Nepal’s surge of Covid-19 continues unabated with new hotspots, and because of inadequate testing, no one really knows how much and how fast the pandemic has spread. The government has left Nepalis to their own devices, only issuing guidelines on precautions, but stopping free testing and treatment. Meanwhile the daily positivity rate and fatalities have not come down. As of Thursday, out of the 9,805 people tested nationwide 2,103 were positive, which gives a very high positivity rate of 21.4%.

Nepal’s death rate from the coronavirus of 43 per million is much lower than India (93), but much higher than China and Sri Lanka (3). This points to poor prevention measures as well as inadequate or unaffordable hospital treatment.

The only option for Nepal is to wait for vaccines to be available, but even on this it has moved too late. Many governments around the world have pre-booked vaccines from pharmaceutical companies like Pfizer and Moderna, and most countries will first prioritise their own citizens. Last week, the Nepal government finally set up a committee of secretaries of the Finance, Home, Health and Foreign Affairs ministries to study vaccines under development as well as procedures to procure them.

On Wednesday President Bidya Devi Bhandari signed an ordinance empowering the government to import Covid-19 vaccines from international pharmaceutical companies, and to use them even if they are authorised only for emergency use.

Despite this, Nepal will possibly be one of the last countries in the world to get a vaccine, and even when the first vials arrive perhaps by the middle of 2021, the poorest Nepalis living in the remotest areas will be the last in line to get them.

The government, which has failed all these years to make free health care accessible to all, will have to prove that its vaccine distribution is fair, and the poor in remote areas of the country are not left out.

Says Bikash Gauchan, a physician stationed in remote Achham district: “We need to immediately start identifying vulnerable groups like frontline health workers, the elderly or those with co-morbidities to prioritise for immunisation, and have an effective distribution plan for remote areas.”

Nepal is internationally recognised as a model low-income country with an effective vaccination programs against childhood killer diseases. It has valuable experience in deploying a nationwide network of Female Community Health Volunteers, and Nepal’s Covid-19 vaccine delivery will have to re-learn from its own best practices.

Monitoring the follow-up vaccine dose can gain from Nepal’s acclaimed DOTS program to deliver anti-tuberculosis therapies, and Nepal’s rural health care workers have experience in maintaining the cold chain from previous vaccination programs.

Despite recent breakthroughs in trials (see page 12), public health experts say Nepal should be looking at neighbouring China and India and belatedly begin ‘vaccine diplomacy’ to secure its supply.

Nepal Health Research Council is once again considering conducting Phase III clinical trial of Coronavac by China’s Sinovac Biotech after an initial divided opinion over its safety. The vaccine has shown quick immune response in mid-stage trials in South America and parts of Asia.

In India, the Serum Institute has anticipated demand by already manufacturing 40 million doses of AstraZeneca’s potential Covid-19 vaccine. It will also soon manufacture Novavax.

“There is bound to be vaccine politics and it will mostly likely be ugly,” predicts Sher Bahadur Pun of the Health Ministry. “But we should not lose track of two things: efficacy of the vaccine against our population and its economic viability. If we do that we should be on the right path, more or less.”

Sonia Awale
NEPAL-INDIA RELATIONS

Read online or in the print edition:
20 years ago this week in
Bhutan's capital, Thimphu, a large proportion of the population took to the streets demanding the restoration of democracy and the resignation of King Jigme Singye Wangchuk. Since then, the relationship between the two countries has gone through a rollercoaster ride of political upheavals, economic disagreements, and territorial disputes. But it has also seen moments of cooperation and mutual respect.

One of the most significant events in recent years was the signing of the India-Nepal Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 2016, which aimed to strengthen bilateral relations and address longstanding issues. This was followed by the signing of the Nepal-India Border Trade Agreement in 2018, which was expected to boost economic ties between the two countries.

Despite these developments, the relationship has been marred by occasional tensions, especially over the management of the shared border, and territorial disputes such as the Gogra-Hatibandha area in the Tarai region. The recent incident of cross-border firing and shelling along the India-Nepal border is a recent example of this.

India has also been accused of interfering in Nepali politics, with allegations of funding to political parties and influencing election outcomes. This has strained relations between the two countries, with Nepal accusing India of interfering in its internal affairs.

The current government of Nepal, led by Mahendra Pandit Oli, has also been criticized for its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, with accusations of neglect and mismanagement. This has led to increased criticism of the Nepali government by both the international community and domestic civil society organizations.

As Nepal prepares to hold its next general election, the relationship with India will be a key issue for the incoming government, with both countries expected to engage in political dialogue to ease tensions and improve bilateral relations.

WHAT'S TRENDING

Impact of Bihar polls on Nepal

When Bihar was scrutinized on the Indian elections, a neighbouring Indian state was holding its own, which went largely ignored. Now Nehru’s party, which has a historic role in Nepal, is set to return to power in the province.

New Delhi’s new deals

India’s foreign policy has been a source of much commentary in recent years. From its strategic partnership with the US to its expanding ties with Southeast Asia, India has been active in the international arena. However, its approach to the relationship with Nepal has been complex, with periods of cooperation and tension.

Quote of the Week

"India's foreign policy has been a source of much commentary in recent years. From its strategic partnership with the US to its expanding ties with Southeast Asia, India has been active in the international arena. However, its approach to the relationship with Nepal has been complex, with periods of cooperation and tension."

Latest from Nepali Times

20 Years Ago This Week

The Himalayan glacial melt crisis can...
Price starts at **Rs 29.99 Lacs**

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Nitish Kumar is set to return as the chief minister of Bihar state for yet another term in a tightly fought contest in which he leveraged Prime Minister Narendra Modi's popularity and the NDA (National Democratic Alliance). His win has important implications for bordering Nepal.

As per the Indo-Nepal Treaty, Bihar government’s water resources department executes the flood management work along the border. But it is futile to blame Nepal wholly when other cooperative frameworks have not been fully functional between the two countries.

Cooperation is subject to dialogue between the two central governments, and state governments have very little influence over foreign policy matters in India. In his new term Chief Minister Nitish Kumar is in a good position to seek timely embankment works and encourage state and central government bureaucracies to speed up the long-standing water management issues between the two countries.

Nitish Kumar has been Chief Minister for 15 years, and his performance in delivering infrastructure and social development has waned. His alliance partnerships in the past have dented the Nitish brand. In 2013 when Modi and Nitish Kumar joined hands to return to power, the BJP's L K Advani factions have dented the Nitish brand. All alliance options were shrinking and in 2015 had not won even in a single constituency.

But he will remain a strong opposition and the show will be BJP versus Tejashwi Yadav in Bihar. The All India Majlis-e-Itthihaas-i Muslim (AIMIM) led by Asaduddin Owaisi has made a mark in Bihar with five seats this time. It contested only in 24 seats and in 2015 had not won even in a single constituency.

With the Bihar poll results, the BJP is set to maintain its dominance over Indian politics, thereby setting the stage solely for itself for 2025 in Bihar. Despite the Covid-19-related problems, the crisis faced by the Bihari migrant workers in the aftermath of the lockdown, border dispute with China, and economic sluggishness, people have reinforced their faith in Modi.

Nitish Kumar, 67, is thus set to play a subdued role this time, and has declared that this will be his last election. Given his weakened position, the central BJP government would extend a helping hand to the state, but also maintain complete dominance.

Akanshya Shah is a Times journalist and reporter in New Delhi and contributes this column, DEL-KTM DEL-KTM

In his next, and last, tenure as Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar can deepen cooperation with Nepal

Delhi-Kathmandu-Patna triangle

In his next, and last, tenure as Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar can deepen cooperation with Nepal.
Nepali diaspora hit by Covid surge

The second wave in Europe and the US has affected Nepalis living and working abroad. A second wave of Covid-19 cases in Europe and the exclusive spread in the United States has raised the number of deaths from the pandemic in the Nepali diaspora, but experts say the toll may be higher than officially recorded.

The Non-Resident Nepalese Association (NRNA) which keeps track of the impact of the pandemic among Nepalis living outside the country says new cases and fatalities have been reported in the past two weeks from United Kingdom, the United States, Spain, Austria, the Netherlands, Denmark, the Czech Republic, Germany, India, UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

The estimated total number of Nepalis abroad who tested positive for the virus crossed 46,000 on 14 November, with 263 deaths in countries from whose figures were available, NRNA said. Nepalis have tested positive in 44 countries around the world, and fatalities have been reported from 18 of them.

More than 1,000 new cases were confirmed in the past two weeks, and eight more deaths of Nepalis were reported from India alone in the past week in Chennai and Maharashtra states. The largest number of new cases has been reported from Romania, where 503 have tested positive in the past two weeks taking the total infected Nepalese there to 9,714. Two of them are said to be in a critical state in hospital.

There are no exact figures for the numbers of Nepali migrant workers in Romania, but 4,325 arrived in 2019 alone, and reports say Nepalis from the largest number of people applying for work permits in 2020. Most had jobs in the hotel and restaurant business which have been hit hard by the Covid-19 crisis. One report said all 22 Nepalis working in an auto company in Bucharest had tested positive.

Of the Nepalis abroad who were infected, the association said in more than 41,000 had recovered — possibly indicating that most of them were younger Nepali immigrants in Europe and the Gulf region. However, the death rate is higher in the UK, where there is a large population of elderly Nepali Gurkha pensioners and their families, as well as the United States.

Many Nepalis in countries like the UK, US and Israel are also at the frontlines as caregivers or medical personnel, or work in jobs which require public interaction, and where they are at high risk.

“Nepalis abroad should take care during family gatherings, they should keep a distance and wear masks at all times,” says NRNA’s Health Committee coordinator, Sanjib Shakya.

Meanwhile in Nepal, the number of infected crossed 200,000 last week, even though the recovery rate is at 82% and 182,780 people are not infected any more. The total fatalities in Nepal increased by 12 on Wednesday to reach 1,209.

Of the new infections, 1,038 were in Kathmandu Valley, and Wednesday saw 1,442 testing positive. The numbers are slightly slower than the daily average for the past two weeks because testing clinics were closed for the Tihar holidays.

Among those hospitalised with Covid-19 is Girija KC, the activist surgeon who has for the past four years staged 19 hunger strikes demanding that the government reform medical education and make health care more accessible and affordable. Ironically, KC has been admitted to Teaching Hospital, where he has been treated in RCJ in a critical state during his lasts.

The total number of active cases in Kathmandu is now 12,572. Bhaktapur has 1,162 and Lalitpur 2,056. Most are in home isolation, either because they have mild symptoms, because there are not enough beds in hospitals in the Valley, or because they cannot afford being admitted.

On Wednesday, 6,731 PCR tests were carried out while 3,538 have made recoveries.
**Events**

**Mt Everest Diaries**
In 2008, Dina Bista climbed Mt Everest and the South Summit. Women have been part of the world’s first female group to scale the highest peak in each continent. Bista who is also a comedian is set to bring many living aspects of this lifetime adventure in a unique format through ‘Mt Everest Diaries’. 26 November, 5.45 AM IST

**The Forest of Enchantments, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni**
More than a decade after the release offer much famous novel, ‘Peacock Palace’ on Mallika’s Desai’s perspectives, the Palace of Illusions, author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has come out with a new feminist approach, in ‘The Forest of Enchantments’. A look at the centre of the novel and reveals Banerjee in her perspectives.

**The Living Goddess, Isabella Souza**
The Living Goddess written by Isabella Souza is being celebrated for research and interviews as it drives into the cultural history of the tradition of the living goddess. The author goes back in time of the Malla and Shah dynasties, focusing on the emerging Kumari tradition in the Kathmandu Valley till today.

**Shangri-La Village Resort**
Protein nation, beautiful mountainous areas and a serene environment, nothing beats Pulchowk's breadsticks. Keeping in mind the Covid-19 essence, Pulchowk’s Shangri-La Village Resort has an engaging staycation offer that includes breaks, dinner along with a free yoga session as Rs 1,099 for a couple. (9809923599)

**Photo Kathmandu**
A weekend photography session every Saturday with documentary photographer Nabin Basnet focuses on the importance of images to convey messages. Application deadline: doping basis

**Cabin and Cartels, Rajib Upadhyay**

**The Doosiwallahs, Joy Ma, Dilip D’Souza**
Authorised by Joy Ma and Dilip D’Souza, The Doosiwallahs is a true and satirical story of the 3,000 Chinese-descent.

**Isolation Readings**

**Dining Separately**

**Online Archives**

**Decorating separately**

**Isolation Readings**

**Global Nepali Museum**

**Poetry Foundation**

**Movie Locations tour**
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**Virtual world tour**
Taste treats include: Food tours, day-hikes, and incredible experiences from across the globe doesn't have to be. Get your Guide's The world at home incredible experiences from across the globe doesn't have to be. Get your Guide's The world at home

**Our Pick**

The fourth season of Netflix’s much-loved series, The Crown, is now streaming. The show based in the real lives of the British royal family is a hit for history lovers around the world. The Queen Elizabeth the First family has garnered a plethora of awards and accolades since its return in 2016. The Crown is in its latest season focuses on Prime Minister Cherie Blair and Princess Diana's relationship and the Queen's relationship with the prime minister Margaret Thatcher.

Margaret Thatcher, Sally Champion, Josh O'Connor and Emma Corrin star.

**Kathmandu, 13 - 19 November**

**Katra, Joshi**

**ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOYI**

**EcoLogic with Miss Moti**

**Post-lockdown town**

**EcoLogic with Miss Moti**

**Pamphlet of the week - Photo Kathmandu**

**Going places together - qatarairways.com**

**Kathmandu, 17 November**

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**Photo Kathmandu, 20 - 26 November 2020**

**Post-lockdown town**
What is it about Ama Dablam?

Elegant but dangerous peak in Nepal draws mountaineers despite the pandemic

It has been described as the most beautiful mountain in the world, its silhouette the logo of a global insurance company, and the 6,812m peak was once described by Edmund Hillary as being “unclimbable”.

Trekkers and mountaineers on their way up to Mt Everest Base Camp have for decades marvelled at the chintelled escarpment that dominates the trail. Many have vowed to return to climb it one day.

One of them was Sheikh ‘Moe’ Al Thani who, in an interview on ABC Radio last October, vowed to return to climb Ama Dablam one day. The Sheikh was part of the Qatari Prince’s team, Garrett Madison, first tried to climb the mountain in 2003, but had to turn back due to technical difficulties on the southwest ridge, but returned to summit twice in 2012 and 2014.

Madison wrote in a blog post last week: “We had a beautiful clear, perfect day up on the summit … it has been a wonderful, successful and safe expedition here in Nepal, we are very happy we got to come and experience the wonderful people with warm hearts.”

What is surprising this year is that those climbs of Ama Dablam have happened during the middle of a pandemic, and Nepal has been closed for trekking and mountaineering since March until foreign teams were finally allowed back in mid-September.

Even before that, a Bahraini military team got special permission to climb Mt Manaslu, and an all-Nepali expedition climbed Barunse. And during the pandemic in spring, the Chinese climbed Mt Everest and Cho Oyu from the north. Besides this, many Nepali guides, porters, trekking companies, hotels, airlines and helicopter companies have lost business.

Despite the minister’s remark, it is clear that Nepal’s trekking and mountaineering has suffered from the Covid-19 crisis. The country usually makes $20 million in royalty and other fees from climbing, and this year the count is only $3.3 million.

Besides this, many Nepali guides, porters, trekking companies, hotels, airlines and helicopter companies have lost business. Last autumn there were 210 climbing expeditions in the Nepal Himalaya, but this season there are only seven. Minister Bhattarai also hosted the Qatari team in Kathmandu last week after their climb, during which Prince Al Thani said: “I have always been enchanted by Ama Dablam, and I have been struck by the scenic beauty of Nepal and the hospitality of its people. I promise to return very often.”

Despite the pandemic, mountaineers have flocked to Mt Ama Dablam, 6,812m in the Nepal Himalayas this autumn.

“Ama Dablam is a fantastic climb by any definition. In many ways it is more satisfying than the 8,000m climbs with the rock, ice and snow sections. But it is a very dangerous climb today with the instability of the seracs. Ama Dablam means ‘Mother’s Pendant’ in Sherpa because its summit makes the mountain look like a mother huging her young, and the ‘dablam’ is the massive hanging serac near the summit which looks like a holy locket. Mountaineers try to avoid climbing and camping below this serac, but despite that some have been killed by chunks breaking off. In 2006, a piece of the hanging ice fell and killed six climbers in Camp III at the point where the southwest ridge meets the top of the face. These were more killed before the serac. In 2014, Nepali climber Thundu Sherpa was killed when an earthquake in 2015 triggered an avalanche on the face.

This year, despite the pandemic and the dangers of climbing via the traditional southwest ridge route, mountaineers could not resist the temptation of climbing Ama Dablam. What helped was the relative ease of navigating the mountain. It was visible to the naked eye from Khumjung, which is 3,000m below and 12km away. The Kuwaitis said they were just trying to break a record, and did not know a permission was required.

Alan Arnette, a mountaineer and blogger climbed Ama Dablam in 2000, and described the allure: “Ama Dablam is a fantastic climb by any definition. In many ways it is more satisfying than the 8,000m climbs with the rock, ice and snow sections. But it is a very dangerous climb today with the instability of the seracs.”

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Nepalis hoping for a kinder America

Many Nepalis based in the US and elsewhere closely followed the US election results. It was key concern because of what the election outcome meant for immigration policies.

Donald Trump was bad news for immigrants, including many Nepalis – responsible for over 400 executive actions since he took office.

“I did not care about the US election at all in 2016, but I followed the 2020 election very closely, refreshing my phone past midnight to check the results,” says 2020 Diversity Visa (DV) lottery winner Archana KC, who received news about her successful DV-outcome in May 2019. But on 22 June Trump banned migration to the US.

Every year, some 55,000 winners from over 14 million applicants are selected for permanent residency from underrepresented countries, including Nepal. The number of applicants from Nepal exceeds 600,000 annually. In 2018, 4,097 Nepalis were awarded permanent residency in the US through this program.

On 22 April, Trump signed a proclamation suspending migrants who pose a threat to the US labour market during the economic recovery following the pandemic, which was further extended on 22 June till the end of the year.

This was bad news for the 2020 DV lottery winners, as they lose their spot if they are not vetted for and receive their visas by end of September.

“The DV lottery program has been one of Trump’s target programs. He has said it brings the “worst of the worst to the US”. In September, the US District Court Judge ordered the Trump administration to resume processing of DVs for 2020 winners. Prior to the ban, 12,000 diversity visas had already been issued.

Taking into account Covid 19 and its impact on the State Department’s visa and consular processing capacity, the judge ordered a total of 9,095 slots to be reserved past the end of 30 September deadline, but it is unsure which of the 43,000 remaining winners will fall in that group.

Stranded Nepali DV winners have built an online community and joke among themselves: ‘It is ironic that DV losers will never understand the pain of DV winners.’

Many have given up hope, but KC is confident it will all work out with the Biden win. “We have come this far and all the effort and energy that has gone into this will not go to waste,” she says, recalling how she had to go around with her one week old daughter to get her a passport. “But just to be on the safe side, I have also applied for the 2022 lottery.”

The other Nepalis impacted by the uncertainty are Temporary Protection Status (TPS) beneficiaries, a humanitarian program that allows those affected by war or disasters to temporarily live and work in the US. Over 411,000 individuals from 10 countries are eligible, including 14,549 Nepalis who benefited from the program after the 2015 earthquake. They include students and those overstaying their visas.

Donald Trump has tried to end this program since 2017, citing countries have recovered from the natural disasters or violent conflicts that caused people to flee.

He has faced a number of lawsuits including, one filed by a group of Nepalis and Hondurans. The TPS designation for Nepal is currently expected to be valid till 4 January, 2021.

A recent survey by the group Adhikar of 324 TPS Nepalis showed that 68.7% reported thinking about this issue once a day or more, 54.3% of respondents think about being deported once a day or more, and 45.9% reported thinking about how TPS would mean not being able to see their children grow up.

Biden’s immigration plan includes protection of TPS from being returned to countries that are deemed unsafe, and to offer a path to citizenship to those who have been in the country for an extended period of time and built lives in the US.

Ramesh is one such Nepali.
policies, has committed to a 100-day freeze on deportations, which will allow children of undocumented immigrants to remain in the country. There are only 60 Nepalis under DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) out of the 843,560 active ‘Dreamers.’ Trump’s attempts to dismantle the program in 2017 was blocked by US Supreme Court.

Aalok is one of the 60 Nepali DACA recipients, who has lived in the US since he was six. “I grew up thinking I am a US citizen as my parents did a very good job of hiding this from my sister and I,” Aalok told us on the phone.

But once he found out, Aalok recalls the traumatic experience because of the constant uncertainty. “I am grateful for this program, but I disliked the term Dreamer because it was anything but a dream. It was a nightmare, because your identity was often used as a political bargaining tool. It was particularly difficult when I had to go into college because I could not apply for any federal and state funding, but was lucky to get a merit-based scholarship.”

When the networks called Biden’s win last week, Aalok was part of the car honking and dancing celebrations in New York. He says: “It was as if the whole world was breathing a collective sigh of relief.”

Joe Biden also has a positive stance on skilled-visas like the H-1B, which has been contentious under Trump. Nepalis make up only 0.64% of H-1B visa holders annually, which is dominated by Indians who make up three-fourths of the visa holders. The June proclamation also suspended the H-1B and other employment-related visas, and in October the Trump administration announced further restrictions including narrowing the definition of ‘specialty occupations’ to ensure applicants have the degree specific to the job they are applying for, and increasing the salary threshold.

A Nepali with highly specialised programming skills in the Nepal branch of a small software development company says that he wrote the core platform and his managers considered him irreplaceable. He was offered a position under the L1B specialized worker visa, where his work was appreciated and he moved to a wider role.

But after two years when it was time to get my visa renewed, it was rejected as my job description was deemed different than the original one,” he says. “The lawyer then filed a new application and, hopefully things will move quicker under the Biden administration.”

Another student, an OPT intern who was working for a multi-billion dollar e-commerce retailer applied for an H-1B, had his visa rejected and had to move back to Nepal.

“The application was rejected over minor points regarding my salary, even though it was above the market rate, and because my area of study was not exactly computer science even though I had the programming skills,” he says.

Biden’s plans regarding skilled visas include reforming the temporary visa system to establish a wage-based allocation process so H-1B allocations are linked to prevailing wages and establish enforcement mechanisms. He also plans to expand the number of high-skilled visas, currently capped at 85,000, and elimination of the limits on employment-based visas by country.

Last year, 7,499 Nepalis got naturalised in the US whereas 10,291 received permanent residence. The top five states hosting Nepalis are Texas, New York, California, Virginia and Ohio (see figures). In addition, a significant number of Nepalis also take circuitous paths to reach the US when they do not have access to the legal routes like H-1B and DV.

Ramesh went through multiple countries to make it to America. Before he took on the journey, he did not know much about Donald Trump except his obsession with the wall and increased enforcement at the border that would make his journey from Mexico difficult.

It did not deter him. His journey to the US took 2-3 months, which is relatively short to other migrants taking this circuitous path from Kathmandu through Dubai-Russia, Spain-Bolivia-Colombia-Panama-Honduras-Nicaragua-Guatemala-Mexico-US. The trek through the forest in Colombia was harsh when they even passed bodies of migrants who had not made it.

Ramesh and his friends took along six cans of Red Bull for energy during the forest trek. “It would make us feel energised for hours to continue for another few hours,” he recalls.

Besides the dangers of the jungle, they were also robbed, had nothing to eat and survived on bananas and water.

He reached Tijuana in Mexico, but soon after jumping over a wall and entering the US, he was detained. “After the torture we had gone through, we did not want to talk about the detention centre where we were given food, hygiene kits and clothes,” Ramesh recalls.

After spending two months in detention, he was released on a bond of $14,000 as he waits for his asylum case. After over five months, he was eligible to apply for his work permit and social security card. Now, he dreams of bringing his family to the US someday if he is granted asylum. Nepalis form one of the top ten nationalities receiving asylum grants. In 2019, 827 Nepalis were granted asylum, placing it in the 9th highest nationalities. “I don’t really have an opinion on Trump or Biden,” says Ramesh. “As a royalist, I was vocal against politicians of the current ruling party, I often got into trouble in my village back home. I came here to earn. The good thing about US is that if you are willing to work hard, you can earn and that is all I am focused on now. And as long as I can work, it doesn’t matter who is President.”

But the work authorisation that Ramesh enjoys as he waits for his asylum hearing has been targeted by Trump who issued two new rules in effective August requiring asylum-seekers to wait 90 days before applying for work authorisation instead of the 150 that Ramesh got, and removing the 30 day limit for the work authorisation applications to be processed. These rules were blocked by a judge in September. Between 2018-2019, there were 4,513 unauthorised Nepalis who have been apprehended. Of them, 5,124 were deemed inadmissible, while 961 Nepalis were returned or removed. Removals involve a formal court order, whereas returns are those who voluntarily return to Nepal.

Particularly notable is the removal of 169 Nepalis in 2019, a significantly higher number than previous years. (See figure) Biden has committed to a 100-day freeze on deportations of unauthorised foreigners in the US after he takes office.

Hari is from the same village as Ramesh, and returned last year from the US. He spent six months in a detention centre, and unsuccessfully fought his case with support from a Nepali lawyer.

“When they were taking me to the airport, I thought that I was being transferred to another detention centre, it was a surprise when I found out I was flying home but there was no other option,” he says.

While in immigration detention, Hari wrote a diary with painful details that help him analyse his emotions, but he decided to throw it away. “The plan was to turn the diary into a book, I wanted to title ‘My Journey to America’ to dissuade others from repeating my mistake, but no one wanted to listen to my advice in the village,” he explains.

Hari sold his house to pay back the $85 million loan he took for his failed journey to the US, and says he is not surprised that his journey was unsuccessful. “I am not sure if having Trump as President versus Biden would have made a difference, but had I landed in another state and not Louisiana, or a Potter directed by New York, I believe I would have been released.”

Surya works in a California-based law firm and specialises in asylum cases, and confirms Hari’s hands. “To get me out of jail from states like Louisiana and Georgia is very difficult. California, Arizona, Colorado and DC have it slightly easier. But it also depends on the judges.”

The TRAC project maintained by Syracuse University shows the variation within and across immigration courts in judge denial rates, with a judge in New York who has a denial rate of 3%, and a judge in Houston with a denial rate of 50%.

TRAC data shows that the median bond amount for Nepalis was $15,000 in 2018/2019 and $12,000 in 2020. Research shows that detention immigrants from Nepal have higher odds of being granted bond, but also pay more compared to other nationalities. In 2018, 79% of the 591 detained Nepalis were released on bonds, higher than the national average of 48%.

Joe Biden has big plans from legalising 11 million undocumented workers to overhauling the skilled visa program, from returning DACA to reinstating TPS beneficiaries. Many of these will impact Nepalis.

But a lot has hinged on the two Georgia senate runoffs in January, and the health policies that have taken precedence over other topics. Many Nepalis, in America and in Nepal, however, remain hopeful of a kinder America under Biden.

Some wounds have been charged.
Thirty thousand life-sized cardboard cutouts were placed on the facade of the grand temple historically known as Machindranath and Bisket Jatra, which have been closed since the beginning of the lockdown period, while other activities remain open, like markets and shops, said Dhiraj.

"Dhanamaya has not seen a sibling or niece for so long. Even when they cannot physically be there, she feels any less connected as a family. For example, when Maya Dangol’s mother died a couple of months ago, she and her family struggled to conduct the death rituals due to the lockdown measures. Market closures, supply shortages, and the ever-increasing price of hire plate restrictions on vehicles posed a challenge when trying to obtain all the necessary material to conduct the funeral rituals. She says her family and friends also felt helpless during this time as they were prevented from visiting the temples regularly due to the lockdown measures," said Dhiraj, adding that this was partly due to fears about disease transmission, but also partially due to government regulation.

Despite the impact of the major religious events, which have been canceled or carried out with highly reduced numbers, residents of Kathmandu and people across Nepal have found ways to continue to celebrate and maintain their livelihoods while devotees can continue to engage, though from afar.

"Monthly puja cannot be replicated in the temples or in the presence of a priest. Technology has helped fill that gap. However, not everyone has the means to adopt this practice or who reject it outright, the experience and perceived benefits of being at a temple or in the presence of a priest during puja cannot be replicated virtually," said Dhiraj, adding that people across Nepal have found a greater sense of community during this time.

"In India, virtual reality (VR) platforms have been marketed as a way to enable people to do darshan even when they cannot physically get to the temples. But this is not the same. Whether it is the sense of community or the spiritual elements of rituals that are being lost when people can’t physically be there. Regrettably, in this situation, technology has not been able to replicate the magic of the real experience," Dhiraj said.
Nepal's highest ever tiger sighting prompts calls for a new conservation zone

Mukesh Pokhrel in Dadeldhura

When researchers installed camera traps deep in the forested mountains of western Nepal last year, they expected to capture lots of shots of leopards. And they did. But one day in April while scanning the images, they could not believe their eyes.

Among other animals that had taken selfies through the motion detector cameras, they found one of the most unexpected: a tiger.

"It was extremely rare to see a tiger," says Jyoti Bhaskar Thapa, head of the Divisional Forestry Office (DFO) in Dadeldhura. "We reported the sighting to the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) and they inspected the area on 21 April."

Subsequently, the tiger was spotted several times, soaring to the highest elevation at which a tiger has been seen in Nepal: 3,350m. Although this was the highest ever elevation at which a tiger has been spotted in Nepal, it is only 200m lower than the previous record, a tiger that was spotted in April 2020 in the Mahabharat Range in Dadeldhura. But the new sighting is a good indicator of our tiger population and how it might be recovering, points out Thapa.

"Our camera traps were placed along the wildlife migratory route in the Bhageswar and Ghanteswar Basins, and we were trying to figure out whether it had strayed across the border from Tanzania National Park in India, or climbed up from the Shukla Phanta reserve in Nepal," Thapa says. "We sent samples to experts to compare the stripes of other tigers seen in Dadeldhura's Jogbuda as well as Sukla Phanta, but none of them matched."

After the tiger was sighted in April, fieldwork was conducted by the Divisional Forestry Office to confirm the tiger's presence in the forest. This would also help protect the tiger from poachers. A team of experts from the Nepali government is currently studying the National Parks and Wildlife Act of 1973 and the Forestry Act of 2019 to see if it is possible to declare the region a national park or conservation area.

According to the Department of Forests, the tiger may have been seen in the Mahabharat Range in Dadeldhura. While it is not clear if the tiger will be able to move to the northern area of the valley, the government is considering a conservation corridor that would add to the biodiversity of the region.

"The forests in the Mahabharat Range join the Kali and Karnali basins, and spread over an area of 700 sq km that is important from a biodiversity perspective," says Bishnu Acharya of the Dadeldhura Divisional Forestry Office, who adds that a further 800 sq km could be declared a buffer zone, as in other conservation areas in the country.

Law makers both in Sudur Paschim Province as well as the Federal Parliament in Kathmandu are studying the National Parks and Wildlife Act of 1973 and the Forestry Act of 2019 to see if it is possible to declare the region a national park or conservation area.

The Mahabharat Range in Dadeldhura where a tiger was sighted in April at 3,200m. Conservationists want the area protected since it is an important wildlife corridor.

The Mahabharat Range in Dadeldhura where a tiger was sighted in April at 3,200m. Conservationists want the area protected since it is an important wildlife corridor.
When will Nepal’s Covid vaccine turn come?

Nepal may be one of the last countries to get a vaccine, even then the poor here will be at the end of the line

Sonia Awale

With the pre-winter measures to contain Covid-19 around the world and in Nepal, pressure is mounting on governments to procure vaccines to protect their populations. Last week, the Nepali government set up a committee of secretaries from the Finance, Home, Health and Foreign Affairs ministries to study vaccines under development as well as procedures to procure them. But the country is far behind other countries, which have already booked their future supplies.

On the Wednesday President Bidya Devi Bhandari signed an ordinance empowering the government to import Covid-19 vaccines from international pharmaceutical companies and to use them even if they are authorised only for emergency use. However, there is no effective strategy to ensure vaccines for all as distribution in Nepal comes with the challenge of taking it to poor and remote corners of the country. Experts fear that even when the vaccines become available, the campaign will be plagued by the same socio-economic inequities that afflict the medical system.

“We need to immediately start identifying high-risk groups like frontline health workers, the elderly or those with comorbidities to prioritise for immunisation,” says Bikash Gauchan of a physician at Basyapati Hospital in the under-served western district of Achham. “We also need to set up proper cold chain facilities across the country as soon as possible and have a well thought out distribution plan so that when the vaccines do arrive, we can hit the ground running,” he adds.

The silver lining is that Nepal already has a successful childhood immunisation network that has successfully mobilised Female Community Health Volunteers, and these can deliver vaccines to the homes of the elderly who cannot make it to clinics. Monitoring the follow-up second dose for some of the vaccines will be crucial, although Nepal’s health system has some experience maintaining a cold chain for other campaigns.

Despite recent breakthroughs in trials (see box) public health experts stress the importance of ensuring vaccine supply options closer to home. As of now, 11 vaccines developed in several parts of the world are in the third phase of trials with many of them expected to be as effective. Notwithstanding China and India are at the forefront. And Nepal should have begun its ‘vaccine diplomacy’ much before this to secure its own supply of shots.

There is also the uncertainty of vaccine efficacy depending on the strain: the same vaccine could be highly effective against people in the West but not as much in South Asia where people suffer from chronic malnutrition and multiple infections.

“For a working vaccine to be made within a year is an amazing victory for science but we also need to know that these vaccines are designed for their population. So I’d want to know more about the vaccines in India and China,” says Sameer Mani Dixit of the Centre for Molecular Dynamics Nepal. “Particularly China, as it was where the pandemic started but has since controlled it effectively unlike rest of the world.”

Buddha Basnayat of the Patan Academy of Health Science agrees. He says: “China looks at the reality in our backyard. So a more suitable vaccine for us could come from the Chinese, particularly because they have a track record of having developed better vaccine for this part of the world.”

Indeed, the Covax made by the researchers in Chengdu is now the most widely used jab against Japanese Encephalitis because it’s more cost effective compared to its western counterparts.

Nepal Health Research Council is once again considering conducting Phase III clinical trial of Coronavac by China’s Sinovac Biotech after an initial divided opinion over its safety. The vaccine has shown quick immune response in multi-stage trials in South America and parts of Asia.

In India, the Serum Institute has anticipated demand by already manufacturing 40 million doses of Astrazeneca’s potential Covid-19 vaccine. It will also soon manufacture Novavax.

Similarly, researchers at the Indian Institute of Science have devised a Covid-19 vaccine that is heat-tolerant vaccine that can stay stable for a month at 37°C, and could endure temperatures as high as 108°C if froze dried, a feature that could be a game changer for mass vaccination campaigns in lower and middle income countries in Asia and Africa.

The other factor to consider will the duration of the immunity after each vaccine shot, as well reinforcement groups and if antibodies developed in the first episode helps fight the mutated forms of the virus.

With Covid-19 crisis continuing to spread rapidly across Nepal and at 10 fatalities per million population (same as Pakistan and much higher than China’s 0.9), it is not too early to start dialogue with Gavi, the vaccine alliance, COVAX and agencies like the World Bank and World Health Organization to help procure the most cost effective approach for vaccines most suitable to Nepal’s conditions.

Alternatively, many pharmaceutical companies will want to play the field in order to boost their profile. In fact, embassies and foreign dignitaries are already hard at work pushing for trials and deals.

“There is bound to be vaccine politics and it will mostly likely be ‘surgical’,” adds Babar Bahadur Pun of the Health Ministry. “But we should not lose track of two things: efficacy of the vaccine against our population and its economic viability. We do not want them to be on the right path, more or less.”

In all this excitement, Nepal’s health authorities must also keep an eye on the plight of infected people and many more to come as it waits for a vaccine. The results of current treatment regimen campaigns and research grants to administering Remdesivir have been patchy. And as scientists study the long-term impact of Covid-19 on patients even after they recover, making an optimum use of resources becomes even more significant.

So far, the government has been faulted for squandering money and resources in studies and trials, and not carrying out sufficient tests and contact tracing, not increasing hospital capacity and equipment, and letting the people fend for themselves.

The result is that Nepal is suffering a sustained surge, with more than 1,400 new cases a day, over 60% of them in Kathmandu Valley alone and a quarter of those tested coming out positive. There is also a surge in symptomatic patients, even among those without pre-existing conditions, and those sick enough to require ICUs and ventilator.

Even when the government does act, the priorities seem to be misplaced. For instance, health experts say the emphasis in the past months should have been on high flow oxygen therapy or High Dependency Units rather than Intensive Care Units in hospitals. “It would have been cheaper, does not require highly trained staff or sophisticated equipment, and it would have freed up the ICUs for the really critical patients,” adds Pun, who himself is at the Health Ministry, and this possibly means his advice is not taken.

Insiders say it will likely take upwards of six months for the first vaccines to arrive in Nepal, and there will be a rush by the rich, the powerful and those with political connections to get their shots. The marginalised, poor, those in remote areas will be the last to get their injections, unless the government has a fair and effective rule in place and implements them.

“I think, then there is little else to do than keep masking up this winter, avoid large gatherings, keep distance and wash hands regularly,” says Buddha Basnayat. “If the mask is the best vaccine we have at the moment. These safety measures have largely reduced hospitalisation due to other infections in 2020, masks in particular will also protect us from winter pollution in the coming months.”

The Vaccine Race

The global race of Covid-19 in the northern winter has coincided with breaking news every day of successful new vaccine trials. First the Russians announced a vaccine in September that is 92% potent against SARS-CoV-2. Last week Pfizer unveiled a 90% effective vaccine, which on Wednesday was upgraded to 95% efficacy without side effects. Moderna was next with a vaccine 95%, and not needing extreme refrigeration. More companies in China, India and Europe are conducting their own trials.

Public health experts have hailed the developments, but warn that vaccines will not be universally available till late 2021 and even so will not provide full protection. They suggest continuing with mask up, keeping distance and avoiding crowded indoor places.

Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech’s mRNA-based vaccine came out declaring over 90% effectiveness but only at -20°C ultra cold chain which will be a challenge even for countries with the best health facilities in the world.

Massachusetts-based Moderna’s mRNA shot has 94.5% efficacy, seems to also prevent severe infections and remains stable at -20°C and home refrigerators for up to 30 days, in freezers (-20°C) for up to six months, and at room temperature for up to 12 hours.

Even so, poorer countries are unlikely to get coronavirus vaccine any time soon. Even the biggest pharmaceutical multinationals can only manufacture a limited quantity of the vaccine over the next year.

Pfizer has capped its production at 1.4 billion for 2021, 80% of which has already been booked through advance purchase agreement by the US, UK, EU, Canada and Japan. Moderna expects to manufacture 20 million doses this year and up to one million in 2021.

On the other hand, Russian’s Sputnik V has been overshadowed by questions of its efficacy and due to lack of sufficient data to back its claim of 92% efficacy. Although geopolitical rivalry with the West has given it negative publicity, some health agencies have not ruled it out.