Last month, reports emerged in the Indian media that the Chinese had built seven structures in a ‘disputed’ border area between China and Nepal in Humla district.

This was not the first time the area on Lapcha Pass (5,018m) on the ridge between Limi Valley and Tibet had been in the news. After the Chinese built two houses there in 2015, a Nepali team had concluded that it was indeed inside China as per the 1962 border demarcation, and the matter was laid to rest.

However, after the Lipu Lekh row between Nepal and India in April, security forces from the Nepali side had stepped up patrols along the Nepal-India and Nepal-China borders, and had been inspecting border pillars.

One team last month saw that the Chinese had built a new compound with seven houses near border pillar #12 at Lapcha Pass on Limi Valley, and reported this back to Kathmandu, which ordered the Chief District Officer of Humla to go inspect the area.

On Monday, a Nepali security team reached the compound, and were told by a Chinese soldier with a hand-held hailer to go back. The person who spoke English was then removed, and his Chinese superior started speaking in Mandarin, brandishing a map.

This encounter hit the headlines in Kathmandu on Wednesday morning. There was even a sudden demonstration outside the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu with banners that said ‘Back Of China’ that was dispersed by police.

Minister of Foreign Affairs and government spokesperson Pradeep Gyawali went into damage control and told a press briefing on Wednesday evening: “In 2015, our team visited the site and made a field report saying that the structures were 1km inside Chinese territory … Nepal does not have any border dispute with China.”

Later at night, the Chinese Embassy spokesperson in Kathmandu also clarified: “There is proof that the houses shown in media reports are on Chinese side … it can be further verified if Nepal wants. We do not have any border disagreement with Nepal.”

The team that went to Lapcha then trekked westward along the border to Hilsa, and on Tuesday located Border Pillar #11 which was half-buried in snow and dirt at an elevation of 5,202m on Takule peak.

Survey expert Budhhi Narayan Shrestha says the 1962 demarcation resolved many of the contested areas between Nepal and China, erected pillars, and where that was not possible, decided that either rivers or the Himalayan watershed was the border.

Photographer Bharat Bandhu Thapa who trekked through the region four years ago remembers looking down from Lapcha Pass, a wide meadow on the border ridge, and taking pictures of two houses (left).

This is one of the few points in Nepal from where Lake Mansarovar and Mt Kailash are visible, and it is clear from the images that the Chinese structures are down the northern side of the Pass.

“I remember locals telling me the houses were in China, and that the army post further down was built after the Chinese found out there were people moving across Lapcha Pass because it was an easy place to cross between Tibet and Nepal,” Thapa recalls.

“They said the Chinese never gave locals any trouble, but would stop outsiders.”

HIGH FRONTIER: Houses built by the Chinese as seen from Lapcha Pass in 2016 with Lake Mansarovar and Mt Kailash visible in the distance (left). Photograph of the same place last month (below) with the new Chinese compound. In the distance, Mt Kailash and Mansarovar.

Map of the Nepal-China border showing location of Border Pillar 11 and 12, Lapcha Pass and the Hilsa checkpoint.
The ‘F’ word

On 19 September, Nepal marked Constitution Day. It was on this day five years ago that the Constitution was hurriedly promulgated by the then-prime minister Khadga Prasad Oli, triggering severe criticism for being slow to respond to the deadly earthquakes earlier in 2015.

The Constitution took one step forward, but the state has taken two steps back — especially after the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) government came to power. Not only are we still mired in the miasma of a virus, impunity, freedom of expression, tolerance of dissent, independence of the judiciary, and the like, but there is a pandemic of corruption.

The public was increasingly fed up with the government’s poor performance even before Covid-19, but in the past six months it has become manifestly clear that the welfare of the country’s vulnerable.

We have often argued in this space against declaring Nepal a ‘federal’ state. Whatever it is called, genuine decentralization and workable political decentralization was more important for development and service delivery — whether it was during the Panchayat, the post-1990 era, or today.

Indeed, development got a boost after the decentralization and local self-governance acts went into effect in the 1990s. Grassroots communities took a stake in decision-making led to significant improvements in living standards in many districts.

But ‘federalism’ became synonymous with ‘power’ because that was how the Nepali Congress thought it was wage, and later it was the price to be paid to meet demands for regional autonomy. Political parties haggled for nearly a decade about how many federal provinces there should be, which way they should be demarcated, and what to name them, (some have since been removed) until it turned out, the boundaries of post-2017 ‘provinces’ roughly resemble the Panchayat-era anchal, and Bagmati, Karnali and Gorkha even carry the same river names.

The ‘F’ word became policy without being correct. But the past five years have shown that there was no need at all to call it federalism in Nepal as was Kathmandu-centric as ever. In fact, there was probably more genuine devolution during the 1990s than now under federalism.

We should have known. Communists through modern history (Soviet Union, China under Mao) have used federalism as a façade to continue with their ideology of ‘democratic centralism’. No wonder, NCP, which has more power than any other recent government has controlled it not just Singha Darbar but inside one room in Baluwatar.

Except Province 2, all others are governed by the NCP. Provincial leaders therefore there have more allegiance to the party headquarters from where all power emanates. As our report on Covid-19 shows (page 10), the way Province 2 and Tani municipality handled testing and contact tracing during the pandemic is a lesson for Kathmandu. The provincial government has shown that devolution improves government response in a crisis.

Now that we are stuck with a federal state, let us try to make the best of it by practising what it really means: true devolution of decision-making, effective service delivery, and resource distribution to local governments.

WHEN THERE WERE NO PLANES

In the latest episode of Walkabout with Anil, take a look back at when those incredible figures travelled from400 km to Kathmandu, Palpa to Kathmandu and Lumbini to Karachi. Subscribe in @NepaliTimes, Emerson Apple and JustWatch on Amazon. Watch full video on the Nepal Times YouTube channel.

RUPANISH GHING

We must extract him MP and then see what comes out of it (@TransMan @editorial, @1202).

So why stop at MP or minister? Ghising appears to have the management nous, moral integrity and popularity to be Nepal’s first Tamang MP – a party they will support him.

Rahul De Leslie

Nepal politics is complex so he must not pin it He won’t be able to do what he wants. @NepaliTimes, Emerson Apple and JustWatch on Amazon. Watch full video on the Nepal Times YouTube channel.

REDDICOCK

Ted R (Ted) Ricardo was a much-revered friend of the Nepali community in New York and a great agent among Nepalis. Ted’s death was probably the greatest loss to the Nepali community he never had to be told what he was right.

Saiful Panjali

Our leaders are corrupt and shameless. They will hear Kumar anti-corruption and against him and won’t hesitate to put him behind the bars.

Kul Gautam

LANDSLIDES

So add to this read his (Deadly monsoon in Nepal turns deadline, Ramesh Bhatta, nepalitimes.com). There is an urgent need to tackle hunger. Anything else is bad PPL.

Gyurme Dondup

What good is a Constitution when it does not protect the people’s lives? Don’t need a pompous self-centred PM to praise a new generation of Nepali heroes, they are smiling down from heaven, and may his soul rest in eternal peace.

Hans Hofer

CONSTITUTION DAY

Everything seems relevant when people are going hungry not far from Singha Darbar (Youth-led feeding campaign), Nuna Rau, NepaliTimes.com. There is an urgent need to tackle hunger. Anything else is bad PPL.

Ravindra Shrestha

Learning about the Buddha’s teachings and heritage (‘Walkabout with Anil: Chiba’, nepalitimes.com). We live in Florida and had to travel to Nepal for it could have pushed the government to...

Raven Shrestha

@NepaliTimes, Emerson Apple and JustWatch on Amazon. Watch full video on the Nepal Times YouTube channel.

Radhika Shukla

This video on covid carried a deep meaning. Thanks for the beautiful content.

Rubina XP

Once I return from Australia, I will be looking at these structures closely and with more understanding.

Owen Martin

COVID-19

While travelling from the US to Kathmandu, our PCR tests already expired on the way (‘Covid is Kathmandu is only half the story’, Tufan Neupane, nepalitimes.com). We had a flight in Kathmandu and had to travel on our way to Washington DC. We were advised to arrive a day earlier and stay overnight in Washington. When we finally arrived in Kathmandu, there was big chaos while filling COVID forms at the airport. Things could have very simply been made a lot simpler.

Swaran Thapa

It’s true that Covid-19 is also lessening the loss of life from traffic accidents and air pollution. An insightful analysis how Covid-19 lives in Nepal (Sonia, Awale, nepalitimes.com).

Colette Minna

Very good observation linking the fall in highway fatalities to deaths from Covid-19. Kutte to the writer. @Pradhan

Raj Tamang

This is one interesting way to look at things.
Father Moran and Nepal’s Jesuits

Educator and ham radio enthusiast, 9N1MM was the country’s first window into the modern world

The Society of Jesus fathers have made their indelible mark on the history of Nepal. From Shigatse (Xigazê) in Tibet to Kathmandu Valley, and they were remembered by generations of students as their scholarly study, academic research, and social work resulted in books, centres and clinics where their calling was manifested in their devout vocations with practical ministrations. Father Moran is remembered riding his motorbike to Godavari, white robes billowing, and in his wake-alarmed buffers and excited dogs cowering down the umade road in a cloud of dust.

For Nepal, the brothers’ profound influence on education impacted on generations of privileged pupils lucky enough to attend St Xavier’s and St Mary’s in Godavari and Jawalakhel – Nepal’s first internationally accredited school opened in 1951 and 1955 respectively. At the initiative of the newly instated King Tribhuvan, the Jesuits literally brought modern thinking to Nepal, founding the first permanent Christian mission sanctioned in Kathmandu for nearly 200 years. This remarkable achievement was mainly due to the sheer force of personality and charisma of Father Marshall Moran. The first European ever encountered by the Valley’s Newa inhabitants was a Portuguese Jesuit, Father John Calap, on his way from Shigatse (Xigazê) in Tibet to Benaulim in early 1682. These intrepid Westerners were Jesuit monks despatched from Rome to their Catholic mission in Tibet. They

must have been a strange sight, austere travellers clothed in long capes and plain, black, ankle-length soutanes gathered at the waist with a rope.

The Jesuits’ legation in Lhasa was never robust and in 1792 Pope Clement XI suspended the mission-field of Tibet to the Oratory of Friars Minor Capuchin – a branch of Roman Catholic Franciscans. The Capuchins would have been instantly recognisable with their dark brown robes, pointed hoods drawn over their heads, and untrimmmed bushy black beards. The Malla kings allowed Capuchin friars from Lhasa to live in the Valley’s city states for over half a century, until they were politely sent packing by Pritivi Narayan Shah in 1779. Wolter Coen in Bhaktapur, Raju Ranajit Malla wrote to Bouvier to the Pope saying that they were free to evangelise but, concerning his own conversion, he would “not be able to do it now”. The site of the Lalitpur Capuchin house and small cemetery, said to lie north of Patan, is forgotten and lost. Other than the occasional visit by a wandering Capuchin, there would be no Christian clergy living in Nepal until the restoration of the monarchy when Father Moran established the current Jesuit mission.

Born in Chicago in 1906, Marshall D. Moran joined the Society of Jesus in 1924. With five other Jesuits sailed out from New York to Bombay in 1929, then by train to their destination, the Patna Mission in Bihar. In India he studied and taught in Shambaganur, Bettiah, Kurseong and Ranchi, set up schools and hospitals, and worked in Patna University which had links with the London mission. In 1939, Marshall was ‘home’ for a brief period in Kathmandu – a connection that would change his life. Father Bill Robins tells the story: “The Patna University sent an invigilator each year to Nepal to supervise the Tri Chandra college exams. Professors hated to go. Marshall volunteered to fill in, and so in October 1949 travelled to the border and on to Amritpur. A bus got him to Bhimphedi and from there he walked to Kathmandu. During the month in Nepal, Marsh was able to build relationships with those in power, while offering to help Nepal through school education. He returned to Patna, hoping that he would be invited back.”

On the feast of All Saints a year later, Marshall Moran received the long-awaited summons from the new education minister, Nrip Jang Rana. Returning to Kathmandu in early 1951, Father Moran accepted the offer of Godavari Darbar, the Prime Minister’s summer residence, as the school site, he recruited students and prepared the buildings. St. Xavier’s in Godavari began classes on 1 May 1951, and land was purchased in Jawalakhel in 1954. Thanks to a plentiful supply of American missionaries and visas restrictions with which a succession of Jesuit teachers were available to run the schools.

There were a couple of non-negotiable conditions attached to the invitation as prescribed by King Tribhuvan, and to which Father Moran concurred. The Jesuits’ work was confined only to the Kathmandu Valley, and they were not permitted to proselytise. Within those limitations, which to this day the brotherhood are proud to have honoured at the letter, the Society of Jesus fathers have made their indelible mark on the history of Nepal.
Zurich Airport International opts out of Nijgad
Still, government pushes a ghost airport so it can clear-cut valuable hardwood forest

Kashish Das Shrestha

T
the Nepali government’s plan to force through a mammoth airport project, despite a global recession and concerns about an ecological disaster, has been pushed back after a Swiss company decided to pull out.

The government of Prime Minister K P Oli recently announced it was finalising an agreement with Zurich Airport International (ZAI) to develop the $3.45 billion airport at Nijgad, 75km south of Kathmandu.

However, ZAI says it knows nothing about an agreement.

“The government’s statement about such an agreement is misleading,” said Raffaela Stelzer, a spokesperson for ZAI told Nepal Times last week. “We do not foresee any investments in projects outside the areas that have been already announced.”

The Oli government had been pushing Nijgad as a ‘national pride project’ ever since it came to power in 2017, and it was aggressively backed by former Tourism Minister Rabindra Adhikari, and by his current successor Yogesh Bhattarai.

The government argues that Kathmandu airport is too congested, has limited room for expansion, and that the budget can be siphoned off from the project site to force through a mammoth project.

However, if in May it was apparent that there had been no formal understanding between the Nepali government and ZAI, even though in Kathmandu the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism was using an agreement with ZAI as the basis for its decisions to go ahead with allocating a budget for tenders, and planning to cut trees.

The government argues that a purported deal with ZAI is nothing about an agreement. ZAI’s Stelzer told us in May:

“Yes, in 2019 we expressed our general interest in this project to the government. Since then the ball has never really started for us and we are not able to say more about it at the moment.”

Yet, Minister Bhattarai and the government have spent the last four months pretending to media and the public that things were in order with their chosen Swiss partner. Now, ZAI has confirmed that it is no longer interested in building the airport.

The arguments against building Nijgad are both economic and environmental.

When the grandiose project was first mooted in 1994, passenger jets had shorter range, and the hub-and-spoke model still made sense in aviation. Flights from Europe to East Asia and Australia had to make stopovers, and Nijgad could have been Nepal’s Singapore or Dubai, boosting tourism.

However, with new Boeing 777X and 787-10s as well as Airbus 350s, planes can now fly point-to-point for 17 hours or more at a stretch, obviating the need for a refuelling stop. Also, awareness about climate change was already reducing air travel, and now the Covid-19 crisis has forced global aviation to go belly-up. Experts agree it is the wrong time to be building mega airports.

Situated in the plains just south of the Chhune Range and next to Pasa National Park, Nijgad is the last remaining patch of the famous Char Kose (bury) wilderness that spanned the Tarai. The forests have an important role in the hydrological ecosystem and food security downstream. Clear-cutting would jeopardise the region’s rich biodiversity, and wildlife corridors for wild elephants and other animals.

A pro-forma government Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) that cleared the project was found to have copied-pasted entire paragraphs from a hydropower scheme in the mountains. The Nepali EIA says the project site at 285m's elevation is the habitat of two mammal species only found in the high mountains.

The government has said it will build Nijgad with its own money if foreign investors are not interested. But can Nepal, which has been hard-hit by the Covid-19 crisis, afford an expensive airport when job losses are driving Nepalis to hunger and suicide?

Yet, the government remains firmly committed to this white elephant project. How it has probably has something to do with profits that can be made in kickbacks for logging contracts. It must be too tempting to pass up – especially to build a political war-chest ahead of the 2022 elections.

The deal to clear-cut the valuable sal hardwood forest at Nijgad is said to be worth at least $500 million, and if there is no airport, there will be no justification to clear the forest.

Illegal natural resource extraction is already the most lucrative business in Nepal, with contractors enjoying full political protection from many local ward chairpersons to the federal government in Kathmandu. Illegal sand-mining, quarrying, and the lucrative Chure River has well-established and have deep connections to politicians at the highest levels in Nepal.

In the 2017 elections, some of these contractors even got themselves elected as mayors, and became members of provincial and federal parliaments. Illegal and unsustainbale sand and boulder mining of mountains and rivers have changed the entire landscape of parts of Nepal.

The government and backers of the project have called those opposing the project ‘anti-development’ and ‘voter-funded’, and people who do not want to see Nepali prosperity.

But, district, where Nijgad is located, is also ground-zero for extreme weather events in recent years: heat waves, recurring floods, winter cold snaps that have killed hundreds, and even a freak tornado last year that flattened villages, killing 79.

With the climate crisis intensifying natural disasters, would any developer investing $3.45 billion take such a site seriously for an airport? It could be a belly-up airport project.

The answer is no. But there is just too much money to be made, and Nepal’s kleptocracy is pushing this ghost airport so it can make a quick killing.

Kashish Das Shrestha is a National Geographic Explorer. He is a former adviser to Parliament’s Natural Resources and Means Committee and Water and Energy Committee.
Turkish adds flights
T urkish Airlines, which had resumed weekly flight since Kathmandu airport reopened for regular flights will increase its frequency to three per week between Kathmandu-Istanbul from October. Nepal government has also permitted the country to foreigners who want to go back to home and climb in the Himalaya from 17 October, and being the only European airline operating Kathmandu, Turkish is expecting bookings to pick up. All incoming passengers are required to have RT-PCR regular reports done 72 hours prior to departure, and can go for two weeks home or hotel quarantine on arrival.

Sud Turkish Airlines Nepal general manager Abdullah Tuner Kemen: “Nepal is a tourism destination for us. Depending on the entry requirements for foreigners and Nepalis living abroad, we will be preparing to further increase the frequency in the coming months.”

Yeti domestic tourism
After being grounded for six months, Yeti Airlines started limited flights this week, and has announced a domestic tourism package for Nepalis. Under the slogan: ‘Flying for LIGHTENING’, the package will include round trip ticket, hotel stay, transport for domestic passengers. The carrier also launched a membership app to coincide with its 22nd anniversary.

Ncell launches two data packs under its umbrella campaign ‘Flash’, which will enable 4G customers to choose between a one-day or 30-day pack for roaming access to TikTok and Facebook. The one-day pack is available to customers at Rs 250, while the 30-day pack is available at Rs 360. Customers who choose to activate the 30-day pack will get GoJil bonus data to browse the web.

QFX cinema needs a happy ending

The pandemic has turned its thriving multiplex business into a horror movie

Today, the popular QFX multiplexes at Labin Mall in Patan looks like a scene from a post-apocalyptic movie. The box office is deserted, the once-packed foyer is empty except for a security guard, the poster screens are covered up, the popcorn machine at the refreshment counter is covered in a sheet. While the government ceased the lockdown this month by resuming flights, travel, hotels, restaurants, and will soon allow trekking, QFX is waiting for approval for its cinema hall, “We are a happy ending. So I think we will be in trouble if we don’t get back to business soon.”

Nakim thought the lockdown would last a few months, but has had to reconfigure his entire business model. Most of the halls have three Audi screens with 180 seats for the audience, and he is considering reopening with just 70-70 seats. Kishal Adhikari, CEO of QFX Cinemas has been crunching the numbers to see if that is a worthwhile “Through the Motion Pictures Association of Nepal, the company has submitted a proposal for limited opening of cinemas before Dasain.

Even if the government gives us a green signal, it is next to impossible for us to get back in one foot right away. We take time for the audience to regain the confidence to go see a movie in a cinema hall,” Nakim admits. “We have had zero revenue since March and in our country there is no law for bankruptcy. So I think we will be in trouble if we don’t get back to business soon.”

After taking over and revamping Jai Nepal and Kumari hall in 2000, QFX was established, the chain of multiplexes has introduced escapism. “Cinema can serve as a form of entertainment, and if there are no opportunities in cinema, there is no escape. The pandemic is scaring more frightening than any movie script.”

For Nakim Uddin and his team at QFX Cinemas, the pandemic has turned a thriving business into a horror show much more frightening than any movie script. In the last two decades since QFX was established, the chain of multiplexes has introduced unadorned comfort to Nepal’s cinemas-goers.

After revamping Jai Nepal and Kumari hall in 2000, QFX dominated the entertainment scene, expanding rapidly in Kathmandu Valley and across the country. For a time it looked like nothing could stop Nakim and his partners, until the pandemic happened.

“Frightening than any movie script. However, he adds: “I am tired of binge-watching series and movies at home, nothing can beat the charm of a big silver screen in a theatre. It feels surreal thinking about it now.”

Nakim and Adhikar are optimistic about the future despite the Covid-19 crisis, and the challenges from movie streaming services. Both cinema owners and their cinema goers are waiting for a happy ending.

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Boudha, 9801978106

The American Literature Library has a global Nepali museum is the first database of its kind in Nepal that features Nepali art and artifacts that are housed in museums around the world. Go to the museum's website and learn about sculptures, paintings, as well as contemporary art, and other Nepali cultural objects.

American Literature Library
The American Literature Library has a collection of 160 of the greatest classic short stories, and also thousands of classic novels.

Google Arts and Culture
Google Arts & Culture has teamed up with over 2,500 museums and galleries around the world to bring everyone virtual tours and online exhibits of some of the world's most famous museums.

One World Theatre
Two of One World Theatre's plays are now on their YouTube channel. Watch the play The Right and its adaptation of the Russian play Three Sisters.

Globe Theatre
Now and then, an actor can create a powerful story using a unique script. "Everytime," produced by The Globe Theatre in June, features the acting talents of Arjun Shrestha, Rebekah Brink, and Mercedes Shrestha.

The Storyline
"Everytime," directed by Arts Director Rebekah Brink, tells the story of a mother and her daughter who face the challenges of love and loss.

Cafe Soma
Pick from Cafe Soma's burgers and sandwiches served with potato wedges and salad. Or get the Figga Heart & Walnut salad as a healthier option. Browse the menu.

Blenders Milkshake
As the days get shorter and evenings cooler, look back at the last few summer afternoons with delicious fresh cold milkshakes out of reusable bottles. Feel flavas to suit on Bhupin Fried and Foolmonds, or call to order.

Himali Farmer's Kitchen
Enjoy the best of classic Nepali dishes like shahmaa achar, Maa Chaal, and bhaba sadeko. Delivery options are also available.

Dhokra Cafe
Browse the Chef’s Special Lunch Menu from Dhokra every week for takeaways, and deliveries. This week, it's tandoori chicken.

EveryFresh
Need a boost for breakfast and breakfast lovers, EveryFresh offers the best elevated可靠 steep, fully parsnips, broth and turbay peaches. Lactose, 880739078.

Space Apps 2020
Participate in this contest for the NASA Space Apps 2020 is now open. Go to the space apps challenge website to search for a local event near you. Participants will meet their local teams once they register, and will have access to the workshops and training that will be offered, as part of the Virtual bootcamp. Visit Nepal Astronomical Society (NASTAS) Facebook page for details.

24th October

Nepal Bhasa classes
Join Nepal Bhasa classes for beginners every Monday and Thursday with instructor Robin Shrestha. The classes are part of the Mother Tongues language classes series from Quaker's. Apply at https://forms.gle/jcLiP4yGjQWQiTuO

27th September onwards, Tum-dam, Fee: Rs.925/month

Photography workshop
photocontest is taking applications from photographers for their upcoming two-week workshop. Titled to Storytelling 2020 from 1-15 October. Participants will be introduced to a wide variety of visual styles and languages will be supported in producing a body of work in the duration of the workshop. Apply at forms.gle/92riM1W0DzG6gXlL6 Application deadline: 27 September

International Illustration Competition
Complements the growing trend in Japanese graphic novels, this contest will offer artists the chance to win an opportunity to have their work published in a book.

The graph above shows a perfect correlation between rains and air pollution. On days when there has been showers, the daily average Air Quality Index (AQI) tends to be lower. Air pollution rose this week, as the low pressure system from the Bay of Bengal was stopped in its tracks by a nascent westerly, but it is not unusual. The low pressure system from the Bay of Bengal was stopped in its tracks by a nascent westerly, but it is not unusual. The low pressure system from the Bay of Bengal was stopped in its tracks by a nascent westerly, but it is not unusual. The low pressure system from the Bay of Bengal was stopped in its tracks by a nascent westerly, but it is not unusual. The low pressure system from the Bay of Bengal was stopped in its tracks by a nascent westerly, but it is not unusual. The low pressure system from the Bay of Bengal was stopped in its tracks by a nascent westerly, but it is not unusual. The low pressure system from the Bay of Bengal was stopped in its tracks by a nascent westerly, but it is not unusual.

The graph above shows a perfect correlation between rains and air pollution. On days when there has been showers, the daily average Air Quality Index (AQI) tends to be lower. Air pollution rose this week, as the low pressure system from the Bay of Bengal was stopped in its tracks by a nascent westerly, but it is not unusual. The low pressure system from the Bay of Bengal was stopped in its tracks by a nascent westerly, but it is not unusual. The low pressure system from the Bay of Bengal was stopped in its tracks by a nascent westerly, but it is not unusual. The low pressure system from the Bay of Bengal was stopped in its tracks by a nascent westerly, but it is not unusual. The low pressure system from the Bay of Bengal was stopped in its tracks by a nascent westerly, but it is not unusual.
I am a Captain with Nepal Airlines, and had been feeling unusually fatigued in the cockpit during recent trips. After a repatriation flight from Riyadh two weeks ago, I was assigned to fly out Nepal Army peacekeeping troops stationed in South Sudan.

I was in the cockpit for only half the 24 hour roundtrip to Juba, but on return to Kathmandu my skin started feeling like it was being poked with needles. I had a headache, and soon developed a fever. I gradually lost my sense of taste and smell of food, and used to break out into sweat. I quarantined myself at Soaltee Hotel and got a PCR test. Since it came back positive, and being symptomatic, I was admitted into Star Hospital.

My condition got worse. The fever stayed at 102, and I had severe head and joint aches. I tossed and turned in bed, and could not sleep, sometimes I was delirious. Nurses and physicians in masks, visors and PPE would ask me muffled questions, but I could not see their faces, and in my blurred vision, they looked like automatons.

I am certain that I am alive now, and can speak these words, because of these dedicated healthcare workers. As airline crew during the pandemic, we considered ourselves frontline professionals as we carried out ferry flights to rescue stranded Nepalis abroad. But it is the medical personnel at our hospitals who are the true frontline heroes doing battle to save lives at great personal risk.

Even when a vaccine is available next year, it is not a 100% guarantee, and you will need to maintain these precautions.

The most distressing thing about Covid-19 is that you are all alone in your hospital. You cannot see your family, the health care workers do not have faces, and it can really bring your spirit down. So, you have to maintain a positive mental attitude, convince yourself that you will beat this virus.

You have to keep your brain very active, not worry too much, and make plans for the future. You cannot let the virus win, and keeping yourself mentally alert is as important as maintaining physical strength. After all, it is the mind that enhances your immune system.

Vijay Lama is a senior Airbus330 captain with Nepal Airlines, and dictated this comment from his hospital bed on Wednesday morning.
Workers stuck in no-man’s land

Migrants in the Gulf are caught between cruel employers and a heartless homeland

More than 43,000 overseas migrant workers have returned to Nepal during the Coronavirus pandemic out of 125,000 who registered to be “rescued,” according to Nepal’s Labour Ministry. The pace of the repatriation exercise has been painfully slow, and many workers who have lost their jobs or cannot bear to be so far away, are desperately trying to return home.

Many stranded workers have spent any savings that they had, and are barely surviving with support from friends, co-workers or through Indian and Bangladeshi migrant worker friends, but it is back-breaking. “The work is not regular, and for 12 hours I only make about Rs12,000,” Kisku says.

“Still, it is better than having no work — it at least helps me to survive.”

He has been waiting to return home for many months, but the flight costs more than he can afford. “The ticket home is Rs85,000 one way; I don’t have that kind of money,” he says adding, “At this rate, I wonder if I will be able to go back.”

Kisku’s company still has his passport despite efforts to get it back. “I keep calling them, but they always say one thing or the other and hang up.”

Kisku has built a community of Nepalis who he calls his “solti” and “soltini.” Every morning after waking up he calls his soltini who works at the airport to check ticket prices. “I am not educated, I do not know the ways of the world, so I ask them, and I trust that they will help me in my time of need,” he says.

Etubar Kisku Raju Murmu

SAUDI ARABIA

Raju Murmu — When we talked to Raju Murmu in late August, he was staying in a room in Saudi Arabia’s capital Jeddah with 14 other Nepalis. They had pooled their money and bought an internet data pack to ensure that they could use the internet. “Where are the concerned authorities? We want them to see the condition we are living in now, we want them to rescue us,” said Murmu then, via video call.

Murmu had been stuck in Jeddah since December. After he lost his job as a cleaner at the airport, he tried to find another one in the city, but he was not allowed to work. When the Nepal Government announced that international commercial flights would resume in August, he asked his family in Nepal to send him Rs20,000 and paid Rs84,000 for a ticket home. He also paid Rs7000 for a PCR test.

Finally on 6 September, Murmu landed in Kathmandu for a PCR test. He tested negative and quarantined in a hotel in Bag Bazar, where last Thursday he did a PCR test. He tested negative and has been with his family in Jorpati since then.

Murmu made the journey home — to pay for the internet.

Narendra Sarwariya, Mahendra Hemran, Narendra Prasad Chaudhary, Ramnepal Thakur

Among those who shared a room with Raju Murmu are Narendra Sarwariya, 36, and Mahendra Hemran, 26, from Mahottari and Morang districts. They worked as cleaners in Jeddah but have been unemployed for the last six months.

The men have been sharing the single room with up to 14 other Nepalis. They first pooled their money and bought an internet data pack to ensure that they could share their plight. The internet ran out, and now they are selling gifts they had bought for their families — blankets, chocolates, watches, etc. — to pay for the internet.

While two among them have managed to make it back to Nepal, the others whose families do not have money to send for tickets have remained behind. They are running out of food and water and have been ordered to vacate their single room. Weeks after we originally talked to Hemran, last week he left this voice message on our mobile phone: “Please help me get back home. I want to come home, I love my country. If I could come home everything would be good.”

Also sharing the room are Narendra Prasad Chaudhary, 48, from Nawalparasi and Ramnepal Thakur, 53, from Dhanusa. They cannot go home because the company they worked for refused to return their passport.

Chaudhary says he was asked to pay Rs165,000 and Thakur Rs125,000 to get their passports back. “How can we pay such a huge amount?” asks Chaudhary. “We have been unemployed for the past six months.”

He continues: “Having worked through Indian and Bangladeshi migrant worker friends, but it is back-breaking. ‘The work is not regular, and for 12 hours I only make about Rs12,000,’ Kisku says.

‘Still, it is better than having no work — it at least helps me to survive.’

He has been waiting to return home for many months, but the flight costs more than he can afford. ‘The ticket home is Rs85,000 one way; I don’t have that kind of money,’ he says adding, ‘At this rate, I wonder if I will be able to go back.’

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Kisku has built a community of Nepalis who he calls his ‘solti’ and ‘soltini.’ Every morning after waking up he calls his soltini who works at the airport to check ticket prices. ‘I am not educated, I do not know the ways of the world, so I ask them, and I trust that they will help me in my time of need,’ he says.

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He continues: ‘Having worked
Kumar Shrestha

After more than five years working as a security guard in Dubai, Kumar Shrestha had hoped to clear his loans and save a little with this year’s earnings. Little did he know that he would be stuck in a camp in Al Quraiz without a job from March onwards.

Things were going according to plan until January, when his company cut his salary after business declined. In March they told him to stay home until they called. Every day his roommates would wake up for work while he waited for the phone to ring. “I was unemployed for six months. I was getting 300 dirham (Rs4,600) per month for food. It is not enough for an expensive city like Dubai but I do not have any other choice,” says Shrestha, 32, from Bhadgaon.

Frustrated with the waiting, Shrestha is resigned to his fate. “I do not want to come back now. I was planning to stay for another year, pay off my bank loan, save some money and go back to my own country. The plan has been shattered by this pandemic.”

Now living with five others in a labour camp, he applied for a chartered flight from the Nepali Government but has not heard from the embassy. He planned to use his savings of Rs3,100 to buy a ticket home, but prices have risen to Rs6,500 so he cannot afford one.

He dejectedly describes his life in the camp: “I have not been in a real jail but this does feel like one … there is nothing to do and I cannot go anywhere. I am just waiting for the ticket prices to go down.”

Tripty Tamang Pakhrin

Dipesh Bhattarai

In July, when Dipesh Bhattarai read that Nepal would resume international flights by mid-August he was thrilled. The 21-year-old had been stuck in Dubai for the last four months on an expired visa without a job, and no way to support himself. Then, his excitement turned to disappointment when the Nepali Government reversed the decision and announced that international commercial flights would remain suspended until 31 August.

Bhattarai left Bardia two years ago to support his family. In Dubai, he worked as a supply assistant. He calls the Nepal Embassy in Abu Dhabi every day but has not been able to get through to someone with information. “The embassy doesn’t answer when people like us call,” he says.

Bhattarai has no food, is running out of money and his passport is with his former employer.

“They took our passports the day we entered Dubai because they think we will run away,” he says. “This is not my country, and my country does not do anything — I feel like I do not belong anywhere.”

Nitu Ghale

Krishna Bahadur Gandharva

Krishna Bahadur Gandharva, 39, from Sandakphuwa of Arghakhanchi district was one of the 17 Nepalis who reached Dubai to work with Flex Facility Management in January 2020. The following month they were all left stranded in Dubai. Their visas were cancelled with the company citing Covid-19 related reasons. The group did not have money to return to Nepal. Additionally, they had borrowed money from friends and banks to pay Rs1,40,000 each to the recruitment agency in Nepal to get their jobs. For five months, Gandharva and his friends were stuck in the Jebel Ali camp. “It was very torturous. We did not have money for food, there was no running water, there was no fan, it was 25 degrees,” he says. “The NRNA gave us food once in a while, but it would only last a few days. Some days we begged for food, some days we slept with empty stomachs.”

Their lives were made harder by supervisors and camp personnel who mentally and physically harassed them to try to force them to leave. Finally their employer and the Nepal Embassy reached an agreement and booked their tickets for free for 10 August.

“We were so delighted to return to Nepal. I forgot all the hardships we endured during those five months the moment I heard the news,” says Gandharva.

When they reached the airport, the UAE authorities said they would charge them for over-staying their visas. “We asked to pay 1,287 dirham (Rs4,000) each. It was a shock,” says Gandharva, adding, “we tried calling our employer but they told us to never contact them again. We had no money so we were sent back from the airport.”

The NRNA stepped in and provided them with a room in a four star, where they have been living ever since. “It’s been a month now and the NRNA has asked us to find a way to go back — the fine for living in Dubai without a visa is 25 Dirham (Rs40) per day,” says Gandharva.

“Please rescue us and take us home.”

Tripty Tamang Pakhrin

Stories produced in collaboration with @NepalPhotoProject and the Photo Circle 2020 grant.
Covid-19 lessons for Kathmandu from the Tarai

Sonia Awale

In July, as the government eased the first lockdown, people streamed across the border from India into Nepal, spreading the coronavirus infection along cities in the Tarai. The districts from Jhapa to Parsa became hotspots. Hospitals ran out of ICU beds and ventilators, municipalities had no test kits left, and there were horror stories of patients dying while going from one hospital to another that refused admission. But it was not too late for asymptomatic carriers to bring the virus into Kathmandu Valley, where population density and high mobility made the capital an ideal breeding ground for SARS-CoV-2.

With 16 additional deaths on Monday, total Covid-19 fatalities in Nepal now reached 427. Kathmandu Valley alone accounts for over one-fourth of all deaths in Nepal from the virus. On Monday, Kathmandu, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur districts recorded 674 new cases (more than half the nationwide total of 1,154).

The tables are now turned. Even as the Tarai has the virus largely under control, the majority of the 196 patients in ICU and 11 on ventilator support nationwide are in Kathmandu Valley. The country’s only infectious diseases hospital in Tika, despite adding isolation wards, ventilators and ICU beds, has run out of space for Covid-19 patients.

“Even with the increased capacity, we have admitted 90% of all the patients,” hospital director Sagar Kajhbandari told Nepal Times. These months after the government announced it would build a hospital in Kathmandu, despite admitting patients from the different districts of the country, there has been no action. It has not followed the advice of its own public health officials to expand testing and tracing.

In fact, the Nepal government seems to have admitted defeat. Its unspoken strategy now is now to handle the outbreak “as if we are under control.”

“Kathmandu is the most crowded city in the country,” said Chandra Kishore, a Tarai-based journalist in Birgunj. “The focus should be on empowering local municipalities and health posts to contain the spread of the virus.”

Even as Kathmandu struggles to contain the virus with all the resources and facilities at its disposal, Nepal’s capital could learn a few things from the way other cities and municipalities handled the spike and brought the virus under control.

One example is Narainapur in Banke district, which first made it to the news as a hotspot back in May with over 100 cases and Nepal’s second Covid-19 fatality. Most of the infected were migrant worker returnees from India. Since then, the municipality has brought active cases down to zero.

“In our experience what worked the best was the collaboration between the local government, CDO offices and the Nepal Army,” says Narash Shrestha, the Kathmandu-talocal point for Banke district. “This has helped us conduct proactive contact tracing and raise awareness about safety measures. Narainapur is also relatively isolated which helped us seal off the points and better manage the outbreak.”

After Kathmandu Valley, Banke has conducted most PCR tests and of the total 1,662 coronavirus cases in the district, 1,264 people have already recovered. The remaining cases are in densely populated areas in the Mugli and Kohalpur.

Nepalgunj mayor Bhawar Shumsher Gyana says his city was among the first to be hit with the coronavirus, and had to learn quickly through trial and error.

“We have the virus more or less under control. We still have some cases, but life is back to normal and our people are following safety measures,” he says.

In the neighbouring district of Bara which has a 68km border with India, there has been a gradual rise in cases. In Bahundanda municipality, the authorities shut the quarantine centre that had become an incubator for the virus.

“Af ter we realised what was happening, we focused on containing the virus in the quarantine centre and invested in contact tracing, which helped us bring the situation under control,” explained Gokarna Giri of the Bardia District Health Office.

Udyapur in the Inner Tarai of eastern Nepal was a coronavirus hot spot in April when 13 men in a mosque who had returned from Delhi all tested positive. There was stringent contact tracing of people who had been in close proximity to, and the district was sealed off for months.

In fact, Udyapur’s experience is now called the ‘Bhilwara Model’ after a ward of Triyuga Municipality that used PCR tests for contact tracing after false negatives from RDIs. Infected people were immediately sent to hospital isolation wards, and health officials did repeat contact tracing of the entire community until cases came down to zero. Guided-based activist Nahid Khan used to travel every day on her motorbike with supplies and medicines for communities extracted due to infection. The community, volunteers, and the local authorities all worked together to overcome the virus. It is because of this that Udyapur is a model for successfully bringing Covid-19 under control,” Khan says.

In the beginning, Udyapur did not even have sufficient personnel to collect swab samples, and the district hospital’s Pambananda Yadav was working overtime to conduct tests without proper personal protective gear. His hard work was met with stigma; fearful colleagues stopped talking, and the austerity he implemented stopped services. But Yadav persisted, he trained lab personnel to bring the district’s limited health services up to speed and received PPPs from non-profits in the area.

“It was a difficult two months, but it paid off knowing how far we have come in terms of controlling Covid-19,” says Yadav. “Kathmandu could learn from our strategy of widespread testing, contact tracing, and strict border controls.”

With reporting from Kamal Sapkota.

Nepal District-wise Breakdown of Covid-19 Cases and Fatalities as of 22 September, 2020

The virus jumps from the plains to spread rapidly in Kathmandu Valley

COVID-19 timeline

01-06-20 Nepal announces 1st successful COVID-19 test and Nepal Drug Test Laboratory opens.
01-06-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 case in Kathmandu.
02-06-20 Nepal has 1st COVID-19 death.
14-06-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 recovery.
28-06-20 Nepal reports 1st COVID-19 case in Jhapa.
01-07-20 Nepal confirms 1st COVID-19 case in Banke.
02-07-20 Nepal confirms 1st COVID-19 case in Bardiya.
03-07-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 case in Siraha.
06-07-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 case in Humla.
07-07-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 case in Myagdi.
08-07-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 case in Mugu.
15-07-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 case in Makwanpur.
16-07-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 case in Makwanpur.
19-07-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 case in Rolpa.
22-07-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 case in Baglung.
25-07-20 Nepal announce 1st COVID-19 case in Kailashaghat, India.
30-07-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 case in Darchula.
01-08-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 case in Jhapa.
05-08-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 case in Khotang.
07-08-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 case in Lamjung.
11-08-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 case in Bardiya.
12-08-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 case in Rolpa.
15-08-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 case in Sankhuwasabha.
16-08-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 case in Makwanpur.
17-08-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 case in Makwanpur.
18-08-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 case in Rolpa.
20-08-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 case in Baglung.
21-08-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 case in Panchthar.
22-08-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 case in Sushyamangalam.
24-08-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 case in Nawalparasi.
26-08-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 case in Sindhuli.
27-08-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 case in Sindhuli.
28-08-20 Nepal announces 1st COVID-19 case in Sushyamangalam.
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