a picture of her father, taken during a festival. Her father was captured twice by the security forces, and later disappeared for being a Maoist. She was just one year old. Her mother Rubi, thinking she would be next, went underground. After the 2006 peace deal, Rubi married again and gave birth to a boy.



Bimala Dhakal

Bimala Dhakal poses for a portrait alongside the projected photo of her husband Rajendra Prasad Dhakal who was a human rights activist in Gorkha, and was disappeared in 1999 during a trip to Tanahu. She looked for her husband everywhere, and was herself arrested and tortured by the army. She never found him. Bimala rarely talks about her husband in front of her children, only when something reminds her of him.



Bibek Dhakal

Bibek poses for a portrait alongside a photo of his father Rajendra Prasad Dhakal projected to the wall behind him. He was only nine months old when his father was disappeared in 1999. "Sometimes, when I smile or sing out loud, my mother tells me that I look just like my father," Bibek says.



Maina Karki

Maina Karki and her son sit in front a picture of her late husband, who was a sociology teacher in a government school. He was detained twice by Maoist guerrillas for refusing to give them a donation, and killed the second time. The police report said he had been shot four times.



Narayan Devi Shrestha

Narayan Devi Shrestha poses for a portrait in front her husband's picture in which he is in a Maoist party meeting. Her husband, brother and brother-in-law were all arrested and disappeared together. He was a district member of Lalitpur in Kathmandu, and eye witnesses said they had seen him pressed to the ground with a gun pointing at his head.



Nagma Mali

Nagma poses for a portrait in front of a picture of her father. Nagma's mother passed away while giving birth to her sister Swastika. Their father was abducted by the army when Swastika was three, and she had to support her little sister and her grandmother who was ill. Nagma now works for the Children of the Disappeared while studying for her bachelor degree.



Swastika Mali

Swastika stands in the garden of their home in Lalitpur. Swastika's mother died while giving birth to her. Three years later, her father, Nanda Gopal, who was an artisan, was abducted by the army. After her father disappeared, Swastika was raised by her sister Nagma.



Srijana Shrestha

Srijana sits in front of a picture of herself with her husband, Sanjay, who was a supporter of the Nepali Congress party. In 2001, Maoist guerrillas came into their home and shot her husband in the room. He died on the way to hospital. They were an inter-caste marriage, and the couple had to escape to Pokhara to get married.



Gita Rasaili

Gita poses for a portrait in front of a picture of her sister Reena. Gita and two of her brothers joined the Maoist militia when she was 14. One of her brothers died in combat, and her sister Reena, a student at that time, was raped and killed by the army in her own backyard.

"What I feel is that we need to speak up for tomorrow," says Gita. Since 2007, Gita has been working for people who were victimised during the war and on issues of women empowerment in Voices of Women in Media.



Devi Sunar

Devi Sunar and her adopted daughter Maina in front of the picture of Devi's late daughter Maina who was only 14 when she was tortured and killed by the army as revenge for her mother's criticism of their involvement in the murder of her niece, Reena Rasaili. Accused of being a Maoist supporter, Reena was shot dead in her own backyard.

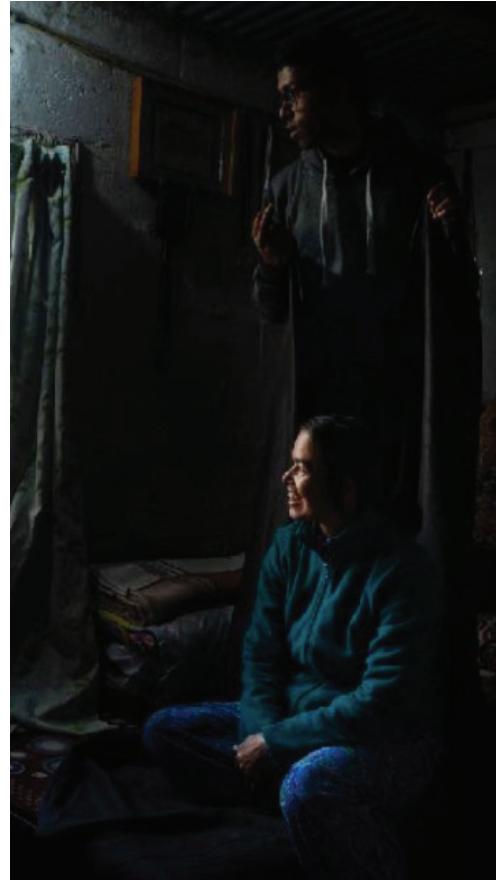
"Maina's body has been in the hospital morgue for 17 years, and I will cremate her when she gets justice," says Devi, who has founded the Maina Child Development Committee.



Suman Adhikari

Suman Adhikari sits in front of a family picture in which his brother and father Muktiadhan Adhikari are celebrating Tihar. Suman's father was a teacher and human rights activist in Lamjung. He was accused of continuing to teach Sanskrit and for refusing to give donations to the Maoists cause. In 2002, a dozen guerrillas took him away from a class he was teaching, tied him to a tree, stabbed him in the chest, and shot him.

Former Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai has publicly acknowledged that the murder was a "mistake". No one has been punished for the crime.



Rekha Bastola

Rekha looks out her window while I was trying to capture her portrait, her nephew holds a backdrop from behind. This is the only picture of her husband that Rekha has. As Maoist commanders wanted by the government, their wedding was held secretly with only a few comrades attending. Four months after the wedding, her husband was arrested by security and never came back.

Rekha brought up her husband's nephews and nieces. She remains single, believing that her husband will eventually come home some day.

Guligo Jia, 30 is a Chinese photographer and documentary filmmaker based in Beijing, and was stranded in Nepal from February-July 2020. guligojia@qq.com

Erika and King Tribhuvan

Looking back 70 years to the role of a German physiotherapist and her friendship with King Tribhuvan in Nepal's transition

Alisha Sijapati

When Erika read the story to the King, he cried out, "But that is I, Erika! And that is you!" The King asked if he might keep the story and Erika said, "It was written for you, but I promise you, one day the whole world will know."

The king is King Tribhuvan. Erika is Erika Leuchtag, a German physiotherapist. The story is the book *With a King in the Clouds* which came out in 1958, and a later edition titled *Erika and the King* published by Coward-McCann Inc.

The book is an intimate history of King Tribhuvan during Nepal's political transition, his queens Kanti and Ishwari and the princesses Nalini, Vijaya and Bharati, who were not allowed to leave the Narayanhit Palace by Nepal's Rana rulers.

The 270-page memoir begins on Christmas Eve in 1948 when Erika receives a letter from a European doctor, asking if she would be prepared to be a masseur for the Senior Queen of Nepal, who was then staying in the household of the royal family of Patiala in India.

Despite her family and friends advising her against venturing out to what was then a forbidden Himalayan kingdom, Erika entered Nepal in February 1949 and walked up across Chandragiri pass to Kathmandu with her helper Gorkhi Ram and her spaniel dog, Peepchen.

Erika did not have a clue about the Shah-Rana dynamics of Nepal's two royal families until she sensed something was 'off' when she visited Singha Darbar – a prototype of the Palace of Versailles -- to meet the last Rana Prime Minister Mohan Shumsher and the Director-General of Foreign Affairs, Bijaya Shumsher.

The British had left India, and an Anglophilic Rana dynasty's days were numbered. There were new rulers in Delhi, and many members



Erika Leuchtag with King Tribhuvan, 'Birdy' and 'Dreamy' (Senior Queen Kanti and Junior Queen Ishwari) along with Princess Vijaya in Calcutta in 1951 at Princess Bharati's wedding.

of Nepal's royal families and of India's princely states were married to each other. Palace intrigue, royal rivalries, and geopolitics were churning, and Erika changed from what the Ranas saw as a ditzy European woman to an insider playing an integral part in helping Tribhuvan's escape to India and the eventual end of Rana rule.

Her daily visits to the 'Naran Hity Durbar' were ostensibly to serve Senior Queen Kanti Rajya Lakshmi, but she ended up befriending the entire family, particularly King Tribhuvan. She was not just a physiotherapist for them, but a teacher, a Western dance instructor and a German language tutor.

She nicknamed the two queens Kanti and Ishwari 'Birdy' and 'Dreamy' for their beauty and personalities, but one gets hints of a growing intimacy with Tribhuvan. Erika Leuchtag herself left Germany before the war because of the rise of Adolf Hitler, and she makes no secret of the fact that the Ranas reminded her of the Nazis, and the Shahs were therefore allies.

Historian Dinesh Raj Panta remembers reading a smuggled copy of the first edition of Leuchtag's book in secrecy because it was banned, ironically, after the Shahs came to power. As a historian, Panta was intrigued by the German's relationship with Tribhuvan, his escape to the Indian

Embassy in Kathmandu, departure to Delhi, and the events that followed.

"Was she in love with Tribhuvan? Or was it just loyal devotion towards the king? Maybe the book was banned because people might think that the king's father had a romantic alliance with a European woman and that would taint the history of the restoration of the Shah dynasty," Panta speculates.

Rajni Chand, the granddaughter of King Tribhuvan and daughter of Princess Nalini, was brought up in Happy Cottage inside Narayanhit since she was two by both her grandmothers – Queens Kanti and Ishwari. Now 64 and living

in Chhauni, she remembers her grannies talk about Erika and how everything changed after she arrived in Kathmandu.

It was not just Erika who was devoted to the family. Chand remembers being told the royal family was also extremely fond of her. They even named the room where she taught them to waltz the Erika Dance Hall in her honour. As



King Tribhuvan's four daughters in Calcutta in 1951.



Erika Leuchtag



King Tribhuvan with Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, B P Koirala and other democratic leaders in New Delhi in 1951 before the signing of the Delhi Accord to form a tripartite interim government.

a child, Chand remembers sneaking into the hall every chance she got to admire the colourful walls, the decoration and cute animal toys.

"My grandparents, mother and aunts were prisoners in the palace, and Erika was like a ray of sunshine in their lives, someone who they never imagined would help them recover from their miseries, and even in that short time, Erika managed to leave long-lasting memories for each one of them," Chand told us in an interview last week.

Unlike many history books about Nepal's longest reigning king, Erika gives us an insider's personal perspective on the man, describing vividly his melancholy and frustration at being a mere pawn at the hands of five Rana prime ministers: Chandra Shumsher, Bhim Shumsher, Juddha Shumsher, Padma Shumsher and Mohan Shumsher.

Perhaps it is because of Erika's influence that Tribhuvan confides that he wished to become a constitutional monarch like King George V of England. Which was happened briefly during the transition in the 1950s, until his son King Mahendra took back absolute powers in 1961.

King Tribhuvan worked alongside Dharma Bhakta Mathema and other Nepali democracy activists politicians, but the book's more revealing parts are about the softer side of the man who loved and respected his wives and daughters, and who reciprocated the love.

The King and his family lived in Happy Cottage, which was later known as Tribhuvan Sadan inside Narayanhit Palace. As a royal prisoner, the king's life was like that of a bird in a gilded cage. He was intrigued by Europe, and often pored over mail-catalogues for clothes, furniture and cars to order for the palace. The book describes Tribhuvan as a man of sophistication who yearned to visit the outside the world.

Tribhuvan was childlike, and according to Erika he never liked alcohol – mainly because he did not want to be a puppet king spoilt by wine and women like his father and grandfather. He was fond of cigars, dressed well, and once smuggled two trunks full of books from India through Boris Lissanevitch, the White Russian émigré who managed Royal Hotel.

The book is a time capsule and through Erika's keen sense of observation, we get descriptions of Narayanhit's majestic gardens and detailed portrayals of people she came across. The book is necessarily dated and in places turgid when she is describing the sights and sounds of Kathmandu, but one has to understand that this was one of the first books introducing Nepal to the outside world.

There are hints that Erika was

EXCERPTS:

*King Tribhuvan was curious about Senior Queen's physiotherapy treatment and wanted the same treatment for himself too. Here, Erika describes King Tribhuvan's physique in intimate details:

He took off the dressing gown. Beneath it, he wore black and white bathing trunks, and his body was as superbly muscled and as graceful as that of the dancing deity Nata Raja. About his hips, and dipping down toward his loins, was a broad belt of thin golden mesh, fastened in the centre by a clip mounted with a great emerald. Around the biceps of his right arm he writhed a golden snake, its head a milky moonstone. From his throat, hung amulets strung with gold and emeralds.

From neck to ankle he was tattooed, twisting, cunning convolutions of blue lace of his pale skin. The intricate patterns combined on his chest, thighs and shoulders to form ferns, flowers and the outstretched beauty of peacock's feathers.

*Letter from Tribhuvan to Leuchtag, giving due credit to her help through coded words:

Dear Miss Lakshmi -- I thank you for your advice -- be still more grave. I will try very much to be grave. The photo of Lakshmi is in my portico, the reflection is in my heart. Do not forget us.

The bird came to my garden and gave me the Doctor's flower, but you are the person who sowed the seed and took care of the plant. The flower is very sweet and beautiful. What more? Not only I, but all my party offer you our heartfelt thanks for the trouble you have taken to plant and make it free from pest.

*In a conversation with Indian Ambassador CPN Singh during a picnic trip to Budhanilkantha, Erika Leuchtag writes:

I told him that Surjit had met the King, and that he had promised to help, even by flying the King out of Nepal to asylum in India, but this had come to nothing with Surjit's recall.

Chandreshwar Prasad Narain Singh: "I should meet your King, also, although I cannot promise to fly him out of the country. But first tell me what it is he wants from India. I shall be going to India soon. Perhaps I could talk to Pandit-ji and perhaps bring a letter back for your King."



Rajni Chand more than a royal physiotherapist, she mentions walking hand-in-hand with the Tribhuvan around the palace garden. It is clear that she and Tribhuvan were working together to overthrow the Ranas, and in this she became the go-between to coordinate logistics with Indian ambassadors Surjit Singh Majithia (1947-49) and CPN Singh (1949-52).

She and Tribhuvan developed elaborate code words in their communications to keep their plans a secret. Here were some of them:

*Serpent - A Rana
Big Snake - Prime Minister Mohan Shumsher
Bird - Ambassador
Moor - The King
Flower - Letter
Kite - Airplane
Storm - Evacuation
Erika - Lakshmi*

Erika and the King, is now available as an e-book in English translation and is a timeless historical read. This is a fairy-tale account of that period, but it is accurate and does not exaggerate her own influence.

Rajni Chand, who has read the book, notes that Erika's account and the oral history that she grew up with in the Shah royal family do match quite a bit. Chand admits she admired and respected Erika, probably also because the book mentions her grandmothers, mother and aunts in loving terms. That is the other unique part of this book -- very few historical accounts in Nepal mention the women behind the scenes, and if they do, female protagonists are often portrayed as power-hungry and ruthless.

The book concludes with King Tribhuvan's death in a hospital in Zurich, and as Dinesh Raj Panta notes, leaves open an interpretation about why Erika did so much for a country that would have never have recognised her efforts.

Even 62 years after its first publication, *Erika and the King* is a fascinating insider account of Nepal's royal family through the eyes of a foreigner. It also reintroduces us to Erika Leuchtag, who seems to have played an important role in the escape of



The New York Times Intrigue in Katmandu

ERIKA AND THE KING. By Erika Leuchtag. Illustrated. 255 pp. New York: Coward-McCann. \$3.95.
By ROBERT TRUMBULL

THE emotional reminiscence of Erika Leuchtag's days in Nepal and her friendship for the late King Tribhuvana (one of several accepted spellings of his name) is intended to be of the same genre as "The King and I." Miss Leuchtag is a German physiotherapist who went to Katmandu, capital of the tiny Himalayan state between India and Tibet, to treat the senior of Tribhuvana's two Queens (they are sisters). In addition, she taught the King to dance, held his hand through long, sentimental evenings at the palace, and eventually played a role in Nepalese politics.

On her arrival in Katmandu, a city of golden temple spires that reminds every Western visitor of Shangri-la, she was startled to learn that the King was a virtual prisoner in his palace,

and that all power was in the hands of an hereditary Prime Minister. This had been going on for slightly over 100 years, since a noble of the Rana clan decided to put an end to capricious rule by weak monarchs.

From that time on, the office of Prime Minister — carrying with it the title of Maharaja — had passed to the eldest male Rana, and the King was a sa

cred nonentity. This curious system, which Miss Leuchtag calls "Ranarchy," inevitably corrupted the Ranas, who soon cornered virtually all the kingdom's wealth and suppressed opposition with oriental forthrightness. Meanwhile, there was a popular anti-Rana movement, backed by Indians and having the sympathy of Indian Prime Minister Nehru. This was the situation into which Miss Leuchtag stepped.

ONE day the King decided that he wanted Miss Leuchtag's massage treatments. She writes:

"He took off the dressing gown. Beneath it he wore black and white bathing trunks, and his body was as superbly muscled and as graceful as that of the dancing deity Nata Raja. About his hips, and dipping down toward his loins, was a broad belt of thin golden mesh, fastened in the center by a clip mounted with a great emerald. Around the biceps of his right arm he writhed a golden snake, its head a milky moonstone. From his throat, hung amulets strung with gold and emeralds.

"From neck to ankle he was tattooed, twisting, cunning convolutions of blue lace on his pale skin. The intricate patterns combined on his chest, thighs and shoulders to form ferns, flowers and the outstretched beauty of peacock feathers."

The King, by Miss Leuchtag's account, was an insatiable customer of foreign mail-order houses — she had reason to think,

Mr. Trumbull, author of "As I See India," was The Times correspondent in New Delhi during the years 1947-1955.

Tribhuvan and his family in 1950 to the Indian Embassy and four days later to Delhi.

The rest, of course, is history, as the Delhi Agreement paved the way for an interim government and move towards a democratic Nepal. We won't give away any spoilers, but we learn about Erika's role in getting Tribhuvan to meet the Indian ambassadors and carry a letter from Nehru.

This is all stuff that could be turned into a gripping historical tv series like *The Crown* for which Erika Leuchtag has already written the script. ☐

as the months passed and he produced one surprising Western gadget after another, that he had in time bought the whole catalogue. His wrist watches, "a different one each day and never the same one twice, were an ornament, and I never saw him consult them. Why should he? Where had he to go, and what had he to do?"

The Kings of Nepal are revered as reincarnations of the Hindu god, Vishnu. That was about all the outside world knew of them, for the Ranas kept them out of sight except on ceremonial occasions. The ruling clique encouraged a belief that the monarchs were uniformly frail creatures, weak-minded from debaucheries and addicted to the delights of the harem and the opium pipe. It was said the Ranas introduced them to the last vice while they were yet boys.

MISS LEUCHTAG, besides admiring the King's physique and face, which seem to have intrigued her immoderately, found him to be an intelligent man whose ambition was to be a constitutional monarch like the Kings of England. He had smuggled books from Calcutta, and was well read on Western methods of government. She decided that the King's true character, as she saw it, should be known to those who might help him.

Meeting indifference at the British Embassy, she turned to the Indians. Eventually, she relates, she persuaded the King to write a letter to Nehru explaining his democratic ambitions for Nepal. Miss Leuchtag carried this letter to the Indian Ambassador, Sir Chandreswar Prasad Nairain Singh. That suave gentleman took it to New Delhi, and eventually brought back a letter to the King from Nehru.

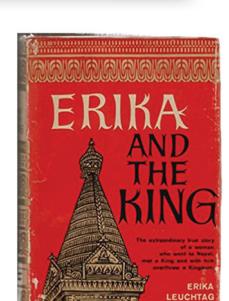
On Nov. 6, 1950, the King and his family set out on what was ostensibly a hunting party, with Rana guards accompanying them. The King was driving the lead car himself. As the caravan reached the Indian Embassy, the King swung abruptly through the gates, his surprised entourage following.

The rest is history—the spiriting of Tribhuvan to India, the revolution and overthrow of the Ranas and the King's triumphal return as his country's first constitutional monarch. Miss Leuchtag loses nothing of the melodrama in her account of these happenings, which she followed from India.

When Tribhuvan achieved the role he had envisaged for himself, the first Nepalese King to be more than a figurehead in more than a century, he lived up to it. There was no time now for hand-holding in the palace gardens with the attractive German physiotherapist. Eventually Miss Leuchtag went to England. The sentimental account dwindles to a sad conclusion with the King's premature death of a heart ailment, in a Swiss sanatorium, leaving Erika with her dreams.

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Erika and the King
(With a King in the Clouds)

by Erika Leuchtag
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Hardcover 255 pages \$12.48 on Amazon



Health workers battle Covid-19, but also stigma

It is not just the virus that is spreading in the community, so is fear of frontline workers

Sonia Awale

Nepal reported the first death of a medical worker from Covid-19 last week, a 35-year-old health assistant in Mahottari district. Across the country, over 500 healthcare providers including doctors, nurses and lab technicians have tested positive for SARS-CoV-2.

But instead of crediting them for putting their own lives on the line at the frontlines of the war against the pandemic, health workers in Nepal are being ostracised, publicly humiliated, and sometimes threatened by landlords and neighbours who fear that they will spread the virus.

Even as they battle community transmission, in many cases it is the community itself that has turned against medical personnel.

Over 20 staff at Bayalpata Hospital in Achham district have tested positive for Covid-19 in the last month, and all are currently isolated in the facility's staff quarters because landlords have driven them out of their rented rooms in town.

"The government has directed asymptomatic people to isolate themselves at home, but this shows just how difficult this is in reality," says Bikash Gauchan, a doctor at Bayalpata. "It is harder to fight society than Covid-19."

Gauchan himself was in isolation after a previous outbreak and tested negative, but on a recent trip to the market to buy grocery, the shopkeeper stopped him from entering just because he worked at the hospital.

At the Patan Academy of Health Sciences, the newly appointed director Rabi Shakya gets resignation letters from staff every day, and the reason cited by everyone of them is because of community harassment, or due to family pressure.

"Health workers are already working in less than ideal conditions, they are not properly equipped, are overworked and have no incentives. Many don't even have family support," says Shakya. "They are risking their own health for the public, but when that very public turns against you, it is very painful."

Shakya says many younger doctors are now rethinking their decision to work in the medical field in Nepal. He adds, "Societal stigma stems from ignorance, and it means we have failed to communicate to the public how the virus is transmitted. Even some health workers themselves are not fully aware."

Says epidemiologist Mahesh Maskey: "It is ironic that these brave workers are receiving abuse from the very people they are protecting.



BIKRAM RAI



Free minibus service for health workers in Kathmandu Valley hired by various charity groups.

I am surprised by how the psychology of fear has led us to do this, and I urge everyone to change their mentality."

The flood of positive cases in Kathmandu and other cities in the past month has led to public panic about Covid-19, and this is turning people against those who are self-isolating at home, or those working at close quarters with patients.

Experts partly blame the relentless media focus on the daily case totals and fatalities,

instead of the recovery rate, Nepal's relatively low death rate, and the precautions the public needs to take. This has fed the notion that Covid-19 is highly lethal, fuelling the irrational fear.

On Thursday, Nepal registered a record 1,228 new confirmed cases, 481 of them in Kathmandu Valley alone. There were 6 additional deaths, bringing the total to 257. However, what was buried in the news reports was that there were 968 recoveries, one of the

highest so far in a single day and the total recoveries now stands at 24,207.

Some doctors have retorted on social media with messages for those who stigmatise health workers, saying they should also think about who is going to save their lives when they find themselves in the ICU.

Amidst the gloom and doom, there are glimmers of hope. Nepal Scouts, Nepal Medical Association and Higher Institutions and Secondary Schools' Association Nepal in coordination with the Ministry of Health have started a free bus service for medical personnel inside Kathmandu Valley to take them to and from hospital and their homes.

Charities are offering free daily meals for those without any source of sustenance. In Biratnagar, local youth groups are helping rehabilitate Covid-19 patients who have recovered (*see below*). And there are communities which have honoured medical frontline workers who live in their midst, saying they are true heroes.

However, these are exceptions. Anisha Shakya, a medical officer at International Friendship Children Hospital says she and her colleagues are already working with limited equipment and resources, and the harassment heaped on health workers is stressful.

She adds, "What would build morale is positive reinforcement, emotional support in this difficult time and more tolerance on the part of the public."



Youth help

Kamal Rimal
in Biratnagar

Worried by the ostracisation and harassment of even those who have recovered from novel coronavirus infections, youth groups in Biratnagar have taken it upon themselves to help in their reintegration into society.

They conduct home visits, sanitise homes and help with the management of funerals. Bargahi Youth Group recently helped perform the funeral of an individual who had passed away due to coronavirus in Birat Hospital, and who was

shunned by relatives and the community. The entire team is now in quarantine. High Court Biratnagar recently ruled that the final rites of Covid-19 victim should be performed by the families, or as per their wishes.

When a person was infected in Ashok Chok recently, locals blocked off the streets preventing residents from commuting.

Ward 8 committee chair Ram Pokhrel says increased fear of coronavirus in the community and the resulting societal stigma has forced his office to scale up the campaign.

"We are sanitising homes among other things in order to prevent more incidents like this from happening in the future. But first and foremost, we need to change the way society thinks," says Pokhrel, adding that even well-educated

neighbours who are engineers and school principals were against the presence of infected individuals in the community.

In its home visits and sanitisation campaign, the group tries to inform locals that the virus does not transmit if sufficient distance is maintained. They have also distributed masks, gloves, sanitiser and food rations to 54 households.

The municipality is also making home visits with immunity-boosting Ayurvedic herbs for those in self-isolation, helping them get back on their feet.

Former chair Binod Raut says: "Coronavirus is now spreading in the community. We are going house to house, informing people about how the virus spreads and sanitising the homes of infected people."

