



MONIKA DEUPALA

Window on the future

The coronavirus is here to stay. Vaccines will not be available for Nepalis till late next year. There are no proven therapies yet. The only way to stay safe is through prevention, since hospitals will be full.

That is the prognosis from health experts for the coming winter and into next year. Even before SARS-CoV-2, Nepal used to see a winter spike in deaths of the elderly from pneumonia. But with the added threat of the new virus, this winter is going to be even more dangerous than previous ones.

“This thing will keep going for another year at least, the only way to deal with it is prevention – that means masks, separation and handwashing,” says Buddha

Basnyat at the Patan Academy of Health Sciences.

People above 65 and those with pre-existing conditions need to be especially careful –their family members have to take strict precautions not to bring the virus into the household.

Doctors advise taking flu shots where available so that the high risk groups do not end up having to fight on two fronts in the coming months.

“In Nepal, data shows that winter is a killer of older people, so in the coming months they need to minimise interaction with immediate family members who move about in public,” says Sameer Mani Dixit of the Centre for Molecular Dynamics. He advises that seniors isolate in their

rooms, and meet relatives in open spaces wearing masks.

What makes high risk groups even more vulnerable is that in winter windows are closed, and they tend to mingle with the extended family with whom they share the home. They should also get as much exercise as possible, and expose themselves to direct sunlight to boost immunity. Similar precautions need to be taken by those with hypertension, diabetes, obesity and other conditions.

Says Dixit; “High risk individuals like the elderly and those with pre-existing conditions have to treat all members of the household and visitors as if they are Covid positive. That means wearing masks, keeping separation

and meeting them only in open areas.”

The government, which seems to have more or less given up trying to control the virus by leaving it to the public to take precautions, needs to prepare for the winter surge. There has to be adequate oxygen supply to hospitals, more ICU capacity, separate corona wards in hospitals, and the new Nepal Army hospital could be turned into a Covid-dedicated facility.

The silver lining is that mask-wearing and handwashing have reduced other chronic infections

in Nepal. Hospitals report a marked decrease in water-borne diseases like typhoid and dysentery, and airborne infections like COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease). Mask-wearing slowed the spread of seasonal flu in this year’s southern hemisphere winter.

Some in Nepal are promoting ‘herd immunity’ as an antidote to the expected winter surge. Scientists caution against this notion because there is still so much uncertainty about the virus.

Says Buddha Basnyat: “Herd immunity is herd mentality, it is dangerous.”🇳🇵

Covid-19 and the new Great Game
EDITORIAL
PAGE 2

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GOING PLACES TOGETHER

Covid-19 and the new Great Game

One of Barack Obama's White House staffers once got into trouble for saying that a hurricane disaster presented a good opportunity for the administration to show it could get things done. It was politically incorrect, but true.

Indeed, here in Nepal, frequent natural disasters have been god-sent chances for governments of the day to prove themselves. We thought that would happen after the 2015 earthquake, but our rulers squandered the chance to invest in rebuilding with massive job creation. The Blockade was a time to rise to the occasion, and turn the crisis into an

opportunity for the government to demonstrate it was serious about trade diversification and weaning Nepal away from petroleum dependency.



This monsoon's landslides and floods with unprecedented loss of life could have yielded political dividends if only Prime Minister K P Oli's government was not so obsessed with an internecine power struggle within his ruling party.

The Covid-19 crisis offers the Oli administration a chance to take the advice of scientists and act decisively to cushion the blow on Nepal's most vulnerable citizens. Instead, it has fallen back on business as usual, coddling cronies and now, as we near year-end, to tell Nepalis that they have to take care of themselves.

To be fair, even the most accountable and well-governed countries in the world have been found wanting in dealing with the coronavirus crisis. Europe is struggling to contain the spread ahead of a predicted winter resurgence. In the United States, President Trump has no plan, and has surrendered to the virus.

The Dasain break offered the government a chance to regroup and reassess its Covid-19 strategy. Alas, leaders of the two factions in the ruling NCP appear to have wasted the time to plot their next move to undermine each other.

The surprise visit by Indian intelligence chief Samant Goel to Kathmandu on 21 October became another excuse for the two factions to lash out, and prove one was more nationalist than the other. NCP members loyal to Pushpa Kamal Dahal were having a

go at their own prime minister, as if they were members of an opposition party.

Oli's advisers did him no favours by flip-flopping on whether Goel was in Kathmandu on a private or official visit, and if he was sent by Prime Minister Modi, or invited himself. What got lost in all the Oli-slammings was that Goel also met Baburam Bhattarai at close quarters before he tested positive for Covid-19, as well as secretly meeting other Dahal loyalists.

It now appears that India's top spook was indeed sent by Prime Minister Narendra Modi as a trusted emissary to patch up strained India-Nepal relations, and address the perception spread by India's jingoistic media that Nepal is drifting into the Chinese orbit. The timing is also significant — it comes ahead of a three-day visit by India's Army Chief Manoj Mukund Naravane on 4 November, which had been delayed by the pandemic.

Naravane is well remembered in

Nepal has to tread carefully in a bipolar world in which its northern and southern neighbours are on opposite sides

China to stake its claim on its territory. This remark was criticised even in India for his insensitivity towards Nepali nationals serving in the Indian Army, some of them deployed in Ladakh. There is much confidence rebuilding that Naravane needs to do in Kathmandu.

The Goel jet dash to Kathmandu and the Naravane visit take on added meaning with the 2+2 meeting of top American and Indian foreign and defence officials in New Delhi on Tuesday, and the signing of the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) — which despite its awkward acronym is essentially a bilateral strategic pact.

This is proof that the world is once more bipolar, as the Anglosphere plus Japan and India are pitted against China, and its growing dominance and influence in the world. With the flare-up in tension between India and China over their Himalayan border, Nepal has to tread carefully in this new Great Game between its giant northern and southern neighbours.

Meanwhile, in Kathmandu US-China rivalry was taken to a new level with Dasain diplomacy. American ambassador Randy Berry made mutton curry while Chinese ambassador Hou Yanqi outdid everyone by singing the popular trekking song *Resham Firi*. We wonder if the allusion to the scarf waving in the wind was to the New Silk Road to counter the American-supported MCC.

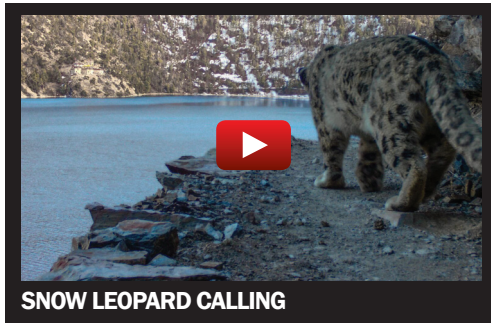
In the midst of all this high drama, it is easy for Prime Minister Oli to lose focus on the main crisis at hand — managing the health and economic fallout of Covid-19. But it is a chance for him to use the disaster to prove that he can protect the people who elected him and his party to power.

ONLINE PACKAGES



KHUMBU REOPENS CAUTIOUSLY

The Khumbu Valley below Mt Everest has detected the first cases of Covid-19, and residents here want to keep it from spreading. But they see no reason why tourists should be kept away, as long as they take health precautions. Watch this scenic video on our YouTube channel and read story on [page 7](#).



SNOW LEOPARD CALLING

Snow leopard researcher and conservationist Tshiring Lhamu Lama spent three winter months earlier this year in Phoksundo to research and plan for a conservation trek next year. Her personal journey of documenting this elusive cat in the Nepal's Himalaya is in this special feature on [page 8-9](#). Also watch the trailer of her film.

NEPALI TIMES PRINT EDITION

It was a pleasant surprise to receive the hard copy this morning. Little things make a difference.

Raj Tamang

• Love reading the printed ones.

Kamal Keshari Tuladhar

• Great work and always great research.

Peter Hinze

• Been missing the print version.

Stephen Keeling

KITE FIGHT

I hear that kites are back in Nepal's skies more than previous years ('Kite fight over Kathmandu', Alisha Sijapati, #1032). Rooftops are packed with people of all ages, trying to shout their lungs out with changaaaaa chaittttt! I miss being a kite warrior. Let's stay home and fly more kites.

Abhodaya Poudyal

• Nice one. Most of the present generation might have forgotten this.

Robert Dongol

• Deadly for the birds though.

Jane Loveless

DALIT LIVES MATTER

Education clashes with the mindset ('Caste aside, Dalits battle stigma', Nunuta Rai, #1032). This article has now compelled me to think about the quality of our education because if education is not the catalyst for change, then how do we ever begin to change the minds of people to form a better society, nation and the world?

Pabi Karki

• Discrimination of any kind is gross and appalling! It gets objectionably disgusting when it comes from people who deem themselves to be educated. Initially, when the caste system was created, it had its foundation on who performed what task and not in lineage. All the people highlighted in the article are extremely talented and have created a niche for themselves. We have to fight caste system based on lineage.

Rashmi Sharma

• Please also write about Newa dalits too.

Gita Chhetri

CLIMATE AND RHINOS

To be honest, hotels are encroaching closer to their territory, which can have a negative impact on the wild animals, especially when the bars and karaoke are allowed late into night in Chitwan ('Climate change: new threat to Nepal's rhinos', Mukesh Pokhrel, nepalitimes.com).

Ngawang Tenzin

PRAKASH ADHIKARI

Very sad to know about the demise of such a great person ('The light is gone', Buddha Basnyat, nepalitimes.com). Another sad episode is we have countless people who are at the helm of our country for whom we cannot say so. Very sad and dreadful.

Pukar Rana

• What a loss to all who love Nepal!

Joyce Slater

• Such men are hard to find.

Parkaz Gorkhali

NEPALI FOOD

For a small country, Nepal has an amazing assortment of delicious food ('Exploring Nepal's culinary diversity', Kedar Sharma and Kiran Sharma, Nepali Times Archive)! This article made me so hungry for Nepali food.

Jonathan Murray

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



Kite fight over Kathmandu

by Alisha Sijapati

Kite flying saw a revival this year owing to Covid-19 crisis. We delve into the history of kite flying, the art of kite fights and provide ultimate tricks and techniques to winning one in this special package only at [nepalitimes.com](#)



Most reached and shared on Facebook



Nepal's acid attack survivors find a saviour

By Sabina Devkota

After years of lobbying, Nepal's President Bidya Devi Bhandari finally signed into law two ordinances regulating acid sales and criminalising perpetrators of acid attacks. Meet Ujjwal Bikram Thapa, the force behind the landmark decision in this profile on our website.



Most popular on Twitter



Caste aside, Dalits battle stigma

by Nunuta Rai

Nepal's Dalits say discrimination from educated in city is worse. Prominent Dalit politician, soldier, singer, engineer, tourism entrepreneur open up in this longread. Read feedback and join the online discussion.



Most commented



Kathmandu homes and hotels turn into hospitals

by Sonia Awale

Nepal's capital has run out of affordable ICU care for its COVID-19 patients. Healthcare personnel are now turning homes and hotels into hospital. Follow us online and on social media for the latest developments as the coronavirus crisis unfolds.



Most visited online page

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Sathish Jung Shahi@SJSShahi
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Shobhana GP@ShobhanaGP
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In #Nepal kite flying is a martial art. Here, a #kite has to fight and have a killer instinct. The idea is to cut the enemy's thread with your line. Nepali Times brings you an ultimate guide to kite fight techniques for this Dasain.



Saniaa Shah@SaniaaSan
This excellent article by @NepaliTimes gives us a cool 101 on kite-flying, right on time for Dasain 2020. Here's to the one festive activity that is social but also allows physical distancing! :)



Nepali Times@NepaliTimes
In the latest episode of his Walkabout series, Anil Chitrakar delves deep into the restoration of ancient scriptures of PragmaParamita. The episode premieres on Saturday, 17 October in the Nepali Times YouTube channel. #history #heritage



शहीक शही@shahipratik04
We need more shows like this.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Twenty years ago this week in Nepali Times issue #15 of 3-9 November 2000, the front page story dealt with first of many peace talks with the Maoists. The paper would not figure out whether it was a Maoist tactic to buy time, or a chance to sue for peace in a war they knew they could not ultimately win.

In his page 1 analysis titled 'Peace Keepers', Rajendra Dahal looked at the first ever peace talks between Deputy Prime Minister Ram Chandra Poudel of the Nepali Congress and the Maoist Rabinendra Shrestha which was brokered by civil society stalwart Padma Ratna Tuladhar. The talks broke down, as we now know, and the country was back to war. Within one year, the Maoists would attack the Royal Nepal Army, dragging it into the conflict, escalating casualties.

Excerpts from the story:

They joked, they drank tea and they shared biscuits. Deputy Prime Minister Ram Chandra Poudel was in a relaxed Tihar mood. He quipped that he used to be the leader of a communist student union. Across the sofa, the Maoists Kathmandu commander, Rabinendra Shrestha slapped his knee and laughed out loud, saying: "How strange, I used to be with the Nepal Students Union (the students wing of the Nepali Congress)!"

The maverick activist and career-mediator, Padma Ratna Tuladhar, who brought the two men together for the first ever face-to-face talks between



a government minister and the Maoists, poured more tea and sat back to let the two sides size each other up. The bonhomie helped. After two hours of talks, a beaming Tuladhar dropped Poudel off at the Ministers' residential quarters in Pulchowk in a sleek metallic beige Corolla sedan. "So, they don't look like monsters, do they?" Tuladhar asked Poudel in the car. The Deputy Prime Minister agreed.

Whatever may be Prachanda's reason to come to the table, the government has no alternative but to negotiate. The Maoists have shown their flexibility by removing some of their early pre-conditions, successfully throwing the ball in the government's court. The ruling party needs to show similar adaptability. That is why these things are called negotiations: you give as well as take.

The Maoists have not yet declared that the talks are a substitute to the war, nor have they shown signs that they have slowed mobilisation. What the government needs to do is to hold on to the Maoists' expressed desire to come to talks and create the conditions where they will keep talking. Otherwise the blame for failure will be laid squarely on the feckless ruling party.

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



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The Himalaya mourn a saintly leader

The Tengboche Rinpoche was a constant source of saintly support, presiding through periods of prosperity and disaster

In the midst of the galloping pandemic, we were recently blessed with a moment of reflective respite in the form of a beautiful date – 10102020 – rounded calm numbers to relish and harmonise in these troubled times. It was not long before sad news from the Khumbu reached the Valley. Just after midnight on this perfectly balanced date, the Tengboche Rinpoche passed away in Namche Bazar.



SO FAR SO GOOD
Lisa Choegyal

Tengboche monastery triumphantly straddles a steep saddle overlooking Mount Sagarmatha, the heart of Sherpa heritage and religion. Its Rinpoche was born on the same day as His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 1935 to a Sherpa family in Namche – named Passang Tenzin and later ordained Ngawang Tenzin Zangbu.

He was sent to study in Rongbuk monastery in Tibet, and aged five was recognised as the incarnation of Tengboche monastery's founder in 1916, Lama Gulu. Throughout his long life, Rinpoche's grave, quiet, compassionate demeanour was a familiar presence at all significant ceremonies, memorials and events in the Khumbu, honoured not only amongst Sherpas but by every expedition and mountaineer who would seek his mandatory blessing before attempting the high Himalayan summits.

Greatly respected by all who came into his orbit, Rinpoche's gentle guiding hand and wise serious voice were behind conservation and development decisions affecting the region, to ensure that all viewpoints were considered and every outcome brought benefits to the natural environment and Sherpa culture.

For the government, he chaired the Panchayat lama and monastery management committees and for the Himalayan Trust he inaugurated the Khumjung School in 1961. Far reaching initiatives which today we take for granted, such as the gazetting of Sagarmatha National Park and UNESCO World Heritage Site and the formation of the Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee, would not have got off the ground without his unobtrusive but steely support.

Rinpoche was a constant source of saintly succour and support,



Tengboche Rinpoche.

JIM JERRAM HIMALAYAN TRUST

presiding through periods of trekking prosperity and favourable harvests, and during times of disaster including earthquakes, floods, avalanches and accidents that have caused much weeping and grief in Sherpa households and Khumbu kitchens.

Late night on 19 January 1989, his Tengboche monastery burned to the ground, blamed on an electrical fault from the new micro-hydro. Rinpoche turned to Sir Edmund Hillary and other friends to contribute to the monastery's rebuilding, presiding over the meticulous reconstruction of the Sherpa's most significant Buddhist centre.

On the auspicious day of the reopening in 1993, I was invited to join the Himalayan Trust group attending the consecration ceremony. By this time Sir Ed was confined to travelling by helicopter from Kathmandu, having lost all tolerance to altitude and unable to stay long in the high places he loved.

With us were Nepal's Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala as chief guest, and Himalayan Trust supporters including Richard Blum of the American Himalayan Foundation and the indomitable Elizabeth Hawley, a rare sight in the mountains. But Sir Ed was struggling with his health and bad weather threatened as we landed in



Tengboche Rinpoche arrives at Namche monastery for the Dumji festival during the summer of 2018.

SUJOY DAS

the meadow in front of the newly restored gompa.

Sitting cross-legged on carpeted cushions in the enlarged prayer hall beneath the repainted murals, Rinpoche presided, monks chanted, incense wafted, drums pounded and hand bells chimed. Afterwards, colour-drenched dancers whirled in the stone flagged courtyard and conches signalled the close of the celebrations, but Ang Rita's face was sombre with apprehension.

Thick clouds had descended and a heavy silence enveloped the ridge – we had no choice but to wait in the high thin air under limp prayer flags wreathed in

mist. Ed was not the only person looking grey and gaunt when the two helicopters found a gap to dive through the weather, just long enough to pick us up whilst the rotors roared, frantic farewells were waved, and rhododendrons bowed in the fierce damp gusts.

Over the decades Rinpoche witnessed many cycles of Sagarmatha triumphs and catastrophes. In May 1996 my young sons ran ahead as I toiled up the Namche hill, to meet up with the retreating Everest expeditions. Their members were dazed and traumatised from the shattering events that resulted in eight people dead in one day including two experienced leaders, New Zealander Rob Hall and American Scott Fischer.

Everyone along the trail was talking about the tragedy, and one lonely morning we offered lamps and katas at Tengboche monastery in the time-honoured custom. With the bleak cry of kites spiralling the thermals overhead, Guy Cotter strode towards us across the bridge below Pangboche, Rob's Kiwi climbing colleague who had led the rescue. He was lean, drawn and exhausted in grief.

The drama had unfolded over several days, so intense that it became the subject of many books and films, Hollywood made a blockbuster movie, and those of us directly involved have the events seared into our memory.

Whilst attempting the summit on 10 May 1996 an unexpected storm descended, stranding climbers high on the mountain. With Guy in base camp I coordinated the rescue by radio phone from Kathmandu with help

from the American Embassy, but despite everyone's best efforts we failed to get them all back down.

Some headway was made – valiant Sherpas saved members lost in the blizzard, America's most experienced mountaineers abandoned their IMAX Everest film to help, and when the weather cleared the heroic helicopter captain Madan KC broke altitude records to pick up the worst injured climbers from above the Khumbu icefall. Later that day in the Kathmandu clinic, I held the telephone to Beck Weathers' ear as the Texan surgeon, both frostbitten hands fully bandaged, told his wife in Dallas that he had miraculously survived having been "left for dead" – tears streamed down his ice-burned face.

Photographer Sujoy Das remembers a monsoon visit to the Dumji festival, the landscape shrouded in mist and dripping with rain. "I climbed to Namche gompa where monks were occupied making torma, exquisite flour and butter sculptures, as festival offerings. Sherpa families take turns to sponsor Dumji, and invite monks to officiate in the monasteries.

On my way back down the hill, amidst great local excitement, I passed the Rinpoche of Tengboche who had arrived by helicopter to preside over the services. The festivities honour the founder saint, Guru Padmasambhava, and are said to date back to the historic times of Lama Sangwa Dorjee and his two famous tantric brothers who established the original three gompas of Pangboche, Thame and Rimijung after the Khumbu beyul (holy refuge) was first discovered by Sherpa people migrating from eastern Tibet."

On one particularly bizarre occasion in 2003, Rinpoche agreed to an unusual proposition. Sitting politely on carpets beneath a wall of thanks, I explained that some Germans wished to arrange a memorable birthday for their boss. The card would read 'HH Rinpoche of Tengboche is pleased to welcome Dr Klaus Zumwinkel to stay in his monastery in the Everest region. This gift on the occasion of your sixtieth birthday is given by all employees of Deutsche Post World Net'.

The experience involved staying in monk's quarters and taking part in prayers and monastery activities for a week, with a personal monk interpreter deputed to help him navigate real monastery life. Despite sending a generous donation, I apologised that the boss never showed up to claim his birthday present. "Never mind!" twinkled Rinpoche.

Without his encompassing spiritual authority, this week the Khumbu is a different place. Every forlorn Sherpa home is conducting personal pujas. In the diamond light of autumn, Rinpoche's loss echoes through the stone houses, the rushing rivers, the rock walls, the soaring white peaks and reforested hillsides that shelter red tragopans, iridescent impeyan pheasants, skittish musk deer and Himalayan tahr with lavish manes. A striking dawn cloud formation seems to salute his passing.

Mingma Norbu told me: "Early on Monday the local Sherpa people carried his body in procession to Tengboche after a solemn blessing from Deu Rinpoche at Namche gompa. Reaching at 1145am, monks from Thame and Thamo attended for his special welcome. Rinpoche's body will remain in Tengboche for 49 days, after which he will be cremated according to our local tradition." 🇳🇵



The young Tengboche Rinpoche with Louise and Ed Hillary in 1966.

MIKE GILL

Nepalis denied tv channels over Dasain

The public is outraged, blames government for playing dirty with clean feed rule

Raju Banskota

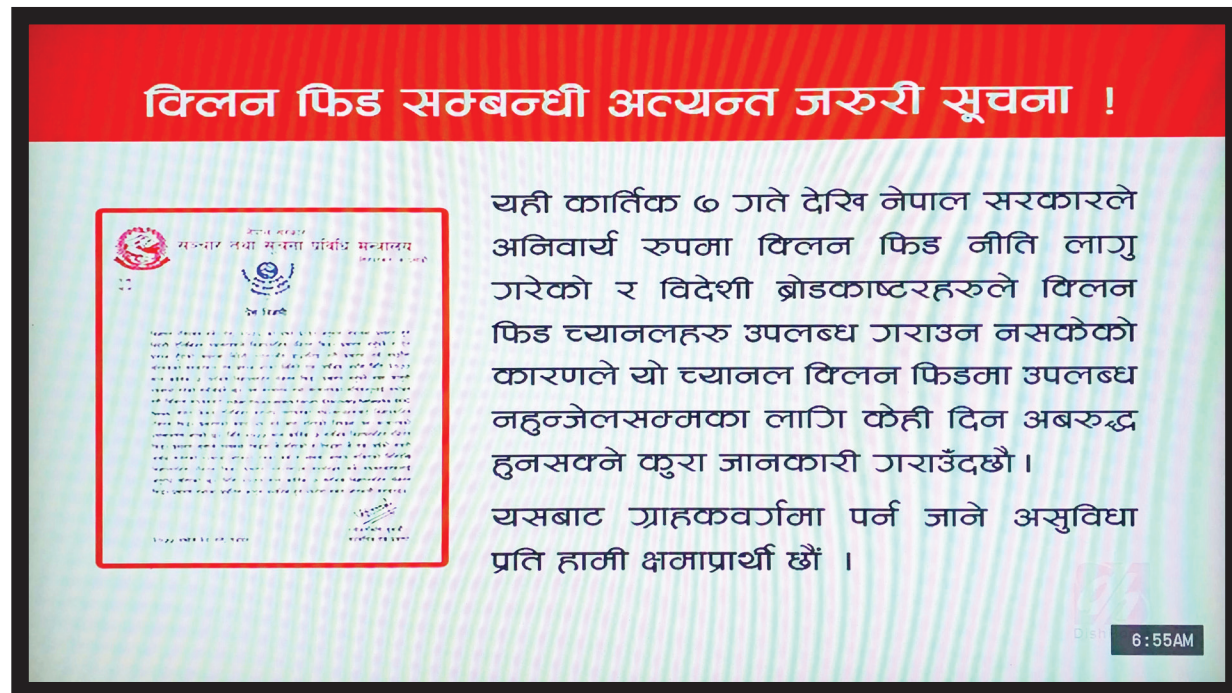
On Sunday night, television viewers across Nepal browsing channels on their satellite and cable systems suddenly found that they could not access their favourite sports channels, BBC News, as well as many Hindi entertainment programs.

On the eve of Dasain, the government decided to enforce the rule requiring television distributors to provide advertisement-free foreign channels. Suddenly, 120 of the most popular channels got blacked out of the cable menu.

The Ministry of Communication and Information said it had given satellite and cable operators one year's notice to implement its 'Clean Feed' policy, and it had to stop the distribution of foreign tv channels that contained commercials.

The theory is that customers should not be charged for television programs that contain advertising, but between the lines the directive had a nationalistic rationale against Indian commercials. In June, Nepal got distributors to delete most Indian news channels from their feed for airing content that was derogatory towards Prime Minister K P Oli.

There was also an argument that Clean Feed would encourage Nepal-based content and upgrade the quality of Nepali commercials.



Since Sunday night, Nepali tv viewers are greeted with this message on their screens for 120 of the most popular international sports, entertainment and news channels.

However, most analysts say that will take time, and for now it will be Nepali viewers who will be deprived of the most popular channels, and have to pay more expensive cable tariffs.

"So what if the government says its decision is final? We have not been able to bring in the necessary equipment needed for clean feeds," said Sudhir Parajuli of Subisu Cablenet. "And the foreign channels also have to be ready to beam us programming without commercials. It's not entirely up to us."

Direct-to-home satellite and cable distributors say they have been negotiating with international channels to provide clean feeds, but not all of them have complied, while

others have cited delays caused by the Covid-19 crisis.

"They are working on the technical details of providing the clean feed, some are in the testing stage, and a few of the channels should be back on air in a few days," said Dhruba Sharma of the Nepal Cable Television Operators Federation.

The Federation had asked for a six-month extension in implementing the Clean Feed provision, citing the pandemic. The Indian Broadcasters' Forum, Discovery Network, BBC News and others had also requested the Ministry for an extension to work out the technical details, but the government decided not to grant that.

While advertising agencies have generally welcomed the decision, the government's move has been greeted by outrage from the public in social media, mainly because it was enforced during Dasain, and also while most people have been forced to stay home because of the rapid spread of the coronavirus in Nepal.

"The children do not have school, and we are all confined to our homes because the virus is everywhere, and watching television was a way to pass the time, now the kids cannot even get to follow the sports channels anymore," complained Putali Tamang of Dhobighat.

Among the popular channels affected are all those under Star

Sports, Star Sports Select, Star Plus, Discovery, BBC, Colours, and others. The ban has hit hardest Nepali fans of the English Premier League, Indian Premier League, and other football and cricket games.

All news and entertainment programs under India's Zee banner, Sony, HBO and Cinemax are still available because they do not carry commercials. Al Jazeera is also still being beamed, and CNN is also available depending on the distributor.

What this means is that while the monthly fees for satellite dish or cable may not go up right away, as the agreements with various international channels are renewed, operators will be forced to pass on the added cost of commercial-free programming to Nepali customers. Of the 90 pay tv channels, 60 are said to be completing their technical preparation for clean feeds.

The government's argument is that international channels that charge Nepali customers through their local distributors should not also be making money from commercials. It says this follows the international practice that if customers pay for a feed, it should not carry commercials.

However, the government seems to be unaware that many Nepalis are now paying for live streaming of sports events and entertainment programs through the internet. The Clean Feed policy also does not include IPTV, which does not need any permission to beam uncensored content directly to Nepalis through their internet service providers.

The Android IPTV box is becoming popular, and allows ISP customers to bypass distribution via cable and satellite.

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KUNDA DIXIT

Nepal's baffling ban on India flights

Irrational and bizarre restrictions on foreigners and Delhi flights hurt travellers

After eight months, non-Nepalis were finally allowed to fly to Kathmandu from 17 October, but with two bizarre exceptions: flights from Indian cities are still banned, and only foreign trekkers and mountaineers are allowed into Nepal.

While the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAAN) has lifted passenger restrictions at Kathmandu airport, and international airlines have added services to meet the demand, flights to New Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Bengaluru are still not permitted.

Foreigners can now travel to Nepal, but only if they want to go trekking or climb a Himalayan mountain. Foreign passport holders who want to reunite with families, visit friends, join meditation classes, or just want to chill out in Kathmandu or Pokhara, are mysteriously still banned.

Neither CAAN nor the government have given any official explanation about why flights to and from India are still not allowed, although ministers have privately said that it is because of the pandemic peak in India. However, the total new cases in India have started going down, while Covid-19 cases and fatalities are rising in Nepal.

The India flight restrictions are all the more absurd because people have been travelling to and from across the India-Nepal land border without tests or quarantines, whereas air passengers would need a mandatory PCR negative certificate before boarding, and quarantine at home for a week after landing in Kathmandu.

The Indian authorities had proposed an 'air bubble' with Nepal two months ago to allow nationals of both countries to travel back and forth, but there has been no response from officials in Nepal. Minister of Tourism and Civil Aviation Yogesh Bhattarai and Indian Ambassador Vinay Mohan Kwatra met on 11 October, but not much was disclosed.

Bhattarai, who was not wearing a mask during the meeting, tested positive for Covid-19 the very next day. Kwatra was quoted as saying that he raised the issue of resumption of Nepal-India flights, while the Nepali side said the discussions were only about

again after a confusing series of conflicting decisions last week (see page 7).

For all those reasons, even visitors who were determined to trek in Nepal this autumn have cancelled reservations, agencies say.



Minister of Tourism and Civil Aviation Yogesh Bhattarai and Indian Ambassador Vinay Mohan Kwatra met on 11 October in Kathmandu. PHOTO: MINISTRY OF CIVIL AVIATION AND TOURISM

new India-Nepal air routes for the international airport at Bhairawa, as well as two-way flights on the L626 airway corridor via Mahendranagar.

There is speculation that the Prime Minister's Office may be holding back permission for India flights as a bargaining tool to extract Indian concessions on air routes. However, by not allowing flights, it is Nepalis who are affected more.

There are tens of thousands of Nepalis working in India, students and those who had gone for medical treatment who have been stranded there for months. While Nepalis from North America, Europe and Australia have flown home since July, Nepalis have not been able to travel back from a next-door country. Flights connecting Kathmandu to Chinese cities like Lhasa, Chengdu, Guangzhou and Hong Kong are operating.

Although foreign climbers and trekkers have been allowed to fly to Kathmandu, Nepal's travel trade is not at all enthused. It is too late in the season for mountaineering expeditions and most treks. Besides, tourists must have extra \$5,000 worth of insurance, and have to spend a week in hotel quarantine in Kathmandu.

Although Langtang and Rolwaling trails are open, and the Everest Trail that has been closed or most of 2020 has finally opened

"Tourists were not about to flood into Nepal. Yet, despite everything, there are still some who want to trek. But instead of making it easier for them, we have made confusing rules and put every possible obstacle in their way," says travel entrepreneur Rajendra Sapkota.

Foreigners visiting Nepal need a letter from a trekking or mountaineering agency, which many say opens up the possibility of visitors being forced to get a trekking permit just to enter Nepal, even though they have no intention of hiking in the Himalaya.

"Since trekking and mountaineering are wilderness destinations, we should make it as easy as possible for them to get an immediate test, and head off to the mountains after landing in Kathmandu," says the former chair of Nepal Tourism Board, Deepak Raj Joshi.

The seven day quarantine is also seen as making no sense, since visitors are required to arrive with PCR negative reports. The result of such irrational deterrence is already evident in the figures for arrivals. Since opening up to foreigners on 17 October, only two trekking groups and two climbing expeditions with a handful of non-Nepalis have arrived at Kathmandu airport.

prabhu BANK

Hong Kong bars Nepal Airlines again

Nepal's national airline has been suspended from operating Kathmandu-Hong Kong flights for the second time this month after more passengers tested positive on arrival on 21 October.



Nine Hong Kong resident Nepali passengers who had boarded RA409 in Kathmandu with RT PCR negative reports were found to be positive when tested again on arrival. The new ban will stop Nepal Airlines flights to Hong Kong till 4 November. A Nepali passenger tested positive at Hong Kong airport from Kathmandu on 3 October, and the 21 October flight was the first after the earlier ban.

Air India flights from New Delhi, and India's Air Vistara flights from Chennai have also been similarly barred after passengers tested positive. Passengers from 11 high risk countries have to spend two weeks in hotel quarantine in Hong Kong after arrival, and Nepal and India are on the list.

Covid-19 fund for businesses

One to Watch, with support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), and in partnership with NMB Bank and Laxmi Bank, has launched the 'Covid-19 MSME Fund Nepal' to provide bridge financing for small and medium businesses to cope with the crisis.

"The Fund will leverage One to Watch's expertise in investment and business development, its robust network of investors and entrepreneurs to identify and support high-impact SMEs," said Suman Joshi of One to Watch.

The Fund will provide collateral-free loans to Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and will pay interest on such loans for up to 18 months. It is expected to support up to 100 MSMEs and help them retain up to 1,000 jobs.

"Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises are the backbone of Nepal's economy. They employ a large share of the workforce and are drivers of innovation and new job creation. Their rebound, therefore, will set the foundation for overall

economic recovery," said Elisabeth von Capeller, Swiss Ambassador to Nepal.

Industrial scale biomass pellets

Bakas Renewable Energy is planning to produce 20,000 metric tonnes of biomass pellets every year and help reduce Nepal's petroleum import bill and improve public health by reducing air pollution. Biomass pellets are a clean and cheap alternative energy source and the raw material for production is sourced from the forest floor.

This week, Bakas signed a loan agreement with NMB Bank for debt financing of Rs160 million. Business Oxygen Pvt Ltd (BO2) is making an equity investment of Rs50 million for developing the biomass pellet project at Ishworpur of Sarlahi District. The remaining Rs50 million will come from promoting shareholders.

"This is an exciting project that assists adaptive resilience and will help the economy with clean energy in numerous ways including being a substitute for coal," said Siddhant Raj Pandey, CEO of BO2.

BO2 this week also signed a shareholders agreement with Meera Biotech, a pharmaceutical company which will manufacture vaccines and biologics in collaboration with the South Korean Eubiologics.

Ncell festive offer

Ncell customers can enjoy endless conversations with their family

and friends within and outside the Ncell network at more affordable rates

this festive season. 'Endless Kurakani+' allows voice-packs for off-net calls at a reduced rate of just Rs1.28 per minute. Customers can subscribe to 7 days, 15 days, or 30 days validity voice packs by dialling *17118*7# and following the instructions.

Ncell
an axiata company

Global IME offers 16% dividend

Global IME Bank will distribute 16% dividend to its shareholders in 2019/20.

Global IME Bank
ग्लोबल आइएमई बैंक लि.

The Bank earned a net profit of Rs3.8 billion in 2019/20. The bank's paid-up capital will reach Rs21.63 billion after the distribution of bonus shares.

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EVENTS

**Photos from the heart**

Hosted by Grownnova, Taking photo from the heart is a short course designed for photo enthusiasts as well as the researcher, communication professional and others. This two-hour session every Saturday with documentary photographer Nabin Baral focuses on the importance of images in any reading materials to convey messages.

Application deadline: Rolling basis

**Boudha market**

Buy fresh and organic fruits and vegetables, fresh baked goods, and other delicious goodies. Support local products and farmers, and follow physical distancing guidelines.

Saturdays, 8-am-12pm, Utpala Cafe, Boudha

**The Cover Story**

The Cover Story is a fortnightly series where writers, editors, and poets talk about the cover designs of their books. Stay tuned to KathaSatha's Instagram page and YouTube channel for updates.

Creative Sundays

Creative Sundays for Kids is a weekly guided workshop for kids aged 6 to 8 to express themselves through art, storytelling, drama, and games. Call or go to Facebook for details.

1 November onwards, 9860588626

**Otaku Next**

For the first time since its launch in 2014, Otaku Next, which began the popular cosplay event in Nepal, is going online. The event will be divided into eight segments—Cosplay showcase, chronicles, and Q&A among others. To participate in the event, visit their various social media channels.

27 November



ONLINE ARCHIVES

**Europeana**

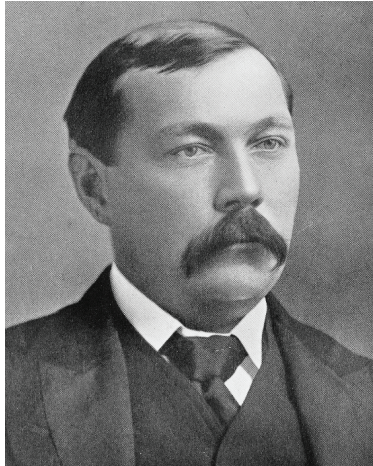
Discover cultural heritage from 3,000 museums, galleries, libraries and archives across Europe. Head online to read about historical places, watch exhibitions, photographs, ancient manuscripts and more.

Histories from Home

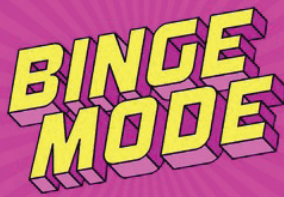
Check out the Reminiscences: Histories from Home exhibition from Book Bus Nepal. Look at the full schedule of contests and conversations on Facebook.

Poetry Foundation

Discover all things poetry. Browse through collections of classic and contemporary poems, readings, poetry news and the entire 100-year archive of Poetry Magazine.

**Binge Mode**

Episodes of this pop-culture podcast produced by *The Ringer* give detailed recaps of your favourite television show, films, or other piece of media. Find Binge Mode on Stitcher and Apple podcasts.

**Virtual world tour**

Travel may be limited these days, but discovering incredible experiences from across the globe doesn't have to be. Get your Guide's The world at home initiative brings some of their top tours, activities, and attractions to you online. Find everything on their YouTube channel.

DINING

**Haadi Biryani**

Craving a quick and easy Biryani? Haadi is the place to go to or order from. Enjoy slow-cooked biryanis seasoned with a secret spice blend which come in clay pots that enhances the dining experience.

Dilli Bazaar (01) 4538444 / 9864334987

**Erma Restaurant**

Erma Restaurant offers an upscale fine dining experience with chef-curated continental dishes. Try the cream of beetroot soup, vegetable saskik, and the Erma house burger.

Hotel Shambala, Chakrapath (01) 4650351

**Cafe de Tukche**

Make Dasain lunches special, and get authentic Thakali food delivered from Cafe de Tukche. Order the Thakali Khana set, or take a break from rice and try the Thakali Dhedo set instead. Check out the menu on Facebook.

Lazimpat, 9828937500

The Workshop Eatery

Head to Facebook to choose from The Workshop Eatery's selection of yummy doughnuts and bagels. Try the burrito bowl and Workshop BBQ chicken sandwich, or get the assorted box of doughnuts this Dasain.

9860431504

**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 Foodmandu for more.

981378858, 9841677377, 9803082797



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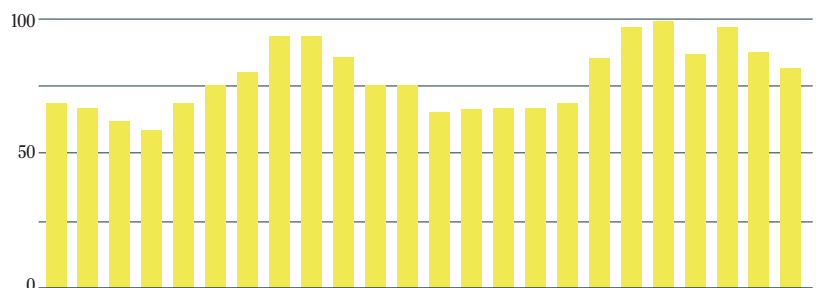


The westerlies are now in command over the northern Subcontinent. The wind direction has shifted to west-north-west which means smoke from the north Indian crop fires (see as blue-grey haze in this NASA photo taken on Thursday morning, left) will be blown off. Look forward to a bright, sunny weekend with the minimum temperature in Kathmandu dropping to a chilly 11 degrees early mornings.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
28° 12°	29° 13°	27° 11°

AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU



The Air Quality Index (AQI) in Kathmandu hovered between 50-100 in the 24 hours from 1pm on Wednesday to 1pm on Thursday (see above). This live hour-by-hour measurement of AQI at the US Embassy monitoring station in Phora Darbar can be seen at www.nepaltimes.com. The morning and evening peaks are clearly visible, but the absence of haze from India and a fresh northwesterly breeze has cleared up Kathmandu Valley's air somewhat.

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

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

KRIPA JOSHI



CHOOSE SUSTAINABLE PALM OIL

Palm oil is very versatile, resistant to oxidation, stable at high temperatures and also odourless and colourless. Because of this, palm oil is everywhere. Nearly 50% of packaged products in supermarkets have palm oil - from pizza, doughnuts and chocolate, to deodorant, shampoo, toothpaste and lipstick. This demand has led to the deforestation of some of the world's most biodiverse forests, which threatens endangered species like the Orangutan, Sumatran Tiger and Pygmy Elephants. However, palm oil is also an efficient crop, producing more oil per land area than any other equivalent vegetable oil crop. Extracting the same amount of alternative oils could just threaten other habitats and species. The Roundtable of Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) represents palm oil that is free of deforestation, expansion on peat, exploitation and the use of fire. Certified palm oil protects the environment and the local communities who depend on it for their livelihoods. #FridaysForFuture

OUR PICK



A novel published in 1993 by author Vikram Seth, is now a drama miniseries of the same name. The series is set in India's post independence era and follows the coming of age story of Lata and her mother's relentless ambition to find a suitable boy for her. Directed by award-winning filmmaker Mira Nair, *A Suitable Boy* boasts of a star studded ensemble cast of Tanya Maniktala, Ishaan Khatter, Tabu, Shahana Goswami and Ram Kapoor.

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

फोन: नं. १०९८ मा खबर गरौं ।



नेपाल सरकार

सञ्चार तथा सूचना प्रविधि मन्त्रालय

सूचना तथा प्रसारण विभाग

Everest Trail reopens, but cautiously

Trekkers return to the Khumbu, but Sherpas do not want virus to spread

Surendra Phuyal
in Solukhumbu

Flying from Kathmandu to Lukla today is almost like taking an international flight. Passengers need a negative RT PCR report not older than 72 hours, have to wear masks, visors and latex gloves on the 35-minute Twin Otter flight.

The Khumbu Valley below Mt Everest reported its very first Covid-19 case on 23 October when an elderly local man suffering from asthma tested positive. The next day a team of medics helicoptered to Namche and contact traced 123 people, of whom nine were found to be positive – all of them young men who are asymptomatic.

The municipality, however, reversed its decision and rescinded the flight ban and on foreign and Nepali trekkers from hiking on the Everest Trail. The local municipality has so far contained the coronavirus crisis, and residents here want to keep it that way.

It has now enforced strict rules on outsiders. Since flights restarted on 17 September, Nepalis who had been cooped up for months by the lockdown had started making up for the absence of foreign trekkers. Non-Nepali tourists started flying in after a week's hotel quarantine in Kathmandu after 17 October, although many trek reservations have been cancelled.

Ang Jangmu Sherpa owns Rivendell Lodge in Debuche which has a stunning view of Everest, Lhotse and Ama Dablam. She is happy several groups of Nepalis arrived after a Bahrain expedition came last month to acclimatise and train in the area.

"It's not just our Khumbu region where businesses are suffering. The entire world is affected by Covid," she said. "We have invested a lot of money to build this place, and suddenly we are in the midst of this crisis."

Aside from the economic difficulties, Ang Jangmu is also



Pasang Yangji Sherpa and Indra Maya Magar of Phakding own lodges in Phakding on the Everest Trail, and have been busy with the influx of Nepali trekkers in the past month.



After coming home on leave from Abu Dhabi, Bishnu Parajuli from Butwal, was stuck in Nepal for months. He took this opportunity to visit the Mt Everest region with his friend Krishna Raj Poudel. They rented ponies to get up the trail to Namche last week.
PHOTO: BISHNU PARAJULI FACEBOOK

worried about visitors bringing the coronavirus to the Khumbu. But she adds: "As long as people take precautions, get PCR tests, Nepalis are welcome and that would be good enough for now."

Records show nearly 60,000

visitors entered the Sagarmatha National Park last year, contributing more than Rs180 million in fees and permits. That does not include another levy charged by the municipality, and also what tourists spend on food, lodgings and paying porters.

The spring season had just started in March when the Covid-19 pandemic hit, the government cancelled all trekking and mountaineering, and tourists had to rush back to Kathmandu to catch

flights out before Nepal went into lockdown on 24 March.

There had been zero tourists since then. In September, Nepali trekkers started trickling in and now there are some foreign trekkers. Many lodge-owners are happy that at least Nepali visitors are finally arriving in the Khumbu after a quiet spring and monsoon.

Says mountain guide Dawa Nuru Sherpa in the village of Pangboche. "Porters have no work, hotels are facing problems. We should welcome Nepalis, at least people like us can work and earn our living."

Nepali tourists are taking advantage of attractive packages offered by airlines, helicopter companies and lodges in the Khumbu. There are two expeditions attempting to climb Mt Ama Dablam, one of them with a Qatari prince.

"We wanted to use the opportunity to get to see Nepal," said Bishnu Parajuli from Butwal, who works in Abu Dhabi, and has been stuck in Nepal because of the lockdowns. "We followed all the travel safety protocols to visit Gokyo. It was worth every paisa. It was amazing and unforgettable."

Pasang Yangji Sherpa who runs Sherpa Guide Lodge in Phakding was happy to greet visitors after months. As 27 Nepalis arrived from Lukla, she had a busy morning last week preparing food and rooms for them. She said: "It's a crisis time but now I'm happy to welcome Nepali tourists. We are following health guidelines, although sometimes in the kitchen or restaurant it is difficult."

In Khumjung, lodge owner Lhakpa Dorje Sherpa, who has climbed Mt Everest and Ama Dablam twice each, looks worried. Khumjung is slightly off the beaten track on the trail between Namche and Tengboche, and few villagers wear masks.

"The PCR tests you do in Kathmandu may not be reliable because you move a lot after that test: you were in a plane, met people after that, you may have caught the virus along the way. We have also heard there are fake PCR reports," he says.

To address these concerns, the Khumbu Municipality guideline says only tests done at government hospitals, HAMS, B and B and Star Hospital will be accepted at Kathmandu airport before boarding a Lukla flight.

"We don't have the right health infrastructure at present for PCR tests," says Lhakpa Tsheri Sherpa of the municipality, "for the moment we have no choice but to rely on PCR reports from Kathmandu."

The Park's Chief Conservation Officer Bhumiraj Upadhyay has this piece of advice to prospective visitors: "Please make sure that you get a proper PCR test before coming here. If you do so, you will know that you are safe and you will help people of Khumbu remain safe from the virus." 🇳🇵



PHOTOS: SURENDRA PHUYAL



Ang Jangmu Sherpa



Dawa Nuru Sherpa



Lhakpa Dorje Sherpa



Bhumiraj Upadhyay



The Khumbu Valley below Mt Everest has detected the first cases of Covid-19, and residents here want to keep it from spreading. But they see no reason why tourists should be kept away, as long as they take health precautions.



TREKKING TO SAVE NEPAL'S SNOW LEOPARDS

Screen capture of camera video of snow leopard on the trail above Phoksundo Lake.

Let the mountains rest during Covid-19, but come back next year for the Snow Leopard Conservation Trek in Dolpo

Sonam Choekyi Lama
in Dolpo

It is morning here at 4,000m, and an overnight blizzard has left everything white. All around us, the outlines of the mountains of Dolpo have been softened by new snow. Below, Phoksundo Lake is partly ice-covered.

The snow has made it easier for us to look for snow leopard tracks. These cats are elusive enough, but their fluffy camouflage makes them hard to see even if they are nearby.

‘That the Snow Leopard is, that it is here, that its frosty eyes watch us from the mountain — that is enough. And in the not-seeing, I am content.’ These lines from Peter Matthiessen’s classic *The Snow Leopard* echo in my mind, and make me curious: what does this creature that is so hard to see look like?

It is the philosophical Zen-like idea of the ‘not-seeing’ that holds such symbolism in Matthiessen’s book. Its powerful description of the animal that is there but not there, that you look for but cannot see. It reminds us of our own ephemeral presence in the eternity of nature, of being here today, gone tomorrow.

Like the tracks on the snow that indicate that the being is nearby, its proof will be erased soon enough with the warmth of the sun. All that will remain is the memory of our presence, and the flash of fur on an icy crag.

The snow leopard is one of the world’s most elusive and rare cats. It is sparsely distributed across 12 countries in Central Asia and the Himalaya, admirably adapted to its high and rugged range at elevations of 3,000-4,500m.

The snow leopard has become not just a professional quest for my sister Tshiring Lhamu Lama, but also a personal journey. She is a Snow leopard researcher and conservationist, and founder of Snow Leopard Journeys. As luck would have it, she invited me to join her to spend three winter months earlier this year in our birthplace of Phoksundo to document her research, and to plan for a Snow Leopard Conservation Trek next year.

There is an easier way to see a snow leopard: through camera traps that we installed. But there is nothing to beat the sight of a snow leopard in the flesh. It was after a month of stalking and tracking that I had my first encounter on 28 February.

The coronavirus pandemic had spread from China to Europe by then, but up here in remote Dolpo, we had no idea. I was alone, scanning the ridges and checking up on the motion-detection camera inside a small cave.

It was 6pm and already getting dark when, right at the entrance to the cave, was a large cat that looked like a furry cloud trailing a long curly tail. We were face-to-face. The leopard was as surprised to see me as I was. My happiness at seeing this apparition overcame my fear. Was it real? Was it an illusion? Did I really see it?

In slow motion, I stretched my hand to grab my camera. The



The snow leopard’s magnificent home range at Phoksundo Lake at 3,589m was partially frozen this winter.



A snow leopard with a blue sheep that it just hunted.



Camera trap image of a snow leopard with a nylon rope around its abdomen from a snare laid by suspected poachers.



Our snow leopard research team (left to right): me, Pamma Gurung and my sister Tshiring in our home village of Phoksundo.

leopard noticed my movement, and leapt away noiselessly, disappearing up into the cliffs above. I did manage a grainy photo as it bolted off – visual proof to myself that I had actually seen what I had just seen.

We sighted snow leopards four more times this winter. I will never forget its haunting yowl echoing from the cliffs overlooking Phoksundo Lake. Even when we did not hear it, the leopard's ghostly presence was all around us. It would pass through our village, marking and depositing scat, but it would disappear before we noticed it was there.

"It looks like he is challenging us, teasing us, playing hide and seek," Tshiring said.

My sister has been to every corner of Dolpo, where even our locals have not yet been, to research snow leopards. We were all inspired by George Schaller and Peter Matthiessen, who passed

through our village of Phoksundo in 1973, long before either of us were born. Schaller's study of the blue sheep and Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* have been the inspiration for Tshiring's conservation work. In 2016, she joined Schaller's team which was retracing his 1973 trip, and had a chance to carry forward her study into snow leopards.

"Throughout my research in Dolpo, our people would ask me why we need to save these predators that kill our yaks and sheep, and which do not give us any milk or food," Tshiring tells me. She tried to explain to the herders the importance of maintaining the ecological balance of these mountains, and how the snow leopard is at the top of the food chain.

She has seen two snow leopard cubs being dragged out of the lair and killed, and we have a camera shot of another snow leopard trailing a nylon rope from a trap around its

waist. This has given her work even more of a sense of urgency, and she is convinced that snow leopard conservation can only happen if the local communities are involved in protecting the animal.

They may be convinced about helping protecting the animals if they see benefits from its conservation through wildlife tourism. Trekking is becoming the mainstay of Dolpo's economy now, even though this year there have been no tourists and no income because of the Covid-19 crisis.

But for next year and beyond, Tshiring is convinced that the Snow Leopard Conservation Trek to Phoksundo Lake can attract premium tourists from all over the world, bringing jobs and income to locals. This, in turn, will convince them of the value of protecting the habitat of the snow leopard in Nepal's largest district bordering the Tibet Plateau.

Last winter, our main aim was to engage and involve local herders through employment opportunities which might change their perception about snow leopards into the protection of these magnificent cats. Snow Leopard Journeys will not just create jobs, but also plough 10% of its income for further snow leopard conservation work by sustaining herder livelihoods. 🇳🇵



Snow leopard researcher and conservationist TshiringLhamu Lama spent three winter months earlier this year in Phoksundo to research and plan for a conservation trek next year. Her personal journey of documenting this elusive cat in the Nepal's Himalaya is in this special feature.



Double whammy: air pollution and Covid-19

Winter air pollution will complicate the struggle to manage the pandemic in India and Nepal

Sonia Awale

In the past eight months of this year, 887 people have died in Nepal from Covid-19. In the whole of 2019, air pollution directly killed 42,100 people in the country.

Poor air quality in cities and inside homes due to smoky kitchen fires kill far more people across South Asia than SARS-CoV-2. But now, researchers say, there is a looming danger that as winter approaches, deterioration of air quality and Covid-19 will emerge as a double whammy.

Even before the pandemic, the World Health Organisation (WHO) was already warning that poor air quality in the Indo-Gangetic plains that includes a part of the Tarai in Nepal was already reducing average lifespan of tens of millions of people by 3.7 years.

“Long-term exposure to air pollution can cause many of the health conditions associated with increased vulnerability to Covid-19, such as diabetes and chronic heart and lung diseases,” says the State of Global Air 2020 released last week.

The report shows that air pollution is among the biggest risk factors for all major mortality in the region, surpassed only by high blood pressure, tobacco use, and poor diet.

Air pollution accounted for 6.7 million deaths globally, 2.1 million in South Asia, and nearly 42,100 deaths in Nepal in 2019 alone. Nepal ranks among the top 10 countries with the highest PM_{2.5} concentrations (harmful particles less than 2.5 microns suspended in the air). Bangladesh, India and Pakistan also made the cut.

The report says that 100% of the population in India lives in areas where PM_{2.5} levels are higher than the WHO Air Quality Guideline. Nepal is not far behind with 98% of its people living in such areas.

The report, a collaboration between the Boston-based Health Effects Institute and the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation



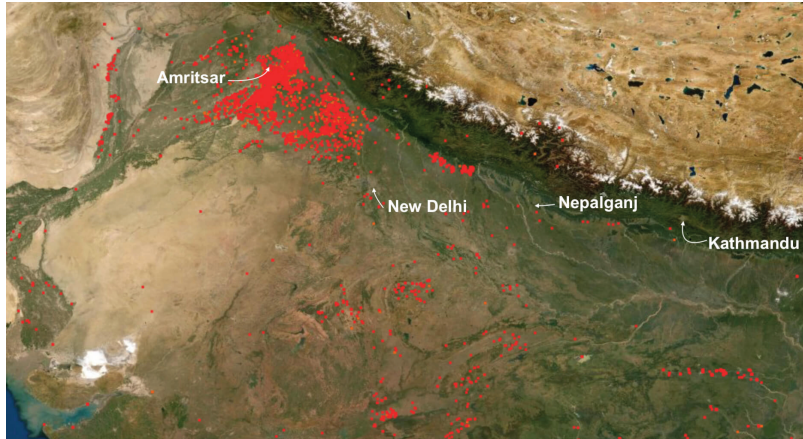
MONIKA DEUPALA

comes as the Covid-19 pandemic has claimed more than 116,000 lives in India and 765 in Nepal. Pollution and SARS-Cov-2 both affect the respiratory tract and lead to pneumonia. In fact, patients with pre-existing heart and lung disease are at high risk of coronavirus infection.

On Thursday, there were a total of 39,643 active cases after an additional 1,954 positives with Kathmandu Valley alone reporting 843 of them. With 2,981 discharged in the last 24 hours, the recovery rate now stands at 75%. There are a total of 290 patients in ICU and 72 on ventilator support. Bagmati province accounts for the most of them, 178 in ICU and 57 on ventilator.

More than 65% of all deaths due to chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder (COPD) in 2019 were linked to air pollution in Nepal. In India, it was 60%, and over 30% of the deaths due to ischemic heart disease in 2019 were linked to air pollution in both countries.

These figures will only increase



Satellite image of individual fires of northern India taken on Wednesday 21 October shows stubble burning in Punjab that has raised air pollution levels in Delhi. Prevailing winds have blown the smoke to Nepal over the past week. Image: NASA Fire Information for Resource Management Systems (FIRMS)

with the upcoming winter months which is also the flu season. India is already struggling with over 8 million Covid-19 cases. Nepal's capital Kathmandu has run out of hospital beds including ICUs, oxygen, ventilators, and there is a shortage of other medical supplies.

Although the full links between

air pollution and Covid-19 are not yet known, there is clear evidence connecting air pollution and increased heart and lung disease. There is growing concern that air pollution exposures, especially in the most polluted regions of South Asia, could exacerbate the effects of Covid-19 significantly.

“Exposures to air pollution have been shown to affect the human body's immune defence making an individual more susceptible to respiratory infections such as pneumonia,” says Pallavi Pant, air quality scientist at the Health Effects Institute. “Air pollution exposures are linked with a range of diseases including chronic heart and lung diseases – all of which contribute to poorer outcomes in patients infected with the virus.”

Researchers say it is likely that people living in areas with high air pollution will experience more adverse outcomes from Covid-19. The report also found that air pollution is a leading risk factor to health both in Nepal and India followed by smoking and high blood pressure.

Even though there is now greater awareness in Nepal and in South Asia about the impact of poor air quality, not even steps have been taken at the national state level. There is also no cross-border collaboration in controlling air quality especially as the annual season for crops residue burning is sending plumes of pollution across South Asia.

“Although there have been actions and air quality improvements in some countries, including Nepal, there has been little or no sustained progress over the last decade in the most polluted countries of South Asia and Africa,” says the report.

In the first-ever comprehensive analysis of air pollution's global impact on newborns, the report finds that outdoor and household particulate matter pollution contributed to the deaths of nearly 500,000 infants in their first month of life. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of the infant deaths are linked to use of household burning of solid fuels, hitting hardest in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

In Nepal, 22% of all neonatal mortality is linked to air pollution, most of which is attributed to indoor pollution from kitchen fires. This is much higher than the figure in India where 46% of all neonatal deaths due to air pollution is attributed to household air pollution. ■

Mario Molina, ozone, air pollution and climate

Arnico Panday

On 7 October, the day that the 2020 Nobel Prize in chemistry was announced, the world lost Mario Molina. I lost an influential teacher.

Mario Molina was the only Mexican ever to receive the Nobel Prize in chemistry, which he was awarded in 1995 together with his postdoctoral adviser at the University of California, Irvine, F. Sherwood Rowland, and their Dutch colleague Paul Crutzen.

The 1995 Nobel chemistry prize honoured their discovery of the role played by anthropogenic chemicals in destroying ozone in the upper atmospheric layer called the stratosphere. Since the 1920s people had been using chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) as refrigerants and propellants.

Designed in the laboratory, CFCs were nontoxic, nonflammable and considered completely safe. Little did people know that new unintended dangers were hidden in their refrigerators, air conditioners and spray cans.

In the 1970s Molina and Rowland realised that CFCs could reach the stratosphere, where the sun would break them apart, releasing reactive chlorine radicals that would attack ozone. Ozone in the stratosphere plays a key role, blocking ultraviolet rays (UV) from the sun.



MÉXICO DESCONOCIDO

Without sufficient ozone in the stratosphere, dangerous amounts of UV could reach the earth's surface, damaging plants and causing skin cancer. In the mid-1980s alarmingly low levels of ozone were discovered in the stratosphere over Antarctica. Mario Molina, together with his then wife Luisa Molina, provided the winning explanation of what caused the Antarctic Ozone Hole.

In 1987 the world's nations signed the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, agreeing to a rapid phasing out of CFCs and similar gases. In the decades that followed, the stratospheric ozone layer has repaired itself.

The Montreal Protocol is still considered to be one of the most successful international

environmental agreements. Driven by scientific results showing that the world was heading in a dangerous direction, world leaders came together to remove from use the substances that were responsible. The Montreal Protocol is seen as a model, or at least an inspiration, for dealing with greenhouse gases that are driving global climate change.

I had the good fortune of having Mario Molina as my teacher. In Spring 2000 he taught atmospheric chemistry to me and four other first-year doctoral students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). He was one of the most humble and self-effacing teachers I have ever had.

No student question was too stupid for him, and he was passionate about making us understand. One time he spent more than three hours, late into the evening, standing at the board in his office, helping me navigate a particularly difficult homework set.

While my primary doctoral advisor at MIT was Ronald Prinn, the New Zealander whose global AGAGE network monitored atmospheric levels of CFCs and other gases at remote locations around the world, Mario was an influential second advisor on my doctoral committee. I spent countless hours talking to Mario about my research and about my plans in life.

Mario had come to the US for his PhD, had settled and risen to stardom in the US, and only started advising the government in his home country Mexico after he won the Nobel Prize. I was

passionate about returning to and contributing to Nepal without waiting as long.

While I worked on my doctoral field research on air pollution in the Kathmandu Valley, Mario led international teams of researchers studying the air pollution problem in Mexico City – a bowl shaped valley that once had the world's worst air pollution.

They provided policy relevant scientific answers that helped drive the massive cleaning up of Mexico City's air over the past two decades, providing inspiration to my work on air pollution since my return to Nepal.

While I never managed to get Mario to visit Nepal, I was lucky to see him again in recent years at international meetings around the world. He was a member of the Climate and Clean Air Coalition (CCAC)'s Scientific Advisory Panel, while I served on the CCAC's Steering Committee.

The last time I saw him was at the Global Climate Action Summit in San Francisco in September 2018. Like all great scientists, Mario was a life-long learner. He moved from topic to topic, while speaking out on issues that mattered. At the CCAC we worked on promoting an integrated approach to reducing both air pollution and climate change globally. ■

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